



No Rights, No Recovery: Toward a Worker-Centered, Post-Pandemic World

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COVID-19 unleashed “the worst human and economic crisis of our lifetime.”¹ It laid bare the exploitation baked into national economies and global supply chains; the impermanence of human rights protections and social gains; and the fragility of the bonds holding democracy together.

Lost incomes, limited social protection, and rising prices mean even those who were previously secure could find themselves at risk of destitution and hunger. Indeed, the pandemic pushed more people into extreme poverty, reversing decades of progress,² and increased the vulnerability of tens of millions of people to falling into poverty.³ It stranded migrant workers far from home and penniless. It allowed highly profitable app-based enterprises, such as food delivery and carshare services, to double down on a business model designed to exploit workers, cutting wages and bonuses and “deplatforming” workers who complained about wage theft or safety issues. International fashion brands opted to cancel orders completed or in progress, shirking their duty to subsistence-wage workers at the end of their supply chain.

Women—who in many countries tend to occupy low-wage, undervalued, and informal jobs⁴ that, even in normal times, do not carry health insurance, paid sick days, or regular working hours or wages—were disproportionately affected. Their jobs became even more irregular, or disappeared entirely: in 2020, for example, women lost sixty-four million jobs worldwide.⁵ And while the burden of unpaid care work fell

even heavier on the shoulders of women during the last two years, the meager economic gains and rights they had won over recent decades were rolled back⁶ by increasingly authoritarian governments around the world.

Under the guise of responding to COVID-19, governments quashed dissent and sought to unravel hard-won civil, women’s, and LGBTQ rights, among others. They limited free speech and the rights to information and assembly. They adopted emergency powers for the head of state (Hungary); implemented “fake news” laws to silence critics (Cambodia, Egypt); and shuttered major news outlets (Hong Kong, Philippines).⁷

And they went after worker organizations—such as unions and other associations—to quiet growing dissent not only about the handling of the pandemic but also about racism and inequality, human rights violations, inflation, poor wages, and unemployment. The majority of countries—87 percent—violated the right to strike in 2022, sometimes by prosecuting union leaders, other times by meeting strikers “with brutal repression.”⁸ They eroded collective bargaining, and, “between April 2021 and March 2022, authorities impeded the registration of, deregistered or arbitrarily dissolved unions in 110 countries out of 148.”

At the same time, employers took the opportunity to cull union members from their payrolls; demand unpaid overtime;

lower wages; fire workers without severance pay (or even earned wages); or ignore collective bargaining agreements.

Without Rights, No Fair Recovery

Despite these dire setbacks, workers and their organizations have persevered, holding the line on health and safety, supporting vulnerable workers, and taking on major social issues, from police violence to regressive laws that hurt working people. They know that no one is coming to their rescue and that better wages, economic justice, and respect are not magically granted by employers and governments. Around the world, these issues are negotiated, even collectively demanded, by a workforce that is, quite often, the most racially, religiously, socioeconomically and gender diverse civil society organization in a country.

For example, a diverse coalition of Colombian workers and their unions, Black and Indigenous communities, environmentalists, young people, and rural workers defied violent state repression and defeated proposed laws in 2021 that would have increased taxes on the poor.⁹ Their democratic and representative movement paved the way for the election of the country's first left-wing president in June 2022.

In Nigeria—where 93 percent¹⁰ of working people toil in the informal economy for low wages, unprotected by labor law and without social services such as pensions and healthcare—rideshare drivers formed two unions during the pandemic. In February 2022, drivers in Lagos embarked on a strike, seeking a fare increase to compensate for prices that had increased more than 200 percent. In March, Nigerian drivers filed a class action suit against two

international app-based ridesharing companies for unpaid overtime and holiday pay, pensions, social security, and union recognition.¹¹

Haitian garment workers and their union held a factory to account for a practice that resulted in the death of a worker: illegally failing to remit funds deducted from paychecks to the agency responsible for healthcare. Union advocates say this was the first time a Haitian garment sector union successfully negotiated a financial settlement without international or fashion brand intervention.¹²

In countries like Belarus and Myanmar, governments eliminated trade union rights entirely during the pandemic, but unions continue to organize—underground, or in exile, or even simply openly and “illegally”—for their rights at work and their right to have unions. Workers in Ukraine are still fighting to defend their labor rights despite war.

Finally, in Mexico, where multinational corporations had long “partnered” with sham unions to suppress wages, a small independent union in the lucrative automotive sector faced down threats and won the right to represent workers.¹³ Prior to the February 2022 win, they were making \$2 an hour.¹⁴ By May of this year, they had negotiated an 8.5 percent wage increase.¹⁵ And they sparked a movement. Today, workers are leading independent union-organizing drives in dozens of workplaces across the country.

Nothing for these workers—nor for those who have successfully rectified wage theft, sexual harassment, illegal firings, or a lack of protective equipment during COVID-19—came easily or without a fight. They protected their rights and economic

interests and, in so doing, the rights and interests of workers across their countries.

Conclusion

The pandemic exposed and exacerbated the many inequalities and indignities that had long existed for working people around the world. The damage cannot be reversed with business-as-usual fixes nor by returning to a status quo that exacerbates inequality, rewards malfeasance, and erodes fundamental human rights. Rather, a sustainable future will be one derived from a worker-centric approach, where working people are integral to decision-making about the future, and social protections and labor laws ensure workers and their communities do not flounder during the next economic shock. Workers have the answers. And they will tell you that the past of work is not an acceptable model for our future of work.

Endnotes

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