Relaxing Labour Laws

What is the issue?

- Madhya Pradesh recently allowed employers to increase working hours in factories from 8 hours to 12 hours, when opened after the lcokdown.
- With many other states also considering changes in labour law, the interests of labourers and workers are at stake.

What are the recent decisions?

- **Madhya Pradesh** has embarked on a plan to give a boost to industry by allowing units to be operated without many of the requirements of the Factories Act.
- The working hours may extend to 12 hours, instead of eight. It has allowed up to 72 hours of work a week in overtime.
- It appears the State has used Section 5 of the Act, which permits exemption from its provisions for 3 months.
- This was done in the hope that the Centre would approve such suspension with extension for at least a thousand days.
- However, this exemption can be given only during a 'public emergency', defined in a limited way as a security threat due to war or external aggression.
- **Uttar Pradesh** has approved an ordinance suspending for 3 years all labour laws, except a few ones.
- The exemptions include laws relating to -
    i. the abolition of child and bonded labour
    ii. women employees
    iii. construction workers
    iv. payment of wages
    v. compensation to workmen for accidents while on duty
- Reports suggest that several States are following this example in the name of boosting economic activity.

Will the Centre give its consent?

- Changes in the manner in which labour laws operate in a State may require the Centre's assent.
- The Centre is already in the process of pursuing a labour reform agenda

through consolidated labour codes.
- So, it might not readily agree to wholesale exemptions from legal safeguards and protections the law now affords to workers.

What are the larger concerns?

- The country’s response at the pandemic time in protecting the most vulnerable sections and vast underclass of labourers is largely upsetting.
- The emphasis in the initial phase was on dealing with the health crisis.
- But the consequence was the creation of an economic crisis.
- The revival of business and economic activity after weeks of forced closure is indeed a key objective to be achieved.
- However, it is amoral for the States to address this by granting sweeping exemptions from legal provisions on protecting labourers and employees.
- Factories are relieved of even elementary duties such as providing drinking water, first aid boxes and protective equipment.
- Requirements such as cleanliness, ventilation, lighting, canteens, restrooms and crèches are suspended.
- With the country into the third spell of the national lockdown, the migrant workers' conditions call for immediate government intervention.
- Given this, it is fair for the Centre to not allow exemptions from welfare laws for workers mooted by States.

Source: The Hindu

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