



National Launch of India Labourline – A glimmer of hope for informal workers

The Working Peoples Charter (WPC), along with Aajeevika Bureau, launched the National Helpline for workers on September 18, 2021 at the Press Club in Mumbai.

The helpline, known as the India Labourline, has been operational since July 16, 2021 and has its headquarters in Mumbai. In the last two months, the helpline has received 2497 calls and provided mediation to 507 workers in distress from states like Delhi, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Haryana, Punjab, Jammu Kashmir, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha, Maharashtra, Karnataka, Kerala, Telangana and Tamil Nadu. It was started in response to the urgency to create a framework to address the issues and bridge the gap in providing legal aid and mediation services for the problems faced by workers at the worksite. The lack of such resources was clearly evidenced by the plight suffered by the workers during the Covid-19 pandemic. The pandemic also emphasized the need for strengthening and reforming the Labour Department which is currently plagued by inefficient governance and administration and absence of human and financial resources.

In addition to providing information, advice, mediation, and legal aid, the tele counsellors on the helpline are trained to provide the first level of counselling/intervention over the phone to workers. Thereafter, the cases of the workers are handed over to the concerned 'State Facilitation Centres' which are responsible for undertaking field-level interventions in legal disputes registered with the helpline. State centres are functional in the following states at present: Maharashtra, Delhi, Uttar Pradesh, Karnataka and Telangana. The helpline also assists workers by connecting them to appropriate stakeholders, such as, police, labour department, etc. In cases where all mediation or referral have failed, the workers are provided help to approach the courts in India.

The main reason for this launch event, hosted by the WPC and Aajeevika Bureau, is to spread awareness regarding the India Labourline. The event was graced by the presence of several dignitaries belonging to varied and accomplished backgrounds and the launch was followed by an insightful commentary on remarks detailing the plight of migrant workers in the pandemic economy and possible legal responses that can be undertaken to help the migrants.

Starting off the discussion at the launch, WPC members Santosh Poonia and Divya Verma gave a comprehensive presentation on the India Labourline. The presentation highlighted

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the difficulties faced by certain strata of workers, stating that “the India Labourline is a direct response to the support need by migrant workers and all those working in the informal sector in India who were abandoned during the lockdown. These workers, in particular, were forced to fend for themselves in this pandemic because of a complete lack of governmental support.”

After this insightful presentation, the event continued with remarks from Meena Menon , Rajiv Khandelwal and Chandan Kumar stating “the workers of this country are suffering when the governments have completely abandoned them. India Labourline hopes to fill the gap between promised benefits and ground realities.

Ajit Prakash Shah, former Chief Justice of the Delhi High Court, expressed grief at the present conditions and stated that, “India is a state of many contradictions. Whereas, we have millions of toiling masses who are struggling each day, the state refuses to provide them with adequate benefits.”

Indira Jaising, former Additional Solicitor General of India, mentioned that “the memory of the mass exodus that occurred last summer is still fresh in our minds. We must remember that workers build our country and we must make all attempts to ease their pain during this crisis.”

Baba Adhav, founding President of Hamal Panchayat and the Working Peoples' Charter Network, said, “the WPC and the Aajeevika Bureau have made this attempt to establish parallel labour governance mechanisms when the current regime has failed.”

Gayatri Singh, Senior Advocate at the Bombay High Court and Member of the Executive Committee of Working Peoples' Charter network, concluded the session by expressing appreciation for mediation strategies pioneered by the helpline, “even our adjudicatory bodies have failed in this age so we have to think of new ways and mediation for smaller disputes is ideal.”

On behalf of India LabourLine HQ,
Meena Menon, Rajiv Khandelwal and Chandan Kumar

Mumbai Centre - Amruta Paradkar
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