
ILO Bureau for Workers' Activities (ACTRAV)

Webinar Series 2.0 for Arab Trade Unions

COVID-19 Crisis; The Trade Union's Role in Protecting Workers in their Workplaces

Date: Wednesday, 24 June 2020

Time: 14h00 Geneva Time - 15h00 Lebanon, and Jordan Time

Duration: 90 minutes

Language: Arabic

BACKGROUND

The global Coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic has devastated the world of work, causing huge costs on economies, labour markets, and societies across the Arab Region and worldwide. At the onset of the crisis, the Arab region governments were quick to enforce stringent preventive measures to limit the spread of the virus. The vast majority of countries stopped international air and sea travel, closed borders, banned public gatherings, restricted citizens' movement, and imposed lockdowns, including the closure of schools and businesses. The various measures imposed, in addition to the local and global factors such as the fall of oil prices, adopted structural adjustment policies, and accompanied austerity procedures, resulted in a surge of mass unemployment and loss of livelihoods, rising poverty rates, and inequalities.

Millions of workers in the Arab Region, mainly those at the lower end of the labour markets, in precarious jobs or the informal economy are paying a high price and left into poverty. Among the most hit by the crisis, women workers, young and old age workers, migrant workers, and refugees who are losing their jobs and livelihoods, without enjoying proper social protection. They are pushed to compromise their fundamental right of safety and protection at work, enshrined in the ILS or national labour laws, to get any job to feed their families.

The lockdown measures in the region have had a huge, ever-growing impact on industrial relations. While most workers cannot move to their workplaces or carry out their jobs, others in the exempted economic sectors continued their work through teleworking modalities and new working arrangements. The matter that placed a high load on those workers who can access to their workplaces or continue to work from home. These new working arrangements have serious effects on the incomes, health, and safety of all workers, mainly those in informal and casual employment. Also, the lack of protection in health and safety, excessive working hours, precarious working conditions, and poor regulatory framework increase the chances of exploitation of all workers, particularly for the low-income and disadvantaged groups. The outbreak posed high risks on different groups of workers who are in the front-

line emergency response, like health care workers, transport and delivery workers, and particularly those actively involved in the management of the outbreak (first responders from emergency medical teams, health-care workers in emergency units and specialized treatment units, transportation, and first aid).

This new situation, although it creates a new challenge for the trade union movement, however, highlights the fundamental role it can play in the protection of all workers especially at workplaces amid almost complete absence of unemployment benefits in existing social security schemes and the lack of alternative comprehensive social protection systems.

While countries in the Arab Region have recently begun easing their lockdown measures, the process is necessarily only gradual and tentative, as governments try to balance the economic benefits and health risks of lifting restrictions.

Re-opening workplaces require occupational health and safety regulations, procedures, and systems that provide the basis for a return to work are in place, as well as in enterprises where work has continued. Social dialogue and negotiations between employers and unions are central to this. Arrangements that are simply imposed on workers without consultation and union involvement pose an additional risk to working people. All the evidence shows that workplaces, whether health and care facilities, transport systems, public venues and other places where workers come into contact with the public, or processing facilities, offices and other places where significant numbers of workers are together, are major vectors for the spread of the virus. Good occupational health and safety protect workers, members of their households, and the public. Workers' organizations have an important role to play in this regard, whether in participating in the decision making and policy responses to the epidemics and recovery plans or at the workplace level. Workers and their representatives should actively cooperate with employers in the development and implementation of preventive and protective measures. They should strictly follow workplace hygiene practices and adopt responsible behaviours. Workers' organizations should contribute to the prevention and protection of workers by giving updated information and promoting solidarity and non-discrimination/stigmatization of workers and sick persons.

ILO ACTRAV through this webinar series 2.0 aims at assisting trade union leaders in the Arab Region to enhance their role in protecting workers in workplaces as a priority to respond to the COVID-19 crisis and beyond. Moreover, to promote, and explain the related ILO tools, and guides that can help them in their effort to achieve a better future for all workers.

OBJECTIVES AND MODALITIES OF THE MEETING

The purpose of the information sharing session is to provide a virtual platform for trade union leaders in the Arab Region to discuss the multiple threats of the pandemic to both the health and livelihoods of workers, what policies in terms of Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) and social protection need to be improved to protect all workers and their families adequately and the role of trade unions. More specifically:

- How to increase the level of protection at the workplace, particularly for those who are at the frontline of fighting the pandemic, including addressing psychosocial issues, enhancing social security schemes, and establishing social protection floors.

- The impact of the new teleworking arrangements, in specific its risks on workers concerning, working time, work-life balance, and OSH risks.
- The role of trade unions in fighting discrimination against the most vulnerable groups in society.
- Discuss the ILO Policy Framework in addressing Covid-19, using International Labour Standards.

The target group for this webinar is the top leaders of the trade union movement for Arab countries in Asia and Africa.

Participating countries

1. Lebanon
2. Jordan
3. Bahrain
4. Oman
5. Kuwait
6. Palestine
7. Iraq
8. Yemen
9. Tunis
10. Algeria
11. Egypt
12. Mauritania
13. Morocco
14. Libya

Regional Organisations: Arab Trade Union Confederation (ATUC)