

### **How bad working conditions breed social unrest**

LAHORE: Social compliance is generally ignored by our industrial sector's movers and shakers as they consider it an unnecessary expenditure that only pushes the cost of doing business up, though money invested in it is more or less compensated by the resultant increased labour efficiency.

Social compliance in fact is a means of ensuring workers rights. The law mandates that workers are protected from hazardous work, paid overtime for extra duty they perform, provided with clean, comfortable, and healthy working conditions, sanitary toilets, etc. Moreover, the buildings/floors housing their work should be well-designed or purpose-built to deal any untoward situation and must have fire escapes.

These are some basic requirements of our law but none of these are generally fulfilled by the industries. Since we have problems in implementing the law these compliance measures are not fulfilled by the industries.

Only the exporters comply with these measures because of pressure from their foreign buyers. In fact the foreign buyers add few more compliance conditions. This includes subsidised meals for the workers, medical facilities and water treatment plants etc in factory premises.

Even after complying with these expensive conditions the exporters remain competitive as their workforce operates more efficiently than employees of non-compliant factories. Additional cost involved in compliance is well compensated by the high productivity of the workers. It has been established that satisfied workforce is the greatest asset of an enterprise and tends to stand by the company in most adverse circumstances and work

When you provide a worker with congenial working environment the productivity automatically manifolds as the worker operates in comfortable atmosphere. Proper lighting, ventilation, noise reduction, etc are the requirements of the state labor laws that are generally ignored by many industries. A decent canteen and a well-equipped clinic are the requirements of law that is complied mainly by the exporting sector only.

Law mandates that the workers get minimum wage, double overtime, have 30 minutes rest after every four hours. It is not that these facilities are not available in companies outside exports, but the instances are few and far between.

But conditions imposed by United States for monitoring the finished exports goods till the consignment is shipped is not part of social compliance and adds unnecessarily to the cost. Only those rules, which facilitate and help workers goes a long way in improving his efficiency.

Domestically produced products are facing stiff competition from imported items because the cost of production increases due to low productivity of the workers whose rights are invariably exploited by most of the industries. As a result of noncompliance of the labor laws not only the productivity but the quality also suffers. The government should take the compliance of labour laws seriously which can only be achieved if corruption in the concerned department is curbed.

It may be noted that only those industrial sectors are socially compliant where the foreign buyers impose strict conditions. Even large exporters like spinners tend to ignore the laws and employ child labour because the buyers of Pakistani yarn do not impose any social compliance conditions on spinners.

If the social compliance rules are observed in its true spirit the workers would start owning the company and see the management through no matter how difficult the situation may be.

This was demonstrated during extreme recession in 2008-09 when an auto part making company after incurring loss for six months decided to cut the salary expenses by 40 percent.

This could have been done by either firing 40 percent of the staff or reducing the salaries across the board by the same percentage. A meeting of entire workforce of 400 was called and they opted for 40 percent reduction in salaries instead of retrenchment of the junior most staff.

Due to adherence to social compliance principles the workers and the management stuck together as one family.

After the storm was weathered the salaries returned to normal and company retained its best talent in the worst times. This was not an exporting company.

The International Labour Organization (ILO) constitution states: “And whereas conditions of labour exist involving such injustice, hardship and privation to large numbers of people as to produce unrest so great that the peace and harmony of the world are imperiled.” This very line makes it clear that setting up proper conditions of work are critical for sustainable and peaceful societies world over.

The ILO says people aspire to have not just a job but a good job. The United Nations labour wing adds wages, working time, work organisation and conditions of work, arrangements to balance working life and the demands of family and life outside work, non-discrimination and protection from harassment and violence at work are core elements of the employment relationship and of workers’ protection, and also affect economic performance.

Mansoor Ahmad