

Nothing to inspect?

More proof that the new Pakistan is like the old Pakistan has been delivered. This time the Punjab government has imposed a ban on labour inspections in factories. This is not because health and safety conditions in factories have improved, or that factories are meeting building laws, but simply to offer relief to businessmen who have been complaining about the larger economic downturn and taxation efforts of the current government. The restoration of labour inspections in 2012 under the PML-N government was not accepted with open arms. However, this was a necessary measure, after numerous factory fires, collapses and workplace accidents came to light.

Now by banning labour inspections, the Punjab government wants to make one thing clear: workers are its lowest priority. Any workplace deaths should now be directly blamed on the Punjab governance machinery, whose head has issued the orders banning labour inspections. Obliging industries is the favoured practice of most governments in Pakistan. Even the restoration of labour inspections half a decade ago only came after pressure from labour unions and international labour rights bodies.

Now, the government will once again stand in violation of the constitution, labour laws and ILO conventions. All rulers flaunt claims of being pro-poor, but it is impossible to be pro-poor and anti-worker at the same time. The poor in any country constitute the large body of underpaid workers. It is these workers whose protections are being taken away, rather than strengthened. If anything, the government could have used its ongoing tax crackdown to regulate workplace safety in a much stricter manner. What is needed in fact is new legislation enforcing stricter labour laws, which gives more rights to workers. The current government, instead, seems more interested in offering a palliative to industrialists, who have been the main reason Pakistan remains mired in crippling poverty and why the workforce remains precarious. Factories need trade unions to work in tandem with labour inspectors to improve the lot of workers. Much like the good work of the Punjab Food and Revenue authorities in recent times, Punjab could do well with an independent labour inspection authority. Moreover, there is a need to bring in the informal sector, including agricultural and construction labour, under the ambit of health and safety as well as labour laws.

The absence of labour inspections between 2003 and 2012 created a situation where more and more dangerous accidents claiming the lives of workers took place. There is little doubt that labour leaders will not take this decision lightly. Labour unions have promised to protest outside the Punjab Assembly on September 20 if labour inspections are not restored. Another two workers died from a roof collapse at a garments factory in Faisalabad just this week. This shows the dangers of operating in a world without labour inspections.