

Labour policy

The Punjab government has taken a bold step to announce a labour policy for the province. Coming as part of the PTI government's 100-day programme, the Punjab Labour Policy 2018 was announced last week by the Punjab labour minister. Much of the announcements involved the enforcement of existing laws and policies, such as eliminating child labour, ending bonded labour, enforcing minimum wage, free medical facilities, health and safety legislation, legislation for home-based and domestic workers, improving the workplace for women and facilitating trade union formation. While none of these is a new policy per se, it is positive to see that the PTI government in Punjab has taken a step to consolidate all of these and stated that it will be a priority for the government. The trouble is that the gap between loud proclamations of labour welfare and the dim reality of their actual lives has remained wide open in previous governments too. The real question is how the Punjab government thinks its policy is different from previous such attempts to claim that the rights of the workers of the province will be protected.

Labour leaders have criticised the policy for lacking the most important point: an enforcement mechanism. Does the Punjab government plan to undertake reform of the Labour Department to ensure that it does actually work in favour of labour? How does it plan to counter the power of big landholders and industrialists, who often use the power of the police to register fake cases against any labourer who attempts to form a legal trade union? How does it plan to enforce health and safety mechanisms for labour in a context where industrialists continue to refuse to let labour inspectors enter their premises? How will the Punjab government manage to curb harassment of women at the workplace and their low-waged status in industry and agriculture? And, most challenging of all, how will it actually intervene in the home-based and domestic labour sectors, which remain very much undocumented contributors to the country's GDP?

One could suggest that the PTI could do its best by focusing on protecting one fundamental workers' right: the freedom to associate. If the government is able to successfully protect trade unions for workers, these trade unions can become the enforcement mechanism that protects and enforces the other legal rights of workers. The labour minister has said that he wants labour inspectors to sit at industrial units to ensure all workers are registered. This would be a positive step if the government begins to enforce it, and would empower workers to take up and enforce their legitimate rights in the workplace.

Editorial