ILO Report – Analysing Labour on a Warming Planet

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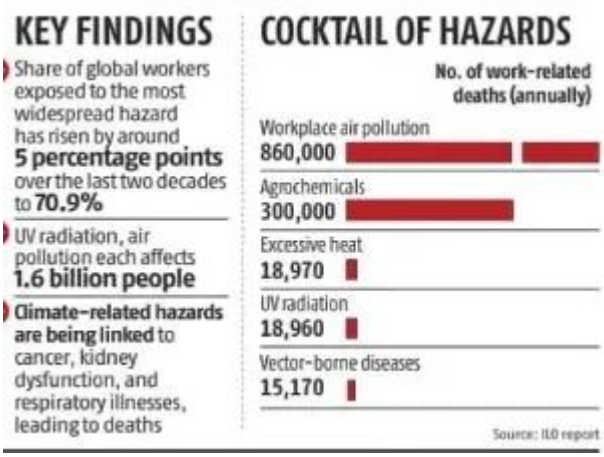
What's in today's article?

Background

- The International Labour Organisation (ILO) had recently published a report title "Ensuring safety and health at work in a changing climate".
- The ILO published this report to bring attention to the global health threat workers are currently facing.
- The report indicates that there is an urgent call to ensure the future of labour is climate proofed and to address the constantly evolving work environment as the planet warms.
- The report states that **well over a third of the world's population, are exposed to excessive heat annually**, leading to almost 23 million work-related injuries.

- The ILO has sought an overhaul of existing Occupational Safety and Health-related (OSH) protections and laws, as they “have struggled to keep up with the evolving risks from climate change, resulting in worker mortality and morbidity.”

What Are the Emerging Hazards?



- The ILO has identified six key impacts of climate change. They are:
    - Excessive heat
    - Ultraviolet (UV) radiation
    - Extreme weather events
    - Workplace air pollution
    - Vector-borne diseases
    - Agrochemicals
- These could lead to a range of health issues such as stress, stroke and exhaustion.
- The ILO mentions agriculture workers, workers in the construction sector, conservancy workers in cities and those employed in transport and tourism as most affected by climate change.
- It is also important to take note of the **global rise in gig employment, which is highly heat-susceptible** .
    - It is also one of India’s fastest growing worker communities, such as ride hailing app drivers, food and groceries deliverers, home repair workers like electrician, plumbers, and AC mechanics, and courier service employees.
    - Gig workers constitute about 1.5% of India’s total work force, which is projected to grow to about 4.5% by 2030, according to a Nasscom study.
- In the Indian context, all these segments put together suggest that about **80% of the country’s 2023 workforce of 600 million is susceptible to heat-related hazards**.
- That is 180 million more than the entire current population of South America.

Which Sectors Are Affected the Most?

- **Agriculture Sector**:
    - Agriculture is by far the most heat susceptible sector globally, particularly so in the developing world, where informal farm labourers work with little to no weather protection.

    - According to the Union Agriculture Minister Arjun Munda, December 2023 replies in Parliament, '**about 45.76% of the total Indian workforce was engaged in agriculture and allied sector during 2022-23**'.
    - This is fast reducing, and about 20% down from the numbers working in agriculture three decades ago.
    - The NSSO data of July 2018-June 2019 reveal that almost 90% of Indian farmers own less than two hectares of land, and earn an average monthly income of a little over ₹10,000.
    - Farmers in the bottom three States of Jharkhand, Odisha and West Bengal are earning as low as ₹4,895, ₹5,112, and ₹6,762.
    - About half of India's farmers are indebted, they lack access to modern technology and the latest research in agriculture.
    - This leaves little room for them to invest in adapting to a warming planet.
    - Many communities have already begun shifting work timings to early mornings and sun-down hours as a heat coping mechanism.
    - The ILO advices more hydration points, breaks and rest shelters in the country's plantations.
- **Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSME) Sector**:
    - Agriculture is followed by India's MSME sector that **employs about 21% of the country's workforce, or more than 123 million workers**.
    - This sector of about 64 million enterprises, second only in size to China's MSME segment, contributes almost half of India's exports and more than a third of the country's total manufacturing output.
    - Yet, the overwhelming informalization of the sector has meant little to no oversight of worker conditions by State Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) departments, leaving them highly vulnerable to heat hazards.
- **Building & Construction Sector**:
    - MSME sector is followed by the building and construction segment which **constitutes about 70 million workers, almost 12% of India's workforce**.
    - Workers here must cope with the urban heat island effect, as construction is a highly urban-centric economy, with rising growth in cities.
    - Construction workers are also the most prone to physical injuries and air pollution related health hazards, like asthma, as several Indian cities are among the most polluted globally.

What Laws Address Workplace Safety?

- A range of more than 13 central laws in India regulate working conditions across several sectors. These include:
    - The Factories Act, 1948, the Workmen Compensation Act, 1923, the Building and Other Construction Workers Act, 1996, the Plantations Labour Act, 1951, the Mines Act, 1952 and the Inter-State Migrant Workmen Act, 1979,
- These laws were consolidated and amended in September 2020 under one law — the **Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions Code, 2020** (OSH Code, 2020).
- While several unions are critical of the new law for watering down safety and inspection standards, **the Union government is yet to officially notify its enforcement**.

- This has meant that unions and the judiciary continue to rely on the older laws to seek redress and accountability.
- The **Indian Factories Act** defines a factory as an enterprise with “10 or more” workers, but those registered under this law are less than a quarter of a million based on the latest available data.
    - An overwhelming majority of India’s 64 million MSMEs are not registered under this law, and are therefore outside the purview of governmental inspections.
- **Provisions w.r.t. Heat Hazards**:
    - When it comes to dealing with occupational heat, the **Factories Act broadly defines “ventilation and temperature” and leaves it to the States to decide optimal standards based on specific industries**.
    - However, these regulations were framed more than five decades back. For instance, Maharashtra framed its rules under the law in 1963, while Tamil Nadu did so in 1950. Both these rules mention a maximum wet bulb temperature of 30°C on a shop floor with a height of 1.5 metres and also mention provisioning “adequate air movement of at least 30 meters per minute”.
- **Provisions w.r.t. Other Climate Hazards**:
    - While the OSH 2020 Code has attempted some remediation, lawyers point to a clause which allows online inspection of safety by enterprises.
    - These raise serious concerns of compromising a law that is already weak in implementation.

Q1. Who started Labour Day in India?

India began celebrating Labour Day on May 1, 1923, in Chennai, and is also known as ‘Kamgar Divas’, ‘Kamgar Din’, and ‘Antrarashtriya Shramik Divas’. The day was first observed by the Labour Kisan Party of Hindustan, and is considered a national holiday in the country.

Q2. What is the objective of the National Skill Development Mission?

Ensuring high-quality training standards through high-quality teaching and benchmarked institutions according to national and international standards which result in a highly-skilled workforce and global job opportunities.

Source: Analysing labour on a warming planet