

‘Suspending labour laws is a false choice’: Wipro's Azim Premji

He also wrote that the economic support announced should be in addition to the already committed government expenditure and not a reclassification of the earlier commitments.

The death of sixteen migrant workers who were mowed down by a train last week is ‘an unforgivable tragedy’, Wipro's Founder Chairman Azim Premji has said in an article authored by him in the Economic Times on Saturday.

This tragedy, he said, is one of the most wrenching markers of the tremendous misery being faced by the weakest and the poorest in this country.

In this context, Azim Premji expressed shock over state governments considering the suspension of some of the labour laws related to settling industrial disputes, occupational safety, working conditions, trade unions, migrant labourers, minimum wages, among others.

He called this a false choice, which would put workers and businesses against each other.

“Over the past few decades labour laws have changed such that they are hardly among industry’s top constraints. At the same time, social security measures have not increased, thus worsening the precarity of the employed. Diluting these already lax laws will not boost economic activity, it will only exacerbate the conditions of the low wage earners and the poor,” he added.

It is the lack of social security and worker protection that killed those sixteen young men, and not because there is too much of it, he further said.

According to him, it is the unjust treatment of the migrant labour that triggered the mass reverse migration.

Further, at a time when the economic crisis is having a devastating impact on the rural agrarian sector, and the informal economy, Azam Premji believes that taking the approach of “‘livelihoods versus lives’, meaning reviving economic activity versus measures to tackle the pandemic, is not only a false choice but also a dysfunctional and unethical way of framing the issue.

"The pandemic must be dealt with on the healthcare front fully and comprehensively, while the people and the economy must be supported, equally to ameliorate the immediate human suffering and to minimise long-term damage. Given the seriousness of the situation, the Union and State Governments must play a central role," he said.

While welcoming the Rs 20 lakh crore economic package announced by the government, Azim Premji also made some suggestions on what actions could be taken over the next 1-2 years.

For starters, he said that the 10% of the GDP that PM Modi announced for battling the crisis, should be in addition to the already committed government expenditure and interventions and should in no way be a reclassification of the earlier commitments.

Emergency cash relief of Rs 7,000 per month for at least 3 months: This, Azim Premji suggested, should be given to each poor household/migrant worker without biometric authentication. He also suggested that minimum wages for 25 days per month should be released to all poor urban residents for the period of the lockdown and for at least two months post the lockdown.

Expanding Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MNREGA): Azim Premji believes that an additional allocation Rs 1 lakh crore should be made to MGNREGA, along with increasing the guaranteed number of days per household and increasing the daily wage. This will help all those who demand work, he said.

Social security and food security: These, he said, are the most important actions to mitigate the humanitarian crisis. “We must universalise and double the PDS ration for 3-6 months and distribute it free through doorstep delivery along with cooking oil, pulses, salt, masala, sanitary pads and soap in advance to all,” he wrote.

Autonomy for stranded migrant workers: No one should be forced either to stay back or to return to their home states, he said. Stranded migrant workers should be allowed to travel for free on buses and trains.

Ensuring timely payment of wages: Azim Premji suggested that an Urban Employment Guarantee Scheme similar to the MNREGA be designed and rolled out. Both these schemes can enable creation of infrastructure and agrarian assets, which will form the backbone of the countries’ economic revival, he said, further adding that a “serious and sustained investment in public health will help the campaign against this and future pandemics, and help build up a desperately needed functioning and responsive National Health System in our country.”

Public investment in agriculture: Premji said that there should be some money allocated to increase public investment in agriculture to “promote sustainable farming initiatives, stronger procurement systems for grains at remunerative prices, and the expansion of local storage and value-addition for perishable crops.”