

Mauritius - An African tourist destination responds to the disruption of COVID-19

Mauritius is a tourism destination island nation of 1.2 million people. The coronavirus entered the island on the 18th March, 2020. As of May 14, 2020, the country had recorded 332 confirmed cases with 322 recoveries and 10 deaths.

The government of Prime Minister Pravind Jugnauth rightly likened the emergence of the pandemic to a “war situation” and announced measures to rein in the virus and also to alleviate the impact of the crisis on the people.

Public health measures –

10 weeks lockdown from 20th March to the 4th of May 2020. The lockdown was extended to the 1st of June 2020. The easing of the lockdown for some economic sectors to resume operations is foreseen for the 15th of May 2020 when workers of those sectors will be issued Access Permit.

The lockdown involved closure of the airport and seaports; closure of schools; imposition of curfew; restriction on movement of persons; quarantine of persons from countries with the coronavirus (over 2,000 people quarantined in government facilities and private hotels); testing and contact tracing (identifying persons who had contact with infected persons), and treatment. The measures were meant to achieve social distancing and prevent the spread of the virus.

In furtherance of social distancing, for people to get supplies of essential goods and services while the lockdown remained, they were allowed to shop on allocated days depending on the first letter of their surname. This means that those whose surnames begin with A-F shop on Monday and Thursday, G-N on Tuesday and Friday and O-Z on Wednesday and Saturday. The shops are closed on Sunday.

Tax measures –

- To promote working from home, the Government introduced a tax reduction scheme which gives employers a double tax deduction in respect of emoluments payable to its staff who work from home and a 5% tax credit on the acquisition of information technology system. These measures are available through to 30 June 2020.
- Companies may also be eligible for certain enhanced tax deductions for plant and machinery acquired during the period 1 March 2020 through 30 June 2020.

Economic stimulus measures –

- The Central Bank provided households impacted by COVID-19 a moratorium of six (6) months on capital repayments of their existing household loans as from the 1st of April 2020. Low-income groups will have the Bank of Mauritius bear the interest payable on outstanding household credits with commercial banks up to June 2020.
- The Bank of Mauritius removed shared ATM fees and continued to maintain an adequate supply of banknotes to commercial banks for their ATMs.
- Non-renewal of road taxes and vehicle insurance not be enforced for one month. Electricity consumption rates have also been reduced for low-income groups and small businesses.
- The BOM has initiated a USD/MUR swap arrangement with commercial banks for an initial amount of USD100 million to enable commercial banks to support import-oriented

businesses, except for the State Trading Corporation which will be dealing directly with the Bank of Mauritius for its foreign currency requirements until further notice.

Employment-related measures -

The employment measures were fashioned out with consideration for the Worker's Rights Act of 2019.

- Both public and private sector establishments were encouraged to allow their workers, especially non-essential services providers to work from home.
- COVID-19 Work Access Permits were issued to key persons of all organizations who need access to their places of work.
- Workers are not to be forced to work. For essential services workers, the employers must provide them with Personal Protective Equipment.
- Workers are not supposed to experience wage cuts during the COVID-19 containment period. Any company unable to meet its wage bill can apply for *Wage Assistance subsidy*. This wage subsidy helps to alleviate the employee cost for March ranging from 15 days basic wage bill to MUR 12,500 (approx. USD 312) per employee.
- Workers from the informal sector, especially self-employed not registered with the revenue authority were promised *50% of the prevailing minimum wage* if they registered (online) with the revenue authority during the COVID-19 lockdown.
- Government to allow employees who become technically unemployed temporarily due to the crisis to access the *Priority Sectors' Assistance* facility. Those who qualified are workers in the travel and tourism sector, export-oriented enterprises, ICT/BPO sector, SMEs and other sectors of the economy that can show relevant contributions to the nation's revenue creation base.

Some gaps in the nation's COVID-19 containment measures –

Some companies that engaged migrant workers did little to pay them their wages and to provide them with PPE. The instances negate the pledge by the government to ensure that no worker suffers wage loss.

Some of the gaps in the measures adopted include-

- Blanket access to the tax and fiscal stimulus provided by the government did not only favor the needy but provided also for the greedy.
- As workers, trade unions and government were busy struggling to contain the virus, a section of the organised business community was busy making moves to undermine the Worker's Rights Act of 2019 under the pretext that its provisions would contribute to the collapse of businesses.
- So far, there have been no social dialogue processes to allow for consultation and common engagement in the fight against the COVID-19.

Trade union contributions to the COVID-19 containment and their way forward

The trade unions have been active in getting their members and the general public to focus on ensuring that everyone stays safe and alive by heeding official health advice and respecting measures announced. This has been done mainly through social media based communication.

Social media and internet have also been used in an interactive manner with union members. These media have been used to compile grievances arising from working from home (WFH) arrangements. Some such grievances have been heavier workloads sent at odd hours; inadequate internet facilities to undertake tasks; and even unannounced home visits by supervisors that violate worker's privacy, family and social life.

Mauritius trade unions appear to have come to terms with the fact WFH is an emerging reality of the world of work and is bound to become popular going forward. They have already developed union positions that they would want employers and government to consider and take into account for the relevant legislation.

The unions also appear ready to pursue their interest in amendments to the Occupational Safety and Health Act of 2005 that would include new provisions for workers' access to hygienic facilities at workplaces.

It is also impressive that Mauritius trade unions have been vigilant and active in protecting the human and labour rights of workers, including non-unionized and migrant workers. An instance is the solidarity gesture of the Construction Workers' Union of Mauritius (CMWEU) and CTSP who came to the aid of 144 unpaid Indian migrant workers employed by Swadeshi Pvt Ltd, an Indian construction company in Mauritius. The workers were vulnerable to COVID-19 as they complained of not being provided with PPEs to protect themselves. In response, the unions distributed hygiene packs to the workers on the 17th of April 2020.

Trade unions in Mauritius have made good effort during this period of crisis that they must consolidate and build upon. Greater cohesion among the various national trade union centers and renewed effort at working together can only strengthen the unity of workers and their possibility to exert more influence on the direction of national economic and social policies. The challenges of survival for workers under the COVID-19 crisis and the demands of recovery after will require stronger organisation and representation of the workers. Trade union leaders of today should live up to their responsibilities and respond to the urgent need to put up the united front that is needed to protect workers' rights in a sustainable manner and ensure that our countries can make the necessary progress that would benefit all the peoples.