

While millions of workers face economic devastation because of COVID-19, Commonwealth governments are not doing enough on income support

ITUC Global COVID-19 Survey: 30 March - 2 April 2020

Key Findings for Commonwealth Countries

The ILO's latest analysis of the catastrophic effect of COVID-19 on working hours and earnings shows that there could be loss of 22 million full time equivalent jobs (based on a 40 hour working week) in Africa and 150 million in Asia-Pacific, where most Commonwealth citizens are found. Meanwhile a union survey of government responses to COVID-19 shows that Commonwealth governments are not providing sufficient support for incomes and wages, although employers in the Commonwealth are doing better than in the rest of the world.

Introduction

116 trade unions from 94 countries took part in the second ITUC Global COVID-19 Survey between 30 March – 2 April 2020. 21 out of 54 Commonwealth countries (including Zimbabwe) responded, including Australia, Bangladesh, Botswana, Cameroon, Canada, Fiji, Dominica, Ghana, India, Kenya, Malta, New Zealand, Nigeria, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Singapore, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Uganda and the UK.

Overall, two thirds of Commonwealth countries are part of the global lockdown, which is pretty much the same proportion as we found globally. But the Commonwealth scores worse on the provision of income and wage support than the rest of the world and those countries which are providing such support are doing slightly worse than the global picture on providing sufficient support to pay for essentials.

Commonwealth governments are slightly less likely than overall to be considered to be doing well in the face of the crisis by their national trade unions, although a majority are doing well. But employers were considered by unions to be doing considerably better in Commonwealth countries than in the world as a whole: indeed a majority of unions in the Commonwealth said employers were doing well compared with a minority in the world as a whole.

1. Government responses to COVID-19

14 Commonwealth countries (67%) are **containing the spread of the virus with national lock down measures**, while 7 Commonwealth countries (33%) are still attempting to **delay the spread of the virus**. The global figures are 68% and 31% respectively.

2. Government provision of income or wages support

13 Commonwealth countries (62%) are **providing income support or wage protection**, a lower proportion than in our global survey which showed 72% doing so. 8 Commonwealth countries (38%) are **not providing income support or wage protection** (higher than the global percentage of 31%).

3. Adequacy of wage protection and income support for essentials

Of the 13 Commonwealth countries which have income protection and wage support, 7 countries (54%) say they are enough to cover essentials, 6 countries (46%) say they are not enough to cover essentials. Again, this is slightly worse than the global picture, where 59% are providing enough for essentials.

4. Assessment of government responses

13 Commonwealth governments (62%) are considered by unions to be responding well to the needs of workers in the crisis, compared with 65% in the global survey. But 8 Commonwealth governments (38%) are responding badly.

5. Assessment of employer responses

However, employers in a majority (12 out of 21) of Commonwealth countries (57%) are responding well to the crisis, which is much higher than the global figure of 44%, with just 43% of employers in Commonwealth countries responding badly to the crisis compared to a majority in the world as a whole (56%).

Conclusions

Africa has been identified in the ITUC survey as a particular problem. 57% of governments surveyed in Africa are not providing wage protection and income support for workers.

“We cannot just sit by and wait for the pandemic to attack countries in Africa with the same ferocity that it has elsewhere without a plan of action. We must be prepared with all the tools at our disposal to support these countries – many of whom the world, including advanced economies, relies on for food and materials through global supply chains.

“The ILO has given a stark warning with the projection of the decline in working hours equivalent to a loss of 230 million full time workers globally - there are difficult times ahead. Only by working together with social dialogue between unions, employers and governments and the commitment for global co-ordination will people retain trust in governments. This is the basis for a post-pandemic future that leaves no one behind,” said Sharan Burrow, General Secretary, ITUC.

The ITUC is calling for immediate support for a Global Fund for Universal Social Protection for the poorest countries to support health care and income support, and for the IMF to co-ordinate fiscal stimulus, issue additional special drawing rights (SDRs), set up a Trust Fund into which advanced economies can re-allocate their holdings of SDRs and earmark the Trust Fund for public health, social protection and jobs. Further proposals for both the IMF and the World Bank are set out here:

https://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/global_unions_statement_imf-wb_4-2020.pdf

The Commonwealth Trade Union Group – under the umbrella of the ITUC – represents 70 million workers in over 40 Commonwealth countries. The full ITUC survey is at https://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/200407_ituc_covid-19_globalsurveyreport_en.pdf