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Social Justice, the Pandemic, And the Right to Employment

The government doesn't give us any support at all. Our children have to help us out. Some brothers and sisters have nothing. We need social security health care and the right to housing. We don't want hand-outs; we want work. Thanks to our work, we eat. The right to a job for non-wage workers is very necessary.

(Guillermo Ramayo, representative of the Plaza Garibaldi Troubadours Union)

They didn't let me back into the house where I had worked for three years. They asked me to put the keys in through the window so they wouldn't catch it. Since that day, my boss hasn't taken my calls.

(Adela Guerrero, domestic worker)

Our incomes have gone down a lot during the pandemic. This makes us vulnerable. We need the authorities to implement a program for decent housing for informal workers.

(Román Dichi Lara, representative of the Organ-grinders Union of Mexico)

Given the lack of government support, we have created a mutual support system among ourselves. When a person is sick, he or she gets Mex\$2,000. When someone dies, the family is given Mex\$120,000. To do this, each of us contributes Mex\$650 a month. This is the way we've found to take care of each other. As of February 2021, fifteen brothers or sisters have died of COVID-19.

(Erick Díaz, representative of the Mexico City Photographers Union)

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Talking about social justice during the pandemic requires seeing and hearing those who embody the consequences of inequality. These people's words give us a small taste of what more than half the population making their living in the informal sector are experiencing in Mexico.

Social justice presupposes equal rights and the possibility for all human beings to benefit from economic and social progress everywhere. Promoting social justice not only means increasing incomes and creating jobs, but doing so in a way that that process is compatible with human rights, dignity, and autonomy. In that sense, the transition from the twentieth to the twenty-first century has shown us how economic growth as an end in itself and not seen as a means to achieving human security and quality of life has wrought more poverty, social polarization, and ecological precariousness.

Consensus exists today about the desirability of economic growth with social justice. On November 26, 2007, the UN General Assembly declared February 20 World Day of Social Justice to remind us of the importance that signers states must carry out concrete actions so that all people without distinction can exercise all their rights in the framework of sustainable development. This includes decent work; equality of men and women; universal, inclusive education with a human rights perspective; universal health; access to decent housing; and the elimination of racism, classism, homophobia, xenophobia, sexism, ableism, and other stigmas against people that naturalize relations of privilege and subordination.

We need these and other rights to be able to live with dignity and have quality of life, not just to survive in a polarized society with generalized labor precariousness, which unfortunately is the day-to-day existence of many people. This context was exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. For a year and a half, we have stopped the normal course of working life, prioritizing certain activities considered more essential than others, demanding that both men and women work from home.

In a country like Mexico, where more than half the population works at informal jobs, this becomes a demand that cannot be met. Thus, the pandemic has brought to the fore social injustice and all the pending tasks we have for guaranteeing the rights of all persons in order for social justice to be achieved.

There is no doubt that those who already lived in situations of discrimination and labor inequality have

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had greater difficulties in the face of COVID-19. Obviously, those already experiencing exclusion because they didn't have a formal job and, as a result, didn't have access to private medical insurance or public social security health care, have been left without the possibility to have orientation to protect their health, be treated in clinics, or acquire medications. This is the case of migrants or agricultural day-laborers, non-wage workers, domestic workers, street-market or delivery workers, volunteers in public cleaning services, street musicians, parking attendants, and other similar kinds of laborers.

In addition, we need to take into account that informal workers are more discriminated against when they are women, disabled, indigenous-language speakers, or migrants. And it is not only a matter of health care; they have also had to deal with serious economic problems because they cannot leave the house to work.

When we talk about how social justice for informal workers has been affected, we come face to face with the fact that day after day during the pandemic they have had no income whatsoever. People employed in the informal sector cannot offer their services at a distance. They have had to resort to relatives and friends, sell their belongings, and even change their eating habits. In addition, many of them have had to move to other cheaper, smaller accommodations, change cities, or go to live with relatives because of their lack of income.

Because of its importance, I want to emphasize this issue of housing. Today, when we have turned our work, education, and even recreation inward to our homes, we realize the importance of having an ample, appropriate, ventilated, sunny space with Internet connectivity. This ideal housing is reflected in our physical and mental health. Generally, people who experience economic vulnerability live on the city's outskirts and do not have services as basic as running water. They cannot achieve social distancing or access the hygiene measures needed to protect themselves from the virus, which is aggravated by over-

crowding and the need to travel long distances in public transportation in the case of those who could not stop working. It is not only that the house does not protect them from contagion; it can even become a place for the propagation of the disease. In addition, families' being closed up together without privacy or spaces for each of their members to develop has increased cases of violence in the home.

We can see, then, that situations involving social injustice are widespread. However, I think it's fundamental in this context of the pandemic to reflect about the right to employment. According to Inter-American Development Bank figures, in 2020, in Mexico, COVID-19 caused the loss of 18 percent of formal jobs and 40 percent of informal jobs, for a total of 58 percent.¹ If we zero in on Mexico City, a study by Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO) showed that in 2019, informal work made up 51.3 percent of all jobs.² This means that more than half the population has no kind of benefits like pensions, savings, health services, or childcare. Their only alternative is to use whatever small amount of savings they have—if they have any at all—, or resort to the solidarity of relatives and friends.

Many domestic workers were sent home “to rest” without pay and with no date for returning. This means they were fired without any severance pay. A large part of informal workers, particularly female heads-of-households, are financially responsible for their children and have no one else to take on that role. So, leaving them without work meant leaving an entire family without food, housing, and healthcare. While the economic consequences of the pandemic have been very difficult to deal with for everyone, these examples show the degree of vulnerability of those who do not have a formal job. And we don't know how long we will take to recover the little road advanced in this area.

Given this situation, the outlook is not very encouraging. The economic and social crisis we are facing in 2021 is much more profound for those who lack decent working condi-

The pandemic brought with it a revolution in the way we relate to each other both work-wise and personally. We have gone through changes that only a short while ago would have seemed unthinkable.

tions. Everything indicates that not only the coming months, but the coming years will be uphill for these people. But the responsibility for making their situation better does not fall on their shoulders: it's not a matter of their solely having the will to work. What is needed to fight the inequality they are experiencing. I have brought together a series of ideas being promoted in civil society in recent months, proposals the authorities, organizations, and all of society in constant dialogue with those affected by the COVID-19 pandemic have the responsibility to carry out:

1. *Making visible the working conditions of informal workers.* These people, the value of their work, their contribution to society, and the situation they live in must be seen in order to create empathy and solidarity among the public, as well as to demand the authorities guarantee their rights. Both the media and social media are excellent channels for sending the entire population messages that make it possible to truly see what non-wage workers experience.

It is important that the authorities and everyone know who we are, what our contribution is as non-wage workers: traditions, identity, services. We offer an economic contribution. We are generators of the local economy.

(Erick Díaz, representative of the Mexico City Photographers Union)

2. *Universal healthcare.* The pandemic makes the urgency of this right very clear, regardless of people's working conditions. Access to social security health care must be restructured for all, men and women. This is a historic debt of the state, and, after the COVID-19 crisis, it cannot be postponed.

Before, we had access to the clinic for non-wage workers, and they took that away from us; they left us with nothing. Our children have to help us out. Some brothers and sisters have nothing.

(Guillermo Ramayo, representative of the Plaza Garibaldi Troubadours Union)

3. *A minimum living income.* It is absolutely necessary to provide an income that allows people to subsist who are at risk of hunger or to their health who have no other

social support, until they can return to their economic activities or can reinsert themselves in the so-called “new normal.” This must be done through direct transfers. Several organizations have taken this proposal to legislators and it would be a great support for those who have lost so much.

With the pandemic, we no longer eat three meals a day; now it’s only two.

(Adela Guerrero, domestic worker)

4. *Take social rights seriously.* We cannot minimize the importance of these rights or think that the market will self-regulate. Jobs have to be guaranteed in times of crisis, firings, wage cuts, and the dismantling of the social security system prohibited.

I got COVID in December, which was a month with a lot of expenses to get oxygen; and in all that time, I didn’t make a cent.

(Román Dichi, representative of the Organ-grinders Union of Mexico)

5. *Offer governmental economic support and non-interest loans so workers can restart their activities.*

“We need the government to see us and support us.”

(Guillermo Ramayo, representative of the Plaza Garibaldi Troubadours Union)

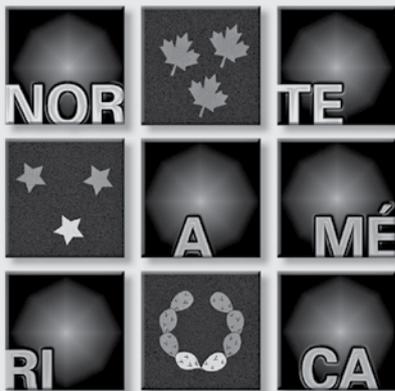
The pandemic brought with it a revolution in the way we relate to each other both work-wise and personally. We have gone through changes that only a short while ago would have seemed unthinkable. We have seen that we can adapt to new scenarios, and now it’s very clear that urgent changes are needed so those who experience social injustice can improve their living conditions. We cannot ignore the needs of the most vulnerable. It is the government’s responsibility, and that of the entire society, to offer mechanisms to ensure that everyone can exercise all their rights. ■■■

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1 IDB, *¿Cómo impactará la covid-19 al empleo? Posibles escenarios para América Latina y el Caribe*, 2020, https://publications.iadb.org/publications/spanish/document/C%C3%B3mo_impactar%C3%A1_la_COVID-19_al_empleo_Posibles_escenarios_para_Am%C3%A9rica_Latina_y_el_Caribe.pdf.

2 WIEGO, *La crisis del covid-19 y la economía informal*, 2020, <https://www.wiego.org/publications/la-crisis-del-covid-19-y-la-economia-informal-trabajadoras-y-trabajadores-en-empleo>.

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