

15 May 2020

Trade Union Responses to COVID-19 Pandemic - Part 1

A. REGIONAL PANDEMIC SITUATIONER: IMPACT ON BWI INDUSTRIES

1. Impact on BWI Industries and Affected Workers

Asia Pacific was the first regional epicentre of the COVID-19 pandemic. Cases of infection were first confirmed in China's Wuhan City in Hubei Province and made publicly known at the end of January 2020. Soon after the whole of China and East Asia became "hotspots" and governments began to implement strict lockdown and containment measures. By February and March, many of the countries in Southeast Asia, South Asia and the Pacific and Oceania declared similar lockdowns, albeit at varying degrees. While the region has now been overtaken by Europe as the new epicentre of the pandemic, the health impacts on the region have been staggering.

In terms of the construction and wood and forestry industries, the hardest hit countries in the Asia Pacific are those experiencing total or partial shutdown of work sites. Seven (7) countries have declared a total shutdown (usually with the exception of industries considered "essential"): New Zealand, India, Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Malaysia and the Philippines. Six (6) countries have declared a partial shutdown: Fiji, Pakistan, South Korea, Singapore, Myanmar and Thailand. Six (6) other countries have continued operations in construction and/or forestry: Australia, Japan, Hong Kong, Cambodia, Indonesia (wood and forestry only), and Vietnam (wood and forestry only).



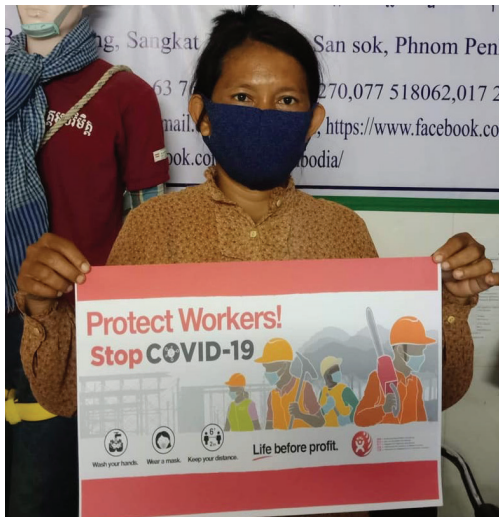
There are more than 76 million workers in the construction and forestry industries across the above-mentioned countries, with roughly 64 million in construction and more than 11 million in forestry. While the specific impacts of COVID-19 on these workers varied across countries and sectors, in all of these places, construction and forestry have slowed down because of labour shortages (workers are unable to go to work because of health reasons or because of containment measures), supply-chain disruptions (most of the building materials come from China) and decreased demand for industry products and services.

2. Pathways and social partner agreements on COVID-19 policies

In the Asia-Pacific region, in the majority of countries, governments have created COVID-19 policies through unilateral means while in a few cases there have been bipartite or tripartite agreements. For the construction industry, unilateral government policies have been instituted in the following countries: New Zealand, Fiji, India, Nepal, Pakistan, South Korea, Hong Kong, Hong Kong, Japan, Malaysia, and Singapore. For the forestry industry, unilateral government policies are in place in the following countries: New Zealand, India, Nepal, Malaysia and Vietnam.



Know more about BWI and Affiliates' COVID-19 Responses at:
<https://odoo.bwint.org/cms/covid-19-union-response-1689>



Although governments may have adopted unilateral policies, unions have often carried out advocacy or participated in policy-making. In India, for example, the 45-member BWI Indian Affiliates Council (IAC) representing both construction and forestry unions undertook online consultations with members and submitted a 10-point “charter of demands” to the Indian Prime Minister and the Ministry of Labour in relation to the government’s extended lockdown policy. Moreover, in countries considered to be migrant hotspots such as Singapore, Thailand and Malaysia, BWI affiliates have coordinated with civil society groups to ensure that migrants are included and gain access to COVID 19-related government policies and programmes.

Other countries in the region (Australia, Cambodia, Philippines, Thailand and Myanmar) adopted either bipartite or tripartite agreements and BWI affiliates have actively shaped government policies. In Australia, for example, the BWI affiliates CFMEU and ETU, as part of the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU), successfully convinced the Australian government to commit to an AUD\$130 billion wage subsidy programme for six months. Moreover, BWI affiliates in Australia and New Zealand have been actively campaigning for worker and union-friendly occupational safety and health protocols in construction and forestry sites. In the Philippines, the BWI affiliate NUBCW has worked for the inclusion of women workers as beneficiaries of the government’s social amelioration programmes. In Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, sector-specific policies have yet to be formulated and BWI affiliates are now pushing for these policies.

B. BWI AND ITS AFFILIATES IN ACTION

1. Employment and Wage Protection

In the Asia Pacific region, most governments have committed to employment support measures and wage subsidy schemes for workers, including those in the construction and forestry industries.

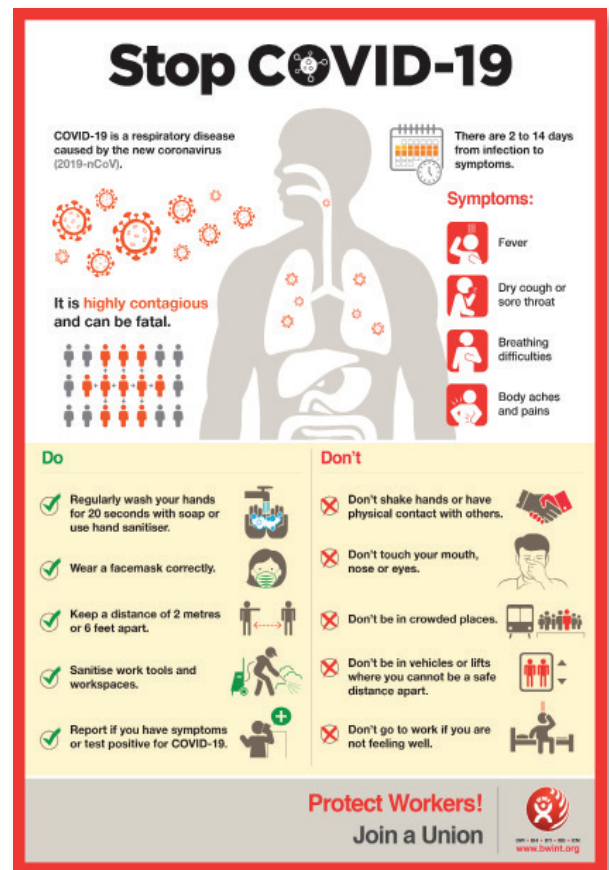
Pacific and Oceania Region. In Australia, through the ‘JobKeeper’ programme, workers will receive at least AUD\$150 per day. In New Zealand, the government has enacted a wage subsidy worth \$585 per week for a full-time employee working 20 hours or more or \$350 per week for a part-time employee. The subsidy is expected to allow businesses to continue paying employees despite the impact of COVID -19 and is available for a 12-week period. In Fiji, the government has allowed workers to access the public pension fund although the process for this has reportedly been slow.

South Asia. In India and Nepal, construction and forestry workers have been able to maintain their jobs and wages. Governments in these countries have prohibited retrenchment or termination of service while lockdowns are ongoing. In Bangladesh the government announced that it would pay the salaries and wages of selected factories but implementation details have yet to be announced. Although operations continue, workers in South Asia face difficulties and BWI unions in this sub-region are actively lobbying governments for social safety nets. In India, for example, BWI unions are demanding a stimulus package, relief to migrant workers, insurance coverage for electricity and water supply workers, and the expansion of testing facilities at worksites and workers’ accommodation facilities.

East Asia. In this sub-region, most countries are relatively developed and wealthy and have committed public spending for stimulus packages and wage subsidies.

In South Korea, the government has declared that it will spend 40 trillion Won (USD 32 billion) to support key industries. In Japan, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has unveiled plans for a stimulus package that will grant all Japanese residents and foreign permanent residents a one-off JPN 100,000 (USD 935) cash payment. In Hong Kong, the government has implemented a HKD \$80 billion (USD 10 billion) “Employment Support Scheme”. The scheme provides wage subsidies to eligible employers to retain their employees. The wage subsidy is equivalent to 50% of the monthly salary capped at \$18,000 and expected to last for a 6-month period. It is intended to benefit 1.5 million employees.

Southeast Asia. In this sub-region, both developed and developing countries have either committed to or have already implemented stimulus packages. In Singapore, the government has adopted three stimulus packages amounting to SGD 41.7 billion (USD 28 billion). A “Jobs Support Scheme” is designed to help enterprises retain their employees. Under this scheme, the government will fund 25% of gross monthly wages, capped at \$4,600 for a period of 9 months, although only Singapore citizens and permanent residents are eligible. In Malaysia, the government introduced a “Wage Subsidy Scheme” as part of the country’s stimulus package for 2020. Thus far, some 30,000 workers have applied for the wage subsidies through their employers. Moreover, households with earnings less than MYR 913 per month (USD 210) are eligible for cash assistance of \$365 per month. In the Philippines, the government has earmarked PHP1.17 trillion (USD 22 billion) for its 4-pillar socio-economic strategy to fight and recover from the pandemic. It has allocated and distributed a social amelioration program (SAP) worth PHP5 billion pesos for workers affected by the lockdown. The SAP allocates PHP 5,000 per displaced local worker and PHP 10,000 per displaced Overseas Filipino Worker (OFW). The Philippine government is also planning to implement a PHP 120-billion credit guarantee programme for affected small businesses, which is also expected to translate into wage subsidies for Covid 19-displaced workers.



2. Health and safety at the workplace

Pacific and Oceania. Unions in Australia and New Zealand have been at the forefront of engaging governments and employers regarding health and safety protocols at work. CFMEU and ETU have met with the Master Builders Association and major employers on health concerns of workers and job continuance.

South Asia. In India, the government has issued an order to all workers’ organizations and employers’ organizations regarding “preventive measures to be taken to contain the spread of novel coronavirus (COVID 19)”. The BWI affiliates in the forestry sector in India have also demanded adequate personal protective equipment (PPE), hand washing/sanitizer facilities and other health safeguards. In Pakistan, the BWI affiliate, the Federation of Building and Wood Workers (PFBWW), which has organised several mega-infrastructure projects including the World-Bank funded Tarbela Dam, has raised concerns regarding working and living conditions.

East Asia. In South Korea, the KFCITU demanded the immediate provision of masks and other PPE, increased oversight to ensure labour-management consultation and OSH committee consultations on response measures, as well as the extension of construction completion deadlines. In Japan, the government has expanded the Industrial Safety and Health Act and companies have been instructed to ensure that workforces are prevented from contracting or spreading infections in the workplace. Protocols include giving instructions to employees regarding hand washing, providing hand sanitizers, ensuring proper indoor ventilation, sanitizing public or common spaces within the worksite and similar measures. In Hong Kong, the Labour Department has issued a “Guidance Note” that stipulates the “obligations and rights of employers and employees under the Employment Ordinance (EO) relating to the Covid 19”.

Southeast Asia. In Malaysia, the Timber Employees Union of Peninsula Malaysia, a BWI affiliate, has called for “mandatory and regular testing of all workers working on the sites... to ensure their health and safety, and so that the industry does not become a vector for the virus”. In the Philippines, the BWI affiliate, the Associated Labor Union (ALU) has proposed that the Philippine government establish a mandatory OSH protocol against COVID 19 for construction workplaces/sites.

3. Migrant Hotspots and Support for Migrant Workers

In Nepal, around 500 workers who had lost their jobs in India because of the shutdown were reported stranded at the border with India in Darchula. They have been unable to go home to Nepal given the lack of transportation services. To address this issue, Nepali officials have opened a suspension bridge that connects Nepal and India.

In Singapore, the government restricted the movement of some 370,000 migrant workers living in dormitories where clusters of COVID-19 cases have been found. As a result, tens of thousands of migrant workers have been unable to work or get access to much needed supplies. To alleviate their plight, the Migrant Workers' Centre (MWC), in collaboration with the Singapore National Trade Union Congress (SNTUC), conducted a donation drive for migrant workers. In Thailand, the Migrant Working Group (MWG) reported that about 60,000 migrant workers living in Thailand left the country since Thai authorities shut shopping malls and many businesses to curb the spread of the coronavirus. For Malaysia's migrant workers, lack of food is the immediate concern as thousands were abandoned by their employers when the Movement Control Order (MCO), the lockdown order, was issued. This dire situation for migrant workers is confirmed by reports concerning 65 Bangladeshi construction workers living in container vans and relying solely on donations from the public to meet their basic needs.

In Qatar, where construction projects for the 2022 FIFA World Cup are underway, BWI has sought to assist construction migrant workers in distress. Almost 90% of the local workforce is comprised of migrant workers mostly coming from Asia: 700,000 Indian, 400,000 Nepali, 400,000 Bangladeshi, 150,000 Pakistanis, 140,000 Sri-Lankans and 236,000 Filipinos. Recently, the construction sites have become a sort of petri-dish for the coronavirus as social distancing is impossible in transport buses, in the cramped living quarters and on the construction sites themselves. In March, in a single industrial compound alone, 238 migrant workers tested positive for Covid 19. Since then, more migrant workers have either fallen sick or have lost their jobs and incomes. Because of the lockdown, they are also unable to go home to their countries of origin. BWI's network of migrant worker leaders, the Community Leaders Forum, composed mostly of workers from the Philippines, India, Nepal and Bangladesh, has collaborated with the Ministry of Labour in Qatar to disseminate information and raise awareness regarding health and employment rights in this time of crisis. BWI has also mobilised a network of volunteers to distribute some 1,336 food packs to workers most in need in areas under lockdown. BWI has also continued to work with the Supreme Committee for Delivery and Legacy (SC) and has held joint health and safety inspections of the construction sites, albeit through virtual means.

4. On Social Protection and Humanitarian Actions

East Asia. In Hong Kong, the government will cover one month's rent for lower-income tenants living in public rental units.

South Asia. In India, the State Building and Construction Workers Welfare Boards have expanded coverage to include support for women, widows and persons with disability. Moreover, the government has earmarked INR 1,700 billion (USD 24.28 billion) for a relief package that includes cash transfers and food supplies. The National Social Assistance Programme is expected to provide cash assistance of INR 1000 to 35 million beneficiaries. In Nepal, the government will pay contributions to the social security programme for one month, on behalf of employers and employees. The government has also distributed food supplies to those affected by the pandemic, rebates on certain services and extended deadlines for utility bills' payment. In Pakistan, the government earmarked PKR 1200 billion (USD 7.5 billion) for a relief package that includes food supplies, of which PKR 200 Billion has been allocated for daily wage earners and labourers. The government has also launched the "Ehsaas Emergency Cash Programme" that provides Rs12, 000 per family and is expected to benefit 10 million families. In Bangladesh, the government has stated it will provide cash transfers but no definite plans have been announced as yet. Some food subsidies have been implemented, including a price reduction of rice from BDT30 to BDT 5 per kilo.

In some countries, BWI affiliates have come together to launch their own humanitarian efforts by distributing food packages to their members. For example, in India, 15 unions were involved, in Nepal, three unions and in Bangladesh one union.

Southeast Asia. In the Philippines, additional funds have been earmarked to cover unemployment insurance for up to 60,000 workers who are projected to lose jobs and the PhilHealth Insurance Corporation has provided



additional funds for hospitals. In Myanmar, the government provided food packages for low-income households as well as exemptions from utility bill payments. The Indonesian affiliate FKUI distributed food packages and wood workers in Lahud Datu, Sabah also received food packs from the Filipino Migrants Association in Malaysia (FMAM) which is partnering with the BWI Regional Office.

5. On Organizing and Members Retention




In countries where construction sites have been allowed to operate, BWI affiliates sought to maintain union work and membership despite the Covid 19 situation.

Humanitarian aid to union members, either directly or in partnership with networks, has been an effective means to mobilise BWI's membership and reaffirm the relevance of unions at a time of crisis. BWI, for example, has been active in preventing further humanitarian crises among migrant workers in Malaysia, Thailand and many parts of South Asia.

BWI affiliates in Asia-Pacific also mobilised on-line to commemorate the International Workers' Memorial Day (IWMD) campaign and May Day celebrations.

6. Matrix of Actions relative to the 7 BWI Convergences

BWI Convergence	Summary of Actions and Outputs Relative to COVID-19 Pandemic
	<p>BWI Asia Pacific affiliates have underscored the rights-based approach to responding to the COVID-19 pandemic crisis and have employed a “no-one-should-be-left-behind” framework.</p> <p>This approach is particularly evident in union advocacy for inclusiveness in government stimulus packages in Australia, South Korea, Malaysia, Philippine, Singapore, India. BWI unions in Asia and Pacific have insisted that all workers – including migrant workers – be included in these stimulus packages, in health protocols and in mass testing programmes.</p>
	<p>BWI affiliates have voiced demands that governments and employers ensure that health and safety protocols are in place, especially where construction and forestry work has continued such as in Australia, South Korea, Hong Kong, Malaysia and Pakistan. In this connection, the following unions have been active: CFMEU, ETU, First Union, Malaysian Liaison Affiliates Council (MLC) and the Labour Law Reform Coalition (LLRC).</p> <p>In places where shutdowns have been in place, such as in India and the Philippines, BWI affiliates are currently proposing health protocols when companies are allowed to resume operations again.</p>
	<p>BWI Asia Pacific Regional Youth Committee member, Gopi Panneerselvam, participated in the International Youth Committee on-line meeting in April 2020 to discuss the COVID-19 impact and strategies to strengthen union actions. Emphasis was placed on the use of social media to further publicise the BWI Global Youth Network.</p> <p>Actions in the context of Covid 19 and its impact on workers have taken place in the different regions. A specific youth campaign “Life before Profits” was endorsed. In Asia-Pacific, youth posters and slogans were also used as part of the IWMD commemorations. The Asia-Pacific region is planning further sector-specific and issue-based discussions with a focus on young workers.</p>
	<p>In Qatar, women leaders from the Philippine migrant workers union, Balikatan ng Manggagawa sa Konstruksyon ng Qatar-(BKM-Q-FFW) have distributed almost 2,000 food packs to migrant workers locked down in the industrial areas.</p> <p>BWI Philippine affiliate NUBCW has been providing online advice and support for women members to ensure that they gain access to the government's social assistance programmes.</p>

	<p>BWI Asia Pacific has intervened in processes of FSC certified companies to uphold workers' rights and sustainable industries. BWI has contributed to the incorporation of ILO standards in the FSC Chain of Custody Standards through its active participation in online public consultations about these standards.</p> <p>BWI has filed a complaint to FSC and PEFC regarding its certified company, Ekowood Malaysia, for violation of workers and trade union rights.</p>
	<p>BWI Asia Pacific (BWI AP) participated in a series of video conferences with the BWI head office, the Supreme Committee for Delivery of Legacy (SC), the ITUC, ILO Qatar Office and Qatar Ministry of Administrative Development, Labour and Social Affairs (MADLSA). The purpose of the conferences was to identify and coordinate field-level interventions for migrant workers affected by Covid-19. BWI Asia Pacific also shared the CFMEU and UNITE OHS guidelines and SOP.</p> <p>BWI AP also participated in a joint statement led by the Open Society Foundation and Humanity United calling upon Qatar and other GCC countries to provide assistance to alleviate the plight of migrant workers.</p> <p>In relation to the 2020 Tokyo Olympic Games, BWI AP provided information on its complaints to the Japan office of Human Rights Now to strengthen a similar complaint they are filing.</p>
	<p>In India, the BWI affiliate in the cement sector has made representations to the Cement Manufacturers Association for the protection of workers' wage and employment protection and also on the observance of COVID-19 safeguards as the lockdown lifts gradually. The union is closely monitoring developments at cement plants across the country and specifically lobbying for coverage of contract workers. This issue was also emphasised during IWMD commemoration at different cement plants in India.</p> <p>In South Asia, unions are also active in the stone quarry value chains. The unions lobbied the stone quarry owners' association and selected companies to ensure workers continued to receive wages during COVID-19 lock down.</p> <p>The BWTUC in Cambodia is preparing for a strike against Chakrey Ting Cement Company for the illegal dismissal of the local union Vice-President, Mr. Houn Hoeurn, and for forcing employees to report 15 minutes before call time without additional pay.</p>

BWI is the Global Union Federation grouping free and democratic unions with members in the Building, Building Materials, Wood, Forestry and Allied sectors.

BWI brings together around 334 trade unions representing around 12 million members in 130 countries. The Headquarters is in Geneva, Switzerland while the Regional Offices are in Panama, Malaysia, and South Africa.

Our mission is to defend and advance workers' rights, and to improve working and living conditions in our sectors. The BWI, above all, has a rights-based approach. We believe that trade union rights are human rights and are based on equality, solidarity and democracy, and that trade unions are indispensable to good governance.

BWI goals include 1) to promote and defend human and trade union rights; 2) to increase trade union strength; 3) to promote a stable and high level of employment in our sectors; and 4) to influence policy and strengthen the capacity of institutions and tripartite structures in our sectors.

©2020 Building and Wood Workers' International (BWI). Parts of this publication may be excerpted or cited as long as the source is acknowledged.



Building and Wood Workers' International
 Asia-Pacific Region
 N°24 - 03, Third Floor, Jalan USJ 9/5T
 Subang Business Center,
 Subang Jaya SGR 47620
 Malaysia

+603 8022 10 89

@BWIGlobalUnion

+603 8023 00 89

@BWIGlobal

apro@bwint.org

www.bwint.org