



One year after the official recognition of Covid-19 as a pandemic: case of the social situation in Russia

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Population's income support in general

The most significant way to maintain the income of the population was to increase the maximum amount of the unemployment benefit from 8,000 rubles (about 108 U.S. dollars) per month to the minimum wage (12,130 rubles - about 164 U.S. dollars) as well as to increase the unemployment benefit's minimum amount to 1,500 rubles (about 20 U.S. dollars) [1] and to 4500 rubles (about 61 U.S. dollars) in April-August 2020 [2]. A notable measure of social support was also an additional payment of an additional allowance to families with two or more children in the amount of 5,000 rubles (about 68 U.S. dollars) per month per each child under three years of age [3, 4], an increase of the unemployment benefit for April-June 2020 for people dismissed after 1 March 2020 in the amount of 3,000 rubles (about 40 U.S. dollars) per each child [5], as well as a single-time payment of 10,000 rubles (about 136 U.S. dollars) per each child aged three to fifteen [6, 7]. Measures aimed at protecting the population in the situation of loss of income also included subsidizing mortgage loans at a preferential rate [8], limiting forced eviction of debtors from residential premises, and extending the deadlines for paying property taxes in a number of regions.

Support for jobs and employers

In Russia, the State chose to transfer the main costs of preserving jobs and workers' incomes to employers. Part of March, all of April and part of May 2020 were declared “non-working days”. The Labour Code of the Russian Federation provides for days off and non-working holidays (Articles 111 and 112 of the Labour Code of the Russian Federation) [9]. Non-working days provided for by the Executive Orders of the President of the Russian Federation [10, 11, 12] do not belong to any of these types. Employers not classified as continuously operating and vital and which were unable to carry out their activities remotely were required to maintain an average wage for their employees in full for the period of restrictions. In accordance with the explanations of the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection of the Russian Federation of April 2, 2020 [13], a forced stop of work in this situation is not considered a downtime due to circumstances beyond the control of the parties, which is paid in the amount of two-thirds of the employee's official salary.

A significant public response was caused by the Government's measures aimed at simultaneously supporting employers and preserving employment. We are talking about the issuance of interest-free loans to businesses related to the industries affected by the pandemic, provided that employers retain at least 90% of jobs compared to March 31, 2020. [14] In addition, in April 2020, the President instructed the Government to provide affected entrepreneurs with financial support from the federal budget on a non-reimbursable basis for solving urgent problems in the amount of at least one minimum wage (12,130 rubles - about 164 U.S. dollars) per employee per month [15, 16]. In

addition, in May, new measures to support employment in the form of a new credit line for businesses from sectors affected by the epidemic were announced. The credit amount is one minimum wage per employee per month at the preferential rate of 2%. The credit is needed to be repaid by April 1, 2021. Moreover, if the employer is able to retain 90% of employees or more, he will be written off the entire credit and interest on it, and if employment is maintained at 80%, half of the credit and interest will be written off [17].

In order to create more than 80 thousand temporary jobs for citizens who had lost their jobs or had been under a threat of dismissal, in July 2020, the Government of the Russian Federation sent earmarked funds from the reserve fund to the constituent entities of the Russian Federation [18].

In the context of coronavirus restrictions, many employers began to offer workers to switch to teleworking in those fields where possible. In the education sector, which employs a large number of workers, the introduction of distance learning was based on decisions of public authorities. However, not all workers were ready for such a transition: questions arose regarding the skills of using the equipment, the equipment itself, as well as the premises from which work was supposed to be carried out remotely. In cases where workers refused to change working conditions to remote ones, employers were obliged to pay them a downtime in the amount of two-thirds of a fixed part of their wage (salary). In response to this and other problems associated with remote work, an updated version of the Labour Code chapter on teleworkers was adopted and came into force on January 1, 2021. [19] This chapter includes a new art. 312.9, which allows employers, in the event of natural and man-made disasters and emergencies (including epidemics), to transfer employees to teleworking without their consent, but with compensation for their expenses (equipment, electricity, Internet, etc.). However, it is not yet clear how this article will work in situations of disputes regarding the availability of the necessary premises, the preservation of workers' privacy rights in relation to videoconferencing from home, etc.

It should be understood that for companies in affected industries that have actually stopped their operations due to restrictive measures, i.e. have completely lost their operating profit, but that still bear rental costs, pay tax and insurance payments, which have been deferred, but not abolished, while their employees are on “non-working days” paid by the employer in full and significantly higher than the minimum wage, these measures will not be sufficient even for survival in a significant number of cases.

In a situation where the state shifts the main burden of costs associated with the suspension of operations on employers, they, in turn, seek to transfer their losses to workers by violating their labour rights. Based on the materials of the Confederation of Labour of Russia (KTR), the Presidential Council for Civil Society and Human Rights (HRC) summarized the problems arising among workers and the population in general in connection with the pandemic and, in the end of April 2020, developed proposals in connection with these problems on the protection of social and labour rights in the context of the development of coronavirus infection, and sent them to the Government of the Russian Federation [20]. According to the HRC, the practice of forcing employees to take unpaid leaves; unlawfully cutting wages; forcing employees to perform work in violation of the non-working day regime; insufficient provision of workers with personal protective equipment; failure to comply with the recommendations of Rospotrebnadzor regarding the prevention of coronavirus stand out among the most common violations of workers' rights. After the publication of the HRC's conclusions, the press was discussing protest actions of shift workers employed in the construction of gas pipelines, among whom the infection had begun to spread, and of medical workers who, while working in an extremely overloaded mode, either were not receiving the promised bonuses for working with Covid-19, or had become victims of redistribution of

bonuses through using the regular incentive payments for non-Covid-19 healthcare workers to provide additional payments to those working with the infection.

Protection of vulnerable groups

The decision of the Government of Russia on the payment of temporary disability benefits to persons over 65 in situations where their employers do not stop operations due to non-working days [21], adopted on the basis of a proposal by trade unions, is encouraging. This support measure will end on April 1, 2021. Unfortunately, similar measures have not been distributed to all other workers who are in isolation mode, if their employers have not stopped work and not moved to a remote work.

Medical workers who work directly with patients with the new coronavirus infection have become one of the most vulnerable categories of the population during the pandemic. The Government of the Russian Federation introduced special incentive payments for special working conditions and additional workload for medical workers providing medical care to citizens who have been diagnosed with the new coronavirus infection and to people at risk of contracting the new coronavirus infection, which are paid from April 2020 to February 2022 at the expense of subsidies from the reserve fund [22, 23].

It is very important that from March 15, 2020 to June 15, 2021, periods of foreign citizens' temporary stay in the Russian Federation were extended due to the pandemic [24]. At the same time, foreign citizens are exempted from monthly payments for work permits for this period, which constitute a significant part of the earnings of migrant workers. Employers have the right, subject to restrictions aimed at the sanitary and epidemiological well-being of the population, to continue to employ foreign citizens without the need to obtain work permits or patents.

However, these measures can hardly be considered sufficient. In the context of the spread of the coronavirus, prompt and urgent solutions are needed for people who are left without a livelihood. Representatives of civil society sent a proposal to the Government of the Russian Federation to pay unemployment benefits during quarantine not only to Russian citizens, but also to foreigners in the territory of the Russian Federation. This proposal deserves support, but it solves the problems (and only partially) only in relation to one of the vulnerable categories of people.

Conclusion

As a general assessment of the state policy on mitigating the negative impact of the coronavirus epidemic and of the associated restrictive measures on the population as a whole as well as on workers and employers, it is necessary to note the insufficiency of resources allocated, of consistency in the approach to the situation, and of coverage of various categories of the population, coupled with weak administration and extremely dangerous disrespect towards law on the part of the government.

Despite the impressive amount of funds allocated for measures to support workers losing earnings and employers who have lost income, these measures not only do not compensate for a significant part of the losses of business and workers, but do not even remove the threat to the continued existence of employers in the most affected industries and leave workers in a critical situation from the point of view of simple survival.

For the entire period of restrictions related to quarantines, unconditional social payments in the amount of not less than the subsistence level should be available to any people who find themselves

in our territory without a livelihood. Such payments should be periodical, not *ad hoc*, and should be paid to those persons who are not entitled to ordinary social benefits from employers or the state.

Measures in relation to informal workers, migrants and homeless people can be called the actual gap in support policies at present.

It is very important to exercise effective control to ensure that the measures taken achieve their goals and the allocated funds reach their addressees; at the moment, there are serious problems with these issues. In this connection, norms and enforcement practices that have weakened the system of labor inspections in violation of the ILO labour inspection conventions should be reviewed.

It should be noted that countering the consequences of the pandemic should not lead to violations in the field of workers' rights. Some of the initiatives discussed, such as the introduction of the option for employers to unilaterally amend employment contracts due to restrictive measures, carry risks of losing labour rights for millions of workers and cannot be justified by considerations of employer protection. In this regard, it is very important that measures related to reducing the regulatory burden on business, including limiting inspections by state bodies, do not extend to monitoring employers' compliance with labour legislation. Moreover, in the current conditions, this monitoring should be strengthened, and the system of labour inspections in Russia itself should be strengthened not on a temporary, but on a permanent basis, by eliminating numerous inconsistencies of Russian legislation with the provisions of the 1947 ILO Labour Inspection Convention (No. 81), ratified by our country.

LINKS

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