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Q6(a)

Discuss the new labour codes and their impact on formal and informal labour in India.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2020 · Sociology GS 1 · 20 marks · Works and Economic Life

Works and Economic Life: Social organization of work in different types of society; Formal and informal organization of work; Labour and society.

Core demand of the question

- Discuss the new labour codes and their impact on formal and informal labour in India
- Keep the discussion within a 20-mark length

Revision summary

Four codes unify wages, IR, social security, and safety.

- **Formal labour:** more flexibility, contested union rights.
- **Informal labour:** majority still without a clear employer; gig cover is a promise.

Marx's contract appearance and **Weber's** formal law both apply.

PLFS and **SEWA** mark the gap between gazette and life.

Impact is split and implementation-dependent.

Introduction

India's new labour codes consolidate many laws into **four codes** on wages, industrial relations, social security, and occupational safety. They aim at ease of business and a wider social-security net. Impact splits along the formal-informal line that Jan **Breman** described, rather than ending that line.

Body**What the codes try to do**

- Unify definitions of wage and worker, raise some thresholds, and allow electronic compliance.
- Social security code promises to cover gig and unorganised workers on paper.
- Industrial relations code changes thresholds for standing orders, hire-and-fire, and strike notice.

Impact on formal labour

- Firms may gain flexibility in retrenchment and in who counts as a factory.
- Unions fear a thinner right to strike and a harder path to recognition, which Robert Michels already saw as an organisational fight, now rewritten by statute.
- Regular-wage workers in large units remain the core that **Max Weber's** formal law actually reaches.

Impact on informal labour

- Most Indian workers, in **PLFS** terms, were never inside the old factory Acts. A code does not by itself create an employer.
- Gig and platform clauses can be a door to portable benefits if implemented. They can also legalise the self-employment appearance that **Karl Marx** would call a fetish of the contract.
- Women in home-based work, as feminist labour studies after Ann Oakley insist, still need to be named as workers, not as helpers.
- Inspection capacity and state rules will decide whether street vendors and construction gangs see a net or only a portal.

Sociological assessment

- Formalisation without voice is a paper shift.
- Informalisation of the formal, through contractors, may continue inside "code-compliant" firms.
- **SEWA**-type organising remains the practical complement to the statute.

Discuss

- **Potential:** a wider legal umbrella.
- **Risk:** flexibility for capital, delayed cover for the majority.

Flow diagram

Labour codes -> Formal core flexibility
Labour codes -> Informal gig on paper
Implementation voice -> Actual cover
Informal gig on paper -> Implementation voice

Conclusion

The new labour codes rewrite the formal core's flexibility and promise a social-security umbrella for informal and gig work. Impact on formal labour is more immediate in industrial relations. Impact on informal labour depends on implementation, inspection, and whether an employer can be found. **Breman**, **PLFS**, and feminist labour studies warn against celebrating the gazette as a changed society.

Facts & figures

Four codes

Wages, industrial relations, social security, occupational safety and health.

PLFS

Shows the informal majority that any code must still reach.

Breman

Footloose labour as the normal Indian capitalist relation, hard to code.

SEWA

Organising model for women informal workers that statutes alone do not replace.

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