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India's Four Labour Codes — May Day 2026 and the Status of Implementation

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ECONOMY**SOCIAL ISSUES**

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India's Four Labour Codes — May Day 2026 and the Status of Implementation

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WHY IN NEWS

International Workers' Day (May 1, 2026) was observed across India even as the country's **four labour codes** — consolidating 29 central labour laws — remain partially implemented. The codes were enacted between **2019-2020** but their operationalisation requires both Central rules and state-level rules. As of May 2026, all four codes have been notified by the Centre but state rule frameworks are inconsistent.

THE FOUR LABOUR CODES

1. Code on Wages, 2019

Replaces: Payment of Wages Act 1936, Minimum Wages Act 1948, Payment of Bonus Act 1965, Equal Remuneration Act 1976.

Key provisions:

- Universal minimum wage applicable to all employment (formerly only “scheduled employments”)
- Statutory **floor wage** for all of India (state minimum wage cannot fall below)
- Equal pay for equal work — gender-neutral
- Bonus payment retained for low-wage workers

2. Code on Industrial Relations, 2020

Replaces: Trade Unions Act 1926, Industrial Employment (Standing Orders) Act 1946, Industrial Disputes Act 1947.

Key provisions:

- **Threshold for retrenchment without government approval increased** — firms with up to 300 workers (earlier 100) can retrench without prior approval
- New definitions of “industrial dispute” and “strike”
- Mandatory 14-day notice for strikes
- Recognition of single negotiating union (with 51%+ membership) or negotiating council

3. Code on Social Security, 2020

Replaces: Employees’ Compensation Act 1923, Employees’ State Insurance Act 1948, Employees’ Provident Funds Act 1952, Maternity Benefit Act 1961, Payment of Gratuity Act 1972, Building and Other Construction Workers Acts 1996, Cine Workers Welfare Fund Act 1981, Unorganised Workers Social Security Act 2008.

Key provisions:

- **Social security expansion to gig and platform workers** for the first time (Section 2(35) and 2(60))
- National Social Security Board for unorganised workers
- ESIC and EPFO restructuring
- Maternity benefits made universal across all firms

4. Code on Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions (OSH), 2020

Replaces: Factories Act 1948, Mines Act 1952, Dock Workers Act 1986, Plantation Labour Act 1951, Contract Labour Act 1970, Inter-State Migrant Workmen Act 1979, Building and Construction Workers Act 1996, Cinema (Regulation) Act 1952, Beedi and Cigar Workers Act 1966.

Key provisions:

- 8-hour working day cap; overtime regulated
- Annual medical examination for hazardous industries
- Free annual health check-ups for workers above 45
- Migrant workers definition expanded; portability of benefits

WHAT HAS CHANGED (2025-2026)

AREA	STATUS (2026)
Central rules notified	✔ All four codes
State rules drafted	Most states have drafted rules but not all notified
Effective date	Different states have different timelines
EPFO/ESIC integration	Ongoing
Gig worker registration	Started under e-Shram portal (~30 crore registrations)

The **e-Shram portal** is the practical enrollment mechanism for unorganised workers, with over **30 crore registrations** as of 2026.

CRITIQUES AND CONTROVERSIES

CONCERN	SOURCE
300-worker threshold increases firing flexibility	Trade unions (CITU, AITUC)
Gig worker definition incomplete	Worker advocacy groups
Strike restrictions weaken union power	Left-aligned trade unions
State implementation slow	State-level union representation
Migrant worker portability untested	Inter-state migrant rights groups

The 2020-2021 farmers' agitation extended to labour codes; trade unions called several **all-India strikes** during 2020-2024 demanding repeal or significant amendment.

INDIA'S ILO CONVENTION RECORD

India is a founding member of the International Labour Organization (ILO, 1919) and has ratified **47 ILO Conventions**, including 6 of 8 fundamental conventions:

- Forced Labour Convention (29) — ratified 1954
- Abolition of Forced Labour Convention (105) — ratified 2000
- Equal Remuneration Convention (100) — ratified 1958
- Discrimination Convention (111) — ratified 1960
- Minimum Age Convention (138) — ratified 2017
- Worst Forms of Child Labour (182) — ratified 2017

Not ratified: Freedom of Association (87) and Right to Organise and Collective Bargaining (98) — India views these as already covered by domestic law.

UPSC RELEVANCE

PAPER	ANGLE
GS3 — Economy	Labour reforms; ease of doing business; informal economy
GS2 — Governance	Labour codes implementation; cooperative federalism; state-Centre coordination
GS3 — Inclusive Growth	Gig workers; e-Shram portal; social security architecture

Mains Keywords: Four labour codes, Code on Wages 2019, Industrial Relations Code 2020, Social Security Code 2020, OSH Code 2020, gig workers, e-Shram portal, ILO conventions, ESIC, EPFO, retrenchment threshold

Facts Corner

ITEM	FACT
Codes enacted	2019 (Wages); 2020 (IR, SS, OSH)
Replaced laws	29 central labour laws into 4 codes
Code on Wages	2019 — universal minimum wage
Industrial Relations Code	2020 — 300-worker retrenchment threshold
Social Security Code	2020 — first to cover gig workers
OSH Code	2020 — factories, mines, plantations consolidated
e-Shram portal	30+ crore unorganised worker registrations
ILO conventions ratified by India	47 (6 of 8 fundamental)
Not ratified	Convention 87 (Freedom of Association); 98 (Collective Bargaining)
Founded ILO	1919 (India is founding member)

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