

Labour Ethics

Posted at: 23/03/2024

Context:

An ILO report highlighted that among various work-related risks, long working hours are the leading cause of death among employees which has raised debate surrounding labour ethics.

Background:

Increasing economic inequality and weakening of labour laws has affected the conditions of labourers.

About Labour Ethics:

1. It includes consideration of right and wrong on a wide range of questions having to do with the treatment of labour. It entails that employers are ethically required to provide a safe and healthy workplace for their employees.
2. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights affirms that people have a right to rest and leisure, including reasonable limitations on working hours and periodic holidays with pay.

Ethical arguments for long work hours:

1. For maintenance of essential services, during emergency situations like pandemic, wartime, etc. (Situational Ethics).
2. Shortage of staff and a paucity of skilled workers. (Situational Ethics)
3. To improve work productivity, efficiency, and competitiveness of industries and countries. (Utilitarian Ethics).

Ethical concerns against overtime and long work hours:

1. It leads to violation of the ethical principle of non-maleficence which dictates that care should be taken not to harm others. Long working hours cause exhaustion leading to medical negligence, and disasters e.g. Chernobyl, Space Shuttle Challenger accident, etc.
2. Choosing extra overtime income compromises the physical and mental health of the employee. E.g. job burnout in investment banking.
3. Mandating long work hours is against a sustainable work culture where businesses are mindful of workers' health.
4. It leads to the erosion of family and societal values by eroding time for personal relationships and ties to the broader community.
5. Long work hours concentrate job opportunities for a limited set of labour force resulting in inequitable distribution of employment. It limits gainful employment opportunities for women who prefer shorter-hour shifts due to dual burdens.