

GOVERNMENT MUST RESOLVE THREATS OF CURRENT WORK STOPPAGES JUSTLY, SAYS JCTR

The threats of work stoppages prevailing in the country today must be resolved in ways that take care of the needs of both the employees and the employers, says the Jesuit Centre for Theological Reflection (JCTR). "This essential two-way relationship," says Muweme Muweme, Coordinator of the Social Conditions Research Project of the JCTR, "has on many occasions in the Zambian context not been beneficial to the employees."

The sad situation in Zambia is that not only do employees suffer from inadequate wages, but there is also a serious absence of decent employment. Thus high levels of unemployment are essentially a fertile ground for exploitative tendencies on the part of employers.

By and large, most employees in Zambia earn far less than what is required to meet their daily needs. The Zambian people, especially the poor in and out of employment, are restricted in terms of health and education, decent housing, adequate food, and other basics.

According to the latest JCTR *Basic Needs Basket*, the overall cost of basic needs has increased by K6,150 from K1,029,150 for the month of January to K1,035,300 for the month of February. The cost of non-essential food items shows an increase of K4,400 from the January cost of K628,100 to K632,500. The cost of food only has increased from K401,050 for the month of January to K402,800 for the month of February. This increase is mainly due to upward adjustments in the prices of mealie meal and cooking oil.

It must be realized that what the *Basic Needs Basket* highlights is not a total picture of what it takes for decent human living. For example, personal care, transport, health, etc., are not included in its calculation. However, it forms a fairly accurate picture of cost of living and its relationship to people's incomes.

According to Muweme, it is paramount that the current negotiations taking place between different employee unions and their respective employers be looked at in the context of the requirements for decent survival. For example, teachers' demands for 1.5 million Kwacha monthly salary may appear highly unrealistic. But considering that after tax, take-home pay is only a little over 1 million Kwacha, it is clear that this salary cannot meet the most modest demands of the *Basic Needs Basket*.

Core to this situation of threats of work stoppages is one fundamental experience the country has been going through over the years, namely, deterioration in the living conditions of the majority of Zambian people. This has been caused by *prolonged economic policy failure* attributed to both local and international factors.

"As the people of Zambia move towards reviewing the Republican Constitution, it will be critical to see that basic needs are treated as human rights. It is important for government to realize that meeting basic needs of people, especially of the poor, *is not an option but an imperative*," says Muweme.

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