

JCTR CHALLENGES ALL EMPLOYERS TO RESPECT THE DIGNITY OF ZAMBIAN WORKERS

The *Jesuit Centre for Theological Reflection* (JCTR) challenges all employers of labour, whether foreign investors, the government, local businessmen or informal employers, to respect the inherent dignity of their employees by valuing the work that they do and compensating them justly.

According to Muweme Muweme of the Social Conditions Research Project of the JCTR, "Created in the image of God, each one of us has inherent dignity and has God-given talents that should be employed to contribute to the good of society at large. This implies that conditions that promote that dignity and the use of God-given talents must be created."

It is unfortunate that in Zambia today, the prevailing situation is where workers are employed under insufficient human conditions, treated, in some cases, simply as a means to maximise profits, inadequately remunerated for a family to meet the cost of basic needs, casualisation of jobs that require full-time engagement, etc. This situation has been manifested, for example, in the current dispute between Shoprite workers and management, and the recent Chambishi incidence which witnessed loss of many lives.

The JCTR *Basic Needs Basket* that measures cost of living for a family of six in Lusaka, Livingston, Kabwe, Ndola, Luanshya and Kitwe has shown the disparity that exists between income on one hand and cost of living on the other. For example, the *Basic Needs Basket* for Lusaka in the month of June stood at K1,349,650 with the cost of a 25 Kg bag of breakfast mealie meal rising for the second month in a row by approximately K1,000. Comparing this figure of cost of basic needs with a full-time employee in a multi-national supermarket earning only up to K400,000 gives us an example of the extent to which incomes fall below the requirements for decent human survival. "The current high cost of living not only denies the ability to lead dignified lives but inhibits effective exploitation of God-given talents," says Muweme.

It is of utmost necessity therefore that the minimum wage as last set by the Ministry of Labour in 2002 is updated in terms, *first* of its scope and, *second*, its inconsistency with the high cost of living that affects many Zambian people, especially the poor. Moreover, the JCTR observes that the just released Draft Constitution fails to explicitly grant the power to set a minimum wage to any branch of the government.

According to Muweme, casualisation of labour where people are engaged as temporary workers for longer periods and receive limited rights and benefits of a temporary worker is not only *unlawful* in the Zambian context but *unjust* as it takes away that which is supposed to accrue to an employee engaged under sufficient labour conditions.

The JCTR believes that government itself must strive to increase the wages of its employees to encourage more effective service delivery and to set a positive example in the country on the respect of work. But, as Muweme Muweme observes, "The Zambian worker will not be free from injustice until employers are simultaneously motivated by prudent government regulations and a moral obligation to respect workers in their role as co-creators with God and where workers in return demonstrate responsibility, creativity and hard work."

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