

JCTR SAYS PRESENT EMPLOYMENT SITUATION MUST NOT BE A WAY OF LIFE, LABOUR DAY CELEBRATIONS MUST ADVANCE ACTION

As Zambia celebrates Labour Day, there is an urgent need for pragmatic steps in addressing the country's employment situation beyond considerations of the informal sector as a buffer to the situation, says the *Jesuit Centre for Theological Reflection* (JCTR).

In a situation such as obtaining in Zambia where a huge number of the population is competing for very few formal sector jobs, there is a compelling need of a corresponding large scale and well planned type of response beyond current initiatives -- including a serious examination of our education system -- to address the problem. "I see the necessity of tackling this problem from a very serious political, social, economic and moral point of view," says Muweme Muweme Coordinator of the Social Conditions Research Project of the JCTR.

It has long been realised that true welfare or sustainable improvement in the economy of Zambia is only going to be achieved through involvement of the people. The people are the key players to achieving economic prosperity and therefore space or employment must be created for their participation. Moreover, problems of children without homes and other social vices such as crime and prostitution will only be addressed effectively when people have a strong feeling of being part of society. The principle that employment or work is central to the "humanisation of social life" must rein supreme in our Zambian situation!

More profound is the moral perspective in looking at Zambia's employment situation than any other considerations. Human beings are not only a means through which development is going to take place but are the essence of that development. From that perspective, it is an obvious case that in Zambia there are deeper issues that we need to contend with. The context of low wages, in some cases long working hours without corresponding adequate remuneration, delayed salaries, unpaid terminal benefits, retrenchments, child labour, inadequate social protection, worker intimidation of one form or the other are all factors that *must* inform or guide our actions, policy or legal reform.

According to Muweme, there must be high level and pragmatic commitment seen strongly and prominently as feature in public policy pronouncement by all political contenders. In addition, during this election year and for those to come, let us, as a nation develop "checklists" to monitor and critically evaluate public policy positions and intended actions of different political parties.

The JCTR is both *encouraged* and *sceptical* about the context of this year's Labour Day celebrations. *Encouraged* that these celebrations are taking place when the country is reviewing its labour laws, including a review of the minimum wage from the previous figure of K98,000. *Sceptical* that there are issues about, firstly, the breadth of these reforms. Are these reforms particularly going to respond to the most disadvantaged in our society? Secondly, the depth of the reforms. How far will these reforms go in responding to, among others, to the issue of inadequate wages?

The JCTR has always contended that government actions, review of policy or legal reform must relate to people's real life experiences. In addition, it has been the position of the JCTR that the minimum wage be tied to the cost of essential food and non-food items. For example, the JCTR *Basic Needs Basket* that measures cost of living for a family of six in Lusaka and other urban areas (Livingstone, Kabwe, Ndola, Kitwe and Luanshya) recorded the cost of food in Lusaka at K498,800 and that of essential non-food items at K909,900 in the month of April. The question therefore is: Does the proposed minimum wage bear any relationship to these costs?

It is a well known fact that these issues have been raised before. "The danger of having a longstanding problem -- and without constantly challenging it and coming up with solutions -- is that the problem transforms itself into being a part of life, a norm," says Muweme. The JCTR hopes that this year's Labour Day will go beyond mere ceremonial pronouncements and serve as a starting point for concrete actions to address the employment situation in the country.

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