

Workers' Day 2020: Home alone in lockdown level 4

by

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Today is Workers' Day. It is also Day 1 of Lockdown level 4 and Day 36 of the overall lockdown. For the first time in my career I have a sense that this Workers' Day is totally different to any of the others. There is a strange feeling to Workers' Day this year. Given the Covid-19 crisis one has mixed feelings: Should I celebrate Workers' Day today? Will I have work tomorrow? What is the value of work? How did it happen that a virus entered the workplace? What do unemployed people think about Workers' Day? How powerful and destructive is this virus to shut down companies, countries and the whole world? Will we be free again the next Workers' Day? Perhaps before I attempt to answer some of these questions, let us revisit the essence of work and Workers' Day in particular.

Leo Tolstoy said "work is the inevitable condition of human life, the true source of human welfare." As we reflect upon the role of workers in society, despite the perpetuation of work being dominated by the role of employers, and over the past 35 days government, we are reminded of the enormous progress that has been made. The reality is that up to the middle of the twentieth century, work was characterised by slavery, exploitation, discrimination and the gross violation of human and workers' rights all over the world. Jeremy Cronin reminds us of the perpetuation of inequalities in certain sectors of the South African economy. He states in the *Sunday Times*: "Black workers and the urban poor continue to be hugely disadvantaged by their geographical marginalization in dormitory townships." The lockdown further amplified the levels of poverty and inequality in society at large.

The history of the Workers' Day goes back to the 1886 Haymarket Affair in Chicago, (USA) where police tried to disperse a large crowd of striking workers who were demanding shorter hours of work. A bomb was thrown at the policemen by an unidentified assailant resulting in the law enforcers firing live ammunition at the defenceless crowd. Since then this day has been used by the working class across the world to emphasise the need for fair labour practices and conditions of employment. In South Africa on Workers' Day we also celebrate the role played by trade unions and other labour movements in the struggle against apartheid.

Now again as we make the transition from level 5 to level 4 of the lockdown, the trade union movement is at the centre of the rights of workers during this time. They pose uncomfortable questions that should be answered: How can non-essential workers be allowed to return to work and be provided with personal and protective equipment, while essential workers with the highest risk exposure do not have protection? What is the total number of health workers being infected with the virus? What is the total number of police officers infected with the virus? What is the total number of retail workers infected with the virus? How will teachers be protected against the virus? More importantly: What are we doing to protect our employees from being infected with the virus – both essential and so-called non-essential workers?

However, over the past three decades across the world, there was more progress in workers' rights than in the history of work before. The recent trend toward an employment value proposition (EVP), very often reflected in awards such as "the best company to work for", signifies a shift towards a full realisation of the importance of creating a work environment where employees can flourish, as employers realise that this contributes directly to the "bottom line". However, it is evident that even companies who call themselves "employers of choice" are not committed to be an employer of choice. They don't understand that employer of choice means that people really want to come and work for them because they really look after them and make them thrive. Real employers of choice have explicit people strategies in which the needs of people are addressed through a daily and personalised employee experience driven actively by means of an employee experience strategy. Very few employers in South Africa understand that, while all employees want to be treated with the necessary respect and dignity and to be given an opportunity of realising their potential.

Within the spirit of Workers' Day let us celebrate work and workers by reminding ourselves of the 3R's of what today is really all about, and I will also add a Covid-19 statement to each one of these R's:

- **Rights:** Today workers have rights in many countries, and these rights are enshrined in national constitutions, national bill of rights in many nations, international labour standards and a focus on decent work, taken through to national labour legislation, codes and regulations. In certain areas, such as health and safety, significant progress has been made in most parts of the world. The worker's right of safety and protection from Covid-19 is key today and employers must take all steps necessary to protect workers against the virus.
- **Responsibilities:** Despite the focus on worker rights, most employees realise that they have a co-responsibility with management to make a meaningful contribution to productivity in workplaces. For instance, without the active contribution of workers, safety at work will remain a pipedream. All employees have a responsibility to comply with all the Covid-19 safety and hygiene requirements and to protect one another and their families from being infected to curb the spread of the virus.
- **Results:** Workers have contributed to performance, sustained their families, provided products and services to customers, grown their companies and industries, as well as societies and economies. While management, with the support of high level specialists such as engineers and architects, designed and planned the construction of buildings, not a single building would have arisen without the sweat and meticulous hard work of labour. We need more transparency in the workplace regarding performance and results. We also need daily dashboards on Covid-19 numbers and clear actions to ensure that the infection numbers remain as low as possible.

In celebrating the above, we are reminded that we need to continue striving towards exercising our rights, accepting our responsibilities, and achieving results. At times, further sacrifices may be needed to achieve an optimum balance between rights, responsibilities and results. All of us have made huge sacrifices during the past 35 days and we will continue to do so despite widespread criticism of some of the regulations.

However, work and the workplace has changed dramatically over the past 35 days given the unprecedented crisis and regulations as a result of the Covid-19 lockdown. Fortunately, advances in technology helped many employees to continue doing some online work. The question is whether

workers have also changed. Are we as workers and employers ready for the technological revolution spearheaded by advanced technological innovation and the explosion of social media? If you are not ready, you are even behind government, because government departments have been excellent in the use of technology over the past month. In fact, they were hiding this capacity before. We now all understand the power of instant communication, connection and engagement as the new source of individualised and collective empowerment and democratisation when staying and working from home.

Despite fair labour laws and the gains made by workers in recent times, the reality is that workers still face significant challenges that could take decades to resolve:

- The pursuit of equal opportunities is an ongoing reality worldwide, and not a single government can proudly proclaim that inequality in terms of race, gender, disability and other forms of discrimination has been eliminated completely. For example, there is only one country in the world with more female than male medical doctors and that is Spain.
- Courts are kept very busy with continuous labour disputes based on poor working conditions and other forms of unfair labour practices.
- Child labour, abuse of women and lack of opportunity for people with disabilities still occur in many parts of the world.
- While advances in safety have been made, accidents still occur resulting in injuries and loss of life. Notwithstanding this progress, it is now a reality that more workers die from poor health (caused by poor lifestyle, poverty, and diseases) than from injuries at work.
- Skills and talent shortages are perpetuated all over the world through lack of access to education and development opportunities, making it difficult for many employees to realise their full potential.
- Despite the promulgation of the Minimum Wage Act, continuous debate about the minimum wage shows how far we still need to go in finding answers to the gap between the highest and lowest earners.
- The explosion in executive pay over the last decade exacerbates pay gaps between the highest and lowest earners in society.
- World-wide, the level of unionisation is decreasing, and this means that protection and advancement of workers' rights needs to be handled differently.
- Although significant progress has been made regarding gender equity, flexible work practices and working from home appears to be the exception rather than the norm and an appropriate work-life balance is often not achieved. In fact, we only use it during emergencies such as Covid-19.
- The recent trend toward indigenisation in certain countries could limit opportunities for expatriates and fuel xenophobia, especially in the light of the increased globalisation of workforces and workplaces everywhere. The closing of country borders during lockdown will slow down physical globalisation, while increasing the speed of online globalisation.
- Unemployment has risen in many parts of the world, and it is only getting worse given the shutdown of economies and if not addressed will further widen the gap between the employed and the unemployed, thereby threatening political stability in many countries. In fact, and this is the most worrying of all these trends, very soon we will have more unemployed than employed people.

Given the lockdowns and economic turmoil all over the world, the socio-economic impact of the crisis needs the urgent attention of government, business and labour. We have reached the stage where a

social compact is needed between these three stakeholders. There are positive signs that this could be possible given the fact that these partners are working together to fight one common enemy, and that is the coronavirus epidemic. This virus had a devastating impact on all stakeholders and more sacrifices will need to be made. Government stepped up significantly in providing a R500 billion stimulus package, executives took significant pay cuts, and trade unions co-operated in working with their members and the other partners in alleviating the devastating impact of the crisis. Dealing with the crisis will require two main priorities over the next six months, i.e. income relief and extreme safety regulations at work, in addition to massive poverty alleviation strategies. Moreover, if the three social partners are unable to ensure economic recovery and a sustainable economic growth strategy going forward in the shortest possible period, we may then need a new public holiday next year: Unemployed Day.

This year we celebrate Workers' Day home alone as individuals or families. We should celebrate Workers' Day, not only today, but every day. The biggest achievement of the lockdown is that people and their lives were put first. But we need to acknowledge that worker rights have to be balanced with responsibilities, in particular as we work towards finding a solution for this global coronavirus pandemic. On this Workers' Day, we need to recognise the dedication and commitment of all our healthcare workers, and all other essential workers at the frontline of the virus. They are risking their own health in serving society. Endangering their health and lives by forcing them to continue working without protective equipment and other precautions is unacceptable and immoral.

Although we are celebrating Workers' Day this year with mixed feelings, we are again reminded of the importance of work in the economy and society at large. But we all need to realise that it will take extraordinary efforts of all workers and employers to rebuild our companies and economy during and after this period of a workforce and society in lockdown. It also requires honesty, self-correction and commitment in putting productivity at the centre of all efforts to recover business and economic activity. As Menander stated: "He who works diligently need never despair; for all things are accomplished by diligence and labour." Stronger employer-employee collaboration is needed to assist workers and companies in dealing with the current economic and health crisis simultaneously. A more mature employer and employee is needed in the modern work environment in this crisis. Perhaps it is time to explore the German model of co-determination and make it work in South Africa. Likewise, both parties need to realise that they have a wider more all-encompassing role to play, and that is to contribute to worker empowerment, safety and hygiene, socio-economic recovery, economic growth, and sustainability. Let us continue to advance worker empowerment to grow people, fight Covid-19 together, recover our companies and economies and let people survive and sustain themselves.

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Meander

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