

## **A JUNK WORKERS DAY**

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As the country stares into junk status, the hardest hit are the poor and unemployed. Contrary to the utterances of several (uninformed and or reckless) public officials that junk status allows South Africa to set its own rules of the game, there is no good that comes from higher borrowing cost, higher rates of debt repayment and its concomitant effect on domestic allocations for social services, infrastructure development and cost of food and transport, among a myriad of impacts of a downgrade to sub-investment ratings.

The *status quo* stands in contrast to a vision that was outlined by the National Planning Commission in its 2011 National Development Plan (NDP). Chapter three on Economy and Employment (Vision 2030) outlined a considered strategy whereby “achieving full employment, decent work and sustainable livelihoods is the only way to improve living standards and ensure a dignified existence for all South Africans. Rising employment, productivity and incomes are the surest long-term solution to reducing inequality”.

How will the NDP’s central goal to “expand employment and entrepreneurial opportunities on the back of a growing, more inclusive economy”, be held ransom by the current incompetent and unaccountable political leadership, on whose watch the economy has slid into a tailspin, with growth levels predicted at under 1% per annum.

Lacklustre annual growth disables the very conditions for employment of people and begs the question of whether there is much to celebrate this year, with current rates of unemployment peaking and no imminent economic lift-off.

The very basis of International Workers Labour or May Day/Labour Day is located within the struggles of workers for fair and humane working conditions. These rights are enshrined in international and domestic law, and in the case of South Africa are firmly enshrined in section 23 of the Bill of Rights, Labour Relations. The NDP elucidates further on the post-1994 vision that the “central role of the new labour regime was to define and protect against unfair labour practices; minimise dispute settlement costs, ensuring visibly fair outcomes; promote collaboration between workers and employers to enable industrial expansion, with visibly fair distribution of benefits; and overcome skills development and career mobility”. The rights of workers have been further consolidated with the *Labour Relations Act* of 1995, whose stated aim is to promote economic development, social justice, labour peace and democracy in the workplace. Furthermore, the establishment of the National Economic Development and Labour Council (NEDLAC) in 1994 as a statutory body to bring together representatives from organised labour, organised business, government and communities was aimed at strengthening relations and building a solid basis for labour legislation and policies.

The rights so eloquently enshrined pre-suppose economic growth and with that, increased employment and improvement in the quality of life, mobility and aspirations of most South Africans. A stake in the future of the country is a vital element of building a peaceful,



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productive and caring society which advances the founding provisions of the Constitution to ensure human dignity, equality, non-racialism, non-sexism, supremacy of the Constitution and Rule of Law, and universal adult suffrage.

The cruel reality however is one of large swathes of unemployed who are growing disillusioned and bitter and may never experience formal or other work. While statistics vary from between 25% to 40% of the working age population that is either unemployed, under-employed or no longer seeking work, the figures for youth unemployment are staggering and lie close to half of this population.

This should send the loudest alarm bells out to government to address the grave matter of an economy in decline, a growing youth bulge, coupled with unemployment and disillusionment at a broken political system where state capture and corruption corrode the fabric of society. The NDP's Vision 2030 is in serious jeopardy as the country will struggle longer and harder to emerge from junk status. For those in employment, Workers Day is cause for celebration of victories won and rights achieved but for millions of unemployed, it is just another day without work.