



Striking point: In search of a living

By Isobel Frye

A frequent response to industrial action embarked upon by workers over wage demands is that surely in a country with such high levels of unemployment, striking workers and their union leaders should appreciate that any job, no matter what the salary, is better than no job at all.

While there is no explicit right to a job on the Constitution, there is an overarching set of rights that guarantee to everybody the right to life, to dignity, equality and freedom, and the state has a positive duty to protect as well as to actively fulfill these rights.

In current national discourse, the state is pushing for higher economic growth, spurred on by inter alia the ASGISA (Accelerated and Shared Growth Initiative for South Africa) initiatives. The impetus for the accelerated achievement of economic growth, so the mantra goes, is to ensure accelerated poverty eradication. This sharing of the benefits of increased growth will take place as a result of the increase in employment creation resulting from the increase in demand catalysed by the increased economic growth.

There are a number of very questionable assumptions in this admittedly very crude summation of the dynamics involved in accelerated growth, which others are better able to debate. What needs to become part of the national discourse on poverty and unemployment is whether a bad job is better than no job at all; whether workers should be able to expect a living wage, or whether it is true that beggars cannot be choosers in our democratic South Africa.

According to the September 2005 Labour Force Survey released by Statistics South Africa, 16.71% of all officially employed people in South Africa earn less than R500 per month, 34.29% earn under R1000 a month, and a total of 60% of all workers earn less than R2 500 per month. Many of these workers constitute the sole income earner in their households: divide a top income between five (two parents, two children and a grandparent) translates into an income of R500 per person per month. Every parent wants to be able to give their children a better life than they had: for working class parents the challenge is overwhelming.

For many employers in South Africa, the true effects of poverty cannot be but at best a fiction far removed from their known realities given the sharp inequality that divides this country. As part of an attempt to document the realities of poverty to better inform public debate and policy formation, the National Labour and Economic Development Institute (NALEDI) with funding from the Open

Society Foundation, is undertaking a primary research study in the greater Pimville area in Soweto. The focus of this research is the economic dynamics of households, which includes analyzing the impact of social grant income into households, and understanding what opportunities are foregone as a result of low or no income flows, as well as recoding diverse coping mechanisms adopted by vulnerable people in the face of poverty and destitution.

The study reflects many different experiences and stories of how poverty affects and impacts on people's lives: it is clear that the poor are not an homogenous group and policy interventions need to reflect this, but despite the rampant poverty and unemployment, what is equally evident is that the participants and the members of their broader communities have a strong awareness of their fundamental rights to life, dignity, equality and freedom, and that these rights are the dividend of their new democratic government.

And it is this consciousness of rights and the certainty of the protection of these rights by the state that leads to reflections that ever though under Apartheid there may have been more employment, their parents and grandparents who were in full time employment were made to work for "slave wages". For many of the participants, liberation might not have brought jobs, but it has brought the freedom from having to accept and endure conditions that undermined their life, their freedoms, their dignity and their equality.

Progressive trade unions provided much of the leadership and strength to the long struggle for freedom from the oppression of Apartheid. They have a clear mandate from their members to continue to struggle for equality until the distribution of resources in this country allows their members to enjoy a better life.

It is a real shame that the middle class and elites in this country suffer the dual diseases of myopia and amnesia that force people to have to strike for a living wage in the first place.