



Investing in People for Social and Economic Justice

The Plight of the Zimbabwean Worker

The 2020 International Worker's day is being commemorated against a global pandemic, novel coronavirus, which has infected 3,308,548 people in 212 countries and territories, resulting in more than 234,112 deaths¹. Zimbabwe has not been spared by the pandemic which claimed 4 lives out of 40 reported cases as of 1 May 2020. The outbreak of coronavirus is rapidly changing the ways of life and work especially in countries where national lockdowns have been and are being implemented, Zimbabwe included. Remote operations and skeletal staff operations have become a norm for formal employment whilst those that have been declared essential service providers it remains work as usual. As workers worldwide commemorate the International Worker's Day, it is particularly important to reflect on the plight of the Zimbabwean worker pre, during and post COVID-19.

In Zimbabwe, the deadly pandemic did not only change the "face" of work but has worsened the plight of workers both in the formal and the informal sector. The crisis has brought to the fore and worsened the social and economic woes the poor working class has already been grappling with. Speaking during a National Indaba focusing on the future of work and other Public Finance Management related issues in the context of COVID-19, the President of the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions, Peter Mutasa highlighted that,

"COVID-19 has just exposed the inequalities, corruption and the careless attitude of the state, the labour movement has always been lamenting. Now that the pandemic has struck, we cannot expect a miracle from the government to provide social safety for the majority."

The careless attitude cited above relates to the adoption and implementation of austerity measures by the government. In 2019, the government of Zimbabwe introduced austerity measures operationalised under the "austerity for prosperity mantra". Nevertheless, the fiscal policies did not yield any prosperity for the majority of Zimbabwean workers whose wages and salaries were severely eroded, instead the austerity measures left the working poor in a far worse situation than before. It did not even help the situation that austerity meant severe cuts in government expenditure in public spending, consequently, public service delivery declined with the country's public healthcare for instance now in shambles. The cost of living continually rise to unprecedented levels against stagnant and eroded wages and salaries further relegating workers to abject poverty. Therefore, austerity measures entrenched poverty and other forms of inequality worsening the material conditions of the working class.

¹ Downloaded from <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/> on 1 May 2020

Privatisation of social services like health and education worsens the social and economic challenges the working class is facing. Speaking at the same platform, Takura Zhangazha who is a Social and Economic Justice Activist reiterated that,

“In as far as the global pandemic is requiring all hands on the deck, it is critical for us to understand that the devastating effects of the pandemic are because we have allowed the state to withdraw from its mandate of providing basic social amenities like health. The free market economy undermines the state's ability to deal with the effects of coronavirus. Privatization of social services like health & water is not a welcome move and its effects are felt in times like this. Placing the private sector at the centre of dealing with a pandemic of any nature is detrimental.”

The effects of coronavirus we are grappling with as a country have therefore exposed the short sightedness of the economic system that the country has adopted, a system based on massive cuts in government expenditure in public investment. The effects are just speaking to the inadequacies of the social protection systems in Zimbabwe, reiterated Sifiso Ndlovu, Chief Executive Officer of the Zimbabwe Teachers' Association during the Indaba. He added that Zimbabwe needs an economic model that reactivates the economy which is job rich to address the high unemployment rate.

Zimbabwean workers are faced with hunger and deprivation. According to Zimstats, the total consumption poverty line (TCPL) for an average of five persons shot by 21,3% to \$6 420,87 in March 2020. This is the amount needed for both food and non-food items for a family of five to be deemed not poor. It is unfortunate that the cost of living is rising against stagnant salaries and the majority of workers are facing poverty and deprivation. This is exacerbated by the annual inflation rate that shot up to 676,39% in March from 540,16% in February 2020. It is unfortunate that the government of Zimbabwe is failing to cushion the working class amidst the rising levels of poverty especially during lockdown. Peter Mutasa said that,

“In as far as ZCTU called for a national lockdown to protect the workers, we are disappointed by the government's failure to take specific action to provide social safety nets to address hunger issues.”

The disappointment comes at a time when the government of Zimbabwe availed a paltry ZW\$200 per household to cushion about 1 million vulnerable families including informal workers across the country, an intervention which has been considered a slap in the face for the suffering masses. This is far less than the total consumption poverty line (TCPL) per person which stood at \$1 284,17 in March 2020. This means that the informal workers are now living in extreme poverty. On that regard ZCTU called upon the labour movement in Zimbabwe to unite and engage in a social dialogue with the government to come up with a post COVID-19 Response Mechanism to cater for the poor working class.

The coronavirus came amid repeated deadlocks between the government, labour and the business on the salaries with gazetting SI 81 of 2020 which set the minimum wage at ZWL\$2, 547.74 against the total consumption poverty line (TCPL) for an average of five persons of \$6 420,87 as of March 2020 (ZIMSTATS, 2020). The wages and salaries are inadequate to cover the basic household necessities relegating the majority of workers into poverty. The recent price hikes effected during the lockdown has made it worse for the worker to make ends meet. Over a year, civil servants have not received the promised non-monetary incentives including residential stands promised by the government in 2019.

Furthermore, the outbreak of coronavirus has put the lives of workers at risk with government abrogating its responsibility to provide personal protective equipment (PPEs) to health workers. Healthcare workers rely on personal protective equipment to protect themselves and their patients from being infected by the deadly virus. However, failure on the part of government to provide PPEs is leaving doctors, nurses and other frontline workers precariously ill-equipped to care for COVID-19 patients, due to unavailability of gloves, medical masks, respirators, goggles, face shields, gowns, and aprons in public hospitals. The government has not yet enforced the High Court order ordering government to provide PPE for health personnel at the forefront of fighting the coronavirus pandemic. This is despite the release of ZWL\$600 million by treasury and the donations and pledges from the international community and business people. One would then wonder what the government is prioritising when the frontline workers are not being placed at the top of the priority list.

Recommendations

- The government should expedite the disbursement of the proposed stimulus package to cushion business and labour from the impacts of COVID-19. The stimulus package must be well thought out and target critical sectors and those that are severely impacted following a comprehensive assessment. The stimulus package must also target Small Scale and Medium Enterprises including the registered and unregistered informal traders.
- The government must issue, through a Statutory Instrument, an employment moratorium to ensure that the contracts of workers are not terminated during the lockdown and in cases of illness.
- The government must consider offering unemployment benefits to people who lose jobs in the event of prolonged lockdown to cushion both the workers and the business community.
- The government should mobilise additional resources in order to increase resources earmarked for social assistance benefits to enhance income security and boost aggregate demand. Social protection systems and public infrastructure for social services increase resilience allowing societies to cope with emergencies in the immediate term and to mitigate the impact of possible future crises (ILO, 2020).
- The government must make a deliberate decision to ensure accurate, consistent, timely and transparent information for fighting the pandemic but also for reducing uncertainty and boosting confidence at all levels of the economy and society, including the workplace (ILO, 2020).
- The government must come up with a comprehensive response mechanism that include policies to support skills development and entrepreneurship to alleviate the impact of unemployment.
- The fight against the pandemic is a shared responsibility calling for constructive and persistent social dialogue between the government and social actors. The government must consistently consult with social partners and civil society in order to develop an effective response at the enterprise, sectoral and macroeconomic level.
- The government must put in place robust public finance management mechanisms to safeguard public resources from abuse and corruption in order to increase the value for money in public procurement.

- Alleged cartels hijacking government’s social protection programmes must be severely dealt with by the law especially in relation to embezzlement of food subsidies and disbursements earmarked for the poor and vulnerable
- Destructions and of vending stalls should have taken place after alternate vending sites had been put up. A compensation plan must form part and parcel of the reconstruction efforts to assist vendors in also rebuilding their livelihoods.

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