

STRUGGLING WITH UNEMPLOYMENT

"I don't like getting out of bed in the morning any more. I know that every day will be the same. I try and find some work every day, but there is nothing. In the beginning, when my boss said there was no more work, I didn't tell my family. You must work for your family, and if you cannot work, then you are no good any more. Even though I didn't like the work I was doing, I knew that I would get money for my family at the end of the week. Now I get nothing and the children can't go to school any more and they have little to eat. I don't see my friends any more since I have no work. I always feel tired and I can't do even little things. Now I don't care what kind of work I have to do. If I can't get something, I will die. It is also too much money for me to go into town every day. The buses and trains are too expensive when you have no money. Every week I must go to the UIF office. But now I have been going there for two months and they always say next week, next week, next week."

Unemployment in South Africa

Statistics about the number of unemployed in South Africa vary. Official unemployment figures put the number of unemployed people at 61 816 (as of December 1984). Most of these are blacks. However, official figures do not include the number of work seekers in the so-called homelands. Unofficial estimates (which include the unemployed in the so-called homelands) place the number of unemployed people at three million. To these figures one could add the vast number of underemployed persons. Underemployed people are those who officially have work, but they do not get enough income to maintain themselves and their families above the poverty datum line.

Studies done in Soweto have shown that unemployment has risen at 5,5% per year during the recession. The Institute for Industrial Relations recorded more than 13 000 retrenchments from January to October 1984.

It has generally been estimated that at least 200 000 jobs a year have to be provided to keep all black people in a job. However, as the recession bites deeper, the employment situation gets worse, and the possibilities for more jobs diminish.



Mental Health and Unemployment

High rates of unemployment cause problems in any society. People who are retrenched or cannot find work feel rejected by the society in which they live. They tend to lose their self-respect and confidence. Many researchers have shown that unemployment is linked to poor psychological health. Some of the most common forms of strain reported by unemployed workers include high blood pressure, increased alcohol intake, worry, anxiety, and sleeplessness.

People who are retrenched and become unemployed often get confused if they do not get told why they have been retrenched. People who have been retrenched in this way talk about feelings of failure, frustration, and anxiety. From this, it becomes clear that the pay-packet

at the end of the month is not the only reason why people need work.

Unemployed people have to cope with a loss of income which immediately affects themselves and their families. But apart from this, their rights and abilities to work have been taken away. Work gives a sense of identity, meaning, and structure to one's life, and the possibility of organising around problems shared with other people. When the right to work is withdrawn, the person concerned experiences a deep sense of loss.

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Unemployment and the family

It is important to realise that even though we have been talking about "the unemployed person", the effects of unemployment are felt not only by the individual, but also by those people around him or her.

Firstly, the unemployed person cannot financially support those who previously were dependent on his/her wage. Secondly, the unemployed worker has to be supported financially and emotionally by relatives and friends. Thus the increase in unemployment places an added burden on those who have got jobs. Thirdly, not only does the unemployed person's family feel the effects of unemployment, but eventually, the community as a whole feels the effects too.

The political nature of unemployment

Unemployment in South Africa is unique because of the particular ways in which the state intervenes and structures people's access to jobs. Because of the influx control laws, employers can be very selective in deciding whom to employ and under what conditions. For the worker, the choice is between the job that he or she might be lucky enough to get, or otherwise removal to some rural impoverished 'homeland' where the chances of surviving are very low. This employment situation does

not leave the individual black worker any bargaining power. The bantustan policy, together with influx control laws serves, among other things, to maintain a large pool of unskilled workers who can be drawn into employment when industries expand, and who are the first ones to be retrenched in times of recession.

Dealing with unemployment, therefore, is not only a matter of coming to terms with unemployment psychologically or financially; it becomes also a political task.



Unemployment benefits

Some researchers have argued that the most devastating consequences of unemployment have been minimised by social welfare programmes. However, South Africa differs from those advanced industrial countries which provide extensive social security benefits. For the majority of people living in South Africa, social security benefits are inadequate.

Many unemployed people here do not benefit from the Unemployment Insurance Fund (UIF) because of their occupations, as in the case of domestic workers, farm workers, and contract workers. Those who do qualify for UIF, often have to deal with a great deal of bureaucratic procedures. In these bureaucracies, mismanagement of funds is not uncommon. Many employers do not fill out unemployment fund cards correctly when workers leave their employ. If the reason given for unemployment is "discharged - own fault", that means that it will take at least six weeks before any money becomes available.

In June 1981, only 0,2% of black unemployed persons had received their unemployment benefits. The Black Sash office in Natal reported that for the last eight months of 1984, 72% of their cases concerning UIF payments were complaints about delayed payments of unemployment benefits.

Unions and unemployment

Many unions are taking up the issue of UIF payments. In 1982, a number of unions and worker advice groups drew up a memorandum to the Minister of Manpower. The motivation behind this was that many unemployed people did not receive unemployment benefits; also, thousands of workers are not allowed to contribute to the UIF and the majority of unemployed workers can only survive with the help of relatives who have jobs.

The continuing recession has made retrenchment a major issue of dispute between employers and trade unions. Unions have won important rights against arbitrary dismissal and retrenchment. This has been done mainly through making demands on employers and negotiating fair dismissal and retrenchment procedures. Many of the progressive trade unions have made public proposals aimed at lessening the worst effects of retrenchment.

While it is important to make every effort to reduce the scale and consequences of recession and unemployment,

it is much more difficult to prevent retrenchment altogether. Retrenchment and unemployment do not occur because there is not enough work to be done. Rather, it arises out of declining rates of profit. With more and more machinery being introduced, the demand for large numbers of unskilled workers goes down. There is a higher demand for semi-skilled workers who can read and write, and know how to operate certain kinds of machinery. Thus retrenchments mean that companies are getting rid of unskilled labourers whom they no longer need.

Recessions and retrenchments tend to undermine worker organisations and force them to be more compromising in their attitude towards negotiating with management. Given these factors, in the event of an upswing in the economy, re-employment will be selective. (This already occurred in the firing and selective re-hiring of SASOL workers.) Many workers who are active in trade unions, are specifically not re-employed.

Thus, fighting retrenchments and unemployment does not merely mean fighting through a bad patch in the business cycle. Rather, it is a matter of fighting a tendency of the economic and political system which removes able people from the work force.