

The Dignity of Work

The dignity of work and workers hinges on the presumption that all jobs are respected and there is the elimination of any form of bias and discrimination when it comes to the type of work engaged. Employers can set the tone by demonstrating a respect for workers' rights, human rights and providing good conditions of work. This basically speaks to promotion of decent work.

The International Labour Organization (ILO), defines decent work as “productive work for women and men in conditions of freedom, equity, security and human dignity.” The ILO advances that work is considered as decent when a fair wage is paid, where there is a secured form of employment, safe working conditions prevail, equal opportunities and treatment is applied to all workers, there is social protection for workers and their families, prospects for personal development are offered, social integration is encouraged, workers are free to express their concerns and to organize.

Unionized workers tend to be the beneficiary of the collective action that comes through the understandings reached under a collective bargaining agreement, and the representation made by the labour movement to ensure that there is adequate social protection. It must be stressed that social protection holds immense significance for the working poor. Trade unions are therefore required to play an important role in protecting the exploitation of workers by employers.

Generally, social protection is designed to protect low education achievers, those who are usually involved in precarious work, have jobs in the informal sector and are self-employed. Workers who fall in these categories, face income disparities. There is often no work training provided. The insecurity of the job accounts for the high incidence of turnover in jobs. With the level of income being a problem, many workers are forced to do more than one job in order to earn enough to support their individual families and meet existing financial obligations. This is said to be the fate of approximately 1.4 billion people in developing countries, who are forced to accept to work in these conditions.

It must be disconcerting for workers to find that they are grossly underpaid for the job they do. Employers are known to expect their employees to showcase good work ethics and to be productive. Vulnerable workers for the most part who are often considered as low-level workers, tend to face a level of stigmatization. This single factor may contribute to the low level of wages paid and the security of tenure which is attached to the job. It would appear that vulnerable workers work in jobs which are undervalued. Employers and the public often tend to have a rethink of the value of these low-level workers, where circumstances warrant that they withdraw their labour to press demands for improved conditions of work.

If the dignity of work is to take on its intended characteristics, then this needs to start with the payment of better wages and salaries. The fact that many workers continue to live in a state of poverty and have to rely on state welfare assistance and social services, this means that these people are not empowered. In these circumstances, workers are not inclined to be motivated and as a consequence, there is a decline in worker productivity. It must be understood that the dignity of work spans across all areas of work and applies to all categories of workers. Middle and upper-level class of workers have the same expectations. For some reasons, it is believed that these two categories of workers are more highly favoured. It may be that these fall into the category of professional workers, whose expertise carry a higher value than the average worker. This outlook runs contrary to the expectation of promoting equity and fairness of treatment to workers.

The dignity of workers has a lot to do with the respect shown to workers by their employers and management. Those employers who refuse to pay their part of the workers' national insurance payment which is a statutory requirement, are not only disrespecting their employees but are practicing dishonesty. Employers who fail to pay workers their wages or salaries when due, are basically demoralizing their employees. It is even worse, when employers resort to retrenching their employees and do not honour the payment of severance.

It is advisable that employers undertake to follow workplace standards. They ought to display that they have a consciousness of what is fair, just and reasonable, and to demonstrate a willingness to work to ensure that the dignity of work and workers is not compromised. The observance of labour standards and practices, conformity to follow the dictates of labour legislation, processes and procedures

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and to identify with established policy would tend to give reason to believe that the rights of workers and the dignity of work are being respected.

Many enterprises would often tend to suggest that they have the interest of their employees at heart. As the cliché goes, 'the proof of the pudding is in the eating.'

It is a burning shame that employees are forced to resort to the picket lines to press for justice to be served and demand what they are legally entitled too. It is difficult to understand how employers who are guilty of such behaviour can in the same breath, boast of having a corporate or social conscience. The display of a social conscience means that the employer understands the importance of making their employees happy. The social conscience must therefore move behind the confines of capital investment, to the placing of a value on people as an asset in the value chain. In summary, the model employer must demonstrate a sense or consciousness of their moral goodness, character, conduct and intentions, which reflect their understanding that they must meet their obligations and to do the right things.