



AFRICA-FRIDAY REFLECTIONS

"AFROCENTRIC THOUGHT"



WORKERS' RIGHTS IN THE DIGITAL AGE

BY TIEGO NWOKORO.

Mother Teresa - 'The miracle is not that we do this work, but that we are happy to do it'

It is in Utopia where all workers can say that they are adequately protected and enjoy the work that they do. There are those lucky few that do enjoy their craft but for the most part, workers simply do what they have to do to survive. The digitalisation of the economy is expected to disrupt production processes, the world of work and society at large.

But we still do not have a clear idea of what this digitalisation really is about and how it is likely to impact the social construct. As we usher in the digital age, the 4th Industrial Revolution - the rights of the worker must be an issue that we focus on. We have to conscientiously work to understand how these new business models that have emerged will impact worker's rights. These business models are powered by digital technologies and have disrupted a range of activities including transportation, accommodation and schooling to name just a few.

New problems are arising because of this shift to the digital economy. Issues such as automated hiring, employment discrimination and privacy concerns that give rise to privacy and discrimination concerns related to electronic workplace surveillance.

Africans have missed out in the first industrial revolutions; but now we have a chance to make a difference; to improve the conditions of the worker. In this piece I argue that workers need to educate and organise themselves in appropriate ways so as to be on the right side of the revolution. And in South Africa, we can effectively deal with the triple scourge of unemployment, inequality and poverty if we take this opportunity to reinvent the worker. The alternative is that we create a bigger problem of the current state of affairs. First, we have to understand the new type of worker in order to create a new social compact.

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We are still scrambling with how we are going to treat our workers even though annually on the 1st of May, International Workers' Day is commemorated, celebrating the advances made by the labour movement and the workers. That shows that the problem is a changing one and we need to be agile enough to respond effectively.

The manner in which capital accumulation happens in Africa is that labour has always been subjugated. In South Africa the poor treatment of labour has been keeping the Apartheid system in power. We have attained political independence, but the economy is still in the hands of the minority. The majority of black workers still face precarious working conditions. In our beloved country is where one finds the working poor, that is, an employed person who can hardly make ends meet.

The system thrives on keeping a high number of unemployed men and women. In this way, the worker will bend over backwards to please the employer as there are many more people willing and able to work but lack opportunity. It is no wonder that unemployment is still one of the biggest plagues that has befallen South Africa. Historically the nature of the job the capitalists needed done was primarily by an army of black men conscripted to the mines. The capitalists brutally removed black men from their farms and made out of them a reserved army of unemployed men.

Demonstrations took place on the 1st of May 1890 in the United States, in most countries in Europe and a few countries in Africa. Workers were demanding an eight-hour working day and equal rights for all. These protests emanate from an 1889 resolution that called for a once-off demonstration on 1 May. The day gained momentum and became an annual event all over the world. In South Africa however, it is only from the 1980s that Mayday has been unofficially celebrated. It is only after the new dispensation was ushered in in 1994 that the 1st of May became officially recognised as a public holiday.

We have a particular interest in previously disadvantaged individuals as we consider who the worker is. The one that has been given prostitutes in the mining towns for entertainment, so he does not miss home too much. The one who has been given unrestrained access to bars and taverns as soon as he comes off the train from work. The one who miraculously kept the family going even when he had nothing because he gets paid peanuts from the employment he had.

Fast forward to 2021 where we are supposed to be catching on; the African worker is still facing a tough time at work instead of evolving like labour is all around the world. The economy is moving online. Workers' rights have to be taken into consideration in that fashion. There is artificial intelligence (AI) and robotisation in all its forms.

This includes all the computerisation and automation that enable robots to carry out non-routine manual and cognitive tasks. Robots may be either tangible like smart factories or virtual like software algorithms. There is also the platform economy as a new business model. The platform economy has been made possible courtesy of ubiquitous connectivity, availability of data and mobile devices that enable people to connect on digital platforms, access new services, take advantage of financial technology like having the ability to invest in cryptocurrencies, access to e-commerce and online outsourcing. This collaborative platform economy is introducing a new kind of worker. This worker is disseminated all over the world and different jurisdictions will need to work in unison to continue to protect the rights of the worker.

The worker and their families are still battling the three plagues in South Africa, unemployment, Inequality and Poverty. We therefore have to look at solutions that will address this reality and set us on a path of economic recovery.

Unemployment

The unemployment rate in South Africa is especially high amongst the youth, a bit shy of 60%. That is both a tragedy and a time bomb waiting to explode. When you have an army of so many young people that are agitating and willing to do something; and there is nothing positive they can turn to, they will turn to all kinds of ills. That is one of the reasons why we see those ills rife in our society.

Chasing inflation instead of unemployment

When you have a particular problem; you face it head on as a leader. Not unless you want to sheepishly follow the ways of the elders have done in the past, even when you can see conditions have taken on another form. You may even see that your method and tools need to change. That is exactly where we find ourselves in South Africa. Between inflation and unemployment is said to be a trade-off. In that light, the monetary authorities in South Africa have opted for inflation as a problem they are facing. The bigger problem of unemployment is not of primary concern to them.

It may also be an inherent fear of the unknown, but I submit that things have to be done differently. We have heard time without number the Monetary Authorities reinforcing their commitment to inflation targeting at the expense of employment. In this instance it should not be a wonder why we face such high rates of unemployment. The majority of the people willing and able to work simply do not find jobs and they are mostly black people.

In this age the Black worker has a chance to reinvent themselves, so do governments and companies. This is the nature of development; there has to be learning on the shop floor, in boardrooms and in the seats of political power. We all have a chance to take on new skills that will respond to the new challenges in the economy.

Having everything move online creates both opportunities and risks. One of the major risks is that many black people may find themselves completely blocked out of the system while others with access will enjoy the fruits of digitisation. These new models of business rely on information technologies that can incorporate multiple benefits. For example, the use of technology to provide valuable information about the quality of products and services can be very beneficial for the economy by removing information asymmetries such as moral hazard and adverse selection. These new forms of work also afford flexibility to the firms that organise them and to those who perform the work and those in government.

Workers who might otherwise be unemployed or underemployed have a chance of a new source of income. There might be greater choice over the hours, workers do their jobs and more choice in the types of jobs that are available.

Any policy intervention on digital work should be carefully targeted so they do not needlessly undermine these benefits.

Inequality

We are at the brink of an era that will change the manner in which people do the most basic things such as go to school, work, shop, worship and even play. In South Africa we still have a lot of people that are not part of the revolution simply because access is an issue.

If prices of data are not prohibitively high, then there is no infrastructure to enable reasonable access to the internet. This is especially true in the rural areas. This will create further inequality if not taken into consideration in a convincing way by the state. Already South Africa has one of the biggest gaps between rich and poor and this new era is likely to create more of a chasm if care is not taken.

Poverty

The cycle of poverty can be broken once we undertake to equip our workers and young people with the relevant skills to take advantage of the opportunities at hand. The effects on labour markets and working lives need to be managed carefully, otherwise we may be in for an increasingly polarised and unequal society. Digital platforms may move towards the trend of deregulation and the failure of firms to comply with legislation. Money and work are evolving and this gives us a chance to defeat poverty if we respond appropriately to the changing environment.

Currently there are a number of Master Plans that are being deliberated by government, labour and business in response to the ailing economy. Whilst this an encouraging development, we know from experience that there is a poverty of implementation which needs to be attended to.

Conclusion

The fruits of any industrial revolution can be quantified; different countries can be compared to one another based on metrics such as the growth rates of their respective economies and development levels. The number of people lifted out of poverty has been a feature in the economies that have been able to transform from poor to developed countries. In this piece I argued that the new forms of employment and ways of communication brought on by technology, needs a different approach from the worker, statesmen and company leadership.

In South Africa in particular, we have an opportunity to effectively deal with our internal problems and bring about a more just transition to the digital age. We may also be able to give rise to a worker that actually enjoys their work. A happy worker has a range of externalities for the society at large.



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