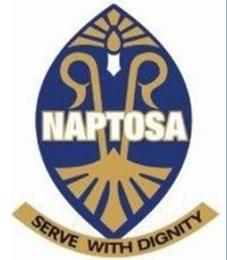




NATIONAL NEWS FLASH



SERVING EDUCATION SINCE 1904

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NNF 18 of 2021

29 April 2021

WORKERS' DAY MESSAGE

Last year NAPTOSA celebrated Workers' Day in a spirit of thankfulness.

We acknowledged that we enjoy labour rights far in advance of many countries. Our thankfulness also extended to the fact that amid lockdowns we still enjoyed employment while so many of our counterparts in other sectors of the economy were losing jobs.

It is a year hence and circumstances are much the same – so also our thankfulness. But our gratitude must not be construed as acceptance, tacit or otherwise, that the State as employer can trample our labour rights.

Since inception of the labour relations regime in the public service in the mid-1990s, Labour and the employer have always engaged in collective bargaining in the spirit intended by this right, culminating in many agreements in the Public Service Co-ordinating Bargaining Council (PSCBC) and the sectoral bargaining councils like the ELRC. Not that it has always been a smooth ride. There were times when Labour had to embark on strike action, but in the end agreement was always achieved, followed by implementation of the agreement.

Then out of the blue, the attitude of the employer changed in 2020. No longer was a collective agreement regarded as a binding contract, but rather something that could be walked away from, causing a direct attack on the collective bargaining rights of employees in the public service. Unfortunately, our expectations of a positive result from our legal action to force the implementation of the agreed salary adjustment for 2020 was dashed by the Labour Appeal Court in a questionable judgement that has seriously compromised our bargaining rights, forcing us, together with the other unions in the PSCBC, to escalate the matter to the Constitutional Court. The matter is to be heard later this year.

As informed in a number of National News Flashes, the employer entered this year's wage negotiations with much the same attitude. First offering a 0% increase and then topping this intransigence with an offer of a once-off bonus (non-pensionable) to be funded by a freeze, reduction or abolishment of certain existing benefits such as pay progression. The employer's arrogance is nothing short of astounding.

The alleged “unaffordable” public sector wage bill is being used as the big stick to deny public servants salary increases. As explained before, the public sector is much broader than the public service and includes local government and parastatals. While the public service makes up the largest portion of the public sector, we cannot be held responsible for the wages in these other sectors where exorbitant salaries (in some instances self- awarded) are often being paid. Nor should public service employees be punished for the looting of the state coffers.

The public service wage bill today is the result of collective agreements entered into over a period of many years. Every agreement carried the approval of the employer’s mandating Ministers who act on behalf of Cabinet. To pin the wage bill problems on Labour and the public service employees is just a smokescreen for the State as employer’s own incompetence and now employees are expected to bear the brunt. This cannot be allowed.

What an indictment on the employer and their preparations for the current round of wage negotiations (and a grave illustration of the level of incompetence) when the Minister of Public Service and Administration has to request the public to make proposals on how to end the deadlock between Labour and the employer. We reject this move by the Minister with the disdain it deserves. It is just further proof of the employer’s efforts to derail collective bargaining in the public service.

While NAPTOSA’s leadership, on this Workers’ Day, wishes to pay tribute to all our members for their dedication, perseverance in the face of difficult circumstances and their hard work, it would be amiss not to prepare members for some turbulent times ahead, lest the employer desists from its continued bad faith bargaining.

The wheels of a wage dispute are already in motion.

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PRESIDENT: NAPTOSA