

Opinion Piece

The dyad of democracy: why economic and political freedom cannot be disconnected

Political truths have a tendency to echo across the eras, as the human race fumbles through history, seeking solutions to human problems which seldom seem to change. At the turn of the twentieth century, German politician, Eugen Richter, made the pronouncement that “Economic freedom has no security without political freedom, and political freedom can find its security only in economic freedom.”

As Freedom Day and Workers’ Day approach, we stand in South Africa in the year 2018 accepting the truth of such a statement, yet still struggling to provide the economic liberation which our people so desperately need. And this is not a uniquely South African challenge – 1 May marks the international celebration of Workers’ Day, and many countries across the globe will spend this day contemplating the current situation of their labour force, the varying challenges which face them, and the methods which may be adopted to ease their burdens.

It is fitting in many ways that Freedom Day and Workers’ Day are celebrated in such close progression in this country, especially considering the role that the workers and trade unions played in fighting for that freedom. World War 1 triggered the initial gatherings and commemoration of Workers’ day in South Africa, but this was initially a white labour movement. By 1928, however, black workers took up the cause en masse, triggering a series of protests over the years that followed, which culminated in 1 May eventually being declared an official public holiday following the 1994 elections.

But the closeness of these two public holidays also reminds us of how far we have strayed from some of the initial ideals and promises made during the struggle for freedom. This idea of economic and political freedom being intertwined, of each enabling the other, was an idea that burnt in many South African hearts in the build-up to the 1994 election. Democracy promised a better life, a step out of poverty, a step-up for the working class to decent wages, a quality standard of living and protection from unethical employees. But it is no secret that Trade Unions in this country have influenced, and been influenced by, political favour and bargaining. The integrity of some unions has had to be questioned over the years, when it appeared that the rights of workers were playing second fiddle to the desires and deals of union leaders.

In an insightful article published in 2017 on biznews.com, Sara Gon, IRR Policy Fellow, discussed the concept that the biggest trade unions in South Africa have “not adapted to a 21st century global environment where the nature of jobs and work have irretrievably changed. They are reactive to change, seeming to be in little position to really assist their members to adapt to increasingly rapid change.”

She went on to suggest that “in an uncertain economic environment, workers look to trade unions to perform their traditional roles of promoting their interests and protecting their employment. The increased muscularity of the opposition parties suggests that workers may no longer be interested in unions and federations representing their political interests.”

However, as we hear the echoes of Richter’s pronouncement centuries later, we see the inevitable unfolding in our country. When our political freedom was won, people’s focus shifted to the economic front. And as the latter fails to be delivered, our people grow restless. Workers speak out against Union leaders. Unions question long-standing political alliances. Voters switch allegiance. And new leaders move to address the scourge of corruption which must be purged in order to make headway in our quest for the political and economic liberation of our people.

One such initiative geared at ensuring economic progress in our city is the City of Johannesburg's programme to insource waste management and security services, for the benefit and dignity of those involved in providing this work. However, instead of celebrating the move to empower our people, we have seen malicious attempts from other parties to thwart our plans, knowing that this would bring detriment to the truly deserving within our labour force.

Under the previous administration, the Jozi@Work programme was used to benefit only those who had the correct political ties, denying many of our residents of fair employment opportunities. Neither service delivery nor work opportunities were the priorities; instead, enriching middle-men and labour brokers appeared to be the order of the day.

Under our insourcing initiative, though, nearly 4000 security guards will be insourced into the City, increasing their remuneration and benefits while costing the City no more than what has been expended on over 100 security contracts in the City, costing nearly R700 million per annum. This process is widely regarded to be amongst the largest scale insourcing projects ever undertaken in the public sector, but we are driven by what is fair and just, rather than what produces lucrative profits for the few fortunate enough to win these tenders.

We are also extremely excited to report that following a successful meeting held with SAMWU, IMATU and Pikitup management, it was decided that some former contract workers and some former Jozi@Work employees will be insourced by the City. These employees will see their earnings increase from R2200 to R6000 per month and be employed on a permanent basis.

We are happy that the unions have expressed their support for our efforts in bringing fair pay to workers within the City. We hope that they will maintain their support as we work to better the City.

This is one simple example of the steps we need to start taking as a nation if we are to protect and liberate our workers. Yes, there is a very long road to be travelled, but there are opportunities aplenty for those who are willing to see them. Government at all levels should be committed to the cause of ensuring

the political and economic freedom of our people. By ensuring that our processes and practices as an employer of a large workforce are in line with fair practice and ethical conduct, we will set an example for employers in every sector in our country. We cannot continue to preach labour rights while exploiting the vulnerable in our society.

As the political landscape of our country draws and redraws its lines, the role of trade unions raises many questions. Undoubtedly they still play a significant role in our country, but for how much longer they can maintain this status if they fail to adapt their modus operandi remains to be seen.

History the world over has shown that the power of the people sits with the working classes, who will eventually rise if they are being wronged.

Let us work to create a South Africa in which our workers are treated with the dignity they deserve. 'A Johannesburg that Works, is a South Africa that works!'

Let us reflect on the dyad of democracy – that political and economic freedoms are intertwined and interdependent. We fought hard to win our democracy; now let us fight hard to reap the benefits which such a political system should bring to all its people.

ENDS

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