

SPEECH DELIVERED BY THE MEC FOR ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, ENVIRONMENT AND TOURISM, MR M.N MOKOENA, MPL, DURING A DEBATE ON WORKERS' MONTH AT THE MPUMALANGA PROVINCIAL LEGISLATURE, RIVERSIDE, MBOMBELA LOCAL MUNICIPALITY.

Thursday, 26 May 2011

Honourable Speaker, Honourable Members;

I am humbled and honoured to have been given this opportunity to pay homage to the Working Class in our country, and the world over. As part of the global community, we acknowledge the workers who stood up for the first time, to celebrate the workers in Russia, Brazil and Ireland in 1891. This resulted in a call in 1904, for all socialists and trade unionists in every country to demonstrate energetically, annually on 1 May, for the legal establishment of the eight hour working day and for universal peace.

I am humbled because as a former trade unionist and representative of the workers, I am in a better position to explain the continuing plight of the workers, who continue to be exploited.

As workers, we were fearless in fighting for our rights during the dark days of apartheid, hence we started celebrating what was then known as May Day in the 1980s. Despite facing the barrel of the gun of the oppressor, we persevered fearlessly to eventually realise May Day being declared a public holiday, in recognition of the contribution being made by the workers.

Although in our parts of the world this day continues to be called May Day, it is now officially known and recognised as Workers' Day in South Africa. Since the dawn of democracy, the ANC lead government has worked very hard to ensure that workers rights are respected. Our government has ensured that the workers voice is heard in government and various workplaces.

This has been done by ensuring that we have legislations such as the Labour Relations Act; the Basic Conditions of Employment Act; the Mines Health and Safety Act and the Employment Equity Act, amongst others. The trade union movement continues to represent workers in redressing inequalities and effectively implementing these legislations.

Honourable Speaker, Honourable Members;

Despite all these achievements, the working class remain faced by challenges in the various sectors. Our people are still exploited in farms where they work long hours, under unbearable conditions, where they are evicted as and when their bosses feel that they are too old to work. This happens after they have worked in these farms from a very tender age in their lives.

We still have domestic workers who are working very long hours, and their employers unashamedly ignoring labour laws. It is depressing that in some cases, these domestic workers are being ill-treated by their fellow black sisters and brothers, who treat them like slaves.

They are supposed to work 24/7 to service their so-called black madams and masters. I do not think that this is a kind of abuse that we've fought for; which resulted in some people losing their lives. We must fight against it as we strive to build a caring society for all; a society which does not look down on others.

As government and the people of Mpumalanga, we must therefore continue to pledge our support to Workers in this country. We must collectively continue to acknowledge their selfless contribution through their sweat towards propelling our country's economic activities, without which our people would never experience improvement of their lives. Critical to this, is our support to ensure that they have access to affordable medical care. A prerequisite to a thriving economy continues to be a healthy work-force.

Most of them are exploited – they continue to be under-paid and over-worked. They receive low wages and salaries which are predominantly used for sustenance to address the bread and butter issues.

We must therefore applaud the ruling party, the African National Congress, for realising that these vulnerable members of our society and many others, should be protected against those who do not care about their well-being, though they continue to make huge profits out off the sweat of the exploited working class.

We applaud the ANC for taking a bold step by intending to introduce the ensuring a healthy nation and a healthy working class, by intending to introduce the *National Health Insurance*, which is aimed providing free healthcare to all, especially to those who cannot afford it.

In its 2009 National Election Manifesto, the ANC committed to ensure that the commitment to provide quality healthcare for all, through the *Freedom Charter* is fulfilled without failure. The Freedom Charter commits us to a preventive health scheme run by the state; free medical care and hospitalisation provided for all, with special care for mothers and young children.

As promised, we must, amongst others:

- “Work together with all key sectors in our society through a social compact to continue to transform the health care;
- Improve quality standards for both public and private sectors, which will include specific targets for the provision of adequate numbers of workers at all levels of the health care system, including recruitment, training and filling of vacant posts.

Honourable Members, through the insurance scheme, we would be acknowledging the role of the poor worker who cannot afford private healthcare, and the majority of our people who sometimes have to stand in long queues for basic medical attention.

These are the people who make our economy tick; hence we cannot afford to let them become unproductive due to sickness and their inability to pay for medical care.

Our freedom and democracy will be meaningless if the working class continue to be marginalised by those who are only concerned about making profits at the expense of workers. Let us all join hands and ensure that all workers enjoy the fruits attained by our struggle heroes. As workers, we also have a responsibility to ensure that we perform our duties to the best of our ability, timeously and responsibly.

As the Workers' Month draws to a close, let us collectively pay homage to these people who continue to oil the economic growth machinery of our country. We salute them for their contribution; for it is through their sweats that our economy continues to thrive. They are a critical economic propeller, and their voice and concerns should be heard at all times.

In conclusion Honourable Speaker, Honourable Members;

I wish to dedicate a poem by Walt Mason, entitled "The Workers." It reads thus and I quote:

*Here's to the man who labours and does it with a song!
He stimulates his neighbours and helps the world along!*

*I like the men who do things, who hustle and achieve;
the men who sow and glue things, and spin and dig and weave.*

*Man earns his bread in sweat or in blood since Adam sinned;
and bales of hay are better than are your bales of wind.
Man groans beneath his burden, beneath the chain he wears;
and still the toiler's guerdon is worth the pain he bears.*

*For there's no satisfaction beneath the bending sky like that,
the man of action enjoys when night is nigh.
To look back over the winding and dark and rocky road,
and know you bore your grinding and soul fatiguing load.*

*As strong men ought to bear it, through all the stress and strife
That is the reward of merit – that is the balm of life!
I like men who do things, who plow and sow reap,
who build and delve and new things while dreamers are asleep.*

I thank you!