



Worth, Wellbeing and Welcome: the Missing Parts of Workers' Day

'What a great thirst for death, for killing, we witness each day in the many conflicts raging in different parts of our world! How much violence we see, often even within families, directed at women and children! How much contempt is stirred up at times towards the vulnerable, the marginalized, and migrants!'

Pope Francis, Easter Sunday 2025¹

1. Introduction

For well over a century 1st May has been observed around the world as May Day, Workers' Day or Labour Day. It commemorates the historic struggles and gains made against often overwhelming odds and against a culture of exploitation. It is also traditionally a day for reflection on ongoing issues in the workplace, such as safety, and issues in the broader world of work, such as the causes of unemployment, discrimination, racism and sexism. It is also an appropriate day for considering questions which are often 'elephants in the room', such as the contributions of undocumented foreign workers, the role of informal traders, and the protection of non-unionised workers.

The traditional May 1st commemoration is largely rooted in the struggles of American workers in the 1880s. In September 1882, 10 000 workers in New York City took unpaid time off work to march from the City Hall to Union Square to make demands around working conditions, thus constituting the first labour march in the USA. However, the more symbolic event took place on 5th May 1886, when labour protesters, calling for the implementation of an eight-hour working day, and police clashed in the infamous Haymarket Riots, which soon became the symbol of the struggle for worker's rights and became associated with the annual observance of May Day.²

2. South Africa: Workers' Day 2025

In South Africa May Day has largely been used as a time to remember and showcase the role of labour movements, the trade unions, and workers generally in overthrowing apartheid and in resisting the harsh work-related policies that discriminated against, and dehumanised, especially workers of colour in the past. A sampling of statements on 1st May 2025 underlines this point.

The official government communique states:

"Workers' Day has been officially recognised and observed since the first democratic elections in 1994. The holiday serves both as a celebration of workers' rights and as a reminder of the critical role that trade unions, the Communist Party and other labour organisations played in the fight against Apartheid. Workers' Day in South Africa holds its own cultural significance, as the public holiday has come to signify not only the sacrifices made on the long road toward fair employment standards but also the bitter battle against Apartheid in which trade and labour unions played a key role. Because South Africa's working classes were those most oppressed by Apartheid, the struggle for better working conditions and the struggle to overthrow systemic segregation became closely linked. Before the elections of 1994, labour and trade

groups often used Workers' Day as a symbol to rally the population against the segregation and oppression of the Apartheid system, organising demonstrations and encouraging widespread resistance."³

The Parliament of South Africa issued the following statement:

"Parliament remains committed to holding the Executive accountable in labour matters, overseeing issues of workplace safety, labour rights, unemployment mitigation, and job creation through committee inquiries, oversight visits, and budgetary scrutiny. As the world of work evolves, Parliament is actively engaging on matters such as basic income support proposals and the regulation of digital and platform work to ensure fair treatment, benefits, and protection for gig economy workers. According to the 2024 Fourth Quarter Labour Force Survey by Statistics South Africa, youth unemployment among those aged 15 to 24 remains unacceptably high at over 60%, highlighting persistent challenges in absorbing young jobseekers. Stats SA further notes that women and black Africans continue to bear the brunt of unemployment disparities, underscoring the need for Parliament to prioritize gender-responsive and equitable economic policies. Parliament will continue to prioritize legislative and oversight efforts to protect the rights of workers and to create an inclusive, prosperous society where all South Africans enjoy dignity, fairness, and opportunity."⁴

3. Non-South African Workers

Even a cursory reading of the statements will show that key aspects of the world of work are missing from the official statements. This includes any reference to the contribution of foreign nationals to the economy, the vulnerability of undocumented foreign nationals in the work place, and the ever present and insidious thread of xenophobia that runs through work situations. The latter was sadly very evident this year.

A new anti-immigrant group, 'March in March', was started in Durban in the month of March, and has now spread to Gauteng, the Free State and the Eastern Cape. It organised marches on Workers' Day calling on the government to issue a thirty day ultimatum for all illegal foreigners to

leave the country voluntarily.⁵ In a statement the group said, "Our march is against illegal immigrants. It's not that we're against foreigners, but there needs to be control. When the system fails to document and manage the number of foreigners entering the country, it becomes unsustainable. These individuals are not contributing to the economy, and many are involved in criminal activity."⁶

At the beginning of April, the Department of Home Affairs reported that 46 898 undocumented immigrants were deported in the 2024/2025 financial year. This was an 18% increase from the previous year's total of 39 672. Following the release of the deportation statistics, Minister of Home Affairs Leon Schreiber said, "The fact that Home Affairs now performs more than double the number of deportations conducted in a country like France, which has the highest rate of deportations in the European Union, sends a clear message to offenders that the days of impunity are over".⁷ This is a clear indicator of the direction of the country with regard to undocumented foreigners. However, on the topic of Workers' Day and jobs, the marchers in Durban cut to the chase in linking the protest with jobs and joblessness: "The Workers' Day Durban March in March saw several speakers link the country's surging crime rate and job scarcity to the presence of undocumented foreigners. Many alleged that local businesses preferred hiring undocumented migrants because they could be paid less and employers could flout labour laws."⁸ In the national build up to Workers' Day another group focusing on workers without jobs, called 'Put Patrollers First', also pointed to the contested issue of work. Their particular concern was around the employment of illegal foreigners in the security industry and in the trucking sector. They also pointed to poor and corrupt vetting systems in the DHA. "The protesters expressed worries that the hiring of undocumented foreign nationals may be taking away job opportunities from South African citizens."⁹

Minister of Sport, Art and Culture, Gayton Mc Kenzie, in a not too dissimilar spirit to some of the sentiments above, has written to chairpersons and accounting officers of his department's entities requesting detailed information about non-South Africans employed by these entities. His fundamental line has been around foreign nationals depriving South Africans of jobs and contributing to the high levels of crime in the

country. In that regard he says especially of the presumed favouring of foreigners for jobs on the historic Robben Island site, "I am drafting a letter to the acting director-general and I will cc Robben Island Museum. I assure the committee I will handle this matter personally and consider it dealt with. We cannot have a situation where foreigners are being given jobs while our children do not have jobs in the Western Cape." In the letter, Mr McKenzie has requested all entities to provide information about foreigners employed by them within three working days. This information includes:

- The person's name, nationality and length of stay in South Africa;
- The status and nature of their work permit if they are not permanent residents (date of issue and expiry);
- The critical or scarce skills possessed that could not be found in the local workforce;
- The expiry date of work contract; and
- The person responsible for signing off on their appointment.

According to Mr McKenzie the exercise will not be limited to the Robben Island Museum.¹⁰ This underlines the direction of policy and the tendency towards a politics of exclusion. The Minister's political party, the Patriotic Alliance, made considerable inroads among voters precisely by problematizing foreigners' presence in South Africa.

While the knee-jerk response of many who feel themselves disadvantaged by the presence of foreigners is understandable at one level, especially if the bigger picture is withheld from them and they are thus not able to make informed decisions, it is nonetheless true that a closer reading of the reality shows that the issue is not so clear cut and that the presence of foreign nationals is not entirely a drain on the economy or a barrier to local employment. "Migrants and refugees significantly contribute to the South African economy by boosting GDP, increasing income per capita, and making a positive net contribution to the government's fiscal balance. They play a vital role in the labour market, often occupying positions in high-growth sectors and contributing to job creation for both themselves and South African citizens. Furthermore, they frequently engage in entrepreneurial activities, particularly in the retail and service sectors, which further

stimulates economic growth and diversification."¹¹

The abstract of another recent academic paper comes to a very similar conclusion: "Immigrants contribute considerably to South Africa's economy. In contrast to popular perception, immigration is not associated with a reduction of the employment rate of the native-born population in South Africa, and some groups of immigrants are likely to increase employment opportunities for the native-born. In part due to the high employment rate of the immigrant population itself, immigrants also raise the income per capita in South Africa. In addition, immigrants have a positive impact on the government's fiscal balance, mostly because they tend to pay more in taxes. Policies focused on immigrant integration and fighting discrimination would further enhance the economic contribution of immigrants in South Africa."¹²

The paper, entitled *How Immigrants Contribute to South Africa's Economy*, is the result of a project carried out by the OECD Development Centre and the International Labour Organization, with support from the European Union. The project aimed to analyse several economic impacts – on the labour market, economic growth, and public finance – of immigration in ten partner countries: Argentina, Costa Rica, Côte d'Ivoire, the Dominican Republic, Ghana, Kyrgyzstan, Nepal, Rwanda, South Africa and Thailand. The empirical evidence stems from a combination of quantitative and qualitative analyses of secondary, and in some cases primary, data sources.¹³

It is also worth noting some of the more positive contributions found in recent studies. For example, a study by the Scalabrini Centre found various positive aspects flowing from refugees' involvement in the economy.

"The study reveals that small businesses owned by refugees bring five main benefits to South Africa. The first beneficiaries of these economic activities are formal sector suppliers such as wholesalers, supermarkets, fresh produce markets, retailers and manufacturers. This is because, in order to restock, refugees purchase from wholesalers. Secondly, the South African treasury greatly benefits from these informal activities. If on one side, small and informal businesses do not pay taxes, on the other side, they do pay value-added tax (VAT) on most of the

supplies they buy from formal sector suppliers. This means that additionally to paying VAT on products, refugees are not able to claim rebates. Thirdly, refugee business owners pay rent to South African property owners. On average, monthly rentals in Limpopo are ZAR 4 555 and ZAR 4 838 in Cape Town. Fourth, municipalities have a direct financial interest in refugees' economic activities. As Crush et al point out, 22% of refugees in Cape Town and 4% of refugees in Limpopo 'pay into municipal coffers through rent for business sites.' Such rents amount to an average of ZAR 879 per month in Cape Town and ZAR 311 in Limpopo. Moreover, business owners need to pay an annual license fee to the municipality equal to ZAR 752 in Limpopo and ZAR 1 959 in Cape Town. Lastly, 'refugee entrepreneurial economies' create jobs for South Africans. Refugee business owners hire South Africans because they speak local languages and understand customers quickly, but also as a form of security against theft. As this research shows, contrary to what the majority of the people believe, 'refugee entrepreneurial economies' are beneficial to the South African economy in multiple ways. It is useful to highlight these benefits in order to challenge public opinion and combat xenophobic attitudes."¹⁴

4. Conclusion

There is little doubt that migrants' place in the world of work is terribly insecure. Most countries, pulled by growing populism, exclusivity, often unstable economies, and a culture of entitlement, seek actively to exclude the 'other' from benefits and solidarity. "Theological perspectives on migrant workers' right to work emphasize the dignity of labour and the need to support vulnerable individuals, particularly those

seeking economic opportunity. Migrants' right to work is often viewed as a matter of social justice, aligning with religious teachings that advocate for fair labour practices and the well-being of all people. Furthermore, the concept of 'decent work' in theology acknowledges the need for fair wages, safe working conditions, and the opportunity for workers to participate in a just and equitable society."¹⁵

This last quotation offers an insight into a trajectory which can usefully be followed in order to continue to create strong foundations for an alternative narrative to the one that so dominates our present policy worldview. For example, the increase in the volume of people on the move has raised ethical questions about the obligations of host countries in terms of traditional concepts such as the 'universal destination of goods', the 'duty of care' and the obligation of host countries to 'provide protection'. Questions about how these concepts interact practically in our contemporary situation with, for example, the principle of the right of nations to protect their borders, need new scrutiny in the light of interdisciplinary understandings of justice. The rise in numbers of migrants and their continued exclusion have also deepened the need for advocacy and documentation, as well as for changes in the political culture, especially around ensuring safe passage.

There is so much work to be done in the engagement of vulnerable migrants, refugees and asylum seekers to ensure that they have exposure to safe and fulfilling work. One intervention that everyone can make is to strenuously counter the popular narratives that criminalise migrants. In marking Workers' Day, instead of being too self-congratulatory about past achievements, we need to muster the courage to take on the present challenges and, through work, enhance the dignity of all people.

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¹ <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/urbi/documents/20250420-urbi-et-orbi-pasqua.html>

² <https://www.britannica.com/topic/list-of-social-movements-2073658>

³ <https://www.gov.za/WorkersDay2025>

⁴ <https://tinyurl.com/498jdnv3>

⁵ <https://www.citizen.co.za/news/marches-against-illegal-immigrants-spread-across-south-africa/>

⁶ <https://www.citizen.co.za/news/marches-against-illegal-immigrants-spread-across-south-africa/>

⁷ <https://www.citizen.co.za/news/marches-against-illegal-immigrants-spread-across-south-africa/>

⁸ <https://iol.co.za/dailynews/2025-05-01-protests-against-illegal-foreigners-growing-countrywide/>

⁹ https://iol.co.za/news/2025-03-24-protesters-demand-action-against-illegal-immigration-in-south-africas-security-sector/#google_vignette

¹⁰ <https://www.timeslive.co.za/politics/2025-05-02-mckenzie-cracks-down-on-employment-of-foreigners/>

¹¹ <https://tinyurl.com/4ptbw6f2>

¹² <https://tinyurl.com/ythscn6j>

¹³ <https://tinyurl.com/ythscn6j>

¹⁴ <https://tinyurl.com/9w8yuv53>

¹⁵ <https://tinyurl.com/yrf9fktc>

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