

Youth Day highlights brand-new struggle

ON Friday millions of South Africans celebrated the gallant efforts of the 1976 generation of young people, who fought tirelessly against the brutal and inhuman system of apartheid.

As we continue reflecting on the role played by this group in rewriting our history, we must do so fully cognisant of the fact that young people today face a different struggle altogether.

Unemployment, particularly among the youth, is alarmingly high. It is at its highest since September 2003. The Quarterly Labour Force Survey released by Stats SA earlier this month showed that, although 144 000 jobs were created in the first quarter, the number of job seekers also increased by 433 000.

Of those who joined the ranks of the unemployed, 58% were young people, bringing our youth unemployment rate to 38,6%.

We are not alone in this. A study released in Australia found that half of that country's young people — between 18 and 29 — had found it difficult to buy food or pay bills in the past three months. This is a trend around the world.

Five million young people who are sitting at home should worry not only our policymakers but all of us.

We urgently need an aggressive, airtight, multifaceted plan if we are to arrest this.

There is recognition from across the different sectors of our economy, including government and organised business, that we are sitting on a time bomb — but we have done very little to address it.

Doing nothing is not an option — if we continue to ignore this situation, it will explode. While the government can lead efforts to find solutions, it cannot be solely responsible. President Jacob Zuma's speech on Friday was disappointing. He spoke with a forked tongue and failed to unpack how he planned to address youth unemployment. Listening to him, it became very clear that the government does not have a plan.

He again spoke about work opportunities created by the expanded public works programme. If this programme, launched in 2014, was the answer, we would not be sitting with this problem.

Instead of piecemeal plans, we need a combined vision by the private and public sectors. That is why today we make the call to the private sector to join hands with the government — this is the only way we can address unemployment.

Gauteng Premier David Makhura made the same call this week. "Young people are used, exploited, and they are at the bleeding edge of high unemployment, persistent poverty and growing inequality. They are easily recruited for negative social causes such as strikes, because they are readily available," said Makhura.

He was launching the #Tshepo1Million programme, aimed at getting more than 2.7 million unemployed young people into jobs through skills training, job placement and entrepreneurial development.

The initiative was launched in 2014 with the aim of reaching 500 000 young people. More than 20 companies have committed to the initiative. Today the Sunday Times throws its support behind this programme.