

Blaming the poor



OPINION

Terry Bell

THAT old English song about the poor always getting the blame while the rich “live in clover” got a fresh twist last week.

It came in a national radio statement from Gerhard Papenfus, chief executive of the National Employers’ Association of SA.

According to him, “the driver of inequality is poverty”. And he opposed, as “a bit of a socialist thing”, talk of instituting a maximum let alone a minimum wage. Once again, it “woz the poor wot got the blame”.

That workers may demand a fairer share of the wealth they produce is a concept clearly beyond the comprehension of Papenfus and the National Employers’ Association.

But we should not be surprised to hear more of this peculiar logic as the debate heats up about the proposed introduction in January of some of the minimum wage provisions agreed to in 2016.

It will almost certainly be a debate punctuated by minimum facts and, all too often, minimum truth from both free-market opponents and minimum wage supporters.

Already all but left out of last week’s discussion about the launch of the minimum wage in the new year was the position of some of the lowest paid of the low paid — domestic and farm workers.

Perhaps in the case of domestic la-

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bour, this is because there already exists a differential in payments for workers in urban and other less populous areas, and between those who labour for a maximum of 27 hours a week and those who work for no more than 45 hours.

Yet all sides may agree that domestic workers probably comprise the largest segment of the working poor.

Their existing minimum wage rates are set by the minister of Labour, with the current top rate being R15,28 an hour, or 28 cents more than the minimum rate that is still to be implemented.

Of course, that top rate only applies to those who labour for no more than 27 hours a week, making for a monthly income of R1 787,80. They would be slightly worse off under the proposed hourly rate.

Domestic workers fortunate enough to have a full-time, 45-hour-a-week job will — if the proposals are put in place for them — be better off by less than R2 an hour after waiting for more than two years.

And their prescribed minimum monthly wage would be R2 925, not

R3 500.

But there are also exemptions that can be applied for by employers claiming to be hard pressed and, as has been shown, there are ways around minimum wage provisions.

None more so than in the use of the state’s self-lauded Expanded Public Works Programme (EPWP), which is one of the government’s key programmes “aimed at providing poverty and income relief through temporary work for the unemployed”.

As such, it was established as a nationwide project to provide “work opportunities”, especially to young unemployed men and women to gain experience that might enable them to enter the world of work. Municipalities have cashed in on this, replacing full-time council employees with rotating groups of cut-price EPWP workers.

Then there are the firefighters recruited, trained and retained by a private company on what seem to be long-term EPWP contracts.

These firefighters complain that their earnings are in the region of R2 100 a month, that there is no medical aid cover provided and that this is less than half the average pay of “permanent” firefighters — a position for which they clearly qualify after years of service.

These are some of the facts that should be aired alongside what may become a deluge of bigoted pro and anti-propaganda from vested minority interests. — News24.

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