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Employment must be our top priority

LAST Monday (July 21), Independent Newspapers reported on the horrific reality of youth unemployment.

The report reflected on more than a million young South Africans had applied for the police service learning programme. Even more shocking was that over three hundred thousand of those graduates had an NQF Level 6 or higher qualifications. The situation is now so bad that six in 10 of our youth are unemployed. These numbers are not just statistics. They are basically



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almost every family.

Despite these stark figures,, we still have government putting enormous restrictions on job creation. We constantly see how small businesses are blocked from their very survival because of regulations and harsh restrictions.

The labour ministry seems hell bent on trying to control who can be employed and where.

We have archaic regulations controlling the employment of people with certain skin pigmentation. We also have legislation telling employers how much they must pay for certain jobs. If the employer can't afford that they are told to apply for an exemption.

These are almost impossible to obtain and the few that do get exemptions from the minimum wage in certain categories, that exemption is for only a short period of time and only in very limited circumstances.

Even the few exemptions that are obtained and don't go far enough, despite the fact that the individuals would rather earn a lower amount than no salary.

These individuals are not entitled to agree to take the lower amount. Their only other alternative is to resort to crime, drugs, or nothing but despair.

Such circumstances tend to lead to some employers breaking the law and to many employees being complicit in breaching the rules and regulations.

In many circumstances in my daily dealing with trade unions even they are willing to overlook these breaches.

In my travels across South Africa, I speak to shop stewards who tell me they would rather have their members employed than to strictly enforce the minimum wage.

Unfortunately, when an employer breaches one piece of legislation, we invariably see that this leads to other unlawful behaviour. For instance, if an employer is forced to ignore the minimum wage legislation they then feel complete indifference to health and safety regulations. This one wrong leads to many others.

To top all of this, we have too few inspectors and the ones that we do have are not properly resourced. When we read about an inspection blitz this normally targets larger businesses in city centres and never reaches informal businesses.

Of course, this also leads to businesses rather employing foreign



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nationals who have no papers at all. Because of the precarious situation that these foreigners find themselves in, we see silence from those individuals who are earning a pittance. This situation in turn leads to xenophobic reaction from South Africans who can't find jobs.

Xenophobia is encouraged by community leaders and to a large degree some of the political parties.

Instead of government going out to tackle the unemployment they often find various ministries using foreign labour as the scapegoat.

There is, however, light at the end of the tunnel.

We are seeing fantastic news come out of our Home Affairs Department where they are encouraging and targeting certain industries to create jobs.

Specific visas and a helping hand in the film industry is one such example.

Another is where Minister Dean Macpherson has entered into agreements across the board including with foreign governments to engender job creation in the building industry.

We've seen the Department of Agriculture doing everything necessary to ensure that our fresh produce is exported to other jurisdictions, despite the American tariffs.

It is also extremely pleasing to see enormous efforts being driven in the Western Cape in the call centre industry including all types of beneficiation of our local goods.

The Government of National Unity, although under threat, has at least given our economy a boost.

Foreigners have been pouring money into various industries around the country. Organisations, such as the Federated Hospitality Association of Southern Africa, have stepped forward and applauded the introduction of two new visa categories.

Our conferences and exhibitions sector are growing at an amazing pace. Our people are innovative and for the first time in many years I'm noticing small manufacturing businesses opening up.

As the world stage becomes more and more complicated, our consumers are once again turning to home grown manufacture.

All of us can play a part in buying South African-made goods and supporting local industry.

It is always refreshing to see labels on goods stating, "Made in South Africa!" | **MICHAEL BAGRAIM** Cape Town