

HOW many people are unemployed at the moment? Every worker knows that the only real answer to this question is that it is too many. But it is important to know just how many people are unemployed so that we know just how big the problem is.

Normally, the government of a country would publish this information. It is a government's job to collect and publish information. This is a first step to seeing how serious a problem is. But in South Africa no-one really knows how many people are unemployed. This government only seems to publish information when it looks good or when it is forced to. Often it just doesn't publish it at all.

Everyone wants to know how bad unemployment is. When unemployment is very high then it means that the whole economic situation is very serious. We believe that the government is scared to publish a true unemployment figure because it is extremely high.

In South Africa, unemploy-

ment is even more serious than in many other countries because the vast majority of those without jobs are not protected by Unemployment Insurance Fund (UIF) benefits or any other social security benefits. So silence is best for the government. The unemployed need to be kept hidden. The government does not want lots of unemployed workers cluttering up their nice clean cities with their sad, hungry and often angry faces.

Until about eight years ago there were no consistent unemployment figures for black workers available at all and a big political storm broke out when some researchers estimated that there were over two million unemployed in South Africa. Partly as a result of this storm, the then department of Statistics introduced the Current Population Survey. This survey of many thousands of households looks at all the race groups except whites regularly.

Is this CPS reliable? Does it tell us what effect the present recession is having? Does it tell

us just how many people have no real hope of getting a job in industry? The answer seems to be a clear no to all these questions.

We all know from our experience that this is the worst recession we have had since 1930 and yet according to the CPS, the unemployment rate among black workers grew from only 7,8 percent in 1981 to 8,5 percent in 1983 and then fell back to 8 percent in 1984. It says that the number of jobless blacks increased from 425 000 to 488 000 in 1984 — a mere 63 000.

There is obviously something seriously wrong. If we are to believe the government's statisticians, the employment of black workers grew by 58 000 between 1981 and 1982, by 83 000 the next year and by a massive 370 000 between 1983 and 1984. Where are all these new workers?

According to other government information, the number of black workers in the manufacturing sector, the most important employment creator,

grew by only 4 200 over the same period. Which figure do we believe?

We are sure that the Central Statistical Services (as the department of Statistics is now called) has a clever explanation for these strange figures but as far as we are concerned the figures they publish are meant to confuse rather than inform. In one publication they say that in 1984 there were 1 101 000 black workers in manufacturing and in another they say that there are 750 000. Where are the other 351 000?

Likewise, one publication says there were 630 000 black miners in 1984 — another says 772 000. Where are they? What about the 780 000 workers in 'trade' according to one publication as opposed to 356 000 in another? Where are the other 400 000 or so workers, selling meat at bus ranks?

No matter what explanation we might or might not get for these very different figures the effect is only too clear. Basically, there is confusion. We go so far as to say that such confu-

sion is deliberate. The government is scared of the truth.

The present economic position is hopeless. Using the government's own figures, we believe that during the present recession 500 000 jobs have either been destroyed or not created because of the recession. Compare this to the estimated 200 000 jobs needed each year just to employ school leavers.

The so-called modern industrial sector has created 2 000 jobs a year. Nearly all of these have been for skilled workers. Jobs for black workers have been destroyed at the rate of about 17 000 a year. This gives a very clear idea of how bad things are.

Apart from the government, only two sectors made a positive contribution to job creation in the modern sector of the economy. Electricity provided about 4 000 jobs a year, half of which went to whites and the other to black workers. Finance and business services (banks, building societies and insurance companies) provided about 8 400 jobs a year — a mere

1 100 of these for black workers.

The rest of the economy is a disaster. The manufacturing sectors destroyed jobs at the rate of 23 000 a year, most of these were for black workers. All in all, over the period 1981 to 1984 nearly one quarter of a million jobs were lost or not created in manufacturing.

This tragic story of jobs destroyed and the picture we see before our eyes every day just does not fit with the government's unemployment figure of eight percent (or 488 000 people). If there are such different figures being produced isn't the truth being hidden?

Furthermore, UIF does little to help. FOSATU has just published a study on UIF which shows that a tiny one percent of the unemployed appear to get benefits. Yet the UIF is in danger of going bankrupt because the government has continued to pay in a fixed amount of R7 million each year despite the worsening economic situation.

The truth must be told because very great changes are needed.

COMMENT

THE present economic crisis is extremely serious. And there is absolutely no sign that government policy will correct the problem. The reason for this is that the present problems started developing many, many years ago. They run deep in our economy and society. Playing around with budgets and taxes will not solve them. It will only cause even more suffering for workers.

One proposed solution — not surprisingly it comes from businessmen — is that the government must stop interfering with the economy.

But, over the past hundred years, government interference has been mainly to the benefit of business. Their laws have created the migrant labour system as a source of cheap labour. The government has also protected South African companies against foreign competition and it has supported and protected white workers and farmers.

Why then are business biting the very hand that has fed them all these years? The truth is that big business is looking for new areas to make profits. There are now some very large companies which are big enough to take over activities which previously only the government was able to carry out — like Iscor, Sasol and Soekor.

Another area which big companies are interested in is providing housing and land for the wealthy black middle class. In the past this market was closed to them by apartheid but now these companies want the laws that have blocked them removed.

When they talk about free enterprise, they are talking about profits. Profits will only be made in selling houses to the wealthy. There are no profits to be made from the poverty and misery of the mass of the workers. Workers' problems will remain unsolved.

Foreign companies also claim that they can help solve our problems. But, how far can they succeed in this? Whatever they do for their own workers will only be a small drop in the ocean of needs. Their real interest is in protecting their profits.

Why is the government so terrified of disinvestment? We suspect that the real reason is that the government needs money. It has milked the people of South Africa dry, but it still needs more. So, the government is turning its eyes to the rich governments of America and Europe. At present getting money from these governments is politically impossible. Doors need to be opened. This is why the government has been hinting at the possibility of talks with the ANC and even the Afrikaner newspapers have been pushing for a National Convention. But will a National Convention help workers?

The government is getting desperate. However, our problems are huge and the solutions are not easy. Big problems need big solutions. None of the political forces in South Africa have developed a programme or plan to solve these social and economic problems. Workers — of all colours, as we are now beginning to see — have to carry the greatest burden. So, it seems that workers will have to take up the task of working out a programme to solve the problems. In future editions FOSATU Worker News will be considering the points raised here.

