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Minister Buthelezi acknowledges government employees as the essential backbone of government machinery

In his address at the 2nd National Labour Relations Conference in Mpumalanga, Minister Inkosi Mzamo Buthelezi lauded the critical role of public servants in running the state, emphasizing that they are indispensable to the existence and functioning of government.

He underscored that a dedicated, professional, and ethical workforce serves as the bedrock of public administration, without which no policy can be operationalized nor any state machinery sustained. By placing public servants at the centre of national progress, Minister Buthelezi highlighted that their daily contributions are essential not only for upholding institutional stability and effective service delivery, but also for preserving the very fabric of democratic governance.

The Minister who was joined by the Premier of Mpumalanga Mr. Mandla Ndlovu, the Acting Deputy Judge President of the Labour Court and several dignitaries said the conference provided a strategic platform for reflection, dialogue and consensus-building on how labour relations capacity can be strengthened to support the realisation of South Africa's developmental state.

In a moving tribute to public servants, Minister Buthelezi told over 250 delegates from across national and provincial departments that government must first recognise the humanity behind public service delivery. "I want to pause and truly honour you. Here, I am not speaking about 'human resources' or 'headcount' or 'the wage bill.' I am speaking about human beings," the Minister said.

“I am speaking about the nurse who finishes a 12-hour shift but sleeps in the hospital because she cannot afford the taxi fare home and back for a morning shift. I am speaking about the teacher who uses her own small salary to buy chalk and sanitary towels for her learners. I am speaking about the social worker who carries the trauma of 200 cases in her heart – yet still must smile at the next client.”

The Minister acknowledged that the sacrifices of public servants are often taken for granted, and that government must become a state that cares for its public servants, especially in moments of failure. “No policy document has ever captured the weight you carry. No budget speech has ever calculated the hours you work beyond the clock,” he said.

“If we truly want a public service that cares for our people, then we must first be a state that cares for its public servants, even in their moment of failure, and especially in their moment of failure.”

Minister Buthelezi emphasised that public servants are indispensable to the existence and functioning of the state: “Today, I want to say it plainly, we see you. we value you. we honour you. you are not the problem of the state. you are the state. you are the alpha and omega – where the state begins, and where the state must deliver. Without you, there is no National Development Plan. Without you, there is no government. Without you, there is no South Africa.”

On government’s role as employer, the Minister outlined a three-fold responsibility: to create stability, to engage continuously, and to professionalise the employment relationship.

On stability, he reaffirmed government’s commitment to centralised collective bargaining through the PSCBC and sectoral councils, while noting the challenge of fragmentation due to the rapid proliferation of trade unions. “While our Constitution guarantees freedom of association, which we all defend – we must also heed the call of the Labour Relations Act to minimise fragmentation and encourage a truly representative trade union system. Division among unions is not a victory for government, but a serious risk to sustainable labour peace,” he said.

With regards to continuous engagement with Organised Labour, the Minister said government will not wait for wage disputes to engage labour. “We cannot afford a relationship where we only meet labour when there is a wage dispute or when a strike is looming over us,” he said. “This government commits itself here to year-round dialogue.”

He also called on for the professionalisation of labour relations, including addressing juniorisation of practitioners, reviewing the Disciplinary Code to reduce delays and costly external role-players, strengthening Employee Health and Wellness, and managing digitalisation and Artificial Intelligence through social dialogue. “The South African public does not measure our labour peace by how many agreements we have

signed in boardrooms; they measure it by whether the clinic is open when they are sick, whether there is a teacher in front of their child, and whether Home Affairs serves them with dignity.”

Minister Buthelezi declared that government will not return to brinkmanship and unilateralism. “Government will not return to the era of brinkmanship and unilateralism. We choose engagement over enmity. But partnership requires maturity from all sides. It requires that we put South Africa first.”

The two-day conference also assessed implementation of resolutions from the inaugural 2024 conference and to agree on actions to professionalise labour relations and build a single, ethical public administration.

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