



MINISTRY
PUBLIC SERVICE AND ADMINISTRATION
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

THE SECOND NATIONAL LABOUR RELATIONS CONFERENCE

Theme: *“Building Sustainable Labour Peace and Improved Service Delivery Through Continuous Engagement with Organised Labour”*

KEYNOTE ADDRESS BY

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Programme Director - Mr Jones

Honourable Premier of Mpumalanga - Mr Ndlovu

President of COSATU and Leaders of Organised Labour

Director Generals, Heads of Departments and Senior Managers

Representatives of the PSCBC and Sectoral Bargaining Councils

Eminent Guests - most importantly the workers of this country

Ladies and Gentlemen

Good morning, all.

I am honoured to address you on a matter that **lies at the heart** of a capable, ethical and developmental state; and well captured in the theme: *“The role of government in building sustainable labour peace as a foundation for improved service delivery”*.

We meet at a critical moment, as this conference seeks to provide 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. We are gathered here **not as adversaries** across a table, but as partners bound by a common constitutional mandate - to serve the people of South Africa.

Jones

Let me do what is not often done from this podium. 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**.

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 has to smile at the next client.

Here, I am speaking about those who kept this country alive during COVID, during load shedding, during floods - when offices were closed, you were open. When everyone stayed home, you showed up.

Colleagues

No policy document has ever **captured** the weight you carry. No budget speech has ever **calculated** the hours you work beyond the clock, the insults you absorb at the frontline, the sacrifices your own families make because you are serving other families.

Even the citizens themselves, those you serve - have never appreciated the hard work you do on their behalf - serving them.

Colleagues

I am speaking about you. The nurse who today sits at home on suspension. Not because she did not care, but because in the execution of her duty, a life was lost.

One life, and suddenly, the system forgets the thousand lives **she saved** before that day. The midnight deliveries she did, the hours she stood in theatre, the children who are alive because of her hands - all forgotten because of one tragic moment.

And yet, the person presiding over her fate has made thousands of mistakes in his own career. But his mistakes are never suspended. He simply shreds the paper, throws it in a bin, and walks away clean.

This is what I mean when I say sacrifice is taken for granted. We are quick to hold onto one mistake, and too slow to remember a thousand good things.

A just state cannot be built like that, and neither can a developmental state be built like that.

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.

Today, I want to say it plainly, and perhaps for the first time from this level that; 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 (NDP). Without you, there is no government. Without you, there is no South Africa.

You are not just appreciated. You are indispensable.

And precisely because you are indispensable, government as an employer carries a dual responsibility, which is to be both **fair** and **firm**.

To be fair means recognising that collective bargaining is not a favour we grant you; it is a constitutional right that we must protect.

To be firm, on the other hand, means ensuring that the outcomes of that bargaining remain sustainable, equitable and in the best interest of both the fiscus and the citizen we all serve.

Our role, therefore, is three-fold:

Firstly, to create stability.

Labour peace does not mean there will be no disagreement; rather, it means we have credible and functional institutions that can manage that disagreement with maturity.

That is why we remain fully committed to strengthening centralised collective bargaining through the PSCBC and sectoral councils.

This stability is even more critical today because we are witnessing a rapid **proliferation** of trade unions in the Public Service.

While our Constitution guarantees freedom of association, which we all defend - but we must also heed the call of the Labour Relations Act to minimise fragmentation and encourage a truly representative trade union system.

Because as we learnt from the previous wage negotiations - division among unions is not a victory for government, but a serious risk to sustainable labour peace.

Secondly, to engage continuously, not episodically.

We cannot afford a relationship where we only meet labour when there is a wage dispute or when a strike is looming over us.

Continuous engagement outside the formal bargaining environment is paramount because it gives us the opportunity for robust and honest dialogue that is **not poisoned** by the tensions and misconceptions that usually come with hard bargaining. And that is why this government commits itself here to year-round dialogue.

The DPSA's Strategic Plan 2025-2030 is clear on this, as it identifies **strengthening** our relationship with organised labour as **a key intervention** to ensure that conditions of service create an enabling environment for productivity and improved service delivery.

And this very conference will advance that intervention while directly supporting Strategic Priority 3 of the seventh administration's MTDP 2024-2029, which is Building a Capable, Ethical and Developmental State.

Thirdly, to professionalise the employment relationship.

A peaceful workplace, colleagues, is never built on wages alone; it is built on dignity, on safety, on career growth and on ethical leadership.

To build lasting peace, we must be honest about the reality we face.

Our labour relations practitioners face a **painful dichotomy** - for on the one hand, the cost of living continues to rise for every worker, while on the other, the national budget is declining. And when this is coupled with growing debt servicing costs, it becomes extremely difficult for the state to meet wage expectations, which in turn **fuels tension** amongst all parties.

We must answer the critical question you have posed: Is the Public Service bloated. Do we have a Demand Management Model. And more importantly, what innovative initiatives can we explore to manage the escalating wage bill without compromising labour peace and service delivery, while still creating a **compelling value proposition** for our employees.

Let me be direct with you:

That, 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.

Therefore, labour peace is not an end in itself - it is **a means** to a much higher end, which is a better life for all citizens.

This brings me to the National Development Plan - Vision 2030.

Government reaffirms its unwavering commitment to the principles of the NDP.

The NDP is clear that we need a capable, developmental and ethical state. Chapter 13 calls for a public service that is professional, accountable, and development **oriented**.

The Constitution and the NDP envision a developmental state - capable of leading inclusive economic growth, reducing inequality, creating decent work, and advancing social justice.

The NDP cannot be implemented by policy documents alone. It will be implemented by public servants. Its vision of reducing poverty and inequality requires a public service that delivers quality education, health care and social protection without interruption.

Its vision of building a capable state requires us to attract and retain skilled professionals - something we can only achieve through fair labour relations.

In short, the NDP provides the what, and Labour relations provide the how.

The question is therefore, how then, do we practically enhance NDP implementation in our daily work.

We must begin by professionalising Labour Relations and building real State capacity, which means this conference must deliberate honestly on the emerging phenomenon of juniorization among practitioners.

We must ask ourselves whether we truly have enough capacity and capability within our Labour Relations environment to build a capable, ethical, and developmental State. And we must inculcate a disciplined culture and strategic capability that aligns collective bargaining with our national development priorities.

Beyond that, we must strengthen ethical governance and discipline, because while our commitment to fighting corruption rightly calls for high-level investigations, the capacity of the State to manage everyday disciplinary cases is being severely tested.

As long as departments continue to employ costly external role-players, we will keep seeing long delays and undesirable outcomes, and that is why we must review the Disciplinary Code to improve how we enforce discipline and drive real culture change.

Equally important is wellness and human dignity, because health and wellness are not separate from human dignity; it is human dignity itself.

In 2008, the DPSA adopted the Employee Health and Wellness Strategic Framework to provide holistic support for occupational health, safety and productivity. And this integrated approach recognises a simple truth - that there can be no productive public service if our workers themselves are not well, because individual wellness, organisational wellness and service delivery are directly linked.

Finally, we must manage digitisation and digitalisation which are fundamentally reshaping how work is organised and how employment relationships function.

While digital transformation can strengthen efficiency, transparency and citizen-centred services, it also **introduces new risks** that require deliberate capacity building, which is why we must manage its implications for eHR, virtual hearings, electronic evidence, POPIA-aligned data governance, and the impacts of automation and Artificial Intelligence through social dialogue, skills development and protecting the rights of workers in the digital workplace.

Comrades and colleagues

Let us make a clear commitment today: 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 substantive focus of this conference is to professionalise Labour Relations, build capacity, create an ethical Public Service, create labour peace, and **encourage collaboration** to create a single, ethical Public Administration.

And we will also assess the resolutions taken during the inaugural labour relations conference held in 2024.

If we can build that culture - of continuous, honest, respectful engagement - then we will not only have labour peace. We will have a public service that delivers, a state that is capable, and a National Development Plan that truly comes alive.

And as I close,

Let me return to where I started:

You are the alpha and omega of this state. You are indispensable.

As I always say, from the day a person decides to join planet earth, the very first person that child has contact with is a public servant - the midwife in that clinic, the nurse in that ward.

And throughout the entire journey of life, a public servant is always there alongside. When that child needs education, it is a teacher. When that family needs protection, it is a police officer. When they need care, it is a social worker. When they need water, electricity, and services, it is a municipal worker.

And even when we depart this earth, the last person to certify our departure, to close our file with dignity, is still a public servant at Home Affairs.

That is what I mean when I say you are the alpha and omega.

Where the state begins, and where the state ends, it is you. There is no South Africa without you.

Let us build together.

I thank you.