

## A cynical protest

PUBLISHED: 2009/10/08 06:25:33 AI

GIVEN that a promise to create “decent work” formed a prominent part of the governing party’s election manifesto earlier in the year — at the insistence of union federation Cosatu — one might have thought yesterday’s international World Day for Decent Work would have been an ideal opportunity for the alliance partners to explain to the people of SA why the opposite outcome has in fact come to pass.

SA has lost hundreds of thousands of jobs over the past six months, many of them decent, and the only employment the government has much hope of stimulating in the coming few months will almost certainly be indecently temporary, arising either from the public works programme or next year’s Soccer World Cup. So why is it even contemplating acceding to Cosatu’s demand for a total ban on labour brokers, which will undoubtedly make it harder for many unemployed South Africans to find jobs?

The government can hardly be blamed for the fallout from the global economic crisis, but it should challenge Cosatu on its insistence that it speaks for all South Africans when it states that if they can’t have “decent” work — full-time employment with all benefits, from pension contributions to maternity leave and medical aid — they would rather not work at all.

President [Jacob Zuma](#) clearly needs Cosatu’s political support now, but it would be a grave mistake to buy that endorsement by caving in to its ideologically driven demands. Zuma is president of all South Africans, not just those with formal sector jobs and union membership cards. In the long run, those who are without work will not thank him for failing to stand up for their right to choose between “indecent” jobs facilitated by a labour broker and the ignominy of long-term unemployment with chronic dependence on a rickety state welfare system.

For all its pretence of solidarity with SA’s unemployed masses, let it not be forgotten that Cosatu represents a privileged minority — those with the decent jobs it rightly values so highly. People employed by labour brokers are nigh on impossible to unionise, hence the unions’ cynical and self-serving insistence on a total ban on the practice. Cosatu’s private sector membership has been in long-term decline, partly because of the rise of labour broking, but let there be no doubt: its cunning plan to reverse the trend and restore its power on the shop floor is being implemented at the expense of the unemployed.

Zuma would be better advised to lean on new labour director-general Jimmy Manyi to ensure that existing labour legislation, which should adequately protect those who find employment through labour brokers, is applied properly. This is not the time to be experimenting with ill-considered policy changes motivated by an ally with a hidden agenda.