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## from the editor

ANNELI GROENEWALD



I am going to stick my neck out and say it: It's a disgrace that government has to police South Africans to pay each other a decent wage.

Coming into effect on 1 January, the national minimum wage (NMW) for workers in most sectors is R20 per hour, or R3 500 per month depending on the amount of hours worked. For farmworkers the hourly rate is R18, and for domestic workers R15.

But in March, government had to put out a statement on what it called "the growing practice of deliberately dodging labour laws, especially the NMW Act".

It said that the department of labour was "in the process of naming and shaming employers who fail to comply by publishing them on the department's website".

According to the post on government's website "about three months into the enactment of the NMW Act, the amended Basic Conditions of Employment Act (BCEA) and Unemployment Insurance Act (UI Act) caseload at the Commission for Conciliation Mediation and Arbitration (CCMA) has risen by 8%".

It said that, according to Wilbur van Niekerk, CCMA legal researcher: office of the director, the NMW Act alone accounted for 262 referrals since the beginning of 2019.

Counter-arguments to annual increases in the minimum wage, and against the implementation of the NMW, are well-known. The minimum wage could, for example, have negative unexpected consequences. When labour becomes too expensive, employers will have no choice but to lay off employees, the argument goes. Of course, this argument does carry weight.

It could be especially difficult for entrepreneurs running small- and medium-sized enterprises to absorb increases in their wage bill. Even more so in a sluggish economy where consumers are struggling to make ends meet. (Of course, when companies and individuals pay a decent living wage to those who work for them, it enables them to spend money on the very basics like food and clothing.)

But what about the most poorly paid (and probably most poorly protected) on the list? Domestic workers, at R15 per hour, earn R120 per day, and I would guess between 10% and 30% of that income has to go towards taxi fares. Let's say 20% of X's salary goes towards taxi fares, and let's say she works 20 days per month. This means she has to survive on R1 920 per month. Could you?

Quite frankly, a law should not be necessary to enforce a living wage. ■

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