Build on industrial gains with stronger labour policy

MORE than 1.2 million Ugandans are currently employed in manufacturing and production, thanks to government's deliberate policy to attract investors. This has certainly boosted job creation.

Most importantly, as we mark Labour Day under the theme; *Safeguarding Uganda's Progress: Empowering the Workforce and Promoting Decent Work for Competitive Enterprises*, we must move beyond counting jobs to improving their quality.

We need to reflect on what still needs to be done. Apparently, the public sector accounts for only about 400,000 jobs, leaving a large proportion to be absorbed by the private and informal sector.

The growth in manufacturing is clear to see. From Namanve to Mbale, Jinja to Mbarara, new factories in steel, agro-processing, textiles and pharmaceuticals are changing the employment landscape.

These industries have given thousands of young Ugandans their first formal pay slip and reduced our dependence on imported goods. This is the fruit of deliberate policy of setting up industrial parks, improved electricity and incentives that have made Uganda attractive to investors. It is progress worth protecting.

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EDITORIAL
Editorial Tel: 0414 337000/337139/337125;
Fax: 0414 235843; P. O. BOX 9815 Kampala.
Email: news@newvision.co.ug;
Marketing/Advertising Tel: 0414337000
Fax: 0414 232050
Email: advertising@newvision.co.ug
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www.newvision.co.ug

With only 400,000 positions in the public sector, the burden of employment rests on private firms and the informal economy. Yet too many workers there still operate without written contracts. That leaves them open to abrupt dismissal, unpaid overtime and unsafe conditions.

High youth unemployment further weakens their bargaining power, while cases of outright exploitation continue to surface. These practices do not build strong enterprises. They create turnover, poor quality and disputes that scare away new investment.

Decent work and competitive enterprises must rise together. A factory that trains its staff, guarantees safety and honours contracts will retain skills, meet export standards and expand.

Government must, therefore, match investment promotion with stronger labour inspection and simpler compliance for small businesses. Employers must treat workers as partners, not costs, by formalising employment and investing in skills.

The 1.2 million manufacturing jobs show that policy can work. The next step is to make each job one that offers dignity, stability and a future. That is how we safeguard Uganda's progress. That is how we build an economy that competes across Africa and lifts families at home.

As we celebrate Labour Day, let us honour workers not with words alone, but with action that turns job creation into decent work for all.