

## **FOOD BASKET COST SLIGHTLY DECREASES; JCTR CALLS FOR SINCERE NEGOTIATIONS IN CURRENT SITUATION**

During the month of May, the cost of the Food Basket minimally decreased according to the Jesuit Centre for Theological Reflection (JCTR). The May findings of the JCTR research show a decrease of K11,320 from the April figure of K340,720. Among other factors, this is due to slightly lower prices in mealie meal and charcoal.

The cost of the Food Basket occurs in a situation of a nation-wide strike by civil servants who are pressing for a 100% increase in their wages.

According to Muweme Muweme, it is clear that wages play an important role in contributing to household welfare and hence deserve urgent attention. The Central Statistical Office notes in its *Living Conditions Preliminary Report of 1998* that 42 per cent of the income for Lusaka Province households comes directly from regular salaries. "Obviously this means that with depressed wages, which is the case currently, household well being is seriously affected," says Muweme.

Much as the importance of wages is recognised by government sources, wages in Zambia have consistently remained low for most employees. It is now two years since President F.T.J. Chiluba pronounced civil servants' wages lower than K200,000 as "scandalous." At that time the Food Basket cost K252,740.

But wages have not increased in proportion to the rising cost of the Food Basket. JCTR's position has always been that employers pay employees just wages, wages that will sustain their families.

This sensitivity of JCTR to the question of wages stems from the Church's Social Teaching that recognises the centrality of the dignity of the human person. According to Peter Henriot, JCTR Director and lecturer in the Church's Social Teaching at St. Dominic's Seminary, Lusaka, "this recognition of the dignity of the human person must form the basis for arriving at what should be paid to an employee. Workers cannot be treated simply as 'commodities' in a market exchange," says Henriot, "where the lowest wages possible would be sought without regard for workers' needs."

Moreover, the Church's Social Teaching stresses that whatever wages are paid must be enough to provide for decent living conditions for a family. The basis of a well-ordered society is, of course, the family.

Because of the centrality of wages in household well being, constructive negotiations between employer and employee is of extreme importance. That is why since 1891 the Church's Social Teaching has explicitly supported trade union negotiations and legal strike action as necessary and legitimate steps in the whole process of attaining just wages. This is the clear teaching of the Catholic Church today.

JCTR therefore calls upon sincere and energetic negotiations in the current strike situation. These negotiations should lead to desirable outcomes in support of decent living conditions.

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