

Workers as Agents of Development and Transformation

Being the Text of a Speech Delivered by Abia State Governor, Dr. Alex C. Otti, OFR, During the 2024 Workers' Day Celebration at the Umuahia Township Stadium on May 1, 2024

Protocols,

1. It is with a great sense of pride that I welcome you dear comrades to this year's Labour Day celebration, a day set aside globally to honour those who work with their hands and intellect to earn a living, and in so doing contribute in very significant ways to the development and transformation of their immediate communities and the world at large.

2. Since 1890 when the formal celebration of Workers' Day commenced, it has become customary to set aside the first day in May every year to take stock and evaluate what progress has been made in protecting and advancing the rights and privileges of the working man and woman following the ugly incident at Haymarket Square in Chicago, USA, on May 1, 1886.

3. It is important to state that efforts and struggles to improve the welfare of workers and the conditions of the workplace are global in nature and have remained constant in the evolution of labour relations. Even in our dear country Nigeria, the killing of 21 striking miners in Enugu and the infliction of various degrees of injuries to scores of others by colonial authorities in November 1938 tell very tragic stories on one part; and the heroic sacrifices of others to secure better deals for those whose labour and toil have kept the engine of civilisation in constant motion for centuries.

4. In Abia and across Nigeria, we have witnessed several protests and industrial actions by various trade union groups, most notably, the Trade Union Congress (TUC) and the Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC). These agitations are all connected with the unending struggles to advance the welfare of the labour force, and in pursuance of the ideals of democracy, good governance and a better society for present and future generations of Nigerians.

5. So today we have gathered to honour the men and women whose struggles and resilience in the midst of multiple challenges have led to continued improvements in the living condition of the working man and woman in our State, country and across the world. This day also presents us an opportunity to reflect, and to evaluate what has been achieved and what can be done differently to achieve the common outcomes we seek.

6. Today's event is very significant to us in the State for a number of reasons. The first is to note that it is our day because we are a Labour government, elected through the popular support and goodwill of thousands and millions of people who do honest day's work, who spend each day in toil that they may be able to fend for their families, build their dreams and ultimately, go to bed each night fulfilled that they gave their best.

7. We have therefore come to say thank you to our comrades who work in the organised formal, or in the informal sectors of the State's economy. The State is deeply grateful for your sacrifices, your diligence, and for your continuing support to the government as we strive to rebuild our land from the ruins of the past.

8. This is for us an interface with our people, to hear from you and then share our plans and programmes with you because ultimately, you are major stakeholders in this government. I have carefully listened to the NLC and TUC leaders as well as other comrades who have shared the concerns of their members, identifying what they want the State Government to do for them to enhance their welfare in the light of the present economic realities. Of course, I had met at some other time in the past with Labour leaders in the state.

9. As you are aware, we are a pro-Labour government and right from the inauguration podium on May 29 last year, we made it clear that never again will consideration of workers' welfare be an afterthought. As if we anticipated the theme of this year's event, we made it clear that in the New Abia, it will be "Workers First."

10. Our conviction is that the welfare and interests of the workers, past, present and future, will come before listening to the demands of the political class. Since we assumed office, we have made it an official policy of government that we must meet our salary obligations before political office holders are paid their monthly entitlements.

11. The commitment to paying workers their legitimate entitlements was not borne out of charity, but on the understanding that it is irresponsible to owe anybody that has worked hard to earn their wages. Importantly, the connection between regular payment of workers and the performance of the economy is a reality that no one can ignore.

12. To address the injustice of unpaid salaries and pensions, we went to work shortly after assuming office, setting up various teams to look into the record books, interface with the leaders of the affected personnel and advise the government appropriately. Not too long ago, we cleared the arrears of pensions accumulated since 2014, following a template agreed upon with relevant stakeholders which saw the government pay out close to N10 billion to our senior citizens.

13. We are presently in discussion with staff of a few other institutions with outstanding salary issues pre-dating our administration for settlement. Within the next few weeks, I am sure that the payment of backlogs of salaries accumulated before May 29, 2023 will be done in line with our determination to right the wrongs of the past.

14. In our commitment to put the entire labour force in the State first, we are looking beyond the civil servants and those in the regular employ of the State government. We consider every adult contributing to the state's economy through various trades and productive engagements to be very strategic in our considerations.

15. Farmers, Traders, artisans, taxi drivers, keke operators and their peers in various paid or self-employment are all very important in our agenda. Our biggest motivation for investing massively in road construction and rehabilitation in various parts of the State is to enable quick movements of goods and people from one part of the State to another, enhance trade and open new channels of economic growth and productivity across the State.

16. Beyond roads, we are working very hard to make the State a favourite investment destination through various initiatives that are designed to improve ease of doing business and support the growth of start-ups, and micro, small and medium-scale enterprises (MSMEs). Our plan is to expand the production field in the State and create for thousands of willing but idle hands, an opportunity to earn a decent living.

17. Through the introduction of a unified tax payment platform, we have eliminated the challenge of multiple taxation, cut down on the menace of touting, especially in our urban areas, and through the harmonised taskforce team set up and monitored by the State Government, sanity has been restored to our streets as genuine businessmen and women operating from their shops and authorised business premises no longer face regular harassment from touts and agents working for various interests.

18. Our dream is to make Abia an ideal environment for all who are engaged in legitimate labour to thrive, grow and become prosperous. We are looking beyond wages and financial considerations to the physical environment where our workers spend the greater part of their days.

19. We are presently rehabilitating various government buildings and facilities that we met in decrepit conditions on taking over; and these include schools, hospitals and law courts where our teachers, doctors and judicial officers serve members of the public. The target is to make the physical environment supportive of peak productivity, especially for those directly serving the general population.

20. Coming to your request for a review of the wage structure for the State's civil servants, I am pleased to inform you that we shall take the lead in implementation as soon as a new national minimum wage structure is agreed. I understand that labour leaders across the country are currently engaging with the federal government and we are following those discussions closely. As soon as a concrete agreement is reached, we shall immediately do the needful as a State.

21. We have also noted your other demands including payment of arrears of leave allowance, promotions and other accumulated debts owed our workforce in the last eight to ten years. We shall carefully consider these requests and deal with them on a case-by-case basis, and subject to availability of resources.

22. What you can, however, go home with today is that your welfare shall remain a priority for us. We shall continue to put you first in all policies and programmes of government, and in appreciation of your immense contributions to our economic and social development.

23. Thank you for your services to our State, and for committing your productive years to improving the course of our civilisation. It is my belief that when we gather for this event next year, much of the dominant issues and challenges raised here today must have been effectively dealt with.

24. Thank you for listening and may God bless you all.

Dr Alex C. Otti, OFR,

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