

Not even a cup of tea

When temporary workers from the South African Post Office took to the streets of Johannesburg in May it was the only way that they could exercise their rights to protest insecure employment. In an interview with **Pule Moanakoena, Elijah Chiwota** hears of their plight.

Every morning Pule Moanakoena (27) from Soweto wakes up early to go to work. And every three months his temporary contract of employment expires and is renewed, not by his employer, but with the labour broker. Some of his workmates have been going through this cycle for over seven years. To him, it is his third year. Unfortunately for Moanakoena, his labour is hired to the South African Post Office (SAPO) by the broker, who reportedly managed to 'save' millions of rands for the public company by slashing the workers' working time from eight to seven hours, effectively reducing the pay packet, in December 2010. To workers who are paid less than R15 per hour this is a big blow.

It seems there are few choices for him and his workmates: to take the job or join the growing ranks of the unemployed. And he rightly describes his working conditions as 'pure slavery'.

Even where there are job vacancies within SAPO, it is the

broker who gets the job? 'When we apply we do not get replies, instead the broker gets the job and hires you for a fraction of what you would get if you had a permanent position.'

In a state of anxiety caused by uncertainty that has become his lifestyle, and with sweat on his forehead he pedals a bicycle as he delivers letters and parcels in Johannesburg. Even a request to replace a worn-out tyre can take as long as a month, thus risking injury to the worker who continues to dice on the busy roads with wobbling wheels.

'Work uniform is considered an expense so you do not get it, and if you make a mistake you get fired on the spot.'

Neither the employer nor the broker attempts to flavour or sweeten the raw deal.

'Come tea time all you get is water. As for tea and sugar you provide for yourself. There is no medical aid, pension or bonuses. You can only get sick but for a day. Otherwise if you are not well and

go beyond, you have just given yourself unpaid leave and will be singing the blues as the days are deducted from your pay,' said Moanakoena.

WE HAVE NO UNION

'We do not belong to a union and therefore do not have representation. How can we belong to a union when we do not even know whether we will have a job the following day?'

'I do not understand why a big public company like SAPO can't give its temporary workers permanent contracts,' he argues.

'This disadvantages us as we are losing out on further training because we are considered uneducated.'

'There are no opportunities like bursaries for most of us who did not complete matric. The employer ignores our circumstances. This was not out of choice but because our parents did not afford. In the absence of opportunities to develop ourselves, where is our future as young people?' **LB**