

How positive public spirit can

By Owen Wagabaza

What started as International Workers' Day in Chicago in May 1886 further spread to other parts of the world, Uganda being no exception.

In 1884 the National Federation of Organised Trades and Labour Assemblies decided to call for a general strike on May 1, 1884 in the US, to enforce demands for employers to observe the eight-hour day. Prior to the strike, workers were working for more than 12 to 16 hours a day and in unsafe conditions. Because of the many working hours, workers were getting sick and injured, yet with little help from the employers.

During the protests, the Police while trying to disperse the protestors fired into the crowd, killing four people.

In 1886, the second international Socialist Conference chose May 1, as the International Workers' Day.

The day was formally recognised as an annual event at the International's day second congress in 1891.

In 1904, the international socialist congress in Amsterdam called on all social democratic party organisations and trade unions of all countries to demonstrate energetically on May 1 for the



Workers in a factory operating machinery which stretches yarn used for fishnets

legal establishment of the eight-hour workday. The congress made it mandatory on the labour organisations of all countries of the world to honour May 1, as the day for workers.

For long, the day was a focal point for demonstrations by various groups of people, advocating for better labour laws.

The day has since become one of the most important holidays in

the world. The day is celebrated around the world with trade unions advocating for better labour policies through demonstrations, workshops and conferences and many other ways.

Promoting public spirit

The celebrations for this year's Labour Day are being held in Sembabule under the theme *Promoting the public spirit in the*

public sector. Apollo Onzoma, the acting commissioner in the labour ministry says public spirit refers to loving or caring for the nation the way an ordinary person cares for their personal interests.

"Public spirited persons identify themselves with the interests of the nation and make those interests their own. Similarly, a public-spirited person shields the nation from anything that can harm it," Onzoma

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says. The public sector in Uganda's context refers to central government ministries, departments and agencies as well as local governments.

Onzoma explains that unlike the private sector, the public sector institutions are not only owned and operated by government, but they also exist to solely provide services to the citizens.

"The choice of the theme is informed by the fact that whereas public servants like all workers seek employment as a means to a livelihood. They also have an overarching obligation to serve and act in the public interest," Onzoma says.

In a synopsis released prior to the labour day celebrations, the labour ministry explained that the key function of the public service is to help maintain an appropriate structure for decision-making.

This is ensures that the various voices are heard, that no relevant

foster Uganda's development

interests are omitted, and that constitutionally and legally acceptable conclusions are formulated.

"In other words public servants should ensure that citizens are co-producers of public policy and programmes through regular consultations. To this end, public servants should also help to inform the assessment of policy options, by providing a reservoir of reliable information, expertise and experience," reads the synopsis in part.

Need for public spirit

Onzoma says there is no greater virtue to be found in a good citizen than the public spirit. There can be no strong nation without the public spirit. However, on many occasions public officials have in the pursuit of private or personal interest compromised the public good or interest.

"As a result, planning and implementation of many government programmes and projects has been compromised. This has not only cost the public treasury resources but has also left the ordinary citizens without the much needed services," the commissioner explains.

In the synopsis, the ministry explains that failure to promote public interest in the public service undermines the



A worker sorting fishnets in a factory

performance of the private sector which is a key driver of economic growth.

"The history of development further teaches us that failure to reign in on the pursuit of personal interest at the expense of the public good slows down

the socioeconomic transformation of a country," reads part of the synopsis.

"Therefore, public officials are required to ensure that the objectives and outcomes of their decisions are in the public interest. Similarly, the processes

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adopted and procedures followed by decision makers in exercising their discretionary powers should also be in the public interest."

According to the ministry, this entails complying with applicable laws and policies, carrying out functions fairly and impartially, with integrity and professionalism, complying with the principles of procedural fairness and natural justice, and ensuring proper accountability and transparency.

Public interest also entails exposing corrupt conduct and maladministration, avoiding or properly managing situations where the private interests conflict or might reasonably be perceived to conflict with the impartial fulfillment of official duties and assisting citizens to articulate and meet their shared interests.

Way forward

"Public servants have a primary responsibility to pursue the public interest. This sets them apart from workers in the private sectors. As such, the notion of the public interest serves as part of their corporate mission. They are expected to put the public interest ahead of their own when exercising their powers," Apollo Onzoma, the acting commissioner in the labour ministry says.

He adds that placing citizens at the forefront of public service requires a fundamental change in the mindset of public officials. This requires reforms that target changing the values, behaviours as well as the technical capacity of public servants with a view of deepening motivation and instilling the public spirit.

"Much as one cannot build a good house with poorly burnt bricks, a great nation cannot be built with citizens who lack the public spirit," Onzoma explains.

Therefore, promoting the public spirit in the public sector calls for raising awareness of the citizens about acting in the best interest of the nation.

"To this end patriotism lessons and clubs should be encouraged at all levels of education. This is important because the public service recruits from the citizens," Onzoma says.