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TO THE HARDWORKING MEN AND WOMEN OF LAGOS,

Today is International Workers' Day. As usual, we can expect platitudes, social media posts, events in celebration of workers, flowery words on the importance of workers, on the need to support our labor unions, civil servants, first responders, and the private sector. Today we will celebrate work but what does it mean to honor work and workers?

For most of us, work is a huge part of who we are and can affect our social and self-worth. Many of our aspirations involve work - we all aim to get to the next level in our careers or businesses and then continue to climb. Work often defines us - Arch Deji, Nurse Chioma, Dr. Musa, etc, it is frequently how we see ourselves and how people see us. We pursue credentials, degrees, and certificates to enhance our status at work.

Conversations will be triggered today, about the treatment or mistreatment of work and workers, especially Lagosians in the lower income bracket. Unpaid salaries of government workers, and also workers in the private sector. The harsh conditions of work; Lagosians braving the heat and heavy rains to make ends meet. Declining job security, stagnating wages not keeping up with galloping inflation, the role of technology, automation, and, increasingly, AI in the future of work, and the cost of commuting to work. Further, attention will be drawn to the extortionary conditions faced by bus drivers, dispatch riders, market women, and most micro-businesses, in their respective lines of work. The conversations will also touch on the persistent issues of deep unemployment and underemployment, which prevent many Lagosians from providing for their families.

Debates will be had far and wide. But let the debates be sincere and candid and lead to ideas and plans on how to improve opportunity, upward mobility, and prosperity.

This year, I also want to challenge us to think deeper about what this day means - what it means to work. It was the Rev Martin Luther King who said "No work is insignificant. All labor that uplifts humanity has dignity and importance and should be undertaken with painstaking excellence". He went on to say "If a man is called to be a street sweeper, he should sweep streets even as a Michaelangelo painted, or Beethoven composed music or Shakespeare wrote poetry. He should sweep streets so well that all the hosts of heaven and earth will pause to say, "Here lived a great street sweeper who did his job well." So today, as we celebrate work wherever we are in Lagos State - let us reflect on these words - Let our labor speak of the greatness we all have in us. From the bus driver to the bus conductor,

from the cashier to the security guard, from the bricklayer to the teacher to the Commissioner to the Managing Director - no work is insignificant. If we all do the best, we can - Lagos will be on its way to becoming the most successful city in Africa and one of the top cities in the world. A model city. It is you the people, the workers, with that famous, matchless energy and ingenuity for which the people of Lagos are known, that will deliver it. I can see it; we have what it takes.

But the first step is to acknowledge that many Lagosians, including civil servants, bemoan their interactions and relationship with their Government. This should ordinarily not be an acrimonious relationship, since the welfare of the people should be the primary concern of the Government. The apparatus of the state has to work and the leaders in Government are entrusted with that apparatus. They have a disproportionate potential to affect people's lives positively or negatively. Especially the most vulnerable. They can do more to bring out the best, or the worst, in the average citizen than can most others. The fact that interactions with the Government are often viewed as abusive, extractive, and predatory, is a symptom of broken trust and broken faith. The broken trust of a people in their Government and an employer (Government) that has also not kept faith with its own employees and to whom, therefore, those workers feel they owe little allegiance.

This is a status quo we have experienced in this state for basically a generation since 1999. It is a dynamic equilibrium that is optimized for extraction by the few, rather than inclusion of the many, and that inevitably leads to resource concentration and mass impoverishment rather than widespread prosperity. Lagos is due for a new conversation on work, service, and reward. A new charter on what we owe one another, and a fresh understanding of our roles from the executive committee down to the newly minted school leaver who arrived last week from Ekiti, Abia, Kaduna, or New York. This can be a State we all love and take pride in.

So today on this workers' day, I encourage us to each reflect on the part we can play. In all our different roles - as fathers and mothers, as employers and employees, in the private sector or public sector, in the faith community and non-governmental organizations, in the media and our public discourse, and most importantly as citizens. In our work, whether as leaders or as followers, government or the governed, let us serve in such a way that the heavens will look down upon us and say, well done.

I wish us all a happy workers' day.

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