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The handicapped persons, whatever their physical or mental handicap may be, whatever level their handicap may reach, first and foremost is a human being with all his/her dignity like any other person, nothing more and nothing less. This dignity of the handicapped person must be respected by all in society because this is required by the law of nature.

This dignity should be respected in all its forms, most importantly we must ensure that the handicapped will not have anything which represents an obstacle or would inhibit their full enjoyment of rights as human beings.

Among these rights there is the right to work - that is like any other section of the society, the handicapped have a right to earn their living through their work. And here we must remember that work is something noble and through this, the level of dignity is higher.

It is true that not all the handicapped are capable to work and earn a living. Thus the society must be in solidarity with them expressed through social services and grants. It is important that these grants be kept on an adequate level throughout the years so that these handicapped persons may live a decent life.

There are other handicapped persons whose disabilities permit them to do certain jobs in the same manner as other workers and this work is done with the same efficiency without the need of any adaptations to help them do this work.

Then there are other handicapped persons who are able to do certain jobs as long as these jobs are parallel to the level of their disability. Due to these disabilities not all jobs are adequate for them.

If in the first place we accept the fact that those handicapped persons who can work should be employed, then, we as society in general, headed by the government should make sure that there is no discrimination done with these people when jobs are handed out. At the same time, society has the duty and responsibility to provide the handicapped with adequate employment.

But it is important that these jobs give the handicapped some satisfaction-not only through the pay they earn, but more important through the knowledge that the person is creating something good and worthwhile.

With this I mean that the work must fill the handicapped with self confidence, give him a feeling of independence and the knowledge that he, although having a disability, forms a part of society and also a part of the labour force.

Thus society has the duty to give the handicapped interesting and impeniative work and not simply employment just to say that the handicapped are being employed. Work for the handicapped should be a way by which he can use all his abilities.

Our country offers several social services to the handicapped and this involves large amounts of money every year on the part of the government. This is a good thing according to the right principles of solidarity and social justice.

But here we must be careful that the handicapped that enjoy these services and social benefits will not end up in situations (as long as they are able to work) where they start to get the feeling of dependence on the state - because such dependence might lead the handicapped to the wrong conclusion that in order to survive s/he needs somebody's help. Such thinking will create great psychological harm because it will lead him to the state of a beggar who depends on charity for his survival.

The International Labour Organisation (I.L.O.) says that social benefits are not all the real solutions for the handicapped. The I.L.O. says that it will be better and more effective - and above all will do a lot of good psychologically - if the governments allocate a part of their financial resources specifically to plan and run programmes in order to create work which is adequate to the handicapped.

The I.L.O. even suggests that the handicapped, in order to feel more independent, should be encouraged and helped financially by the government to set up their own business, i.e. they will be 'self-employed' - and thus they will not have to rely on anyone for their employment.

The wise Chinese saying comes to mind now which states 'do not give one fish to the poor but teach him how to fish because if you give him one fish today he will only eat today, but if you teach him how to fish then he can rely for food on the fish he has

caught himself.

In our country there is a law which says that those companies which employ more than 50 workers must reserve 2% of the number of jobs for handicapped persons. Unfortunately the law is not always observed, and not everybody observes the law. The law is not being observed either by the government nor by the private sector.

This situation is present not only in our country. It exists in other countries as well. In the world there are over five hundred million (500,000,000) handicapped persons. This figure increases by 15,000,000 yearly either because people are being born physically or mentally handicapped or others who become handicapped themselves through wars, incidents, illnesses or as effects of poverty and hunger.

Let us take an example - England - where every company employing twenty or more persons must have 3% of workers registered as handicapped persons. But from research carried last year it was found that out of 33,000 companies employing more than twenty people only 9,000 were keeping in line with the system of employing handicapped people.

But we cannot say that because in England and in other countries the system is not being respected we should not keep in line with the system ourselves. Maltese society has the duty to see that the law is implemented by everyone and that the government should set the example.

But it could be the case that in certain companies the work is not adequate for the handicapped or else the place of work does not offer the necessary facilities which allows it to offer jobs to the handicapped.

One should see whether the government should offer help to these companies that could employ handicapped persons. Financial help can be given to adapt the work environment and machinery in a way that could facilitate the employment of handicapped persons. These incentives and aids have been introduced in various countries, such as France, West Germany and Japan.

When we speak about handicapped persons we do not only mean persons who were born handicapped. They could be persons who were born healthy but in their lifetime they were handicapped through one reason or another.

As a tradeunionist I make special reference to those persons who were handicapped at their place of work and due to this, were unable to continue their work.

These persons need our solidarity more than the persons who were born handicapped, because the persons who were born handicapped do not know anything better and to

a certain extent have learnt how to live with their handicap. But those persons who have become handicapped in their life time find it more difficult to learn to live with their disability.

But, I am sorry to say, that some employers have terminated the work of some of their employees because they were injured during their work and were not able to continue their work. They have not checked whether these persons could have been able to do an alternative job within their company.

I understand that sometimes this cannot be done. But the government - and this mainly applies to young people who have a long life time of work in front of them - should create means by which the workers who become handicapped will not depend on social services and benefits but should provide training for them in a new job which they will be capable to do and thus provide them with a new job.

We must work harder to introduce the handicapped to the labour world. If we do not do this we will be falling short of our duties and responsibilities. We will be going against one of the fundamental rights of the human being. Above all we will not respect the dignity of the handicapped person.

When society does its duty towards the handicapped persons and respects their rights, this society will be a strong one built on the forces of moral values. And it is these values that make a civilised society.