

Retail Workers in the Context of the Coronavirus (Covid-19) and Lockdown Regulations: An Analysis of Shoprite Workers in South Africa

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Abstract

Many sectors of the South African economy have felt the effect of the coronavirus, except for a few companies such as the Shoprite Group. The Shoprite Group kept its stores open during the Covid-19 lockdown levels and regulations in South Africa, except for its liquor stores owing to lockdown regulations that prohibited the sale of alcohol. The Shoprite Group did not retrench its workforce, but created thousands of jobs since Covid-19 hit the country. Retail workers such as Shoprite workers are deemed essential workers and are allowed to go to work during the Covid-19 lockdown periods. The retail giant is required to provide protective equipment such as face masks and hand sanitisers to its workforce. The workforce at Shoprite consist of full-time permanent workers and sub-standard workers (i.e. temporary, labour brokers and casual workers). This article highlights that Covid-19 provides an opportune time for both government and Shoprite to revisit the employment status of some workers, particularly sub-standard workers. They should recognise them as essential workers and give them essential, decent full-time permanent jobs with decent salaries, protection and benefits.

Keywords: Shoprite, Covid-19, sub-standard, employment, South Africa

Introduction

The coronavirus, Covid-19, is the defining health crisis and the greatest challenge the world has faced since World War II. Since its emergence in Asia towards the end of 2019, the virus has spread to every continent except Antarctica. However, Covid-19 is much more than a health crisis; it is also an unprecedented socio-economic crisis. The pandemic has the potential to create devastating economic, social and political effects



that will leave significant and long-lasting impacts. Many sectors such as the manufacturing, tourism and hospitality sectors have already felt the effect of Covid-19. Consequently, many workers have lost their jobs and are more likely to not meet their basic needs. The official unemployment rate increased to 30.1 per cent in the first quarter of 2020 and is forecast to reach around 37.9 per cent in the second quarter of 2020 (Stats SA, 2020) as many businesses have had to shut their doors permanently or to downscale their workforce (De Witt, 2020).

However, the Shoprite Group is one of the few companies that have not felt the devastating effect of Covid-19. All the Shoprite stores have been operating throughout the Covid-19 lockdown periods, except for the liquor stores because of lockdown regulations that prohibited the sale of alcohol. The sale of alcohol is prohibited on the grounds that it has the potential to spread the virus as people might not adhere to Covid-19 regulations such as the wearing of masks and social distancing. The other reason is that alcohol is associated with serious injuries as people misbehave when they are intoxicated. In this regard, health facilities are not equipped to deal with both Covid-19 patients and alcohol-related injuries.

However, a few Shoprite stores were closed temporarily owing to cases of Covid-19 infections. The Shoprite Group kept most of its jobs and created 4 305 jobs in the six months ending in December 2020. The Shoprite Group employed 140 000 people in South Africa and the rest of Africa (Wilson, 2021a). The retail giant found itself in a stronger position with regard to its balance sheet; its trading profit rose to R4.7 billion and its dividend per share has increased from 22.4 per cent to 191c (Wilson, 2021a). This article highlights that the sub-standard workforce of Shoprite consists of essential workers who always provide essential services to millions of people, and especially during the Covid-19 period. It argues that these workers should therefore be provided with decent full-time employment.

This article is structured as follows: in the next section I introduce a brief background of Shoprite and highlight other business services the retail company offers, its expansion to African countries and the number of Shoprite stores in countries in which it operates. I then discuss the history of sub-standard employment at Shoprite dating as far back as the 1930s to current years and its implications on workers. I then discuss the impact of Covid-19 on Shoprite and argue that some Shoprite workers, regarded as essential workers, are still subjected to sub-standard employment. Based on this, I highlight that it is time for the government and the retail companies to revisit the form of employment of many retail workers (i.e. employment of sub-standard or precarious, temporary forms of work) and to offer them full-time permanent employment owing to their essential nature of work. This section is then followed by the conclusion.

Shoprite Group: A Brief Background

Shoprite is a South African based retail company and a leader in South Africa's retail sector and in Africa. The Shoprite Group's core business is food (grocery) retailing; however, the company also provides services that go beyond the grocery business. The retail company offers other business services ranging from financial services, cellular and technology services, liquor sales, money market kiosks and pharmacies. Shoprite incorporates 13 distinctive retail brands, namely, Checkers, Checkers Hyper, Checkers Food Service, Computicket, OK Furniture, OK Power Express, OK Franchise Division, House & Home, Medirite Pharmacy, Shoprite Liquor Shop, Freshmark, Hungry Lion, and Shoprite Usave (Mathekga & Maciko, 2018; Ntongana, 2016; Reddy, 2020; Shoprite, 2020). The Shoprite Usave brand targets lower income consumers in South Africa (Wilson, 2021a).

In 1992, Shoprite started to expand into the rest of Africa while it was busy consolidating its purchase of the Checkers chain of supermarkets, representing a sixfold increase in its size in its home country, South Africa (Webster, 2005). Then, in 1996, the Zambian government sold its wholesale stores to Shoprite (Webster, 2005). The selling of Zambian state-owned wholesale stores to Shoprite was part of the Zambian government's privatisation programme (Webster, 2005). In 2003, Shoprite has expanded from South Africa to 14 African countries with a revenue of more than US\$3.3 billion (Webster, 2005).

In 2016, the retail company had 1 855 corporate stores across Africa (Shoprite, 2016). For instance, Shoprite had 89 stores in Namibia, 58 stores in Zambia and 49 stores in Angola (Shoprite, 2016). The 2020 Shoprite Holdings integrated annual report indicates that the Shoprite Group's corporate stores have increased to 2 352 in Africa, including South Africa (Shoprite, 2020). However, Shoprite has announced its exit from the Kenyan market because of the lack of profit and movement restrictions put in place since the outbreak of the coronavirus (Standard Bank, 2020). Table 1 presents the number of corporate stores Shoprite has in African countries, including South Africa.

Table 1: The number of Shoprite corporate stores in Africa, including South Africa, in 2020

Name of country	Number of corporate stores
South Africa (home country)	2 002
Namibia	95
Zambia	49
Angola	37
Botswana	33
Mozambique	28

Name of country	Number of corporate stores
Lesotho	25
Eswatini	25
Nigeria	25
Madagascar*	10
Ghana	7
Malawi	6
Uganda	5
Kenya	3
Democratic Republic of the Congo	2
Total	2 352

Source: Shoprite (2020).

* Madagascar is regarded as part of Africa because of its proximity.

Most importantly, Shoprite is one of the South African supermarket chains that have contributed to the development of shopping malls in South Africa and other African countries. In 2020, the financial institution, Standard Bank, published a report titled: “Africa consumer insights report 2020,” in which it reveals that the modern retail real estate sector has been the main focus for development in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) over the past years, causing an increase in the number of shopping malls in many big African cities (Standard Bank, 2020). In 2010, the number of shopping malls in Africa was 225, which has increased to 579 shopping malls (Standard Bank, 2020). The development of shopping malls has been driven largely by the growth of the continent’s consumer markets and the expansion of domestic and international retailers, notably South Africa’s supermarket chains such as Shoprite and Game stores, and also the United States of America’s leading service restaurants, Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC) and Pizza Hut (Standard Bank, 2020). Mention has to be made that South Africa is by far the most developed and largest modern retail market in SSA (Standard Bank 2020). The country has shopping malls covering over 25 million square metres of retail gross leasable area (Standard Bank, 2020).

Sub-Standard Employment at Shoprite: An Appraisal

The increased use of sub-standard employment by the retail sector dates as far back as the 1930s and has further increased in the 1990s and 2000s (Kenny, 2005, 2016a, 2016b; Klerck, 2005; Webster, 2005). Neoliberal restructuring and globalisation of production have accelerated precarious, temporary, and often informal form of work (Bernards, 2015). These forms of employment are difficult to resolve through labour legislation or by the trade unions that are incorporated into political parties (Bernards, 2015). Sub-standard employment is defined as jobs that fall outside the scope of a standard

employment relationship, which in turn is understood as full-time, indefinite employment in a subordinate employment relationship (Theron & Visser, 2010). Forms of sub-standard employment include casual, part-time, temporary and labour broker employment (Dickson, 2015; ILO, 2015; Theron & Visser, 2010). Webster (2005) points out that the retail sector has increased its subcontracting of labour, contracting out the so-called non-core services such as cleaning and shelf packing to labour broker companies providing merchandising services (Webster, 2005).

As early as the 1950s, the Department of Labour introduced part-time and casual labour as a response by the government to stabilise the appeal of retail sector jobs for white people, particularly females in the context of an increase in labour turnover (Kenny, 2016b). White females were working part-time shifts between 11:00 and 15:00 so that they can leave work early because of domestic and childcare duties (Kenny, 2016b). Another group of non-standard employment which existed as a core feature of retail sector is casual employment (Kenny, 2016b). Casual employment, which was understood to be seasonal work for a short period, was legally allowed in the retail sector (Kenny, 2016b). Casual employment was defined as employment for not more than 14 days per week (Kenny, 2016b).

Mention has to be made that casual employment was normalised in the retail sector as early as the 1950s, and a casual worker was defined as “a person working not more than three days per week” (Kenny, 2016b). Casual work was viewed as regular but temporary employment hired during busy seasons such as holidays, festive seasons and busy months (Kenny, 2016b). Without rights to paid leave or notice to termination of contract, casual workers were paid accordingly (Kenny, 2016b). Casual workers were given a premium wage of one-and-a-third a rate of a qualified person in the occupational category (Kenny, 2016b). The premium wage was created to limit an increase in casual labour, to prevent the substitution of permanent workers, and to compensate casual workers for working without benefits or leave rights (Kenny, 2016b). Casual workers were not included in the bargaining unit of trade unions, they were seen as young white males students (male learners or students) working to gain work experience (Kenny, 2016b).

In the 1960s onwards, black workers were increasing in the retail sector, and the use of casual workers by the retail sector expanded and started to fragment the standard employment in new but yet familiar ways (Kenny, 2016b). The definition of casual employment mentioned earlier relied not on limited duration of employment, but on part-time hours of work (Kenny, 2016b). This uncertainty carried results for the expansion of precarious employment in the late apartheid and post-apartheid period (Kenny, 2016b). In the late 1980s, for example, casual employment continued to be viewed as temporary, however, casual workers continued to be employed for lengthy durations while excluded from basic protection and benefits (Kenny, 2016b). Again, in the 1980s, casual workers were often students working extra hours around school times (Kenny, 2016b). Similar to the white workers, the black workers brought their children

and relatives to work as casual workers to earn an extra income (Kenny, 2016b). Permanent, full-time and unionised workers did not take casual workers seriously because of their subordinate status (Kenny, 2016b).

Kenny (2016b) points out that throughout the 1990s and the 2000s, retail companies increased the use of casual workers on the shop floor across jobs and for lengthy periods. Rees (as cited in Nnaeme, 2017) points out that casual employment in the retail sector has increased by 44.7 per cent between 1987 and 1997 in South Africa. In his work, McKinley (2020) maps the world of casualised work and struggle in South Africa. He found that the wholesale and retail trade is one of the economic sectors in South Africa with a significant number of casualised work at 33.4 per cent (McKinley, 2020). In South Africa, argues Kenny (2016b), retail companies continue to use casual workers. These temporary casual workers are employed weekly for less than 24 hours per week. By the 1990s, many casual workers had worked for many years for the same retail company as casuals without job security or the regulated premiums meant to counterbalance this insecurity (Kenny, 2016b). As a consequence, the divisions of labour between casual workers and permanent workers are reproduced (Kenny, 2016b). Casual workers were seen to be young and less experienced workers and they were not allowed a voice by full-time workers; their interests in bargaining were not represented (Kenny, 2016b). Casual workers became an important source of cheap labour for the retailers (Kenny, 2016b).

This type of employment has experienced remarkable growth in the post-apartheid period. For example, Shoprite uses sub-standard employment in some, if not all, of the African countries in which it operates. For example, in 1996, Shoprite subcontracted its directly employed shelf packers to labour broker companies (Webster, 2005). These workers were no longer employed directly by Shoprite, but by many different labour brokers with different conditions of employment (Webster, 2005). These workers worked full-time hours for lower wages with no benefits (Webster, 2005). Their jobs were not secured because the service contract between Shoprite and the labour brokers often changes (Webster, 2005). This resulted in weak trade unions and reduced levels of contestation (Webster, 2005).

From 2000s onwards, not much has changed with regard to the nature of employment because workers at Shoprite were still subjected to contract, casual, temporary and labour broker work (Mathekga & Maciko, 2018; Njadvera, 2021). Most casual and part-time workers are employed as cashiers, shelve packers and store controllers. Sub-standard employment in the retail sector has re-segmented the sector into core workers and flexi-workers (Kenny & Webster, 2008). The labour market of retail sectors represents two common flexible forms of labour in South Africa, namely, the labour outsourcing to labour brokers or labour agencies and casualisation (Kenny & Webster, 2008). Casualisation is associated with the reduction of statutory employment benefits and protection for workers in direct employment and the outsourcing is associated with

the commercialisation of employment through externalisation of labour to labour brokers (Kenny & Webster, 2008; Nnaeme, 2017).

In 2016, about 90 per cent of the 1 000 workers at Shoprite's Centurion facility in Gauteng, South Africa, were employed by labour brokers (Maromo, 2016). On 4 April 2016, the same workers (i.e. more than 90 per cent of the 1 000 workers at the Shoprite distribution centre in Gauteng) embarked on a strike demanding an end to outsourcing and a minimum wage of R10 000 per month (Department of Labour, 2016). Furthermore, at the march organised by the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) in October 2016 in Johannesburg, Shoprite's temporary workers also complained about their prospects of getting permanent employment (Madibogo & Dlamini, 2016). The temporary workers complained that their chances of becoming permanently employed at Shoprite are as little as 5 per cent (Madibogo & Dlamini, 2016). The temporary workers mentioned that they do not know whether their jobs are safe and stable for a long time because their chances of becoming permanently employed are very slim (Madibogo & Dlamini, 2016).

An article titled "Shoprite workers on strike for better working conditions" published by community newspaper, *Elitsha*, on 28 March 2018 reveals that the Shoprite store in King Williams Town in the Eastern Cape, South Africa, have workers who are employed on a casual basis and some have worked for more than three years as casual workers (Velapi, 2018). Velapi (2018) quoted a deli worker, Nomfusi Yenge, at Shoprite's King Williams Store, who said:

I have been working at the store for 11 years and I'm still a casual. I earn about R600 a month and I have to look after my children and mother. We want to be made permanent workers and our salaries raised.

As a consequence, 50 Shoprite workers and members of the South African Commercial Catering and Allied Workers Union in King Williams Town embarked on a two-days strike. They demanded better working conditions, permanent employment of casual workers who have been working for Shoprite for more than five years and the provision of transport in the evening for workers who worked until late at night (Velapi, 2018).

Furthermore, an article titled "'Shoprite doesn't want to meet us halfway' – workers strike over 'demoralising' conditions" published by the South African local newspaper, *City Press*, on 28 March 2018, reveals that there are Shoprite workers who worked for the retail company for over five to 16 years as casual workers without being employed permanently (Mbude, 2018). For example, Njadvera (2021, p. 1) quoted a worker who humbly requested anonymity:

She joined the company in 1999 as a casual worker, before being made permanent in 2004. She said after 22 years, her salary is still around N\$3 000. Imagine after all those years my salary is still around N\$3 000 with no benefits. I cannot continue like this the company must come on board and give us reasonable benefits.

Sub-standard workers at Shoprite do the same work as permanent workers, but their salaries are completely different, with casual and part-time workers at the bottom of the wage pyramid. For instance, in 2014, Shoprite's casual and part-time workers in Namibia earned a weekly wage of as little as N\$300 (i.e. R298,27 or US\$20,30) (Mathekga & Maciko, 2018). In 2021, the Namibian local newspaper, *New Era*, published an article titled "Shoprite strike: No solution in sight" which reported that Shoprite workers who are not permanent receive a salary of N\$1 200 per month, which is approximately R1 195,40 or US\$81,19 (Njadvera, 2021). The wage is not sufficient given the state of the Namibian economy and the current coronavirus pandemic (Njadvera, 2021). As a result, Shoprite workers in Namibia embarked on a strike on 5 January 2021 demanding a salary increment of N\$600 per month, a transport allowance of N\$500, a housing allowance of N\$450 and permanent employment of workers who have been working for Shoprite for over a year on a temporary basis (Njadvera, 2021).

In South Africa, the lowest paid full-time worker at Shoprite received a monthly salary of R4 500 and entry-level part-time workers received around R18 per hour in 2019 (Teuteberg, 2020a). Chief executive officers (CEOs) and other executives of Shoprite are known for receiving big total remuneration packages. In 2016, CEOs in South Africa were ranked seventh by Bloomberg as the most highly paid in the world (Teuteberg, 2020a). For example, the former Shoprite CEO, Whitey Basson, received an annual total remuneration package of over R100 million in 2016, and the current CEO, Pieter Engelbrecht, received an annual remuneration package of over R21 million in 2019 (Teuteberg, 2020a).

In October 2016, Shoprite workers dressed in their red Shoprite work T-shirts joined the march organised by COSATU in Johannesburg complaining about the R100 million salary of Shoprite's former CEO, Whitey Basson, expressing their frustrations that they are paid very little while the CEO is earning millions of rands (Madibogo & Dlamini, 2016; Ntongana, 2016). The workers also expressed their frustrations over working conditions at Shoprite. One worker was quoted (in Madibogo & Dlamini, 2016, p. 1) saying:

We get paid little money. [For] a week you get R500 and that is not enough. They don't treat us right at Shoprite. When your shift starts at a certain time, usually we get there 30 minutes early, but you are asked to remain an extra hour after your shift but there is no extra pay for that.

The Impact of Covid-19 on Shoprite

It is without doubt that many countries across Africa and the rest of the world are operating throughout the unprecedented Covid-19 crisis. Governments across the world are grappling with how best to revive their economies in a responsible manner. To fight the spread of Covid-19, Cyril Ramaphosa, the president of South Africa, declared a

National State of Disaster with countermeasures on 15 March 2020 (Arndt et al., 2020). Three weeks later, the president announced the lockdown on 23 March 2020; however, the lockdown became effective on 27 March 2020 (Arndt et al., 2020).

The South African government then developed a strategy aimed at balancing health and economic considerations in determining the extent to which the lockdown regulations would apply to the movement of people and therefore economic activities (De Witt, 2020). In South Africa, the developed strategy is called the “COVID-19 Risk Adjusted Strategy” which is comprised of five levels, with lockdown level 5 being the most severe of the lockdown levels because many businesses were requested to close, except for essential services such as hospitals, petrol filling stations services and grocery retail stores, and lockdown level 1 permitting almost all economic activities to restart (De Witt, 2020; Teuteberg, 2020b).

The lockdown levels were amended as the year went by, and in line with Covid-19 status. For example, at the end of July 2020, lockdown level 3 regulations were amended and the advanced lockdown level 3 regulations came into effect (De Witt, 2020). Under the advanced lockdown level 3 regulations, restaurants were allowed to operate under strict regulation to offer sit-down or dine-in services accompanied by on-site consumption sales of alcoholic beverages (De Witt, 2020). Conference and meeting venues were allowed to host conferences, meetings and events for up to 50 persons while adhering to the social distancing rules and casino operators were allowed to open restricted to 50 per cent of the casino’s capacity (De Witt, 2020). In late August 2020, lockdown level 2 came into effect and brought with it the permission to travel between provinces for both business and leisure purposes. Licensed restaurants were also permitted to sell alcoholic beverages for on-site consumption every day of the week while observing the curfew hours. Restaurateurs welcomed the announcement that the nightly curfew would only start at 22:00 allowing them an extra hour to trade (De Witt, 2020).

Sectors such as travel and tourism, manufacturing, commercial property, and hospitality have been negatively affected by the outbreak of Covid-19 and lockdown regulations intended to stop the spread of Covid-19 (Wilson, 2021b). Many companies in South Africa have retrenched their workers; the workers who are still in employment are nervous about losing their jobs. For example, the tourism sector has been the hardest hit by Covid-19. It should be mentioned that the tourism sector creates close to 740 000 direct jobs and 1.5 million indirect jobs (Department of Tourism, 2020). Small businesses make up around 80 per cent of the travel and tourism industry (Department of Tourism, 2020). However, many of the small and medium businesses are on the brink of closing down owing to Covid-19. With regard to job losses, the tourism sector has shed close to 300 000 jobs as hotels and game lodges closed during the hard lockdown (Wilson, 2021b).

In 2020, the Department of Tourism in collaboration with the International Finance Corporation, the Tourism Business Council of South Africa and all its member associations conducted a survey. The aim of the survey was to measure the extent of the impact of Covid-19, how effective the support has been, and what kind of assistance is required (Department of Tourism, 2020). The survey, which covered a wide spectrum of tourism businesses across South Africa, was published in April 2020. The survey found that companies in the tourism sector have reported to have managed their workers in different ways, with some companies preferring to reduce the wages of workers and other companies laying off some of their workers.

The survey further revealed that 50 per cent of the companies have reduced the wages of their workers for more than 50 per cent of staff, 36 per cent of companies have reduced the wages for all their workers, 11 per cent of companies have made more than 50 per cent of their workers redundant, and 53 per cent of the companies have not made their workers redundant. As for small and medium businesses, 31 per cent of small businesses have applied redundancies and 75 per cent of medium businesses have reduced the wages. In 2021, between January and March, South Africa operated under level 1 lockdown. The tourism sector opened; however, some employees were back at work and working reduced hours or getting only weekends shifts owing to limited international tourism and corporate travels (Wilson, 2021b).

Commercial property is another sector that has been negatively affected by Covid-19. For instance, the sector experienced a loss of tenants as many office spaces in malls and other business places were left empty as a result of office workers working from their homes (Wilson, 2021b). The mining sector has not been hard hit during the Covid-19 period. For example, the mining sector has been driving the Johannesburg Stock Exchange for the last stretch as the weak exchange rate has been good for mining, with the platinum index going up by 40 per cent and the gold sector by 35 per cent in 2020 (Wilson, 2021b).

The retail companies such as Shoprite, Clicks and Pick n Pay have been operating during the lockdown periods. However, there were a few Shoprite stores that were forced to close temporarily owing to their staff being exposed to or testing positive for Covid-19 (Reddy, 2020). For example, in the Western Cape, 17 Shoprite stores, such as the Bothasig and Athlone stores in Cape Town, had to temporarily close after an employee tested positive for Covid-19 virus in the first week of May 2020 and six other stores were closed in the second week of May 2021 (Reddy, 2020; Teuteberg, 2020a). A professional decontamination company was brought in to sanitise and to do deep cleaning of the stores. Infected Shoprite staff were required to stay at home in self-isolation for 14 days (Reddy, 2020; Teuteberg, 2020a). While they are in self-isolation for 14 days, they are remunerated according to Shoprite's special Covid-19 leave policy (Reddy, 2020). The special Covid-19 leave policy applies to both full-time permanent and part-time workers (Reddy, 2020). Reddy (2020, p. 1) quoted the Shoprite Group spokesperson, Sarita van Wyk:

Employees who have tested positive for Covid-19 are remunerated according to the company's special Covid-19 leave policy. Each employee's situation is individually considered based on their individual needs and the specific scenario, in short, in cases where there is confirmed positive Covid-19 testing, the full salary will be paid to the employee and the company will claim back a portion in terms of the COIDA¹ regulations.

There has been a rise in online retail shopping during the Covid-19 period. In 2020, online retail sales made up about 2 per cent of total retail sales in South Africa and the retail sales increased dramatically to 3.5 per cent and 4 per cent in 2021 (Wilson, 2021b). For example, the retail company Pick n Pay has a liquor and grocery app called Bottles App (Wilson, 2021b). The Pick n Pay Bottles App has 400 000 registered users, with many downloads since the beginning of the lockdown periods in South Africa (Wilson, 2021b). By the end of March 2020, the Pick n Pay Bottles App had more than 800 000 downloads and has grown orders 400 per cent year on year (Wilson, 2021b). The Pick n Pay Bottles App was initially an alcohol delivery app, but after the lockdown and alcohol ban in March 2020, the Bottles App was adapted and used for grocery deliveries (Wilson, 2021b). The Bottles App is now the biggest grocery- and liquor-on-demand app in South Africa (Wilson, 2021b). The Clicks company has also experienced an increase in online shopping, which increased Clicks' sales by over 360 per cent for the second half of the year 2020 (Wilson, 2021b).

In an article titled "Shoprite mulls over rivals' stores", published by the *Sunday Times*, Wilson (2021a) points out that Shoprite is one of the few companies in South Africa to have kept its stores open throughout Covid-19 lockdown levels and regulations, except for its liquor stores. The company has kept all its workforce in the jobs and have created additional new jobs since the pandemic hit South Africa at the beginning of 2020 (Wilson, 2021a). The company has employed more than 140 000 people in South Africa and in other Africa countries in which it operates (Wilson, 2021a).

In the same vein, the Shoprite Group has announced a once-off R102 million "appreciation bonus" for its shop-floor and distribution-centre workers as a way to thank them for their tireless effort to provide millions of South Africans with essential services during the Covid-19 period (Staff reporter, 2020; Teuteberg, 2020a). This amounted to a R700 voucher to Shoprite (Teuteberg 2020a). Teuteberg (2020a, p. 1) quoted Shoprite CEO, Pieter Engelbrecht, who said that "our employee are crucial players in the task ahead and the group wants to thank and reward them for their tireless efforts to stock our shelves with food and other essentials for our 29 million shoppers". The announcement to pay Shoprite workers appreciation bonuses came after

1 The Compensation for Occupational Injuries and Diseases Act, 1993 (Act No. 130 of 1993).

Cyril Ramaphosa made a call on big businesses to take care of their workers during the unprecedented period of Covid-19 (Staff reporter, 2020).

Mention has to be made that Shoprite workers sacrifice their rights (i.e. the right to go from their homes to places of work) and continue to provide essential services to millions of South Africans. Section 7 of the Constitution of South Africa (RSA, 1996) articulates the Bill of Rights, which is the cornerstone of South Africa's democracy. It enshrines the rights of all people in South Africa and affirms the democratic values of human dignity, equality and freedom. Some of the rights enshrined in section 7 of the Constitution include freedom and security of a person, slavery, servitude and forced labour, freedom of trade, occupation and profession; and labour relations. The state has a duty to respect, protect, promote and fulfil the rights in the Bill of Rights. However, during the Covid-19 pandemic and in an effort to combat the Covid-19 pandemic, the South African government has decided to temporarily suspend certain rights under the Disaster Management Act of 2002. Some of the rights temporarily suspended are the freedom of assembly, association and movements (Bohler-Muller et al., 2020).

The University of Johannesburg and the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) conducted an online survey to understand and monitor South African experiences, attitudes and behaviour during the Covid-19 pandemic. The data collected from 12 300 participants during the level 5 lockdown between 13 April and 11 May 2020 indicate that most people, 78 per cent, were willing to sacrifice (suspend their freedom of assembly, movements and association temporarily) to reduce the spread of Covid-19 (Bohler-Muller et al., 2020). However, the data collected from 2 570 participants from 8 to 17 July 2020 indicated that as the country moved to lower lockdown levels, there was a decline in support for the limitation of freedom. Frustration and anger over Covid-19 intensified, resulting in support dropping from 78 per cent to 70 per cent (Bohler-Muller et al., 2020). This indicates that people were gradually moving away from supporting the suspension of their freedom of movement, assembly and association to help reduce the spread of Covid-19.

Furthermore, with regard to revenue and profit, Shoprite continues to dominate the retail sector as before Covid-19. For example, in 2017, Shoprite had a revenue of over R141 billion and growth of 8.44 per cent (Labour Research Services, 2018). Shoprite found itself in a stronger position with regard to its balance sheet than at the beginning of the pandemic. The retail giant has a strong cash generation that have allowed the company to settle US\$400 million (R5.9 billion) of its US\$480 million dollar debt, which has been a major concern for investors (Wilson, 2021a). According to Shoprite CEO Pieter Engelbrecht, Shoprite's net cash is positive at about R6.6 billion (Wilson, 2021a). The company has managed to settle its United States dollar debt, to expatriate US\$58 million from Angola, and to generate close to R12 billion in cash (Wilson, 2021a). The company's trading profit has risen to R4.7 billion and its dividend per share has increased from 22.4 per cent to 191c (Wilson, 2021a).

Shoprite's CEO Pieter Engelbrecht said: "We ended 2020 having gained R4.9 billion in market shares in our core supermarkets RSA business" (Shoprite, 2020). A plus factor is that Shoprite has been successful with its Checkers and Shoprite Xtra Savings rewards programme (Wilson, 2021a). Through the Checkers Xtra Savings rewards programme, Shoprite has managed to attract 4.7 million rewards card customers; the number has increased to 17 million members, which make the company the largest retail company in South Africa with regard to the Xtra Savings rewards membership (Shoprite, 2020; Wilson, 2021).

Conclusion

Covid-19 has undoubtedly affected many companies across the world, South Africa included. Shoprite has not been affected by the coronavirus. The retail company has been operating and providing essential services to millions of people. The retail company has performed very well with regard to market share and trading profit during Covid-19. The company has created jobs and employed thousands of workers during the Covid-19 period. By contrast, there are non-permanent workers at Shoprite working as cashiers, shelve packers and store controllers to provide essential services. They are employed through labour brokers and others by Shoprite as casuals and part-time workers. Some of these workers have been working for Shoprite for many years on a casual and part-time basis. Some workers have gained full-time permanent employment, but others are still holding on to the casual and part-time employment status. Covid-19 provides an opportune time for both government and big retail companies such as Shoprite to revisit the employment status of retail workers and their remuneration. It also highlights the importance of retail workers to the millions of people and the economy. Consequently, it is time for government and big retailers to recognise this importance and to employ these workers permanently.

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