



Sleeping giant is stirring: Farmworkers in South Africa

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“My name is Gert, I have worked on the same farm for over 20 years. My life on the farm is terrible. But I don’t even want to start my complaints about earning low wages. I just want to be respected. I don’t want to work in fear and to be scared. I don’t want to be beaten with a spade. I don’t want the same conditions for my children”.

Interviewed in Ashton on 16 November 2012.

On the 28 October 2012, farms around De Doorns, a small, agricultural town 180 km from Cape Town, South Africa were brought to a standstill. Farmworkers decided to go on strike demanding a living wage of R150.00 (17 dollars) per day. The average wage that farmworkers were earning was between R60- R80 (7 and 8 dollars) per day.

Solidarity actions were organised and by 4 November the strike had spread to over 25 rural towns mainly in the wine and fruit sectors. The farm worker strike gave expression to the anger, the frustrations, the deprivation, and extreme poverty under which farmworkers continue to live.

This was a historic moment because it was the first time in the history of the Western Cape that farmworkers revolted. The dire position of farmworkers, their low wages and almost slave-like conditions on the farms in South Africa has a long history. In the beautiful and bountiful Western Cape, this is a legacy that is interlinked with slavery, and the dispossession of the indigenous Khoi and San peoples.

The farmworkers rebellion has to be located within a system of commercial agriculture that is oriented to the export market. Agriculture continues to be a significant sector

of the South African economy, employing 603,000 people and constituting the country's most labor-intensive export sector. It is also one of the sectors of the South African economy that has seen very limited transformation and less than seven per cent of agricultural land has been redistributed to those who have been historically dispossessed. It is therefore quite ironic that since the birth of the new South Africa in 1994, over one million farm dwellers have been evicted from commercial farms in South Africa.

Situation of farmworkers

The backbone of the fruit and wine agriculture industry in the Western Cape is provided by 121,000 farmworkers; this is more than in any other region of South Africa. Nearly half of all farmworkers in the Western Cape are "permanent", meaning that most of the permanent workers and their families live on the commercial farms and work throughout the year. Some of these permanent workers and their families have lived on farms in the region for generations. Permanent farmworkers are more often men; many women farmworkers who work all year are sometimes still seen as "not permanent workers."

Agricultural work is inherently seasonal, and the vast majority of farms in the Western Cape require additional workers during certain periods. Just over half of all farmworkers are casual or seasonal workers who come to the farms via labour brokers (labour contractors). Although farmers have varying hiring practices for non-permanent labour, the majority of the season or casual farmworkers are women. Some are women who may live on the farm but only work during certain periods. Many are women and men from nearby townships and rural informal settlements who are unable to find permanent jobs; go and work on the farms during the harvesting season as casual workers.

Still another category of farmworkers are migrant workers, either from the poorer regions of South Africa, or from neighbouring countries, including Zimbabwe, Mozambique and Lesotho. Some migrant workers arrive for certain seasons and then return home at the end of the harvesting season, struggling to survive on their meager savings. In recent years farmworkers migrate between provinces and work during harvest seasons that occur at different times. Some of these seasonal workers live in townships and are transported to the farm each working day.

Commercial agriculture is poorly regulated

The agricultural system is in a state of transition from paternalistic arrangements between owners and workers to relationships between employers and employees that are regulated by the government. However, there is an almost complete failure on the part of government to ensure that farmers adhere to labour legislation. The second challenge is the low level of unionisation, with less than five per cent of farmworkers in unions. It is often NGOs working on land and agrarian questions that support farmworkers' self-organisation and awareness-raising of their rights.

The precarious situation of farmworkers is exacerbated by the low wages that they earn. The minimum wage for farmworkers, which is set by the Minister of Labour through a sectoral determination, is one of the lowest in South Africa's formal employment sector. This wage is lower than the minimum wages for domestic workers—the other lowest wage earners—in most municipalities in the Western Cape. The difference in wages for farmworkers versus other workers is drastic: in 2010 the median pay for farmworkers was 1,213 rand per month, compared to 3,683 rand per month for workers in the formal sector. Generally, female farmworkers are paid even less than male farmworkers. Their incomes are between R1,192 per month versus R1,300 per month. However it is not only the question of wages that farmworkers are unhappy about. It's the living conditions, and it's the general working conditions.

My life is sad....

"I am 42 years old. I have worked on this farm from the time I was 16 yrs. A few years ago our boss built these houses here in the location and many of us moved here. But when we told our boss that we wanted to talk to him about the R150 a day, he became angry, swore at us and told us to "f- off out of his houses". He is so rude. He speaks so harshly to us, like animals. When we saw the TV of De Doorns we decided to do the same. We asked Mawubuye Land Rights Movement to assist us with our strike. We have gone to many farms here in the valley and many farmworkers are joining us."

Victory for farmworkers

At the end of January 2013, after three months of strikes, work stoppages and campaigns, the Minister of Labour announced a new minimum wage for the farmworkers. For the first time, the farmworkers were granted an increase of 52 per cent. This was certainly below the demand for R150 per day but it is a still significant given previous increases.

But the victory has not simply a victory that could be counted in monetary terms. It has to be seen in the new levels of consciousness of the farmworkers, in the new confidence of the farmworkers.

"It was an experience to be involved in the strike. When De Doorns came out on strike, we decided to join them in Montagu. We were forced to defend ourselves and other farmworkers, as well as the union. When they tried to isolate the leaders, I told the police that it is my right to protest. It is my right to fight for R150 per day. It is my right to fight for a plate of food on my table. But, I want to say that I am not here for the R150 minimum wage. I am fighting for land and water because I realize that without land and water you have nothing and you will never fight your way out of poverty." Riaan Plaatjies, Montagu

For the first time farmworkers also began to demand access to land for livelihoods and for a real change in the countryside. The struggle for a living wage has also been a struggle for hope and a new imagination of what the countryside can look like.

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The Agrarian Reform for Food Sovereignty Campaign, member of La Via Campesina Africa, was among the strikers.