

South Africa Agriculture: Harvesting discontent

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"I earn R800,00 per month and with this money I have to feed, clothe and fend for my family of eight. We barely survive; I cannot even afford to buy school shoes for the children. I cannot take it any longer"- Gertie Beukes, Ashton farmworker. "We produce the food that we cannot even afford to buy, we often go hungry" says Denico Swartz, a farmworker from Robertson." (Farmworkers at a meeting in Ashton, Western Cape 26th November 2012)

Rebellion on the farms

The protests and mobilisation that started in the small town of De Doorns on the 6th of November galvanised the anger of farm dwellers against decades of discontent at extreme exploitation and oppression that persist on farms, rural towns and the agricultural sector as a whole.

De Doorns is not dissimilar from hundreds of small rural towns across the Western Cape and South Africa. The grievances and problems that the farmworkers and rural poor speak of extend well beyond the Hex River Mountains in the Western Cape to the borders of South Africa in Limpopo and Mpumalanga. However, the De Doorns uprising has to be seen an important moment. Like Marikana in the mining sector, 'De Doorns' has ignited the imagination of farmworkers and the rural poor. As with the mineworkers demand for 'R12 500 per month', the farmworkers demand of 'R150 per day' has become the rallying call of this struggle.

In fact, mining and agriculture, the historical backbone of South African capitalism, have been severely shaken.

A historic strike

The spontaneous protests and often self-organised actions of farm workers that unfolded on farms and in rural towns are historic, inspiring and has indeed stunned the rural establishment. Even the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forests, Tina Joemat-Pettersson Joemat recognised this when she said, "farms and agriculture in the Western Cape will never be the same again".

The significance of what has been unfolding in the Western Cape is that a people who have been labouring under all most feudal conditions, yet remained poorly organised (union representation stands at less than 5%), rose up spontaneously on some of the wealthiest and most productive farmlands in the country, demanding a living wage and radical transformation of the countryside.

A new generation of farmworkers has grown up in the post apartheid South Africa. These are young workers who challenge their parents for not standing up to decades of oppression on the farms. They've had better education, and if one uses De Doorns and Robertson as examples; the use of cell phones and social media, such as Mixit, played an important role in motivating and facilitating neighbouring farmworkers to join in action. Access to popular organisations, television and the radio contributed significantly to overcome the isolation and marginalization of farmworkers and allowed for co-ordination - however tentative.

Rural women, many of them seasonal workers, have played a leading role in mobilizing at community level in townships and informal settlements on the outskirts of farms. In many instances they led the protests, giving confidence to the men to follow suit. These women often earn less than the men and have more insecure conditions of employment and tenure.

Behind the strike

It is important to ask what ignited the struggles in De Doorns. What has given rise to this historic awakening in the rural areas? And why has the strike and protests been able to spread to many of the surrounding rural towns in the Western Cape in a relatively short space of time?

It relates in essence to a range of objective and subjective reasons that gave rise to the protests and the strikes. Key among these is the fact that despite the changes in labour relations since 1994, little has changed on South Africa's farms. Rather one can describe much of the current labour relations as a continuation of the Apartheid era of "baasskap" or feudalistic social and economic conditions of master servant relations. Massive human rights violations continued, as highlighted by many local reports as well as the recent Human Rights Watch report Ripe with Abuse. The new Labour Relations Act as well as other labour legislation supporting equity and decent work has been largely ignored by farmers.

The Department of Labour, which is supposed to monitor and undertake inspections on farms, is unable to cope. They have very limited access to farms and, even worse, sometimes collude with the farmers against the workers.

Conditions of abuse

Over these past few weeks in meeting after meeting farmworkers told stories of how they work and live:

"This week my pay was only R240, 00 and I don't know why. I don't get a pay slip." (Bonnievale)

"When I joined the union I was told that I must fuck off from his farm, he wants no trouble makers." (Francois, Ashton)

"They are so rude and abusive, they are racist and speak very badly to us." (Betty, De Doorns)

There are many stories of violence and intimidation:

“A group of us were huddled together taking shelter from the rain and the farm manager marched up to us and ordered us to go back to work. Suddenly he started beating us with a spade.” (Gawie, Ashton)

“Just before the strike was to resume the farmer lined us up against the fence, pointed his shotgun at us, told us he will shoot the lot of us if we join the strike.”

From many of these testimonies it was also clear that a substantial number of farmworkers earn well below the R70 per day minimum wage that is the bone of contention. “I work on an apricot farm on the road to Montague where I am paid 89c for every 25kg drum of apricots I fill, and if I want to earn a lousy R89 per day I have to fill over 100 drums with apricots. At the end of such a week all my limbs ache and I can barely stand straight.” (Margriet, Montague)

These are stories of hardship and suffering. Many have similar tales of how they are constantly humiliated, belittled and even beaten: “My boss has seven farms but we don’t have toilets and when we demanded toilets, he said he would rather buy an additional farm than install toilets... All their children go to university and have cars. We cannot afford anything, not even school shoes.”

The problems of organising farmworkers

Today there are just over 500 000 farmworkers in South Africa of which the largest proportion, 121 000, are employed in the Western Cape. Very few farmworkers, both permanent and seasonal, are organized. In fact, only three to five percent are unionized. The history of the labour movement in South Africa suggests that it was extremely difficult to organise farmworkers during the apartheid era given the strong state controls in rural areas, which made access to farms, where most of the farm workers lived, very difficult.

Those parts of the Western Cape where the protests and strikes have been fiercest are also the regions that are most organised with a stronger presence of small unions, popular movements, farmers(workers’ associations and NGOs.

Democratic South Africa has introduced a battery of progressive legislation including the Constitution that guarantees the right to freedom of expression and association. While in theory everyone has the right to belong to a union of their choice and the right to strike, most farmworkers have been denied these rights through the prevailing conditions of fear and intimidation that is the everyday reality of South Africa’s farming system. Joining a union often leads to eviction or retrenchment.

Another difficulty that confronts those organising farmworkers is the very isolation of the farms and workers who reside on them. Unlike urban workers, farm workers struggle to meet with other workers regularly. There is a lack of access to public transport and resources to link up and organize.

Deepening poverty

Behind the strike also lies a tale of deepening poverty, ironically entrenched by rising food prices. Low wages and increasing costs have served to intensify the desperation to the point that farmworkers had little to lose by rising up.

Farmworkers complain that they spend the bulk of their meager income on food, yet still go hungry.

This is a complaint from both those living on the farms and the contract and seasonal workers. Those who live on the farms very often buy food on credit from the shops set-up by the farmer on the farm itself. Here, they also buy electricity for pre-paid meters that were recently installed in their shack-like homes. They often also have to pay rent and an additional amount for children living with them, but not working on the farm.

The result is direct deductions from their wages against the balance of what they owe. This farm 'credit system' has left thousands of workers in a cascading debt trap. Over and above this, farmworkers also have to pay school fees, and in some cases, boarding fees for hostels. This burden of feeding and fending for the family as well as the extended family piles additional pressure meager incomes.

Inequality is extremely stark where impoverished farmworkers live in such close proximity to the farmer and his family. Glaring disparities in living conditions, sanitation, transport and mobility, access to health services, etc. are right in your face. The farmworker is made to feel sub-human as cause and effect become confounded. The more the farmworker does not have, the less deserving he or she is considered to be. For example, denying their farmworkers decent sanitation in the vineyards and fields, serves to entrench the farmer's perception of their employees as animals. This much is apparent as one goes from farm to farm.

These difficulties notwithstanding, the sleeping giant has stirred. A new period has dawned. Farmworkers in more than twenty towns across the Western Cape have mobilized and started to organise themselves both on the farms and in the informal settlements where many contract workers live. The protests and strike have seen contract workers and seasonal workers (including those who live on the farms and those who are brought in each day) making common cause. Perhaps the words of Marx should be invoked when we see the truckloads of workers traveling to farms daily: "capitalism has produced its own gravedigger".

The protests have also unlocked new forms of self-organization on the farms as farmworkers establish farm worker committees. Significantly, alliances between small farmer organisations, contract workers and community groups have cohered to not only support the protests, but also to make new links between the basic demands of the farmworkers and those who demand a radical transformation of the countryside.

Mercia Andrews
