

South African farm workers' strikes inspired by events at Marikana

Joshua Lumet, Iqra Qalam
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Militant struggles among South Africa's impoverished workers have spread to the Western Cape province's farms, following on months of upheavals in the mining industry. The farm workers' strikes started two weeks ago in the picturesque Boland town of De Doorns, some 90 miles outside of Cape Town, prompted by a dispute on the Keurboschkloof farm. Subsequently, the militant struggles have spread like wildfire throughout the province.

Wednesday, November 14, saw the strikes spread to the towns of Porterville, Saron and Wolseley. Michael Daniels, a 27-year-old worker, was shot dead, allegedly in a confrontation with the South African Police Services (SAPS).

Farm workers, most of whom have lived all of their lives in the area and toil for long hours for a wage of only R70 (\$7.85) per day, say they were inspired by recent events in the mining industry. They are demanding a wage of R150 (\$16.90) per day.

On 16 August, police shot and killed 34 workers at the Marikana mine outside Johannesburg, belonging to the British-based platinum mining company Lonmin. The massacre, which also saw countless rock drillers injured and hundreds arrested, led to Lonmin agreeing to pay workers significant salary increases, but still short of the R12,500 they asked for. The increases did, however, lead to workers in the Boland farming region deciding to down tools in the fight for a living wage.

Muriel Sitholo, a 44-year-old mother of four who has lived and worked all her life on the Bella Vista farm belonging to S. L. Jordaan said, "I was born in this area and it is one of the most fertile lands you can find anywhere; the farmers are very wealthy. There is no way they cannot afford to pay us more than the R70 we currently earn. We just cannot survive and that is why we are brave in doing what we are doing, even though it is dangerous. Workers in South Africa don't earn enough for what we do, and that goes all the way back to the days

of Apartheid."

She agreed that events at Marikana galvanized workers to start the strikes in the Boland. The strikes have spread to other areas in the Western Cape province and authorities have called on workers to end the strike as negotiations between the African National Congress (ANC) government and representatives of the workers, some of whom are affiliated to the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), continue.

Justin Pieterse, the son of Nosey Pieterse, the executive president of the Black Association for the Agricultural Sector (Bawsi), agrees that as was the case at Marikana and other mines, workers have started to form their own representative groups and have started to steer away from the control of the existing unions like COSATU. Added Ashlin Thomas, "The unions can say what they want, but here we are all equal and every person wants the same thing, so each worker is a leader in his own right."

In the mining sector, thousands of workers brought mines to a standstill when they decided that the unions were in cahoots with the ANC government and the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) in protecting the interests of the mining companies.

Justin Pieterse continued, "So far the farmers have offered us R80 per day, which is a slap in the face. We will continue to strike until our demand for R150 per day is met. It doesn't really matter what the authorities say because some workers are not going according to the unions and, in a way, each worker wants to fight for a better life."

The Western Cape is ruled by the right-wing opposition party, the Democratic Alliance. Workers in the City of Cape Town, disillusioned with the ANC, voted the DA into power in 2006, expecting a dramatic improvement in their quality of life. This never transpired; instead deepening unemployment, the rising cost of living and real wage decreases have exacerbated poverty even

further. Despite their parliamentary antics, the ANC and the DA have two things in common—their commitment to big business and brazen hostility towards the working class.

The DA's Western Cape Premier Helen Zille yesterday called on President Jacob Zuma to deploy the army to the towns that had been affected by the strikes.

The ANC and COSATU have viewed the unrest as an opportunity to dislodge the DA from the Western Cape. Fear that the militant struggles can spread to the urban centers of the Western Cape have prompted Zille to call on ANC provincial leader Marius Fransman to remove politics from the labour dispute, urging him to repudiate some of the "incitement" COSATU had spread by earlier describing the protests as "Marikana comes to the farms."

In an attempt to defuse the situation, Minister of Labour Mildred Oliphant, who is currently overseas, will publish a notice in the Government Gazette next week canceling the existing sectorial determination that sets the minimum wage for farm workers at R70 a day. Announcing the deal, Agriculture Minister Tina Joemat-Pettersson, flanked by acting Labour Minister Angie Motshekga and her trade and industry counterpart Minister Rob Davies, said the Employment Conditions Commission would meet next week to decide on the basic level of pay for Western Cape farm workers.

Minister Joemat-Pettersson has at the same time called for an end to the strike in the De Doorns area. "The farm workers' unions said they were willing to abandon the strikes for two weeks until a solution to the wage issue was found," Minister Joemat-Pettersson said in a statement on Tuesday night. Joemat-Pettersson also called on the labour department to intervene in the strike.

She said she had helped "restore relationships" between striking farm workers and farmers. "I think we've [the department] acted as a facilitator to allow that these negotiations and talks to stay on track. ... We cannot afford this sector to lose jobs ... that is why we decided to participate in normalising the situation."

Although she said that farm workers' unions had agreed to suspend the strike, most workers at De Doorns and other areas rubbished her claim. Said Justin Pieterse: "We will really only stop this action once they (the authorities and the farmers) have agreed to pay us the R150 per day we are asking for."

Farm workers are being threatened with the prospect of job losses as a result of their militant struggle. They are being warned that their pay demand will adversely affect the "international competitiveness" of the farming

industry. However, the majority of farm workers maintained that, like their counterparts in the mining industry, only a successful pay increase would stop the strikes.

Said Bernard Msongo, a 22-year-old immigrant worker from Zimbabwe, "Of course this issue is in the end really just about the fact that workers do not earn enough to make a good living. It is about the poor workers versus the rich farmers and the workers are far more than the farmers; we are different classes of people and it shows if you look how wealthy those farmers are in this area."

The militant struggle in the Boland is the struggle of the poor masses in South Africa, the most unequal country in the world, fighting for a better life. In the Western Cape, the unemployment rate is now 29.3 percent, the cost of living is soaring and wages are decreasing. Displaying their disillusionment with the bourgeois politicians of the DA and ANC, and their lackeys in COSATU, farm workers, like their mine worker counterparts, are coming into direct conflict with state security forces.

Said Edward Gege, a worker who was born in the area and has worked the farms for the last 30 years: "There are a lot of issues at stake here. Some people like the politicians want to make it all about them and the unions, but it is actually just about the workers who are being exploited.

"And if the farmers and government cannot come back to us and say we will pay you more money, the strikes will continue, whether COSATU is helping us or not, or whether government said they have deals on the table or not, it does not matter. What matters is that we have the money in our pockets and everyone knows that."

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