

South African farm workers' strike spreads

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The three-week-long farm workers' strike in the fertile farmlands of the Boland area in South Africa's Western Cape Province has now spread to 24 different areas and has led to further violent clashes with police. The strike has hit grape and other fruit-producing areas of De Doorns, Ceres and Robertson. At least two more workers have been killed in confrontations with the South African Police Services (SAPS).

The continued action in the Boland area is further evidence that the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) is losing its grip on South African workers.

Union membership in the agricultural sector has dropped. Human Rights Watch estimated recently that less than three percent of all farm workers were union members. Farm workers, like their mineworker counterparts, are fed up at seeing the unions working against them and have begun to form rank-and-file committees. The decision to form such committees was taken at a meeting in Villiersdorp on Saturday.

The South African Civil Society Information Service's (SACSIS's) Anna Majavu recently explained that because of the monopoly of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), "whose leaders and officials have long preferred compromise and co-determination over worker control, it has been difficult for mineworkers to strike—until the Marikana massacre."

Speaking about the farm workers, she continued, "it has possibly been even harder for farm workers to strike," as striking farm workers often face losing their homes on farms.

In an attempt to head off the spread of farm worker action, government and unions last week appealed to the workers to suspend their strike for two weeks, until 4 December. Prospects for an end to the farm workers' strike faded at the weekend as workers' representatives vowed to press ahead with their demand for an increase in their daily wage to R150 (\$US 17). Workers, braving

threats of eviction and police violence, are determined to fight for a better wage.

Voicing his desperation, Mlungiseleli Ndongeni, the provincial secretary of the Food and Allied Workers Union (Fawu), told the media, "There is no hope that the strike will end soon. Our fear is that the illegal strike will spread to other areas of the country if a solution is not found immediately."

"A major hurdle to finding a solution to the strike was that employers wanted to negotiate on an individual basis, while the farm workers were calling for a centralised negotiation as they were in solidarity with each other," said Ndongeni.

The farm workers have brought the agricultural industry in the Western Cape to a standstill. The Du Toit Group company, employing about 9,000 farm workers, is one of the leading fresh vegetable and fruit producers based in Ceres. In a statement last Friday, Pieter Du Toit, the managing director for the group's marketing division, said that the company was considering mechanising operations after losing R30 million (\$US 3.4 million) during the first days of the strikes. The company expects to incur losses of up to R10 million a day if production does not resume soon.

On November 19, a meeting between the newly-formed strike committees, religious leaders and the Black Association of the Agricultural Sector (Bawsi), was held in the town of Worcester, at the church. As was their modus operandi during the mineworkers strike, the African National Congress (ANC) government is hoping that the religious leaders and organisations like Bawsi will aid them in getting farm workers back onto the farms.

Nosey Pieterse, executive president of Bawsi, was put forward to play a leading role in the meeting along with the church leaders. Pieterse said his organisation's main role this week would be to ensure that workers who did return to work were not victimized by farmers.

He would also work towards securing the release of workers who had been detained by the police.

“Our hope is that workers can trust government, that they are serious about changing the minimum wage structure [of R70 per day],” Pieterse said.

In an attempt to bolster COSATU’s credibility, Pieterse added that while most workers were not aligned with the unions, organizations such as COSATU still played an “instrumental” role in trying to get negotiations between farmers and their employees off the ground. He did, however, admit that there was not as yet any offer on the table from government, or from any of the farmers in the areas where clashes had taken place.

Despite the machinations of the ANC and Democratic Alliance (DA)—the governing party in the Western Cape province and the ANC’s official opposition—and their co-opting of religious leaders and other agents of compromise, the farm workers are resolved to continue their struggle for a living wage. A coalition of farm worker representatives said yesterday they had given the ANC and DA government until December 4 to institute the minimum daily wage of R150 or face intensified protest action.

“Farm workers are not going to calm down and reconcile to the same old slavery conditions. There will be change,” the coalition of farm worker representatives said.



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