

Trade unions shut down South African farm workers strike

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The Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) called off the strike of farm workers in the Western Cape Province on Tuesday, even though none of the demands of the farm workers has been met.

COSATU's provincial secretary, Tony Ehrenreich, made the announcement following a one-day action December 4, the deadline given by farm workers for the government to respond to demands for an increase in the minimum wage to R150 a day.

Before Tuesday's action, the African National Congress government made clear that it would do nothing in response to the farm workers' demands, instead relying on the services of COSATU and a network of pseudo-left organizations to suppress the strike and get them back to work for the remainder of the grape harvesting season.

Ehrenreich declared, "An agreement put forward by Agri SA contains the basis of the accord that temporarily ends this strike," He said Agri SA, which represented farm owners, "essentially commits" itself to negotiations to be held farm-by-farm. Talks would be about the wage demand of a R150 per day and a profit-sharing scheme.

By trying to contain any discussion over the conditions of workers to a farm-by-farm process, COSATU is seeking to prevent a unified struggle. ANC Agricultural Minister Tina Joemat-Pettersson said Wednesday that the farm-by-farm negotiations would be followed by government discussions on an overall minimum wage later next year.

Grateful for the intervention of the government and the union, Gerhard de Kock, chairman of the Cape Orchard Alliance which owns 12 farms in the valley, said labour relations on Normandy farm had improved in the wake of recent strikes. "All change is painful, but to resist change can be more painful. I have tried to see

the unrest as an opportunity for better relations rather than a tragedy," he said.

There is widespread scepticism among the workers. Commenting on the demobilization of collective action, Moos Arries, who works on the Mooigesig farm in De Doorns, told the *World Socialist Web Site*, "It looks like we will now be negotiating on every farm for a better living and we don't know when this process will be finished."

Willem Koopman from the Morgenson farm noted that while Agri SA and the government have shown a willingness to negotiate, nothing has effectively changed in their lives "because we have not seen any increase in our living conditions and therefore it looks like we are in for the long haul."

The ruling class was shocked by the eruption of the farm workers' strike, which began independently of the unions. The initial eruption of working class opposition, inspired by the struggles of mine workers, quickly spread to dozens of towns. As with the miners, farm workers have been regularly attacked by the South African Police Service, with two workers killed in confrontations.

The ANC, together with the Democratic Alliance (DA), which governs in the Western Cape province, responded by calling on the services of COSATU. This was combined with the threat of force, with DA Premier Helen Zille urging the intervention of the military.

On November 19, the strike was temporarily suspended after a series of meetings involving farm workers, COSATU, the ANC and the DA. This served to remove all initiative from the workers, paving the way for this week's agreement.

On November 20, representatives of the farm workers

told the ANC and the DA they had until December 4 to institute the minimum daily wage of R150 or face renewed protest. It was on this basis that COSATU, in order to head off the development of an insurrectionary movement, moved to present itself in a more radical guise and supportive of the strike's extension, the better to keep it under control. To this end COSATU sanctioned a single day of action in the agricultural sector for December 4.

Speaking about the decision, Ehrenreich said COSATU had done all they could to avert further stoppages and threatened, "This strike ... can set back labour relations on farms by decades and could see a reversal to the low-level civil war we all witnessed on farms a few weeks ago."

Ehrenreich is a time-served bureaucrat and member of the ruling ANC that sanctioned the brutal massacre of striking platinum miners at Lonmin, Marikana in August. Last week the DA charged him with inciting violence. This was due to his image being used on the poster of a COSATU-affiliated trade union, under which was written the slogan, "FEEL IT!!! Western Cape Marikana is here!!!" This was a reference to comments Ehrenreich had reportedly made earlier in the dispute: "The ill treatment and underpayment of workers by some farmers must stop, otherwise we will see a Marikana in De Doorns."

In response to the DA's charges, Ehrenreich spoke candidly about his and COSATU's role in the dispute, aimed at strangling a movement of workers outside of the control of the trade unions and in opposition in the ANC. He stated, "I used Marikana as a parallel to what's happening at the farms because workers went ahead without the guidance of unions and the danger for things getting out of hand is greater, without unions."

The unions now hope to utilize the prospect of an Agri-SA deal to try and establish their control over an increasingly restive section of the working class. Union membership in the agricultural sector is currently estimated at less than 3 percent. "This agreement means that workers will return to work and join any union of their choice," said Ehrenreich. "These unions will negotiate with the farmers on the different farms."

In addition to COSATU and the ANC, a crucial role in sabotaging the strike was played by a network of organizations, including the United Democratic Front,

recently relaunched by Mario Wanza, a former leading ANC activist. Wanza and the UDF have postured as a more militant opposition, while seeking to pressure COSATU and the ANC and prevent any struggle against the capitalist system. Wanza's attempt to revive the UDF is part of an effort to establish a new organization to contain and channel growing mass hostility to the establishment parties in South Africa.

At the height of the anti-Apartheid struggle, the UDF had around 3 million members. Seeking to unite conflicting class forces, its slogan was the "UDF Unites, Apartheid Divides." This political perspective subordinated the working class to a pro-capitalist perspective and a movement dominated by the ANC and a leadership whose aim was to secure their own advancement into the ranks of the bourgeoisie that proved instrumental in the survival of capitalism in South Africa.

Another organization involved in the strike is the South African National NGO Coalition (SANGOCO). It is the umbrella group for many social sector non-government organizations. They are beholden to the capitalist class for donations and grants to finance their activities and are obliged to protect the interests of large farming corporations. SANGOCO has been actively promoting the idea that the farm workers must simply try to "influence national development policy."

The interests of farm workers and other sections of the working class in South Africa cannot be realized within the framework of these organizations. The basic rights of workers—including for a decent wage and quality housing—can be realized only through their independent organisation in a political struggle for socialism against the ANC, COSATU and the capitalist profit system that they defend.



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