

South African police fire on striking farm workers

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11 January 2013

Confrontations between striking farm workers and South African police and private security guards have left several people wounded and some 50 arrested.

On Thursday, the second day of a renewed agricultural strike, a community leader was reportedly shot and wounded by private security guards in the town of De Doorns, in South Africa's Western Cape province, the center of the strike.

The violence against the strikers and their supporters followed clashes on Wednesday in which strikers blocked roads with rocks and burning tyres and were fired on with rubber bullets and stun grenades by police. A vehicle belonging to the *Cape Times* newspaper was set alight and overturned. Lt. Col. Andre Traut, a police spokesman, told the *Sowetan* that 50 people were arrested across the Western Cape on Wednesday on public violence-related charges.

Western Cape farm workers resumed their strikes after negotiations over the holiday season failed to yield results. The farm workers are struggling for an increase in the daily wage, from the R70 (US\$8.17) to R150 per day (US\$17.50).

The renewed strike action in the agricultural sector has received patchy support this week following the failure of the South African government and unions to come to the aid of workers.

The government has warned that workers could lose their jobs if the current strike action continues, because importers of South African fruits could go elsewhere to look for their products.

The Western Cape government's Agriculture Ministry has agreed with the labour union, the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu), that this kind of stay-away by workers could result in traditional markets being compromised.

For their part, Cosatu has persistently used the strikes to further its own end of containing the workers' struggle, to ultimately bolster the ends of the capitalist owners of the farms, while at the same time promising workers that their demands of an increased living wage of R150 per day will be met.

Independent Newspapers reports that the areas of Grabouw, Wolseley and Barrydale were the only ones where strikers disrupted transport routes this week.

Most seasonal and permanent workers were at work on Wednesday in Ceres and the Koue Bokkeveld area, it was reported. In Grabouw, strikers briefly blockaded the N2, forcing motorists to detour through the town. A burning tyre barricade was also erected on a road into the town. Police on the scene said the obstructions were soon removed.

In the suburb of Pineview, several hundred people gathered at a bus depot, but without incident. The protest appeared to fizzle out when it started raining at around 10 a.m.

In Barrydale, police and strikers clashed as the road into Smitsville township was blockaded with burning tyres.

Mercia Andrews, a member of the Mawubuye Land Rights Movement, said most permanent workers went to work, while seasonal workers stayed away.

The farm workers were initially inspired by events in South Africa's mining industry where workers at the British-based firm Lonmin outside Johannesburg gained significant salary increases following similarly militant uprisings and a series of wildcat strikes.

While the strikes in the mining sector had been simmering for the last three months, Western Cape farmers have been holding their breath as Wednesday's deadline for a government decision on the wage increases neared.

Agriculture Minister Tina Joemat-Pettersson has said that a decision on wages may only be likely by April of this year. Joemat-Pettersson did express government's desire to change the legislation governing the minimum wages paid to farm workers, but no official announcement has been made.

Cosatu provincial secretary Tony Ehrenreich told reporters last week at the labour department's offices in Cape Town that "there's been no progress that's been significant in the negotiations with Agri-SA or with the South African government."

Cosatu and the main political parties in the Western Cape, the ANC and the Democratic Alliance (DA) have been

seeking to demobilize the farm workers struggle.

The ANC and Cosatu have also viewed the unrest as an opportunity to dislodge the DA from the Western Cape. Last year, fear that the militant struggles could spread to the urban centers of the Western Cape prompted DA leader Helen 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 when Ehrenreich earlier described the protests as “Marikana comes to the farms.”

This week the Cosatu Western Cape leader again warned that the strikes could spill over to other areas of the country and that his organization would support such action.

Cosatu does not have substantial standing with the farm workers. Most of the farm workers are not members of trade unions. 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.

Ehrenreich said they would call on the international community to boycott South African agricultural products, because they were produced in “slave labour conditions”. On Wednesday (January 9), Western Cape Agriculture Minister Gerrit van Rensburg said such boycotts could lead to farm workers losing their jobs because importers of South African fruit could go elsewhere in their search for quality products.

Agri-SA, which has been representing the farmers at the bargaining table, told the South African Press Association (Sapa) last week that Cosatu had brought nothing but demands and threats of anarchy to the negotiating table.

The president of the farmers’ organisation, Johannes Möller, said they had made several proposals during talks. These included participating in the process to re-evaluate the minimum wage for workers, and allowing farmers to discuss salaries and bonuses with workers.

He said they are now going to advise farmers to restructure agriculture. This would probably include moving the farming of labour-intensive commodities to neighbouring countries, where the risk of labour unrest is lower.

Möller was critical of Cosatu’s boycott threats.

“Due to the scarcity of agricultural products, I doubt they will be successful. For one of the governing parts of the tripartite alliance (the African National Congress’s other partner in the alliance is the Stalinist South African Communist Party) to make threats of sanctions against agriculture is highly irresponsible.”

The Food and Allied Workers’ Union, Sikhula Sonke, the Building and Allied Workers’ Union of SA, and the Women on Farms Project joined Cosatu in calling on the government to do more to get Agri-SA back to the negotiating table.

The unions had met with labour department director-

general Nkosinathi Nhleko.

“Nhleko conveyed the wishes of government that real substantive negotiations should commence as soon as possible to avert further troubles that could seriously affect the country’s economy,” a government statement read.

In November of last year, table grape workers in De Doorns started striking, protesting against low wages of around R70 per day, and strikes soon spread to 15 other towns. Violence marred the strikes and two people were killed.

The strike was called off last month after Agri-SA agreed to negotiations on a farm-by-farm basis. But the farmers then failed to negotiate.

Activist Nosey Pieterse, representing the Baws Agricultural Workers Union of South Africa, said the farmers had shown a “hardening of the heart.”

Fawu provincial organiser Sandile Keni said the union was still willing to negotiate with farmers, but that they would also be making a call at a later stage to other industries represented by the union which might also go on strike.

The organisations added that they were also appealing for an international boycott of the farmers.

Farm worker Jan Harms said this week that while the unions and farmers and the South African government continued the negotiations, he and his co-workers are frustrated by the failure of the talks and do not hold out much hope that the government will help them meet their demands. Word among the workers, he said, is that the strikes which resumed this week would be the only way to convince these parties of the desperate need to increase wages.

“It is very, very true that there are rich people in government who have lost touch with the workers and that government is also known for their empty promises”, Harms said.

“We have said from the start that we are in this for the long haul because we simply cannot live on R70 per day, which is the minimum wage set by government sometime ago. The money we earn is just about enough to buy food and some people are struggling to keep a roof over their heads. Government is going to have to come to the party”, he added.



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