

Letters from our readers

15 January 2013

On “ South African police fire on striking farm workers ”

On behalf of the Dutch East India Company, Jan van Riebeeck first began commercial farming at the Cape in the 17th century. In the days before refrigeration, and before the Suez Canal shortened the journey East for European shipping, the company guaranteed itself a crucial refreshment station through Van Riebeeck's settlement at the Cape.

In the intervening centuries, both the fruit as well as the wine industry burgeoned locally and later globally. This was thanks to the Cape's Mediterranean climate, the development of various cultivars, the discovery of diamonds and then gold in the interior and, last but by no means least, the availability of cheap labour among the indigenous peoples.

Having originally been a boon to land-grabbing Europeans, apartheid laws became a distinct fetter with the imposition of sanctions by the international community in the 1980s. Like other sections of the bourgeoisie, the farm owners were the foremost beneficiaries of progress in negotiations between the National Party administration of F.W. De Klerk and the African National Congress. From the 1990s, export markets opened up again for raw agricultural produce and, more importantly, for processed goods, especially wine.

Since the first fully democratic elections of 1994 (which brought the ANC to power), Western Cape farm workers have been waiting, like the rest of the proletariat, for their share of the fat of the land. Instead, they have watched as spoils in the commanding heights of the economy went to the ANC elite. Among these we may count Cyril Ramaphosa, newly elected ANC deputy president.

Ramaphosa was among the key ANC negotiators during the transition from apartheid rule. He formed strong links with Roelf Meyer, his opposite number from the National Party team, as well as other

representatives of the white political and business elite. For his services in securing a constitution in which private property rights were enshrined, Ramaphosa became a BEE (black economic empowerment) shareholder in the mining sector. He also has significant agricultural holdings in the Western Cape.

It was Ramaphosa who, during the 2012 Marikana mine workers' strike, called for action against the wildcatters and their leaders. South African Police Services brass interpreted this as permission to use maximum force against the strikers, which rank-and-file policemen duly applied.

Probably with an eye towards the presidency of the ANC, Ramaphosa recently denied on CNN that the email in which he called for “concomitant action” against “criminal” strikers meant that police should shoot to kill. He claims he was “calling for the saving of lives”. Whatever he meant, Western Cape workers may be assured that this landowner and heir to European colonisers will again firmly turn his face away from them in the coming escalation of class conflict.

Thabo

12 January 2013

On “ Recent climate change research points to a growing global crisis ”

I have long been of the opinion that scientists have been too cautious in their predictions. What worries me is the emphasis on temperature rather than on amount of heat energy absorbed. The latter may be hard to assess but consider this:

Before any change in temperature is observed, a good deal of (latent) heat is absorbed by melting ice or evaporation of water. So, permafrost can be melting (releasing methane), water evaporating (vapour as well as methane being a greenhouse gas), and melting ice reducing the albedo effect. These are all potential tipping points that run ahead of measurable changes in average temperature.

I can understand scientists not wanting to make claims that cannot be related to measured effects, but I think there is a real problem here and a risk of the danger being understated.

Mike M
Sheffield, England
12 January 2013

On “ Tax cuts for business, pay cuts for workers ”

The author writes that: “In effect, all American workers are taking a 2 percent pay cut, except the most highly paid white-collar and skilled workers”.

This is not entirely true. As I learned (the “hard way”) while working at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, an institution with its own retirement plan can opt-out of Social Security (UAF did so in January, 1980). During the 21 months in which I worked at UAF (12/2009-9/2011), every one of my biweekly paychecks was debited for Medicare contributions, but never once for the taxpayer portion of Social Security (and UAF did not pay either the employer or taxpayer portions).

Some institutions permit their employees to opt-in to Social Security, but many (UAF, included) do not.

Sadly, most (if not all) institutions require a “vesting period” for the employer portion of their retirement plans. In my case, my retirement plan at UAF had a mandatory three-year vesting period for the employer portion. When the ARRA funding for my position—a.k.a. “Obama stimulus plan”—ran out, I lost my job. Because I had only been employed there for 21 months, UAF took back its contribution to my retirement plan (\$20K); however, UAF did not, then, pay the employer and/or employee portions of Social Security, leaving me with a 21-month “hole” in coverage.

Had UAF provided me with the option to continue my life-long contribution to Social Security, the amount I would receive at age 62 for early Social Security benefits would be over \$900/month, instead of the \$700/month I will receive.

Jonathan H
Florida, USA
5 January 2013



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