

# COSATU calls off farm workers strike in South Africa

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The Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) has once again called off a strike by farm workers without any of the demands of the workers being met.

The strike was ended last week pending a government announcement on a new minimum wage, which is certain to be far below the workers' demand for 150 rand (\$16.62) a day. The government has set a deadline of April 1 to decide on altering legislation governing minimum wages.

The African National Congress (ANC) government and its tripartite partner COSATU have worked tirelessly to demobilise striking farm workers in the Western Cape province, a highly lucrative source of profits for large farms and corporations. Revenues in South Africa's fruit and wine sector are now at \$1.3 billion a year.

Farm workers went on strike last year, demanding that their minimum daily wage be increased from R69 (US\$8.50) to R150, and that a comprehensive land reform programme be implemented. The strike action came after and was encouraged by the eruption of class struggle in the country's mining sector.

Most of the farm workers are not unionized. Concern by the government and the trade unions that the struggle could get out of hand led to the intervention of COSATU.

In November, COSATU ended the strike on the basis of farm-by-farm negotiations and an appeal to the government for an increase to the minimum wage. A deadline of January 9 was given for the resumption of the strike if demands were not met. It is this second strike that has now been called off by the unions.

The second strike, as with the first, was accompanied by police violence and intimidation. At least three farm workers were killed. More than 22 complaints of police

brutality during the strike have been lodged at the De Doorns police station. Members of the SA Human Rights Commission (SAHRC) accompanied families and individuals to the police station to lodge more complaints.

Agri Western Cape spokeswoman Porchia Adams said that workers had largely heeded the call to return to work, though some remain out or have not been rehired. Adams said all permanent workers and around 60 percent of seasonal workers were back to work. This excluded areas such as De Doorns, the epicentre of strike action, where most seasonal workers were not at work last week.

Meanwhile, the Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration (CCMA) started visiting farms in the Western Cape this week to try and mediate the ongoing labour unrest in the South African province. There are fears that the strikes could flare up again.

The union said in a statement that it has secured the undertaking from farmers that workers will not be victimised. However, many striking workers have still not been rehired, despite the union's assurances.

COSATU's Western Cape provincial secretary Tony Ehrenreich said: "We will only stop fighting if farm workers have better working conditions, have profit shares in farms, and better relationships with farmers."

This is so much bluster. The union's claim to be committed to improved wages is belied by an agreement in the town of Clanwilliam. Ehrenreich told reporters regarding the state of negotiations between the various groups, "We have the emergence of a good agreement with the farmers in Clanwilliam which we believe represents a model that will take us close to resolving the dispute sooner rather than later." The Clanwilliam farmers made an offer of only R105 a day.

The efforts by COSATU to subordinate farm workers to the ANC government follow its actions during the mine strikes last year, when the union collaborated in the killing of miners who entered into struggle in opposition to the National Union of Mineworkers, one of the principal unions in COSATU.

In addition to seeking to contain the farm workers struggle, COSATU is also seeking to advance its own interests by establishing closer relations with the farm owners. “We will change this sector forever and will see that decent conditions and partnerships are established, just like in any other sector of the economy—through negotiations,” the union federation said in a statement. The pledge to establish “decent conditions” should be seen in the light of its role in other sectors, where the unions help enforce poverty level wages.

There is also the hope that the ANC can leverage the strike to improve its position in the Western Cape, currently run by the Democratic Alliance (DA), which is no less hostile to the workers than the ANC itself.

Farm workers must be warned: Whatever their claims, the interests of COSATU, absolutely committed to its alliance with the capitalist ANC government, are thoroughly antagonistic to the interests of the workers themselves.

A successful struggle depends on the formation of independent organizations of the workers themselves, completely independent of COSATU, the ANC and the DA. Above all, what is necessary is a political struggle against these organizations and the capitalist profit system that they defend.



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