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South Africa:

David and Goliath : The story of farm workers and farm bosses in the Breede River Valley

- IV Online magazine - 2013 - IV462 - July 2013 -
Publication date: Monday 22 July 2013

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On Wednesday 6 March 2013 in Ashton, 180 km from Cape Town, people started gathering for a meeting early in the morning. Outside the library, one could observe the expensive bakkies and luxury sedans of the consultants and lawyers representing 42 farms that had been called to a meeting by the (Commission for Conflict Mediation and Arbitration (CCMA). The CCMA is a parastatal that has the power to mediate and solve conflict and problems between workers and their bosses.

In a corner under a tree stood a few farm workers' representatives, leaders from the Mawubuye Land Rights Movement, union officials from the Commercial Stevedoring Agricultural & Allied Workers Union (CSAAWU) and NGO representatives from the Coalition for Farm Worker's Solidarity. Most farm workers present had walked to the meeting; others had hiked lifts, and one or two arrived on the back of bakkies belonging to their bosses.

Each group was engrossed in conversation, preparing for the meeting. The divisions between the two groups were stark. The farmers, their lawyers and consultants were all white South Africans. The union representatives, farmworkers and the coalition representatives were all, barring one, black South Africans. It was a scene that told the story of the rural Western Cape. It told the story of how little South Africa had changed. It told the story of who owns land and who works on the farms to produce the wealth of the agricultural sector.

The farm worker uprising of the past five months held many lessons for CSAAWU, Mawubuye and those who are in solidarity with struggles of the farm workers and rural poor. The key lesson has been the ongoing refusal of the farmers to negotiate with the unions or the farm workers' committees. Throughout these five months, we heard the farmers' organisations, such as Agri-SA, say that they had no mandate to speak to the unions or negotiate on behalf of their members. Farmers refused to speak to workers' committees except to threaten workers. The farm workers' strike is a clear indication of how farmers have used the lack of bargaining councils in their favour, and how this lack undermines marginalised workers. Our recent experience with farmers from the Langeberg valley is testimony to this.

The meeting between farmers, farm workers and their representatives on the 6 March was the first of its kind. It was a direct outflow of the farmworkers' strike and the protests that started in De Doorns in November 2012. CSAAWU, a small, independent farmworkers' union operating in the Breede River Valley, the Overberg and Kannaland, had, during the strike, invited farmers to negotiate on the farmworkers' demands for a living wage and decent living and working conditions. On most farms where the union was present, the farmers refused to negotiate.

Despite a proposal put forward by Agri-SA that there should be 'farm-to-farm' negotiations, when Mawubuye activists went to deliver letters requesting meetings with the farmers, they had to be escorted to the farms by the police because it was often difficult to enter farms and speak to workers. Unions are consistently barred from entering farms on the grounds that they are private property; workers are consistently victimised and targeted when they join unions.

This was the background to the gathering on 6 March. From the outset, the meeting was tense and polarised. After the CCMA's introduction, the union outlined the challenges facing the organisation and the right to unionise farm workers. The union referred to the strike as an indication that conditions of abuse and exploitation in rural areas cannot continue and stated that the proposals for farm-to-farm negotiations had failed. These experiences were the reasons for the request that farmers consider agreeing to a framework that could facilitate collective bargaining around problems farmworkers experienced.

Farmers insisted that they only wanted to discuss labour relations, and had no interest in 'politics' and 'emotive

issues'. They refused to address the intimidation of workers or the denial of trade union access to farms, and were adamant that they had no interest in collective bargaining. Their main argument was that CSAAWU did not have enough representation on the farms in the region to bargain on behalf of workers. Many of the consultants and lawyers present indicated that CSAAWU had no mandate to change the present system for negotiating wages; one of the lawyers even said: 'The right to bargain is not automatic; all parties have to agree'. There was complete denial of the unequal power between farmers and workers, and of the abusive working conditions. One farmer from Robertson said, 'I met with the workers on my farm and explained that I could not afford to pay the R150,00 per day. I offered them R85,00 per day. They accepted this. Everyone on the farm is happy and satisfied.'

This meeting with farmers, their consultants and lawyers is indicative of the inequality in the agricultural sector. Farm and seasonal workers will remain marginalised and unable to access their rights and a living wage unless power relations on the farms are challenged and structurally changed.

Already farm workers are being denied the victory and the gains made in the recent farmworkers' strike: the Department of Labour as well as Business Day (8 March) report that over 10% of farmers (employing nearly 75,000 workers) have applied for an exemption from the new minimum wage of R105,00 per day. Farmers are also increasing rent and electricity for workers living on the farms and threatening evictions and retrenchments.

The new minimum wage of R105, 00 per day, the right to organise, the right to join a union, the freedom of association, and to a guaranteed minimum wage, were hard won rights in this country that must be defended by strong workers' organisations on the farms and in rural towns.

18 April 2013

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