IN THE WORKPLACE

Farmers’ knee-jerk reaction

Dangerous & short-sighted

Since last year farm workers have been on strike demanding a wage increase of R150 per day. Although an agreement was reached for a minimum wage of R105 per day, some farmers have threatened to retrench workers, writes Katishi Masemola.

The Food and Allied Workers Union (Fawu) is concerned that, as expected, some farm owners will see it fit to make a knee-jerk reaction to the new minimums by unduly retrenching workers or, even worse by some farmers, by engaging in vicious victimisation in various forms such as unfair dismissals, illegal evictions and illegitimate deportations of foreign migrant workers.

Fawu wants to remind farm owners that South Africans cannot approve such conduct by some of them. It is almost 20 years since freedom and democracy with land still in the hands of largely white people, and 100 years after the institutionalised (1913 Land Act) takeover of the already inadequate land from black people and the creation of black farm workers. It is also 360 years since the violent occupation of land by settlers from indigenous people.

In light of this history, Fawu still calls on farm owners to be sensitive and reasonable when it comes to the plight of farm workers, farm dwellers, the landless and dispossessed majority. It is unacceptable for farm owners to behave as if there was no democratic breakthrough in 1994. There is also a need for faster redress to the plight of farm workers in the next few years.

We still hope that those farm owners who are truly experiencing cash-flow challenges will take advantage of the call by the Minister of Labour to ask for a reprieve based on financial information provided. Equally, we wish to caution the minister to deal carefully with such information and preferably in a forensic way as some complicated ways are being used on the farm balance sheets, which may even influence or affect the cash-flow picture.

ENGAGING FARMERS

Meanwhile, Fawu will seek to engage those farm owners who are talking of retrenchment and hopefully reach an understanding with them. If no agreement is unduly reached or where there is no union on a farm where workers are being victimised, we will immediately coordinate local consumer boycotts and international retailer boycotts. Fawu reserves its rights to take on such actions.

However, despite this reaction by farmers Fawu welcomes the short-term victory of a 50% adjustment in minimum wage for farm workers, from R69.00 to R105.00.

Fawu is inspired by the courageous announcement by the Minister of Labour, Mildred Oliphant, and by the preceding recommendations by members of the Employment Conditions Commission (ECC) to adjust wages by more than 50%.

Fawu believes that this meets our short-term demand of a minimum wage increase for farm workers of not less than R105 per day.

This raise of over 50%, by the Department of Labour, is a meaningful step towards obtaining a living wage for farm workers. It is unprecedented to have a wage increase of over 50%, but it was the least that could have been expected in light of the unacceptably low minimum wage of R69 per day - enough to buy only four loaves of bread per day.

We will, however, fearlessly continue to push for higher wages in the sector, with the clarion call for a R150 per day minimum as our mandate. We will do so through any and all militant, but legal and responsible methods. Additionally, we will engage with all relevant stakeholders in our attempt to make living wages viable, including innovative methods such as possibly pushing for tax-breaks for farm owners, lower export/import duties, pushing for retailers, exporters, ‘middle men’ and traders to pay more to farm owners and possibly even government subsidies.

Our members, guided by their union, will also continue to
negotiate on a farm-by-farm basis and such negotiations should, hopefully, result in agreement on issues such as working conditions like hours of work and health or safety as well as on living conditions like shelter and services on electricity and water.

Where there are no farm-by-farm agreements, we will not rule out industrial actions targeted at those specific farms as well as calls for domestic consumer boycotts and international retailer boycotts of produce or products coming from such farms.

Our short-term focus will now be on ensuring that farm owners respect the law and pay workers no less than the new minimum wage. Our members will also be on the look-out for any unfair dismissals and illegitimate deportation of foreign nationals.

Katishi Masemola is the general secretary of Fawu.