

Decent work themes for Gauteng farm workers

I believe then there will be peace. Besides the R12,500 there will be no peace. Because even now, the example that I - have been injured by police - and I have been injured by police again [when I was arrested]. While they were arresting me; they were hitting and wanted to kill me. Without any reason. Secondly, all those who were arrested [270], their cases must be dropped. Then there will be peace. But then, as in now, we don't know what kind of peace they are talking about. As in now, people are still prisoners, even me. I am a prisoner.

Luke: Do you know about the recent findings at the commission (Marikana Commission of Inquiry) which suggest that the police were hiding and fabricating evidence?

Rasta: Ok yeah... I have heard it and I saw others on the Internet. I have even seen myself on the Internet that there are things that they were hiding during the time when they were going to kill us - while we were walking away from the police. They were going to shoot and kill us. Those are the things that they were hiding. They were hiding those things so that the information won't be known. They take that evidence and throw it in a bin. But now it is known and we don't know now that Farlam (Judge Ian Gordon Farlam head of the Commission of Inquiry), as himself, that he is an ANC... we don't know whether or not he will actually be able to see who is on the guilty side. The commission, they just stop it sometimes and then they continue again, we don't know what is happening. The commission should have been ended a long time ago. We can see that what they don't need or want is the truth. As it is now, they don't want to pay the lawyers of workers (This is has since changed after the lawyers representing workers won their case for the state to meet their expenses). They don't want the truth to be revealed. **LB**

In a study *'You entered through that gate and you will leave through that gate': The decent work deficit for Gauteng's farmworkers*, by **Edward Webster, Mbuso Nkosi, Debbie Budlender, Lelanie Williams and Mark Orkin**, which we published in the October/November 2013 issue, some of the highlights of the study were decent work themes. In this issue the writers explore the themes of employment opportunity, stability and security at work.

EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES

All farm workers were asked if they agreed or disagreed with a number of statements. More than half of all farm workers (58%) were of the view that it was difficult to find a job as a farm worker in Gauteng. Workers on horticulture farms were divided in terms of their view on this statement, as shown in Table 1. This division arises from the fact that farm work is based on seasons. If one comes during the season it might be easy to get a job as the following comments illustrate:

Makhwezi: 'They only hire from November till January of the following year. If you come this time you will get a job.'

Jeff: 'After a while, yes it is easy to get a job, but not too quickly. When the mealies start to dry out, they cut it and they'll hire people to pick up the mealies because machinery can't pick it up from the floor.'

Table 1: It is difficult to get a job as a farm worker in Gauteng

	Livestock	Field crops	Horticulture	Mixed farming	Total
Agree	60%	65%	49%	54%	58%
Unsure	4%	6%	5%	1%	5%
Disagree	37%	29%	46%	44%	37%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
N	230	176	113	81	600



Women at work: Nursing seedlings at a farm in Gauteng.

However, approximately half of all workers (52%) seemed to think that it was still easier to find a job as a farm worker than to get work in construction.

Table 2: It is easier to get a job as a farm worker than a job in construction

	Live-stock	Field crops	Horti-culture	Mixed farming	Total
Agree	50%	57%	51%	51%	52%
Unsure	17%	25%	20%	20%	20%
Disagree	32%	18%	29%	30%	27%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
N	230	176	112	81	599

Similarly, half of farm workers (56%) perceived access to farm work as easier than starting their own business. However, there were higher levels of scepticism amongst those who worked on mixed farms compared to other workers, as a smaller proportion (37%) agreed with the statement.

Table 3: It is easier to get a job as a farm worker than start your own business

	Live-stock	Field crops	Horti-culture	Mixed farming	Total
Agree	56%	65%	56%	37%	56%
Unsure	24%	17%	23%	21%	21%
Disagree	20%	18%	21%	42%	23%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
N	230	176	113	81	600

Farm workers were divided in terms of their perceptions of job security. However, it seemed that those who worked on mixed farms were more uncertain about job security as slightly more than a third (33%) agreed with the statement shown in Table 4.

Table 4: I fear I will lose this job in the next 12 months

	Live-stock	Field crops	Horti-culture	Mixed farming	Total
Agree	46%	48%	37%	33%	43%
Unsure	11%	8%	19%	26%	14%
Disagree	43%	44%	44%	41%	43%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
N	230	176	113	81	600

Farm workers were not optimistic about their chances of being promoted in the near future as approximately two in every three (66%) disagreed with the statement. Workers based on horticulture farms were even less optimistic as the proportion who disagreed (73%) was higher than for other types of workers.

STABILITY AND SECURITY AT WORK

Approximately one in every five farm workers (19%) had a written contract. However, this was the case for close to one-third (29%) of workers involved in horticulture, as shown in Table 5.

Table 5: Contract of employment

	Live-stock	Field crops	Horti-culture	Mixed farming	Total
Yes-written contract	14%	15%	29%	25%	19%
Yes-verbal contract	64%	63%	56%	65%	63%
No	21%	22%	15%	10%	19%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
	230	176	113	81	600

Farm workers who had contracts were asked to specify the nature of their contracts, i.e. continuous/permanent, fixed term/temporary or casual. Three in every four farm workers (75%) had permanent contracts, however the proportion was slightly smaller for those who worked field crops (65%) than for other types of farming.

Table 6: Type of contract – permanent or temporary?

	Livestock	Field Crops	Horti-culture	Mixed farming
Permanent/indefinite	76%	65%	78%	77%
Fixed term/temporary	23%	30%	20%	23%
Casual	0%	4%	2%	0%
Other	1%	0%	0%	0%

Most workers who were interviewed indicated that they were ‘permanent’ but their understanding of permanent is that they had a job on a continuing basis for an indefinite period, without a written contract. This lack of clarity on their job status made them feel insecure – not knowing whether they would have a job the next day or not. The unclear and precarious nature of their employment status is illustrated in the comments below:

Makhwezi: ‘This is how my boss operates (referring to verbal means of employment). He doesn’t want us knowing the finer details, he just employs us and that is it. This makes it easy for him to fire us.’

Nthabiseng: ‘No, I was just hired. I do not know my status [referring to the verbal contract], but I am full time... because the boss wants to be able to fire anytime he feels like it.’

Manthotho: ‘Er... what can I say? I don’t know what to say. We work from the 9th month of the year and carry onto the following year until June and then go on leave for three months.’

Mamtsekuoa: ‘Yes, after working for six months you become a permanent worker by law. But since we have had unions, when my boss hires people he makes them casual workers and makes them sign papers to renew their contracts every three months. So no matter how long a person has been working here, they will continue working as casual workers.’

Qenehelo: ‘Uh uh... He just hired me and I started working, that is all... I am a permanent worker, not a casual worker... There were no contracts involved; I do not even know what a contract looks like.’

Johannes: ‘I think I am permanent. I do not have a contract, but he just hires you so that you can work there forever and you get fired easily without any questions asked.’

Most workers understood they were employed on a continuous basis even in cases where they were seasonal workers or temporarily employed. They described the seasons where they did not work as a ‘four month’ leave.

Makhwezi: ‘Any day I can simply be told to go on leave depending on how the boss is feeling. Leave is usually given in May, June, July or in August and so this means that none of us really knows when exactly leave will be given. I usually go on leave in July.’

Malindi: ‘That four month break we go on is called leave. I don’t know of a leave for four months, I know of a three weeks leave. And in those four months I don’t get paid for four months because I’m doing nothing.’

Farm workers were asked if they have received a wage increase in the past 12 months. Only a third of workers (30%) had received an increase. The proportion was smallest for workers of field crops (23%).

Table 7: Wage increase received in past 12 months

	Live-stock	Field crops	Horti-culture	Mixed farming	Total
Yes	33%	23%	35%	28%	30%
No	45%	52%	42%	49%	47%
N/A	21%	26%	23%	22%	23%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
N	181	138	96	73	488

Farm workers were asked what, if any, procedure was followed if employers wanted to dismiss workers. Only one in every five workers (21%) said employers issued workers with a verbal or written warning. However, over a third of workers in horticulture (36%) noted this. Those who worked with field crops (71%) were more likely than other types of workers to say that there was no set procedure, as shown in Table 8.

Table 8: Procedure for dismissal

	Livestock	Field crops	Horticulture	Mixed farming	Total
Verbal or written warning and hearing	21%	11%	36%	21%	21%
No set procedure	56%	71%	44%	69%	60%
Don't know	23%	18%	21%	10%	19%
Other	0%	1%	0%	0%	0%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
N	230	176	112	81	599

Most interviewees confirmed that there was no set procedure, and if you had any quarrel with the employer you were shown the 'gate'. The comments below refer to the gate metaphor, which is an indication of the power the farmer has because the farm is his (private) property and workers fear raising any concerns because of the 'gate':

Moses: 'He tells you to leave through the same gate you came in so I just hang in there just so I can stay here. I hang in there... I have tried telling him about the working conditions, but the problem is the gate... The gate! You must just head straight for the gate. If you came in through it, leave through it that is what he will tell you.'

Jeff: 'No, we are afraid to tell him because you never know whether you'll get fired from work for bringing up issues. We just keep quiet. Even when he reprimands us, we just keep quiet and do not answer back.'

Mamtsekuoa: 'The problem is that our bosses mistreat us. They insult us for the pettiest of things like going to the toilet to relieve one self. It is as if they expect us to work non-stop without at least going to the bathroom or going to drink water or eating.'

Baveze: 'A lot of them would not confront the boss because of the fear of being fired. You'll talk to your

boss and he'll tell you to stay home. He'll ask whether you're here for work or for raincoats [referring to not being given a raincoat] and he'll send you home and show you the gate.'

Johannes: 'The boss would threaten to punish you if you raise problems and say "you know the gate you used... I will show you the gate now!'"

Nobuntu: 'It is hard; it is physically exhausting especially the constant bending over. If you are standing around or trying to stretch yourself the farmer swears at you and threatens to fire you.'

Xoli: 'The difficulties we are faced is that we usually do jobs that we aren't supposed to do, it's not always safe. Sometimes we get called to go dig holes and we have to go. Sometimes when you try to tell them that this isn't the type of job for you, they tell you that you are here to work, we didn't drag you here; you came on your own accord... you are told to leave through the gate you came in by.'

Tumelo: 'You work here and should you make even the slightest mistake you do not get a warning notice, you just get chased away with the stinging words "Fuck off, fuck off."'

Union organiser from Food and Allied Workers Union (Fawu): 'You have to understand that the farm

is another world. The farm owner sees himself as owning the people as his property. If he says jump, you cannot ask how high? You must just jump, otherwise you will be dismissed.'

Kedisalese: 'I have a problem with the bosses here. The problem is that we have to understand their rights and yet they do not understand our rights. If they see that you know and try to assert your rights as workers, they will tell you that there is nothing you can do if you are not satisfied you can leave through the gate!'

The metaphor of the gate also came up in our interview with one of the employers and in a conversation with another Fawu union organiser:

'We as the union encounter the problem of the gate. If it is closed the question is: how do we get access and the workers? This gate is a problem in the farms, but we need to find strategies to find workers outside the gate.'

Joe: 'The principal thing in this place is that you come here because you want to work. If you feel this is too much, I tell them that "the gate is open." ¹⁸

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