

# Low pay for Gauteng farm workers

Minimum wages for farm workers are lower than those recommended by the Department of Labour's sectoral determinations and in some instances workers are given food by employers to supplement their meagre earnings. Where they are not given food but have access, like from the fields, some workers take food home, write **Edward Webster, Mbuso Nkosi, Debbie Budlender, Lelanie Williams and Mark Orkin** in a study titled: 'You entered through that gate and you will leave through that gate: the decent work deficit for Gauteng's farm workers'.

**T**here is a sectoral determination which stipulates minimum wages for farm workers. According to the Department of Labour the official (starting from 1 March 2012) minimum wage for farm workers is R1,503.90 a month based on a 45 hours a week work rate. However, the minima specified for the period up to March were R7, 04 per hour, R317.51 per week and R1,375.94 per month. These minima are the relevant ones for the survey as the fieldwork survey was conducted in February and the first week of March 2012. It is therefore likely that workers would have reported earnings for February rather than March.

Workers were asked to state their take-home pay, excluding overtime. Almost half (299) of the workers reported earnings below the monthly minimum. The mean earnings were R1,602, excluding overtime. The median - the earnings of the person in the middle - was lower at R1,382, which suggests clustering at the smaller amounts in the income range, with a few larger amounts pulling up the mean. The mean for workers in mixed farming was less than for those involved in other types of farming, whereas the mean was highest for those in livestock farming. More than three in every four workers (78%) earned their income on a monthly basis.

## Take-home pay excluding overtime

	Mean	Median	Min	Max
All farm workers	1,602	1,382	200	21,667
Livestock	1,701	1,400	300	15,400
Field crops	1,586	1,300	200	21,667
Horticulture	1,569	1,370	217	5,900
Mixed farming	1,400	1,300	600	4,900

Employers are reluctant to negotiate wages, as these comments illustrate:

**Chauke:** The problem is that on the farm, the white people are not very generous in terms of money, you know how it works. Like here, what happened last time, the people were on strike... You can ask the guys sitting on the other side. When you ask for more money, you were just fired.

**Alfred:** Telling the boss that you aren't happy about the working condition(s)... Actually, telling him your problems... He won't listen. I'm the one who came here looking for a job. He'll tell you that if you're not looking to work then it is best you leave. I won't... I'm not going to lose my job just because of water. No! I work because my family needs to survive. My child has to eat, you see... So it is very difficult to tell the boss that you have such and such a problem.



*Processing vegetables at a Gauteng farm.*

We asked workers if the employer rewards them in kind as the sectoral determination provides for 10% of the wage in food. This provision has led to an ambiguous situation where some owners provide food for their employees while in other cases workers simply help themselves, as the following comments illustrate.

Makhwezi: In all honesty, we steal from them; they are not given to us. They have their own shop where they sell their products anyway.

Mbali: No, we steal from them if we get caught we have money deducted from our pay.

Xoli: Yho! He is very fussy about his things. Right now, in my bag, I stole one tomato, if he finds me with it then I would be fired.

Nthabiseng: We get them by stealing them. Other than that we get nothing.

Jeff: He gives us... 25kg maize meal on the 15th of every month.

Sophia: We take cabbages [laughter]. This money we get is little, we can never get the food we want and things are expensive.

Ncane: I pick my own spinach. While I harvest, I make sure I pick spinach to cook for myself. He doesn't seem to be bothered by the fact that I eat some of the spinach, his spinach. He doesn't shout. You'll never find him saying that it's his spinach. Even if he sees me walking from the fields with the spinach, he doesn't say

anything. He sees it in my tupperware when he's doing the rounds at work and you still won't find him saying that the spinach is his. Sometimes I take beetroot, just four. I go to the workers that deal with beetroot and I get at least four and he still doesn't shout, at least that I can eat. Even with cabbage, if I'm working near the workers harvesting the cabbage then I go there as well and get some cabbage and still he says nothing and I bring it back home to eat.

In addition, workers were asked to state their take-home pay including overtime. The mean amounted to R1,690 which was not very different from mean earnings excluding overtime. The median was lower at R1,400, which as previously explained suggests clustering at the smaller amounts in the income range, with a few larger amounts pulling up the mean. Similar to the previous finding, workers involved in mixed farming tended to earn less, including overtime, while those involved in livestock farming earned more than those engaged in other forms of farming.

More than three in every four workers (77%) reported the same wages including overtime as they had reported excluding overtime. This is partly explained by the fact that almost three quarters of workers did not usually work overtime. There are also over a quarter of farm workers who seem to be working excessive unpaid overtime.

The sectoral determination specifies that employers must pay their workers overtime at 1.5 times the normal wage or the worker may agree to receive paid time off. Any overtime which is done on a Sunday or a public holiday must be paid in accordance with the provisions for Sunday and public holidays. According to the Department of Labour, during the first six months of employment, an employee is only permitted to a day paid sick leave for every 26 days worked.

### Take-home pay including overtime

	Mean	Median	Min	Max
All farm workers	1,690	1,400	200	21,667
Livestock	1,804	1,500	300	15,400
Field crops	1,626	1,400	200	21,667
Horticulture	1,702	1,500	217	8,000
Mixed farming	1,491	1,395	300	6,400

Farm workers were asked to indicate if their earnings changed a lot, changed a little or stayed the same from week to week or month to month. Only 2% of workers said their earnings changed a lot, but double this proportion (4%) of workers in horticulture indicated this. More than three in every four workers (79%) noted that their earnings stayed the same.

We asked all farm workers to indicate when they last attended work-related training. The overwhelming majority (96%) said they had never attended work-related training. The proportion was slightly higher for livestock and field crop farm workers (both 98%) than for the other two types of farming.

### Most recent work-related training

	Live-stock	Field crops	Horti-culture	Mixed far-ming	Total
In last 12 months	0%	1%	4%	5%	2%
In last 5 years	1%	1%	3%	2%	2%
More than 5 years ago	0%	0%	0%	2%	1%
Never	98%	98%	93%	90%	96%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
N	230	176	113	81	600

For the 24 respondents who attended training, we asked who paid for the last training they had attended; 16 farm workers who went for training said their employer paid for the training and for four respondents training was paid for by the government. None of the workers reported more than one source of payment for the last training.

### Payment of last training attended

	Live-stock	Field crops	Horti-culture	Mixed far-ming	Total
Total sample	230	176	113	81	
Employer	3	2	7	4	16
Myself/my family	0	1	0	1	2
Government	2	0	0	2	4
Don't know	0	0	0	1	1
Total	5	3	7	8	23

The 24 respondents who attended training were asked to specify the duration of training in years, months, days or hours. One farm worker specified the duration of training in years, stating that the training lasted one year. A total of six farm workers specified the duration in months, with the duration ranging from one to six months; 16 farm workers specified the duration of training in terms of days, with responses ranging from one to 30 days. One respondent specified the duration in hours (4 hours).

We asked all farm workers who had ever attended training whether they acquired skills during the training that they could use in another industry. Out of the 24 workers who attended training, 17 farm workers said they acquired skills that could be useful in another industry.

### Skills acquired in training useful in another industry

	Live-stock	Field crops	Horti-culture	Mixed far-ming	Total
Yes	4	2	5	6	17
No	1	1	2	2	6
Don't know	0	0	1	0	1
Total	5	3	8	8	24

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