

# Farm worker uprising

## Transformation, organising, and action

Some of the lessons to be learnt from the De Doorns farm workers' strike is that new forms of organisation should be tried, and effective strategies that involved communities should be reinstated, writes **Jesse Wilderman**.

*'We outnumber the farmers 11 to one and they still board the economic power and still talk to us with disrespect. We could kill all the farmers in a weekend if we wanted to and this land will be messed up. It could happen in one day. But until this strike we were never able to get all the farm workers and all of us to come out and fight back'* – Local councillor and supporter of the farm worker protests

In late 2012 into early 2013, tens of thousands of farm workers and their allies across more than 25 towns around the Western Cape of South Africa engaged in a historic series of explosive and unexpected work stoppages and protests. While the main issue associated with the uprising was a demand for an increase in the minimum wage, myriad grievances have plagued farm workers and their communities for years. Yet there had not in living memory been a protest that reached this scale and intensity; the perceived power of the farm owners coupled with a lack of large, formal organisation or trade unions among farm workers seemed to have stacked the deck against overt, collective resistance.

Not only was the scale and intensity of this uprising historic, it displayed a form of resistance outside the 'paternalistic' discourse that had come to characterise relationships between farm workers and farm owners; as Ewert and Du Toit explain about traditional farm worker resistance, '... they

rely on the "weapons of the weak", operating within the framework of the paternalistic moral universe itself, relying on individual appeals, consensual negotiations, and the avoidance of the appearance of open conflict.'

This uprising in the Western Cape was, in contrast, defined by open conflict, including burning of vineyards, protest marches, and pitched battles with the police; farm workers and their allies adopted an overt, confrontational, and adversarial approach in an apparent break from the traditional discourse.

If this were not puzzle enough, employment regimes on Western Cape farms, mirroring trends across the globe, were shifting to become more 'flexible', with an increase in outsourcing and temporary labour; farm owners, seeking to cut costs and avoid worker protections, were driving a transformation of the farm workforce away from permanent, on-farm labour to a more seasonal, off-farm and migrant labour force. Popular thinking might suggest that these shifts create a more

vulnerable and transitory workforce, making organising collective resistance even more difficult. Yet it was these 'vulnerable' seasonal workers who were at the heart of initiating and mobilising the protests.

Given these trends and history, along with trade unions' mostly failed attempts at organising farm workers on a large scale in South Africa, we are forced to ask what made this moment of mass collective action and uprising possible?

### CHANGING WORKFORCE

Over the last 20 years, the agricultural sector in South Africa has reacted to increased costs and regulatory pressures driven by a loss of trade protections and subsidies, a more powerful and consolidated set of buyers with greater demands for higher quality and lower cost, and increased government protections for farm workers and farm-dwellers by transforming their workforces so that seasonal labourers often outnumber or



De Doorns farmworkers protest. Credit: Esa Alexander, Sunday Times.

equal permanent workers. Greater numbers of farm workers are living off farms, particularly in growing informal settlement communities on the hillsides of farming towns and permanent migrants make up a larger and larger part of the workforce. In the town of De Doorns at the epicentre of the uprising, estimates suggest that 80% of the farm workers are seasonal labour, and over 10,000 people – and growing all the time – live in the informal settlement community.

While in some ways creating greater income insecurity and amplifying worker vulnerability, this transformation of the workforce and spatial living arrangements is also breaking down some of the key mechanisms of social control and impediments to collective resistance, namely paternalism and isolation. In the past, the traditional paternalistic power relationship so dominant among permanent, on-farm labour in the Western Cape farms, dictated that land owners were both providers for the farm ‘family’, including farm workers, and the final authority over all those who lived on their land. According to Ewert and De Toit not only did this social formation create dependence on the farm owner for housing, transport, water, and other

basic necessities, but the relationship of hierarchy and domination was woven into the social construction of the farm owner and farm worker identities. This social construction, along with the isolation and lack of information that often comes along with living on a farm far from other large groups of farm workers or the broader community, limited the possibilities of farm worker collaboration and resistance.

Unlike the traditional permanent worker who lives on the farm, seasonal workers, particularly those who live off the farms in settlement communities, are not considered – by themselves or the farm owner – to be part of the farm ‘family’; their relationship with the farm owner is much more transactional and temporary, with a life experience that extends well beyond the farm. (There is often also a racial distinction in this divide, with seasonal workers being predominantly black African while permanent on-farm labour is dominated by ‘coloured’ workers.) As one farm worker explains: ‘Many of these seasonal workers have come from other places, had other jobs, speak other languages so they know their rights and are less likely to worry about what the farmer thinks of them.’

In addition, the transient nature of seasonal work, along with the concentration of large numbers of workers in settlement communities, has been breaking down the barriers to collaboration and sharing of grievances, while at the same time strengthening and broadening informal networks and relationships. This explains why the hub of activity and organisation for the protests tended to be the settlement communities, where workers and the broader community could be mobilised around a shared set of frustrations related to poverty and unfairness. As explained by workers in one settlement community, the initial organisation of the strike and mobilisation – from twice daily meetings on the local rugby field, to nightly house-by-house communication, to the use of whistles to bring people out of their houses in the morning – were critically facilitated by the concentration of farm workers in one area.

This living arrangement also made organising possible without the need for significant resources; while organisers from trade unions consistently raised concerns about their ability to reach large numbers of workers with few resources, a key strike committee member

from one settlement explained that, ‘thousands of people were mobilised by just a few of us without speakers, money, car – we had nothing... just using our voices and going around telling people’.

Thus, the transformation of the workforce to a more seasonal, off-farm and migrant labour is creating new spatial arrangements in farming communities while severing some of the key bindings of the paternalistic social construction; contrary to most of the popular discourse that global trends towards a more ‘flexible’ workforce make it more difficult to organise collective resistance because workers are more vulnerable and transitory. In this case, the transformation of the workforce – which in many ways has intensified the grievances and precarity driven by poverty, unemployment and inequality – actually made organising and resistance more possible.

A farm owner summarised the opportunity for resistance created by this transformation, in a pejorative way, by saying that ‘seasonality caused this “disaster” – all those new people sitting up there in those settlements – which just keep getting bigger and bigger – with nothing to do for much of the year’. For him the expansion of ‘seasonality’ and ‘settlements’ and ‘new people’ was a visible demonstration of the breakdown of the old order – the re-negotiation of the relationship between farm workers and farm owners, the shifting spatial arrangement of rural communities, and the changing make-up of the workforce.

### GETTING TO SCALE

These changes then created more space for overt resistance. But farm workers and the rural poor lacked effective institutional or organisational vehicles for channelling grievances into an orderly resolution process, meaning that mobilisation relied, at least initially, on an alternative set of stories, structures, and strategies

less mediated by traditional vehicles of large trade unions and formal, membership-based organisation. As Campbell explains, ‘... contemporary transformations in capitalist production shape and make possible certain forms of struggle’.

In the case of this uprising, farm workers and the rural poor of these communities turned to motivation through unmediated stories of struggle, mobilising structures of small ‘coordinating units’ and informal networks, and a combination of easily replicable tactics drawing on structural (work stoppages which affect production) and disruptive (public protests and conflict that interrupted the normal functioning of the larger community) sources of power.

The combination of these organising and mobilising approaches allowed the protest to exceed, in the speed and scale of growth – involving thousands of workers in over 25 towns across the Western Cape – the planning or resources of any of its leaders. The scale and rapid spread of the protests – the widely held belief as said by the head of the Congress of South African Trade Unions in the Western Cape in an interview in *New Agenda* 2013 that ‘It [the strike and protests] just exploded, and then spread like wildfire’ – amplified, at least in the short term, the impact of the protests.

### UNMEDIATED STORIES OF STRUGGLE

The television images of the first large-scale protests that erupted in De Doorns had a galvanising effect on farm workers around the region; scenes of conflict with police, coupled with a clear demand for a more than doubling of the minimum wage, awakened an urgency and consciousness that called people to action. A key element of these images was that they featured farm workers themselves – unmediated and unfiltered by professional activists – defining the conflict, risk and demand.

As one farm worker explained, ‘One day we are working on the farms and we see the De Doorns strike on the television and it is coming from farm workers themselves. We are doing nothing but we are sitting there in our houses and every night we see [on the television] the police shooting at them because they are talking about R150 living wage; no one will take them seriously if it is only just them in De Doorns... if they are going to win, it will benefit all of us. After that, we decide we are going to join De Doorns.’

Or as another worker simply put it, ‘we saw De Doorns on TV and they were farm workers like us and not afraid so we decided we would not be afraid’. The lack of formal organisational engagement and professional spokespeople, particularly at the beginning of the uprising, increased the moral power of the protest and framed it with a more genuine and legitimate character. With headlines like ‘Leaderless farm strike is “organic”’ (*Mail and Guardian*, 16 Nov, 2012), the protestors suggested an action by moral urgency rather than planning and coordination.

### COORDINATING UNITS

Much of the inspiration from the De Doorns protests spread into collective action in farming communities across the Western Cape through locally-based organisations or vanguard groups – cadres – of pre-existing community-based activists – what might be described as ‘coordinating units’. These were primarily smaller trade unions, non-governmental organisations and community-based organisations. These coordinating units used their know-how and networks to shape the energy and motivation of the workers and communities into concrete action, seizing the moment to mobilise well beyond the scale of their membership, resources, or previous efforts.

These 'coordinating units' had several characteristics in common in that they:

- 1) were able to recognise the opportunity that the uprising presented for much broader mobilisation beyond the incremental organisation building they had done in the past;
- 2) were nimble enough to re-focus and take action quickly;
- 3) had local, volunteer capacity to do outreach and mobilisation as well as local, informal networks;
- 4) had some experience with protest and organising;
- 5) had a 'social base' which went beyond the workplace and farm workers; and
- 6) were linked with other activist and social movement organisations around the Western Cape.

As an organiser from one of these coordinating units explains: 'The first day of the strike very few people came out but we got together and said we must spread the pamphlet and pick a day to come out and support De Doorns. We worked through the night and go from farm to farm... it was popular organisations that made the strike possible here and provided coordination. Farm workers really relied on these groups... We worked long hours to assist farm workers and did all kinds of assistance with everything, even water and food on the picket line.'

These coordinating units were aided by informal networks - networks developed within the growing informal settlements and also by the transitory nature of a more temporary workforce. As one farm worker activist explains: 'Farm workers are not organised but truth is that they are organised. Whenever there is a small thing, things spread because they moved around to other farms and two months and then another farm. They are moving around between farms so people know each other.'

Along with informal networks, widespread accessibility of mobile phones also played a critical role in facilitating the spread of the protests, continuing to break down the traditional isolation faced by farm workers and allowing people to communicate and coordinate more rapidly across large distances.

### STRATEGIES AND TACTICS

Finally, the spread of the protest was facilitated by a set of tactics and strategies that were easily recognised and replicated plus allowed for broad participation beyond workers themselves. Many of these tactics were also familiar to participants from previous protests around service delivery issues in the settlement communities. The strategies of the protestors focused on both work stoppages meant to affect production on the farms and public protests and conflict meant to interrupt the normal functioning of the larger community.

Blocking roads, burning tyres, marches, refusing to work, stopping others from working - were all tactics that could easily be picked up by others who wanted to join the protest. At the same time, these tactics could be adapted to local situations and facilitate broad participation beyond farm workers. Anyone in the community - youth, the unemployed, community members - could join a march, burn a tyre, or help block a road, said Commercial Stevedoring Agricultural and Allied Workers Union (CSAWU) activist members. Moreover, the tactics did not require a lot of advance planning or external resources beyond what was easily accessible to most farm workers and the rural poor - most notably their bodies. Other materials like petrol, tyres, stones, and hand-written placards were also relatively easy for farm workers to acquire and did not require coordination with outside support or organisations.

It is worth noting that the broad participation of non-farm workers in the protest was both critical to its success and raises questions about whether this uprising was primarily a workplace-focused strike driven by unfair working conditions, or a community rebellion driven by outrage at political marginalisation and lack of decent living conditions. The answer may be that it was both. As farm employment becomes more seasonal and workers live off-farm, there is a blurring of the distinction and identity between farm worker and unemployed or farm worker and settlement dweller. As the employment and living arrangements shift, both groups are highly impacted by both inadequate government services and poverty level wages paid on the farms.

In either case, the heavy reliance on disruptive power turned out to be effective at getting government to act. The result of the protest was a government-mandated increase in the minimum wage by over 50%. Yet there might have been a 'power mismatch' in the protests: many of the underlying power relationships are still defined between farm owner and farm worker day-to-day on farms, but the disruptive power of the protest and the aggregation of the resources of the protestors were in the 'streets'. In the aftermath of the strike, many worker interviewees indicated that the relationship with the farm owner has not changed or become more equal as confirmed by interviews that included members of the Food Allied and Workers Union (FAWU).

In other words, farm workers, through this specific form of collective action, were able to challenge their conditions of poverty but less able to confront the faces of power that dominate daily work life; the resistance and outrage were still 'outside the gate' and not 'on the farm'.



Building a stone barricade in De Doorns. Credit: Halden Krog/Sunday Times.

### POSSIBLE LESSONS

The story of this Western Cape farm worker and community uprising shows that the drive by various forms of capital around the world to create a more 'flexible' workforce can also provide new opportunities for organising and collective action. This collective resistance may take its own form and character, relying on stories, structures, and strategies that are less familiar and perhaps less easily translated into traditional mass membership-based social movement organisations.

Despite the intensity, energy and scale of the 2012/2013 protests, the evidence thus far is that they have not successfully led to greater levels of ongoing organisation among Western Cape farm workers – not least because of the success of a farm owner backlash. Reflecting on the conditions that made the uprising possible, however, we might discern some lessons about how approaches to organising and mobilisation of farm workers and rural communities could lead to further strategic action, power and lasting change. Key organising approaches might include:

- Taking a community-based organising approach rather than simply an employer-based, farm-by-farm approach.
- Building organisation that speaks specifically to the new workforce, particularly seasonal and migrant workers.
- Organising and organisations that speak to a broad set of issues and build a social base beyond farm workers.
- Influencing organisations that engage in ongoing work in these communities, and building leadership outside moments of game-changing action.
- An orientation towards collective problems and collective action rather than individual problems and legalistic action.
- A strategic analysis, understanding, and approach to the changing agricultural sector.

Maybe most importantly, it is critical for established organisations to create the space for 'organisational experimentation' and more 'learning by doing' in

terms of resistance among farm workers and the rural poor – and when moments of madness erupt, to amplify and support the moment in such a way as to build the leadership, networks, and organisation for further action. These moments can create opportunities to challenge not only material conditions on the farms but the underlying power relationships holding back broader transformation; as one farm worker explains while reflecting on the uprising, 'I will never forget the way people stood together – it was amazing – and we could see the power of togetherness, and I will never forget that we could see that the farmer – for once – was really afraid of us'.<sup>16</sup>

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