

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.

Katisbi Masemola is the general secretary of Fawu.

The Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu) fully agrees with the Food and Allied Workers Union (Fawu) that these farmers have made 'a knee-jerk reaction' to the new minimums by 'engaging in a vicious backlash of victimisation... unfair dismissals, illegal evictions and illegitimate deportations.'

For decades farm workers and dwellers have been treated little better than slaves - paid poverty wages for working long and unsocial hours, forced to live in squalid houses, with no security of tenure. If they lost their job, they would often lose the house as well, and families could find themselves on the streets. In the worst cases, workers have been assaulted or even murdered.

The federation accepts that many other farmers have moved on, they abide by the labour laws, and some are already paying more than the minimum wage. We are always willing to sit down and talk to such employers and negotiate better wages and conditions.

Cosatu is however concerned at the comment attributed to Deputy Agriculture Minister, Pieter Mulder, that a blanket wage increase for farm workers would not be financially viable, as not all farm owners would be able to afford the new minimum wage. 'I think it's a mistake,' he is quoted as saying, 'to determine it for the whole sector. Some farmers in De Doorns can certainly pay it,

but some of the poorer farmers in Limpopo and even upcoming commercial black farmers can't afford to pay it.'

Mulder must also be aware that farmers can apply for exemption from the minimum wage. They do not have to go for retrenchments and evictions. But these have to be the exceptions to the rule. Others must comply with the minimum wage announced by the deputy minister's government.

DISMISSALS AND EVICTIONS

Cosatu condemns the action of bad farmers who are now threatening to dismiss workers en masse. This is nothing more than a political action by the farmers, who are unhappy about the fact that their days of Baasskap are over. They also feel they are less able to control every aspect of the farm workers' lives, when the farm workers earn a decent wage.

This dismissal threat is nothing more than an effort to spite workers and the government, and to try and turn an important step towards undoing the apartheid legacy around. This is a declaration of war against justice and fairness on farms; this is an act of hostility against the workers and the government.

Should farmers have legitimate problems of paying the new wages then they should apply for an exemption, as the law prescribes and the minister advised. None of the farmers who are now threatening dismissals

have applied for an exemption. So this confirms that it is just an attempt to undermine the move to decent wages.

Agri SA had through the Business constituency made an offer of R94 a day for labour at the Employment Conditions Commission, so clearly they had the ability to pay more. These steps on the part of bad farmers are just an attempt to try and secure the apartheid generational advantage, which is going to be undone, with greater fairness.

Cosatu calls on workers to oppose these dismissals and continue production on the farms, and to call on government to pay out these bad farmers who are promoting dismissals, when government takes their land. This land must then be distributed amongst good farmers and good workers to build a new partnership for agriculture.

There are clearly a number of bad farmers, advised by Agri SA who want to continue the historical hostility, between farmers and farm workers. We caution them and advise that an *Injury to one is an injury to all*, and we will as Cosatu use everything at our disposal to defend workers. This year the issue of land reform must be addressed and the farmers would do better to cooperate with change, than to try and continue with their apartheid-style attitude against workers. **LB**