

New ideas, new directions?

Food and Allied Workers Union

The **Labour Bulletin** is asking trade unions to share any new and interesting approaches that they have used in the organising, bargaining or political arenas in recent times. **Eric Watkinson** writes the Food and Allied Workers Union's contribution.

Under much harsher conditions than today, the hero founders of the Food and Allied Workers Union (Fawu) adopted a selfless culture of organising farm workers. Recruitment was done on foot and security branch police were never far behind.

This article reviews some of the trials that Fawu has gone through in its quest to organise natural resource workers (fishing, forestry and formal agriculture) in the last three years.

SECTORS AND CHALLENGES

The problem of organising in the natural resource sectors, unlike mining, is the combination of inaccessible work and living places, low incomes, gender divisions, temporary work, labour broking, climatic and price volatility and the real and/or perceived threat by workers of employers retaliating if they organise.

The organising problem is not however uniform across the country. Exporters who access top prices for their produce or farmer/processors who add value to basic products can often afford to pay considerably more than the

minimum wage in agriculture of R1 090 pm and in forestry of about R998 pm. Simultaneously, some producers of unprocessed produce for the domestic market will argue that any increase in the minimum wage will mean retrenchments.

The supply of cheap labour also varies from place to place. Cheap labour areas are concentrated firstly near to international inland boundaries like Zimbabwe, Mozambique and Swaziland. Then cheap labour is found next to communal areas and also in areas that have arrangements with traditional authorities to transport workers from communal areas to commercial farms for the harvesting season (such as the North West communal areas which supply cheap labour to Upington, Orange River irrigation farms).

Fawu's general secretary characterises employers as belonging to three groups. Those who respect labour law are few and far between. Then those who comply with labour law but erode its intent through loopholes and lastly, the worst group, who actively defy the minimum wage and related legislation.

An excess of cheap labour means

that employers hold much power over conditions of work, but this can be moderated by improved access to education, social security grants, public works programmes, the creation of employment in other sectors, and employment growth in neighbouring nations.

STRATEGY AND TACTICS

Until recently, Fawu interacted with this complex rural environment avoiding risks and organising farm and forestry workers at larger and more progressive estates and/or scatterings of smaller employers, where the risks of employer retaliation were lower.

With the support of several organisations (such as Naledi) and people, Fawu has now been through a process of organisational review. This affirmed the cross-subsidy that Fawu applies from the subscriptions of food and beverage processing members in urban areas (±R70 per month x 99 000 members) to farm worker members (±R15 per month x 15 000 members).

The review also supported the strategy of employing dedicated farm worker organisers at rural offices. Several of Fawu's most

effective organisers were farm workers themselves.

The organisational review also assisted Fawu to emphasise branch demarcation, recruitment planning information, human resource development and performance monitoring as activities to implement through a project with the Danish Trade Union Federation, 3E

Here, the medium-term aim is to ensure that organisers and members are competent in union organisation, occupational health and safety, sector strategy and aspects of broad based black economic empowerment. Following training, Fawu has also graduated administration staff into becoming organisers which has led to some improvement in the balance of female and male organisers and members.

Reflecting on our failures, unionisation of farm workers along sub-sector lines has been limited and progress with a sector strategy, skills development, collective bargaining and black economic empowerment has been almost non-existent.

In order to succeed in farm and forestry organising in the long term, Fawu has to build skills development and collective bargaining from the occupational and sector strengths of its membership at branch level (there are about 1 293 occupations that relate to the farm, forestry, fishing, food, beverage and tobacco processing industries). This, in-turn, creates the need for a membership data system and accurate information and research on sectoral prospects.

STATE INTERVENTION

Because of the large number of people involved as workers and

dwellers in farming and forestry (the 2001 census found 881 935 households on farms, i.e. 2.93 million people), and the backlog in infrastructure and services that they experience, Fawu has emphasised state intervention to address their plight. We propose this state intervention:

- *Pro Poor Rural Investment*
Health Care and Social Services
Education and Training
Public Transport
Shelter, Water, Sanitation and
Integrated Agrivillages
Communications
Land Rights Acquisition
Sustainable Rural Livelihoods
and Decent Work
- *Transformation*
AgriBEE, ForestryBEE and Social
Responsibility
Research and Development for
AgroEcological Zones
- *Policy and Law*
Implementation and Reform
Labour Laws, Rural Workplaces
and Access to Union Organisers
Legal Representation, Mediation
for Farm Dwellers and Evictions
Monitoring
- *Special Intervention*
Specialised Courts and Justice
System

Possibly because of policy vacuums on land and agrarian reform and rural development there has been little take-up of these proposals through adjustments to the design of departmental programmes or budgets.

However, the Department of Education is a notable exception. Because of its no-fee school programme that started in 2008, the children of workers at farm schools have benefited along with other children in low-income areas.

CONCLUSION

Any long-term strategy to organise

farm, fishing, forestry, food and beverage workers and improve their living and working conditions has to take place within a supportive environment. This means one that is not characterised by wild swings in sector production and prices and one that has new and equitable sector opportunities.

A supportive environment would consist of an employer and government willingness to negotiate a sector strategy that delivers benefits to those who work the land and those who process the produce of the land, whilst growth is taking place. As a union, we do not have such a signal from government or agri-business.

Business has yet to accept that a structured sector strategy process at Nedlac will contribute more to its long-term sustainability than lobbying at the Presidential Working Group on Commercial Agriculture and a reliance on existing market and semi-market institutions where it dominates proceedings.

Under existing market institutions and with favourable weather and pricing from 2007 to 2008, industries boosted the exports of unprocessed fruit and vegetable products. But at the same time it ignored the domestic production of natural colourants, binders and healthy carrier oils and fats. The processed food industry performance has been poor, to say the least.

In summary, if the agricultural sector is seeking support, their lobbying effort should begin with communication on the living and working conditions of worker households who work their land. ■

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