

# Organising migrant farm workers

## Fertile ground

The world of paternalistic relations between farmer and farm worker in South Africa's Limpopo province is coming to an end. **Lincoln Addison** visited some farms and discovered that highly exploited Zimbabwean migrant workers now have the opportunity to flex their organisational muscles.

**S**outh African workers are among the most unionised in the world, but efforts to organise farm workers have generally failed. Out of roughly 300 000 farm workers, only 5% are unionised, and these tend to be permanent, full-time workers with South African citizenship.

The lack of seasonal and migrant workers among the ranks of the unionised suggests that labour casualisation is a major obstacle to union recruitment. Indeed, seasonal and migrant workers are very difficult to organise. Their temporary and sometimes undocumented status often blocks their participation in union activity, and their willingness to accept very low wages can undermine collective action.

However, casualisation may also create openings for organising because it produces a work force less involved in paternalistic relations. Paternalism in South Africa meant that the farmer provided for certain of his workers' needs in return for an almost slave-like loyalty accompanied by low wages. Openings for unionisation now exist in northern Limpopo province where Zimbabwean labour predominates. Various factors,

including regularisation of migrant worker status and the decline of paternalism, create an historic opportunity for unions to organise these Zimbabwean workers.

### PATERNALISM BREAKS DOWN

Historically, paternalism has been the dominant mode on commercial farms in South Africa. Paternalism constructed the farm as a quasi-family in which benevolence and coercion existed in tension.

Farm workers could expect certain entitlements, such as food and housing, yet they remained at the mercy of the farmer, who presided over them as a father figure. As Andries du Toit argues, the central theme for farm workers under paternalism is "belonging" to the farm and being accepted within the farm hierarchy and remaining in good favour with the employer.

As the dominant form of managing rural labour relations, paternalism provided a stabilising force under the often brutal working conditions of farm labour during apartheid. Furthermore, in the northern Limpopo valley, labour was scarce so paternalism helped farmers retain their workers by providing minor incentives for them to remain on farms. Yet in recent

times paternalistic relations have unravelled as farmers responded to economic restructuring and attempts by state agencies, unions and NGOs to intervene and regulate farm life.

Farmers' responses have varied across the country according to local conditions. In northern Limpopo farmers have adapted to deregulation and post-apartheid reforms by shedding local South African labour and employing low-waged Zimbabwean migrants.

There are about 20 000 Zimbabwean workers on farms in this area, and most have come as a result of the deteriorating Zimbabwean economy. While some of the migrants have worked on Limpopo farms for decades, such as chiVenda speakers on farms next to the border, most farm workers have worked there for not more than ten years.

As farmers turned to Zimbabwean labour, old paternalistic bonds with previous South African workers broke down. Since Zimbabwean labour is abundant, farmers have little incentive to provide paternalistic welfare as they once did.

For example, instead of providing food and housing free of charge,



*Tea and citrus workers in Limpopo Province*

William Matlala

employers now deduct these services from workers' pay. As a result, farms become more profitable, but labour relations have become more authoritarian and impersonal and empty of mutual obligations.

Of course, paternalism has not entirely disappeared. Employers cultivate paternalistic relations with foremen and other high ranking workers whom they rely upon to supervise the majority. Yet, most workers fall outside of paternalistic privilege and have great difficulty appealing to their employer for welfare.

The overall effect is the intensified exploitation of Zimbabwean labour. Also any sense of the farm as a 'family' disappears. Most Zimbabweans feel little sense of belonging or long-term connection to the farm. Their only desire is to earn wages. They expect to return to Zimbabwe once the economy improves, or they use the farm as a 'stop-over' before proceeding to Johannesburg and other southern locations.

Unions may have more success organising workers such as these who are not enmeshed in the family-like structure of paternalistic rule. In addition, growing

regularisation paves the way for unionisation.

#### **TAKING ACTION**

Zimbabweans are vulnerable to abuse from employers because, until recently, they were often undocumented. Without legal status in South Africa, they have great difficulty accessing services or organisations that can protect them. However, there is growing evidence that Zimbabwean migration is becoming more regularised.

Among farmers, there is more widespread compliance with work permit regulations set in place by government. This growing use of work permits is a significant success for government especially since white farmers often resisted government attempts to regulate their labour force. However, Zimbabwean workers are yet to benefit fully. Even when they are documented and entitled to legal protections, they are often paid below minimum wages and work under intolerable conditions. Nevertheless, the fact that most are legal enables them to participate in unions.

Zimbabwean farm workers may appear powerless, but this is far from the case. Spontaneous,

unorganised acts of resistance occur throughout these farms. Sometimes this goes further and takes the form of full-out strikes.

The strike at Maswiri Boerdery by over 400 Zimbabwean fruit pickers in 2005 was one of these notable actions. Maswiri is notorious in the area because of its bad working conditions. Although it is an extreme example, it demonstrates the trend of fading paternalism and how migrant workers will resist when faced with an intolerable situation.

Maswiri owns several farms in Limpopo, and this strike erupted at Hayoma in the Tshipise area. It is a large citrus and vegetable farm that employs over 1 000 workers during picking season. Most are Zimbabwean, although some come from neighbouring Venda communities. Zimbabwean migrants were employed in 1998 after about 400 South African workers, mostly Venda labour tenants, were dismissed after illegal strike action.

The June strike centred on the form of payment for citrus-pickers. Before 2005, pickers were paid according to a 'punch card system' whereby each picker carried an individual card that was hole-punched by foremen for each bag

of oranges dumped in the trailer. The piece rate for each bag was 28 cents. Pickers submitted their card at the end of the day and received payment once a month for the number of bags accounted for on the cards.

In May 2005, the punch-card system was replaced by a technologically-intensive 'computer-tag system.' This required pickers to carry a small electronic tag and, after dumping a bag of oranges in the trailer, to press the tag against a scanner attached to the trailer, which recorded the picker's bag count. This change was imposed suddenly, without any consultation with workers. After receiving their first pay under the new system, many of the pickers said they were "cheated" by the computer as they earned less than in previous years. A key issue was transparency.

One worker observed, "The punch-card system (before the computer) allowed us to see what we had done, to check our counts with what the boss paid us." Other pickers said the computer technology was faulty; sometimes the scanner and tag did not function properly and dumped bags went unrecorded. For many pickers, the faulty technology meant they received less pay. The previous system allowed pickers to monitor their own counts and compare them with management's. When the computer-tag system was imposed, oversight was denied and amounted to a moral affront.

These strong feelings of being cheated combined with low pay erupted into a strike on 23 June. Hundreds of pickers went to the field but refused the directives of their foremen and demanded a meeting with the manager regarding their payment.

Initially, the manager refused to meet the workers, but eventually he arrived in the field. However, instead of listening to their concerns, he

ordered them to form two lines: one for those who would go to work, and another for those who would not. The pickers refused these divisive tactics and marched towards the compound in a demonstration which began a week-long strike.

An NGO worker from Nkuzi Development Association that supports farm workers, happened to pass the workers while they were marching. Nkuzi became involved and helped to negotiate on behalf of the strikers.

After more than ten days of tense negotiations between management and workers an agreement was reached. The strikers received their final pay and were dismissed. Many sought work elsewhere in South Africa, some were reemployed at Maswiri while others were black-listed.

Conditions improved slightly as the piece-work system was replaced by part-time hourly wages as stipulated by the sectoral determination for farm workers. Under the new arrangement, pickers were guaranteed at least R430 per month if they maintained a 13 bag per-hour 'standard of production' to qualify for the hourly wage. The new hourly wage system thus retained aspects of the piece-work regime.

Overall, the strike exemplifies the forms of resistance that can emerge in situations where paternalism is absent. It also demonstrates that Zimbabweans are not just docile labourers too desperate to resist.

### ORGANISING POSSIBILITIES

Nevertheless, such examples of large-scale collective action are rare. More often resistance takes the form of individual 'weapons of the weak' such as foot dragging and desertion. The desperation of Zimbabweans is a huge obstacle to more organised forms of resistance.

It will not be an easy task to

organise Zimbabwean workers, even with the decline of paternalism. There are signs however that the Food and Allied Workers Union (Fawu), which is South Africa's largest farm union, in calling for a national dialogue on farm workers' problems is becoming more interested in the plight of seasonal and migrant workers. However, unions still need to take concrete steps to organise these marginal workers.

In the first place, Zimbabweans must be convinced that interacting with, let alone joining, a union will not have negative consequences. This is a tall order since employers tend to fire or retrench workers that join unions, even though this is illegal. When recruiting workers, union organisers must maintain an almost permanent presence on farms to monitor and report any reprisal actions by employers.

Second, unions must shift from their traditional emphasis on permanent workers towards seasonal workers, who make up the bulk of the agricultural work force. It is an open question on how best to organise seasonal workers. Clearly, provisions must be put in place to ensure a seasonal worker remains in the union while returning to Zimbabwe for several months during the off-season.

Finally, by organising Zimbabwean workers, unions will take an active role in opposing xenophobic tendencies in South African society. They will assist in national integration and develop a broader front of organised workers in the southern African region. LB

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