

Women-led social movement union

Sikhula Sonke challenging inequality

Many unions in South Africa have failed to raise the living standards of farm workers because they do not systematically address paternalism and gender inequalities on farms. **Fiona White** however believes that Sikhula Sonke, a Western Cape social movement union, is managing to do just this. She traces its successes as it moves towards attaining its goals.

South African farm workers have struggled for decades to achieve the right to political equality and fair labour practices. Here I look at the role of one farm workers' trade union formed in 2002, Sikhula Sonke, and how it supports farm workers in the Western Cape.

Sikhula Sonke defines itself as a 'women-led social movement trade union' dealing with all the livelihood challenges faced by farm women.

The organisation was not initially conceived as a union. However, it soon evolved into one because, as its president, Sarah Classen, explains, one of the most pressing problems facing wine and fruit farm workers was limited access to effective union representation.

There were existing unions in the fruit and wine industries but Sikhula's founders felt they were unreliable and incompetent: 'As a farm worker I had lived through five unions already. They came from the cities and were never around at wage negotiations.' Today the union has nearly 5 000 members, from over 200 farms in

ten locations in the Western Cape.

Sikhula's objectives, however, stretch beyond those of a traditional union. The organisation has a broad social mandate: 'It is more than a union because we look at more than labour problems. We look at all issues that affect women and their children'. Indeed members said they joined Sikhula Sonke because it can help with a wide range of concerns, such as 'the conditions we live in on the farm', 'alcoholism problems', 'evictions' or 'getting an ID'.

In order to achieve its aims the movement focuses on a range of activities, first of which is building strong leadership structures, based on democratic principles which are representative of the diversity of workers in the agricultural sector. In order to improve the position of women farm workers the organisation also tries to reduce social inequality on Western Cape farms and challenge unfair labour practices.

INEQUALITY ON FARMS

A key aim of Sikhula is to address the social and economic needs of

its members. This means tackling fixed ideas of social inequality on farms, particularly paternalism and gender prejudice.

When looking at employee-employer relationships it is clear that paternalism persists on Western Cape farms.

In a paternalistic relationship workers view the farmer and the farmer views himself as 'the father'. When workers are employed they do not simply enter into a formal business relationship but become 'a part of the family'.

At the heart of paternalism is the idea that workers and the farmer share a common interest in the survival of the farm community. Paternalism is not always a harmful relationship; farmers can provide a fair wage package and, for example, medical care, education, transport and crèches. However, paternalism on many farms also includes the idea that some people have rights as citizens, and others, like children, are the subjects of a master.

Workers have had little sense of power in the working environment because the farmer has total authority. It is this dynamic that

Sikhula is trying to change by getting workers to understand that they are citizens of a state with both human and labour rights.

Through training and empowerment Sikhula has been very successful in helping workers embrace their rights, but this has come with complications. Many farm workers are now caught between the need for a formal unionised relationship with the farmer and the need to feel a part of the farm family.

A side-effect of the formalisation of working relationships has been that some workers now face worse living conditions as they have no access to social benefits and services previously provided by farmers.

Where there is a legal requirement, such as access to water, Sikhula will try to ensure this is enforced. But where benefits are part of a paternalistic relationship they can get lost in a formal 'rights based' framework. Indeed, the opportunity to gain employment may decrease for coloured workers.

Andrè Bloem, a labour consultant representing farm owners, maintains that the 'entire set up' of farms will change with 'black not coloured people being employed' as African workers only want wages without the complications of employment packages that include housing, for example. Certainly for Bloem, 'the social and economic conditions of farm workers have changed for the worse because of unions'.

Despite these complexities, Sikhula's work in challenging paternalism has been significant. By empowering farm workers it has confronted the deep-rooted view that the farmer holds all power.

As a movement Sikhula provides strength to workers to contest not only existing social inequalities, including racial inequality, but economic inequality too. If, in the context of private land ownership, power relations can never be

equal between farm owners and workers, Sikhula nevertheless is building a sense of worth amongst workers that can take them some way towards a healthier balance of power between a marginalised community and the 'baas' [boss].

A second form of inequality addressed by Sikhula is gender. Agricultural workers may be worse off than other sectors of the economy but it is women that are the most marginalised. As one movement member explained, during her entire working life on the farm she has been paid less than her husband.

The abuse experienced by women farm workers is well illustrated by a chart compiled by the Women on Farms Project. In the chart below women describe their working day compared to the men around them.

This chart shows patterns of subordination and inequality between men and women that Sikhula hopes to change.

In farm meetings, for example, organisers explain the importance of treating women as valued and equal members of a family. They also address more sensitive issues such as the abuse of young girls.

Within its own leadership structures Sikhula clearly supports the role of women. As an organiser clarifies, 'we did let men join, but... women are the leaders'. The National Executive Council is composed almost entirely of women and this is something they hope to replicate at lower levels.

Furthermore, Sikhula negotiates with farmers to pay women wages equal to those of men. Although changing these understandings

A Typical Day	
Woman	Man
5am I wake up and go to the toilet	5am Sleeping
6am I prepare to go to work	6am Sleeping
7am Out of the train in the station to work	7am I wake up and dress
8am Start work – plant grapes, remove seeds	8am I eat all the food that the women have cooked
9am I am working	9am I am at the shebeen
10am I am working	10am I am drinking
11am I am working	11am I am drinking
12am Lunch	12am I am drinking more
1pm I start to work again	1pm I am lying down
2pm I am working	2pm I am lying down
3pm I am working	3pm I wake up and go to the shebeen
4pm I am working	4pm I drink more alcohol
5pm I am working	5pm I am at the shebeen
6pm I am working	6pm I am at the shebeen
7pm I arrive at home and start to cook food for supper and wash myself	7pm I am at the shebeen
8pm I dish supper	8pm I come back to see if the wife has cooked after work
9pm I wash dishes after supper	9pm I discover that she has not cooked and punish her
10pm I sleep	10pm I force her to cook and eat all that food
11pm I sleep	11pm I lie down in the bed with my muddy shoes
	12pm I am sleeping

of gendered roles is difficult, the organisation has taken the first step in recognising the need to reduce gender inequality within the farm worker community.

UNFAIR LABOUR PRACTICES

Another key aim of Sikhula is to challenge unfair labour practices. The union employs two broad strategies for achieving this. First, directly engaging with and, where necessary, contesting employers' actions and, second, engaging with and influencing government policy with regards to farm workers' rights.

Engaging employers

Sikhula will try to influence employers and represent members' interests in a variety of ways.

At first, staff try to resolve labour disputes with the farmer directly, through discussion or negotiation. 'We try to build relationships. It disadvantages members if you are constantly aggressive. On some farms, farmers and workers have a very good relationship and this empowers workers to do things for themselves'.

On the farm *Die Eike*, for example, although workers were paid below the minimum wage, by negotiating with the farmer, Sikhula ensured that the farmer met legal requirements.

It is interesting to note that in dealing with employers Sikhula has yet to advocate striking: 'We don't say to workers that they must strike... Workers have a right to strike, but striking can cause people to lose jobs and houses. There is always a way to bring parties together to try to solve the problems.'

If negotiation does not work Sikhula will resort to other strategies, including using the Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration (CCMA) and the Labour Court.

The union uses the CCMA effectively by challenging



Sikhula members participating in a recruitment and education blitz.

employers and refusing to allow intimidation of workers. It has won the majority of its cases. Where it has won cases it has often secured a livelihood for a person.

Using the CCMA and the Labour Court is also important for addressing the paternalistic farmer/farm worker relationship. The CCMA can be an empowering environment for farm workers as their views are listened to on equal terms to their employer. The CCMA and Labour Court allow marginalised workers to engage with the state as citizens, rather than as subjects of their employer, an experience they previously seldom enjoyed.

Engaging the state

Sikhula challenges unfair labour practices by attempting to influence government actors and, in turn, government policy-making and implementation, even though this is not a core focus of the organisation. The union has a fairly broad range of governmental campaigns centred on workers' rights, living conditions and social issues.

Sikhula actively uses government commissions, such as the Human Rights Commission (HRC) and the Employment Conditions Commission (ECC) to influence government policy.

It frequently engages with the ECC through submissions regarding the sectoral determination, by means of which government legislates and controls the terms and conditions of employment for workers in a particular sector, including setting minimum wages and housing standards for workers living on an employer's premises.

Sikhula members who went to ECC hearings at the Department of Labour recall: 'We had banners and t-shirts and some members spoke at the gathering... They told their stories'.

By ensuring its members were represented at the hearings, Sikhula played a significant role in getting the ECC to scrap the two-tier system prescribing different minimum wages for rural and urban areas. Although it was unable to get the minimum wage raised to the level that workers had testified in public hearings was a living wage, the Department of Labour acknowledged that by taking members to sectoral determination hearings Sikhula had 'forced the department to communicate properly with workers'.

Indeed, the organisation explained that 'before the ECC made their findings to the Minister they first called us... it was clear that the ECC was flooded with

concerns, but they still came to us to justify how they had reached the sectoral determination amount.'

Sikhula's campaign against farm dweller evictions is another example of how the movement has successfully targeted government decision-makers. The focus of this campaign has been to respond to the growing farm workers' housing crisis which has resulted from farmers choosing to replace permanent workers living on farms with migrant and seasonal labourers and from the inadequacy of existing land tenure security laws.

of ESTA. We want to demolish more because we cannot get people off the farm and out of houses.'

Stronger tenancy laws are thus resulting in fewer houses for farm workers. Equivalent off-farm housing stock is more costly and brings with it transport costs and, in some cases, a weakened sense of community.

Sikhula, however, as part of a collective effort, was able to win the first ever moratorium on farm dweller evictions. The movement helped form the Jonkershoek Crisis Committee which generated substantial media coverage of

These politicians also accepted that land tenure policy for farm workers is inadequate and must be reviewed. According to the Western Cape Ministry of Agriculture spokesperson, the decision to implement a moratorium on evictions in Jonkershoek was taken because 'Sikhula Sonke posed threats in terms of mass action; they explained that blood would flow if the evictions were not stopped. Because of these calls we felt compelled to deal with the problem'.

Indeed the ministry felt that the process of dialogue and constructive engagement may well be the first in agricultural communities and could serve as a blueprint for other provinces.

CONCLUSION

Sikhula may have challenges to overcome but it is, overall, a successful social movement union. It has made significant inroads into achieving its aims by consistently challenging social and economic inequality and unfair labour practices.

The union is most effective in meeting its aims on an individual level as one member explained: 'It is very good to be a member. Things have changed a lot in my life. I have started to stand on my own feet.'

In addition, it also strengthens the influence of members on a broader scale. For example, one expert in the farm worker sector wondered: 'Can Sikhula Sonke change discourses? Can they get workers political agency as citizens?' Ultimately he concluded that, 'They have a better chance of making a difference than any other organisation.' ¹⁸

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Sikhula Sonke



Sikhula Sonke Sakha Ulwazi and Bottelary branch chair persons at a strategy meeting of five branches.

The 1997 Extension of Security of Tenure Act (ESTA) strengthened the rights of workers occupying housing provided by a farmer. Workers are, in theory, less vulnerable to arbitrary evictions. The effect of ESTA, however, has been that many farmers are now reluctant to have workers living on their land.

As one farmer explains: 'If there is no one working in a house on our farm, but it is occupied because of ESTA, we call this a 'dead house'... We have demolished seven houses because

evictions in Jonkershoek, near Stellenbosch.

About 600 people, many Sikhula members, marched two kilometres through Stellenbosch before handing over a memorandum to a representative of the Western Cape Premier. The protest successfully demonstrated the combined size and tenacity of farm workers and had the important effect of succeeding in getting key decision-makers (including the Western Cape MEC for Agriculture and the mayor of Stellenbosch) to agree to a moratorium on evictions in Jonkershoek.