

<https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article2863>



South Africa

# Neoliberal land & agricultural policies at heart of farm strikes

- IV Online magazine - 2013 - IV456 - January 2013 -

Publication date: Monday 14 January 2013

---

Copyright © International Viewpoint - online socialist magazine - All rights reserved

---

**The heroic and historic strike by thousands of farm workers in the Western Cape has struck at the heart of the ANC government's neoliberal policies on land reform and agricultural policy. The strike marks the beginnings of much-needed mass struggles to challenge white baaskaap, slave-like conditions, and market-based land reform.**

The land and agriculture policy framework since 1994 has roundly failed to extend labour rights and a minimum wage to farm workers. In addition, the labour relations framework actually favours commercial white farmers over workers. The Department of Labour has far too few labour inspectors to effectively monitor working conditions and compliance with labour laws on farms. In many of the farming districts, there is massive collusion between farmers, the police and magistrates.

Instead of respecting labour laws and paying even the measly minimum wage, many farmers have responded to post-1994 regulations and other pressures by labour shedding. From a high of more than a million farm workers in the 1970s, agricultural employment is now estimated at just 600,000. The highest rate of decline in agricultural employment occurred in the mid-1990s and early 2000s. Between 1993 and 2002, total employment declined by 14%, regular employment declined by 26%. A 2005 report by Nkuzi and Social Surveys revealed that more than one million people were evicted from white commercial farms in the decade from 1995 to 2005. This shows how weak the tenure security laws are.

This was part of a wider structural shift in the post-apartheid economy towards temporary, seasonal and subcontracted labour. At the heart of this was the squeeze many farmers felt from liberalisation and deregulation which exposed them to global competition from subsidised farmers in the north. In turn, farmers turned the screws on their labour force in order to sustain profits.

One consequence of this is the slave-like conditions almost all farm workers and dwellers endure. Farm workers do backbreaking work under unsafe and unhealthy conditions to produce food, earning starvation wages while living with minimal provision of water, sanitation and electricity. They face the constant threat of evictions, violent physical and verbal abuse and intimidation at the hands of the bosses.

The market-based land reform programme has also failed to ensure widespread redistribution of land. As the 2005 Nkuzi and Social Surveys' report on farm evictions shows, the very social base that should have benefitted from redistributive land reform has actually been displaced from land and has lost access to even the minimal livelihoods that living on farms may have provided. In fact, the more than one million people the survey found had suffered eviction, greatly outnumber those who benefitted from the land reform programme.

In addition, during the era when post-apartheid land reform should have redistributed land to more people, there has actually been a consolidation of farm sizes and increased concentration in farm ownership. The number of farming units declined from just over 60,000 to 45,000 in the six years between 1996 and 2002, and then to 37,000 by 2011. Ruth Hall of the University of the Western Cape has argued that this is a process of the consolidation of landholdings into larger units of ownership and production, as farms are acquired by neighbours and become part of a larger farming enterprises, or as larger agribusinesses buy up farms in an area.

In some cases, these farming units consist of separate farms that are operated as a single unit. In many instances a single owner (whether an individual or a company) owns more than one farming unit. Hall has also shown that alongside this consolidation of land parcels, another process of consolidation appears to be underway in the

distribution of agricultural capital in primary production and upstream and downstream industries. Input trends have changed as production has become more capital-intensive and less labour-intensive. This is complemented by the intensification of high-cost forms of agriculture, with ongoing mechanisation and heavy reliance on pesticides and fertilisers across the horticulture, field-crop and livestock sectors.

The land reform programme has not been accompanied by an associated agrarian reform programme which would restructure the entire agricultural value chain to ensure that the beneficiaries of land reform have conducive conditions and structural power. This policy regime has not empowered farm workers to become owners and producers on redistributed farms within a restructured agricultural value chain. Large-scale commercial farmers and agribusinesses have actively promoted and benefited from these untransformative land and agricultural policies. They have used their monopoly control over most of our food and their contribution to export earnings through agriculture to blackmail the country into believing that there are no alternative agrarian policy options. At the same time, they have managed to portray the rather feeble market-based land reform policies as a huge attack on agriculture.

They have also successfully redefined land reform in their own interests: to become a limited programme of black commercial farmer settlement. White farmers are aware that, unlike the mass of the rural landless, these aspirants are unlikely to constitute a large and powerful interest group that can challenge the dominant interests within the sector, but rather will be absorbed into it. The narrative here is that 'only commercial agriculture is 'real agriculture''. In line with this, AgriSA has defended the property rights of landowners as absolute. These efforts have been aided by the inefficiency of the state and a political strategy of using the DA as an effective political mouthpiece to challenge any possible radical changes as irrational.

The farm worker strike marks the beginnings of much-needed mass struggles to challenge and defeat white baaskaap, starvation wages, slave working conditions, market-based land reform and liberalised agricultural policy. The awakening farm workers and dwellers need to realise that their organised social power is the key to break the strategic advantage of agrarian capitalists. The farm worker committees that have emerged must combine with the radical independent trade unions like CSAAWU and the organised bodies of farm dwellers such as the Mawubuye Land Rights Forum and the Citrusdal Farm Workers/Dwellers' Forum. It will also be important for farm workers and dwellers to link up with allies in urban areas and other countries. Shared concerns about high food prices are potentially unifying. Urban consumers have the power to put pressure on farmers. Urban consumers must take action now to build solidarity with farm workers. Urban consumers must also work out boycott strategies to demand produce from farms that respect worker rights and pay a living wage.