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Die Kämpfe von Land- und Plantagenarbeiter/innen im 21. Jahrhundert.

Presentation on the Struggle of Agricultural labour in South Africa

“I am so tired and so hurt; I cannot believe that we would be treated in such a ugly way. My entire family worked on the farm, I worked on the farm, I also worked in the kitchen and before we were evicted, I spent weeks nursing the oubaas and ounooi. My husband brought me to the farm when we were first married.

Our children were born there, my husband worked for over 28 years. Yet three days after the oubaas died, that boy that I looked after, came and told us that we would have to leave his farm and their house. When we refused to leave Wonderfontein, they came with a tractor to smash the wall of the house. He evicted us; I sat outside in the rain on bed with all our belongings. He said we were too old.”

This story of Margriet who lived on Wonderfontein, outside Robertson is not a unique story. It's the story of thousands of farm workers and farm dwellers who were evicted from the farms across South Africa post 1994.

South Africa has a sophisticated agricultural production system integrated into the broader economy. The highly mechanized and modern farms of today were built historically based on extensive state support to white agriculture over many decades.

When the ANC took political control of the state in 1994. The restructuring of agriculture was already underway.

It included deregulation and liberalization of the sector, and favoured export-oriented producers and agribusinesses. Smaller, often less efficient white family farmers who had relied heavily on state subsidies for their prosperity and survival during apartheid were the main losers in the commercial sector.

In the past two decades we saw greater consolidation of land & economies of scale became the mantra. There are many examples of big fish eating little fish –Van Loveren in the Western Cape has just recently acquired 22 farms for wine production.

The said purpose of agricultural deregulation was to modernise the agricultural sector, pushing out the inefficient white farmers who had survived on the back of state protection which

enabling those at the centre to consolidate ownership of assets in the name of greater efficiency and lower consumer prices.

Instead, what we saw was sharp decline in primary production from 61,000 to 40,000 commercial units between 1996 and 2007 (DAFF, 2012:6)

Today 20% of producers now generate 80 % of output value.

The processes of agrarian restructuring accompanying over the last few decades have led to many changes in the organisation of agriculture, not least the conditions of labour as well as governance.

Agrarian labour was transformed in a complex way and was influenced by economic and productive restructuring of agriculture. Thus, the demand for labour was influenced by technology, farmers' practices, size of farms, market type of crops, etc.

Agriculture was further integrated agro-industrial complexes that links it to production chains. There is an increased use of technology, more mechanisation etc. Production of wine is a good example of this.

Most importantly, the restructuring pushed agriculture into the global market.

In general, the demand for labour has fallen, new qualifications for labour has been introduced, and the nature of work itself has changed.

The most common practice today is "flexibility " in the agricultural market which in the past two decades has become widespread, and characterised by precarity with respect to workers' livelihoods.

"Casualisation" of the workforce (a growing number of workers previously employed on a permanent basis are now employed part-time or only in at seasonal periods. There is a marked drop in the size of work force.

This flexible has impacted greatly on Women working on farms. Today 80% of farm worker households survive mainly because the low wages are supplemented by government's social grants.

Today the use of labour brokers and temporary labour is a reality in South Africa. On most farms, the entire labour force has experienced a general decline and re-organisation of work.

We have seen significant changes in the past two decades – in South Africa, over 1 million farm workers and farm dwellers have been displaced. These changes have political implications for organising and working with rural movements and farmworker unions.

The challenges for organising agricultural labour is further complicated by a two systems of labour migration in commercial agriculture:

There is a historically entrenched with formal- informal systems in border-lying provinces, represented for instance in Mpumalanga and Limpopo. Here there is greater mobility of la-

bour in the region. Teams of workers going working and moving from one tomato and other fruit plantation to another.

This is different in the Western Cape where labour brokers play a greater role and workers come in “organised teams” from Lesotho, Zimbabwe” in the main.

Whilst there may be difference between the systems both are exploitative.

This growing casualisation is very poorly regulated labour system leading to more exploitative practices and eroding the protection offered by legislation or unionisation. There is systematic erosion of rights and moves toward greater precarity despite improved labour legislation and more rigorous immigration legislation.

Contributing factors that are location and isolation of farms, lack of awareness of rights, poor inspectorate capacity, broader political and economic policy agenda.

Employers play a very powerful role on farms, white privilege as land owners and owners of the means of production remains entrenched. This is despite the tension between the ANC Government and commercial agriculture. Government has also become dependent of agriculture and hence one sees attempts to push we greater “modernation” of management styles etc., but the social distance, the master slave relations, co-exist in a modern agriculture.

Racism, lack of transformation based on apartheid legacy continues. Today this is mediated through the system of labour consumtants that take responsibility for labour relations on the farms.

Much of this is not matched by the state’s governance mechanisms.

Poor organising in the sector is somewhat explained by broader structural reasons (low unionisation capacity, farm workers’ reluctance to engage in mobilisation for fear of reprisals/lack of faith, problems with access to farms).

There is generally a poor impact of labour law in bringing about change in the absence of stronger enforcement measures.

The department of Labour is not only poorly staffed, the labour inspectors like union organisers struggle to get beyond the farm gate.

However, we also see involvement of political elites in labour brokering companies.

These conditions in my view will not change unless we strengthen organisation amongst agricultural labour.

We have already said that union density is extremely low- 3-5 percentage nationally.

Organisationally rights, the right to join a union and have collectively bargaining has remained a challenged.

Organisationaling agriculture labour requires new strategies-

- It has to be linked directly to rural transformation
- It has to be linked to the demand for land and agrarian restructuring and pushing for

greater more deep-rooted land reforms.

- Present proposals of government such as agri-villages etc. continue to keep the status quo in place.
- The task is to build the organised voice the agriculture labour,
However meaningful transformation will only developing an alternative strategy – it is clear that unionisation has to go beyond traditional forms of unionisation- today the idea of social movement unionisation is taking root in CSAAWU.
- We have to organise the farm family because mostly the entire family and the rural poor in the village or