

Workers return to negotiating table

Negotiations over wages and working conditions for farm workers resumed on Thursday (29 November) ahead of a planned protest next week, Agri-SA said.

Agri-SA's labour relations manager Elize van der Westhuizen said the employer body met union representatives and labour department officials in Cape Town.

The farmworkers' strike coalition invited Agri-SA to meet in Worcester to discuss arrangements for the pending strike next Tuesday (4th December).

Van der Westhuizen said the organisation had received the notice but was unable to attend because of a formal plenary in Cape Town. It will arrange an alternative date.

The coalition's Mario Wanza said that workers would resume their strike next week in various rural areas in the Western Cape.

He said plan was to meet farmers in the spirit of "peace and friendship" and discuss a way forward.

Wanza, however, could not guarantee peace.

"I don't think we as a coalition can claim to say everything will go well. When a protest happens, anything is possible. There is extreme anger among workers who are saying: 'We have nothing left to lose, we are treated like slaves. Let's go all the way'."

It was agreed that the strike would continue until workers' demands were met.

The coalition represents organisations including Women on Farms, Sikhula Sonke, the Black Association of the Wine and Spirit Industry, the Congress of SA Trade Unions (Cosatu) and non-unionised workers in Zolani, Bonnievale, De Doorns, Worcester, Robertson and Nkubela.

Table grape harvesters started a protest in De Doorns demanding wages of R150 per day and improved living conditions. Workers claim they currently earn between R69 and R75 a day. The protests spread to 15 other towns in the Western Cape and were marred by violence and deaths.

Workers suspended their strike until December 4 on condition that the employment condition commission (ECC) look at the sectoral determination for agriculture.

Labour Minister Mildred Oliphant announced this week that it was impossible to meet the deadline.

She said the sectoral determination was put in place in March this year and by law, could only be reviewed again in 12 months.

Wanza said government had to take responsibility for the deadline and farmers should be willing to co-operate.

"Surely you can give everyone a bonus. Nothing in law prevents a farmer from giving workers a weekly bonus. If you have farm workers living on your land for 20 years, why not give [them] a title deed to that piece of land?"

Van der Westhuizen said the sentiment of farmers matched that of Oliphant.

"We agree with the minister and are prepared to agree within the legal framework. The problem is affordability. A farmer can't promise what they can't afford," she said."

No formal offer had yet been put on the bargaining table.

Source: *Sapa* via I-Net Bridge

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