

Strikes, a wake-up call, Mantashe tells farmers

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The current spread of strikes in the mining and transport sectors is no longer just about wages - it is a wake-up call to all to note that the economy is not benefiting the majority, African National Congress (ANC) secretary-general Gwede Mantashe told the Agri SA congress.

He said the people were using the wage negotiations to highlight the effects of the international financial crisis on ordinary workers, and to register their objections to the wealth of South Africa remaining in the hands of the few, with empowerment transactions not necessarily making an impact in black business ownership and job creation.

Mantashe pointed to criticism of former unionist Cyril Ramaphosa's 9% stake in Lonmin and demands that he resolves the strike - which he had no real power to do - saying this was indicative of the political pressure for more real change in the demographics of SA's economy.

To allay fears about calls by some ANC members for land grabs without compensation, and concern about a green paper's proposed changes to land evaluations, Mantashe assured farmers there would never be land grabs in SA while the ANC was in government.

He said the party was opposed to land invasions and would "never prop (them) up" or encourage a land distribution programme that would compromise the country's food security.

He said farmers should not be spooked by policy debates within the party but should rather seek to engage the ruling party in all structures, and through all channels and public participation processes aimed at bringing about transformation in land ownership, agriculture and the economy in general.

"One of the key objectives of the ANC's policy on land reform is to make sure we do not replace white faces that owned the farm with black faces that would let productive agricultural land lay fallow while visiting on weekends for a braai," he said.

"Offer your expertise to emerging farmers, but also offer your ideas to influence the ANC policy processes," he said.

Mantashe said that the ANC had proven it could be trusted after conceding during the Codesa negotiation in the early 1990s to the sunset clauses, letting whites run strategic institutions and ministries such as the Reserve Bank, trade and industry, and minerals in a bid to show good faith and an inclusive policy of being united in diversity.

He said subsequent changes, including giving blacks such positions, had also shown the party was not leaving any section

of the nation out in the cold.

Prof André Jooste of the National Agriculture Marketing Council said there was no doubt ordinary people were feeling the economic squeeze as a result of the ripple effects of the global economic downturn. Meanwhile, profit margins across the entire value chain were also under severe pressure, and ultimately affecting retailers, he said, from high maize and wheat prices, to storage costs, transport and milling and packaging

While land issues and input costs remained important, the volatile sociopolitical situation was a worrying factor.

"Combined with high unemployment and inequality, as well as potential upward pressure on food prices ... one might ask, are we brewing a dangerous cocktail ... that will affect the local value chain much more significantly than the other factors we are concerned about?" Jooste asked.

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