

# Farm worker strike spreads in Western Cape

Farm worker organisations from around the Western Cape say that workers will picket major routes in the Boland, West Coast and Overberg regions in solidarity with strikers in De Doorns on Wednesday (14 November).

A coalition of several independent trade unions working on farms, the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu), affiliated Food and Allied Workers Union (Fawu) and non-government organisations and lobby groups on Tuesday (13 November) in Stellenbosch announced a campaign of "rolling mass action" in support of the demand to raise the minimum wage for farm workers to R150 a day from its present level of R70.

This what the De Doorns strikers are demanding. They barricaded the N1 highway and have been on strike over wage demands for more than a week.

On Tuesday (13 November), Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries Minister Tina Joemat-Pettersson and organised agriculture held talks in Pretoria to discuss the principle of sectoral bargaining over agricultural wages and the raising of the minimum wage.

Agricultural wages are set by sectoral determination, recommended by the Employment Conditions Commission and legislated by the labour minister. The outcome of the talks is not yet known.

Last weekend talks between unions, the government and labour resulted in an offer from the South African Table Grape Industry, which was affected by the De Doorns strike, to raise the minimum wage to R80. The offer was rejected by workers at report-back meetings in De Doorns on Tuesday, said Cosatu provincial secretary Tony Ehrenreich.

While Cosatu, Fawu and a range of small independent trade unions are now trying to co-ordinate the labour activity on Western Cape farms, the strikes originated without the involvement of organised labour, led by workers themselves.

While Western Cape premier Helen Zille has claimed the strikes are "politically motivated", union representatives said they were following the lead that had been set by workers and they were convinced the strikes were completely "self-organised".

Ehrenreich said the actions had strong echoes of Marikana in that trade unions had found themselves playing catch-up with workers. "We have circumstances where workers are going out on their own. They are unhappy with the minimum, they are taking action on their own because of their difficulties of making ends meet on slave wages," he said.

Trevor Christians of the Commercial Stevedoring Agricultural and Allied Workers Union said: "Workers have gone in front; this is a strike against low wages. Not just the DA's low wages but also the low wages of the Department of Labour that legislated them.

"Who can live on R70 a day? Who can even live on R150? The demand for R150 shows how desperate they are," he said.

Union activists said farm workers had been inspired by Marikana and by mineworkers who had been on strike for two months.

"They are also making the point that agriculture is the wealth of the nation; like mining, it belongs to everyone. They are making the same plea as the mineworkers for a decent salary and a share of the profits," Ehrenreich said.

Source: *Business Day* via I-Net Bridge

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