

# AgriSA's plea: "stop making protests worse"

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AgriSA says it believes that forces not related to farming are fuelling farmer protests, making labour relations much worse and endangering lives and food services.



Tina Joemat-Pettersson

Farm workers have been rioting in the Western Cape over employment conditions. The workers are demanding a minimum wage of R150 a day, which is more than double their current wage of about R70 a day.

Some economists have argued that higher wages threaten job security but others says R70 is not an acceptable living wage.

"Outside influences with little interest in the welfare of agriculture and workers are abusing the minimum wage issue to promote labour unrest, which in the short to long term will have dire consequences for those who have a direct interest in agriculture," Johannes Möller, president of Agri SA told a press conference on Wednesday (14 November).

Protests have been taking place in 16 towns throughout the province and several workers have been arrested for public violence.

AgriSA is unhappy that politicians, who do not have portfolios related to farming, are making public statements about the protests and about what minimum wages should be.

Congress of South African Trade Unions Western Cape secretary Tony Ehrenreich said last week that the protests could lead to a massacre similar to that which happened in Marikana in Rustenburg this year.

ANC provincial leader Marius Fransman accused the opposition Democratic Alliance's agriculture MEC Gerrit van Rensburg of siding with farmers and promoting un-liveable wages.

Agri SA, along with other agricultural organisations, met with the Minister of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, Tina Joemat-Pettersson, in Pretoria on Tuesday (13 November).

Möller said consensus was reached that the protest action was serious and could not be ascribed only to minimum wages.

Other factors included a striving by competing unions to get a foothold in agriculture, tension between the work status of Lesotho and Zimbabwean workers, the mobilising of unemployed and persons unrelated to the issue for political gain and unsatisfactory service delivery in the informal sector by local government structures, he said.

"The minimum wage in agriculture is determined by the Basic Condition of Employment Act and is reviewed annually in March.

"In 2012 it was adjusted above inflation. Neither Agri SA, nor any other agricultural organisation has the legal right to act on behalf of farmers in respect to the minimum wage negotiations. Agri SA cannot be part of a dispensation that will undermine the statutory and legal rules that shape the environment within which the agricultural sector operates," he said.

But he said farmers were welcome to negotiate with their own workers on wages.

"In this regard Agri SA has encouraged farmers, where possible, to pay above the minimum wage", said Möller.

Agri SA and Joemat-Pettersson agreed that the government's co-operation was needed to reject inflammatory and inciting utterances by politicians and police to help prevent intimidation, incitement to violence, and the busing in of people not directly involved in the sector's wage dispute.

Farmers and their workers should be given the opportunity to negotiate minimum wages without external influences and other ministers were requested urgently to give attention to issues not related to minimum wages.

Lastly, the Western Cape government was asked to turn its attention to specific service delivery problems experienced at a local government level.

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