

Western Cape farm workers on strike

The Western Cape braced itself for another round of agricultural strikes starting on Wednesday (9 January) amid fears that the protests may turn violent.

Police in the province had been placed on high alert, while the province had placed its Disaster Risk Management Centre on standby.

The strikes, which began in November last year, were suspended twice, with the latest break last month being meant to give farm-by-farm negotiations a chance.

Trade unions and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) described those talks as a failure, saying farmers refused to discuss wage increases with their workers. Farm workers are holding out for an increase in their minimum daily wage, from R69 to R150, along with an improvement in working and living conditions.

The epicentre of the strike has been the De Doorns area, an important table-grape growing region, but last year's protests encompassed other towns such as Touwsrivier and Paarl.

In the last strike wave, 271 people were arrested facing public violence charges and seven are still in detention. Two people died and about R100m damage was said to have resulted after protesting workers set vineyards alight.

Complicating the protests were initial claims - in the only province controlled by the opposition Democratic Alliance - that the strikes were politically orchestrated. Unions and NGOs have insisted that they only advised workers and did not organise them. Less than 6% of agricultural workers in SA are unionised.

A report by the Bureau for Food and Agricultural Policy released on Tuesday (8 January) said the agricultural sector was dependent on cheap unskilled labour and salaries could be described as starvation wages.

The report said the wages, even if increased to R150 a day, would not be enough to keep a family properly fed.

However, the report also said most farms would not be able to afford to pay even R104 a day and that the sector needed to go through a structural change, including the increased use of mechanisation, although this would lead to job losses.

This week negotiations involving the Department of Labour, NGOs, trade unions and farmers' body Agri SA failed to stop the strike from going ahead.

Labour Minister Mildred Oliphant's spokesman, Musa Zondi, said the department was pleased that all sides had agreed to

talk to each other under the supervision of a senior Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration negotiator in the near future.

Women on Farms Project deputy director Colette Solomons alleged that police intimidation had started, but said that farm workers were determined to go ahead with the strike.

Solomons said workers were willing to go through a short-term loss of wages in order to secure better pay and conditions in the longer-term.

Agri Wes-Cape spokeswoman Porchia Adams said farmers had been reporting cases of intimidation against their workers who were not willing to join in the strike action and wanted to continue working.

Source: *Business Day* via I-Net Bridge

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