

## Fruit boycott is irresponsible says Cape Chamber

Calls for an international boycott of export fruit from South Africa are irresponsible, the Cape Chamber of Commerce and Industry said on Monday (7 January).



"A boycott will simply create opportunities for our competitors in South America, Australia and New Zealand to move in and grab our share of the market," said the Chamber's labour analyst Michael Bagraim in a statement.

Last week the Congress of SA Trade Unions' provincial secretary Tony Ehrenreich said Cosatu would call on the international community to boycott South African agricultural products, because they were produced using "slave labour conditions".

"We are also calling for a mandate from the international community to boycott the products of those farmers who do not want to enter into decent negotiations with their workers," he said.

Western Cape farmworkers went on strike last year demanding that they be paid R150 a day. They also want a "coherent land reform programme".

At least two people died during protests in the Western Cape farming areas between 27 August and 4 December last year.

The strike action was suspended but is due to resume on Wednesday (9 January).

The Chamber of Commerce said such a boycott was likely to do permanent damage to the agricultural sector of the Western Cape.

Bagraim said that once alternate suppliers entrenched themselves in the market it would be very difficult for South Africa to regain the confidence of customers and recapture lost ground.

"As it is the violence and destruction of the farm workers' strike as well as the extravagant demands of union leaders has already got our customers worried. I have no doubt they are already talking to other suppliers," Bagraim said.

He said the unions did not seem to understand that agriculture was a vastly different industry from mining. Work stops on mines there are huge losses but the gold and the platinum remain in the ground for extraction at a later date.

On the farms, however, the fruit rots in the fields and a whole year's work and investments are lost." This all

undermined the sector's ability to invest in next year's crop.

Bagraim warned that drastic increases in wages would drive up production costs and make South African fruit too expensive for overseas importers who would buy cheaper products from other markets.

"Increased costs and uncertainty about the labour force will leave farmers no option but to mechanise and that will mean a permanent loss of jobs." He pointed out that agriculture offered the best hope for the unskilled and unemployed people in rural areas to earn some money.

"Don't take these opportunities away from people who desperately need to earn money for food and clothing," Bagraim pleaded.

Source: *Sapa* via I-Net Bridge

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