“Marikana Has Come to the Farms!!!”: An Analysis of the Socio-Economic Impact of the November 2012–January 2013 Farm Workers’ Strike in the Western Cape

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In August 2012 a bloody strike broke out at the Marikana platinum mine, close to Rustenburg in the Northwest Province. The strike, involving 3,000 African miners, became violent and police opened fire and killed 34 people. The issue of minimum wages and union recognition, *inter alia*, were underlying causes of this strike. The much televised Marikana strike had a knock-on effect and a few months later a widespread strike broke out among workers in the agricultural sector of the Western Cape. Large-scale destruction of property and crop damage took place on farms reaching levels of militancy never previously encountered in this sector. As in the case of the Marikana strike the root causes of the strike action in the Western Cape seemed to be the question of minimum wages, and, to a lesser extent, union recognition and other social issues involving political undertones. This article explores the socio-economic causes of the strike and its ramifications for labour and agriculture in the province.

Keywords: farm workers’ strike, Western Cape, De Doorns, paternalism, labour brokering, casual workers, agricultural trade unions

Introduction and Theoretical Framework

Strike conflict, according to Eddie Webster and Andrew Levy, has intensified in post-apartheid South Africa (Jones, 2013). A serious mining incident in 2012, dubbed by the press as the “Marikana Massacre”, took place at a Lonmin platinum mine near the town of Marikana, 100 km northwest of Johannesburg when the police dispersed an unprotected strike of African miners by force. Preliminary indications are that the strike broke out, *inter alia*, over rivalry between die National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) and the Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (AMCU) in an eight-month union turf war for majority control over mine worker membership. In comparison with the NUM’s consent to meagre wage increases AMCU promised rock drillers earning R4,000 an increase to R12,500 through strike action. Within one month AMCU’s support in the Lonmin mines shot up by 19%. The strike turned violent when ten people, including two policemen, died in nearly a week of fighting between the rival worker factions at the mine. On 16 August 2012 an estimated 3,000 miners gathered on a rocky outcrop near the mine. According to the police, negotiations with the strike leaders broke down and because of a life-threatening situation they were compelled to use armed force. Consequently, 44 miners were killed and 78 wounded (Mkhize, 2012; Malala, 2012). Commentators referred to

this incident as a major event in labour relations in South Africa.¹

The Marikana incident seemed to have set the pretext for a widespread strike which broke out three months later in November 2012 in the agricultural sector of the Western Cape. The levels of violence which accompanied the strike were uncharacteristic of any industrial action previously taken in this sector. Based on an extensive analysis of contemporary media commentaries, agricultural labour surveys and scholarly articles, this article investigates the causes of the strike and focuses on its historical, socio-economic, demographic and political dimensions as well as some of the socio-economic ramifications which this strike could pose for farm workers and farmers alike.

The Unfolding of the Farm Workers’ Strike—A Brief Account

The occurrence of militancy during the Marikana strike reverberated nationally as well as internationally. On the deciduous fruit and wine farms of the Western Cape seasonal workers had access to television and could observe the shocking images of blood and violence as the industrial action unfolded on the platinum mines. In these events they also saw an opportunity to challenge the authorities (Joubert, 2012; Pienaar, 2013a).

The epicentre of the strike was the town of De Doorns. It lies in the Hex River Valley, 140 km from Cape Town and 40 km from the larger agricultural town of Worcester in heartland of the Western Cape wine and deciduous fruit industry. Although some workers on farms surrounding De Doorns already began to down tools by August, the strike and accompanying protest action in the Western Cape’s rural areas erupted on 5 November 2012 in De Doorns’s informal settlements Stofland, Sandhills, Haasvlakte and Ekuphumleni where most of these workers live in abject poverty. Farm workers demanded an increase in their daily minimum wage from R69 to R150 and an improvement of their living and working conditions. Running battles ensued between strikers and the police and people barricaded the national highway and railway that runs past the town (Hattingh, 2013; Vecchiato, 2013). The strike coincided with the early harvesting season and soon spread to other agricultural towns in Western Cape wine and deciduous industries such as Ceres, Wolseley, Worcester, Saron, Touwsrivier, Robertson, Ashton, Bonnievale, Swellendam, Barrydale, Ladismith, Grabouw, Villiersdorp, Somerset-West, Wellington, Paarl, Malmesbury, Franschhoek, Piketberg, Citrusdal and Clanwilliam. Some vineyards and orchards were set alight and certain farms suffered millions of Rands’ worth of damage in arson attacks when packing sheds and equipment were burnt and vehicles damaged. On 14 November a protesting farm worker was killed by police in Wolseley, causing an eruption of violence and looting in the town as well as the serious assault of an elderly farmer. By 19 November another two farm workers had died from gun wounds. On 4 December 2012 the strike was suspended temporarily for negotiations to take place on a farm-to-farm basis (Gunning & Pienaar, 2012; Vecchiato, 2013b; Brent-Styan, Venter, Janse van Rensburg, Barnard & Gerber, 2013; Breytenbach & Venter, 2013; Nombembe & Strydom, 2013).

When negotiations for sectoral determination of a minimum wage for farm workers reached a stalemate, an intermittent strike, which included continued public violence, intimidation, plundering and arson of a packing shed, vehicles and orchards, recommenced on 9 January 2013. Once again battles raged between the police and protesters. On 17 January the strike was called off by COSATU who had become involved in the meantime with the strikers’ demands (Venter, Roberts, & Gerber, 2013; Roberts, 2013; Venter, 2013; Gerber,

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¹ The South African government appointed the Farlam Commission to investigate the shootings and the labour relations on the Lonmin mines.

2013a). On 4 February 2013 Mildred Oliphant, the Minister of Labour, announced that a new minimum wage of R105 a day was determined and was to be implemented from the beginning of March 2013 (Anon., 2013a).

Contemporary commentators called the De Doorns strike “another Marikana” (Anon., 2013b), a “watershed” for agriculture (Pienaar, 2013) and “the historic awakening of the so-called subalterns” (Mbadlanyana, 2013), while Gerrit van Rensburg, the Western Cape Minister of Agriculture, conceded that the causes of the strike were much more complex and intertwined than merely a question of statutory wage determination (Gerber, 2013b). From a perusal of the relevant literature it is quite evident that never before in the history of the Western Cape agricultural sector had strikes and protests by farm workers reached such extreme levels of insurrection and accompanying violence as those of November 2012 and January 2013. On the surface it would appear as if the strike originated unexpectedly and out of the blue. However, an investigation into various studies and reports on farm labour in the Western Cape revealed that there were indeed underlying factors which precipitated the eventual outbreak of the strike. These factors will be analysed in more detail in the ensuing section of this article.

Socio-Economic Causes of the Strike

The Evolution of Farm Labour and Paternalism in the Western Cape

When the Dutch East India Company established a victualing station at the Cape of Good Hope in 1652 distinctions among legal status groups structured Cape society. The first free burghers were granted land in 1657. As a rule, the Company recruited its servants and free immigrants in Europe and brought some Asian or Eurasian employees and settlers to the Cape, therefore creating the precedent of a political and economic elite which was almost exclusively European. Importing slaves, since 1658, none of whom were European, intensified the correlation between legal status and race. By the turn of the seventeenth century free burghers already spoke of the previously independent Khoikhoi in the same breath as slaves. The smallpox epidemic of 1713 decimated the Khoikhoi. The epidemic completed their transformation from a sovereign people into subordinated colonial subjects and the majority began to seek work on European farms for survival. From a seventeenth century European-dominated society, in the Western Cape a farming pattern evolved where landowners and farmers, with few exceptions, were white and farm labourers were Coloured—the descendants of slaves and Khoikhoi (Elphick & Giliomee, 1979; Ross, 1986; Atkinson, 2007; Van der Waal, 2014).

The social relations which developed between Coloured farm labourers and their white employers created a paternalistic social order on the farms as several generations of farm workers’ families settled on specific farms in the Western Cape. The farmer’s family and the farm workers’ families lived in close proximity, often with intense relationships of loyalty, reciprocity and mutual expectations that transcended the workplace situation to include matters such as housing, education, health, transport, religious practices and even friendship. Where the relationship went sour, farmers could resort to intimidation and coercion. For instance, if a farm worker lost his job he also lost his home. But there was a definite sense that farmers and their workers formed an organic social unit, often lasting from generation to generation. The paternalistic system entailed the mutual recognition and acceptance of all the obligations, rights, benefits and duties associated with membership of a farm community. For both parties, this arrangement sustained the belief that worker and farmer ultimately shared a common interest in the survival of the farm community, and that everyone on the farm was part of an organic “family” (Beinart, Delius, & Trapido, 1986; Du Toit, 1993; Atkinson, 2007; Van der Waal, 2014).

However, according to Du Toit (1993) and Atkinson (2007), the farmer's goodwill could never be taken for granted and farm workers were dependent on his protection. Paternalism gave the farmer a unique authority of speaking on behalf of the workers as well as the final power of judgement, which created an asymmetric relationship. Therefore a farm worker's life was based on perpetual insecurity and he and his family were always vulnerable to the termination of employment and eviction. Because of the strong role of the farmer as *pater familias*, paternalism denied workers' individuality and inhibited the space in which they could exercise their independent judgement. This resulted in some cases, in a poor sense of self-identity on the part of farm workers.

Du Toit (1993) explains that owing to a profitability crisis in the Western Cape deciduous fruit industry since the 1990s farming operations were forced to adapt to more market-orientated practices and reforms in labour relations. These developments also transformed the hegemony of traditional, authoritarian paternalism. It brought about an increasing emphasis on worker productivity as essential to the farm's financial success as a business and has led to an emphasis on farm management. An emphasis on management and accompanying bureaucracy meant a change in the functioning of authority and a gradual formalisation of working relationships. The person of the manager or farmer became divorced from his managerial role and management discourse tended to render the portrayal of power increasingly impersonal. Farmers as well as workers were increasingly being regarded as co-owners, sharing essentially the same relationship to the farm. But according to Du Toit the relationship between farmer and farm employee only underwent a nuanced change. Paternalism as such was not replaced by management discourses, but rather re-articulated into a liberalised paternalism. Workers' authority was delimited to very specific subjects and their right to speak was mediated by management. Thus it became very difficult to establish the independent authority of a worker who had been appointed as an overseer or as a spokesperson.

Paternalism, combined with forced evictions and abuse, had created deep-rooted feelings of inadequacy among farm workers and at the time of the strike they were still experiencing painful rejection and injustice. They felt that their dignity was disregarded (Robb & Davis, 2010; White, 2010). The embedded paternalist norms and culture that prevailed on many farms seemed to be linked with other social problems, which, in turn, constituted some of the underlying causes for the strike. Farm workers were seen as inferior, with little social investment provided, including education and skills, and discrimination based on gender and race was inherent. Social problems were particularly prevalent among low-skilled farm workers and off-farm casual workers. Casual workers had greater insecurity and fewer legal rights than permanent workers, and the move from a permanent to a casual job represented social downgrading. Living conditions were often poor or unfit for living. Many of these low-waged workers were poverty-stricken and suffered social decay. They lacked proper access to toilets and drinking water and are exposed to pesticides without proper safety equipment. They were also more likely to have lower educational levels, consequently suffering from low self-esteem and experiencing personal difficulties such as alcoholism (Atkinson, 2007; Anon., 2011; Barrientos & Visser, 2012a; Mbadlanyana, 2013; Jansen, 2013).

Cash-poor households lacked household resources and infrastructure and according to Du Toit (2004) there was also a strong correlation between income poverty and reported food insecurity. In 2002 Du Toit and Ewert (2002) calculated that between 30% and 40% of the rural population of the Western Cape lived in poverty. The highest incidence of disease in De Doorns, for example, was scurvy, malnutrition and

kwashiorkor which, according to Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries Minister Tina Joemat-Pettersson, indicated poor service delivery to farm workers (Vecchiato, 2013c). Through ignorance or imprudence many farm workers became caught up in a debt trap through unscrupulous loan sharks. Eventually the farmers served as scapegoat to unleash the anger resulting from workers' misery and bleak existence (Anon., 2013c). A move to off-farm housing did involve some level of freedom from the domination of a paternalistic employer, but it usually meant the loss of the opportunity to benefit from the significant social wage paid by farmers in the form of housing and the provision of other services. Many workers experienced conditions of living in informal settlements in peri-urban areas and in small rural towns as harsh or harsher than they ever had on farms (Du Toit & Ewert, 2002).

The Labour Demography, Agri-Economy and Employment Conditions of the Western Cape—A Changing Scene

As explained earlier the labour force which emerged on the fruit and wine farms in the Western Cape since colonial times were Coloured and until the demise of the Coloured labour preference policy toward the end of the 20th century this group formed the backbone of the permanent workers on these farms. Du Toit and Ally's survey estimates this figure to have been almost as high as 89% (Du Toit, 1993; Du Toit & Ally, 2003). However, as early as the 1940s, with the development of a local food industry and factories during the Second World War, many deciduous fruit and wine farmers began to recruit African migrant workers from the Eastern Cape who were in search of jobs and a better life. While some of these workers developed long-term relationships with the farms on which they work, others became part of teams that kept returning again and again to the same farm each harvest season. But as many African workers came to reside permanently in the wine lands the demographic composition of many of the agricultural towns prominent during the strike, with their previously predominant Coloured populations, began to change. This phenomenon became prevalent in towns such as Grabouw, Robertson, Worcester and the Hex River Valley (Du Toit & Ally, 2003; Du Toit, 2004; Barrientos & Visser, 2012a; White, 2010; Van der Waal, 2014). The demographic changes would have a profound socio-economic impact on these towns and was an important underlying factor contributing to the outbreak of the strike, as will be discussed later.

Since the demise of apartheid in 1994, South African agriculture has moved from being heavily protected by state subsidies and tariff barriers to being exposed to global competition to an extent paralleled only by New Zealand. In 1997 the South African state disbanded the regulated single marketing channels for fruit exports precisely at the same time as increasing consolidation of retailer power in the deciduous fruit industry's key European markets put margins under pressure. Deregulation opened up South African fruit producers to the direct forces of global competition, particularly with Chile and New Zealand. By 2007 South African agricultural subsidies were among the lowest in the world, amounting to roughly 2.7% of the total output. The agricultural debt situation was also worsening and the debt cycle became an increasing burden. Farmers who had borrowed extensively to finance further development or to restructure their orchards found themselves suddenly caught between downward pressure on producer prices from supermarkets, increasing labour and other input costs, and increasing interest rates in the wake of the 1997 Asian economic crisis.

One survey estimated that wages as a share of total farm costs for table grape farms, which are relatively labour intensive, had increased from 35% to 52% between 2003 and 2011. Farmers started with debt which hampered them from undertaking orchard renewals and planting the new, high-value cultivars required for

export. The lack of renewal resulted in their producing lower yields and lower grade fruit which meant that exporting to global supermarkets became increasingly difficult. Consequently, numerous farmers have gone out of business as the pattern of pressures forces many less competitive farmers out of agriculture. Between 2007 and 2011 there was a 30% fall in the number of grape producers. Exit from the table grape industry reflects a combination of downgrading for producers unable to compete and value chain consolidation for those able to buy up farms (Du Toit, 2002, 2004; Atkinson, 2007; Barrientos & Visser, 2012a).

The transition to democracy in South Africa also saw the introduction of a swathe of regulation now fully applied to farm workers. These included the Labour Relations Act 75 of 1997; a new Basic Conditions of Employment Act (1997), which expected farmers to comply with a relatively worker-friendly set of conditions of work and labour standards; Sectoral Determination 13, which introduced a minimum wage; the Unemployment Insurance Act and in particular, the Extension of Security of Tenure Act, or ESTA, promulgated in 1997 (Du Toit & Ally, 2003; Theron, 2010; Barrientos & Visser, 2012a). This was a law of unintended consequences. The Act provides that households who live on farms may not be unlawfully evicted. For a commercial farmer, land tenure security for employees means the inability to shed unwanted, unproductive labourers who may even constitute a security threat and such farmers perceived this law as giving farm workers permanent rights to their land. Consequently, many employers have either reduced their labour requirements or separated employment from residence rights. Farmers have become more cautious about building new houses to those workers who are not already living on farms. They are also reluctant to improve existing housing, because ESTA requires that if a farm worker's right of residence is terminated, he or she is entitled to “suitable alternative accommodation”, which may be defined as “no less favourable than the occupier's previous situation”. Therefore farmers perceive ESTA as a disincentive to invest in decent housing standards.

In terms of redressing historical land injustices ESTA placed disproportionate burdens of land reform on current agricultural landowners, compared to commercial or industrial landowners. As many farmers felt anxious and threatened by ESTA-type land claims this Act has resulted in pre-emptive evictions before farm workers managed to achieve the ESTA-defined minimum of ten years' occupancy. More than 942,000 farm workers were evicted between 1994 and 2004. These evictions correlated significantly with the introduction of ESTA, the Basic Conditions of Employment Act and the minimum wage in agriculture. Some farmers chose not to replace workers who leave with new permanent workers; others chose not to provide housing or to rotate their workers around different properties to prevent them from qualifying for ESTA rights; yet others have housed their workers in nearby towns. Farmers thus began a process of slowly moving permanent workers off the farms and in this way they contributed to the growth of informal settlements such as Stofland, Sandhills, Haasvlakte and Ekuphumleni in De Doorns and other rural towns affected by the strike (Du Toit & Ewert, 2002; Du Toit & Ally, 2003; Du Toit, 2004; Atkinson, 2007; Conradie, 2007; Jacobs, 2008; White, 2010).

Farmers also began to revert to other cost-saving measures. Labour-intensive products were replaced by low-cost products, mechanisation, fixed irrigation systems, and the use of agricultural chemicals such as pesticides and herbicides became preferred to creating employment, especially in the context of labour and tenure legislation. In the table grape industry cultivar mix changed from predominantly seeded varieties, which need to be thinned by hand, to predominantly seedless varieties which can be thinned chemically. The trellising system was changed to less labour intensive methods and with tractor access fruit also does not have to be carried out of orchards and vineyards, but can be driven out. In grape vine harvesting labour was reduced by

harvesting the grapes mechanically, and in the packing shed major labour savings were made when palletising and the use of forklifts became common (Du Toit & Ally, 2003; Atkinson, 2007; Conradie, 2007; Theron, 2012).

Thus, with a looming profit squeeze and margins constantly under pressure labour costs were one among the few elements of farm inputs that farmers could change. Many commentators pointed to the fact that cutting on labour costs meant labour shedding. It indicated a clear and systematic shift away from the use of permanent farm employment and towards the use of temporary (casual), seasonal and subcontracted labour, particularly among fruit and wine farmers. The decrease of employment within the agricultural sector was due to mainly Coloured workers leaving the sector. Many permanent jobs that were not replaced by mechanisation were replaced by casual labour and for seasonal work emphasis was put more and more on off-farm migrant African workers of whom the majority are women. More and more farms began to source their labour from nearby rural towns and surrounding areas and squatter camps (Du Toit & Ewert, 2002; Du Toit & Ally, 2003; Du Toit, 2004; Atkinson, 2007; Conradie, 2007; Jacobs, 2008; Robb & Davis, 2010; Theron, 2010; Barrientos & Visser, 2012a). Du Toit and Ally's survey (2003) indicates that the remaining permanent jobs on deciduous fruit farms are reserved for Coloured men.

Concomitantly with job-shedding went an exponential increase in the practice of labour brokering to provide in the labour needs of the farms. Apart from environmental factors, globalization and technology, legal loopholes presented opportunities for labour brokers to play a significant role in negotiating and so determining conditions of employment. There was thus a marked shift towards the externalisation in the provision of labour by third party labour contractors, which was also accompanied by an increasing depersonalisation or separation in the relationship between farm worker and the farmer/manager, leading to the marginalisation of the former. In these instances the employment relationship is not with a farmer. Instead, the farm concludes an agreement with a third party—the labour broker—who is then responsible for bringing workers onto the farm. The service is supplied in terms of a commercial contract and has nothing to do with an employment relationship. Labour contractors also took the legislative responsibility away from the farmer (Du Toit, 1993; Du Toit & Ewert, 2002; Du Toit & Ally, 2003; Du Toit, 2004; Jacobs, 2008; Robb & Davis, 2010).

The casualisation of farm labour and labour brokerage did entail a number of negative consequences for these low-skilled temporary, seasonal and subcontracted labourers. According to Conradie (2007) it increased the precariousness of their existence because contract labour takes place in an unregulated environment. Therefore labour contractors and the competition among them for business provided farmers with a cheaper option of employment without legal formalities. Casual workers were not fully covered by the standard employment relationship due to the definition of the Basic Conditions of Employment Act of 1997. They did not have fulltime employment and the workplace differs as the labour contractor moves from farm to farm. Seasonal workers were not registered for unemployment insurance or workmen's compensation, nor belonged to a trade union; therefore they did not qualify for standard employee benefits such as social security and bonuses. They were paid under the minimum wage and worked only on certain days, the principle of no work no pay being applied.

Furthermore, they were paid by performance, which meant the physically stronger or more efficient workers got paid more, making it difficult for women to ensure a better income. In addition seasonal workers were doomed to the seasonal nature of their work and therefore a scarcity of work and greater insecurity of employment, poverty, an uncertain and lower income and resultant cash dependency and the destructive types

of patron-client relationships to which they had to resort with clientelistic municipal officials, loan sharks, shacklords and criminal gangs. To top it all, life in the rural agricultural towns is expensive and conditions are poor. Informal settlements seldom have running water, electricity, proper sewerage systems or roads (Du Toit & Ewert, 2002; Du Toit, 2004; Atkinson, 2007; Jacobs, 2008; Misago, 2009; Barrientos & Visser, 2012a; Theron, 2012; Jones, 2013). These factors were core causes towards the outbreak of the strike. The power behind the strike, therefore, seemed to be the people who did not live on the farms (Jordan, 2013).

The Role of Trade Unions and Politicians

An investigation into contemporary sources reporting on the events revealed that the strike undoubtedly presented trade unionists and political leaders an opportunity to further their own agendas, and in so doing heightened the tensions and emotions involved with the demonstrations. This should be seen against the fact that up to the outbreak of the strike trade unions had not been able to penetrate the agricultural work force of the Western Cape with much success due to farmers' resistance and worker apathy or ignorance of trade unionism. For instance, between 1987 and the 1990s the Food and Allied Workers' Union (FAWU), an affiliate of the trade union federation COSATU, had limited union organisation successes among the province's farm worker community. The reasons were farmers' resistance and intense aversion to unionisation on their farms, as well as the possibility of worker victimisation by farmers. Therefore trade union capacity in the deciduous fruit sector was extremely poor and fragmented. In the absence of effective, independent unions and social dialogue the farms workers had no bargaining power; the strike action was actually an outburst of pent-up frustration (Du Toit, 1993; Barrientos & Visser, 2012b; Hattingh, 2013). Union density in the agricultural sector was only 4.3%, compared with around 32% of the total South African workforce belonging to a trade union. For instance, with their low and irregular income seasonal workers could simply not afford union membership fees (Jones, 2012).

Various sources (Hattingh, 2013; Essop, 2013; Van der Merwe, 2012; Anon., 2013b) are of the opinion that the strike was initially self-organised outside of the unions until the obscure figure of Nosey Pieterse from the BAWSI Agricultural Workers' Union of South Africa (BAWUSA), FAWU officials, and COSATU's Western Cape secretary Tony Ehrenreich, entered the scene, particularly in De Doorns. Their entry saw a gradual shift of power away from the workers' themselves, even eclipsing the strike committees which had been formed initially. The officials of these unions started to become the public "face" of the strike and were able to influence the demonstrations in profound ways. Pieterse and Ehrenreich were soon singled out by the media as the unofficial spokespersons of the strike because of their already existing public profiles. Pieterse and BAWUSA embodied "black-empowerment outcomes" from the Black Association of the Wine and Spirit Industry (BAWSI) which obtained an interest in one of the largest wine companies in the Western Cape, KWV. BAWSI and BAWUSA officials saw the strike as an opportunity to expand the profile of these organisations and their officials. Hattingh argues that while these two entities led demonstrations in De Doorns on a number of occasions, it often seemed to be a secondary tactic with the primary objective being entry into negotiations that included unions, the government and farm owners but with strike committees having no direct representation in the negotiations. Reports also indicated that there was competition between FAWU and BAWUSA to influence strike audiences and apparently protesters were also bussed in to the strike hotspots (Anon., 2013d; Jones, 2012; Sibanyoni, 2013).

COSATU officials viewed the strike as a way of finally making inroads in terms of union membership on the farms. Hattingh claims that through FAWU, COSATU wanted to gain leadership over the strikes and its agenda was to push for a negotiated settlement along with driving the strike into the confines of the existing labour legislation framework (Hattingh, 2013). Ehrenreich of COSATU uttered provocative rhetoric such as that the farmers were “land thieves” who built “holiday homes” and whose vehicles, homesteads and “overseas holidays” were “becoming more extravagant each year” at the expense of the farm workers (Ehrenreich, 2013, p. 9). And it was he who coined phrases such as “Marikana has come to the farms!!!” (Gerber, 2012, p. 1; Zille, 2013a, p. 13) and “Feel it! Western Cape Marikana is here!” (Potgieter, 2012, p. 2), thereby exacerbating the volatile emotions of people who were involved in the strike.

Political involvement in the strike should be seen against the background of a long-standing struggle between the ANC and the Democratic Alliance (DA) for political hegemony and the political allegiance of especially Coloured constituents who represent the demographic majority in the Western Cape; since 2009 it has been the only province in South Africa not ruled by the ANC but governed by the DA. ANC-politicians who visited the strike areas, such as ANC Western Cape leader Marius Fransman and the national Minister of Agriculture Joemat-Pettersson, used abusive language in their speeches against the DA and white farmers. On the other hand it is noteworthy that Helen Zille, the Western Cape’s DA Premier, was prevented from addressing striking crowds in De Doorns. From its perspective the DA claimed that this was the doing of the ANC, COSATU and BAWUSA and that ANC involvement in the strike was an effort to embarrass the former in order to make the Western Cape ungovernable so that the ANC could reclaim it in the next elections (Jones, 2012; Toerien, 2013; Anon., 2013b; Mama, 2013; Zille, 2013a, 2013b).

Labour and Migrants in De Doorns and the Hex River Valley—A Poisonous Ethnic Cauldron

Most causes of the strike, as analysed in the preceding sections, can be related to De Doorns and the Hex River Valley—the origin of the upheavals. Western Cape Premier Helen Zille (2013a; 2013b) claims that the strike had its origin on the farm Keurboschkloof in the valley where workers were paid above the minimum wage determined at the time. When the farmer died his farm was taken over by a black empowerment consortium that immediately cut wages from an average of R14.51 to R10.60 an hour. Understandably, this elicited protest action by workers since October 2012. According to Zille, the protests were further aggravated by the fact that a former ANC councillor, who was also a labour broker, had tried to bring in “scab labour” at the behest of the BEE consortium to replace the protesting farm workers. The accusation was of course denied by an ANC spokesperson (Gerber, 2013c, p. 2). Originally Mildred Oliphant, the national Minister of Labour, did not intervene in the minimum wage dispute and as the strike began to escalate to surrounding farms the ANC sought to blame the farmers for the workers’ desolate economic woes.

However, the strike origins should be investigated beyond a particular political perspective. Two factors made De Doorns and the Hex River Valley quite attractive for thousands of indigent job seekers across Southern Africa. The valley is the centre of the Western Cape’s table grape production and farms where this labour-intensive variety is being produced provide more permanent jobs than any other deciduous fruit sector. They also create more temporary employment, requiring more person-days per hectare than any other crop throughout almost an entire year (Du Toit & Ally, 2003; Theron, 2010). Secondly, a survey by Stanwix (2013) showed that on average farmers pay significantly higher wages in the Western Cape than in other provinces. For these reasons so many desperately poor people are seeking for work in one of the few industries that still

offers jobs to unskilled labourers. For months on end they are jobless and rely on work opportunities offered during the relatively short harvesting season in the deciduous fruit districts. As their numbers increase the competition for work amidst a job-shedding economic climate also becomes more severe. In cases of competition for limited resources individuals begin to group in order to protect and further their own interests. In stratified societies the dividing lines often correlate with ethnicity. In the Western Cape deciduous fruit industry and in De Doorns in particular, there are four competing groups of seasonal workers: Zimbabweans, Basotho, Xhosa and Coloureds who congregate in the mushrooming informal settlements in and around the town (Robb & Davis, 2010; Theron, 2010, 2012; Zille, 2013a, 2013b).

Since 2002, when government policies bred political persecution and an economic meltdown in that country, numbers of especially Zimbabwean migrant workers on farms in the De Doorns area increased significantly. It coincided with the increasing seasonal needs of the Western Cape agricultural sector. By 2009 Zimbabweans were estimated to be 2,500 of the estimated 21,000 people living in the area and they contributed a significant portion of the seasonal labour demand. With its very accessible location on the N1 between Cape Town and Zimbabwe De Doorns also became a convenient staging post for farmers to collect Zimbabweans to work on farms as far away as the Eastern Cape and Namibia. Established Zimbabwean social support networks in town also helped to ease compatriots' way towards De Doorns, where they hoped to obtain jobs; yet a 2007 Integrated Development Plan for the Cape Winelands Municipality cited the town itself as having one of the highest unemployment rates (Misago, 2009; Robb & Davis, 2010; Theron, 2012).

Analysts concur that the De Doorns farmers preferred Zimbabwean seasonal workers to South Africans for various reasons. The perception among the farmers was that South Africans were “lazy” to work, abused alcohol, were dishonest and had a propensity for criminality, while as a labour pool, Zimbabweans had qualities of a better work ethic and displayed traits of honesty, faithfulness, sobriety and gratefulness. It was also believed that the latter were better skilled, “learned faster” and were prepared to work overtime and on weekends. Compared to the scholastic levels of the South African working class populace of the Hex River Valley, on average the Zimbabweans were indeed highly educated. Many Zimbabwean workers also regarded themselves as better educated and more worldly-wise than their South African counterparts, whose social grants were spoiling them: they lacked the dedication required for long and physically strenuous work during the harvest season.

Local farmers' claim that there was a continuing labour shortage led to successful negotiations with the Department of Home Affairs in 2009, to open a satellite refugee reception office in De Doorns for Zimbabwean and Basotho migrants in the region who helped to meet the seasonal labour demands. This process was conducted without any consultation with local government, police or the local community, and has been cited as a source of conflict. Many non-nationals from other parts of the Western Cape that needed asylum papers also began to arrive in De Doorns to access the services of the satellite office. The town's infrastructure could not sustain the sudden influx into the population and this caused tensions in the community. Although the office was short-lived and did eventually close, it cannot be discounted as a contributing factor in fuelling a developing discourse during which especially Zimbabweans were accused of receiving “special treatment” and “stealing the jobs” of locals. This led to xenophobic attacks on Zimbabweans in Stofland, Ekuphumleni and Haasvlakte as early as November 2009. Labour brokers also contributed to the ethnic tension. The brokers and those they recruited divided themselves on the basis of race and nationality: Coloured, Xhosa, Zimbabwean and Basotho. Apparently, the Zimbabwean brokers were more successful than others on account of the farmers'

labour preference. On the other hand, it was perceived by many brokers from the Xhosa community that they suffered income losses due to Zimbabwean contractors and that the Xhosa had been marginalised by the white farmers. Therefore, the social tension generated by the competition for work, the contested space of overcrowded and under-resourced living conditions in the informal settlements by poverty-stricken nationals and non-nationals, all these elements contributed to the creation of an ethnic and socio-economic time-bomb in De Doorns which exploded in November 2012. The agitation for a living wage directed at the farming community was the overt cause of the strike (Misago, 2009; Mama, 2013; Robb & Davis, 2010; Theron, 2010, 2012; Barrientos & Visser, 2012a).

The Consequences of the November 2013–January 2013 Farm Workers’ Strike

The new minimum sectoral wage determination of R105 per day has left the Western Cape deciduous fruit industry in a financial Catch 22-situation. In January 2013 a joint report by researchers of the University of Stellenbosch and of the Bureau of Food and Agricultural Policy (BFAP) at the University of Pretoria stated that many individual farmers would not be able to afford a wage of R105 per day and still cover operating expenses. For example, after all costs involved in the production of a bottle of wine were subtracted, a wine producer was left with a net farming income of R0.55 a bottle before the new wage increase was factored into the production price. After all subtractions were made from the R50 per crate of seedless grapes that farmers earned (2013 prices) they were left with R4 per crate to pay for capital expenses and interest on bank loans. Some farmers’ profit margins were less than 5%. On the other hand, the BFAP has also indicated that not even a household with two adults each earning R150 per day could actually afford an energy-adequate and nutritionally balanced daily food intake. Therefore most farm worker households consisting of four persons per family could not provide the nutrition needed to make them food secure. In terms of 2013 food prices alone, the cost of a daily meal for such a family amounted to R460 (Jones, 2012; Williams, 2013a, 2013b; Kitshoff, 2013; Geldenhuys, 2013; Coetzee, 2013a; Sherry, 2013).

Whether the acts of arson and destruction of property were instigated by provocateurs from outside the agricultural community or conducted by local criminal elements, there is no question that the strike caused a breach of confidence and mutual distrust between farm employer and employee and that labour relations suffered badly. Farmers are naturally reluctant to make new investments and expand production in an industry which is vulnerable to strike action and the huge potential risks of the damage associated with such action (Jones, 2012; Williams, 2012a; Gunning, 2012; Pelsner, 2013). The drive to reduce labour costs and increase farmers’ financial flexibility will further the process of labour-shedding and casualization among the deciduous fruit industry’s work force. Other labour cost saving strategies such as continued mechanisation, piece rates for piecework and reduced working hours, as well as farm mergers and consolidations will also be implemented increasingly. In fact, various reports have already indicated a reduced number of seasonal workers being employed for shorter periods since the introduction of the new minimum wage in March 2013 while lay-offs have also occurred. There is greater emphasis on productivity and retaining the most productive workers. In some cases workers have been evicted from farms, while others have been charged for previously subsidised electricity, water, and housing (Du Toit & Ally, 2003; Barrientos & Visser, 2012a; Anon., 2013b; Hattingh, 2013; Coetzee, 2013a; Coetzee, 2013b; Pienaar, 2013b; Sherry, 2013; Gerber, 2013d; Smith, 2013).

Another negative consequence of the strike is that it will become more difficult to redeploy farm workers displaced as a result of productivity gains in agriculture. This means that over time agriculture will be less and

less able to create significant numbers of semi-skilled and unskilled jobs (Conradie, 2007). Therefore, despite the gains in minimum wage levels, workers' negotiating positions have become weaker because they are competing in an oversupplied labour market (Du Toit & Ally, 2003).

According to Kahn and Bernickow (2013) and Joubert (2013) farmers' behaviour towards the strike also damaged agriculture's cause. Their refusal to consider local-level wage mediation, but instead submit themselves to the more formalistic and legalistic sectoral wage determination process across the board contributed to the prolongation of the strike and continued insurrection. For organised agriculture the increased minimum wage had a knock-on effect from Cape Town to Musina and has significantly altered the economics of farming. Unfortunately the lesson that the dynamics of labour relations in South Africa are changing rapidly has been learnt the hard way. Hence, farmers might no longer find their old beliefs—such as those about collective bargaining, and that having unions on their farms negatively disrupts the relationship between the farmer and his workers—either useful or sustainable. The lessons to be learnt also includes the complexities of dealing with new, dynamic power relationships between unions, workers and/or worker committees, management and other interest groups, and, crucially, the danger of ignoring the broader social conditions that affect workers and their families.

Conclusion

Many lessons have been learnt during the strike action of November 2013–January 2013 and it is quite evident that the farm workers' strike was about much more than a strike for a better living wage. It suggests something bigger and more complex than a farmer-worker relationship. It must be emphasised that many farm workers maintain good relations with their employers, and are happy in their jobs and working environment. Not all farmers in the strike-affected districts should be considered as indifferent to the socio-economic needs of their employees. Many farm workers were already being paid above the minimum wage levels even before the new sectoral wage determination came into being. Among this group were farm workers who, although sympathetic towards and in favour of increased wage levels, refrained from participating in the strike and were opposed to the violent nature of its occurrence. It was apparent that very little strike action occurred on farms where liberalised forms of paternalism were still practised and where farm workers felt that their positions were at stake.

However, the focus of this article is on those who did participate in the strike and it endeavours to discern their reasons for doing so. The vulnerable nature of seasonal work, coupled with poor services and squalid living conditions, changing socio-economic conditions in rural agriculture and the changing ethnic nature of the agricultural work force, as well labour brokers competing with one another, to name but a few, were all contributing factors to the outbreak of the strike. Strike unrest was the only escape valve for the powerless poor, increasingly under pressure as a result of the rise in the cost of living, to demonstrate that they were dissatisfied. For this reason the entire community of the Stofland informal settlement at De Doorns, like so many other rural settlements in towns affected by the strike, came out in support of the workers' demands and added their own demands: better housing and sanitation, access to work and an end to inequality (Smith, 2012; Williams, 2012b; Hattingh, 2013; Coetzee, 2013b; Kahn & Bernickow, 2013).

Robb and Davis (2010) argue that negative attitudes of some farmers as primary employers, low wages, increased supply of surplus labour and lack of service delivery all contribute towards polarising and undermining the relationship between the white farming community and black South African residents that

remain the majority of the labour pool. The Marikana and Western Cape agricultural strikes have proven that the working-class poor are prepared to challenge socio-economic inequalities through strike action. It can be assumed that especially agricultural workers of the deciduous fruit industry will in future reach for the strike weapon again precisely during harvest time, since it proved to be very effective to force down their demands. In such circumstances politicians and trade unionists are certain to take an opportunistic advantage of the situation to further their own interests. The avoidance of such a scenario would entail a concrete intervention by organised agriculture in tackling socio-economic issues such as poverty which could permeate labour disputes. Intervention in wages, education and housing is necessary to give farm workers a starting place for better, value-added socio-economic upliftment (Joubert, 2012; Williams, 2012b; De Lange, 2013).

According to the BFAP the time of cheap labour on farms is over (Sherry, 2013). In future farm labour in the Western Cape would probably be stabilised by the introduction of a smaller core of well-paid, highly skilled workers, supplemented with a skilled and productive corps of better-paid casual labour from townships, of which all would most likely be unionised (Du Toit, 1993; Du Toit & Ally, 2003). While such a reorganisation and reform of labour practices could be very beneficial for agriculture in terms of labour relations and eventually productivity and profitability on the farms it remains a moot question how such restructuring will affect South Africa's huge rural unemployment problems.

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