

Angela Conway, Southern Cape Land Committee

The Changing Face of Rural Workers

IN CONSIDERING THE changing face of rural workers one has to also consider issues of tenure, housing, access to basic services and agrarian reform. Rural workers' labour and employment are closely linked to tenure rights. This paper is based on the experiences of the Southern Cape Land Committee in the rural areas of the Southern and Eastern Cape. The paper considers the challenges and mobilisation strategies of rural workers, primarily in these areas.

Farm workers

The majority of workers in rural areas work within the agricultural sector, primarily as farm workers on commercial farms. In the past farm workers and their families lived on the farms where they were employed. Workers' tenure and labour rights were intrinsically linked and skewed power relationships were entrenched into an owner/serf-like relationship. In some rural areas, particularly KwaZulu Natal (KZN) and Mpumalanga, farm workers or labour tenants lived on the land for generations, using portions of the land for small-scale agriculture. These workers enjoyed insecure tenure rights and faced eviction from their homes if they lost their employment. However, they did have permanent jobs and a relationship with farm owners, often very paternalistic, which afforded workers and their families some protection. At the same time farm workers living on farms were able to supplement income from small-scale agriculture, wood collection and similar activities.

With the strengthening of tenure rights in the form of ESTA (the Extension of Security of Tenure Act), which does not prevent but rather regulates evictions, farm owners have become increasingly reluctant to house workers on

their farms. There has been a spate of evictions and relocation of farm dwellers into urban townships, resulting in impoverishment, a loss of cultural ties and unemployment. Commercial farmers now opt to source casual workers from neighbouring townships. The general trend is that workers wait at pick-up points in the township where farmers pick them up in large trucks and drop them off after work. These workers are usually employed on a daily (or sometimes weekly) basis without contracts or benefits and with no relationship between workers and employers. Workers are very vulnerable as principles of "no work / no pay" usually apply meaning employers are not bound to pay for sick leave, rain days, public holidays and so on. There are high levels of non-adherence to labour legislation and limited or no enforcement from the Department of Labour, aggravated by the lack of effective unions in the sector.

Increasing casualisation has also meant a re-gendering of the workforce on farms, with women employed as the majority of casual and seasonal daily workers. These women remain unskilled and are loaded with the responsibility of being the bread winners, as well as domestic responsibilities and motherhood. With high levels of unemployment nationally even vulnerable employment opportunities such as these are sought after. In intensive farming areas such as the fruit farming area of the Langkloof there is an ongoing influx of people moving into small, rural towns seeking casual and seasonal work. This has led to the formation of labour dumps with sprawling informal settlements, backyard shacks and overcrowded RDP houses in rural towns. Services are inadequate and schools catering for children with a home language different from the predominate language of the area are non-existent. During off-season times, unemployment and poverty levels peak resulting in pockets of extreme poverty and hardship. Many employers do not adhere to the labour legislation, in particular injury on duty procedures, and there are a large number of workers disabled at work who receive no compensation, and live in rural towns in abject poverty.

There is also a growing move by farmers to use labour brokers to source and manage farm workers. The labour brokers often source workers, usually young women, in the former homelands like the Transkei. Workers find themselves trapped into slave-like conditions as they already owe the broker the transport

costs from their homes to the farming areas before they have even secured their first contract. People are housed in appalling conditions with limited access to legal avenues for support in challenging unjust work and living arrangements. A particular challenge facing farm workers is the formation of so-called equity schemes. Commercial farmers, often those who are struggling to remain commercially viable, may apply to the state land reform programme to turn their farms into "equity schemes or trust farms". Farmers can then access grants to make workers shareholders on the farms. The schemes are in the main designed by consultants without an adequate process to address the existing skewed power relationships, leaving workers ill informed of their rights and ill equipped to serve on decision-making structures such as Boards of Directors. Thus workers become token shareholders. Often these same shareholders / part owners are dismissed from the farm and leave with no compensation or course to seek legal redress. After many cases of abuse of equity schemes, a moratorium was placed on the programme, but it has been lifted recently.

Another group of farm workers whose lifestyles have significantly changed are the itinerant workers. In areas like the Karoo a number of farm workers are itinerant workers, with particular skills like fencing, who move from farm to farm securing contract positions. Traditionally these itinerant workers, or "Kartetjie Mense", travelled on donkey carts with their entire families and lived in houses provided by farmers for the duration of their contracts. Within the democratic South Africa the lives of these itinerant families have changed radically. Farm owners, fearing claims to tenure and occupation rights, are no longer willing to house entire families for any length of time and will only provide short-term accommodation for single male workers. At the same time there is growing pressure on parents to ensure children attend school, and thus women and children no longer travel on the carts. They remain in one place while their male partners travel and seek work, often away for months at a time. Dotted around the Karoo are settlements of women and children, many living in tiny, makeshift plastic structures located near rural, farm schools. These women live in extremely harsh circumstances, aggravated by the harsh climate, and struggle to keep their children fed and in school. They are often forced to collect the leftovers or discarded vegetables on neighbouring

farms, sometimes illegally. There is growing pressure from surrounding commercial farmers and local authorities to relocate the families into urban townships, which people are strongly resisting, fearful of losing their culture, history and camaraderie, and of the crime and discrimination they might face in townships.

Rural workers affected by the privatisation of state assets

In line with neoliberal fiscal policies, the ANC government has pursued a policy of privatisation of state assets like the forestry and railway industries. This has had a huge impact on rural workers who were employed within these industries. Towards rationalising the railway system and increasing profits, small, rural railway stations have largely been shut down, leaving entire settlements of former workers retrenched, dependent on state grants and living in a no-man's land where neither the new owners of the railway system, Transnet, nor local authorities take responsibility for providing services. The residents of the railway settlements occupy large, sturdy railway homes and have employed diverse strategies to supplement their livelihoods. They are resistant to relocation into crowded urban townships. Where Transnet has maintained some workers, this compromises the mobilisation of the settlements as workers are restricted in their actions fearing losing their work. In the forestry industry privatisation has severely compromised workers' employment and tenure conditions. Commercial plantations have been leased to business corporations and indigenous forests transferred to SANParks, both of which are clear that they are in the business of trees not of housing or people. Workers housed in forestry settlements for generations (where they were originally forced to live to be on 24-hour guard for forest fires) have established vibrant communities, and now face retrenchment and relocation to urban townships despite the fact that they live on state land which is a so-called priority for redistribution. The negotiations around the privatisation process took place with unions in the workplace, thus excluding the women whose lives and futures were intrinsically affected. The struggle for secure tenure and the transfer of the settlements under the jurisdiction of local authorities has been an intense and protracted process. While there have been some victories, with a number of settlements now transferred to the relevant local government

and processes of upgrading and securing ownership of houses underway, there is a renewed strategy of forced eviction from SANParks. They have begun evicting families of workers as soon as the worker dies and have now slapped rental arrears notices on the occupiers of the houses.

The privately owned forestry plantations are decreasing their permanent labour force and are outsourcing work by placing contracts out to tender. The tender requirements are prohibitive to the majority of forestry workers who are forced to work for contractors as casual workers without the protection afforded to permanent workers.

Workers affected by the conversion of agricultural land

Land continues to be a commodity used to generate profits. With the deregulation of markets and the rising costs of production commercial farmers are seeking other ways to use the land to generate profits. There is a trend to convert and develop agricultural land, particularly into elite golf estates or game farms. This is having an impact on rural workers, particularly farm workers and dwellers.

Farm dwellers' skills and lifestyles are not considered congruent with elite, rich developments resulting in evictions and displacements from farms to urban townships. Developers make promises of employment and investment opportunities which do not materialise except at best in short-term contracts secured during development or low-skilled jobs as cleaners and maintenance workers on the estates. Large estates generally use labour brokers and even outsource their transport to companies rather than using local taxi corporations. In exchange vast tracts of productive land and huge quantities of water are gobbled up for the use of an elite few at the expense of food production, land redistribution and sustainable rural development.

State land forms part of the conversion agenda, especially land for conservation purposes. Despite principles and policies of "people in parks" and biodiversity, evictions and loss of jobs continue. State departments, especially SANParks, are resistant to considering ways to include rural people in conservation programmes and extreme pressure is placed on people to relocate, including through raised

rentals, shutting off access roads and incentives of employment offered to those who relocate. Entire communities face the threat of relocation, like the 23 families living at Coleske, in the Baviaanskloof, who are farm workers who lost their jobs during the conversion process.

The response of rural workers

Rural people are committed to preserving rural lifestyles and cultures. While young people continue to migrate to the urban centres they often come back to the rural areas when they fail to secure work. There is a passion which underpins the mobilisation of rural workers and dwellers resulting in a number of strategies, organisations and movements.

Farm workers organisations

Traditionally farm workers have not been well organised. The challenges of organising are compounded by geographic isolation, the fact that the workplace is on privately owned land, high levels of intimidation and collusion between farmers and law enforcement agencies. There is an absence of strong unions within the farm worker sector at a national level and farm workers are often mistrustful of union organisers who are perceived as taking membership fees and never being seen again. However, there are growing levels of organisation and resistance amongst farm workers and dwellers.

In the winelands of the Western Cape levels of unionisation are increasing through unions like Sikhule Sonke. In other areas farm workers are organising into on-farm or area committees, bringing together farm workers and dwellers from a number of different farms. Through these structures workers are able to challenge non-adherence to labour legislation, unfair labour practices and to engage with relevant state departments to address the service needs of farm workers and dwellers. The committees also build levels of organisation and leadership amongst farm workers, laying a solid foundation for future possible unionisation.

In the Western and Eastern Cape farm worker structures in a number of districts are currently running a campaign targeting the Department of Labour

for better inspections on farms and enforcement of labour legislation. Women, who are usually only employed as seasonal workers, are able to play a leading role in the organising structures where the male workers might feel intimidated and fear loss of employment. This has also resulted in a challenging of skewed gender power relationships. These local structures are engaging at provincial level through exchanges and joint actions which begins to build provincial movements. However, farm workers are still not well organised nationally, and at a regional level in Southern African. While there have been some attempts at national campaigns and to foster solidarity with farm workers in Southern Africa, representatives often struggle to secure mandates and grassroots support within such a diverse, scattered sector.

Forums of rural workers

One of the primary challenges to organising rural workers is geographic isolation. Workers seize opportunities to come together and build movements and sectoral forums, strengthening the voice of rural workers and women not represented by workplace unions. As an example, the 16 forestry settlements on state and private land in the Southern Cape formed the Forestry Indaba in June 2000. The Indaba has successfully mobilized in all 16 settlements, engaged in a number of mass actions, made presentations to portfolio committees, engaged decision makers and undertaken research to support the call for secure tenure and upgrading of the forestry settlements. The Forum is now taking up the SANParks evictions. The Indaba has achieved some major successes, in particular securing the tenure of the majority of settlements within commercial plantations. There is an effort by employers to undermine the Indaba through setting up workplace bargaining councils or structures and "community liaison officers". The more outspoken Indaba members, especially women, have been targeted and offered paid positions to effectively silence dissenting voices. Another challenge faced by the Indaba is pressure to formalize and register as a legal entity of sorts. State and corporate bodies are now refusing to engage with a "loose structure". The Indaba continues to grapple with these issues and remain focused on their vision for mobilisation.

The Transnet settlements of the Central Karoo have also formed a regional forum to drive the campaign for secure tenure and upgrading of settlements. This structure has led mass actions calling for provision of services and upgrading of houses. In 2010 the Transnet Forum engaged the Western Province Premier and Transnet CEO and secured an agreement for upgrading of the settlements and transfer of title of the houses to occupiers. This is now being challenged again by Transnet, who have issued letters of eviction to a number of occupiers. So the struggle continues!

Strengthening rural livelihoods

Rural workers and dwellers continue to explore and expand strategies to strengthen rural livelihoods, support resistance to relocation, both voluntary and forced, to urban centres and combat the effects of job shedding. There is a growing move towards taking control over food production through agro-ecological food production sites. Farm dwellers and other rural settlements have mobilised for access to the means of production (land, water and seed) and are producing their own nutritional food. This strengthens tenure rights and challenges the commodification of food and the high prices of rural food outlets.

Small-scale agriculture is the primary means of strengthening rural livelihoods. Each rural settlement has an organisation of small-scale farmers who supplement their food and in some cases generate income. Farmers are becoming more organised locally and nationally to influence statutory policy and budget towards a climate more supportive of small-scale agricultural production. At the same time people are exploring appropriate and affordable methods of service provision to counteract the strategy that it is too expensive for local authorities to support small rural settlements.

Conclusion

The challenge facing rural workers and dwellers is to build movements across geographic and sectoral divides. While there are pockets of resistance and organisation, there is no united voice which draws together farm workers, forestry

workers, railway workers and other rural workers and dwellers to challenge the root causes of discrimination and patterns of accumulation. The issues go way beyond organisation of workers and as such the unions have not been successful in building a strong organised rural workforce. The challenges of geographic spread and skewed power relations in rural areas make it particularly difficult to organise and build accountable social movements with grassroots support. The fact that the ANC government has identified rural development as one of their key pillars demonstrates growing awareness around rural issues. The time is ripe for rural workers, rural women and men, to strengthen mobilisation strategies and build social movements towards a vibrant and just rural countryside.