

# Farmworkers strike

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JABU MATIKO reports on one of the first strikes by members of the newly-formed National Union of Farmworkers (NUF).

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"Our strike is a test ground for all the farmworkers. All the surrounding Magaliesburg farmworkers are asking us how are we coping with the strike, what is the employers' next move?" - LAZARUS MOTSWADI, farmworker.

It is at one of the recently organized nurseries - Impala Nurseries in Magaliesburg - that the National Union of Farmworkers (NUF) faced its major challenge from farm employers. One hundred Impala farmworkers were dismissed for going on a strike for better wages. The strike began on the 18th April after workers demanded the farm owner begin negotiations with the NUF.

## Grievance of workers

The final outburst against the repressive situation at Impala Nurseries occurred after eight months of intensive discussion by workers about their working and living conditions. According to Johannes Motsila, a shop-steward on the farm, the farm-owners were

made aware of the workers' grievances in October 1987. All workers were promised an increase in early January 1988. No exact amount of money was, however, demanded by workers.

The conditions faced by Impala farmworkers are described by a woman worker, Lorencia Mbewe, as "degrading and reducing female workers to slaves..... Female planters are not paid the same wages as male planters. Women use their bare heads to carry heavy manured soil. After 33 years of service in the Impala Nurseries I am still paid R198 per month". A shop-steward who is living in the farm with his wife and one child said "I can't allow my wife to work at Impala. I don't think I could bear looking at her working like a slave, doing the same job with some men but paid a

lower wage. That I can't accept".

In addition to bad working conditions all workers are accommodated in the farm compounds. One room is allocated irrespective of the size of the worker's family.

This situation laid the basis for worker unity and the strike action in

elected by the 100 Impala workers demanded that the farmers begin talking to the NUF about a wage increase. According to Motswadi, a shopsteward, "This was a plain wage grievance and no exact amount was demanded." It appears the workers had accepted the false image of the farmer as a benevolent father. Wor-



*"I can't allow my wife to work like a slave...."*

*Photo: Tsuks Mokolobate/Learn and Teach*

Impala Nurseries. After workers had discussed the exploitative and oppressive conditions they are subjected to, they decided to meet with their employer. According to a shop-steward workers had begun to prioritise their wage demand after they were organized by NUF.

On April 18 three shop-stewards

had raised a wage grievance, but at the same time left it to the farmer to decide how much to offer. However the farmer's attitude to their wage grievance forced workers to be militant. According to the Weekly Mail, about 100 workers went on a strike after the farmer told the shopstewards to "F.....off".

Before midday he sacked the strikers and told them to leave the farm compound by the next morning.

### **Workers' experience on farms**

Farmworkers are not covered by the country's labour laws. They find it difficult to belong to trade unions and develop methods of collective bargaining. No minimum wages are laid down, and farmworkers are not covered by the Unemployment Insurance Fund when they lose their jobs. According to workers at Impala, there is no old age pension. Farmworkers are simply evicted from the farm compounds and dumped in homelands when they are too old to work.

Mbewe describes her experience of the exploitation on the farms as follows: "My husband started working on this farm in 1952. In 1953 he started working as a builder. He is the only worker who is still alive among those who were building the compounds we are now evicted from. Before we were sacked he earned R297 per month".

### **Farmers' attitudes**

Farmers resist unionisation of workers. Trade unions organise workers to be in a stronger position to struggle to challenge employers against the exploitative and oppressive conditions in the workplace. Farmers also oppose the extension of labour law to farms. Farmers

want to protect their profits by enjoying the advantage of not being subjected to legislation governing workers. The only law protecting workers at the workplace which does apply to farmworkers is the Workmens Compensation Act.

The strike by Impala farmworkers is a demonstration of workers' rejection of paternalism and exploitation coupled with state oppression. The struggle of Impala Nurseries workers for recognition of their shopstewards and living wages was sharpened as the farmer dismissed all workers who were on strike. Dismissals were used by Impala management to destroy the initiative and motivation beginning to develop in organised farmworkers.

As most farmworkers live in farm compounds, evictions and trespass charges strip workers of the right to shelter after dismissals. Like Sapekoe Tea estate workers, organised by FAWU, who were dismissed for basic union rights and thereafter evicted from the company premises in 1987, Impala workers were sacked immediately after the strike. On June 17, one month after the strike began, workers were evicted from the farm through a court order applied for by Impala Nurseries management. According to Moletsane, on Monday June 20 the farm management ordered that workers who had remained on the farm because of a lack of alternative accomodation, be

forced off the farm premises. Moletsane claimed that worker's belongings were put in a tractor and thrown in the street, about 1,5 km away from the living compounds.

Workers told SALB that unemployed workers from the surrounding farms were hired. In addition, white school children came in after school to work on the farm for R10 per day. The hiring of scab labour has not shaken the unity of workers.

### Co-ordination of the strike.

Motswadi says that 20 workers defied the strike decision taken by the majority of workers. "We understand their problem. Most are very old, and the only way of living is to continue working for Impala Nurseries. Dismissals also mean losing farm accomodation", said one striker.

Before the evictions workers were holding meetings in the compound. The compound has in fact strengthened worker organisation during the strike as all strikers attend all meetings. As in many conflicts between employers and workers, Impala workers also allege the police visited them twice. On the first occasion it is alleged the police requested workers to sign some documents which they referred to as "job contracts with Impala Nurseries, but workers refused to do so the NUF organizer had told us nothing about such forms".

### Launch of NUF

The Impala strike took place two months after the launch of NUF.

According to the NUF organiser, about 1200 workers travelled from Natal, the Western Cape, Northern Natal and the outskirts of Johannesburg to attend the launch.

National office bearers elected at the launching congress of NUF were Lazarus Musekwa as president, Moses Mahlangu as treasurer and Tshaka Moletsane as general secretary of the union.

The NUF organiser claims the union had membership in the Tsitstikama Forest, at Sentrachem farms in Natal, Fun Fair Chickens, pig farms in Worcester and Anglo-American Corporation farms.

### NUF resolutions

At the launching congress the union adopted a number of resolutions. The political policy resolution declares that the union "accepts and recognises all the historical documents noting the liberation struggle. The union however believes that worker interests, demands and views can best be served only through the development by workers of a Workers Manifesto". NUF argues that its membership is drawn from different ideological persuasions ranging from Inkatha, to United Democratic Front and Azapo, and therefore it commits it-

self to work towards developing and enlarging from time to time the Workers' Manifesto through the regular assembly of worker representatives.

As an affiliate of NACTU, the NUF declared its commitment to the principles opposing racism, capitalism, and imperialism.

At the launching congress NUF requested that NACTU seriously reaffirm its non-aligned and non-sectarian position and work for the unity in struggle of all political movements. NACTU office bearers,

workers and officials were also requested not to use the federation as a political tool to enhance their own political beliefs.

In conclusion the union stressed that contact with and support for the Southern African Trade Union Co-ordinating Council (SATUCC), should continue to ensure that regional solidarity is built amongst workers. NACTU was requested to continue its dialogue with the Organisation of African Trade Union Unity (OATUU), and seek affiliation with OATUU.