

Farm Worker Uprising on the Western Cape: From “Flexible Work” to “Moment of Madness”

By Jesse Wilderman

“We outnumber the farmers eleven to one and they still hoard the economic power and still talk to us with disrespect. We could kill all the farmers in a weekend if we wanted to and this land will be fucked up - it could happen in one day. But until this strike we were never able to get all the farm workers and all of us to come out and fight back”

Local Councilman and supporter of the farm worker protests

In late 2012 into early 2013, tens of thousands of farm workers and their allies across more than twenty-five towns around the Western Cape of South Africa, engaged in a historic series of explosive and unexpected work stoppages and protests. There had not in living memory been a protest that reached this scale and intensity, even though grievances around low wages, inadequate housing, and unfair treatment have plagued farm workers for years; the perceived power of the farm owners coupled with a lack of large, formal organisation or trade unions among farm workers seemed to have stacked the deck against collective resistance.

Not only was the scale of this uprising historic, it displayed a form of resistance outside the “paternalistic” discourse that characterised relationships between farm workers and farm owners; as Ewert and Du Toit explain about traditional farm worker resistance, “. . . they rely on the ‘weapons of the weak’, operating within the framework of the paternalistic moral universe itself, relying on individual appeals, consensual negotiations, and the avoidance of the appearance of open conflict” (2005). Yet this uprising was defined by open conflict, including burning of vineyards, protest marches, and pitched battles with the police; farm workers and their allies adopted an overt, confrontational, and adversarial approach in an apparent break from the traditional discourse.

If this were not puzzling enough, employment regimes on Western Cape farms, mirroring trends across the globe, were shifting to become more “flexible”; farm owners, seeking to cut cost and avoid worker protections, were transforming the farm workforce away from permanent, on-farm labour to a more seasonal, off-farm and migrant labour force. Popular discourse might suggest that these shifts create a more vulnerable and transitory workforce, making organising collective resistance even more difficult. Yet it was these “vulnerable” seasonal workers who were at the heart of the protests.

Given these trends and history, along with trade unions’ mostly failed attempts at organising farm workers on a large scale in South Africa, we must ask what made this moment of mass uprising possible?

Changing Workforce - Breaking Down Barriers to Collective Action

Over the last twenty years, the agricultural sector in South Africa

has reacted to increased cost and regulatory pressures - a loss of trade protections and subsidies, a more powerful and consolidated set of buyers with greater demands for higher quality and lower cost, and increased government protections for farm workers and farm-dwellers - by transforming their workforces so that seasonal labourers often outnumber permanent workers; greater numbers of farm workers are living off farms, particularly in growing informal settlement communities on the hillsides of farming towns; permanent migrants make up a growing part of the workforce. In the town of De Doorns at the epicentre of the uprising, estimates suggest that eighty percent of farm workers are seasonal labour, and over ten thousand people - and growing - live in the informal settlement (interviews with Gouws 2014; Visser 2014).

While in some ways exacerbating income insecurity and worker vulnerability, this transformation of the workforce and spatial living arrangements is also breaking down some of the key mechanisms of social control and impediments to collective resistance - namely paternalism and isolation. The traditional paternalistic power relationship so dominant among permanent, on-farm labour in the Western Cape farms dictated that land owners were both providers for the farm “family”, including farm workers, and the final authority over all those who lived on their land. Not only did this social formation create dependence on the farm owner for housing, transport, water and other basic necessities, but the relationship of hierarchy and domination was woven into the social construction of farm owner and farm worker identities (Ewert & Du Toit 2005).

Unlike the traditional permanent worker living on the farm, seasonal workers, particularly those who live off farms in settlement communities, are not considered-- by themselves or the farm owner-- to be part of the farm “family”; their relationship with the farm owner is more transactional and temporary with a life experience that extends beyond the farm. As one farm worker explains “[M]any of these seasonal workers have come from other places, had other jobs, speak other languages so they know their rights and are less likely to worry about what the farmer thinks of them” (interview with Prins 2013).

In addition, the transient nature of seasonal work, along with the concentration of large numbers of workers in settlement communities, is breaking down barriers to collaboration and sharing of grievances, while strengthening and broadening informal networks and relationships; this explains why the hub of activity and organisation for the pro-

tests tended to be the settlement communities. The organisation of the strike occurred in the communities - from twice daily meetings on the local rugby field, to nightly house-by-house communication, to the use of whistles to bring people out of their houses in the morning - was critically facilitated by the concentration of farm workers in one area (interviews with Witbooi 2013; Marowmo 2014; Jacobs 2013). This living arrangement also made organising possible without the need for significant resources; as a key strike committee member from one settlement explained, "[T]housands of people were mobilised by just a few of us without speakers, money, car - we had nothing . . . just using our voices and going around telling people" (interview with Yanda 2013).

Thus, the transformation of the workforce to more seasonal, off-farm and migrant labour - while in many ways intensifying the grievances and precarity driven by poverty and unemployment - actually made organising and resistance more possible by creating new spatial living arrangements; while weakening some of the key bindings of paternalistic social construction.

A farm owner summarised this effect by saying that "[S]easonality caused this 'disaster' - all those new people sitting up there in those settlements - which just keep getting bigger and bigger-- with nothing to do for much of the year" (interview with De Wet 2014); for him the expansion of "seasonality" and "settlements" and "new people" demonstrated the breakdown of the old order - the re-negotiation of the relationship between farm workers and farm owners, the shifting spatial arrangement of rural communities, and the changing make-up of the workforce.

From Moment of Madness to Organisation, Power, and Change

The story of this uprising thus shows that the drive by various forms of capital around the world to create a more "flexible" workforce can also provide new opportunities for organising and collective action. This collective resistance may take its own form and character relying on stories, structures, and strategies that are less familiar and perhaps less easily translated into traditional mass membership-based social movement organisations or trade unions. As Campbell explains, ". . . contemporary transformations in capitalist production shape and make possible *certain forms* of struggle" (citing Hardt and Negri 2001).

In this case, the changes brought on by the transformation of the workforce - along with a set of widely disseminated and unmediated stories of unfairness and resistance; cadres of coordinating units of seasoned activists and informal community networks; and a set of easily replicable tactics of strikes and disruptive street protests - created space for not simply an organising campaign, but what could be described as a "moment of madness" (Tarrow 1993). This is a moment when sudden collective action spread beyond the incremental planning capacity of organisers, where more volatile and experimental forms of resistance emerged. The question then for social movement organisations, particularly trade unions, is how to support and amplify this energy without seeking to control it;

how do organisations continue to provide a supportive organisational context where new repertoires of resistance can be refined, where the energy of the moment can be translated into strategic action that unites the broader community of the rural poor.

The story of the uprising also highlights the distinction between *mobilising*, which is primarily about moving pre-existing structures and networks into collective action around specific issues, and *organising*, which is about building the individual and institutional leadership capacity to act. The distinction is important if we are to explore whether this uprising increased the capacity of farm workers to take further action in the future.

The protests might suggest some approaches to further organising and action - community-based rather than farm-by-farm organising; services, membership, and organisation that speak to a more seasonal and migrant worker identities; building struggle around a broad social base and broad issues of rural poverty and lack of voice. Maybe most importantly, it is critical for established organisations to create the space for "organisational experimentation" and more "learning by doing" in terms of resistance among farm workers and the rural poor - and when moments of madness erupt, to amplify and support the moment in such a way as to build the leadership, networks, and organisation for further action. These moments *can* create opportunities to challenge not only material conditions on the farms but the underlying power relationships holding back broader transformation; as one farm worker explains while reflecting on the uprising, "I will never forget the way people stood together - it was amazing - and we could see the power of togetherness, and I will never forget that we could see that the farmer - for once - was really afraid of us" (interview with Erumas 2014).

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