



Exploited and vulnerable farm workers remain out in the cold

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Farm workers are essential to the economy and food system, but they are poor and vulnerable to exploitation and abuse.

Many evicted farm workers face an under-reported crisis of underemployment, poverty and hunger.

At a time when the future for farm workers looks increasingly precarious, new thinking and fresh ideas are needed.

After 1994, a range of progressive laws were introduced to protect workers.

Farm workers therefore received special protection under the Sectoral Determination for Farm Workers, which establishes legal standards for living and working conditions on farms, including the right to a minimum wage that is adjusted annually by the department of labour.

Research conducted by the

Women on Farms Project in the Northern Cape and Western Cape found that farm workers' rights are routinely violated by farmers.

More than two-thirds of women seasonal workers surveyed are not paid the legal minimum wage, do not have access to toilets in vineyards or orchards, are exposed to dangerous pesticides within an hour after spraying, and are not provided with protective clothes as required by law.

Very few farm workers are members of trade unions, often because farmers do not allow workers to join a union.

With the department of labour not enforcing labour legislation and low rates of unionisation, violations happen with impunity.

For decades an ongoing restructuring of the sector has resulted in hundreds of thousands of farm workers being evicted from commercial farms, and



President Cyril Ramaphosa.

Picture: Yeshiel Panchia

"casualised" – losing homes and full-time employment and being rehired as seasonal or casual workers – or becoming permanently unemployed.

Legislation intended to protect against eviction has instead been used by farmers for how to evict workers legally.

About 20 000 people currently face eviction from farms in the Drakenstein municipal-

ity in the Boland. More than 1 200 cases are currently on the court roll, pending eviction orders being granted by the court.

On separate occasions in 2018 Mcebisi Skwatsha, deputy minister of rural development and land reform, and Alan Winde, then MEC for economic opportunities and now premier of the Western Cape, met with workers and farm dwellers.

Neither politician has yet taken action to assist or intervene.

Before becoming president, Cyril Ramaphosa expressed his support for a moratorium on evictions. In 2014, while deputy president, he asked farmers to halt evictions. He spoke after meeting with farmers and farm labour representatives in Paarl. But this plea was ignored.

A blanket prohibition on legal evictions would likely require a constitutional amendment.

President Ramaphosa revisited this issue during the 2019 election campaign, when he met

with farm workers in Citrusdal.

He also told farmers in Stellenbosch: "We face a serious challenge of evictions", and he urged farmers to treat their workers with human respect.

This is a significant softening of tone from the total ban on evictions Ramaphosa appealed for, five years ago. Now, post elections, there is still no sign of decisive action.

New technologies could accelerate the forced removal of farm workers. Mechanisation is already displacing workers.

A report by the Western Cape department of agriculture and Stellenbosch University found that "smart farming" technologies such as satellite agriculture, sensors, robotics and drones could transform the sector, and anticipated higher yields, reduced costs and higher profits – leaving farm workers out in the cold.

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