

From Flexible Work to Mass Uprising

The Western Cape Farm Workers'
Struggle

By Jesse Wilderman



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paper 4

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Cover photo: Farmworkers in November 2012, during the first weeks of the protest, march on the N1 National Highway near the town of De Doorns on the Western Cape. Shelley Christians/The Times

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**FRIEDRICH
EBERT** 
STIFTUNG

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Farm workers and community members rallying and protesting over wages and poor working and living conditions in the fruit and wine farming towns of the Western Cape. Photograph: Esa Alexander/Sunday Times

"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

"We have paid for the caskets of your families. We have paid for their funerals. We have carried their caskets in church with you, cried with you and mourned with you... We have bought your children's school clothes... I have personally loaned my wedding dress to staff, and the only ball gown I own has been worn to many of your children's matric dances... When you were hungry we have brought you food, when you forgot your lunch I have made you sandwiches. You have been part of our family and part of every celebration we have ever had. If you want to strike today, then don't bother coming back."

Farm Owner in letter to the Cape Times before planned strike action

Introduction

There had never been a strike on Shirleen's farm; she spent most of her childhood and teenage years living on the fruit and wine farms in the Western Cape, where both her parents worked, but had never seen a large scale protest involving farm workers. About 10 years ago, when she returned from living "in town" to work on a wine farm outside of Robertson, conditions for farm workers and farm dwellers hadn't improved. Not only were hours long, pay low, and the work hot and gruelling, but her house on the farm had only two rooms, even though she is married with three children, and there was no toilet in the house; the nearest showers and toilets were about 20 metres from her house and had to be shared with a dozen other families living in the same housing compound.

In early November of 2012, Shirleen turned on her television set to see scenes of thousands of farm workers—poor, black and coloured workers like her—protesting, blocking roads, battling the police, and demanding a minimum wage for farm workers that was more than double the current rate; amazingly, the protests were taking place in the town of De Doorns, not more than 70 kilometres from where she was. She knew right away what she had to do—"I saw De Doorns [protests] on the seven PM news and when I saw De Doorns on the TV, I thought now is the chance that we will all go out and the farmers can see what we are capable of... I just wanted to confirm that the circumstances that I am living under is not enough" (interview 2014). The next day she and her co-workers

refused to go to work on the farm; the day after that they blocked the roads in front of the farm by burning tires and were joined by farm workers from other farms across the river. After several more days of protest, the police intervened to try to stop them and she and her co-workers walked in to town to join the larger protests involving thousands of workers now taking place in the settlement area of Nkqebela on the outskirts of Robertson, where more burning of tires, blocking roads, and battles with the police ensued. By the second week of the protest, the *Daily Maverick* newspaper described the scene:

By Wednesday, the Cape winelands had morphed into a battlefield . . . many roads and thoroughfares were rendered almost impassable by rocks heaped by protestors across the road. Tree branches, lead pipes, barbed wire, and even the turn-off sign to a winery further blockaded the motorist's path... Close to Robertson, fires burned on both sides of the road. The vines of the "Constitution Road Wine Growers" flickered with flame... A steady stream of farm workers appeared out of the smoke shrouding the town. "Eenvyftig!" they shouted, a reference to their wage demand of R150. "Die boere wil vir ons fokol gee!" one yelled: the farmers want to give us nothing. (Nov 15th, 2012)

Massive and unprecedented protests and strikes had erupted among farm workers and the rural poor in over 25 towns in the Western Cape in South Africa, eventually involving tens of thousands of workers and lasting, intermittently, for over 3 months. The extraordinary nature and size of this explosive uprising raises questions of "why now" – why did the protests happen when they did – and what allowed them to reach such a large scale against what most people thought of as nearly impossible odds.

One

The Puzzle: Collective Uprising in a World of Paternalism and Flexible Work

While the main issue associated with the uprising was a demand for an increase in the minimum wage, a myriad of grievances have plagued farm workers and the rural poor in these areas for years. Yet, as mentioned above, there had not in living memory been a protest anywhere near this scale and intensity. The perceived power of the farm owners coupled with a lack of large, formal organization among farm workers seemed to have stacked the deck against overt, collective resistance; before this explosion of action, many observers thought the narrative of the Western Cape fruit and wine farms implied that transformation of working and living conditions would not be prompted by action from below.

Yet not only was this uprising historic in scale and intensity, it displayed a form of resistance outside the “paternalistic” discourse that had come to characterize 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). This uprising in the Western Cape, however, was defined by open conflict; farm workers and their allies adopted an overt, confrontational, and adversarial approach that was an apparent break from the traditional discourse.

If this were not puzzle enough, employment regimes on Western Cape farms, mirroring larger trends across the globe, were shifting to become more “flexible”, with a drop in permanent contracts, a rise in seasonal employment and decreased income security; recent discourse might suggest that this shift creates 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 initiating and mobilising the protests.

This working paper explores these puzzles to better understand what allowed this uprising to emerge and gain unprecedented size and form; in other words, what made it possible for these workers to mobilise and take collective action when more traditional attempts at building organisation and resistance had lacked scale and impact? More specifically, this working paper argues that the changing nature of the workforce, while creating less security, also undermined the key impediments to overt and confrontational collective resistance – namely paternalistic social construction and isolation – while increasing social instability. These changes created more space for overt resistance. But farm workers and the rural poor lacked effective, large-scale institutional or organisational vehicles for channelling grievances into an orderly resolution process, meaning that mobilisation relied, at least initially, on an alternative set of structures, strategies, and stories less mediated by traditional vehicles of large trade unions and formal, membership-based organisation. This gave the uprising a unique set of organising structures and resources of power; as Campbell explains, “...contemporary transformations in capitalist production shape and make possible *certain forms* of struggle” (citing Hardt and Negri 2001).

This paper is broken into four parts: first, it briefly sets the context by explaining conditions for farm workers, traditional impediments to organising, and the basic events of the uprising itself. The second section explores how the ongoing transformation of the workforce among



A protester runs for cover as police take aim during a round of protests in early January, 2013. Three protesters were killed by police and private security during the course of the uprising. Photograph: Halden Krog/Sunday Times

Western Cape farms has implications for the social construction of relationships of power as well as the spatial composition of farming communities and the rural poor, thereby opening the door for more collective forms of resistance. Thirdly, the paper turns to the forms of organisation, solidarity, resources, and power that participants relied on in the uprising. Finally, the paper closes by very briefly exploring some of the challenges and opportunities that arise from this type of resistance by farm workers and the rural poor.

Two

Farm Workers, Organising Challenges, and The Uprising

Understanding the farm worker protests of late 2012 and early 2013 requires some account of the working and living conditions facing farm workers along with what have been considered the traditional impediments to organising, organisation, and collective action. The challenges for farm workers, farm dwellers, and the residents of nearby settlements and townships are closely linked and overlap. At work, many farm workers face extremely long hours, lack access to basic working conditions like drinking water or toilets, and are exposed to health and safety risks like pesticides

or bodily injury. For their gruelling work, many farm workers – until the most recent uprising – were earning a minimum wage of R69 per day. This wage level left farm workers as some of the lowest paid workers in the formal sector of employment (Human Rights Watch Report 2011; Basic Conditions of Employment Act No. 75 of 1997).

One worker describes the resulting poverty and vulnerability: “With the wages we are paid, when you buy your food on Saturday it ends on Wednesday night and on Thursday and Friday you must depend on your neighbour or go back to the farmer and ask for some money or sometimes just go hungry.” (interview with Dube 2013).



A group of farmworkers who participated in the uprising and strike described both fear and determination in their fight against unfair treatment, poverty, and injustice. Photograph: Jesse Wilderman

Conditions for farm workers outside the workplace are also very poor. Fewer farm workers are housed on the farms than in the past, and the on-farm housing that exists is often substandard. Of those workers living off the farms, most live in nearby informal settlements, which are home to a broader group of the rural poor. Residents of these settlements also experience substandard housing, and often inadequate delivery of electricity, water, sanitation and other basic needs. Lack of access to health services and transport also pose significant challenges (Human Rights Watch Report 2011; BFAP Report 2012; Naledi Report 2011).

Yet even with these many and significant grievances facing farm workers and the communities in which they live, trade unions have been mostly unsuccessful at organising among farm workers, with union density around five percent. Organisers cite a range of challenges including employer opposition and the vulnerability of workers as well as an embedded culture of domination and subordination, particularly for workers who live on farms and are dependent on the farm owner for housing and other basic needs. Other impediments to building organisation include the transitory nature of many of the workers and the distance between workers who live on-farms, which limit interactions between groups of workers (Human Rights Watch Report 2011; Naledi Report 2011).

Despite these impediments to organising and lack of large-scale membership-based organisation, massive protests erupted in the farming town of De Doorns in early November 2012, and by early December had spread to towns across the Western Cape, involving not only thousands of workers but the unemployed, youth, and other poor people living in rural areas (interview with Wesso 2013). The exact nature and size of the protests varied from town to town, but generally protest activities involved farm workers and residents of rural settlements marching, blocking roads with burning tires and debris, holding placards demanding R150 per day, and, importantly, refusing to go to work. In many cases, the protests also involved some destruction of property and vineyards as well as confrontations with the police that involved tear gas, rubber bullets, and arrests; three deaths were reported over the course of the protests.

In De Doorns, media reports suggested that “about 8000 farm workers have abandoned vineyards and brought traffic on the N1 highway to a standstill” (*In Edition*, Nov 8th, 2012). In Citrusdal, thousands of farm workers and settlement residents marched into town to deliver a memorandum to government before being

forced to disperse in a pitched battle with police. In Robertson, farm workers blocked the main traffic circle outside the Nkqebela settlement while farm workers who lived on far-away farms took to the streets at the entrances to their farms, picketing and blocking the roads. In Bonnievale, protestors blocked the main entrance to the settlement area until police arrested several protestors and local councilors intervened. In all these cases, large-scale work stoppages were a defining feature of the protests as well as activities to disrupt the movement of goods and people (interviews with Brink 2013; Draghoender 2013; Philander 2013; Dube 2013; Vollenhoven 2014).

Large-scale protests and mobilizations ebbed and flowed over the course of several months before finally coming to an end in early February 2013, when the Department of Labour announced its intention to increase the minimum wage a whopping fifty-two percent – a response to the primary rallying cry of the protestors for a daily wage of R150. While the aftermath of the protests and their final impact on improving conditions for farm workers is contested, there is no question that the uprising was unprecedented and unexpected in its nature and scale, and that it exercised enough power to force government to take some level of remedial action. The questions for this paper are what kinds of changes among a workforce traditionally considered both weak and hard to organise opened the door for this to happen, and what were the critical organising structures, strategies and stories that allowed farm workers and their communities to drive this change.

The 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 – driven by 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; and permanent migrants make up a larger and larger part of the workforce.

This transformation of the workforce and living arrangements is aimed at decreasing labour costs by more aggressively adjusting the size of the workforce based on seasonal needs as well as insulating the farm owner from new responsibilities granted under employment and tenant rights legislation. As a result, more than half of the workers on fruit and wine farms in the Western Cape are now casual or seasonal and a majority of farm workers live off farms (Human Rights Watch Report 2011). In the town of De Doorns, at the epicentre of the uprising, estimates suggest that eighty percent of the farm workers are seasonal labour, and over ten thousand people – and growing all the time – live in the informal settlement community (Interviews with Gouws 2014; Visser 2014). And, with the increasing reliance on seasonal rather than permanent labour, many

households in the settlement communities have a connection to farm work for only part of the year and are forced to find other means to survive at other times, weakening their “farm worker” identity (interview with Prins 2013; Du Toit 2014).

While in some ways creating greater income insecurity and amplifying 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. In the past, the 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, along with its institutions and arrangements, create dependence on – and vulnerability to – the farm owner for housing, transport, water, and other basic necessities, but the relationship of hierarchy and domination became woven into the identities of the farm owner and farm worker alike (Ewert & Du Toit 2005). Within this paternalistic world, for many farm workers “the most important day-to-day question is one’s relationship to and one’s place within this ‘family’ that is the farm” (Du Toit 1993). Coupled with the isolation of on-farm living that limits the influence of competing definitions of self and society, “... paternalism smothers any possibility of resistance” (Du Toit 1993).

Unlike the traditional permanent worker who lives on the farm, seasonal workers, particularly those who live off the 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 much more transactional and temporary, with a life experience that extends well beyond the farm. This transition has been intensified by the growing number of more “permanent” migrant workers moving to the Western Cape fruit and wine areas; the growing

number of permanent migrants is driven – at least in part – by economic challenges in neighbouring countries as well as greater freedom of movement for South African workers after the end of apartheid (interview with Mouton 2014). Many people interviewed suggested that this influx of migrants was also helping to shift the “profile” of the traditional Western Cape farm worker; organisers and farm workers used words like “younger”, “more educated”, “exposure to other things beyond the farm” to describe the changing nature of farm workers brought on by greater numbers of migrants (interviews with Yanda 2014; Witbooi 2014; Jansen 2013).

As the farm owner is removed from his role as landlord, service provider, and in some cases even permanent employer, the bonds and history that help formulate the identities, institutions, and norms of paternalism are greatly weakened; seasonal, off-farm, and migrant workers are more likely to have demands that focus on disparity in outcomes and rights rather than harmony and appreciation of the farm owner’s “gifts” to them (interview with Du Toit 2014). As one farm worker explains “Many 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).

With this in mind, it is less surprising that the seasonal, off-farm workers were credited with initiating the strike and uprising action, particularly in its epicentre of De Doorns; as Tony Ehrenreich, the Western Cape provincial secretary of COSATU, explains about who was involved, “the majority were seasonal and potential seasonal workers – workers who are unemployed and live in those communities . . . the main leadership – the more militant leadership came from seasonal workers” (interview in New Agenda 2013).

This new leadership by off-farm labour was also evident in the primary demand of the protestors that, while more multifaceted in some regions, was primarily about demanding a daily wage of 150 Rand. Unlike on-farm labour, where survival is dependent on a range of services provided by the farmer, the seasonal workers who live in the rural settlements are dependent on their wages and provision of municipal services and social grants. As explained by a Department of Labour official who was involved in helping to mediate the dispute, “Eighty percent of the strike was because they [farm workers] wanted more money and that demand came mostly from the seasonal workers. The seasonal worker is an ordinary worker and has to shop at Shoprite and has to take a

taxi to town and has to pay for water and electricity and these things are all getting more expensive... [the seasonal worker] is not there to see any of the challenges or drought or other issues on the farm, he doesn’t see or care about those issues and is not as compliant as workers on the farm and the low wages [paid] do not speak to his social condition” (2014). In other words, the connection of the seasonal worker to the farm is much more transactional and less susceptible to the relationship and power dynamics that breed paternalistic social construction.

In addition, the transient nature of seasonal work along with the concentration of large numbers of workers in settlement communities is breaking down the isolation and barriers to collaboration and sharing of grievances, while at the same time strengthening and broadening informal networks and relationships; this explains why the hubs of activity and organisation for the protests tended to be the settlement communities, where workers and the broader community could be mobilised around a shared set of frustrations related to poverty and unfairness.

As explained by workers in one settlement community, the initial organisation of the strike and mobilisation – 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 – were critically facilitated by the concentration of farm workers in one area (interviews with Yanda 2013; Witbooi 2013; Marowmo 2014; Jacobs 2013). This living arrangement also made organising possible without the need for significant resources; while organisers from trade unions consistently raised concerns about their ability to reach large numbers of workers with few resources, a key strike committee member from one settlement explained that, “Thousands of people were mobilized 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). Finally, the changing spatial arrangements also allowed for the engagement of people in the rural settlements beyond just farm workers, including the unemployed, people working but not on the farms, youth, and the elderly; as the identities and grievances of these groups become more intertwined, particularly given the more fluid and transient nature of employment, common struggles become more probable and possible (interview with Brink 2013).



Marching farmworkers express their frustrations in early December, 2012, as the protests spread to more towns and communities on the Western Cape. Photograph: Shelley Christians/The Times

Thus, the transformation of the workforce to more seasonal, off-farm, and migrant labour is creating new spatial arrangements in farming communities while severing some of the key bindings of the paternalistic social construction; contrary to most of the popular discourse that global trends toward a more “flexible” workforce make it more difficult to organise collective resistance because workers are more vulnerable and transitory, in this case, the transformation of the workforce – which in many ways has intensified the grievances and precarity driven by poverty, unemployment, and inequality – actually made organising and resistance more possible.

A farm owner summarized the opportunity for resistance created by this transformation, in a pejorative way, by saying that “Seasonality 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” was a visible demonstration of 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 work force.

While some of the key moral and physical impediments to collective action are breaking down, farm workers and their allies had little access to more traditional vehicles of resistance like trade unions or other institutional structures; lacking those vehicles, they relied, at least initially, on motivation by moral urgency, alternative mobilising structures, and mixed sources of power during the uprising.

Four

Getting to Scale, Having an Impact: Stories, Structure, and Action

In terms of the uprising itself, the first large-scale action involving thousands of people was in the town of De Doorns and was inspired by the spark of hope and sense of strategic possibility created by a relatively small but successful farm worker strike on a individual farm near that town (interview with Prins 2013; Yanda 2013; FAWU members at 1st Farm 2014; Knoetze 2014).

The subsequent spread of the protest from De Doorns to thousands of workers and the rural poor in over 25 towns around the Western Cape – a scale partially responsible for giving the uprising its impact – required

the broad dissemination of a compelling story through the media, a group of locally based coordinating organisations, and the sharing of a replicable set of strategies and tactics that were familiar to the rural poor of the settlement communities.

4.1 Framing: Unmediated Stories of Struggle

The question of how information and – as importantly – inspiration was spread is in many ways a question about what kind of “story” was being told by whom and how it reached people. Movement narratives that are successful in motivating people to act generally include the grievance that the community faces, a construction



Farmworkers in the town of Citrusdal face off against a large police presence as they march into town to deliver a memorandum to government demanding an increase in the minimum wage to 150 Rand per day. Photograph: Pedro Kotze

of common identity, and a picture of collective action that can redress the problem (Polletta 1998). The story of the De Doorns protest, as recounted by farm workers in towns to which the protest spread, had all of these elements; every participant in the uprising who was interviewed for this research reported being first inspired to action by seeing this story on television.

A critical element of the television images and story – described as videos of large numbers of black and coloured people blocking the highway, marching in protest, burning tires, throwing stones, holding placards demanding R150 per day, and speaking out against white farm owners who treat them unfairly – was that they were, at least initially, unmediated by professional voices and unfiltered in defining the conflict, risk, and demand. For many farm workers, they saw themselves in the protestors, providing a sense of courage that collective action was possible; as a farm worker who was born and lived her whole life on a farm explains, “We were afraid in the first place and now we are not afraid; we saw De Doorns on the TV and they were farm workers like us and not afraid so we decided we would not be afraid” (interview with Erumas 2014).

These scenes of conflict also awakened a rights-based discourse – in contradiction to the traditional paternalistic discourse – that inspired almost an obligation to participate; as one farm worker explained, “One day we are working on the farms and we see the De Doorns strike on the television and it is coming from farm workers themselves. We are doing nothing but we are sitting there in our houses and every night we see [on the television] the police shooting at them because they are talking about R150 living wage; no one will take them seriously if it is only just them in De Doorns. . . if they are going to win, it will benefit all of us. After that, we decide we are going to join De Doorns” (interview with Jacobs 2013). The lack of formal organisational engagement and professional spokespeople, particularly at the beginning of the uprising, increased the moral power of the protest and framed it with a more genuine and legitimate character. With headlines like “Leaderless farm strike is ‘organic’” (*Mail and Guardian*, Nov 16, 2012), the protests suggested an action by moral urgency rather than planning and coordination.

In addition, the clarity of the demand and, more specifically, the size of the wage increase that workers were demanding – over 100 percent – served to raise expectations and spark indignation. And more than simply increasing expectations, the scale of the increase

signalled the demand for a much broader transformation of conditions for the rural poor in the Western Cape; the workers were articulating “...a wage demand so large as to signify a much broader rejection of the overall system underlying their conditions” (Fischer 1978). And, while having farm worker wage demands at its centre, this broad rejection of the conditions for the rural poor clearly inspired participation beyond a limited set of workers, drawing in whole communities that included the unemployed, youth, and community leaders, perhaps indicating the operation (and deepening) of a broader class consciousness.

In other words, essential to the spread of the protest was a clear framing (McAdam, Tarrow & Tilly 1996) of the struggle of farm workers and the rural poor through direct images and stories of the initial protests in De Doorns unfiltered by professional voices; these stories amplified a shared set of values and convictions necessary for others across the Western Cape to act.

4.2 Mobilising Structures: Coordinating Units, Networks, and Technology

The key structures that allowed for much of the inspiration from the De Doorns protests to be turned into strategy and collective action across many of the farming communities were locally-based organisations or vanguard groups – cadres of pre-existing community-based activists – what might be described as “coordinating units” (Killian 1984). These coordinating units were able to use their know-how and networks to spread large, at times confrontational, collective action, seizing the moment to mobilize well beyond the scale of their membership, resources, or previous efforts.

These “coordinating units” had several characteristics in common: 1) they were able to recognize the opportunity that the uprising presented for much broader mobilization beyond the incremental organisation – building they had done in the past; 2) they were nimble enough to re-focus and take action quickly; 3) they had local, volunteer capacity to do outreach and mobilisation as well as local, informal networks; 4) they had some experience with protest and organising; 5) they had a “social base” which went beyond the workplace and farm workers; and 6) they were linked with other activist and social movement organisations around the Western Cape.



Seasonal workers employed by an outside contractor or labour broker are brought in to work during harvest season. These seasonal workers make up a larger and larger percentage of the workforce and were credited as a major force in launching the uprising.
Photograph: Jesse Wilderman

For example, around Robertson there is a “coordinating unit” made up of a small, socialist trade union (Commercial, Stevedoring, Agricultural, and Allied Workers Union – CSAAWU), a community-based organisation focused on land rights and small scale farmers (Mawubuye Land Rights Forum) and a non-governmental organisation focused broadly on rural issues (Trust for Community Outreach and Education – TCOE); these three groups work together in a relatively formalized alliance, which includes sharing resources and joint campaigns. When these groups first learned about the De Doorns uprising, they quickly called a meeting of their core members, dropped other projects, and developed a mobilizing pamphlet which they distributed not only around the settlement community but by travelling from farm to farm; because they were not able to access some farms, they used their networks to call someone they knew who lived on the farm and notify them that they left the pamphlets under a rock outside the gate. The protest action in the Robertson area started small, but by building on their core membership along with their work and relationships in the broader settlement and farming communities, these organisers were eventually able to spread the protest action to include large numbers of participants. As one of the organisers from Mawubuye explains, “The first day of the strike very few people came out but we got together

and said we must spread the pamphlet and pick a day to come out and support De Doorns; we worked through the night and go from farm to farm... it was popular organisations that made the strike possible here and provided coordination. Farm workers really relied on these groups... We worked long hours to assist farm workers and did all kinds of assistance with everything, even water and food on the picket line” (interview with Jansen 2013).

In addition to recognising the opportunity that the energy from the De Doorns strike created in poor, rural communities, and quickly shifting their focus and resources to help to spread the protest action, these three organisations are structured in such a way as to allow them to draw on their respective strengths and diversity of relationships. As one of the leaders in CSAAWU explains, “We work closely with Mawubuye and small-scale farmers which helps strengthen our social base” (Interview with Swartz 2013); this strengthening of the social base, particularly given that the protests engaged broad swaths of the rural poor, meant that these organisations were better positioned to help the spread of collective action. Given the trends which are re-shaping the rural communities, this approach to organisation speaks to the shifting and broad range of identities and struggles that poor

communities in the rural areas face. As a leader of TCOE explains about their approach, “We look at the rural community as a whole, not fragmenting it, because there is a strong interrelationship between these categories of people... a small farmer can also be a seasonal farm worker, a farm dweller may also work in a canning factory during the peak season – there is a continuum of how people’s livelihoods connect” (interview with Andrews 2013).

Engaging with this continuum gave these organisations deeper networks and local volunteer capacity that, along with their understanding and history, put them at the centre of the action. After word of the De Doorns strike spread, a leader of Mawubuye recalls a story about groups of unorganised farm workers walking long distances during the night to seek out Mawubuye members for help on how to “toi-toi” (protest) (interview with Jansen 2013). These same organisations also held relationships with other organisations across the Western Cape, allowing for some broader levels of collaboration and coordination, more specifically in the form of a Farm Worker Coalition. This is just one example of the many different kinds of coordinating units that were critical to translating the energy of the moment into concrete strategy and action in towns across the region.

While these “coordinating units” played a key role in facilitating participation in the moment of the uprising, these and other organisations also engaged in “influencing” work well before the uprising started; while not immediately directed toward confrontational collective action, this earlier base building work helped establish the “supportive organisational context” (McAdam in Killian 1984), leadership, and networks that would later make the spread of the uprising possible. Activities like “Speak Outs”, political education schools, or training in basic workplace and human rights were used to develop leadership that could later be found among the leadership of the uprising (interviews with Andrews 2014; Jacobs 2013).

While locally-based organisations, with their deep community roots, were the key to spreading the protest on the ground, there were different levels of organisational engagement, with the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) contributing to the spread (and at times contraction) of the protest by using its standing and prominent public profile to encourage participation and provide legitimacy. In theory, the different sets of resources and strengths between smaller, local coordinating units and larger, national organisations

could be complementary in spreading and sustaining the protest; in reality, the challenges of coordination, collaboration, and leadership – particularly when there is not a clear understanding of common purpose, roles, and goals – probably amplified the uprising in the short term but ultimately led to significant amounts of infighting that could create challenges to longer-term collaboration (interview with Ehrenreich 2013).

In addition to the role of pre-existing organisations, informal networks also played a role in the spread of information and participation. The increasingly transient nature of agricultural work means that farm workers are building networks by moving between seasonal jobs or even between individual farms within an area. And, as mentioned previously, the shifting spatial make-up of the farming communities – particularly the growth of settlements – means that workers have more opportunities to build networks with a broader group of other farm workers and also with non-farm workers who live in the same area. Finally, the increasing numbers of migrants – particularly those that move between communities based on the availability of seasonal work – means that more and more networks are being built amongst these groups and between the farming towns. As an organiser from De Doorns explains, “Farm workers are not organised but truth is that they are organised; whenever there is a small thing, things spread because they moved around to other farms and two months and then another farm. They are moving around between farms so people know each other” (interview with Marowmo 2014).

Technology – particularly mobile phones – also played a role in the rapid spread of the strike. Every worker and community respondent who was interviewed for this study had the use of a mobile phone and many of the respondents used both Facebook and WhatsApp as tools to communicate with their networks and engage in group sharing. This technology-based interconnectedness has been part of the ongoing transformation that has broken down some of the isolation faced by farm workers. The increased technology has dramatically increased the speed at which rural communities can communicate with each other and increased the ability to convey a common message, as well as helping farm workers gain exposure to more outside ideas and influences. As a Department of Labour official who has spent his career working with farm workers explains, “Part of the evolution of the sector is also because of technology; 90 percent of those farm workers have a cell phone... I could send a message to a farm dweller

and tell them not to go to work because people are not going to work in De Doorns or Stofland. How do you think service delivery protests spread – the living conditions are the same, the townships are the same and they use social networks to talk to each other and then the government starts to listen. It's 'cut and paste' communication" (interview 2014).

This explanation also points to the role of earlier service delivery protests as a source of building networks, leadership, and informal organisation; in several places, these service delivery protests helped to engage the whole community of the rural poor and develop a set of protest tactics that would be widely used during the uprising. As one activist and researcher of these rural communities explains, "Seasonal workers [living in the settlements] were not organised and had no access to trade unions; people developed civic committees in these townships, with the big innovation of these committees being service-related issues; first they organised around these issues and then also started to take on issues around farm employment and migrants in the area... service delivery issues drove them together" (interview with Kleinbooi 2013).

4.3 Repertoires of Contention: Replicable Tactics and Strategy

Along with formal and informal networks, the basic strategies and tactics that were used in the protest made it more likely and possible for the protest to gain scale. Strategy can be defined as "turning the resources we have into the power we need to get what we want" (Ganz 2010). Tactics are how this strategy gets put into action. Tactics and strategy – or repertoires of resistance – are shaped by the experience and traditions of the collective actors; in other words, "the repertoire is therefore not only what people *do* when they make a claim; it is what they *know how to do*..." (Tarrow 1993).

In this case, as has been previously pointed out, the experiences and leadership of the coordinating units were critical in spreading the protest and shaping the tactics being used, while larger numbers of protestors, given that they reside in settlement areas, had some previous experiences with marches or collective action around service delivery issues. These experiences were part of what allowed repertoires of resistance to emerge among rural communities that were collective and confrontational in nature and outside the traditional paternalistic paradigm of non-confrontational resistance;

as one leader of the strike explained, "We have blocked the road before for housing and service delivery issues . . . if we want everyone to listen to us then we block the N1 [highway]" (interview with Prins 2013).

These tactics were also easily replicable, and this power of imitation – action that was easily recognisable and mimicked – helped spread the uprising. The main tactics of the De Doorns strikers – blocking roads, burning tires, marches, refusing to work, stopping others from working – were all tactics that could easily be picked up by others who wanted to join the protest. At the same time, these tactics could be adapted to local situations and facilitate broad participation beyond farm workers; anyone in the community could join a march, burn a tire, or help block a road (interviews with CSSAWU activist members 2014; Dube 2014). Moreover, the tactics did not require a lot of advance planning or external resources beyond what was easily accessible to most farm workers and the rural poor – most notably their bodies. Other materials like petrol, tires, stones, and hand-written placards were also relatively easy for farm workers to acquire and didn't require coordination with outside support or organisations.

The question then arises as to how the protestors not only achieved scale but turned their resources into power to drive change; while the tactics and actions were similarly adopted among protestors across the region, the stated purpose for these activities varied. Some workers thought that if they caused enough disruption or used their "positional power" – the ability to use their collective strength to disrupt elements of larger society, including the public, other producers, and consumers (Olin Wright 1984; Perrone 1984) – that government would have to intervene and force farm owners to agree to their demands (interviews with Prins 2013; Yanda 2013). Other workers suggested a more structural power – the ability to stop production by withholding labour (Olin Wright 1984) – where a refusal to work, along with blocking replacement labour, particularly as the harvest was about to begin, would force farmers to agree to their demands (interview with FAWU members at 1st Farm 2014). Still others pointed to the idea that media attention – or more symbolic power used to shift power in the arena of public contention (Chun 2013) – would call national attention to the unfairness of their situation forcing the government to intervene, while also forcing farmers to act because of a fear that global consumers would not want to purchase their exports (interviews with Witbooi 2013; Dube 2013). In this last case, farm workers did seem to recognise the potential for increased structural power in

a world of tighter production timelines, increased global competition, and increasing production standards, even if a clear strategy never developed around this during the protests.

In some sense, the protestors were recognising a range of sources of power and leverage, drawing on the resources of both farm workers and the broader community – with workers, the ability to withhold labour; with engagement of the broader community, the ability to disrupt the normal functioning of society; and with both workers and community together, the ability to call public attention to the broad injustices facing the rural poor.

On the one hand, the results of the uprising suggest that structural power, particularly with the ability of farm owners to bring in replacement workers, was not enough to win significant concessions from farm owners even with the increasing demands on and sensitivity of the production process. On the other hand, the government did feel compelled to intervene and raise the minimum wage by the significant amount of fifty-two percent. In many ways, this demonstrates the power of combining broad community engagement with worker-based mobilisation and targeting the government as a key

actor; the challenge, of course, of relying on the government as the chief actor is how to implement these gains when the enforcement and regulatory power of this same government is lacking.

Questions of implementation of gains aside, this kind of joint-struggle approach to building power seemed all the more likely and possible given the changing nature of the workforce and living arrangements of these rural communities. As farm employment becomes more seasonal and workers live off-farm, there is a blurring of the distinction and identity between a farm worker and an unemployed person, between a farm worker and settlement dweller; the issues of the settlement community are now the issues of the farm worker and vice versa, and both are highly dependent on adequate government support and service delivery as well as the wage level on the farms. At the same time, as the identities of these groups become more intertwined, they both face a marginalisation and sense of powerlessness from the employers who are supposed to pay them and the government that is supposed to support them.

This blurring of distinction and the facing of common grievances is important because the primary forms of power employed during the uprising – structural and



A farmworker builds a barricade on the N1 National Highway as the strikes and protests pick up again in early January 2013, after a short hiatus around the holiday season. Photograph: Halden Krog/Sunday Times

disruptive power – only have a chance of being impactful with the participation of both workers and the broader community of the rural poor; if workers were to strike without the support of the broader settlement community, they would be quite easily replaced in their work, while disruption of the broader functioning of society, particularly when facing police repression, requires large numbers and broad support to have any chance of being sustained.

This analysis poses an important question about whether to describe this uprising as a community rebellion of the predominantly black, rural poor who are expressing their outrage at being politically marginalised – without meaningful opportunities for change – and focusing their energy on questioning the state's commitment to fulfilling its obligations. Given the broad community mobilization beyond farm workers, the choice of public space rather than the farms for protest, the tactics borrowed from service delivery protests, the centre of activities being the settlement communities, some articulation of demands beyond the work place, and the focus on government as a key target, there is a strong case to be made that this was a rebellion of the rural poor rather than simply a farm worker uprising. At the same time, one could also make the case that this was primarily an uprising led by black and coloured farm workers targeting white farm owners around a legacy of poverty wages and unbearable living conditions, particularly given the central demand around farm worker wages, the targeting of farms and farm equipment for destruction, the concentrated efforts at stopping farm workers from going to work, the timing of the protests around the beginning of the harvest, and a focus on trying to force the employers to reach an agreement to improve conditions. The answer might be that this uprising was both – a community rebellion and workplace strike rolled into one, where the protest was focused on challenging both the state and the employers, where resources were mobilised to target both of these sources of authority, and where the changing nature of work and the arrangement of rural communities is narrowing the distinction between farm worker and other identities of the rural poor.

In either case, the heavy reliance on disruptive power turned out to be effective at getting government to act. Yet there might have been a “power mismatch” in the protests: many of the underlying power relationships are still defined between farm owner and farm worker day-to-day on farms, but the disruptive power of the protest and the aggregation of the resources of the protestors were in the “streets”. In the aftermath of the strike, many worker interviewees indicated that the relationship with

the farm owner has not changed or become more equal (interviews with Erumas 2014; Shirleen 2014; FAWU members 1st Farm 2014).

In other words, farm workers, through this specific form of collective action, were able to challenge their conditions of poverty but less able to confront the faces of power that dominate daily work life; the resistance and outrage were still “outside the gate” and not “on the farm”. This may explain why farm workers might have been willing to engage in major conflict and confrontation in these protest actions but still indicated high levels of fear around organising trade unions on the farms. As one farm worker explains, “You can lose your job when you join the union, but it is easy to throw stones at the police” (interview with FAWU members at 1st Farm 2014).

The nature of the protest then points to an ongoing difficulty for farm workers in converting temporary mobilisation into the more permanent organisation which could come through work-place based recognition by the employer and the shared consent of a collective agreement (Kuzwayo & Webster 1978). The lack of “recognition” and “shared consent” by farm owners may mean that farm workers must rely either on on-going mobilisation and higher levels of conflict or outside parties – like government – for enforcement and further engagement with farm owners.

The farm worker protest thus gained its scale and impact through a motivation driven by widely disseminated television images of the De Doorns struggle told “by” participants with a clear and aspirational demand, a set of locally-based coordinating units with a specific set of organisational characteristics, an array of relationships built on informal networks that have been expanded and strengthened by the changing nature of farm work and the spatial living arrangements of the rural communities, and communication technology that allowed for the rapid sharing of information. These core factors were aided by an easily repeatable set of tactics and strategies that existed within the experience of the rural poor, exercised both structural and disruptive power, and allowed for broad participation.

These elements give us clues as to how organisers and organisations might engage with the emerging leaders and increasing confidence of some of the protestors to figure out whether the gains of the protest can be institutionalised and built upon or will prove fleeting and temporary.

Five

Key Lessons and Continuing Challenges

The story of the Western Cape farm worker and community uprising of late 2012 and early 2013 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.

Rather than simply a campaign or organising effort, this uprising could be described as what Tarrow calls a “moment of madness” (1993), where a sudden onset of collective action spreads beyond the incremental planning capacity of organisers, where more volatile and experimental forms of resistance emerge, and where the unexpectedness of the uprising gives greater power and urgency to the cause. 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 can be tested and refined and where any gains can be secured and institutionalised? As importantly, how can organisation help translate the energy of the moment into strategic action over time that unifies the broader community of the rural poor around a broad set of issues?

If we assume that organisers and organisations can facilitate agency over time – even if this agency is not determinative *on its own* of the occurrence of further large-scale collective action – we must ask what kind of mobilising structures and organising approaches have the best chance at engaging larger number of farm workers and building leadership and struggle from below. The uprising on the Western Cape seems to suggest that approaches would include:

Taking a community-based organising approach rather than simply an employer-based, farm-by-farm approach. This speaks to the importance of settlement communities as centres of activity and relationships, with fewer impediments to organising. This study suggests

that a spatial dimension is key to building organisation, even if it suggests a different kind of approach and challenge to dealing with workplace issues.

Building organisation that speaks specifically to the new workforce, particularly seasonal and migrant workers. This could mean exploring different models of membership, particularly given that seasonal workers may be unemployed or working at alternative jobs during large parts of the year; this might also mean exploring a different set of services, facilitated through organisation, that address the different needs of these workers. Most importantly, organisations must be able to speak to both the workplace identity as well as the other identities of this changing workforce. The same forces that liberate the farm worker from the paternalistic social construction may also weaken her farm worker identity; if a seasonal migrant only works four months a year on the farm, it may not make sense to her to join a narrowly defined “farm worker” organisation.

Organising and organisations that speak to a broad set of issues and build a social base beyond farm workers. Artificially separating the workplace issues faced by farm workers from the broader issues facing the rural poor narrows the relationship of farm workers and their communities to social movement organisations.

A broader organisational approach also suggests adopting tactics and leadership development activities that allow broad participation – a “horizontal expansion” – rather than being limited to a select number of worker leaders. This calls for organisations that are “of” the community rather than simply allied with the community, and it means that participants must be given meaningful and consequential roles in activities, which in some ways, can reduce centralised control and increase risk. Some elements of this horizontal expansion emerged in the participation of the unemployed, youth, and other community members in the farm worker protests. As Du Toit explains, “...farm worker organisation, if it ever takes root on South Africa's farmed landscape, will much more closely resemble a broad based ‘rural social movement’ than a classical trade union” (2002).

Influencing organisations can be important in building leadership outside moments of game-changing action.

Providing a supportive organisational context that is focused on building capacity and leadership outside the more immediate and direct action – stage setting – provides both confidence and connections amongst the rural poor.

An orientation toward collective problems and collective action rather than individual problems and legalistic action.

Many workers faced a massive farm owner backlash after the uprising – firing activists, launching payroll deductions for benefits that were previously free, adding production quotas – and the challenges that organisations have had in supporting workers during this time proves some of the limits of using the law and institutional processes to resolve conflict in situations of such unequal power. More importantly, the focus on individual problems detracts from a larger movement narrative about the purpose of social movement organisations, reducing their aspirational nature to a more reactive and defensive “job insurance” program. This approach is also disempowering to workers and members, making them reliant on outside and “professional” services that undermine their ability to act independently on a more routine basis. The power of the uprising was its collective nature and its willingness to take the risk of operating outside any prescribed legalistic mechanisms.

A strategic analysis, understanding, and approach to the changing agricultural sector.

While this paper has focused on the organising and power built around mass collective action, organisations hoping to continue to drive and sustain change from below might explore other sources of power, alliances, or approaches based on a deep understanding of the global value chain and the needs and vulnerabilities of its respective actors. Social movements do not happen independent of the context – in this case neo-liberal global capitalism – in which they exist; the power of workers and the rural poor will be limited if we do not more deeply understand who is claiming value and how to enter into arrangements that target the right groups to claim some of that value back. The kind of strategic analysis and decision-making that would be required to recognize this context and engage in sustained campaigning, suggests that spurts of mass collective resistance must have an element of organisation over the longer term.

Even with these approaches, maybe the most challenging aspect of rural transformation still resides in the nuts and bolts of how organisations can speak to the power struggle *on the farm*. In many ways, even a strong organisation of the rural poor would face disaggregation of their power in the daily workings of the farm, where individual farm owners still hold a decision-making authority over smaller groups of workers mostly far removed from regulatory agencies or threats of mass collective action.



Hope for the future: A strike leader, pictured with local children, talks with pride about the uprising. Photograph Jesse Wilderman

These challenges also highlight 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; of course, in the practice of building social movements, organising and mobilising often overlap and contribute to each other. But the distinction is important because organising generally happens over a longer period of time and through more sustained engagement, while mobilisation is more time-limited and often focused around specific events. Even a breakdown of the impediments to collective action coupled with a set of stories, structures, and strategies designed to mobilise the resources of the rural poor in “spurts” of mass resistance doesn’t necessarily speak to the organisation and leadership needed to act consistently over *time* – the ability to both win and hold, and then win again, allowing for more than fleeting progress in really shifting power and wealth to the rural poor.

The protests and their outcomes do not seem to point to any easy answers or approaches to tackle these challenges. This is not to suggest that uprisings like this one are not a critical piece of both making progress and building leadership for further action, but just that they are both hard to replicate consistently over time and that what takes place in between these moments has a dramatic impact on whether progress is temporary and illusive or real and sustained.

Recognising these unanswered questions, it may be most 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 over the longer term 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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