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South Africa

Modern slaves rebel in rural South Africa and win!

- IV Online magazine - 2016 - IV502 - November 2016 -

Publication date: Friday 25 November 2016

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Updated version of article originally entitled “Boycott Robertson’s winery!” Robertson is a small South African town situated in the Breerivier valley, two hours’ drive from Cape Town. It has been nicknamed the wine and roses valley and vine growing plays an important economical role there. 61% of the 28,000 inhabitants are “coloured” to keep to the South African terminology, 23% are black south africans and 15% are white. It goes without saying that “coloured people” don’t live in the pretty Edwardian style town centre but inhabit the out of the city “townships”.

Workers from the Robertson Winery stayed on strike for fourteen weeks. While South Africa is troubled by important social unrest against the ANC and President Zuma whose popularity never ceases to tumble down, the strike that took place at RW is emblematic of working class conditions in rural areas.

In order to try and understand the situation, we have interviewed by telephone two militants we met in 2015 and who had shown to us the harsh conditions for workers on farms and in the food industry. Mercia Andrews is a member of DLF (Democratic Left Front) [\[1\]](#) and has put a lot of energy at defending farm workers conditions, women’s rights and access to land for them, whereas Deneco Dube is a shop steward for CSAAWU (Commercial, Stevedoring, Agricultural and Allied Workers Union) and works at RW.

Since their recent unionisation, workers at RW have discussed about their conditions of work, wage levels, discrimination and inequalities, low pay which triggered off the strike. From the moment they are engaged, black workers (Mercia explains, “by black I mean those who have historically been oppressed”) are discriminated and treated in a way that is reminiscent of slavery. So this fight is not limited to a fight for a salary rise, it also a protest against the fact that workers are no better treated than during apartheid.

Deneco explains that at hiring, 19 to 20 years old youngsters are selected with the help of a lie detector. Many South African companies use this nasty system that originates from the US, but only blacks have to go through it, which suggests that blacks are liars but whites wouldn't know how to lie... As a consequence, only black workers are confined to a bargaining unit and represented by their union. Middle management, all whites, cannot be in the same union and negotiate their conditions directly with their bosses, which is illegal. But it ensures that CSAAWU is not the representative of white workers during negotiations.

Basic salaries at RW average 3,200 rands, approximately 200 euros per months, with a few workers with extra qualifications to drive engines and mechanics earning a little more. But not all workers are treated the same: a black mechanic with 15 years’ experience may lay claim to R8,500 R (about €550) when a white mechanic without experience will get 18 to R19,000R (about €1,200) and a lesser working load.

Working hours, 8.30 am to 17.30 pm do not give an accurate picture of the real working time as workers have to clock in three times before getting to their work station: once outside, whatever the weather might be like, once before the cloak-room, and a third one before the workplace. With more than 200 workers, queues are long and it is necessary to lengthen the day by one hour morning and evening. These hours are not paid and workers only have a 20 min break during the day (to include going to the toilet, eating and have a smoke), even a second extra time will lead to a written warning and a deduction on salary. But above all, only blacks clock in, and Deneco’s anger when we questioned him about the legality of such a fact is perceptible: “no, it is not legal, and I don’t understand why the Labour office tolerates these discriminations, these facts should be recorded in its reports; even audits on inequalities that companies annually transmit to the ministry show that black workers are a lot less paid than white workers, not

even taking into account discriminations against women.”

Companies have had to give up the system by which they paid part of the salaries in kind with wine. But as Mercia explains to us: “ though this system is no longer legal, its noxious effect has not stopped. In many of the areas we intervene, alcohol consumption is very high and a number of workers are completely dependent on it. Bosses no longer pay with wine, but they sell bad quality alcohol to their workers. For us, fighting against alcohol dependency is a major issue because the more people are dependent, the more difficult it is for them to fight oppression and exploitation.

Facing the strikers’ determination we asked how the wine industry reacted. Mercia: “the sector is very well organised, bosses have coalesced within VinPro, and its within this organisation that all policies on salaries are decided for all the various companies. This year, they have decided not to go over an 8% rise, and for them it is out of the question that RW gives in to strikers demands who wish to see their basic salaries rise to R8,500, as all the workers in the industry would then go for similar increases.”

For CSAAWU, it was of the outmost importance not to limit the fight to the 227 workers of RW but on the contrary to extend it all along the value chain, from the vineyards that supply the distillery with raw wine to the distributors and even across other distilleries. Though CSAAWU represents 80% of the workforce, the fight is rough and risks are high. Mercia: “the management tried to outlaw the strike, then it tried to dictate to the union how they could fight for their cause, then threatened leaders with prison and a R500,000 fine if they be in the way of lorries or scabs management had recruited.”

Facing a very unfavorable balance of power, strikers have attempted to broaden their supports towards the civil society in South Africa and abroad. From the beginning, DLF members got strongly involved and their role is central in this fight. The Red Brigades [\[2\]](#) have also brought their support and have invited workers to come to the Cape Town Parliament and read a declaration condemning their employers. As for the ANC’s attitude, Mercia’s response is scathing and sharp “nothing”, which confirms how the ANC leader’s pre-occupations are remote from those of South African people. Food and money collections have been organised by other unions or some groups like students from the university of Cape Town. Some northern European unions are also involved particularly in Sweden and Denmark where wines from RW are commercialised. This is how strikers have decided to reactivate the boycott form of fight for Robertson, used in the past to get rid of apartheid. A Facebook page was opened to that effect.

For Deneco, for whom this is the second strike he has been involved with after the uprising of farm workers in 2012, international help and support was essential as strikers would not be able to stay without pay indefinitely, and boycott is the best way to put pressure on bosses. “For us, wine from Robertson equals drinking blood wine, as it is our blood that produces this wine, and we don’t take any advantage from it, we’re paid slave salaries when bosses get richer and richer. Today drinking this wine means drinking our blood.”

On week 12th of the strike, whereas strikers had accepted proposals for a rise of R400 R for lowest wages, approximately 12.5%, the management refused to include a “peace” clause where it would promise not to proceed with dismissals, so negotiations stalled again. There was no doubt that the company was out to break workers morale and destroy their union. CSAAWU, therefore renewed its call for international solidarity, continuation and intensification of the boycott of all products from Robertson, and send protests directly to the company and by all means possible.

Workers refused to comply, give in to threats and fear and held out. On week 14, they decided to stop the strike and signed an agreement with management.

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The agreement includes a rise in salary of 8% or a flat rate of R400 whichever is the most advantageous. This increase is backdated to August 8th. In addition, a annual bonus equivalent to one month's salary will be payed on November 15th. And above all and just as important all threats of legal action against 16 leaders of the strike and union members have been definitely lifted.

Though strikers are far from gaining the salary increases they were fighting for, they have nevertheless, it is a victory on many points. One can even say that the wine industry will never be the same again. The government has had to accept looking into the slavery conditions of work that exist in farms and the wine industry. Women and men working in the wineries of this country will take heart and get inspiration after the success of the strike at Robertson and in turn fight for their own rights.

CSAAWU, the union, comes out much stronger of this victorious strike and it will give some hope to all rural workers in South Africa who suffer as much if not more as those in urban zones due to their isolation. It is also a lesson for all of us, when Europe and the world at large engage in nationalist and reactionary policies. It seems clear that fights must continue with international solidarity in mind.

[1] The Democratic Left Front is a movement formed in 2008, which regroups militants who used to be members of Communist Party's leadership or that came from different political currents and South African left independent popular movements. DLF is engaged in the current left attempts at regrouping forces for a new socialist movement. It is also involved in similar attempts at building up a union movement independent from ANC.

[2] The Red Brigades is the name given to activists and militants from the left Economic Freedom Fighters, founded in 2013 by former members of ANC with Julius Malema as leader.