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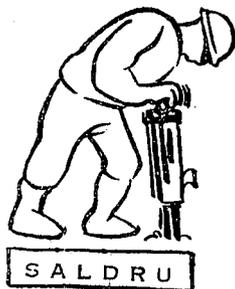
SALDRU FARM LABOUR CONFERENCE

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The 'Coloured' Farm Labourer

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## THE 'COLOURED' FARM LABOURER

The purpose of this paper is to project the Coloured farm labourer as an essential and integral part of the agricultural sector.

According to statistics of the Department of Statistics, 2 175 220 persons of all race groups were engaged in agriculture during 1974. During the same period, of the 819 000 economically active Coloured persons, 109 935 or 13,4% of the total Coloured labour force<sup>were</sup> farm labourers.

The Department of Economics and Marketing in its 1975 issue of its publication "Abstracts of Agriculture" stated that the gross value of South Africa's agricultural production had been R2341,7 million in 1973/74.

In the South African agriculture traditionally the Whites are usually the entrepreneurs and the Coloureds the farm labourers. It is estimated that 60% of the approximately 80 000 White farmers produce 90% of the total agricultural production so that approximately 40% of the total White farmers are operating uneconomic units. This may be attributed to lack of experience, knowledge, business acumen and managerial ability because in many cases with the demise of the owner of the farm a member of the family unequipped to operate the farm successfully takes over.

Besides the usual economic factors which influence the success of an enterprise, agriculture as an industry has to contend with additional forces beyond their control. Viability may also therefore be affected by unfavourable weather conditions such as drought, hail, frost and storms, plagues, pests and when production exceeds the demand because of exceptionally good harvests.

Whereas in other industries workers are engaged on an individual basis the tendency in agriculture is to involve the whole family so that the provision of housing is also considered as part of the remuneration.

Until recently there was no control over the erection of houses and the workers or owner built houses with no regard to health regulations. Houses may now only be built under the control of Divisional Councils and according to definite building and health regulations. The various agricultural unions constantly appeal to their members to provide better houses for their workers because it is realised that if the workers are well-housed it will lead to their contentment and happiness.

As a result of representations by the Cape Agricultural Union a loan scheme was introduced in 1974 to assist farmers to provide better housing for their workers. The maximum loan available for a three-roomed dwelling is R1 550 and R1 850 for a four-roomed dwelling plus R200 per dwelling for the supply of water and the same amount for electricity. To date R6 202 526 has been awarded to 785 applicants. These loans are available at the low rate of interest of 1% per annum.

Today we still find a high percentage of illiterate and unskilled farm labourers because until recently educational facilities were beyond their reach and parents could not maintain their children at Schools in neighbouring towns. In spite of mechanisation and the application of scientific farming methods the farmer realises that skilled and trained workers are a prerequisite for higher production.

To assist the agricultural sector a training centre, exclusively for Coloured farm workers, under control of the Department of Coloured Affairs was started at Kromme Rhee, near Koelenhof. No particular school training is required for admission and the tuition fee, including board and lodging on the farm is R1 per day. A variety of courses with a duration of between two and ten days of instruction is offered. The following courses are offered :

Pruning of Trees and Vines  
 Wire Fencing  
 Artificial Insemination of Cattle  
 Maintenance of Farm Buildings, Farm Vehicle, Combines, Tractors and Trucks  
 Classification of Wool  
 An Intensive Work Foreman's Course.

So far only about 6% of the total farm workers received training at this centre and it is hoped that more farmers will avail themselves of this facility. Courses are being revised and new courses to train agricultural information officers and superintendents for rural Coloured areas will also be introduced.

During the various sessions of the Coloured Representative Council the position of the Coloured farm labourer was fully discussed during the following motions: -

- (1) That farm labourers be covered under the Industrial Conciliation Act, Hansard 1970, page 499, vol. 4.
- (2) Repeal of Master and Servant's Act, etc., Vol. 8, page 322.
- (3) Abolition of tot system on farms, etc., 1972, Vol. 14, page 173.
- (4) Appeal for better wages, fringe benefits and participation in the Unemployment Fund, etc., Vol. 15, page 274.

The Master and Servant's Act has subsequently been repealed and the agricultural

unions have appealed to their members to discontinue the usage of supplying their workers with liquor.

With the inception of the Workmen's Compensation Act only farm labourers who operated machines were classified as workers in terms of the Act but since 1961 the Act applies to all farm labourers.

The Minister of Labour's reply to motion (I) above is based upon the report of the Commission of Enquiry re Industrial Legislation which stated that the legal regulation of wages of farm workers is undesirable, impractical and inexecutable.

In their desire to improve the employment conditions of the farm labourer a delegation of five members of the C.R.C. met the Ministers of Labour and Coloured Affairs on the 8th October 1974. The delegation felt that conditions have altered since the Commission of Enquiry re Industrial Legislation reported and that the matter of the remuneration of farm labourers be referred to a commission once again. However, the Minister of Labour refused to accede to the delegation's representations and it was therefore decided to refer the matter to the Erica Theron Commission and that the delegation meet representatives of the Cape Agricultural Union, where the matter may be pursued further.

The first meeting was held under the auspices of the Secretary of Coloured Relations on the 6th November 1974. Views were exchanged and it became quite evident that because no recognised body existed to tend to the needs of the farm labourer a body should be instituted to further the needs of the farm labourer. It was therefore decided to form a Joint Agricultural Committee consisting of five C.R.C. members and five members of the Cape Agricultural Union with the Secretary for Coloured Relations as chairman, and that the committee meet bi-annually. To date the committee met three times, when the following matters were discussed at length :

- The desirability of a minimum wage.
- Attitude of farmers towards workers.
- C.R.C. members should address agricultural congresses.
- Pension scheme for farm workers.
- Registration of farmers as owners under the Workmen's Compensation Act.
- Provision of toilet facilities.
- Wage increases and wage differentiation.
- Training of farm labourers.

Cognisance must be taken of the important and commendable role of the Cape Agricultural Union as far as the farm worker is concerned. Although the Union

is not in a position to prescribe to its members the Union suggests appropriate guide lines to follow through their Handbook on Farm Labour. Through their efforts there is a change in attitude of the farmer towards the farm labourer, a loan scheme was introduced to assist farmers to provide better housing for their workers and a pension scheme for farm labourers is being considered.

The Committee realised that at this stage it was inadvisable to press for a minimum wage because it may lead to a maximum wage, because of the various forms of remuneration and the impossibility of enforcing statutory regulations. Farmers must rather be induced to devote serious attention to the wage structure of their workers and to satisfy themselves that they pay their workers a decent living wage so that the workers and their families are well-fed and adequately clothed because this is indispensable for good health.

The Committee emphasised that the correct attitude of the farmer towards his worker is of paramount importance and that the worker must at all times be treated with honesty and justice.

The Committee also felt that C.R.C. members interested in the welfare of the farm labourer should be invited to address congresses of agricultural unions.

Acting upon reports that no toilet facilities were provided on many farms, the Committee contacted the Association of Divisional Councils who requested their members to make the necessary investigations and see that the facilities are provided.

It was discovered that many farmers failed to register in terms of the Workmen's Compensation Act; whereupon the Cape Agricultural Union promised to request their members to register accordingly.

The importance of trained workers was discussed and farmers will again be advised of the benefits of sending their workers to the Kromme Rhee Training Centre. Annually a substantial amount is spent on repairs because workers are in most cases not trained to service and maintain machinery and farming equipment.

The following reasons are advanced for failure to introduce legislation to regulate farm labourers' wages :

- (1) Employment and living conditions differ from region to region and farm to farm because of the type of farming, the size of the farm and production.
- (2) Attitude of farmers towards workers - most farmers are against a minimum wage and will not be bound as such.
- (3) The farmer is not assured of a stable income because harvests and prices are never the same, and differ every year.
- (4) Types of remuneration paid to workers. There are three types of remuneration :
  - A. Cash wage only
  - B. Free housing and cash wage
  - C. Free housing, cash and natura. Although it is felt that the remuneration in natura should be abolished, it has many advantages. In many cases workers live far from shops and the owner has to provide the worker with rations. Price increase of food does not affect the worker. There is no uniform base to determine the value of remuneration in natura as this differs from region to region.

According to a survey conducted by the Bureau of Marketing Research of the University of South Africa and contained in the Erica Theron Report the average Coloured farm labourer earns approximately R675 per annum. However, in most areas, including Calitzdorp, Uniondale and Oudtshoorn, in the southern Cape, workers are provided with free housing which is in many cases in poor condition, and a cash wage of R3, R5 or R7 per week. It is in these areas where workers are dissatisfied but are unable to change their employment because of the shortage of houses in towns. These people are living under extremely poor conditions - many suffer malnutrition, are not properly clothed, without proper furniture and are at a loss what to do about their future and their children. It is for this reason that the bulk of the Coloured people on the farms will remain semi-illiterate because parents have to take their children out of school to supplement the family income.

The only solution is therefore the introduction of a minimum wage which may include remuneration in natura. Unless this is done the social and living standards of the Coloured farm labourer and his family will decline.