



Zwelinzima Vavi's address to the National Farm workers Summit 30-31 July 2010 in Somerset West

Comrade President Jacob Zuma Comrade Minister Tina Joemat-Pettersson Premier of the Western Cape Helen Zille Honourable guests Farm workers and dwellers

This meeting is one of the most important that any of us will attend this year and I hope that it leads to rapid solutions to the crisis on our farms. All the many immense problems facing South Africa as a whole – unemployment, poverty, inequality, lack of service delivery, crime and xenophobia - are magnified many times over on our farms.

Poverty pay, job insecurity, casualisation, foul living and working conditions, disregard of health and safety, summary dismissals and evictions, physical assaults, racist abuse and even rape and murder are widespread. Farm workers and dwellers have even been shot "in mistake for baboons" and mauled by lions. This is all part of everyday life on South Africa's farms

Labour relations on farms are a disgraceful blot on our society. The situation is well captured in yesterday's statement by our affiliate FAWU, which said that "It cannot be acceptable that workers continue to earn far less than the minimum wages contained in sectoral determination laws and

work for very long hours with dangerous chemicals under adverse weather conditions yet without protective clothing.

"It cannot continue to happen that workers and dwellers on farms and forests continue to live without adequate decent shelter, without amenities like recreational facilities, health care and educational facilities, and without services like running water and electricity.

"It remains unacceptable that the human rights of these workers and dwellers continue to be violated. Not many of these violations and crimes are reported. Of those reported, only a few are successfully prosecuted. Of those prosecuted the guilty verdict is not common. Of those with guilty verdicts, punishment does not fit the crime committed."

The law of the land is a dead letter on most farms. Sectoral determinations imposing minimum wages are a joke, health and safety laws a dead letter. Workers are carried on the back of lorries like sacks of potatoes, causing many horrific fatal accidents. The first call from this summit must be for the law to be enforced and offenders brought to justice.

The sad part of this saga is that this has been happening in the farms for many decades. I was born in the farms myself. The brutalities I have referred are not something I have only read about in books or newspapers. To me this is no hearsay. My parents and all their kids, including myself, had to endure this every day.

A visit to the farms today serves as a reminder that about three million farm dwellers are trapped in the feudal and semi-slave relationship where arbitrary quotas imposed on the number of livestock they may have means selling their animals with the prices determined by a buyer and not the

seller, where they have to pay taxes for everything from your horse to even goats. All of these are tactics to keep them not only landless but entirely dependent on those who own the land. Yet we know that not every farmer out there is a racist or treats his workers badly. There are many examples of excellent cooperation and relationships that can be emulated. Our challenge is to transform all farms to be centres of food production so that we can reverse the current and recent trend where we have moved from being a food exporter to a food importer.

But the problems on the farms are part of the wider issue of rural under-development, which was recognised in the ANC manifesto, when it said that “despite significant progress made over the last 15 years, people living in rural areas continue to face the harshest conditions of poverty, lack of access to land and basic services.”

The Manifesto went on to promise that ANC government will:

- Intensify the land reform programme to ensure that more land is in the hands of the rural poor and will provide them with technical skills and financial resources to productively use the land to create sustainable livelihoods and decent work in rural areas.
- Review the appropriateness of the existing land redistribution programme, introduce measures aimed at speeding up the pace of land reform and redistribution and promote land ownership by South Africans.
- Expand agrarian reform programme, which will focus on the systematic promotion of agricultural co-operatives throughout the value chain, including agro-processing in the agricultural areas. Government will develop support measures to ensure more access to markets and finance by small farmers, including fencing and irrigation systems.
- Ensure a much stronger link between land and agrarian reform

programmes and water resource allocation and ensure that the best quality of water resources reach all our people, especially the poor.

- Ensure that all schools and health facilities have access to basic infrastructure such as water and electricity by 2014.
- Introduce the provision of proper sanitation systems in the rural areas.
- Strengthen partnership between government and the institution of traditional leadership to focus on rural development and fighting poverty.
- Work together with the farming community to improve the living conditions of farm dwellers, including the provision of subsidized houses and other basic services.
- Provide support for organised labour to organise and unionise farm workers and increase the capacity of the Department of Labour to enforce labour legislation.

Delegates to this conference should examine every one of these excellent promises and check what progress has been made. My fear is that we have hardly started to tackle these immense and urgent challenges.

The crisis on our farms however will never be resolved in isolation from our wider problems. We shall not be able to improve the lives of farm workers and dwellers while we are still mired in the catastrophic crisis of mass unemployment, poverty and inequality.

A further 61 000 jobs disappeared in the 2nd quarter of 2010, bringing the total lost since the beginning of 2009 to an appalling 1102 000. On average every worker supports five dependents, which means that over 5.5 million additional people have been plunged into a life of poverty and misery in just 18 months.

Inequality has been brought into focus by yesterday's depressing report of the Commission for Employment Equity, which showed that in the private sector, virtually nothing has changed in the racial and gender inequalities we inherited from apartheid.

But while we must do everything to support the Minister of Labour to enforce the Employment Equity Act far more strictly, let us not forget that there is nothing more disempowering and inequitable than being unemployed, earning no income and being unable to make a contribution to society. Bringing down our massive levels of unemployment and poverty is the first and most essential step to achieving real and sustainable levels of equity and empowerment.

COSATU will be very soon be launching its detailed programme for a new economic growth path to take us towards an economy based on manufacturing industry and labour-intensive economic activity. The Department of Trade and Industry has made a good start with its Industrial Policy Action Plan but it remains a plan on paper. It must be implemented with the maximum urgency.

The World Cup showed us all what South Africa can do. We are now urging government and civil society to learn the lessons of that brilliant success and adopt the same spirit of 'can-do' to all the problems we face. COSATU has issued a declaration of intent which we hope will be signed by every representative organisation in the country.

The most relevant section for today's meeting is a commitment "to address underdevelopment and poverty in rural areas. This campaign should address food insecurity and empower our people to use land that currently

lies unused, so that people can produce the food they need and escape from their deep levels of unemployment and poverty.”

It goes without saying that for us to achieve that goal we must first of all put an end to exploitation, lawlessness and racism which rule in many rural areas today. I wish you all the best for a highly successful meeting.