

Exact nature of grievances still unclear

SR Valley citrus packhouses closed because of labour unrest

All of the citrus packhouses in Addo and Kirkwood, Eastern Cape, have been closed for the safety of workers and residents of surrounding townships have blocked access to the townships. Operations on citrus farms in the Sundays River Valley have reportedly also come to a halt. It is expected that citrus harvesting and packing will not resume by tomorrow.

The main gate of the Addo Elephant Park is closed to due to the protests.

Yesterday the majority of packhouses were still operational but there were fears that the Sundays River Valley citrus industry could fall victim to dissatisfaction with the new national minimum wage bill that has just been passed by the South African parliament.

Earlier this week the South African National Civic Organisation (SANCO) and other trade unions allegedly requested workers to join a strike at a co-op store in Humansdorp (Eastern Cape) out of solidarity.

However, it is still unclear what the exact reasons are for today's mass action and representatives of the citrus industry are involved in negotiations with the community, with the involvement of the South African Police Service. Captain Gerda Swart of the SAPS confirmed that the SANCO-led protests were labour-related and that roads were blocked by protestors by burning tyres, but that there had as yet occurred no violence necessitating any arrests.

In the nearby citrus production area of Patensie there are no reports of similar unrest, nor further west in the Langkloof where the apple and pear harvest has concluded.

Last week there was temporary disruption at the Sundays River Citrus Company when workers were deterred from going to work, but this affected only a single work shift at one of their three packhouses, says Hannes de Waal, SRCC chairperson, and the company has since reached an agreement with workers, agreeing to a wage increase.

He notes that producers have suffered financial losses with the navel splitting problem of last season. Labour relations in the Sundays River Valley have always been harmonious, he adds. The citrus industry is the single largest economic driver in this part of the Eastern Cape, supplemented by tourism and mohair production.

Three weeks ago a citrus packhouse elsewhere in the Eastern Cape was destroyed in an arson attack and since then, coupled with an increase in protests in other places like Cape Town as well as power struggles in the context of next year's national elections, uncertainty has been growing.

New minimum wage for farm workers

The new minimum wage is R18 (1.23 euros) an hour for farm workers and R20 (1.36 euros) for most workers in other sectors and it is set to be revised in two years' time. Trade union umbrella body Cosatu, longtime ally of the ruling ANC, supports the new minimum wage, but other groups like the Economic Freedom Fighters and the newly-created South African Federation of Trade Unions are calling for a wage increase far above that.



