

South Africa: 'We did not see citrus strikes coming' says SRCC chief

The head of South Africa's Sundays River Citrus Company (SRCC) says the recent labor dispute that brought Eastern Cape citrus operations to a standstill came as a complete surprise to the



sector.

SRCC managing director Hannes de Waal also said as of Monday afternoon almost all the citrus companies in the region were back to normal and he expected the backlog of shipments to be cleared later this week.

A strike by workers in the Eastern Cape began on May 31 and lasted a week, amid demands of higher wages. De Waal said the companies later gave in to the demands on June 7.

Speaking to *Fresh Fruit Portal*, he said the South African National Civic Organisation (SANCO) had improperly taken up the issue of implementing the new minimum wage and had incentivized workers to strike, but he believed the majority of workers had wanted to continue working.

"In some places we see that they did not inform people properly, so there was some confusion. Following the unrest, we decided to give them what they asked for to avoid loss of property and loss of life," he said, noting that had been some cases of arson and violence.

De Waal said that a minimum wage law first passed parliament two years ago, setting an R16.25 per-hour rate for agricultural workers. Changes coming into effect this year will see the level lifted to R18 per hour for agricultural workers and R20 in other sectors, he said.

He explained the regulations would have to pass through some provincial committees, but he expected it would come into effect around July or August. However, he said SANCO had demanded the higher rate be immediately implemented for farmworkers.

Losses related to the unrest are still being quantified, but De Waal said the biggest loss was of trust and relationships.

"Before this it was all very harmonious. We really did not see this coming, and I can honestly say that this is not a place where people who are laborers cannot approach their management," he said.

He also noted that many companies offered a wage incentive system to their workers, and so not many laborers would not have actually benefitted from the rise that was finally agreed to.

"If you ask me, I think some of them are probably confused because they expected more out of it. This civic organization...now meddles in the place of work forums. It created a heck of a problem, to say the least," he said.

Most workers returned to the citrus operations on Thursday evening or Friday afternoon, he said.

"We would like to believe that 80-90% of people wanted nothing to do with the strike, I believe that most people were intimidated. The interesting thing is that when people came back to work, they just got stuck in," he said.

"Already there's lots of fruit that's been loaded into containers. This morning at 7 o'clock the valley was going crazy with activity. I estimate the backlog will be cleared by Thursday or Friday."

He said there would be some fruit loss, mainly of late clementines and some Navels which couldn't be picked. He also noted that, fortunately for the growers, temperatures over recent days had been quite low, which helped to preserve the fruit.

De Waal said he would be hiring someone to conduct research into the causes of the recent unrest. He believed a multitude of reasons could be behind it, but suspected that efforts to win votes for next year's general election could have played a part. The Citrus Growers' Association CGA last week slammed what it described as ["opportunistic political posturing"](#).

"While we are obviously not happy with the civic organization that did things in this manner, I must say we have a lot of empathy with our workers and the community, and we want to find out more about what caused them to take this drastic kind of action," De Waal said.

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