Paul Hardman, Citrus Growers' Association

Citrus industry leads the way in labour relations

The citrus industry and the Citrus Sustainability Forum (CSF) note the Bitter Orange report (https://www.freshplaza.com/article/9330241/citrus-sector-becomes-test-case-for-supply-chain-law/) by the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation and Khanyisa Educational and Development Trust regarding labour matters on Eastern Cape farms.

As an industry we hold ourselves to the highest standards of labour relations and stakeholder management, and as such we have zero tolerance for any practices that fall outside the relevant labour law. This is especially so given that the citrus industry has worked very hard, in concert with our partners, to improve working conditions on farms.

The citrus industry is a major employer in the Eastern Cape (as it is in many other areas of the country) and plays an important role in the economic development of the region and the country more generally.

In the Eastern Cape alone, the citrus industry employs over 35,000 people which is significant in a province where over half the population is unemployed. We thus take our responsibilities as employers very seriously and will always work to address issues that may arise.

In complex matters such as these it would also be prudent to avoid generalizing from a very small sample size to paint the picture of an entire industry.

In this regard, we would suggest it is important to note the following: some of the organisations raising concerns have not engaged in processes that have been specifically created in the Eastern Cape to address labour-related matters.

For example, the Sunday's River Collaborative is an active space where all stakeholders meet, and is proving to be very effective at addressing various social matters. This collaborative is having a significant positive impact for employees, employers and the community. Unions and social organisations are actively participating in and supporting such initiatives whereas the authors have not done so.

Furthermore, the Sustainability Initiative of South Africa (SIZA) itself also has processes where non-compliance can be raised and dealt with appropriately – this appears to not have been acknowledged by the report. SIZA was established as an independent organization that can provide verified information about the situation on farms and is recognised by NGOs and farms alike. It also makes use of independent third party audit bodies.

All the farms mentioned in the report have been audited since 2018 (using different independent auditors) with no major findings. SIZA requires findings to be addressed before an audit report is finalized. Three of the farms have scheduled audits coming up where additional care can be taken to monitor the areas raised in the Report and to ensure the farms are compliant.

The report ignores the overwhelming evidence that working conditions on these farms is fair and actually improving. Employers are also well aware that a “happy” workforce leads to a successful business.
The citrus industry remains committed to working with all role-players to create work environments that are positive and beneficial to all concerned. It is believed such a commitment is a prerequisite for stable, well-functioning rural communities.

Finally, we assure all interested stakeholders across the industry and retail sectors that there is no need for alarm, we will continue to uphold the highest standards of labour and other agricultural
practice going forward.

For more information:

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