

South African union warns against massive layoffs following wage rise

CAPE TOWN, Feb. 8 (Xinhua) -- The Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) on Friday warned that "bad farmers" might resort to massive layoffs of workers following a rise in their minimum daily wages.

The union federation said farmworkers should unite in resisting the dismissals and eviction from farms.

Agri SA, an association of farmers, has said that as many farmers could not afford to pay farmworkers with the daily minimum wage of 105 rands (about 12 dollars) announced by Labor Minister Mildred Oliphant earlier this week, massive layoffs would take place.

Farmworkers, who usually work nine hours a day, currently earn 69 rands (about 8 dollars), which is called "slave wage" by the farmworkers themselves.

Agri SA had offered 94 rands (about 11 dollars) a day, saying paying more than that amount would drive many farmers out of business. It also said the more the workers were paid, the greater possibility for them to be fired.

This stance drew strong condemnation from COSATU which said Agri SA's move "is nothing more than a political action."

"They also feel they are less able to control every aspect of the farmworkers lives, when the farm workers earn a decent wage," COSATU said.

It called the dismissal threat "nothing more than an effort to spite workers and the government, and to try and turn an important step towards undoing the Apartheid legacy around."

"This is a declaration of war against justice and fairness on farms; this is an act of hostility against the workers and the Government."

Should farmers have legitimate problems of paying the new wages then they should apply for an exemption, as the law prescribes and the minister advised, COSATU said.

None of the farmers who are now threatening dismissals have applied for an exemption, according to the union.

"These steps on the part of bad farmers are just an attempt to try and secure the apartheid generational advantage, which is going to be undone, with greater fairness," COSATU said.

A number of bad farmers, advised by Agri SA, want to continue the historical hostility, between farmers and farm workers, said COSATU.

"We caution them and advise that an Injury to one is an injury to all, and we will as COSATU use everything at our disposal to defend workers."

The union urged the government to buy out land from "bad farmers" who are promoting dismissals and distribute the land amongst good farmers and good workers to build a new partnership for agriculture.

"This year the issue of land reform must be addressed and the farmers would do better to cooperate with change, than to try and continue with their apartheid style attitude against workers," COSATU said.

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Thousands of farmworkers in the Western Cape Province downed tools in August last year and again in January to press their demand for a higher pay. They asked for 150 rands (about 18 dollars) per day, a demand rejected by Agr SA.