

Resisting feminised precarity

Farm workers in post-strike Western Cape, South Africa

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Abstract

This dissertation seeks to contribute to the body of research on gender, neoliberal globalisation and work, and on the forms of resistance people engage in within a deeply unequal global order. It was devised in relation to developments during and after widespread, unprecedented labour and social protests among farm workers in export-oriented agriculture in the Western Cape, South Africa, 2012–2013. The protests, referred to in popular discourse as the ‘farm worker strike’, are widely held to have been spearheaded by people in the most precarious positions: seasonal workers, including migrants both from within and outside South Africa, many of whom were women. The dissertation draws on multi-sited ethnography conducted among farm workers in several of the areas to which the protests spread, during what I refer to as the post-strike moment.

The aim of the study is to contribute to an understanding of differently positioned farm workers’ experiences of work and life precarity, organising and resistance – as well as to the interlinkages between these phenomena. Using intersectionality as an ‘analytic sensibility’, the dissertation explores how power relations linked to gender, race/ethnicity and nationality/migration status may be understood as shaped by, and contributing to shaping, work and life precarity. It also looks at how these hierarchies are articulated through labour regimes on farms and through workers’ resistance. Moreover, it interrogates labour activism as a route to resisting not only socio-economic deprivation and apartheid legacies, but further to restoring a sense of dignity (of labour).

The dissertation engages with various broader theoretical discussions. It deliberates on the overlaps between the notions of feminisation of labour, precarious work and precarity – conceiving of precarity as a feminised phenomenon. Experiences of precarity in the Western Cape farmlands, it suggests, are shaped by the devaluing of some workers, linked to racism, sexism and global inequalities, as well as to historical and contemporary processes of dispossession. The dissertation also describes how (some) female farm workers, through presenting themselves as knowledgeable about their rights, and through accentuating feminised aspects of care and responsibility in their activism, position themselves as respectable. Furthermore, through identifying silences and exclusions in representations of farm workers, it contributes to writing black/African female migrant workers back into the strike narrative as important and militant actors. Finally, the dissertation argues that attention to multiple forms of violence – slow, structural, symbolic and direct – and the violence of globalisation under neoliberalism is crucial in order to understand the messy and violent aspects of the ‘farm worker strike’. Importantly, it explores these topics as informed by broader global developments, through which power, control and the retention of value are increasingly placed outside of the deeply unequal spaces that constitute commercial farming areas, discussing links with Sweden as a destination for South African wine and deciduous fruit.

Keywords: *gender, race/ethnicity, precarity, feminisation of labour, resistance, intersectionality, farm work, South Africa, Sweden.*

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