

The Forestry Workers of La Motte

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There are well over 30 thousand state forestry workers in South Africa living in isolated communities. Many of these forestry stations house over 500 workers, while others have as few as 50. The majority of the workers remain unorganised. Where organisation has been established it is bureaucratic and favours the forester and the state. The story of La Motte forestry workers is the story of the majority of state forestry workers.

La Motte, a controlled forestry station of the Western Cape Forestry Directorate, lies approximately 70 km from Cape Town, and is situated in the heart of Franschoek Winelands. The village, housing 141 workers, is surrounded by Mattopi, Koekemoer, Dasberg and Perdekop as the villagers call the nearby koppies. The serenity which prevails in this Drakenstein district belies the hardships faced by the forestry workers and their families. And these conditions are not peculiar to La Motte but face all forestry workers in the Western Cape.

The area monitored and worked by the forestry workers of La Motte stretches from Grabouw in the south to Hawequa in the north, Jonkershoek in the west and Thelwaterskloof in the east. The indigenous forest, plantation and mountain catchment totals 4063 hectares. (1) This is the largest area covered by any one station in the Western Cape's 29,793 hectares of forest, of which 7,034 hectares are privately owned and 22,759 hectares are state owned. (2) La Motte, which forms part of the Drakenstein Forest District is 1 of 15 forestry stations grouped into 4 districts. All but one of these stations were established between the 1880s and the 1930s.

The predominant tree species in the Western Cape area are: conifers, eucalyptus, other broadleaved species and acboreta.

* My thanks are due to the workers of La Motte for their hospitality and patience in answering my questions.

- forestry workers -

The village and its people

La Motte forestry village is situated in a lush valley. There are 145 neatly constructed pine houses. A population of over 500 inhabit the village. The workforce of the station is 141, predominantly coloured labourers. There are five African workers, all of whom have worked more than 20 years at the station. The average age of the workers is 35 years and most have worked an average 8-10 years. There are however, many workers who have spent three quarters of their lives at this forestry station and have seen successive foresters come and go. Their wrinkled faces and hands and stories bear testimony to the years of hardship and suffering. Tradition has also resulted in some families having more than one in the household employed at the station. Isolated from the Franschoek regional centre, the community is a closely knit one.



The houses are well constructed. Some have three bedrooms, while others have two. Many of them are barely furnished, others display old furniture pieces that must have passed through many generations. All the houses have coal stoves; there is no electricity. Although workers are satisfied that they have a roof over their heads, there are complaints:

In winter the houses are extremely cold, while in

summer they are extremely hot like ovens...
and we have no electricity. But the donkeys have lights
in their stables...So they are better off than us.

Forestry workers consider themselves part of the rural work-
force. But like their urban fellow workers, they also com-
plain that wages are low, work is heavy, unhealthy and ex-
tremely dangerous, pension provisions very bad, advancement
virtually non-existent and relations with supervisors or
foremen aggressive.

Wages

Wages in the rural areas are generally low. On the surround-
ing farms, workers, especially the old hands, earn between
R20-30 per week depending on the season and type of work per-
formed. So forestry workers consider themselves a bit better
off, but not at all happy. The state's "temporary employees"
come under the Local Wage System, commonly called "die plaas-
like lone stelsel". (3) There are 5 categories depending on
the type of work, responsibility and formal educational re-
quirements. The majority of the workers at La Motte are in
Local Category 1, although many are qualified, through ex-
perience, for a higher category. But that depends on the
availability of posts and the favour of the foreman.

In Local Category 1 wages start at R183 per month, rising to
R269 after six years. Once they reach the maximum, salaries
can only be increased when there are general increases for
all public workers. The only other possibility of an increase
is to be shifted to a different local wage category. This
very seldom happens because very few posts are created. Work-
ers sometimes receive long service increments for 10 and 15
years service, but these are merely token.

Many workers complain that the state does not take previous
experience, or broken service into consideration. One worker
explained:

I worked for the Department for six years. When I left I
went to work on a nearby farm for two years. When I re-
turned, to start my job, they started me as a new recruit.
It will now take me six years to reach my maximum.

There are three discriminatory elements in the local wage

- forestry workers -

system: race, gender and region. African workers will, for instance, earn less than Coloured workers, although they might do the same work. One worker in the Western Cape will earn a different wage to that of another worker, doing the same task in another region. And women earn less than men. Although the "Coloured labour preference" has been scrapped, the forestry department has not significantly changed its employment patterns. Only a few Africans have been employed, usually on contract and housed in single sex quarters. Some workers have been able to acquire a heavy duty driver's licence but there are no jobs for them. All trucks are driven by whites. So the best they can do is to operate the tractors or power saws which place them in higher wage categories.

Investigations are presently in progress which will, say some sources, end the pernicious local wage system. The forestry workers do not share this optimism. As one worker put it:

Sure there'll be change. They will now call it by a new name, change a few categories here and there. But in the final analysis it is the old principle and package in a new wrapping.

Farm work

Because of the low wages, the wives of the workers of La Motte are forced to do casual labour, on the nearby farms, to make ends meet. This applies to the majority. During the fruit season, everyone is working, including the children "so that they can pay for their uniforms for the new year," said one woman. Another added: "we have no alternative. Our husbands earn far too little and we must assist."

For the period October to January, local farm lorries fetch the womenfolk at 6 a.m. and bring them back at 6 p.m. Earnings are R20 per week. Only when piece work is done do the women stand a better prospect of improving their wage. "Sometimes I'm lucky, and with the help of my children, I can make R40-50 per week. But then I really have to work. And for the entire day you are in the sun", said one woman who has done this seasonal labour for the past 10 years. The added income, although only temporary, is appreciated by the workers. But it still does not always cover all their expenses:

The court messenger is probably the most regular visitor

to this place. You never know when it is your turn. Because, to be honest, my debts force me to pay one month, and skip the next, so that I can pay something else. And these are not luxury items, but essentials.

Living in the rural area is not just fresh air, sunny skies and braaivleis, it is tough. Commodities are expensive. A snap survey revealed that workers at La Motte all have more or less the following basic monthly expenses:

Rent	-	R 5,50
Sanitation	-	5,01
Wood	-	0,70
Medical & Insurance*	-	37,73
Food	-	over 150,00
		<hr/>
		198,94**

* Regular sickness and injury and the burden of funeral expenses make this a necessary item.

** This excludes all other items, for example, clothes, furniture and luxuries.

The stories told by some of the people reflect the general situation in the Drakenstein area. According to many, bread has to be baked because they cannot afford to buy shop bread. Foodstuff is also generally expensive at the nearby shop. Because many of the children of the village are at school parents see education as a priority. "Hopefully when they get a better education, they will not have to live like us", was the optimistic remark of one worker.

Working conditions

Work starts at 7.18 a.m. and stops at 5.30 p.m. The workers are divided into 8 groups of 20-25 men each. Gang 1 is responsible for handing out of tools, filling tractors and lorries with diesel and petrol, and controls the store, nursery and office block. The sick, the old or injured are usually given these "light" jobs.

Gangs 2 and 3 are responsible for the planting of trees, marking of trees, maintaining of trees and ensuring their growth is not hindered. Most of the work entails weeding and cultivation and workers are mainly in the plantation.

- forestry workers -

The work is heavy. Tasks are usually set in the morning by the foreman and workers have to finish them before they go back home. One worker explained:

When you are in the plantation you have no time to raise your head. Once the tasks are set and there is a rush to complete it. At head office, they have designed these time and motion studies. So they "know" what we are capable of doing. If we do not finish on time the truck does not leave until we have.

Gangs 4, 5 and 8 are responsible for clear felling of trees, debranching and the preparation of logs for the saw mills. Like gang 2 and 3 they have specific targets to meet. They also engage in a bit of thinning, pruning and slashing. Power saws are usually used and the work is extremely dangerous. (The longterm effects of this work is to cause nervous tremours.) Injuries occur regularly. Legs or hands are often trapped between logs, and falling branches injure eyes and the face. Sometimes, depending on accessibility, either donkeys or tractors are used to drag logs to a central point for them to be taken to the saw mills. Workers remark that sometimes 350 logs have to be felled per day per gang and if a donkey is used as transport, the figure can be increased. The labour process is not too complex. Each member of the gang has a specific task. There are markers, hookers, debranchers and tractor drivers and power saw operators who work tightly together. Co-operation is vital if the target is to be reached.

Supervision by the foreman is usually abusive. Racist terms and foul language often characterise the instructions.

"What can we do," asks one worker, "I have a family and I need the job. If I back-chat I'll be fired immediately. I'm only a temporary worker. And if you complain, the foremen and foresters cover up for one another. We have already raised the matter collectively. But when it comes to practice the foremen continue their bad language."

Another worker said:

You must understand, a forestry station is a small and closed community, usually isolated from the rest of the community. Here the forester is king and rules his kingdom as he sees fit. As they say in the kingdom of the blind, the person with one eye is king."

The metaphor sums up the harsh realities. With few job opportunities in the surrounding areas, the foresters and their white foremen decide how things are done. In fact it is no different to the general conditions on farms. The forester personifies baaskaap - on the forestry station he represents the authority of the state. The feeling among the workers is that some of the foresters are more concerned about plants and trees than they are about people.

Gang 6 is responsible for nature conservation, while Gang 7 is responsible for transport of the logs to the sawmills. Nature conservation includes building firebreaks, maintaining them, keeping the roads cleared and building new roads to ensure easy access to the plantations. This work is very important because fire prevention can save thousands of hectares of timber. This gang's work is usually in the hot sun, or in rainy conditions, because these preventative measures must be taken. The area which one worker has to clear in a day is approximately 100 metres in length and 20 metres wide, using elementary tools such as hoe, rake and 3 pronged fork.

The gangs have different pressures placed on them. Supervision is close and aggressive. In winter, even when it rains, workers are forced to work. Covered in rainsuits, which make work extremely uncomfortable, workers are still rushed to complete tasks. The year is basically divided into seasons, where certain tasks must be completed. During May, June, July and August, trees nurtured at the nursery are planted. September, October and November, especially after the winter rains, clearing work is done to rid the plantation of invader vegetation (which include Hakea, cluster pine and Acacia). Also during October, early November there are daily shifts of watchmen to monitor the outbreak of fires. December, January, February, March firebreaks are maintained and if necessary increased, depending on wind conditions.

Fires

Besides the injuries in the plantation work, fires remain the most dangerous occupational hazard for forestry workers. Fires have been known to destroy thousands of hectares of timber and taken the lives of many in the process. In 1981-2 there were 9 large fires causing incalculable damage. (4) Tighter controls reduced the figure to 4 during the period

- forestry workers -

1982-3. The most recent, and certainly one of the most costly in lives, was the fire which raged over a ragged line of more than 30 km from Wemmershoek Dam over Groot Drakenstein and Hottentots Holland range through to Tweewaterskloof. It was estimated that over 37,000 hectares of mountain veld were destroyed killing 9 forestry workers in the process. (5) Many workers escaped near death when they were rescued from mountain ledges by helicopter. The fire was the largest in size since the disastrous fire of 1958 which burnt from Gordons Bay to Franschoek Pass. During the recent fire strong desiccating south-east winds fanned the flames and the fire lasted 12 days. This fire shocked the community of La Motte. All the workers were involved in the intensive fire-fighting operation. Not all are fully trained in the techniques of fire-fighting, although courses are run. But when a fire breaks out, they are forced to engage in the fire-operation, trained or untrained. One of the wives of the forestry workers explained her fears:

When fires break out and our husbands go off we really don't know whether they will come back alive. Sometimes for weeks they are away and there is no communication. And when they lose their lives, the compensation is pathetic. Just look at what the dependents of those killed in Villiersdorp got?

The workers share their fears:

You know, the fires have flames sometimes raging 15-20 feet high, and the sudden change of winds can mean death if you are not trained and prepared for any eventuality. Very often we go to areas we don't know and this obviously increases the danger. After every successful stint, we are just happy to be back with our families.

With total departmental expenditure on fire prevention standing at under R1m, (7) the most important instrument used in fighting fires is the slasher, a long stick with a leather flap attached to one end. Increasingly helicopters are also being used for reconnaissance work, airlifting of fire-beaters to strategic points as well as dropping of water buckets. But it seems it is still workers armed with slashers and the use of controlled burning and fire breaks that is most reliable, because at "R2,000 per hour for dousing fires with water-buckets by the helicopters, makes this a dubious method". (8)

Pensions

Because the majority of the workers are classified temporary, pension provisions are not very good. Prior to 1 April 1967, no pension provisions existed for forestry workers. With the implementation of the Non-white Temporary Government Service Pension Fund, workers still had to wait 5 years before contributing to the Fund. Since 1979, with an amendment to the Act, the period has been reduced to 2 years and a number of new elements added. These include a provision that the retirement gratuity now falls away in return for an increased monthly pension and a widow's pension. Workers were extremely dissatisfied with these measures. Although there was some resistance, it was weakly demonstrated. One worker explained:

Because we are a small workforce and because unemployment is high, organisation has proved difficult. We can easily be replaced. Our work is not too highly skilled except for those who do more technical jobs. If you step out of line, you lose your job and your house.

Organisation and representation

This has not prevented organisation. On the contrary, workers are reasonably well organised but their power is limited. The fear of losing their jobs in the struggle for adequate rights of representation seems acceptable. But to have one's family ejected from the house with no alternative accommodation is a sacrifice too great. The forestry workers of La Motte have been building an inter-forestry station contact committee with Grabouw, Highlands and Nuweberg and Lebanon. Many of the workers belong to the PSL (Public Servants League of South Africa), a union organising predominantly central state workers. But they are generally disillusioned with the union, its bureaucracy, and its orientation:

We know we must organise. We read in the newspapers and we hear stories from other people about other workers - how they got higher wages. Our union does very little.

The forestry workers of La Motte also have to contend with the liaison committee, established by the forester to regulate village relations and express the opinions of the villagers. But virtually everyone is critical of the committee, even some of the members who serve on it. "It is basically a dumb body. We want a democratic committee, elected

- forestry workers -

by the workers and accountable to the workers. Not a body appointed by the forester", said one worker.

Resistance to this liaison committee, foisted on villagers, is strong. Some of the workers say that those who serve on the committee are only looking after themselves. Adequate representation is a burning issue. To the workers it is central because through a democratically elected voice the aspirations of the workers can be heard. But as one wise man put it: "how do we transform demands into gains. At the moment, the forces against us are very strong, we are not only fighting the forester but the whole state. What chance do we have?" This is the rub of the matter, not only for forestry workers, but for all public sector workers. Workers are not confronting an individual and competitive enterprise which determines their conditions of employment and wages. Instead they are confronting a power network, not easily identifiable, but whose effects are virtually all pervasive. This has not dampened workers' enthusiasm to organise, but they are very cautious. Although the forestry workers are an isolated community, they know that organisation is vital if their conditions are to improve. They have regular contact with other workers in Paarl and hope to establish democratic structures to secure their aspirations.

Footnotes

- 1 Department of Environmental Affairs, Annual Report 1982-3, p255
- 2 Ibid, p247
- 3 See M Golding, "Workers in the state sector", elsewhere in this edition.
- 4 Department of Environmental Affairs, Annual Report 1982-3, p176
- 5 Public Servant (official organ of the Public Servants Association), May 1984, p6; and Cape Times 23.1.84
- 6 The reported amount received by workers' dependents was apparently below R2,000. But this was not confirmed.
- 7 Department of Environmental Affairs, Annual Report 1982-3, p271
- 8 Public Servant May 1984, p7