Breaking New Ground in Agriculture

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In 1981 the Natal Agricultural Union (NAU) published guidelines on conditions of employment for farm workers, after protracted discussion within the commercial farming sector in the province. The need for a labour code had arisen as a result of several factors:

- the demise of the labour tenant system
- the possible threat of labour action among farm workers
- a concern for security in the rural areas
- an awareness of the side effects of rapid industrialisation and increasing urban wages (NAU, 1981: pp1/2).

The diversity of the agricultural sector inevitably places certain limitations on framing standardised guidelines. Farming in Natal is divided into 14 different sectors (dairy, sugar cane, timber, maize, poultry and others), undertaken on an intensive or extended basis, and labour may fall into permanent, casual or seasonal categories. Despite these complexities and the inability of NAU to enforce the guidelines, there has been a keen demand for the document among farmers from Natal and other provinces, and even from neighbouring states.

Pioneer Projects

The improvement of working conditions began with a 1972 NAU Congress debate, when a pension scheme for farm workers was adopted and subsequently established. Individual farmers then introduced their own pioneering schemes with some notable examples of success.

Mr Dougie Horton of ‘Cosmoore’ in the Eston area initiated novel training schemes and delegated management functions to a senior supervisory cadre. His team soon took over responsibility for the practical operation of the farm’s dairy, vegetable and cane projects. Farm housing, education, recreation and health facilities were upgraded and administered in a joint programme run by the workers on ‘Cosmoore’.

The experience of pioneers who recognised the merits of building a stable and motivated workforce enabled NAU to devise guidelines and promote them among farmers and their employees. With labour being the single largest factor in production costs and the use of expensive machinery, it became evident to...
agricultural employers that a better trained and educated labour force was essential. To attain these goals and higher productivity in turn warranted paying higher wages.

In the late 1970s, the concept of improving working conditions, wages and training prompted a number of farmers in the Nottingham Road area to consider establishing their own training facilities. A farmer's wife stepped in and helped set up a technical centre to provide further education for local African farm children. As government support was not forthcoming, the necessary funds were raised from other sources and the project's scope extended to include courses for the wives of farm workers. Today, as a result of popular demand, the Midlands Centre for Further Education also provides specialist training for Midlands farmers and their managers.

Local farmers, banks, mining houses and other businesses have financed capital needs and contributed towards running costs. Overall response to the project has been excellent and the Centre is now an established training institution. Courses include training for the following jobs: learner tractor drivers, stockmen, tractor maintenance, welding, haymaking, maintenance of farm machinery, electric fencing, dairying, bricklaying and irrigation.

Future Trends
Several recent developments in Natal could have a major impact on the position of farm workers. These are:

NAU GUIDELINES TO CONDITIONS OF SERVICE ON FARMS

First published in 1981, this document sets out a list of proposals to be implemented as soon as possible by all Natal farmers.

WRITTEN CONTRACT
It recommends that a written employment contract be drawn up for each employee. Other proposals concern the enforcement of specific and regular working hours, the provision of protective clothing and regular annual leave.

REMUNERATION
Annual wage increases should take into account both inflation and worker performance. A guideline for minimum rations is also provided.

TRAINING
Specialist training is recommended — the Baynesfield Training Centre near Pietermaritzburg provides training courses for farm employees.

PROMOTION
NAU suggests that all employees be given clear job descriptions. Opportunities for advancement should also be clearly indicated, with every attempt made to develop an African supervisory cadre.

HOUSING AND RECREATION
The proposals lay down minimum standards for housing, and include suggestions for the provision of loans to employees so that they may build their own homes. The provision of recreational facilities on farms is also recommended.

HEALTH
Employers are encouraged to arrange and finance adequate medical care for all their employees. It is suggested that they consider establishing regional clinics — these may be set up in conjunction with the Department of State Health, but at the employer's expense.

EDUCATION AND PENSIONS
A strong emphasis is placed on the importance of providing adequate educational facilities for the children of farm workers.

NAU recommends that farmers provide a private pension to retired workers, which is more substantial than the state pension. They also suggest that pensioners be allowed to remain on white farms after their retirement.

Source:
Cotton picking families in KwaZulu's Msinga district. In August 1986 a group of Natal farmers and Zulu farm workers signed the landmark Louwsburg agreement, to improve labour relations and facilities.

- **The abolition of influx control**
  With the repeal of the pass laws, rural Africans are now able to move freely to the urban areas to seek employment. The superior educational facilities, housing and employment opportunities available there constitute major attractions. In contrast to the rural areas where many social services have to be provided and financed by individual employers, services in urban areas are provided by the state or local authorities.

Despite the high costs involved in upgrading conditions, most farmers have been aware of the inadequacy of rural facilities for some years and there are now excellent facilities on many farms. Workers are also aware of the disadvantages of city life — the breakdown of family life and, more recently, the civil unrest that has disrupted some urban centres.

- **Trade unions**
  The question of trade unions has been raised in the farming sector from time to time. The Federated Chamber of Industries has stated that it believes farm workers should fall under the Labour Relations Act, the Basic Conditions of Employment Act and the Machinery and Occupational Safety Act. Organised agriculture is fully aware of these issues, but it is clear that industrial relations in the farming sector are complex and require understanding.

Because the agricultural sector draws on a large pool of relatively unskilled labour, employers must provide training through self-financed training centres. Further, the escalating costs of agricultural production have left many farmers in a serious financial situation, which could worsen if agricultural exports decline. Wages constitute a major cost and unreasonable industrial action or talk of minimum wages is bound to encourage farmers to increase mechanisation and reduce their workforce, despite high unemployment in rural areas.

- **Employer/employee co-operation**
  Farm labour in Natal must be placed within the context of most farmers being within short distance of KwaZulu, and conversely, most Zulu workers being within relatively short distance of the province's commercial farming sector. This has resulted in the evolution of unique advantages for both parties.

One of the most exciting developments in this regard occurred in August 1986, in the Louwsburg district of northern Natal. Mr Tjaart van Rensburg, Chairman of the Louwsburg Farmers Association, and Mr David Masuka, an employee representative, entered into an agreement of co-operation on behalf of the farmers and the local Zulu community, respectively. Mr van Rensburg stated that "...the two groups need to co-operate in the fields of labour relations; the creation of school facilities, additional employment opportunities and other facilities. These are admirable sentiments and will be a further catalyst for other areas."

**Conclusion**

There is a general consensus within organised agriculture on the need to meet the rising expectations of its workforce. NAU is committed to ensure that farm workers not only retain their jobs, but that further skills can be drawn into the farming sector. This augurs well for the industry, given goodwill and a mutual commitment to the ideals and objectives agreed upon at Louwsburg and, previously, at other centres within our province.