

Woman in the Robertson Winery strike

Based on an interview with Shirley Davids

Mandy Moussouris

December 16, 2016

In what will no doubt become known as a historic strike, women workers at Robertson Winery have played a key role, both because they form the majority of the striking workers but also as leaders of the strike.

Women constitute more than 50% of workers at Robertson Winery. Traditionally, they have been employed to do the general work at the winery. This is because of patriarchal attitudes towards women and work that are strong in the rural areas of South Africa. Women are not employed as operators, forklift drivers or generally in higher paying jobs. Because women are generally employed to do non- skilled work they form the majority of lowest paid workers at the Winery making the struggle for a living wage even more important for them.

The strike is particularly important for women not just because they earn the lowest wages but also because the mobilisation of workers has raised awareness not only around the issue of a just wage and better working conditions, but also around issues of equality. Women must be treated equally and given equal opportunities to do jobs like machine operators and fork lift drivers. Other unfair practices like people getting positions if their family work there are also issues that are coming to the fore as workers fight for a more just and equitable workplace.

As leaders in the strike women have been at the forefront. Most of the committee leaders are women. The strike has set up different committees to deal with the different aspects that arise during strikes, these include fundraising committee, taxi/transport committee, education committee, lobbying committee and door to door mobilisation. This is ensuring that women's voices are heard and their role in the strike, the workplace and the union is being valued.

A strike is a huge sacrifice that workers make for justice now and in the future, none more so than for single mothers who have no other source of income. Their entire family relies solely on their low wages and whilst this is a huge hardship women have been very strong in the strike. Women more than most understand the importance of getting a living wage for them and their children's futures. Any increase of R 6000 and above will at least be a living wage. Women are excited about getting a living wage and are willing to fight.

The Commercial Stevedoring Agriculture and Allied Workers' Union (CSAAWU) with support from other unions across the world and comrades in South Africa have been handing out food parcels which are helping. Women in the community are also showing strong solidarity to the striking workers, neighbours are helping and the community is making soup for hungry workers.

One of the main purchases of the strike fund is nappies and milk to ensure that children do not suffer.

The lesson that is coming out of the strike for women in particular is that we need to support each other in really hard times. Before the strike a lot of the women did not know each other and now they have learned from each other and are getting to know each other. Through workshops women are learning each other's weaknesses and strengths. We are learning that it is important for women to work together and attend workshops because they build solidarity which keeps everyone going.

Our Comrades at FOS SA interviewed Anell (29), a worker of Robertson Winery, who is demanding a living wage of R8 500, says:

"I have been working for Robertson Winery for 8 years now. It is tough. We need to provide for our children. I am a single mother of a seven year old boy. I live with my sister because I cannot afford a home of my own. As a mother you sacrifice a lot. I will go hungry to bed if that means my son can have food for dinner."

"I want to give him what I never had but it's tough. He wants to be an advocate. But I don't even have money for a house, how am I going to afford the school fees? It hurts me as a mother. I will have to bury his dreams."

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Retrieved on 5th August 2021 from anarkismo.net

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