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*Erasmus*

**Precarious politics: dynamics of agrarian social  
movements and coalitions in the rural Western Cape**

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## List of Acronyms

ANC	African National Congress
BIG	Basic Income Grant
CoCT	City of Cape Town
COSATU	Congress of South African Trade Unions
CSAAWU	Commercial Stevedoring Agriculture and Allied Workers Union
CGS	Child Support Grant
DARDLR	Department of Agriculture, Rural Development and Land Reform
DoEL	Department of Employment and Labour
EPWP	Extended Public Works Programme
FASD	Foetal Alcohol Syndrome Disorders
FAWU	Food and Allied Workers Union
FWC	Farm Worker Coalition
GBV	Gender-based violence
ILO	International Labour Organisation
ISS	Institute of Social Studies
LVC	La Via Campesina
MEC	Mineral Energy Complex
QLFS	Quarterly Labour Force Surveys
RFDO	Rural and Farmworkers Development Organisation
RWA	Rural Women's Assembly
SAFTU	South African Federation of Trade Unions
SASSA	South African Social Security Agency
SCLC	Southern Cape Land Committee
TA	Tshintsha Amakhaya
TCOE	Trust for Community Outreach and Education
UDF	United Democratic Front
UIF	Unemployment Insurance Fund
UWC	University of the Western Cape
WC	Western Cape
WFP	Women on Farms Project
WJC	Witzenberg Justice Coalition

## **Abstract**

This research explores how conditions of generalised precarity are impacting rural class relations and struggle in the commercialised agrarian context of the Western Cape in South Africa. The study focuses on agrarian social movements that are responding to this multidimensional precarity through their political activities, demands and actions. The paper engages theoretical debates regarding class relations in the agrarian context through discussions on the political potential of a rural precariat class, and extends theoretical frameworks of class struggle to show the multiple associational and structural powers of this class in the agrarian economy. This study contributes to gaps in the literature on agrarian politics in the rural Western Cape since the 2012-13 farm worker strikes through an archival approach to examining these politics. In this way, the research examines why agrarian social movements are struggling to build coalitions despite their similarities in political demands and actions. The main findings reveal that the forms of association of movements bear significant impact on their politics, and their capacity to build coalitions. This is resulting in a precarious politics among agrarian social movements, build unsteady coalitions in their attempts to respond to the social reproduction crisis through which the rural precariat class live.

## **Relevance to Development Studies**

This topic relevant to Development Studies insofar as it contributes to debates on social movements in development, particularly the roles of non-governmental organisations, trade unions, and community-based organisation in responding to rural social reproduction crises, such as the unemployment, landlessness and conditions of violence seen in the rural Western Cape.

## **Keywords**

Precarisation, social reproduction, the rural precariat class, agrarian social movements, associational and structural powers, coalitions.

## Acknowledgements

It is not easy to write a research paper on a topic so close to heart, being so far from home. I am deeply thankful for the support of comrades, former colleagues, my family and friends at home in their endless support of this work.

To my dear friends at ISS, thank you for the hours of mutual support and solidarity.

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To Helena, thank you for your faith in me and this work.

To the women on farms who politicised me, and extended my heart beyond its known capacity, thank you.



# Chapter 1

## Introduction

### 1.1 Research Problem

The dominance of commercial agriculture in the Western Cape, South Africa has resulted in a social reproduction crisis for poor and working-class Black communities in rural parts of this province. This is a context of generalised precarity, where job insecurity, landlessness, and conditions of violence are transforming classes of labour into a burgeoning rural precariat class. This challenges pre-existing understandings of agrarian politics, as agrarian social movements increasingly respond to these multiple, intersecting dimensions of precarity. This research extends on existing literature on class struggle by adapting it to the agrarian, rural context, and to conditions of generalised precarity where there are increasing interlinkages between productive and reproductive struggles.

The farm worker strike of 2012-13 is an emblematic moment in agrarian politics in the rural Western Cape, and represents the changing form and nature of class struggle and agrarian politics in which this paper is grounded. The rise in informal social struggles and the consolidation of agrarian social movements before and after the strike reveals the necessity of engaging productive and reproductive struggles simultaneously in this context (Webb, 2016). These agrarian social movements have grown the associational power of the rural precariat class through their different forms of association, such as trade unions, non-governmental organisations, community-based organisations and more (Wright, 2000). Agrarian social movements organise to build the structural powers of the rural precariat class, as workers located in agrarian production systems, women in the social reproduction system, and the landless surrounded by prime farming land. These powers are developed through various political activities and actions that articulate both redistributive and reformist political demands of the rural precariat class.

In this way, the rural precariat class requires a coalitional approach to agrarian politics that can engage with their high levels of fragmentation and differentiation as rural classes of labour (Bernstein, 2010; Friedman, 2012). However, despite the presence of various agrarian social movements with similar political demands, there has been limited agrarian transformation in the province. This research explores the many challenges facing these agrarian social movements, and focuses on determining why these movements struggle to build coalitions. This is done through a critical enquiry into the relationship between different forms of association, their political demands and actions, and their capacities to coalesce.

These precarious politics are necessary to

### 1.2 Research Questions and Objectives

#### Research question:

Why are different forms of agrarian social movements struggling to build coalitions despite their similar political demands and actions?

#### Research sub-questions:

- a. How has enduring coloniality and contemporary neo liberalisation in commercial agriculture impacted class relations in the rural Western Cape?

- b. How do conditions of generalized precarity shape agrarian politics in the rural Western Cape?
- c. How do agrarian social movements build the associational and structural powers of the rural precariat class?
- d. How do the politics of agrarian social movements impact their coalitional politics in advancing agrarian transformation?

Research objectives:

- To establish a critical analysis of agrarian social movements and coalitions in the rural Western Cape.
- To extend and deepen theoretical frameworks for understanding class struggle in agrarian politics in the rural Western Cape.
- To contribute to an archive of rural agrarian politics in South Africa.

### 1.3 Investigative approach

The investigative approaches in this research consist primarily of secondary literature and media archival analyses, quantitative data analyses and supporting data collection through targeted qualitative interviews with key informants. This mixed research approach is justified because there is extensive literature on agrarian change in South Africa, and in the Western Cape specifically, as well as wide-ranging media documentation of agrarian politics in this context. By engaging with archival literature on historical and contemporary agrarian politics, this paper follows an anti-colonial archiving approach to political theorizing the agrarian politics of the rural Western Cape, of which there has been limited studies of since the 2012-13 Farm Worker strike (Zeffiro and Hogan, 2015; Kamola and el-Malik, 2017).

The anti-colonial archival approach serves several purposes theoretically, methodologically, and ethically. Firstly, it enables an historical analysis that can develop a Marxist, critical realism theoretical understanding on structure and agency in class struggle (Mtero *et al.*, 2021). Secondly, it allows various sources of information to be included within academic canon, which is particularly important in building an archive of rural, agrarian politics. Thirdly, it allows the research to become in itself a part of an archive of African and rural politics, one that critically holds the successes and failures of social movements, while placing political theory in dialogue with political action (Kamola and el-Malik, 2017). Furthermore, as this research contributes to an archive of political struggle, it also contributes towards the “activist potential” of social movements through the “correlation between self-preservation and politics” (Zeffiro and Hogan, 2015, p.44). The archival research therefore encompasses information from various sources, which were gathered as follows:

- Media archives: through snowball searching and targeted searches such as including specific activist and organisation names, key words such as “protest” “strike” or “march”, locations and years. This was done on specific news websites, YouTube, and Google Search.
- Social media archives: through conducting a similar search style to the media archives, but on various Facebook pages of different agrarian social movements.
- Grey literature: from media releases, statements, annual reports and other documents located on websites of or about agrarian social movements
- Government reports and statistical releases: quantitative data drawn from Statistics South Africa, websites of government departments including the Department of Agriculture, Rural Development and Land Reform; Department of Employment

and Labour; Western Cape Department of Agriculture, and Western Cape Government.

- Interviews and conversations: semi-structured formal interviews with key informants from agrarian social movements, including Mercia Andrews (TCOE, RWA, TA, FWC), Karel Swarts (CSAAWU, FWC, SAFTU), and Sithandiwe ‘Stha’ Yeni (SPP, TA), as well as informal conversations with Ben Cousins (PLAAS), Mngqobi Magubane (PLAAS, UJ) and former colleagues (WFP).

This systematic review was possible due to my professional experience as a staff member at Women on Farms Project from 2017-2020, which gave me insider knowledge regarding key events and political actions in the province. I also worked with many of these organisations directly and indirectly, and built collegial relations through and outside of this work. My relationships with community activists in the rural Western Cape have also been formative in framing the research questions. This paper thus also draws on my embodied knowledge and memories that developed in relation with my colleagues, comrades, and activists on the ground, and attempts to deepen and challenge this knowledge theoretically through this critical research enquiry (Patel, 2016).

There are important limitations that are necessary to note in this investigative approach. While an archiving enables the tracking of these politics across space and over long periods of time, there is the challenge of limited reporting, information and material about these politics. While it was possible to collate instances of political activities from these various sources, it was not always possible to capture the depth of complexity in the relationships within these coalitional politics. For this reason, supplementary interviews with key actors in these social movements and insights from other accounts of coalitional politics proved helpful to capture some of the more elusive dynamics within these politics, as well as to explain some of the silences of the archive.

### **1.3.1 Research Scope and Limitations**

There several necessary limitations in the scope of this research’s inquiry. Firstly, the geographical placing of this research locates itself firmly within the rural, agrarian context of the Western Cape. This focuses the analysis on how commercial agriculture’s dominance has impacted rural class relations in the province.

Secondly, the timeframe of this research focuses on agrarian politics in the democratic era, particularly in the ten years since the 2012-13 farm worker strike as there has been limited research on agrarian politics in the province since then. Still, this draws from information, trends, literature and lessons from agrarian politics and social movements in the transition from apartheid and throughout the democratic era.

Thirdly, agrarian politics focuses here on agrarian social movements and coalitions that respond politically to the agrarian context, meaning that rural politics regarding fisheries, coastlines, and mining are not given primacy in analysis, but rather considered in how they link to agrarian politics and broader coalitional activities. The research also acknowledges how these agrarian social movements connect with politics across the urban/rural divide and with broader civil society, both within and beyond South Africa. While the research examines the role of informal social struggles in agrarian politics, it does this by placing them in relation to the main point of analysis, which is on formalized, agrarian social movements.

The purpose of limiting the research scope is to be able to use the investigative approach of archival research in an appropriate and rigorous manner. This does not ‘close’ the archive of agrarian politics that is being crafted here, but rather offers an opportunity for this archive to be further developed in other lines of inquiry into agrarian politics in South Africa.

## 1.4 Ethics

There are two ethical questions important to this research, firstly my positionality as a researcher, and secondly the positioning of findings regarding these agrarian social movements. As someone who has been actively involved in land and agrarian social movements in the Western Cape since 2016, I approach this research from the lens of critical scholar-activism. The years of professional experience and relationships built within these movements have impacted my political and theoretical perspectives, as well as my personal commitment to land and agrarian justice. The critical findings within this research regarding these agrarian social movements are thus presented to the reader with this background information carefully in mind. Where appropriate, I have withdrawn the names of movement leaders who shared very critical responses in interviews, noting the sensitivities of investigating working-relationships in politics. When reading findings that feel uncomfortable, my hope is that the critique is recognized as valuable, constructive, and a necessary part of political praxis.

## 1.5 Research outline

The paper aims to respond to the main research question by building the argument from the grounded, empirical context of struggle in agrarian politics, and reiterating and extending theoretical perspectives throughout. Chapter one is an introductory framing of the paper, research questions, investigative approaches, ethics and limits. Chapter two explores the roots of discontent in the rural Western Cape, by outlining how enduring coloniality and contemporary neo liberalisation within commercial agriculture has resulted in a social reproduction crisis for rural classes of labour. This has led to a context of generalised precarity that is threefold, namely job insecurity, landlessness, and conditions of violence. Such conditions are experienced by the fragmented and differentiated rural classes of labour, and I propose that these classes can be understood broadly as a burgeoning rural precariat class for analytical and strategic purposes. The historical development of the politics of this class are summarised in Chapter three, which looks at the heritage of trade unions, new social movements and informal social struggles in the democratic era. The chapter includes a vignette on the 2012-13 farm worker strike as an emblematic case study of changing agrarian politics in the democratic era, and concludes by discussing how these politics relate to contemporary agrarian social movements in the rural Western Cape. This then opens the pathway to the heart of the research paper, which is an in-depth analysis of the politics of agrarian social movements and their coalitions since the 2012-13 strike. The chapter examines their efforts at growing the associational and structural powers of the rural precariat class. Finally, chapter 5 concludes this research paper in relating the key findings from this work and their implications, responding to the research questions, and discussing possible avenues for further research.

## Chapter 2

# The roots of discontent in the rural Western Cape

Histories of indigenous heritages, settler colonialism, apartheid racialised capitalism, and neo liberal democracy are engrained into the fabric of contemporary South Africa. Contemporary commercial agriculture has established its dominance in the rural countryside of the Western Cape province through this history, resulting in a crisis of social reproduction experienced by poor and working-class Black communities. This is experienced as generalised precarity that affects the rural classes of labour in three interlocking dimensions: job insecurity, landlessness and conditions of violence. This chapter argues that these conditions have resulted in a burgeoning rural precariat class in the democratic era. Through this understanding of how precarity shapes agrarian class relations, this opens the path to examining the new dynamics in agrarian politics of the rural precariat class.

## 2.1 Enduring coloniality and contemporary neo liberalisation in South African agriculture

Since the mid-1600s, settler agriculture expanded from the Western Cape across the country to ensure the political domination of white colonialists over large portions of indigenous territories. It sustained the growing urbanisation of colonial ports and towns and facilitated backward and forward linkages for merchant capital. The growth of mining in the northern parts of South Africa saw extraction-based economies in both mining and agriculture forming the basis of colonial capitalism, which linked the dispossession of land and exploitation of Black and enslaved people's labour to the growing profits of white English and Afrikaner capital (Keegan, 1989; Fine and Rustomjee, 1998). From the mid-nineteenth century onwards, extensive state support for commercial agriculture enabled the sector to commercialise, and agrarian capital interlocked with finance capital and spread into other processing, distributing and marketing activities (Bernstein, 1996).

Commercial agriculture was therefore foundational to the political-economic project that became apartheid, even as the South African economy exceeded its settler agrarian origins and came to be highly dependent on mining and the financial services sectors. The apartheid period was "marked by a coalitional class alliance" of white interests from both labour and capital, which was enabled by "the context of state protection and racialized capitalism" (Ansari, 2021, p.12). In this way, the South African economy as a whole was thus interlinked, albeit in uneven and at times contradictory ways. Neo liberal measures began to be implemented across the apartheid economy starting in the 1980s, and in agriculture this was seen in the privatisation of public agricultural cooperatives into associations, the marketisation of the sector in preparing for re-entry into foreign markets following the end of sanctions, casualisation and evictions of farm workers, and adjustments to the democratic political transition towards the end of this decade (Bernstein, 1996; Mather and Greenberg, 2003; Conradie, 2007).

The agrarian question of South Africa has thus developed through the history of settler colonialism and apartheid governance, as precolonial indigenous relations to land, farming and food were violently transformed through dispossession, bondage and oppression. The Western Cape was the country's entry point for colonisation, and as such, settler agriculture formed an integral political-economic process of 'accumulation by dispossession' that involved the genocide of indigenous San and Khoi peoples, the destruction of their societal

formations through the grabbing of their lands, enslavement into colonial farm labour, and forced assimilation into Christian colonial social relations (Adhikari, 2010; Moyo, Jha and Yeros, 2016; Harvey, 2017). The contemporary dominance of commercial agriculture is sustained through this continued control over large portions of prime farming lands, water resources, various key points of the agro-food chain, and the near total proletarianization of rural labour (Moseley, 2007; Hall, 2011).

This has been a history written through contentious processes of political oppression and resistance, and intertwined with the contradictory processes of capital's booms and contractions. As the country transitioned into democracy in the 1990s, the government of the African National Congress (ANC) adopted a neoliberal economic and political approach encapsulated in the Growth Employment and Redistribution plan, which has severely limited any attempts at redistributive and reparative justice (O'Laughlin, 2016; Fraser, 2017; Ansari, 2021b). Following twenty-eight years after the first democratic elections in 1994, the country has the highest rates of inequality and unemployment in the world (Naidoo, 2021; Al Jazeera, 2022). The racialised and gendered features of the economy continue to reflect an enduring coloniality in the country, which has been commonly termed as the "post-apartheid apartheid South Africa" (Quijano, 2000; More, 2017, direct quote p.139).

As neo liberal approaches have deepened in the democratic era, this has created differentiated effects for labour and capital. The external shifts towards intensified marketisation and financialisation, and the political transition to non-racial democracy have heightened contradictions in commercial agriculture (Anseeuw, Ducastle and Boche, 2015; Ansari, 2021a). In response to these pressures, commercial agriculture has internally restructured its of production processes and labour relations, through mechanisation, continued labour casualisation, farm consolidation and financialisation (Du Toit, Kruger and Ponte, 2008; Bernstein, 2013; Greenberg, 2013; Anseeuw, Ducastle and Boche, 2015). This has led to a "double divide" for both farmers and farm workers, between those who have benefitted from neo liberalisation processes, and those who have lost out from this (Ewert and du Toit, 2005). However, this is not an equal divide, and the following section shows how neo liberalisation has deepened precarity with harsh effects for the rural classes of labour.

## **2.2 Precarity of life in the rural Western Cape**

While dispossession, exploitation, and oppression under capitalism have been a continuous feature of commercial agriculture in rural contexts since the colonial encounter and through apartheid, there has also been intensification and change in these experiences following neo liberalisation processes. This section examines how this has led to a generalised precarity of life experienced by rural classes of labour in the Western Cape (Bernstein, 2010; Webb, 2016). This multidimensional precarity is seen in labour insecurity, landlessness and conditions of violence, and this section argues that this is resulting in a social reproduction crisis for rural classes of labour. This bears impact for later discussions on class relations and dynamics of class struggle in the agrarian context of the rural Western Cape.

### **2.2.1 Labour insecurity**

Commercial agriculture continues to be an important source of employment in the Western Cape, particularly in rural parts of the province. From 2008 until 2019<sup>1</sup>, agricultural employment in the Western Cape on average made up for roughly 22% of the total national

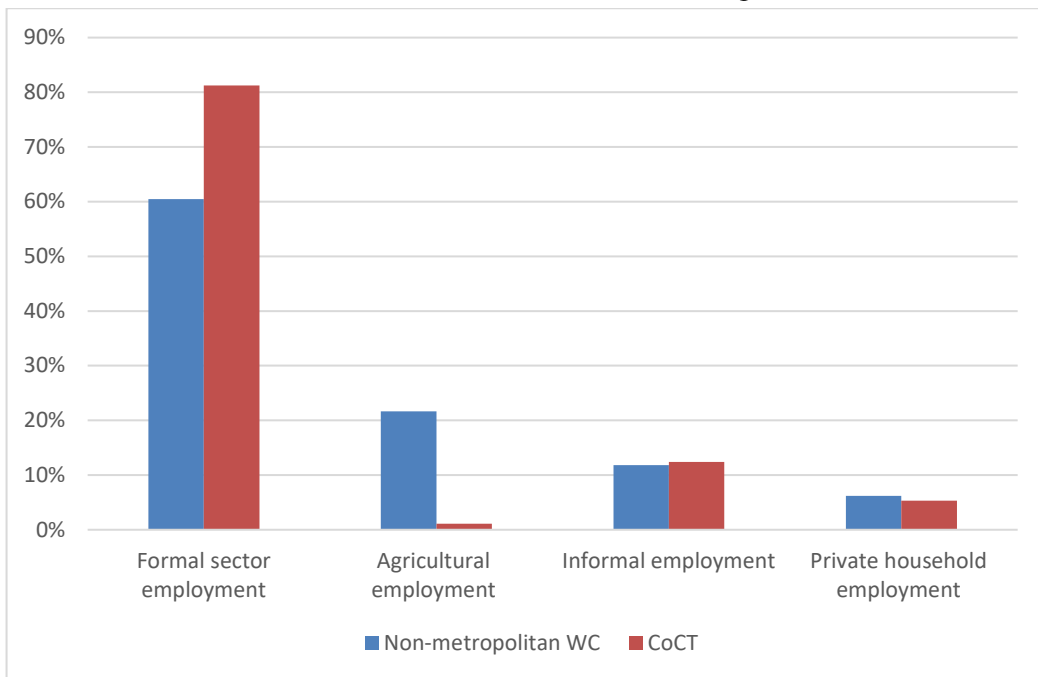
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<sup>1</sup> 2019 is used here to show a general portrait of employment prior to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent national lockdowns.

employment in agriculture (Stats SA, 2022). At the same time, agricultural employment accounts for roughly 8% of employment in all sectors in the province on average. In comparison, in the period of 2015-2019<sup>2</sup>, agricultural employment in rural parts of the Western Cape made up 22% of all employment on average. Additionally, the province also continues to provide employment opportunities across industries and sectors to people throughout South Africa and beyond. However, these statistics do not reveal the high levels of job insecurity nor the nature of rural work. This section critically examines employment, unemployment and labour conditions as they contribute to generalised precarity in the rural Western Cape.

While formal employment remains greater than informal employment throughout the province, there is a higher rate of informal and sectorally-determined lower waged employment in rural parts of the Western Cape. Up until 2021, national labour legislation had sectoral determinants that set a lower minimum wage for farm and domestic workers from the national minimum wage, and expanded public works programme (EPWP) workers earned roughly 50% less than this (Wasserman, 2021). Figure 1 shows the distribution of employment by sectors in the City of Cape Town (CoCT), and the rural (non-metropolitan) parts of the Western Cape. In 2019<sup>3</sup>, employment in agriculture made up for 1% of employment in the CoCT, while in rural areas it accounted for 22%. It is also notable that in this year, agriculture, private households (referring to paid domestic work) and the informal economy account for roughly 40% of sectoral employment in rural areas, in comparison to the province's metropolitan area, where these sectors account for 19% of employment. These sectoral differences contribute significantly to economic precarity experienced by rural classes of labour.

**Figure 1: Distribution of employment by sector, City of Cape Town and non-metropolitan Western Cape, 2019 (Percentages)**



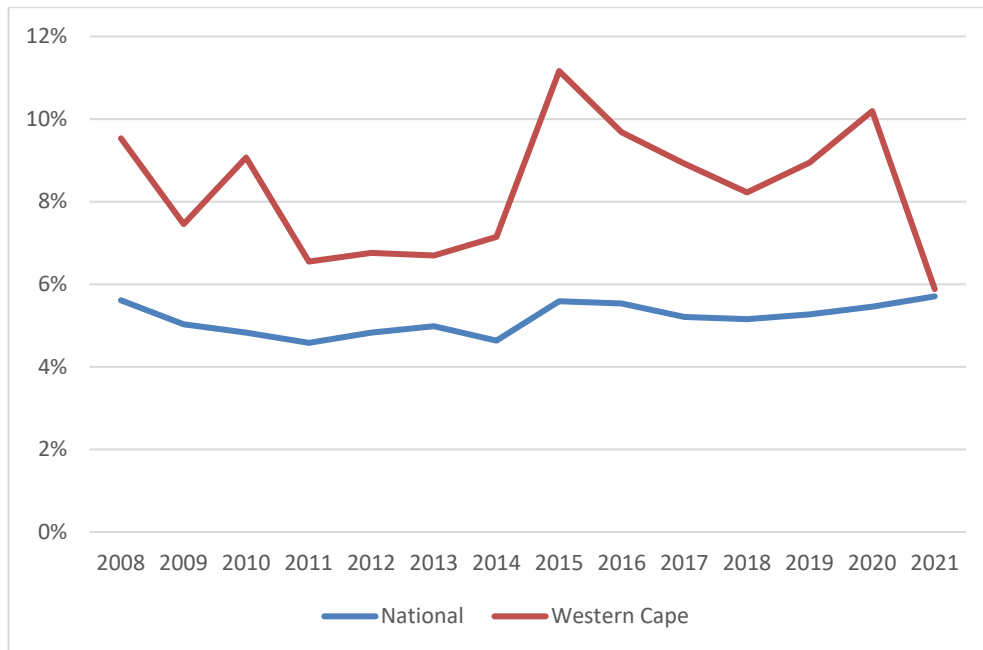
Source: Author's own representation, on the basis of data from Quarterly Labour Force Surveys 2008-2021, Stats SA, accessed in July 2022.

<sup>2</sup> Stats SA only has disaggregated data on employment by sector for metropolitan and rural areas from the period of 2015-2020, in comparison to the tracking of data for the province as a whole for the period of 2008-2021

<sup>3</sup> Stats SA has incomplete data on sector-based employment at this level from 2020 onwards.

Figure 2 shows the contribution of agricultural employment in relation to other sectors of the economy at the national level and in the Western Cape. The Western Cape has the highest rates of agricultural employment nationally in comparison to other provinces, and so is well above the national average for agricultural employment (Stats SA, 2022). Overall, employment in this sector has been more volatile in this province in comparison to national trends, but there are some similarities at both scales, which can be particularly seen in the decline of agricultural employment following the 2008 financial crisis. This data supports other work in agrarian studies regarding the close relation between finance capital and commercial agriculture in South Africa, and shows how workers feel the hit of financial crises (Mather and Greenberg, 2003; Bernstein, 2013). In the Western Cape, the other notable decline in agricultural employment has been the impact of the COVID-19 lockdown and the national bans on alcohol sales, which affected employment on wine farms in the province, where viticulture is extensive in many rural areas (Payne, 2021).

**Figure 2: Proportion of agricultural employment, national and Western Cape, 2008-2021 (Percentages)**



Source: Author’s own representation, on the basis of data from Quarterly Labour Force Surveys 2008-2021, Stats SA, accessed in July 2022.

On the flip side of this picture on employment, lie more concerning trends in unemployment. In 2021, South Africa had the highest rates of unemployment in the world (Naidoo, 2021). Even higher than this is the Stats SA definition of expanded unemployment, which extends unemployment to those who “were available to work but did not look ... either because they are discouraged from looking for work... or did not look for work for other reasons” (Stats SA, 2022). Since 2008, the gap between the standard unemployment definition and the expanded definition has only increased. While South Africa’s standard unemployment rate jumped from 29% in 2019 to 34% in 2021, the expanded unemployment rate increased from 38% in 2019 to at 45% in 2021.

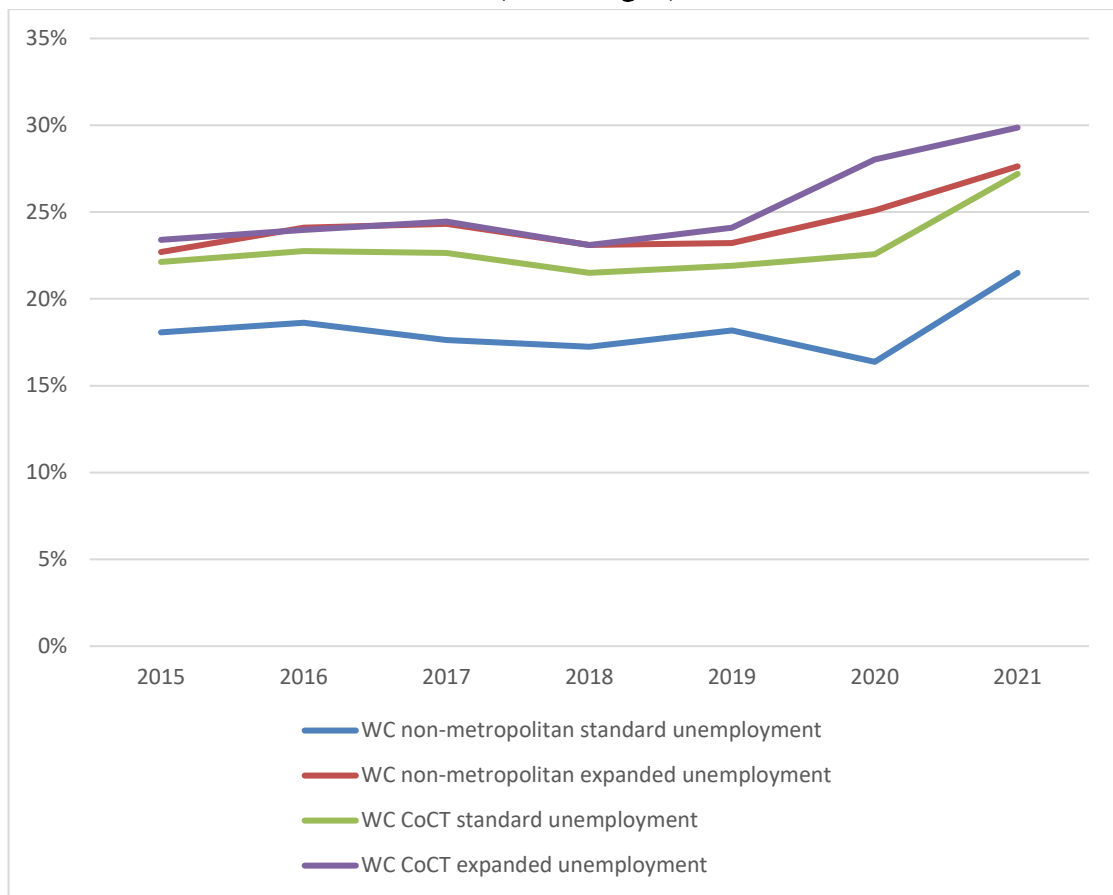
In comparison to national rates, unemployment in the Western Cape is relatively lower. However, in comparison with global rates in 2021, the Western Cape’s unemployment rates



still rank within the top 3 highest unemployment rates of the world (The World Bank, 2022). Economic shocks like the 2008 financial crises and the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic have increased unemployment rates, and following the COVID-19 lockdowns, the province's expanded unemployment rate increased significantly (Stats SA, 2022). This reveals how unemployment has become a constant, deepening feature of the South African economy.

Unemployment also has different dynamics in urban and rural areas. In general, rural unemployment is often higher than rates in urban areas, as it is expected that people in rural areas form part of what Engels has termed the reserve army of labour for urban employment needs, who occupy themselves through peasant food production and temporary employment in agriculture (O'Laughlin, 2013; Naidu and Ossome, 2016). However, the Western Cape is notably different, as urban unemployment rates are significantly higher than rural unemployment rates in this province.

**Figure 3: Proportion of agricultural employment, national and Western Cape, 2008-2021 (Percentages)**



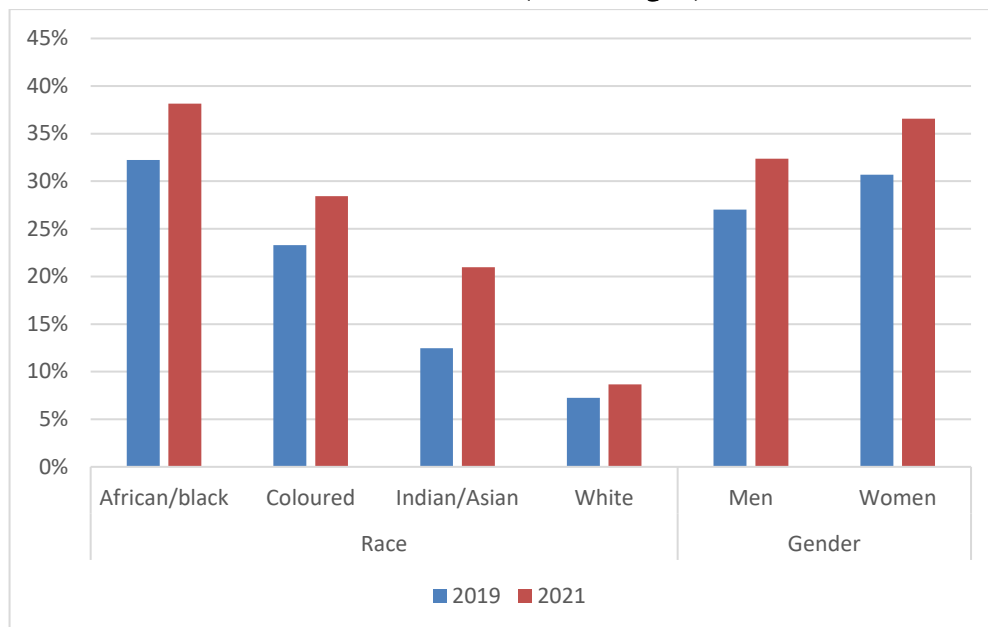
Source: Author's own representation, on the basis of data from Quarterly Labour Force Surveys 2008-2021, Stats SA, accessed in July 2022.

Figure 3 shows that since 2015, the expanded unemployment rates in both rural and urban parts of the Western Cape have mostly aligned. While the standard unemployment rate in rural areas decreased in 2020, the expanded unemployment rate in these areas increased that same year. As of 2021, the expanded unemployment rate in rural areas is approaching the standard and expanded unemployment rates of urban areas. When read with reference to earlier discussions on sectoral employment, the convergences in Figure 3 show the increasing

trend of discouraged work seekers in rural areas, and the precarity of jobs in the rural Western Cape.

Figure 4 reveals the racial and gendered features of unemployment in South Africa, particularly how these inequalities deepened from 2019-2021 following the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2021, African/black people face the highest rates of unemployment that is approaching 40%, while white people face an unemployment rate that remains below 10%. Between 2019-2021, the racially uneven experiences of unemployment deepened for Black people, while conversely white people had the lowest increase in unemployment rates in this period. This shows the enduring racialised economic inequalities from colonialism and apartheid in South Africa. The intersections of race and gender compound for African/black women, who suffer the highest rates of unemployment in the country (Stats SA, 2022).<sup>4</sup> This structural characteristic of how race and gender intersect in unemployment is critical to note in the later discussions of crises of social reproduction in the rural Western Cape.

**Figure 4: Standard unemployment rate according to race and gender, South Africa, 2019-2021 (Percentages)**



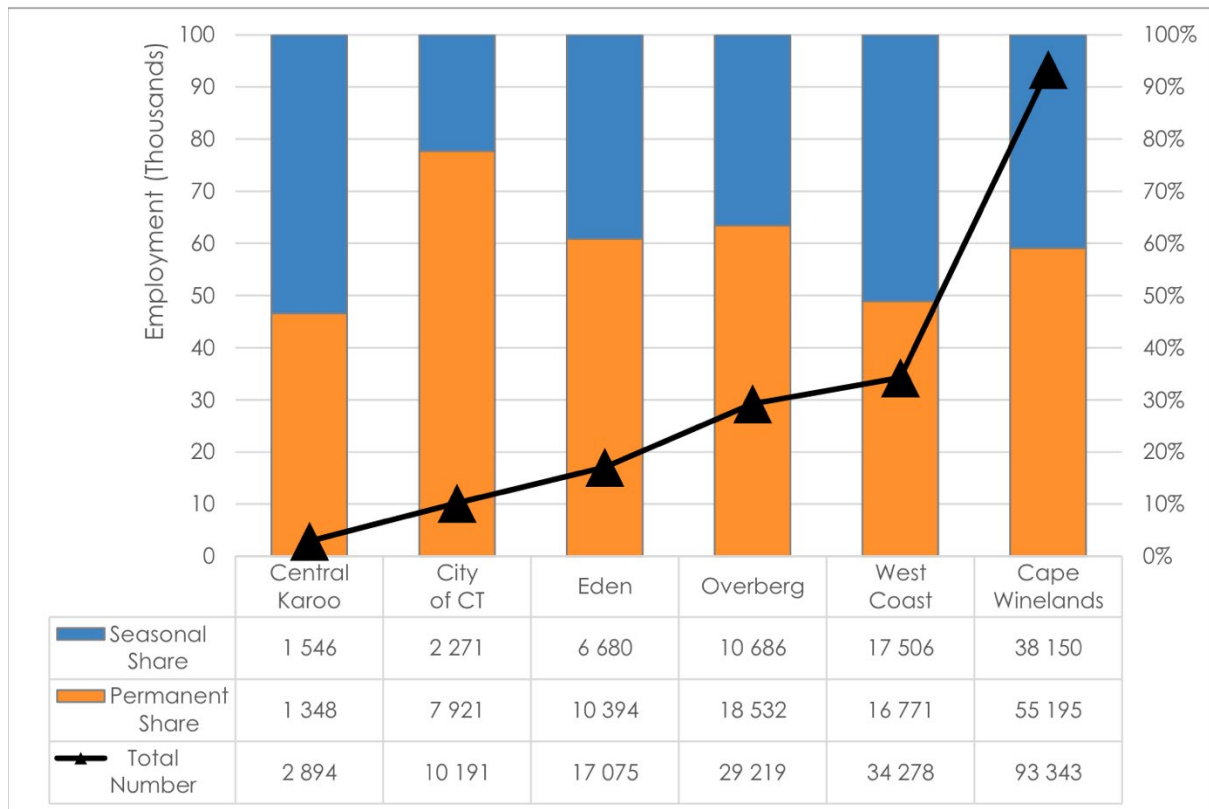
Source: Author's own representation, on the basis of data from Quarterly Labour Force Surveys 2008-2021, Stats SA, accessed in July 2022.

It is necessary to analyse how these trends in un/employment relate to the specific labour and production regimes of commercial agriculture in the Western Cape. The province is dominated by monocultures, which are diverse across region, crop type and scale, and so bear differing implications for rural classes of labour. Figure 5 shows how agricultural employment is unevenly distributed across the different districts in the province, where horticulture, animal husbandry and fieldcrops are variously produced. Western Cape commercial agriculture is highly lucrative, and in 2019 the province contributed to 49% of all national agricultural exports and valued at R34 billion (Partridge, Tshepo Morokong and Ayabonga Sibulali, 2021). Out of the top twenty agricultural exports from the Western Cape, 58% of these come from raw and processed horticultural products, with grapes and citrus accounting

<sup>4</sup> Stats SA does not provide disaggregated data at the provincial level regarding the relationship between unemployment and race and gender.

for the highest shares (ibid). However, agricultural land in the province is dominated by large-scale wheat farming, which is a highly mechanised farming process with less labour involved compared to horticulture. This shows how employment in commercial agriculture in the Western Cape is unevenly distributed, with concentrations in the highly lucrative, export-oriented horticultural Cape Winelands district.

**Figure 5: Breakdown of agricultural employees by district, Western Cape, 2017**



Source: Western Cape Agricultural Sector Profile 2020, Western Cape Department of Agriculture, 2020.

While commercial agriculture remains fairly labour-intensive, Figure 5 also shows the seasonality of agricultural labour in the province. These dynamics have been examined in literature on the labour regimes of commercial agriculture in South Africa, which show that the sector has internally restructured in response to global neo liberalisation and the political transformations of South Africa (Bernstein, 1996; Mather and Greenberg, 2003; Conradie, 2007). Historically, employment in the sector consisted of permanent coloured farm workers living on white farm owners’ lands, with some seasonal employment of workers who were the wives, parents or children of permanent farm workers living on the farm, or who were brought in from neighbouring farms and towns to help with the season’s harvest. This has changed over the years, as there has been significant reduction in the number of permanent farm workers and a heightened dependency on seasonal workers, who are women, African black migrant workers from other provinces or other African countries, and who mostly come from nearby rural informal settlements (Du Toit, 1994; Ewert and du Toit, 2005; Webb, 2017). The labour regimes in this agrarian context are thus highly fragmented and differentiated.

Literature on the conditions of employment for farm workers in the Western Cape shows how paternalist attitudes coincide with racist and sexist approaches to management

and control of workers on farms (Du Toit, 1993). This descends from the history of colonial slave-master relations on farms, and while there have been significant changes in this dynamic following the introduction of stricter labour legislation in the democratic era and growing resistance in farm worker activism, labour rights violations have remained prevalent in the sector (Du Toit, Kruger and Ponte, 2008; Devereux, 2020). In an important piece of research conducted with Women on Farms Project, Devereux (2020) captures the qualitative depth and quantitative extent of labour rights violations of farm workers in the Western Cape and Northern Cape, which concludes as follows:

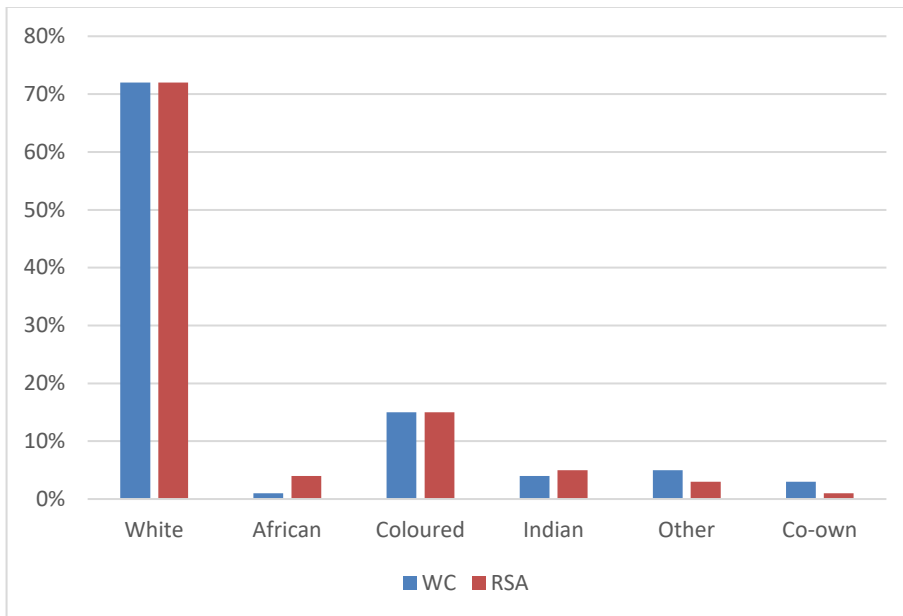
“Many farm workers interviewed have never signed an employment contract and are paid less than the statutory minimum wage. Employers make deductions from paypackets to avoid paying full wages and many do not pay unemployment insurance contributions for their workers. The majority of women surveyed do not have access to toilets while working in vineyards and orchards. Injuries at work often go unreported so workers do not get the compensation they are entitled to under COIDA, and many injured workers have to pay their own medical bills. A high proportion of workers are exposed to pesticides that causes health problems such as skin rashes and breathing difficulties, but farmers rarely provide protective clothing. A fundamental reason for these ongoing violations of the full spectrum of farm workers’ rights is that farmers have little incentive to comply with the laws.” (Devereux, 2020, p. 400)

This research among others shows how labour in commercial agriculture is exploitative, unsafe, undignified, precarious and oppressive for many workers. The wide-reaching frequency of such labour practices on commercial farms in the Western Cape reveals an enduring coloniality in the structure and everyday practices of the sector, whose high profitability remains dependent on the extraction of cheap energy from privatised lands, cheap labour of Black people, and the unpaid social reproduction of these workers. Commercial agriculture’s powerful role in the rural economy of the Western Cape also results in the rural classes of labour’s dependency on the sector for employment and rural development, however with increasing job insecurity the prospects of this are uncertain. The following section will show how this is compounded by skewed land relations in the rural Western Cape, that results in heightened precarity and shifting rural class relations.

### **2.2.2 Landlessness**

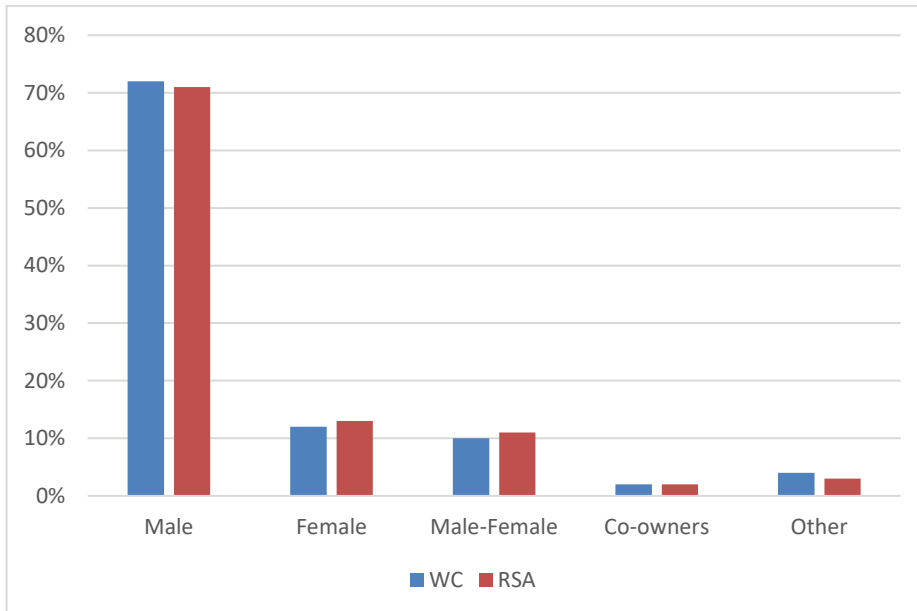
The history of colonial land dispossession and contemporary commercialisation of land in the province has resulted in the extremely skewed distribution of land ownership that continues to favour white ownership of large tracts of prime agricultural land. Figure 6 shows how in the Western Cape, African black people own only 1% of farm land in hectares, compared to white ownership of farm land which is at 72%, and how this provincial disproportionality follows national trends regarding farm land ownership (Department of Rural Development and Land Reform, 2017). Figure 7 shows how this further intersects with gender, as men continue to own the majority of farm land. This data evidences the historical lineage of land dispossession today, and how racism and patriarchy form an integral part of the material structures of commercial agriculture. This concentration of farm land ownership in white, male hands bears numerous implications for regarding land access for the rural classes of labour, in terms of their tenure security on farms, questions of land redistribution, and capacities for social reproduction.

**Figure 6: Individual farm land ownership in hectares by race, Western Cape and South Africa, 2017 (*Percentages*)**



Source: Author's own representation, on the basis of data from the Land Audit 2017, Department of Rural Development and Land Reform

**Figure 7: Individual farm land ownership in hectares by gender, Western Cape and South Africa, 2017 (*Percentages*)**



Source: Author's own representation, on the basis of data from the Land Audit 2017, Department of Rural Development and Land Reform

Tenure security for rural classes of labour who live on white-owned commercial farms remains fragile and at risk. Farm workers who have lived on white-owned farms for multiple generations face continuous vulnerability in securing their land rights while living on these farms. The existing legislation of the Extension of Tenure Security Act (ESTA 1997) does little to protect workers living on farms, as it still does not guarantee farm workers and

dwellers land access independent from farm owners, who have found various loopholes to continue evicting dwellers (Bernstein, 2007). The seminal national survey on farm dweller evictions conducted by Marc Wegerif and Nkuzi Development Association showed that farm evictions increased dramatically in the ten years prior to the democratic elections and in the ten years that followed, with nearly 4.2 million people displaced off of farms in South Africa from 1984-2004 (Bernstein, 2007). Farm workers and dwellers across the country have little to no independent access to prime agricultural land for housing, subsistence food or petty commodity production other than through highly insecure tenure relations with white farm owners.

This evictions crisis has continued in the rural Western Cape and in 2018, the South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC) hosted an *indaba* (dialogue) where a municipal manager within the Cape Winelands district acknowledged that there was a caseload of 1 127 pending farm evictions matters in their municipality, with an estimated impact on 20 000 people (Lali, 2019). Evictions have continued well into the democratic era through legal court procedures, and also through illegal, ‘constructive’ evictions, where farm owners threaten farm dwellers to leave the farm, or make life unbearable for dwellers by illegally switching off water and electricity supplies to their households (Human, 2022f). These evictions also occur alongside the breakdown of paternalistic relations on farms, where farm owners purposefully neglect the upkeep of workers’ houses and sanitation, charge high rates for electricity and rent, and have withdrawn other services such as transport for farm dwellers into towns, or to school (Ewert and du Toit, 2005; Moseley, 2006; Mabena, 2022).

This also corresponds with the growth in informal settlements in the rural Western Cape, which are increasingly filled with evicted farm dwellers and migrant workers settling semi-temporally and permanently in search of farm work. Rural classes of labour in these settlements struggle to access to basic services such as water, electricity, housing, sanitation and healthcare. This has placed growing pressure on rural municipalities and local governments to provide these basic services, which had previously been under the provision of paternalist white farm owners (Ewert and du Toit, 2005). The precarity of living in these rural informal settlements is also affected by other intersecting conditions of violence, which will be further discussed in section 2.2.3.

While the ANC government has acknowledged the historical need for land reform to provide redress to dispossessed Black communities in South Africa, this has occurred at an extremely slow pace. While 70% of all land in South Africa is commercial agricultural land, only 5.46% of this was redistributed between 1995 and 2016 (Kepe and Hall, 2016). The state has approached land reform through three schemas: tenure reform, land restitution and land redistribution (Moseley, 2007). In commercial agriculture, the market-based, ‘willing buyer – willing seller’ model has been the main approach towards land reform, alongside the promotion of the racial diversification farm ownership and management (Greenberg, 2003; Du Toit, Kruger and Ponte, 2008). This has preserved the capitalist nature of the sector and led to elite capture in land reform, which has ultimately prevented meaningful redress for rural classes of labour and left the questions of agrarian and land transformation unaddressed (Kepe and Hall, 2018; de Satgé and Cousins, 2019; Hall, 2011).

The Western Cape has had the least amount of land redistribution projects in the country, and from 2008/9 until 2017/18, only 64 farm projects were transferred to Black beneficiaries (Directorate: Evaluation and Research, 2018). This accounts for only 4% of national redistribution in this period, and is also the second lowest amount of hectares transferred nationally by a province (*ibid.*). While the Western Cape has high levels of land restitution nationally, these are primarily regarding redress for cases of urban forced removals, and there has been limited restitution of rural lands, due to the longer history of dispossession (*ibid.*). This shows the limitations of the state’s approach to land redistribution and restitution,

where claims for restitution are only considered legitimate if can they can be traced after 19 June 1913 (*Restitution of Land Rights Act*, 1994). There have only been a few successful cases of rural farm land restitution for small-scale Black farmers who were dispossessed of their lands during apartheid (Yeld, 2020). Land redistribution and restitution in the rural Western Cape has thus been placed within the state's market-based framework of reform, which curtails rural classes of labour from their intergenerational and indigenous claims to farm lands.

One common approach to land and agrarian reform in the rural Western Cape has been share equity schemes between farmers and farm workers (Moseley, 2007). These projects favour the continuation of commercial farming, and have had mixed results for the intended beneficiaries. Due to workers' historical exploitation and exclusion from the business management of these farms, they often continue to be highly dependent on white farm owners – sometimes their former bosses, now their share partners – to ensure the success of the farm as a highly competitive and export-oriented enterprise, and this has produced mixed results that require updated systematic research (Moseley, 2007). Other land reform projects entail the purchase of white-owned farms by beneficiaries, and there have been some successful cases where various small-scale Black farmers have pooled their resources and with support from the land reform programme have managed to run successful commercial farming enterprises (ibid.). However, it has also been found that these programmes often force the model of large-scale crop cultivation onto emerging farmers, which results in a mismatch in experience and skills, tensions among beneficiaries, and the increased likelihood of failed projects (ibid.).

Despite these mixed results, the lack of overall land and agrarian transformation in the 28 years since the formal ending of apartheid can be rightfully considered a failure of the state to address needs for land, historical redress and justice. In the rural Western Cape, white-owned commercial farms have been protected, resulting in a crisis of landlessness for rural classes of labour. These communities' livelihoods are connected to and dependent on land, and yet their rights to land remain systematically curtailed and precarious. This has profound impact on the dynamics of class relations and struggle in this agrarian context.

### **2.2.3 Conditions of violence**

These conditions of precarity in the high levels of employment insecurity, exploitation, and landlessness for rural classes of labour in the Western Cape bear further consequences on the capacity for social reproduction of these communities. This section explores how economic precarity results in increased poverty, while also interacting with various conditions of violence, which are interpersonal and structural, slow and immediate, and which permeate the lives the rural classes of labour in the Western Cape.

This economic precarity has resulted in the prevalence of hunger, malnutrition and stunting throughout South Africa (Rinquest, 2022). In the Western Cape, 13% of children live in households with insufficient food supplies and 21% of children live in households where meals are skipped due to insufficient food (Daniels, 2022). The national minimum wage in 2022 was set at R23,69 per hour (roughly R3800,00 per month) and this was found to be insufficient to cover the needs of a basic food basket, which was worth over R4000 in 2021 (September, 2021; Marais, 2022). Seasonal hunger is acute among farm workers, especially in the off-season winter months when work is scarce, and this particularly impacts women seasonal workers (Claasen and Lemke, 2019; Devereux and Tavener-Smith, 2019). For this reason, agrarian social movements have called this a 'slave' or 'hunger' minimum wage (September, 2021). Women farm workers survive these periods of unemployment through limited Unemployment Insurance Fund (UIF) benefits, while precariously employed mothers depend heavily on the Child Support Grant (CGS), which has been found inadequate to meet the nutritional needs of a mother and her child (Rinquest, 2022).

Finally, the interpersonal gender-based violence experienced by Black women on farms and rural informal settlements – from partners, sons, male relatives, and white male farm-owners – is linked to all of these structural conditions of patriarchy and capitalism in this agrarian context (Women on Farms Project, 2020). Women, children and LGBTQIA+ people living on farms and in informal settlements face specific vulnerabilities to patriarchal violence due to their high levels of economic dependency on male figures, lack of access to collective care facilities and independent economic opportunities – both land and jobs – and their geographic isolation from sources of protection and justice (Kiewit, 2019; Payne, 2020b; Women on Farms Project, 2020). Additionally, the historical legacy of the ‘dop’ system, when farm workers were paid in alcohol, has resulted in ongoing alcohol dependency and high rates of Foetal Alcohol Syndrome Disorder (FASD), while drug abuse has also increased alongside the spreading of gang-related crime in rural parts of the Western Cape (Du Toit, 1994; London, 1999; ‘On the couch: Dealing with FAS among the female farming community’, 2020; Dolley, 2022). These interpersonal relations and structural conditions of violence affect rural classes of labour in differentiated ways, with women and children evidently disproportionately affected.

### **2.3 The rural precariat class: theorising agrarian class relations and struggle**

The agrarian context of the rural Western Cape thus presents a case of extreme levels of inequality and systemic, collective and individual precarity. This has resulted in an unfolding crisis of social reproduction in which rural classes of labour lack the means to reproduce themselves sufficiently due to job insecurity, landlessness and violence. This crisis is gendered and racialised, and stems from interlocking colonial-capitalist histories of dispossession and exploitation, which has continued with the violent contradictions of capital in the neo liberal, democratic South Africa (O’Laughlin, 1977; Fraser, 2016; Bhattacharya and Vogel, 2017). Marxist feminists have shown how for rural classes of labour in agrarian contexts, land access and income security are vital for their social reproduction (Naidu and Osome, 2016; Fakier and Cock, 2018). The case of the rural Western Cape shows white commercial agriculture is dependent on the exploitation of rural classes of labour, their alienation from land, and the subordination of their social reproduction capacities to the demands of agrarian capital. The crisis of social reproduction thus intertwines with the exploitation of social reproduction, in order to sustain the foundations of white commercial agriculture and subsidise white agrarian capital.

The generalised precarisation of life in this context has contributed to further transformations, differentiations and fragmentations of rural classes of labour, in the interlocking dynamics of racism, patriarchy and capitalism. In the rural Western Cape, the historical legacies of apartheid’s racial divisions among Indian/Asian, coloured and African/black peoples, these groups’ forced segregation from white people, and the oppression of Black family life can be seen in the fragmented, racialised and gendered labour regimes of commercial agriculture and the sector’s continuation of unequal land ownership in the province. The dynamics of rural informal settlements, which are diverse racially and linguistically and permeated with violent precarities, are further evidence of the enduring nature of coloniality and apartheid capitalism in the rural Western Cape (White, 2010; Webb, 2017).

This research acknowledges these class differentiations, particularly in the fragility of ongoing social constructions of race and gender. In this research, the choice of Black (capitalised) as a political signifier and descriptor of a rural precariat class does not intend to reduce or hide these important differences, but rather refers to the work of Black Consciousness theorists and rural Western Cape activists, who use Black as a political unifier in their



ideological frameworks (Adhikari, 2005; White, 2010; More, 2017). This choice also reflects the power relations of white commercial agriculture in the rural Western Cape, where race is still a significant discriminator between workers and bosses, and the landless and the land-owners. Similarly, this research explores the high burden that Black women carry in these conditions of rural precarity, while holding central how enduring coloniality and neo liberalisation have intertwined with patriarchy, thus resulting in differentiated impacts on the gendered relations among Black men, women, LGBTQIA+ people, children and the elderly (Fakier and Cock, 2018; Swanby, 2021).

While there are many ways to understand these differentiations, this research draws from theoretical debates on the ‘precariat’ and ‘classes of labour’ in order to propose a burgeoning *rural precariat class* in the Western Cape (Bernstein, 2010; Jørgensen, 2016). The rural precariat class is distinguished by threefold, interlocking precarity in their relations to labour, land and violence (Webb, 2016; Pye, 2017; Ossome, 2022). Here, production and reproduction are intertwined, as is evident in the lived experiences of Black women seasonal farm workers, whose productive *and* reproductive labour is exploited to subsidise agrarian capital (Stephen, 2021). These dimensions are intertwined due to the interlocking nature of land exploitation and labour dispossession in the rural Western Cape, which has resulted in generalised conditions of precarity and a social reproduction crisis. Thus, while there are internal fragmentations and differentiations of this class, these are due to mutual determinations between race, gender and capital, as they have historically formed in this agrarian context in relation to land and labour, production and reproduction (McNally and Vogel, 2017; Mtero *et al.*, 2021).

The framing of the rural precariat is not meant to show how this class understands or calls itself, rather it emphasises how precarity impacts and unites – in tense and differentiated ways – the relations of rural classes of labour. These tensions are central to understanding the politics of class struggle that are emerging. In this sense, “precarity does not necessarily designate a common cause (nor a class-in-the-making), and we should not lump too much into one concept (cf. the critique of Standing). There are both institutional and other divisions...that cause distinctions, but it *can* function as a social space in which struggles are articulated and united” (Jørgensen, 2016). This bears relation to the social reproduction struggles for the commons, which are relevant to the context of the rural Western Cape’s crisis of social reproduction (Aguilar, Linsalata and Trujillo, 2016). Thus, the framing of the rural precariat class is useful analytically and strategically in linking debates on changing class relations with complex class struggles in agrarian contexts.

In a similar attempt to frame classes of rural, exploited peoples, Shivji (2017) has offered the concept of “working people” as a way to understand the coalitional class politics that can emerge in resisting capital (Shivji, 2017). This concept is built primarily upon the Tanzanian case of differentiated peasantry as they form rural classes of labour that hold differing labour and land demands. This paper follows the spirit of Shivji’s approach, but adjusts his analysis to include the mutually determining class relations of production and reproduction, as these are interlocked through race and gender and as well as material relations to land and labour. This adjustment is necessary for the highly commercialised agrarian context of the rural Western Cape, which does not have peasant classes per se, but rather a class of landless workers, dependent on insecure agricultural employment, differentiated by race and gender, and experiencing generalised precarity.

Thus, in a parallel approach to Shivji, this paper proposes the rural precariat class as a class with “great potency in political discourse and mobilisation” (Shivji, 2017, p.12). Here, this research utilises the framing of the rural precariat class to understand how conditions of precarity result in a dialectic politics that responds to, is shaped by and impacts on this context. This is in line with a Marxist, critical realist approach to understanding how structure

impacts on agency, while still enabling the capacities of agents to strategically operate within and impact on structures (Jessop, 2001; Mtero *et al.*, 2021). This approach to structure and agency is essential to understanding the complex politics of the rural precariat's class struggle in responding to a multidimensional social reproduction crisis.

## Chapter 3

### Post-1994 Agrarian politics in the rural Western Cape

The agrarian politics of the rural precariat class in the Western Cape are thus profoundly shaped by these conditions of generalized precarity in the agrarian political economy. These politics come from a rich history of struggle in the rural Western Cape, from indigenous resistance to colonialism, to organized and everyday resistances to apartheid in the agrarian context of violent and oppressive paternalism (Worden, 1982; Viljoen, 1994; Sandwith, 2004). In the democratic era, new dynamics to political struggle have emerged from this heritage of resistance. This chapter situates these agrarian politics in the rural Western Cape within this broader portrait of political struggle in post-1994 South Africa.

This involves firstly a review from relevant literature on interactions between trade unions and new social movements, alongside the rise of informal ‘social’ struggles, through debates on the impact of forms of association in class struggle. This is then related to agrarian politics in the rural Western Cape, where the 2012-13 farm worker strike is presented as an emblematic case study of post-1994 political struggles in the agrarian context. Finally, the chapter discusses this history in relation to contemporary agrarian social movements in the rural Western Cape, and analyses how different forms of association respond to this context of generalized precarity.

#### 3.1 Dynamics of political struggles in post-1994 South Africa

Political movements have undergone significant changes in South Africa’s democratic era. While trade unions were a powerful movement in the anti-apartheid struggle, their role in the ‘new’ South Africa has been difficult to place. In the liberation movement’s transitioning towards democratic power, the ANC aligned with Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) and the South African Communist Party to form a tripartite alliance that has continued since 1994. Although this has limited COSATU’s capacity to hold critical politics against the ANC government, the scale of worker membership in the federation still affords them immense power (Webster and Buhlungu, 2004; Friedman, 2012). However, as neo liberalisation has resulted in other socio-economic crises, new social movements have emerged to organize around these politics (Kepe, Levin and von Lieres, 2016).

This has resulted in a colourful tapestry of social movement and trade union activism, with dynamics of contention and cooperation coexisting as these movements transitioned from apartheid to democratic South Africa. The Western Cape has inherited many of these dynamics through the history of coalitional politics in the United Democratic Front (UDF), which brought together various anti-apartheid resistance movements whose activists still organize in the democratic era through trade unions, community-based organisations (CBOs), and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) (Walters, 2005). Social movement theorists have studied the dynamics among these various social movements since 1994, through analysing the impact that these different forms of association have on the nature of their politics, and on their ability to build coalitional alliances with one another (Xali, 2006; Friedman, 2012).

Trade unions have struggled to adapt to the increasing fragmentation of the working-class and the precarisation of life, both within their organizing strategies and in their political demands (van der Linden and Roth, 2013). The simultaneous rise of social movements in this period has in some ways stepped in to this gap left by the labour movement, particularly in its capacity to mobilise resources and address the variegated needs of differentiated

exploited and marginalized groups, but this has not come without its own limitations (Edelman, 2001). The professionalization of political activism in these new social movements has been found to stifle and bind activist approaches, and has at times recreated hierarchies of class, race and gender within movements, which is enhanced by a lack of democratic participation of exploited classes in these movements (Walters, 2005; Mngxitama, 2006; Tamale, 2006; Carroll, 2010). This has led to the critical examining of the linkages between forms of association and their capacity to advance redistributive political demands of differentiated classes of labour (Greenberg, 2004b; Friedman, 2012; Jørgensen, 2016).

In South Africa, the contentions among these different forms of association have been juxtaposed against the rise of informal ‘service delivery’ protests. These are the spontaneous and episodic outbursts in urban and peri-urban peripheral settlements, where political demands arise related to the quality of life for poor and working-class Black communities (Webb, 2016; Human, 2022d). These informal struggles reflect the urgent collective need for dignity and communal care, which is common to social reproductive struggles (Katz, 1991; Di Chiro, 2008; Guérin, Hillenkamp and Verschuur, 2021). They are led by various political actors who are not formally organized but act in alliance, and involve a range of political actions often involving civil disobedience, from the shutting down of towns and highways, to protesting outside courts and conducting land occupations (Washinyira and Mazwi, 2018; Pather, 2019; Wire, 2020; Mkentane, 2022).

### **3.2 Agrarian politics in the rural Western Cape**

The agrarian politics of the rural Western Cape connect to this historical ecosystem of politics, and reflect the contentions within class struggle in conditions of generalized precarity. This section opens with a vignette on the 2012-13 farm worker strike, which encapsulates contemporary dynamics within agrarian politics in the rural Western Cape. The following section analyses various agrarian social movements in the province, and draws on previous discussions to examine how different forms of association impact the politics of these movements. This introduces concepts from labour movement theory regarding workers’ associational power as “the various forms of power that result from the formation of collective organizations of workers” (Wright, 2000, p.962). The analysis extends this understanding of associational power according to previous discussions of the rural precariat class, by showing how this highly fragmented and differentiated class has multiple forms of associational power.

### *The Farm Worker Strike of 2012-13*

A stand-out moment of agrarian politics in the democratic era was the 2012-13 farm worker strike that took over the rural Western Cape. The strike began roughly four months after the Marikana strike in August 2012, and both actions showed workers' organizing around their dissatisfaction with the national minimum wage and their quality of life as the working-class of the lucrative extractive industries of mining and commercial agriculture. The farm worker strike was historic, as it was the first ever strike of farm workers in the country at that scale, and was particularly unique in that it was not organized by trade unions (Hattingh, 2021). Many have noted how the strike carries the influence of the politics of Marikana, but closer examination of the protesting farm workers' political demands and actions reveal a more complex portrait of agrarian politics in the rural Western Cape, which reflect some of the aforementioned complex dynamics among trade unions, social movements, and informal social struggles (Webb, 2017; Fogel and Lester, 2022).

One of the exceptional features of the strike was how it was organized. With low levels of unionization among farm workers, workers had mobilized themselves into independent committees in the Stofland informal settlement in De Doorns, a key town next to a national highway in the fertile Hexrivier Valley. The strikes quickly spread across many other towns of the rural Western Cape, as inspired farm workers took radical action in initiating protests at farms, in rural informal settlements, blocking the highway, burning vineyards, and causing operations to come to a halt in the peak of harvest season. Some of the workers' demands included a wage increase from R69 to R150 per day, land for housing, maternity leave and the stopping of evictions, showing that linkages between political demands relating to production and reproduction, land and labour were inherent to their visions of agrarian transformation (Webb, 2016). The extent of police repression in this strike was particularly violent, and corresponded with a firm sense of refusal by commercial farmers to recognize working-class agency.

The strike action quickly attracted the attention of COSATU and other ANC-aligned unions. Various accounts have argued how COSATU leaders effectively interfered with what was originally an "organic" strike mobilization, particularly in calling for a preliminary end to the strike in 2012, which workers rejected and continued into 2013 (Christie, 2012; Knoetze, 2013; Hattingh, 2021). This showed the failings of traditional trade unionism – and in particular the limitations of COSATU under the tripartite alliance – to represent the rich totality of the protestors' demands, and build a democratic, agrarian trade unionism. In contrast to this, a loose grouping of NGOs and a new trade union supported and stimulated this radical strike action to continue, and for the voices of workers' committees to be prioritized. This was what came to be known as the Farm Worker Coalition, which represented a coalition of alternative agrarian social movements that addressed the rural precariat class's political concerns from multiple approaches and were more grounded in the context than COSATU was (Knoetze, 2013; Webb, 2017).

In a compelling study of this moment, Webb (2016) has argued that the strike represented an "insurgent citizenship and the rebellion of the poor", where protestors claimed their status as marginalized citizens to demand a better quality of life than what they were experiencing (Webb, 2016). Agrarian social movements recognised that these struggles were "fundamentally about a crisis of social reproduction faced by rural households, particularly those who work seasonally or casually on commercial farms" (Webb, 2016, p. 231). The strike thus revealed the changing dynamics of class struggle in South African agrarian politics, the impacts that different forms of association have on the rural precariat's politics, and the growing voice of rural social reproduction struggles.

### 3.2.1 Trade unions in agrarian politics

It has proven historically difficult for trade unions in the agrarian context for a number of reasons. In South Africa, it is estimated that less than 6% of farm workers are part of a union, while in the Western Cape, this figure fluctuates between 3 to 11%, with recent studies finding that 14% of women farm workers belonged to a union (Cordes and Baldwin, 2011; Webb, 2017; Devereux, 2020). Currently in the rural Western Cape, the biggest agrarian trade unions are the Commercial Stevedoring Agricultural and Allied Workers Union (CSAAWU) and the Food and Allied Workers Union (FAWU). CSAAWU increased its membership with workers on commercial farms since the 2012-13 strike, while on the other hand, the impact and reach of FAWU among farm workers has diminished, but it remains an important union in the closely related food processing industry, particularly in rural fruit factories in the Western Cape. Furthermore, both CSAAWU and FAWU are part of SAFTU, an independent and rival union federation from COSATU, which enables these unions to take a more critical stance towards the ANC government (Cape Times, 2017).

Unions are composed through direct worker participation in the leadership of the union and based off workers' paid memberships. Because of their form of association, they are able to represent workers in workplace disputes and collective. The union associational form is therefore significant in its potential power for workers on commercial farms, however unions still face numerous challenges in organizing workers on farms. Various studies into the state of farm worker unions show that there are several competing issues at the root cause of this low level of associational power.

One of the main reasons has been the long history of union repression from farm owners, who weaponize paternalist labour relations to threaten workers from joining unions, or outright bar and prevent unions from accessing workers on farms (Du Toit, 1993; White, 2010; Devereux, 2020). This has resulted in a culture of worker hesitancy to join trade unions, which requires unions to have extensive organizing and recurrent trainings with farm workers about their rights (White, 2010; Devereux, 2020). Other contextual challenges for union organizing are inherent to this agrarian, rural context such as the geographic fragmentation and isolation of farm workers from one another, from rural towns and centres of power (Webb, 2017).

However, trade unions also face other difficulties which reveal inherent limitations in the union's associational form, politics and actions in the neo liberal era. Increasing job insecurity and unemployment due to the restructuring of agrarian labour regimes in the rural Western Cape has produced multiple barriers to trade union organizing and politics. The extremes of job insecurity and temporality, combined with geographic shifting and scattering of workers, means that traditional styles of worker mobilization have not been appropriate for some time (Swarts, 2022). It is difficult to organize workers who are rotating across farms, have various employers, and are unemployed for long parts of the year.

Because the agrarian labour regime is also gendered and racialised, with coloured men occupying more permanent farm work positions than women workers, this also has implications for the composition of trade union membership, where seasonal, Black, casual, migrant and women workers are often underrepresented (White, 2010). These workers do not always have income to spare on union fees, and furthermore may not always see themselves solely as farm workers, because they are searching for multiple types of employment throughout the year (White, 2010; Webb, 2017; Devereux, 2020). Farm owners often exploit the differences among workers along racial, gender, linguistic and national identities in the labour regimes on farms, making it difficult to organise and unite such differentiated and fragmented rural precariat class in the Western Cape.

In response to these challenges, CSAAWU democratically elected to adopt an explicitly social trade unionism approach in its last congress (Swarts, 2022). The union still engages with conventional issues related to wages and conditions of service, but also engages with social problems such as farm worker housing and evictions, gender-based violence on farms, and municipal service delivery. This approach intends to grow the union's reach and can be seen as an attempt to revive the strength of the union associational form. But social trade unionism also bears further implications for CSAAWU, as it broadens the scope of union politics, which will be examined critically in Chapter 4.

### **3.2.2 Non-governmental organizations in agrarian politics**

In response to these challenges facing unions, various NGOs have established themselves as social movements capable of responding to the political needs of rural classes of labour in the Western Cape. There is a strong and long-standing cohort of NGOs responding to these conditions of generalized precarity, such as Women on Farms Project (WFP), the Trust for Community Outreach and Education (TCOE), the Surplus Peoples Project (SPP), the Southern Cape Land Committee (SCLC), among others. These NGOs are organised in different ways from trade unions, and among each other. They work with rural classes of labour directly, but maintain an office-based group of staff, with some offering stipends to community field workers. These NGOs work with core clusters of community activists who are spread across different districts in the rural Western Cape, and who participate with varying degrees of democratization in the organizations' decision-making processes and activities (White, 2010; Surplus Peoples Project, 2018; Trust for Community Outreach and Education, 2020).

There are some important differences to note among these NGOs. TCOE functions as a collective trust that aims to build a united movement among different grassroots and community-based organisations, and also provides financial and administrative support to CSAAWU and Mawubuye Land Rights Movement. As an NGO, it operates therefore in a coordinating and supportive role with other rural community organisations (Trust for Community Outreach and Education, 2020). WFP, SPP and SCLC work directly with the rural precariat class in various rural localities through political activities and actions. These NGOs are spread out across rural parts of the province, but also overlap at times, with some key rural activists forming part of TCOE subsidiary movements, WFP or SPP activities, and other unaffiliated grassroots organisations and CBOs.

While there has not been much critical study of the NGO structure in this agrarian context, there have been some key studies on the activities WFP, TCOE and other ecofeminist organisations in the province that illuminate the necessary role these NGOs play in the broader ecosystem of agrarian social movements (White, 2010; Fakier and Cock, 2018). Because NGOs source their funds independently from the rural precariat class, they are able to mobilise and deploy resources for creative responses to their multiple and intersecting political demands which extend beyond the workplace (Yeni, 2022).

However, this also leaves this associational form at risk of prioritizing funder-driven mandates over the democratic participation of the rural precariat class in political decision-making (Mngxitama, 2006; Friedman, 2012). Unlike unions, NGOs have a fluid approach to membership, where the metrics and nature of community participation are usually found in programme evaluation reports or in media accounts. This approach can lead to NGOs over- or underestimating their political scale and impact. Additionally, it can also result in accountability issues regarding NGO's collaboration with and representation of the rural precariat class (Friedman, 2012). This is commonly seen in the power imbalances between NGOs and community activists, or the denial of the NGO's power in relation to the communities with which they work (Yeni, 2022). The politics of the NGO associational form, which has a

strong presence in the agrarian social movement context of the rural Western Cape, thus remain an important feature of analysis moving forward.

### **3.2.3 Community-based organisations in agrarian politics**

Finally, there are various CBOs, including advice offices, community forums, and other action groups that have existed for some time with minimal levels of formalization and at an extremely local level. While there are many of these politically active CBOs in the rural Western Cape, this research includes in its scope the Mawubuye Land Rights Movement (affiliated to TCOE), the Witzenberg Justice Coalition (WJC), and the Rural Farmworkers Development Organisation (RFDO). The community advice offices, which are found in many rural towns of the province, are paralegal structures that offer legal support and advice to poor and working-class Black communities, and which also often partake in explicitly political activities and coalitional work with other social movements.

The strength of the CBO associational form differs from NGOs and unions, due to their limitations in capacity and resource levels, as well as their reach. Some are registered as non-profit organisations, others are long-standing community groups and organisations that work with larger NGOs, trade unions, and coalitions. Many are often spearheaded by one or two activists who receive sporadic or semi-regular funding from local donors. Some work from offices and have paid staff, others do not. These highly varied grassroots organisations are often based in localities where trade unions and NGOs are unable to reach on a regular basis, or do not respond to the political concerns and demands of the rural precariat class there. However, these CBOs are often unable to reach a larger scale of politicization and action without their linkages to other, bigger agrarian social movements and coalitions. Ultimately, they offer a vital political associational form for isolated rural precariat classes, while also showing the potential and limits of self-organised associational forms in conditions of generalized rural precarity.

## **3.3 Building associational power through scale and politicisation activities**

For all of these agrarian social movements, it is necessary to build constantly their associational power, meaning the political potential that can be drawn from their collective identities and actions as agrarian social movements at various levels of scale. Among all these agrarian social movements, it is most common for high levels of political activity at the local municipal level, as this remains fundamental for these associational forms to consider themselves as agrarian social movements. The trade unions and many of the NGOs also operate in provinces other than the Western Cape, and build linkages among their memberships across provinces. These agrarian social movements also draw on their connections at higher levels of scale, through transnational coalitions such as La Via Campesina (LVC), international funders, partners and comrades, continental and regional coalitions, national trade union federations and political parties, civil society across geographies and sectors, as well as the general public as fellow citizens, consumers, and activists. These connections and activities across scale increase their associational power significantly.

At the core of growing these movements' associational power are their politicization activities that intentionally and unintentionally cultivate the class consciousness of the rural precariat class and nurture solidarity. Such activities reveal the political concerns of the rural precariat class and birth the political demands of movements, thus enabling further political actions. They therefore constitute the necessary, on-the-ground, organizing and mobilizing of the rural precariat class to join these movements. This includes planned efforts of



recruitment, popular education workshops and awareness campaign blitzes (Walters, 2005; Novelli and Ferus-Comelo, 2010; White, 2010). This also occurs as activists, leaders and staff of movements are alerted to assist cases of rights violations, and through their combined efforts of solidarity, support and activism a process of politicization can occur and comradeship is built. For many of agrarian social movements, this is the primary form of politicisation action that is taken.

Politicization also occurs during protests and strikes, when those who were previously uninvolved in politics are presented with new opportunities for political engagement through collective action (Melucci, 1995; Mackay, 2018). Similarly politicisation activities are also informed by the outcomes of political actions (Walters, 2005; Novelli and Ferus-Comelo, 2010). Additionally, politicization processes occur through associational learning in research, conferences and external trainings. Politicisation activities and actions can thus be seen as interlinking parts of the whole in the political praxes of these movements (Edelman, 2001).

In order to build associational power, it is necessary that political conscientization develops critical awareness of the root causes behind experiences of exploitation, oppression and precarity shared by the rural precariat class in differentiated ways. Through such processes, a collective identity as the fluctuating rural precariat class can be built, despite fragmentation and differentiation (Freire, 1970; Melucci, 1995). Politicisation reveals how various oppressions and exploitations are dialectically intertwined to result in these lived experiences of multifaceted precarity, and this can inspire solidarity among classes of labour as well as political action (Freire, 1970; McNally and Vogel, 2017). However, this does not always result in coherent class consciousness, and unevenness in politicization reflects the challenges of building a collective identity in such a highly fragmented rural precariat class (Novelli and Ferus-Comelo, 2010; Andrews, 2022). Different associational forms emphasise different elements of the rural precariat class's fragmented identities, such as workers, women or the landless, but ultimately these movements' politicisation activities show that it is still necessary to build coalitional class solidarity in the context of generalized precarity in the rural Western Cape.

## Chapter 4

# Precarious dynamics among contemporary agrarian social movements and coalitions

In the ten years since the farm worker strike, agrarian politics of the rural Western Cape have taken new, dynamic forms, as can be seen in the consolidated politics of agrarian social movements since then. The agrarian politics that emerge from this context of generalized precarity offer new insights to class politics in rural agrarian contexts. For the rural precariat class of the Western Cape who organize “in the context of generalised precariousness, it is difficult to make a clear distinction between productive and reproductive struggles” (Webb, 2016, p.231). This challenges previous understandings of agrarian politics in the province and demands updating and extending existing political frameworks.

The analysis continues from the previous chapters’ theoretical framings of class struggle, namely the associational power of rural classes of labour (Wright, 2000; Pattenden, 2018). This research extends this framework to see the rural precariat class as having multidimensional associational powers, due to their fragmentation and the blurred lines between production and reproduction struggles in experiences generalized precarity. This extension enables a critical analysis of how differentiated experiences of oppression and exploitation interlock and require multiple associational forms and coalitions to build the associational power of this class (Di Chiro, 2008; Friedman, 2012; McNally and Vogel, 2017). Here, associational power is related to structural power, which is the “power that results simply from the location of workers within the economic system” (Wright, 2000, p.962). Similarly to associational power, this research extends the dimensions of structural power to assess how the rural precariat class occupies multiple positions in relation to the structure of the agrarian economy, specifically as workers in the production cycle, as women in the reproduction cycle, and as the landless in the rural periphery surrounded by prime commercial farm lands.

These multidimensional associational and structural powers of the rural precariat class are examined through the political demands and actions of agrarian social movements and coalitions (Friedman, 2012; Pattenden, 2018). In this context, political demands are studied according to their redistributive or reformist visions of agrarian transformation (Friedman, 2012). Political action is examined according to whether it grows the structural power of the rural precariat class, or if it grows this class’s patronage in these agrarian social movements (Friedman, 2012). Finally, these dynamics are explored in their impacts on coalitional politics among these agrarian social movements. This extended analysis of class struggle is grounded in archival evidence of agrarian politics in the rural Western Cape since 2012.

### 4.1 Contemporary agrarian social movements

This section analyses how agrarian social movements build their associational and structural powers through their political demands and actions. Table 1 below shows the selection of agrarian social movements in the rural Western Cape and their associational forms, as well as their political concerns and demands. The selection covers the three types of associational forms of these agrarian social movements, namely trade unions, NGOs, and CBOs. Within this ecosystem of agrarian social movements, it is clear that NGOs and CBOs dominate the political landscape, with only two trade unions in the agricultural sector working here. Table 1 also clearly shows how there is an inherent multiplicity of politics with which all of these

agrarian social movements engage, as this wide-ranging politics attempts to reflect and respond to the complex lived experiences of the rural precariat class in the Western Cape.

**Table 1: Associational forms of agrarian social movements and their political concerns and demands**

ASSOCIATIONAL FORMS	Agrarian Social Movements	POLITICAL CONCERNS AND DEMANDS							
		Labour	Land	Gender	Youth	Health	Food	Service Delivery	Environment
Trade Unions	CSAAWU	X	X	X		X		X	
	FAWU	X				X			
Non-governmental organisations	WFP	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	
	TCOE	X	X	X	X		X	X	X
	SPP	X	X		X	X	X		X
	SCLC	X	X	X			X	X	X
Community organisations	WJC	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
	MAWUBUYE LAND RIGHTS MOVEMENT		X	X	X		X	X	X
	RFDO	X	X	X		X		X	
	ADVICE OFFICES	X	X					X	

Source: Author's own analysis

### 4.1.3 Building structural power through political demands

The intention of growing associational power is to leverage and actualize the structural power of a class. As argued earlier, the potential structural powers of the rural precariat class are threefold – it is workers' position in relation to agrarian production, it is landless communities' position in relation to the prime farming land surrounding them, and it is women's position in relation to the necessary social reproduction of life. These structural powers are built through the articulation of political demands, which range from welfarist reforms to redistributive change (Friedman, 2012). This section explores these spheres of the rural precariat's structural power as they respond to three sites of the agrarian economies structural power, namely it's exploitation of workers, of unpaid care labour, and of dispossessed lands. This is done by examining the various political demands that articulate the rural precariat's structural powers in each aspect.

In this highly commercialized agrarian context, political demands regarding labour rights remain foundational to all agrarian social movements, and are dominated by the demands of farm workers and agro-food processing workers, specifically those in rural food and beverage processing factories. Usually, these are necessary reformist demands revolving around decent working conditions, wage disputes, and value chain ethics and solidarity, in a context where basic labour rights violations still remain widespread (Du Toit, 1993; Webb, 2017; Devereux, 2020). Agrarian social movements have adapted to labour regime fragmentation by articulating the specific political demands of seasonal, casual and migrant workers alongside those of permanent workers. This is most clearly seen in WFP's work with seasonal women farm workers, such as their campaigns for the UIF to be processed speedily in the off-season, as well as their campaigns for occupational health and safety compliance noting the particular needs for women to have access to toilets in vineyards (Maregele, 2017; O'Regan, 2021).

A longstanding labour demand taken up by CSAAWU and some NGOs is for an end to "slavery wages" for farm workers, which forms part of their long-term vision for agrarian transformation (Furlong, 2016). This demand, set against the low level of the national minimum wage, is consistently juxtaposed alongside other political demands for dignified

working and living conditions for farm workers, which are urgent and can be resolved without resolution on the question of the minimum wage (Hendricks, 2019b). This exemplifies how agrarian social movements hold long-term redistributive political demands and visions while simultaneously responding to immediate political demands for reform. Through these various demands both reformist and redistributive, agrarian social movements draw on workers' fragmented positions in the lucrative, export-oriented agrarian production system, in order to leverage their structural power as workers.

Political demands regarding land rights also continue to be prevalent in these agrarian politics. Even though colonial land dispossession in the rural Western Cape occurred a few centuries earlier than the rest of the country, agrarian social movements incorporate what can be seen as a "long memory" approach in their political relationship to land on commercial farms (Pairican and Urrutia, 2021). In this way, movements draw on the rural precariat class's ancestral heritage of intergenerational living and working on commercial farm land since the days of slavery (and before) to claim political demands against farm worker evictions and poor housing conditions for farm dwellers (Nolan, 2008; Human, 2022f; Phyllis, 2022). These demands are reformist at times, but also carry redistributive claims in their supplementary demands for independent and secure land access on farm land (Lali, 2019; Human, 2021).

Land politics of the rural precariat class also extend beyond a closed framework of worker-related dweller rights in commercial agriculture. These include demands for land expropriation without compensation, land redistribution for women, and municipal land for community food gardens. NGOs such as SPP, WFP, SCLC and TCOE mobilize against farm worker evictions and demand that land expropriation consider the social reproduction land needs the rural precariat class (B. Maregele, 2018b; Damons, 2020). This attempts to unite the combined structural powers of rural women, farm workers and dwellers, and landless communities in rural informal settlements through the articulation of redistributive land demands.

These demands have heightened as the land debate gained national prominence due to the slow pace and failures of land reform in South Africa. In 2019, the South African Parliament appointed a working committee to hold public hearings across the country regarding changing section 25 of the national constitution in order to enable land expropriation without compensation. Many of these agrarian social movements participated in this process and made submissions in support of the proposed amendment, but highlighted that the needs of farm workers and dwellers must be considered in the expropriation of commercial farm lands (Velapi, 2018). Parliament's vote did not pass the required majority to amend the constitution, but the enactment of the Expropriation Bill in October 2022 presents another opportunity for social movements to continue fighting for land redistribution (Isandla Institute, 2022).

These agrarian social movements thus attempt to leverage the structural power of the rural precariat's position of landlessness in relation to the abundance of highly productive agricultural land that surrounds them in the rural periphery. This is done through land demands that have redistributive visions of agrarian transformation, and which link the large-scale land ownership of commercial farmers to the dominance of the corporate agro-food system and the resultant systemic hunger of the rural precariat class (Cock, 2016; Devereux, Hall and Solomon, 2019). NGOs and CBOs hold political demands for food sovereignty and land for agroecological food production, which contrast the nature of the Western Cape's export-oriented, commercial farming for luxury foods such as olives and wines, against the reality of farm workers experiencing seasonal hunger on those very farms (Devereux, Hall and Solomon, 2019). This contributes to a broader redistributive food politics embraced by these agrarian social movements, who advocate for indigenous seed capturing and sharing,

nutritional food awareness, and breaking dependencies on supermarkets (Hall, 2011; Cock, 2016; Fakier and Cock, 2018; Andrews, 2020).

Agrarian social movements are also being influenced by the informal social struggles of rural informal settlements, where the rural precariat class directly articulates demands for housing, water, electricity and other basic services. These are political demands that range from reformist to redistributive, and build the structural power of rural informal settlements in the pivotal role that their social reproduction plays in the agrarian economy of the rural Western Cape (De Waal, 2013). Increasingly all agrarian social movements in the province are articulating such political demands for the improved delivery of public services in rural areas, both on farms and in informal settlements (White, 2010). This attempts to leverage the structural power of the rural precariat class's social reproduction as it subsidises agrarian capital (Webb, 2016; Matlawe, 2019).

One of the central threads that continuously merges these various demands is the Black feminist politics that is prevalent throughout these agrarian social movements. Political demands relating to gender are integral to almost all of these social movements, and these demands are both distinct from other political concerns and interlinked with them. Leading women activists are most notable in WFP, but are also prominent in TCOE, CSAAWU, Mawubuye and WJC, and they are at the forefront of multiple struggles for land, labour, health, safety and agrarian transformation. This shows the combined associational and structural power of gender politics, where Black feminist activism reveals the unique expressions of violence that poor and working-class Black women experience because of their gender, race, sexuality, nationality and class position in the rural Western Cape. This is articulated through political demands for women workers' specific occupational health and safety needs at work, the quality of health services in rural areas, access to education for children living on farms, independent tenure security for women farm workers and dwellers, land for women to increase household food security, and recently, a Basic Income Grant (BIG) (Cleary, 2020; Damons, 2020; Wire, 2020; Human, 2022e, 2022f; Rinquest, 2022).

These gender politics also articulate demands calling to "break the silence, break the cycle" of GBV (Adriaanse, 2017; Kiewit, 2019). Such political demands call for improved police and judiciary responses to GBV cases, children's safety, and LGBTQIA+ rights in conservative cultures, and thus position interpersonal gender-based violence as a political issue integral to the systemic violence of the agrarian economy (Payne, 2020b; Ngcakani, 2022). This reclaims and builds the associational and structural power of those unpaid workers and caregivers in the social reproduction cycle, who are subordinated to interlocking violences of patriarchy and capital (Federici, 2020). In this way, agrarian social movements with feminist politics build the structural power of those gendered bodies performing social reproduction work to articulate political demands for independence, safety, and care.

Additionally, agrarian social movements also formulate political demands related to racial justice against the interpersonal and systemic cases of racism that still occur in many parts of the rural Western Cape today. This includes demands for reparative justice against white farm owners who use racist epithets, assault and threaten Black farm workers and dwellers (Serra, 2016; Isaacs, 2022). These agrarian social movements respond to racism in rural towns and within public institutions also hold anti-xenophobic political demands in response to increasing contestations for work between South Africans and migrant workers from other parts of Africa (IOL News, 2022). In this way, these movements attempt to build associational power by promoting racial solidarity within the rural precariat Black class, in order to advance their structural power as exploited Black workers in white commercial agriculture.

#### 4.1.4 Building associational and structural powers through political actions

In order to leverage these structural powers and articulate these political demands, agrarian social movements deploy a variety of political actions. This shows the necessity of having a “multi-pronged approach” in responding to the social reproduction crisis facing the rural precariat class in this agrarian context (White, 2010; Webb, 2016). This section examines the political actions attached to these aforementioned demands along a spectrum of political approaches. These range from moderate to radical approaches, and relate to the nature of the attitude taken towards the target of these political demands. By seeing these approaches as a spectrum, this allows a complex reading of the political strategies taken by agrarian social movements to build their associational and structural power.

Political actions and their related demands are directed at various levels towards the commercial agricultural sector and the state. White farm-owners are targets of political actions at the immediate firm-level, regarding demands related to working conditions, living standards and evictions, and wages; while private commercial agricultural associations and companies are the target of political actions regarding demands relating to value chains, ethical standards, and labour compliance. Political actions directed at the state target different levels, from the local and municipal, the district and provincial, and to the national government, which is largely dependent on where the onus of the state’s responsibility lies. Finally, there are also political actions addressed to poor and working-class Black communities that speak to the internal differentiation of this class, such as demands to men to stop GBV, demands for acceptance of LGBTQIA+ people, and calls for solidarity among racial and national differences.

In terms of radical political actions, common approaches for NGOs and unions involve strikes, marches, pickets and protests (Furlong, 2016; B. Maregele, 2018a; Booyesen, 2022). CBOs struggle to coordinate political actions at this scale due to their smaller structures, but do politically engage in their localities, stage their own localized pickets and often join bigger agrarian social movements in coalitional political actions (Maregele, 2019; Ntseku, 2021; Payne and Metelerkamp, 2022). Political actions which have more moderate approaches involve formal submissions, meetings and dialogues, media releases, petitions, and policy proposals. Some NGOs also use research to support their political demands in both moderate actions like policy proposals and radical actions such as protests, forming at times what can be understood as a joint approach of research and protest (Maregele, 2017; Payne, 2020b).

Another example of this joint approach is seen as NGOs at times march, pickett, hand over memorandums while also hosting meetings, dialogues and indabas with the state and commercial agriculture (White, 2010; Human, 2022c). The associational form of the NGO is particularly well equipped to take on this dual approach, due to their access to resources that can fund research projects, their capacity to coordinate radical political actions that are not limited to the workplace negotiations or strikes, and can target multiple political actors. A good example of this was WFP’s research with UWC in 2016 on labour rights violations of women farm workers in the Northern Cape and Western Cape (Devereux, 2020). This research enabled them to make detailed political demands, both redistributive and reformist, over a number of years in both meetings with and protests against the Department of Employment and Labour (DoEL) and commercial agricultural associations (Maregele, 2017; Payne, 2018).

While radical approaches to political action are common to many of these agrarian social movements, the political targets of these actions respond differently. Many these agrarian social movements have faced criminalization and repression in some of their more radical, direct political actions. Since 2012, union leaders from CSAAWU and the directors of both

WFP and TCOE have all been arrested at different protests and strike actions (Knoetze, 2014; Hendricks, 2019b; *Colette arrested for supporting evicted farm workers*, 2020). The extent of violence and criminalization against activists is often related to political actions that have not sought formal application with the state for their protests, or which breach the terms of their protected action. It is also clear that violent repression has been a common response to radical political actions that articulate redistributive political demands, such as anti-eviction pickets and marches, road blockages during anti-GBV marches, and strikes for living wages.<sup>5</sup>

Additionally, this violence is most common in cases where radical action targets individual white farm-owners and farms, such as the violence against striking CSAAWU workers at Oak Valley Farm, or the violence against WFP protestors outside the forced eviction of farm dwellers at Aruna Farm (Payne, 2020a; Allsop, 2022). Conversely, when agrarian social movements have practiced radical political actions that articulate reformist demands to the state, such as government building occupations and unannounced protests and pickets, they have managed to avoid criminalization in many cases (O'Regan, 2021). When such radical approaches to political action target the state, this has clearly enhanced the negotiating muscle agrarian social movements hold in their more moderate actions like dialogues and meetings (White, 2010; B. Maregele, 2018; Isaacs, 2022). The diversity of these responses shows the structural powers of the rural precariat class, which have been strengthened by their organized associational power.

However, the associational forms of these social movements still greatly influence these political actions and approaches, and this bears impact on the rural precariat's structural powers. Often, political actions that are legal are still favoured by these agrarian social movements due to the formalized nature of their associational forms, and their dependence on international donor funding (Yeni, 2022). This is somewhat in line with previous discussions on the "NGO-isation of politics", however the evidence of some NGOs and unions enacting radical political actions with redistributive politics complicates such an absolutist categorization (Mngxitama, 2006; Friedman, 2012).

Rather, where the critique of NGO dominance in this context does find relevance is in the potential prevalence or favouring of participation in political activities over political actions. In such cases, movements act politically not to leverage the structural powers of the rural precariat class, but to pursue their patronage, which is needed to secure their funding from donors (Friedman, 2012; Yeni, 2022). In this sense, the associational power of the rural precariat class is built contingently on associational forms, and this has the potential to curtail this class's structural powers. Such an elusive dynamic is not so visible in the discussions in this chapter, but becomes more prominent in the dynamics of coalitional politics among these agrarian social movements.

## 4.2 Coalitional politics among agrarian social movements

Since the 2012 strike, various instances of coalitional politics have emerged more clearly, which include the Farm Worker Coalition (FWC), Tshintsha Amakhaya (TA), the Rural Women's Assembly (RWA), and the South African Federation of Trade Unions (SAFTU). These are coalitions that are all active within the rural Western Cape, but which also work at various other scales, including at the national, regional/continental, and international level.

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<sup>5</sup> These instances are drawn from recorded media accounts that are noted above, as well as my professional between 2017-2020 of intimidation from farmers, police and private security during my work at WFP.

**Table 2: Coalitions of agrarian social movements**

Agrarian Social Movements	INFORMAL	FORMAL		
	Farm Worker Coalition	Tshintsha Amakhaya	Rural Womens Assembly	South African Federation of Trade Unions
CSAAWU	X		X	X
FAWU	X			X
WFP	X	X	X	
TCOE	X	X	X	
SPP	X	X	X	
SCLC		X		
WRDC/WJC	X			
MAWUBUYE LAND RIGHTS MOVEMENT	X	X		
RFDO	X			
ADVICE OFFICES				

Source: Author's own analysis

The three formal coalitions in Table 2 each have differences in their forms of association, meaning who is part of them, and hold different focuses in their work. TA is a funder-organised national alliance among NGOs and CBOs that focuses on land and food justice for the rural poor, RWA is a funded Southern African regional assembly that focuses gender justice for women in rural areas, and SAFTU is a national federation that focuses on labour rights and socialist transformation. The FWC does not have a formalized agenda, nor sustained independent funding, and its primary foundation for coalition is the working relationships among activists, who share a “strong common ground” and a basic agenda regarding farm worker rights (Andrews, 2022, direct quote). It therefore bears dual qualities of formality and informality, and is much less structured in terms of who participates actively in the coalition at different times and regarding different issues (Andrews, 2022).

During interviews with activists, many shared how the Western Cape as a province offered an opportunity for sustained political action for agrarian transformation. The 2012-13 strike was noted as a historical point for agrarian politics and coalitional politics in particular, but almost all interviewees regarded this moment as a missed opportunity that did not materialize into a “turning point” for the politics of the rural precariat class in the Western Cape (Swarts, 2022, direct quote). Some attributed this to contextual challenges of organizing in this province, such as the strategies of repression and retaliation deployed by white farm-owners (Swarts, 2022) and the constant fragmentation of the rural precariat class (Andrews, 2022). However, others attributed this to deeper problems of coalitions, where the different associational forms of participating agrarian social movements impacted coalitions, and therefore limited the structural change these coalitions were capable of achieving (Yeni, 2022). The following sub-sections will explore how these themes are seen in the complexities of coalitional relationships and actions, and the implications this bears for agrarian politics in the province.

#### **4.2.1 Coalitional forms: the impact of associational forms on coalitional relationships**

Many of the leaders of these social movements have shared experiences of anti-apartheid struggles, which has resulted in a “common political orientation” that they share in their contemporary political work (Andrews, 2022, direct quote). These relationships are built around shared political concerns and demands but are not without contestation. Some leaders feel there are “good working relationships”, while others feel that there is competition and even animosity among social movement leaders (Andrews, 2022; Swarts, 2022; Yeni,



2022). This has been attributed to competition around organizational relevance and resources from international funders, and the lack of faith in other associational forms and ways of organizing (ibid.). This critique was directed particularly towards NGOs, as interviewees felt that their competition over funding resources led to a lack of cooperation among each other, and the promotion of their organizational identity over their coalitional relationships. This reflects previous discussions that agrarian social movements run the risk of being more concerned with building associational power for “patronage” or protective purposes, than in combining associational powers in order to strengthen the structural powers of the rural precariat class (Friedman, 2012)

The challenges within relationships among social movement leaders were clearly understood to be foundational to the challenges of building a powerful coalition movement. This echoes the long history of contentious relationships between social movements and trade unions in their coalitional politics in the Western Cape (Xali, 2006; Zvoutete, 2014). This kind of associational protectionism is linked to competition among movements, and denies the necessity of having multiple political approaches and structures to build the structural and associational powers of the rural precariat class (Friedman, 2012; Pattenden, 2018). Feminist theorists have done valuable work in showing how coalitional relationships do not require total harmony or full consensus on issues, but rather a careful and discomfiting commitment to crafting solidarity and strategies to challenge multiple dimensions of oppression and exploitation (Reagon, 2015; Gago, 2018).

In the case of coalitions among agrarian social movements in the rural Western Cape, this also requires honesty regarding the dynamics of participation between the rural precariat class and these movements. In each movement, there is a spectrum of democratic participation, from clear delineations of roles and positions, to blurred lines of involvement, to inadequate membership, to voting-based participation, however these formal coalitions are clearly led solely by the staff of these various social movements (Andrews, 2022; Swarts, 2022; Yeni, 2022). Denial of these power relations is particularly common to NGO politics, and this then reflects the dominance of this associational form in these various coalitions, particularly the FWC (Friedman, 2012; Yeni, 2022). This can lead to other problems related to representation and legitimacy, due to the development of political strategy crafted by organizational staff rather than the rural precariat class itself (Friedman, 2012; Yeni, 2022). Movement leaders expressed this as not having found the “vehicle” with which to achieve agrarian transformation (Andrews, 2022). With deeper examination, this concern speaks to the challenge of agrarian coalitions dominated by NGOs, a form of association which struggles to ensure democratic participation of the rural precariat class in their politics.

#### **4.2.2 Coalitional actions: the impact of coalitional forms on approaches to political action**

The contentions in these coalitional relationships have not completely disabled joint political actions, but they have affected coalitional approaches to political action. Coalitional campaigns predominantly take moderate approaches to political action, with pre-approved marches, dialogues, petitions, and submissions being most common (Yeni, 2022). Largely, coalitional political actions have not utilized the mass energy of the 2012-13 strike, and continue to approach coalitional actions through more moderate approaches. One interviewee noted that “I don’t think the strike had a bigger impact on how we organize... We are still back to submissions, back to a march here and there... it’s unfortunate because we could have learnt a lot” (Yeni, 2022, direct quote). While the “organic” and spontaneous nature of a mass strike like that cannot be planned, leaders from these agrarian social movements still felt there was a need to learn from and support the self-directed political actions of the rural precariat class (Luxemburg, 1999; Christie, 2012; Andrews, 2022; Swarts, 2022; Yeni, 2022).

Although there have been instances of more radical political action from some of these social movements on their own as discussed previously, this has not translated into a coalitional approach of radical political action, such as the feminist mass strike common to Latin America (Gago, 2018). There has been notable solidarity and support among agrarian social movements when leaders and activists are targeted, are arrested or take on farmers or the state in court (Knoetze, 2014; Washinyira, 2019). But this has not translated into movements formally coalescing towards mass-scale radical political action (Yeni, 2022). Instead, these agrarian coalitional campaigns often utilize moderate political actions repeatedly over multiple years, to achieve mixed results. Three examples that highlight the mixed results of these coalitional political actions are the campaign for a moratorium on farm worker evictions, the campaigns for labour rights for farm workers, and the ban the pesticides campaign.

Coalitional politics regarding farm worker evictions have focused on demands for a presidential moratorium on evictions. Coalitional actions towards pressuring the moratorium have taken a very moderate approach, and have involved marches, memorandums, calls for meetings with ministers and commercial agricultural business leaders, but this has not stopped legal or illegal evictions from continually occurring (Lali, 2019; Damons, 2020; Human, 2021). The campaign has been taken up by the FWC, TA and RWA, as well as agrarian social movements on their own. However, none of these coalitions actively organise land occupations as a strategy to counter the failures of land reform and ESTA legislation in South Africa. This is in stark contrast to formal urban and peri-urban land movements, which have engaged in civil disobedience through land occupations as a necessary political strategy to serve the housing needs of landless poor and working-class Black communities in urban metropolitans (Pillay and Sendin, 2017; Cheslow, 2019; Matlawe, 2019).

Coalitional actions for labour rights have been less coordinated, but reflect coherence around political demands for oversight in wages and working conditions. There have not been planned joint campaigns, but rather mutual support on these shared political demands through various actions, and have had mixed outcomes. Members of the FWC and SAFTU have drawn from the 2012-13 strike's reformist demands for decent wages and increased farm monitoring from the DoEL through coalitional actions such as workshops, indabas, conferences, and protests, which has resulted in some improved DoEL responses to oversight demands (Hendricks, 2017; Webster, 2018; Chirume, 2019; Palm, 2021; Faulkner, 2022).

One powerful coalitional approach to labour rights has been to act collectively along value chains, particularly along export lines to northern Europe (Greenberg, 2013; Alford, Barrientos and Visser, 2017). Individual agrarian social movement have taken political actions targeting value chains with both moderate and radical approaches, but there have only been a few instances of coalitional actions towards value chains (Kulkarni, 2019; Velapi, 2019). However, there is clear indication that such actions get the attention of European consumers, particularly in this era of 'ethical' trade and consumption (Eye Witness News, 2016). This could prove to be a powerful coalitional approach that leverages the structural powers of the rural precariat class, with the combined associational powers of unions and NGOs who have experience in value chain organizing and international networks of solidarity.

The campaign to ban harmful pesticides used in commercial agriculture can be viewed as one of the more successful coalitional approaches to agrarian politics in recent years. This campaign called for 67 pesticides that are banned in the European Union due to their hazardous health effects to be equally banned in South Africa (Hendricks, 2019a). The campaign took off in 2019 and was led jointly by WFP, Oxfam Germany and South Africa, with 29,302 petition signatures of German consumers, mobilizing support from CSAAWU and TCOE, and formal policy submissions from UnpoisonSA, all of whom pressured the South African

government to reform its pesticide legislature (Ibid., Human, 2022a). Further support came from a 2020 research report led by Rosa Luxembourg Stiftung and their German partners, which showed that international fertilizer firms were utilizing outdated pesticide regulation frameworks in South Africa to their benefit (Dowler, 2020; Tom, 2021).

Coalitional actions among these actors thus took more moderate approaches, and included policy submissions, marches and memorandums showing the findings of different research into health effects and farm practices of pesticides, as well as international solidarity actions through donor networks and consumer petitions. The demands to ban these pesticides and strengthen the occupational health and safety on commercial farms were also included in other political events and actions of these agrarian social movements from 2019 to 2022. The variety of strategies, repeated messaging, and coalitional approaches among agrarian social movements, progressive donor funds, and local and international action networks resulted in the South African government announcing that over 2 years it would phase out certain harmful pesticides and move towards a total ban by 2024 (Human, 2022a). This campaign shows that a moderate approach can leverage structural power to achieve meaningful agrarian reforms, when it has high levels of coordination, detailed demands, and external support.

The associational forms of agrarian social movements in these coalitions have an impact on the approaches to their coalitional actions, and this section has shown that this is a limitation for addressing redistributive political demands and deploying radical coalitional approaches to political action. However, this is not necessarily a limitation for coalitional politics as a whole, as has been seen in the successes of some coalitional campaigns. In drawing from the previous discussion on coalitional relationships, it appears that a recurring limitation facing coalitional politics then is the impact that associational forms have on building meaningful solidarity outside of donor-funded requirements. This is resulting in precarious politics, where agrarian social movements coalesce unsteadily and contingently on external actors in attempts to respond to the crisis of social reproduction through which the rural precariat class live.

## Chapter 5

### Conclusion: Agrarian politics – where to from here?

This research has shown that agrarian politics in the rural Western Cape are inherently precarious, and currently at point of critical reflection. The enduring coloniality and contemporary neo liberalisation of commercial agriculture has ensured the sector's dominance in the province, and has resulting in an unfolding social reproduction crisis affecting the rural classes of labour. This is seen in their experiences of generalized precarity, in which job insecurity, landlessness and conditions of violence interlock and blur the lines between production and reproduction politics. This paper has proposed understanding these fragmented and differentiated rural classes of labour as a rural precariat class. This analytically denotes the mutual yet distinct, dialectical material determinations of their precarity in the intertwining dispossession of land and exploitation of labour, and the compounding effects of race and gender. Most importantly, the framing of the rural precariat class strategically serves as a political signifier of changing and precarious dynamics within class struggle in this agrarian context.

The Western Cape's organized agrarian politics form part of a larger ecosystem of trade unions, new social movements, and informal social struggles in neo liberal, democratic South Africa. The historic farm worker strike of 2012-13 showed that new forms of association were needed to respond to the complex political demands of the rural precariat class. In the ten years since the strike, it is clear that the politics of the rural precariat class in the Western Cape have grown significantly. This can be seen in the extensive growth, profile and activities of agrarian social movements which share similar political demands, actions and activities, and the increasing incidences of coalitional politics. Through its archival approach, this paper has shown that different forms of association are taking up various reformist and redistributive political demands to respond the multiple political concerns of the rural precariat class.

Although these agrarian social movements deploy a range of approaches to political action, in general moderate actions are still favoured over radical approaches, which is particularly evident in actions regarding redistributive political demands around land. This has produced mixed results, with meaningful gains won in some structural reforms such as the upcoming ban on harmful pesticides and wage increases for farm workers, but with little structural redistributive change of the agrarian economy in the rural Western Cape. While this mixed-bag of political outcomes can be expected in light of challenging the enduring coloniality of the commercial agricultural system and neo liberalism in South Africa at large, these also reveal more serious problems facing agrarian social movements today.

The predominance of the two associational forms of NGOs and trade unions has resulted in competitive rather than cooperative coalitional relationships among agrarian social movements. There is a limited commitment to coalitional politics outside of donor-funded requirements, despite the many political similarities among these movements. This can be attributed to agrarian social movements growing their various associational powers for patronage purposes, instead of coalescing these powers to leverage the multidimensional structural powers of the rural precariat class in coalitional political action. This raises further questions to level of democratic participation of the rural precariat class within these movements and coalitions, and how this impacts the approaches to political action that these movements take in advancing political demands. In sum, a politics of patronage specifically attached to the NGO associational form threatens to overtake these agrarian social movements if they are unable to build meaningful relations of solidarity and democracy around actualising the structural powers of the rural precariat class.

In the ten years since the farm worker strike, agrarian social movements should make space to reflect critically on how their politics can be reinvigorated and deepened so to enable the rural precariat class's leadership in the struggle towards agrarian transformation and justice.

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