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The KwaZulu-Natal Agricultural Union (Kwanalu) says the 9,6% wage increase for farm workers and domestic workers was a slap in the face and will place tremendous strain on the already struggling agriculture sector.

Kwanalu said the sector suffered severely due to an increasingly narrow economic production climate, an abnormally high rate of inflation when compared to other sectors due to the nature of inputs, severe incidences of flooding, the impact of the July 2021 unrest, Foot and Mouth disease, deteriorating road and infrastructure conditions, and the significant impacts of the ongoing and increased load shedding schedules.

Employment and Labour minister, Thulas Nxesi, raised the national minimum wage which came into effect on March 1.

The percentage increase for farm workers and domestic workers will translate to a minimum wage of R25,42 per hour.

While the United Domestic Workers of South Africa (Udwosa) welcomed this increase, the union said it was nothing to write home about as most employers enjoy paying domestic workers "slavery wages".

The increase also covers workers employed in the Expanded Public Works Programme (EPWP), learner-ship allowances, the cleaning sector and wholesale and retail.

The minimum wage for the cleaning sector in the metropolitan areas will be R27,97 while the rest of the country will get R25,50.

The department said this significant increase will benefit 892 000 domestic workers who are overwhelmingly women and 800 000 farm workers.

Kwanalu CEO, Sandy La Marque, said the increase in the national minimum wage will have a negative impact on the livelihoods it aimed to serve, as the agricultural sector continued to struggle to keep afloat following other recent, key contributing factors.

"Statistics compiled from the Department of Labour quarterly statistics and annual reports show that specific pressures have, year on year, resulted in a decrease in agricultural employment since 2019 in KZN," said La Marque.

Kwanalu said as there was insufficient evidence to equitably enforce a greater than Consumer Price Index (CPI) inflation on rural employment, a 0% base rate should have been the departure point.

"This is relevant as the rural cost of living is lower than the urban cost of living, so it may well be prudent to give agriculture its own minimum wage determination.

"Kwanalu, prior to the announcement, recommended that an increase of less than CPI is more realistic of the industry position and the impacts on livelihoods of rural employees and dwellers. We will continue to explore options to address the high increase and its impacts," said La Marque.

The United Domestic Workers of South Africa (Udwosa) said while it welcomed the wage increase, it was not excited about it.

Its president, Pinky Mashiane, said the increase would mean something to underpaid and exploited domestic workers, if it were going to be properly implemented and enforced by the Department of Employment and Labour.

"Everything has gone up and this unstable economy is affecting domestic workers as well.

"They can't even buy affordable food, fruits and vegetables for their children and can't buy groceries and basic needs."

She said some employers can afford to pay more than the national minimum wage but they don't because they enjoy paying domestic workers "slavery wages".

"There are employers who say they can't afford to pay it, so let them reduce working days so domestic workers can get part time/ piecemeal jobs to increase the little salaries they get."

She said this increase will hardly be implemented in many areas especially in rural areas where labour inspectors are "invisible".

“ Everything has gone up and this unstable economy is affecting domestic workers as well ...