

Women Workers Take Natures Garden to Task on International Women's Day

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Release date: 27 March 2022

8 March is a day globally known as International Women's Day. The idea of celebrating and commemorating the struggles of women first emerged in the late 1890s and early 1900s through women workers who wanted to use this day to organise mass actions and protests for better wages, better working and living conditions and shorter hours of work.

On 8 March of this year, more than 100 years later, on Beryllium Road in Alberton, a group of more than 70 (majority women) gathered to protest against Natures Garden and to present a memorandum of demands to the company. Nature's Garden produces frozen vegetables and chips to be sold in retail stores like Checkers and Pick 'n' Pay and on QSR (Quick-Service Restaurants) markets. The group consisted of mainly women casual workers, as the company employs mainly women, other women and men workers from the Simunye Women Workers Forum (SWWF) and Simunye Workers Forum, organisers from the Casual Workers Advice Office, activists from Khanya College, and activists from the Black Womxn Caucus, who joined the protest in support of the women workers at Nature's Garden.

According to a women casual worker at Natures Garden the demonstration was necessary as "[casual workers have had enough with being silent and not standing up for our rights." For her, the protest symbolised courage and unity amongst women as workers at Nature's Garden are faced with unfair, unequal treatment between permanent and casual workers, as well as harsh working conditions.

This includes being denied use of the toilets when working off-site or outside the company's gate, and standing outside whilst its raining with no shelter and no toilets which has forced many to relieve themselves behind the bushes near the premises. This risks the health of the women workers, but also their safety as they also report to work in the early hours of the morning and leave late in the evening. Transport is also not provided for the casual workers of the company. The woman worker added that workers are not provided with the proper and necessary PPE's or safety gears, including safety boots, gloves and uniform.

The Memorandum of Demands that was delivered to representatives of Nature's Garden stated; "SWWF together with the community of Thokoza... are consumers of Nature's Garden products and the community where Nature's Garden workers live in. We stand in solidarity... Black women have historically faced multiple kinds of oppression and marginalisation in society and in the workplace specifically. We will not allow Nature's Garden to be a site of such oppression and marginalisation."

The memo listed the following demands: for guaranteed hours of work; transport allowance; an end to labour brokers, and specifically Phakisa Holdings (Ltd) who is responsible for providing Natures Garden with workers; an end to sexual harassment by a specific staff member (Khumbulani) who is alleged to be responsible for incidents on sexual harassment; proper equipment for the cold working environment (boots; gloves); access to the clinic for labour broker workers; labour broker workers must also get vouchers; equal treatment of labour broker workers with permanent workers; and that Nature's Garden adopts at least children from the nearby community and sends them to university.

The memorandum also warned that “Failure to meet our demands will result in a collective consumer boycott of all products of Nature’s Garden and Nature’s Garden supplies being informed of it’s ill treatment of women workers”.

Constance Masekwameng from SWWF said; “issues and working conditions faced by Nature’s Garden’s female casual workers are issues that can’t be left without being addressed as some of these workers have been casual workers for about 6 years but are still registered under Phakisa...”

Masekwameng hopes that women at workplaces will continue to break the silence without fear of being victimised or taken advantage of when addressing their issues. According to Masekwameng, Simunye Women Workers Forum together with the community of Thokoza “organised the protest... to also stand in solidarity with those workers as SWWF and is hoping to kill patriarchal systems by organising and providing a free space that allows women to discuss issues women face in workplaces and communities.”

Oamogetswe Chikwado, a young woman and member of Black Womxn Caucus said; “We also need their employers to take the lead and take care of their employees. ... It is important to normalise these gatherings so that we understand what women go through at workplaces. The nation sees the final product [but does] not know what the [workers] go through in the making of the products.”

During the peaceful demonstration, Nature’s Garden employed intimidation tactics by calling for armed backup from private security, the Ekurhuleni MetroPolice and the South African Police Service (SAPS) to disperse the protestors and clear the premises. This happened after protestors non-violently prevented one of the Nature’s Garden trucks from leaving the premises until the company agreed to hear them out and acknowledge their memorandum. The truck was blocked by the mass of women who knelt in front of the truck, with one worker saying; “if Nature’s Garden won’t listen to us then their trucks won’t deliver as well.”

The police also made threats to the group and said that they would arrest the protestors individually if they did not end the demonstration and leave. Despite these tactics of intimidation, the women workers did not budge or give in to any of the threats. One of the women from the Casual Advice Workers Office (CAWO), Meme Makhuala spoke to the police and said “All we want is to read to them and deliver our memorandum. All that is needed is for one of the owners or directors to come forth and to receive the memorandum and we will... leave”.

The protestors refused to be addressed by any rep from Phakisa, so eventually, after much persistence, arguments and discussion, the organiser came to an agreement with the police and Nature’s Garden, for the Memorandum of Demands to be read out loud, and then received and signed by a rep from Nature’s Garden. The Memo was read with the cheers of the crowd, and then a rep from SWWF was escorted by the police to get the doc signed inside the Nature’s Garden building. The demonstration then peacefully dispersed.

In August 2020, workers at Natures Garden (organised through the General Industries Workers Union of South Africa), decided to strike against their employer to demand better working conditions and treatment by the bosses, better wages and an end to labour brokng through Phakisa Holdings (Ltd). Two years later, it is clear that the conditions of the

workers at Nature's Garden (who are majority women), and especially labour broker workers has not improved much as the company continues to exploit and divide.

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