

Tensions high as MPs grill labour brokers

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PUBLISHED: 2009/08/27 06:15:08 AI

CAPE TOWN — Tense parliamentary labour committee hearings degenerated further yesterday, with angry labour brokers rejecting repeated charges from African National Congress (ANC) MPs that they were “slave traders”.

The second day was dominated by acrimonious accusations that labour brokers broke the law, bought and sold people with impunity, and could not be “beautified”. Brokers were subjected to a barrage of criticism.

ANC committee chairwoman Lumke Yengeni again led the charge by telling the brokers they were not assisting the committee by telling it about legally compliant brokers. She brought in a racial element by saying white brokers were the beneficiaries and black workers the victims.

Eventually, Association of Personnel Service Organisations head Suraj Maharaj told the committee that the language was “inflammatory” and that industry members were not slave traders but businesses that dealt in temporary workers — “respectfully, you should call the industry what it is”.

The brokers said there were laws to protect workers, including temporary ones, from exploitation. But the enforcer, the Department of Labour, was largely absent in the matter.

Other elements of the government were challenged for using the very labour brokers that were under attack. Maharaj said brokers had been asked to help secure enough staff for the Independent Electoral Commission to run the April election.

Responding to accusations that the industry did nothing to promote permanent jobs, he asked whether jobs which lasted a few weeks at election time should be made permanent.

Loane Sharp, of Business Unity SA, speaking after harrowing submissions detailing abuses by labour brokers in farming, said the problem with the hearings was that the brokers present were those who obeyed the law.

He said law-abiding brokers had proposed solutions for years — such as a bargaining council for temporary workers, which was rejected by the unions, and a co-regulatory framework, that the state did not accept.

He said abuses by brokers could not be defended, but warned that over-regulation would drive noncompliant brokers further underground.

Sharp said that in designing a solution to the problems, the committee should be careful of unintended consequences. Part of the problem was an unintended consequence of laws passed to regulate agriculture.

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