

FOCUS ON FARM EVICTIONS

1. Weenen

"I told the police that I can't just go like a bird - I have the family and my belongings. I need to build somewhere. The question is where do I build? After all I just don't know why I must leave from here? Who will look after so many family graves?"

Mathutha Sosibo, Weenen, 12th September 1986

Over the past few months Afra has been monitoring and attempting to assist in the plight of at least 1200 people who are threatened with eviction from their homes on white-owned farms in the Weenen, Vryheid, Hlobane and Richmond districts of Natal.

It is very difficult to investigate and assess the number of workers at present facing eviction from Natal farms. They are evicted as individuals, they are isolated and have no organisation, and no public attention is directed to them.

Afra estimates that between 1948 and 1982, at least 300 000 farm workers and labour tenants were evicted from white farms in the Natal region. The main thrust of the eviction process took place in the late 1960's and 1970's with the massive state-sponsored removal of labour tenants in central and Northern Natal.

The present evictions represent private action by individual farmers - with state backing - against farm workers who are no longer wanted on the farms for a number of reasons.

THE WEENEN EVICTIONS

This area has a long and troubled history of farm evictions particularly in the period 1969-1971 with the massive state-directed removal of between ten and twenty thousand ex-labour-tenant families.

The present evictions centre on a cluster of 20 "labour farms" just to the South of the town of Weenen in central Natal. These dry, overgrazed and overpopulated thornveld farms that evolved as an extension of the

labour-tenancy system still continue to operate as small private labour reserves: white-owned farms used solely by their absentee landlords to house and provide access to grazing and ploughing land for their tenants who, in return, are required to work away from their homes on the commercial farms of their landlords for little or no wages.

About 40 families (at least 390 people) have received eviction notices on a number of the farms. The reasons for the evictions vary.

Mr. Ndala Zungu was born on 'Hopewell' 61 years ago. His father and his grandfather were born and buried there. As a young boy he was contracted by his father to work on the landlord's farm. He has worked on that basis for more than forty years. Last year Mr. Zungu and four other families were given three months notice to leave Hopewell.

"Suddenly we are told to clear off from this land. The reason being that our children do not want to work on the farm anymore. The reason why my son doesn't want to work on the farm is that he doesn't want to be like me - work and work for just about nothing", said Mr. Zungu.

In October last year, after the expiry of the notice period, Mr. Zungu was arrested and charged with illegal squatting and sentenced to three months in prison with the option of R150 fine.

He was released after 2 weeks when his family had managed to scrape together enough money to pay the fine.

Afra was later to establish that the legislation under which Mr. Zungu was convicted had been scrapped in July last year with the abolition of influx control. But this does not alter his eviction plight. An even more repressive law - the Prevention of Illegal Squatting Act No. 52 of 1951 - can now be used by farmers to get rid of their tenants.

The family now awaits their inevitable eviction. Mr. Zungu has appeared in court on a number of occasions since his conviction, but each time the case has been remanded.

"Where will I go as sick as I am? How am I, an old sick man like me, to start all over with a new life again? Why doesn't he (the farmer) let me die on the farm?" says Mr. Zungu.

A number of other families have been evicted following disputes with their landlords about livestock reduction. The farmers say the conservation authorities are putting pressure on them to reduce tenant livestock because of the severe erosion on the farms. The tenants have strongly resisted these attempts because in the absence of wages for their labour their stock constitutes a major source of social security and an important source of income.

Mr. Toto Mlambo has been working on the farm 'Orange Grove' for nine years. He lives on a labour farm with his wife and five children. He receives no wages at all. His children are also expected to work without pay on weekends and holidays. In return he has been given some land for his home and the grazing of his cattle. He has no ploughing rights.

In December last year Mr. Mlambo and seven other families were told to reduce their stock. The families said they would do this if they received a wage payment or ration allowance as a substitute. The farmer refused to listen to their grievances and gave them two weeks to get off the farm.