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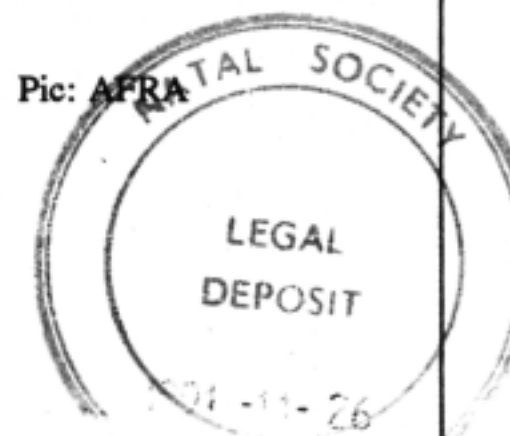
ASSOCIATION FOR RURAL ADVANCEMENT

AFRA NEWSLETTER 13 (November 1991)

GANNAHOEK: A LABOUR TENANT LAND STRUGGLE



Labour tenant homesteads on Gannahoek farm, Colenso, Natal, 1991.



15 african labour tenant families on Gannahoek farm in the Colenso district have recently reached an agreement with the new farm-owner over their right to remain on the land. They occupied the farm before whites arrived, and when it was sold in 1990, the new owner, who wishes to establish a game reserve, tried to evict the families.

Labour tenants have no security of tenure, nor have they been considered in the government's recent land and labour reform proposals. However, Gannahoek's new owner decided to negotiate with the tenants. By August 1991 it was agreed

that the tenants would be given the option to purchase a portion of the farm, in return for which they would accept paid work on the game farm.

This is the first known attempt to reach such an agreement between landowner and labour tenants, and it could offer an important model to land policymakers. Gannahoek also offers one example of how the conflict between indigenous people and commercial conservationists might be resolved. There are major obstacles to be overcome, but at least the process of negotiation between landowner and tenants has been initiated.

Labour tenancy & 'labour farms'

Under Natal's labour tenant system, african families living on white-owned land worked for the owner for part of the year, at a nominal wage, in return for the right to graze stock and cultivate some land. When not thus employed, they undertook short term migrant work and subsistence farming.

In certain areas of Natal the companion institution of 'labour farms' also evolved. These were farms used solely to house labour tenants and their stock, in return for which the tenants worked six months of the year on their landlords' commercial farms elsewhere.

Gannahoek labour farm survives to 1990

Although the State has tried for decades to abolish labour tenancy, Natal is one of two areas where the practice has persisted. The Remainder of Gannahoek 1348 was one such labour farm. The local african community remained on the land after it was granted to the first white 'owner' in 1854, and this practice was followed by the McFie family who owned the farm from 1894 until 1990. The tenants worked on the owner's commercial farm in another district.

Eviction threat to Gannahoek

In January 1990, however, Mr D. McFie told the community that he was selling the farm. The families assumed that their tenure system would continue under the new owner.

But the new owner, Performance Farming Enterprises (Pty) Ltd. (PFE), wanting to establish a game farm, rejected the offer of labour from the community and issued eviction notices. It later emerged that PFE bought the land with vacant possession, a condition which the seller was never able to realise.

Gannahoek tenants refuse to move

The community was given 3 months to leave the farm, but they refused. Said one

of the residents, Mr Bambatha Mdlolo:

"These white men prefer wild animals to people. We are not going to move from our home. They can bring their bulldozers and they can demolish our houses, but we will be sitting inside the houses. We would rather die on our land..."

The tenants claim that they have a legitimate right to live on the land as their forebears lived there long before whites appeared, and they have actively farmed the land. They also believe they have earned the right to own the farm by virtue of their labour, and they are deeply reluctant to abandon their ancestors' graves which have religious and cultural significance.

They claim that they were told by a PFE representative that they could move to the resettlement townships of Waaihoek or Ezakheni. These options were rejected as they would be forced to sell all their livestock (basic to their social organisation), and they fear the violence which is endemic to the resettlement townships. As an elderly member said:

"This place is very quiet. There is no violence here at all and we do not want to move to the townships because we will all be killed."

Despite continued pleas to PFE's lawyer, the owners prosecuted the family heads. An attorney was briefed to defend the eviction notices, but the community continued to explore every avenue to opening negotiations.

Negotiations begin

In May 1991 Mr Dave Albers, director of PFE, decided to negotiate with the community. Initially the Company's attitude was that employment would be offered to the community, and part of the remuneration would be the right to stay on the land.

In response, the community proposed:

- * that they work contractually for PFE;
- * that they be granted security of tenure;
- * that they be allocated the land they have settled and ploughed;
- * that each family retain 25 head of cattle under controlled conditions;
- * that they be allowed to retain a rural settlement pattern; and
- * that they have access to family graves.

possibly be resolved in an equitable, consultative manner, although without State support there are major obstacles to the families being able to raise the capital; * it is also noteworthy in the context of the current conservation debate.

Official neglect of labour tenants

The State has consistently ignored the plight of this sector, and the recent

Gannahoek labour tenants threatened with eviction in 1990.

Pic: Lesley Lawson



PFE's counter-proposals accepted

In August 1991, PFE proposed that the community purchase 1/3rd of the farm, that the men work for PFE on the game farm (fencing, building roads), that some women do domestic work in the camp-sites, and that other women engage in home industries for export.

The community immediately accepted this proposal, and pledged to sell some cattle to raise R 100 000 by 31st December 1991.

Significance of Gannahoek

This agreement has considerable significance: * it offers one example of how the problem of labour tenancy could

White Paper on Land Reform (1991) does not mention labour tenants. In the past, the State left it to white farmers to provide housing, schools and health care to workers, and gave farmers draconian rights to evict tenants. The agricultural recession, and the fear that labour tenants will make claims for their land based on original occupation or long service, are causing many white farmers to evict tenants. This process is exacerbating rural poverty.

Evicted tenants virtual refugees

About 300 000 Natal tenants have been evicted in the last 30 years, but they have had nowhere to go. The rural squatter camps offer poorer facilities and no land

for stock, yet livestock is central to material security and cultural identity. Separation from the land spells dislocation and impoverishment. Evicted tenants struggle to find a refuge, either on other local white farms (an insecure option), or on over-crowded black freehold areas or the KwaZulu homeland. All these options are obstacles to an equitable and sustainable development strategy for the region.

Labour tenant demands for reform

In terms of land reform, therefore, labour tenants are claiming security of tenure, under customary conditions which are to be formalised in law. They also demand development aid and infrastructure as a means of overcoming decades of underdevelopment.

As regards labour conditions, although the majority wish to retain their status as subsistence farmers, they demand fair and equitable conditions insofar as they are obliged to render farm labour.

Conservation and removals

Gannahoek also suggests new approaches to commercial conservation practices which, in the past, led to forced removals of indigenous people on the grounds that their farming techniques were environmentally destructive. Whites believed they were thereby protecting unique natural and biological sites for the common good.

But black people who have been forcibly removed perceive reserves as playgrounds for a privileged racial minority. In a future democracy, such attitudes will threaten the survival of game and nature parks.

Conservation and rural development

The International Union on Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (I.U.C.N.) points out that indigenous people have many sound traditional conservation practices which can be harnessed by conservationists. Harmful practices can be avoided if people are offered acceptable alternatives. Thus the



Gannahoek farm school and pupils, April 1991

conservation of species and nature can be linked with rural development.

But for this to succeed, the I.U.C.N. recommends * regular consultation; * employment of local people instead of outsiders; and * enabling the indigenous families to gain materially, e.g. through controlled harvesting of natural resources, and being drawn into the economy of the reserve - as game guards, cleaners etc.

Conservation will succeed if the local people benefit, for they will not have to be policed; they will become active supporters. The agreement at Gannahoek is broadly in line with these principles.

Financial problems

The problem at Gannahoek at this stage is, however, a financial one: the community has undertaken to raise a deposit on the land by December, but they need to raise the balance of the capital for the scheme to be implemented. In the absence of State or financial institutional support, their ability to do so is doubtful, and the attempt may impoverish them.

Nevertheless, despite many pitfalls, the Gannahoek experiment could provide a significant model to resolving the labour tenant issue. The Association for Rural Advancement urgently calls on the Government to address labour tenant demands.

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