

Papene Sibisi is one of the 188 cases AFRA has on file, of farmworkers who have been evicted off white-owned farms in the past couple of years. He appears twice in our files - first in late 1979 and again in January 1980. Both times the same farmer and the same farm are involved - eviction, reprieve and eviction again.

His story illustrates most of the themes touched upon in previous AFRA reports of farm evictions: the elimination of labour tenancy as an outmoded form of agricultural labour, the marginalisation of a significant section of the rural African population as a result of the tenacity with which these people have clung to their stock and their land, the lack of rights of agricultural workers. But Sibisi is more than a unit in a statistic, exemplifying a general trend. For him there has been nothing typical about his eviction at all; it has been a very lonely and private crisis, intensely suffered. His life, his very existence in the world, not a "system", have been under attack.

His Background Sibisi first approached us in August 1979, an elderly, greying man of perhaps 65, one of a group of farmworkers from several Weenen farms who had been given notice to leave the land on which they were living.

We gathered together some sparse details about his life. The farm on which he lived had been a labour farm, a large tract of rugged thornveld near the Tugela River. Successive landowners had used it to house their labour tenants and graze their cattle but had never lived on it themselves. Sibisi was born on the farm during the 1st World War, the son of a labour tenant whose way of life he inherited and in turn passed on to his own children. He spent most of adult life working away from the farm, as a migrant worker in Johannesburg, then Kimberley and finally Virginia in the Orange Free State. His family, however, remained on the farm and his children worked a six month stint for the landowner every year - without pay - to earn the family's right to live there, graze their cattle and plough some land.

In the early 1970s Sibisi returned home to stay. Labour tenancy had been outlawed in the Weenen district in 1969; henceforth only full-time farmworkers were legal. His 4 eldest sons were reluctant to switch to full-time work, however, and were restless for the more lucrative and attractive jobs of the city so Sibisi himself took over as the family's worker representative. His job was to oversee the grazing of the farmer's cattle for which, like his children before him, he received no pay. What made this apparently very one-sided arrangement worthwhile was that over the years the family had established a substantial herd of animals which they could graze on the farm. Sibisi regarded himself as first and foremost a stockowner. In 1979 he had 15 head of cattle and 69 sheep and goats legally on the farm plus some 25 concealed, unregistered beasts as well - an unusually large herd for a farmworker in the 1970s. With the produce and income from his stock plus the remittances sent home by his sons, the household survived.

Eviction 1979 Abruptly, on the 6th August 1979, this apparently stable existence was turned upside down when Sibisi was given notice to be off the farm, with all his belongings, his family and his stock, within 30 days. He claims that what had provoked the farmer was a quarrel they had had, about rations: Sibisi has asked for payment of one bag of mealie meal a month, the farmer (a very prominent, wealthy Weenen farmer) had angrily refused. The farmer may have had other reasons for dismissing Sibisi - but since he is not obliged to supply them when giving notice, and since he would not discuss the matter with anyone, not even Sibisi's lawyers, these never became known.

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The eviction notice threatened the entire basis of Sibisi's life. He had a large family - 13 people living permanently at home. (himself, his wife, several children, 2 daughters-in-law and their children) plus the 4 migrant sons who returned home once a year. The farm was the only home they knew; both Sibisi's father and grandfather were buried there. The family were frightened by the lawlessness and overcrowding of the neighbouring Msinga district of KwaZulu and even more horrified by the thought of being moved to Nondweni, the nearest official resettlement camp, some 100 km away and without land, jobs or kin. Most disturbing of all was the fate of their stock. Sibisi knew he would not be allowed to take that with him to Nondweni; he also knew that even if he could persuade a chief to make a place for him in Msinga, grazing there was non-existent. It was impossible for him to conceive of a life without land and space and cattle. He was too old to start from scratch again.

So, when all appeals to the landowner had failed the family simply sat tight at their homestead. The sequence of events that followed was as grim as it was predictable. On September 10th 1979 Sibisi was arrested for illegal squatting and fined R90 or 90 days. Shortly thereafter his wife and 2 of his children were also arrested and fined R20 each. The family paid their fines and continued to 'squat' - where else could they go, they said? In November they suffered an even more crippling blow when 15 cattle and all their sheep and goats were impounded by the farmer as "strays". The animals were in the Weenen pound for 4 days; the final bill to release them came to R557,65, of which R360 went to the farmer for alleged damages. Sibisi borrowed the money from a local agricultural project, bailed out his cattle, and returned home.

Reprieve Then suddenly, as arbitrarily as he had given notice, the farmer changed his mind and agreed to let the family stay. Again we have only Sibisi's version of what happened. He says he had invoked the aid of a witchdoctor; he had also agreed to "give" the farmer an ox and arranged for a younger son and daughter to work on the farm. The total cost of reprieve to the family was in the region of R1 000 - R707,65 in court and pound fines, plus the value of the ox and the expense of numerous trips to lawyers, relief agencies, the witchdoctor. But the homestead appeared safe.

Eviction 1981 For a year life continued much as before. Sibisi's teenage son earned R20 a month on the farm; the daughter worked in the farmer's kitchen. In January 1981, however, the family was flung back on the treadmill of crisis once more. Sibisi received another eviction notice - a second scrap of paper, a second ultimatum to leave the land. According to Sibisi the reason this time was that his daughter was sick and failed to report for work one morning. When he went round to the farmhouse to explain, the farmer simply reached for a notepad. "I'm tired of your family" was his only explanation for the notice he handed over.

The weary, futile cycle of attempted negotiations and appeal was launched upon once more. Sibisi put on his city clothes and travelled to Pietermaritzburg to seek legal help. The lawyer spelled out what he did not want to hear - that the farmer was within his rights, that there was nothing the law could do for him because it did not represent his interest. He tried to get a place on another farm and spent several days trekking from place to place but without luck. He again consulted a witchdoctor: it had worked before, perhaps it would this time. Throughout he steadfastly refused to sell his cattle. "I cannot see money in the bank like I can my cattle; I cannot get any pleasure from money like I can from my cattle".

On the 13th February 1981, the day his notice expired, the farmer impounded all his stock. They were in the pound for 11 days while Sibisi struggled to find alternative grazing for them. The final bill this time was for R2 992,04 - ten of Sibisi's cattle and 30 of his goats had to be sold to raise the money. During this time the farmer also knocked down the 7 huts that made up the Sibisi homestead, finally forcing them to move away from their - his - land.

Sibisi and his family are now camped precariously at a church building on a neighbouring farm. They found grazing for their severely reduced herd at R2 a beast a month; they have won another, temporary reprieve of a sort. We know there is absolutely no security in their future at all: they no longer look to any future, only to each day as it is salvaged from the refuse dump of our society.