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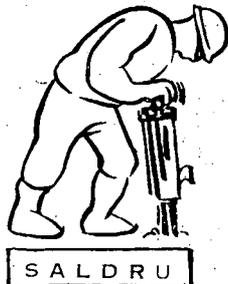
SALDRU FARM LABOUR CONFERENCE

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The Tenant Labourer System in Natal
Seen by a Journalist

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The Tenant Labourer System in Natal

seen by a journalist.

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William and his family were one of 16 families evicted from a farm in the Louwsberg district. He has been on the road looking for somewhere to live for ten months. He has five wives and 36 children, the youngest of whom is six months old. His newly created homeland is not allowed to accept him because it is overpopulated and the already sparse grazing is overstocked. He has gone from official to official with his bundle of trekpases which state simply that he has three months to leave a certain farm. They are trekpases to nowhere.

This is an excerpt from a newspaper report published in 1970. William's plight helped to bring the explosive nature of the tenant labourer situation to public notice for the first time. Till then evictions from farms in the Natal Midlands and in the north of the province had been the occasional fodder of agricultural correspondent's columns.

The average reader knew nothing then of the tenant labourer, nor anything of the conditions under which he lived, worked and trekked. Now readers have no excuse because these Africans have been evicted in hordes and their story has been told many times.

William and his enormous family had nowhere to go because the four alternatives available were closed for a variety of reasons.

He could not go to another White-owned farm, except as an illegal squatter, unless the owner agreed to have him. In 1970 (and in 1975) farmers of the north and middle Natal were nearing the end of their campaign to destroy the tenant labour system, and the size of William's family would, in any case, have made it difficult for those few farmers who might otherwise be sympathetic to employ him.

He could not squat in a so-called Black Spot. Some still existed, overcrowded, but they were dwindling and the Government was hurrying to abolish them.

He could not go to an urban township. He did not qualify under Section 10 of the Urban Areas Act, and in his case no township administration could accommodate one family of 42 people. He could not become a migrant worker because he had no skills of an industrial or commercial nature, there was no call for his services and should he, miraculously, be employed, he had nowhere to house his family.

He could not go into KwaZulu because none of the tribal chiefs was prepared to admit him to his area. KwaZulu is, in terms of agricultural value, badly overpopulated. Apart from this, local tribesmen feel economically threatened by newcomers who also bring with them new customs and attitudes.

In 1973 the Minister of Bantu Administration and Development, Mr. M.C. Botha, claimed there were only 16 350 tenant workers registered on Natal farms.

In August 1974, defending the system, Mr Donald Sinclair, the Natal Agricultural Union president, said farmers were giving "sanctuary" to 400 000 Africans "not really ~~needed~~ needed by the agricultural industry."

There were two types of tenant worker. There was the man who lived with his family on a privately-owned farm given over entirely to the accommodation of African tenants. The owner treated this farm as a labour reservoir and drew workers off it to work on a contract basis on his operational farm elsewhere in Natal.

Two developments largely erased this facet of the system. The abolition of Black Spots played a part, but probably the major reason was the farmers' realisation that these labour farms were being 'tested to destruction' by bad farming, neglect and over-stocking.

The other kind of tenant actually lived on the operational farm. In return for the right to grow crops and keep livestock he gave his labour for six months of the year. Many tenants were given permission to seek work elsewhere, usually in urban areas, for the other six months.

The Government, White farmers and African workers and leaders all agreed the system should be eliminated. The method, timing and the alternatives available to the workers were in contention.

After August 1970, White farmers in Natal were forbidden to take on further Africans under the tenant labour system and all future new employees had to be in full-time employment.

The farmers were not forced to evict those then working as tenant labourers. They could keep them as tenant workers, or give them a choice of full-time employment or they could, if they wanted, evict them.

Under the old system an African was allowed to live on the farm with his family, grow crops, graze cattle and goats, and work six months of the year. Usually he did not receive cash wages. Some received only a bag of mealie meal and some received R2 or R3 a month.

Under the new system they lost the right to plough and to graze stock and received instead a monthly wage ranging from R6 to about R12.

In addition they were warned that Africans who worked on farms would not be allowed to move out of agriculture into other spheres of employment.

It was the White farmers who called on the Government to abolish the tenant labour system. They said it was unproductive and inefficient and seriously damaged the land.

Mr. Sinclair, the NAU president, noted that the system demanded that the farmer give over a large part of his holding to a proliferating family system.

Almost every farmer to whom I have spoken has said the same thing. They have claimed that for every 20 people living on a farm the farmer might get one worker. They have also claimed that after they have agreed to take on a tenant worker with a family of five they find, within five years, that his kraal has grown to contain 30 people --brothers, fathers, uncles and aunts of tenuous relationship.

Mr. Sinclair seems to have an ambivalent attitude toward the system, perhaps because he has been forced to defend organised agriculture's continued use of it which has come under attack so often.

Perhaps his attitude has been formed, in part, by what might be described as the rebirth of the system.

In 1972, several farmers in Weenen, the first area where full-time employment was introduced --in conjunction with Bantu Administration officials tried to force Africans living on a Government-owned farm to sign contracts which would turn them into tenant labourers.

These Weenen farmers had suffered a labour shortage since the abolition of the tenant system.

The Africans were offered R6 a month, a bag of mealie meal and were told they could keep five head of cattle for each kraal. When they refused the offer the local magistrate then instructed an official to hand out eviction notices obviously prepared in advance.

By 1976 the situation was hopelessly tangled. Tenant labourers existed side by side with migrant workers who in turn operated alongside former tenant labourers who had opted for full-time employment for cash wages.

In 1973 Roland Stainbridge spent eight days speaking to employers and workers all over the province and there is little evidence that his findings then would not hold true today.

In summary, Stainbridge found that farmers are protected by legislation which enables them to do virtually anything they like with their workers who are bound to the farms by law.

This is what he wrote: "Workers are unprotected, can be evicted at a moment's notice and end up starving in a resettlement area.

" A method often used to get rid of the worker and his family is to level his home with a tractor or raze it by fire.

" ~~Child~~ ^{CHILD} labour is commonplace.

" Instead of an employer-employee relationship, there is a master-servant relationship and workers are frequently beaten by their employers.

" Many workers pay their own medical bills and have never

had paid leave in their lives "

He found men who had never earned more than R3 a month, some who worked for nothing, some who had to give up good urban jobs because their families were threatened with eviction if they did not work on the farm, and a great deal of evidence of hidings from farmers who clearly thought they were operating a feudal system.

My own findings indicate that nothing has changed. The tenant labour system continues and so does the eviction problem.

In July 1975 I found more than 100 Africans living on farms in the Colenso district who had been served with eviction orders. They had nowhere to go and most of them had been gaoled or fined for squatting on the land they had known since childhood.

In January 1976, the Rev. Samson Khumalo, who operates in the Colenso, Weenen, Estcourt district, spoke to me. He is the organiser for Inkatha, the Black liberation movement founded by Chief Gatsha Buthelezi, the head of the KwaZulu Government.

His story was corroborated by 14 men from this vast district. He said that each time he held a meeting at weekends to explain the new movement, it was followed by evictions.

When the farmers involved were asked for comment they were either insulting or refused to speak.

Mr. Khumalo spoke of a new development in the eviction drama, but the rest of his story simply echoed the words of Dr. Anthony Barker, the head of the Charles Johnson Memorial Hospital, who two years earlier had said: " In the resettlement areas one finds that these evicted families have had to leave their cattle behind on the farms and are committed to paying R2 or R3 a month for grazing -- a sum they can't afford. So, in the end, their beasts are attached or impounded and they lose them."

I know of many such cases. In July last year Mr. Philomon Majola was ordered off a farm and managed to persuade another farmer, nearby, to take his cattle. But, the farmer who evicted him refused to allow the stock to be moved. Then Mr. Majola was sued for stock rent by the man who had evicted him.

Mr. Khumalo who has been involved in this situation for years, said: " Many times farmers prevent their former tenants from taking their cattle off the farm. You see, once notice has been given to a tenant he has to pay R1 per head of stock grazing on the ex-employer's farm."

Africans feel enormous resentment about all this. Not only do they lose their stock and means of livelihood, but they are ejected from areas where they have lived since birth, and extremely often where generations of their families have lived.

Then, too, they frequently do not grasp the western concept of private ~~land~~ ownership because for them the land belongs to everyone.

Many Africans point out that their antecedents lived on the land before the White man arrived. They were, so to speak, bought with the land.

When Chief Magogo Buthelezi and his people were evicted from a Louwsberg farm he recalled that the land they occupied had been the tribe's territory in the time of Shaka.

Africans also find Government officials unsympathetic, and I have found them, in some cases, almost hostile.

Local Bantu Affairs Commissioners often seem more influenced by the interests of the White farmers than Black employees, and although they know the problems, presumably, they rarely hesitate to fine or imprison Africans who have refused to move after being served with eviction orders.

The Chief Bantu Affairs Commissioner for Natal, Mr J.J. van der Watt, told me in December 1975: "Yes, we do have a serious population problem and there is a shortage of land. We are doing the best we can and in some cases we are resettling people.

" Just this week, for example, we offered to resettle 16 families and we have so far resettled four. Often these people just wander off themselves. I don't know where they go.

" We are fitting them in where we can, but if I had 250 people come along now I probably would not be able to resettle them."

Mr. van der Watt's subordinates in the field have been told not to take action against evicted tenants until alternative accommodation has been found. But, Africans are still being fined or imprisoned, and officials are sometimes on hand to see huts demolished by irate farmers before the tenants have been settled elsewhere.

In 1973 Alex Maphalala found that pellagra, malnutrition sores and kwashiorkor were rife in a newly resettled community at Msinga. About 500 children were without a school, their families had no land for ploughing, there were no clinics and no shops.

This community of about 17 families was moved out of Weenen after the abolition of the tenant labour system and after several years of negotiation.

Almost a year after the move they were still living in tents or crude wattle and daub huts.

A spokesman for the Department of Bantu Administration and Development said the Government would do everything in its power to find work for the men. They in turn said they did not want industrial work, but land for ploughing and grazing.

The officials replied: "We are looking for land, but it is very difficult to resettle a small community."

A number of those that wander off seem to find their way onto Bantu Trust farms inside KwaZulu, like those in the Noutu district. They are regarded by officials as squatters and indeed their presence is a problem for officials who sometimes have difficulty reconciling their understanding of African needs with Government regulations.

For KwaZulu, however, the problems are of a different order. The Legislative Assembly, sitting in May this year, resolved to ask Pretoria to transfer all Trust farms to KwaZulu so that Ulundi could plan them for agricultural and residential purposes.

But even the transfer of Trust farms, already heavily populated, will bring little relief. The problems of landless and unemployed Africans will not be solved while White South Africans are obsessed with racist policies and while the African population is expanding at its present rate.

The problem within this situation, as I see it, consists of four facets.

The first is racist legislation. The second is the White man's greed and his inability to relate to African workers as humanbeings. The third is the Africans' ignorance and lack of productivity. The fourth, and probably the most influential in the long term, is the population explosion.

There are not enough jobs now in commerce and industry for all the employable Africans in South Africa, and there is not enough arable land to allow the urban overflow of Africans to become subsistence farmers, even should they be so inclined.

It has been shown that beaming birth control propaganda at Africans is useless, primarily because it has become a political issue.

Even if there was no customary and traditional resistance to birth control, calling on Africans to curb their birth rate while urging Whites to increase their's is bound to have political repercussions.

In any event, the crisis of over-population in terms of what the land can carry is here; it is not an impending problem.

Another factor that must be recognised is that most Africans are bad farmers.

Who can blame them? They have never been trained, never been given credit or marketing facilities and they have never had real security of tenure in either White areas or on communal tribal land.

Thousands of Africans are chained to the land by poverty and law, lack of education and lack of job opportunities. Thousands of Africans in urban areas, with rural land rights, leave their lands to be worked unproductively by women and children.

It has been suggested that each African family be given a holding of 1,7 hectares to farm on a labour intensive basis which presupposes a great deal more arable land than exists.

As I see it agriculture should feed a nation and not merely individual families, and I do not believe the African is remotely interested in this system nor is he culturally suited to it.

The real stumbling block to any solution is the policy of separate development. Landlessness and unemployment are politically explosive elements that cannot be defused by being shut away inside the homeland timebomb.

It is these two problems, highlighted so starkly by the tenant labourer system, that present South Africa with one of its most urgent crises.

Only by eradicating borders, by bringing Africans back into the so-called White areas can a start be made in solving this puzzle.

The land tenure report adopted by the KwaZulu Legislative Assembly this year hints at the kind of solution African thinkers are prepared to accept.

The report advocates freehold tenure, but at the same time the KwaZulu Government is concerned because it has more people than land. It is estimated that there are nearly 500 000 families in KwaZulu, which means that each would have only one-fifth of what KwaZulu regards as an economic farming unit.

Conversely, if each family is to receive a full economic unit of about 33 hectares, four-fifths of the population will have to seek a livelihood off the land.

The report says that about four-fifths of the people now on the land will have to be absorbed in other types of employment.

In KwaZulu the transition to freehold, it seems, will be determined in part by the rate at which non-farmers are eliminated.

It is also proposed that the land be planned with a view to the establishment of villages and towns where it is hoped that more and more people, drawn off the land, will find employment.

Obviously, agriculture is envisaged as the base industry with the villages and towns providing the service industry, and the report also recommended the establishment of rural industrial programmes.

One of the most interesting aspects of this report is the recommendation concerning rural towns. It clearly recognises that not everyone wants to be a farmer, that not everyone should be a farmer, that not everyone can be a farmer.

It implies, too, that Africans will have to adapt to a new lifestyle.

Thus the point is made. Rural towns and villages for Africans can also be created in the so-called White areas from which White farmers and rural industries can draw labour.

This means African farm workers would travel from their family homes to work and would return in the evenings as urban workers do.

To make these villages, with their infrastructures of shops and sewerage systems, clinics and community halls, viable, a number of other adaptations would have to be made.

Rural Africans would have to relinquish their cattle and ploughing rights --this is happening now --and farmers would have to pay fair cash wages.

White-owned farms would have to be run more productively which means farmers would have to be better managers than they are at present and Africans would have to be trained, which they are not at present, to be better workers. They would, thus, have to be given incentives as well like upward job mobility and at the least, workers' committees if not trade unions.

There would be other spin-offs. I think it can be argued that drawing Africans into urban conglomerations will encourage them to gradually accept birth control measures.

Its difficult to make birth control relevant for rural people, but if these same rural people found themselves in an essentially industrial situation with houses that were not infinitely extendable, with the cost of education, rent and transport to consider, they might adapt to the idea of having smaller families.

The tenant labourer system is only part of the whole, a symptom of what is wrong with South Africa.

It simply cannot be seen in isolation from all the other factors that make life so difficult for Africans, and South Africa's approach to this and its other problems will have to be bold and adventurous -- which means enormous expenditure --and therefore it will have to be dealt with politically.

Perhaps I am going beyond my mandate, but the ramifications of the tenant labour system and the consequences of the evictions are threatening because they are inextricably tied in with the other grave issues like the African housing shortage, poor education facilities and unemployment.

Ultimately, of course, I am talking to the Government, perhaps naively.

Sometime ago I wrote an article in which I claimed that African development was South Africa's first line of defence and merited as much money as did military security. I said then: "It is becoming increasingly plain that White survival will be seriously threatened if Africans in this country find nothing worth defending."

If this comment, linked to a discussion on the tenant labour system sounds like an overstatement, I would suggest you talk to the Africans wandering around Natal with trekkpasses to nowhere.

ends.