

South Africa: ANC government evicts poor squatters

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Bailiffs have begun to evict hundreds of homeless poor people attempting to take over an area of barren land at Bredell, near Johannesburg, South Africa. Riot police with armoured cars backed the bailiffs, but the squatters are apparently prepared to move peacefully.

Over 5,000 poor squatters had taken plots of land and begun to erect wooden and corrugated iron shacks, turning the area into a small town over two weeks. Although many moved out when the ANC government took court action against them, several hundred remained because of the desperate housing shortage. There is no running water or other utilities, but families with young children were still prepared to endure freezing winter nights.

The land, although unused, belongs to government agencies and a white farmer. The government was granted an eviction order on Tuesday this week and gave the squatters 48 hours to leave. The occupation is organised by the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC), an opposition grouping. The PAC, which has three parliamentary deputies, broke from the ANC in 1958.

Whilst the government has built 1.1 million low-cost homes since coming to power in 1994, there are still 7.5 million people without proper housing. Growing poverty and unemployment—the government's free market policies have meant more than half a million jobs going in the state sector—have also made housing unaffordable for many.

The ANC government action was clearly designed to calm business fears. Comparison with the land occupations in neighbouring Zimbabwe gave rise to nervousness amongst business investors in South Africa and the rand sank to a new low against the US dollar. After the court case, Safety and Security Minister Steve Tshwete said, “there are people, including those fools in the PAC, who think that the

advent of democracy means the arrival of anarchy and lawlessness in our country.” The *Financial Times* commented that the government “viewed the illegal land occupation as a test of its resolve in upholding property rights and the rule of law.”

This is the first time that the ANC government has resorted to police-backed evictions and it risks losing further support among the black working class. Such actions evoke memories of the apartheid era, which saw millions evicted from land taken by white farmers and driven onto the “homelands” to be used as a source of cheap labour. Nevertheless the pro-business ANC felt it necessary to court public outrage because it is desperate to revive the confidence of investors.

Foreign investment has fallen from a peak of \$4 billion a year in 1997 to just \$1 billion this year. A recent report by UK businessmen expressed serious concerns over “labour regulation, crime, black economic empowerment, future repatriation of capital and corruption.”

Anxious to promote its policy of enabling a small section of the black population to join the ranks of the wealthy, the ANC put forward a programme to make land available to potential black commercial farmers following its election in 1994. Under the Restitution of Land Rights Act, the government has settled some 12,000 of the more than 60,000 claims for land put forward, either by restoring the land seized under apartheid or by paying compensation.

Only a tiny minority of the country's poor people has benefited. Despite promises made that there would also be a redistribution of land, nothing has been done to challenge the ownership of more than 80 percent of the best arable land by a tiny white minority. Less than two percent of such land has been made available and it has gone mainly to black farmers that already had sufficient

capital of their own.

Although the PAC has been called “left wing” and “radical” in press reports because of its Pan Africanist rhetoric, it offers no principled opposition to the ANC’s free-market policies. Representing a section of the black elite that has failed to benefit under the ANC government, the PAC has no perspective for utilizing the vast resources of the African continent for the benefit of either the urban or rural poor. Its use of populist rhetoric over land rights does not challenge the domination of South Africa’s economy by predominantly white big business corporations and banks. The PAC’s policy statement merely calls for the “landed gentry” to “voluntarily surrender their excess land” that is “over and above their optimal business and personal needs.”

There is a parallel to be drawn between the PAC’s efforts to exploit the genuine aspirations of the poor masses for land and the land occupations carried out by the Mugabe regime in Zimbabwe. To build up support for their organisations, both have used the fact that thousands of unemployed people are demanding land—although in South Africa it is mainly a demand for land on which to build houses rather than a desire to return to farming.

The PAC actually charged the thousands of land squatters 25 rand (about \$3) for each plot of land occupied. According to the *South African Mail and Guardian* newspaper, some were even charged rent. Asked how they could collect money for land they did not own, the PAC replied that the poor had a right to the land and that the money would go to a fund to provide utilities for the area.



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