

South Africa: nearly one million farmworkers evicted since 1993

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A recently released survey revealed that evictions from South African farms have accelerated under the African National Congress (ANC) government. Between 1993 and 2004 a total of 942,303 people were evicted, whereas under the apartheid regime, from 1984 to 1993, 737,114 people were evicted.

The survey prepared by the Nkuzi Development Association and Social Surveys Africa finds that the brunt of evictions is borne mainly by women and children, who make up 77 percent of evictees. This is due to the fact that landowners treat women and children as secondary occupiers—that is, their security of tenure is linked to the continued employment of a male member of the household. Even when the women and children also worked on the farm this did not protect them from eviction. Approximately 47,000 of the evicted children were involved in child labour while still living on the farm.

Evictees, according to the report, are “vulnerable members of our society, typically having low levels of education and low incomes even when working.”

The survey revealed that 37 percent of evictees have no education, whilst a further 39 percent have between one and seven years of schooling. Only 8 percent have completed their schooling. Women working on farms generally earn substantially lower incomes than men. In the most recent period, between 2001 and 2004, men and women respectively were earning average incomes of R529.00 (\$82.00) and R332.00 (\$52.00) per month.

Peaks in the numbers of evictions were related mainly to droughts in the pre-1993 era, but thereafter the impact of new legislation sparked increases in the numbers of evictions. The response of landowners to the Labour Relations Act, the Labour Tenants Act, the Basic Conditions of Employment Act, the Extension of Security of Tenure Act and the implementation of a

minimum wage was to evict farmworkers rather than meet the legal requirements.

Evictees received little or no assistance after eviction, with 83 percent of evictees not even knowing where to go for assistance. A large proportion (30 percent) of evictees end up in informal settlements on the periphery of urban areas, while a further 14 percent end up in the former Bantustans. Of the 48 percent that end up in formal townships, the majority are found in the poorer sections. The researchers note, “There is currently no provision or planning for the proper accommodation of people from farms.”

The ANC government has a land reform programme, but it has had a negligible effect on evictions. More people have been evicted than have been given their own land.

In the period between 1994 and 2004, while a total of 164,185 households obtained land or tenure rights, this was exceeded by the total of 199,611 households evicted from commercial farms. Tenure security for farm workers has fared poorly, with only 7,543 farm worker households obtaining secure tenure rights.

The survey concludes that “[d]ispossession of black South Africans has continued unabated in post-Apartheid South Africa” and that “Evictions have effectively cancelled out the limited gains of land reform and have contributed to a concentration of property in fewer and fewer hands.”

There is no effective programme in place to limit evictions or to provide support for those evicted from farms.

The ANC’s approach to agrarian reform has been twofold: firstly, the deregulation of the agricultural sector and the implementation of a free-market approach to agricultural production—a process which commenced under the National Party government—and

secondly a series of limited reforms in the countryside to ameliorate the social pressure created by the implementation of free-market policies.

The ANC's approach became manifest in the early 1990s. Under the aegis of the Land and Agricultural Policy Centre, set up by the ANC in collaboration with the World Bank, a new land policy was developed. Complete deregulation and liberalisation, the abolition of subsidies and minimum government involvement was advocated. All of these measures were eventually adopted by the ANC government.

The maintenance of stability in the countryside, and especially the commercial farming areas, appears to be the keystone of ANC policy. While the deregulation of the agricultural sector has deepened inequality, a series of measures have been put in place to divert the social tensions created by the defence of agribusinesses. The most significant of these is the government's land reform policy.

Land reform in South Africa is based upon a capitalist policy. In essence, the state provides grants to black South Africans to enable them to purchase land on the market. Its "flagship" is the Land Redistribution for Agricultural Development programme. Applicants can obtain grants only if they put forward a proportion of the investment themselves. This means that in practice wealthier applicants are able to obtain substantial grants, which are also combined with loans from commercial institutions. Operating commercial farms are often purchased by these wealthier applicants. Farm workers, a severely impoverished section of the population, are unlikely to be able to raise a sufficient contribution to acquire anything beyond a "food-security" garden.

The Extension of Security of Tenure Act, 1997, was intended to alleviate the plight of farm workers. The legislation provides a legal process whereby a landowner may obtain an eviction order. The Act further provides for the prosecution of landowners who illegally evict occupiers from their land. Even the extremely limited protection offered by this legislation is not available to the vast majority of farm workers, as evidenced by the National Evictions Survey's finding that only 1 percent of evictions followed a legal process.

The gains that were supposed to flow from the ANC's implementation of free-market measures in the

countryside have not been realized. Terms of trade continue to remain unfavourable and overall investment in the agricultural sector has declined. Although the government has indicated its preparedness to expropriate land for land reform purposes, this is purely window dressing. Indeed the South African constitution contains a clause guaranteeing the right to property and the state is compelled to pay market-based compensation for any expropriation.

Evictions are the logical outcome of the free market policies being pursued by the South African government. The further consolidation of land under the control of a few will continue unabated, but with a sprinkling of a small number of black farmers. Farmworkers, as the most vulnerable and marginal category of workers in the country, have born the brunt of these policies.



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