

Labour tenants' strike

By ABIE DITLHAKE of Farmworkers Research and Resource Project

For rural workers in Isepwe in the Eastern Transvaal, change is not coming fast enough in the "new South Africa". Over a thousand forestry and farm workers were met with razor wire and bullets when they went on strike in early September, demanding payment of outstanding wages, an end to subcontracting in forestry, and land reform.

Although the strike started with 210 forestry workers employed by Silvercell, a subcontractor to the forestry company HL&H, it was co-ordinated by the Panbult-Iswepe-Idalia sub-regional committee (an affiliate of the South Eastern Transvaal Labour Tenant Committee). Workers at Silvacell had not been paid for three months. Subcontracting allows the forestry companies to avoid the costs of social benefits like pension funds, and keep the workforce highly flexible. For workers it's a shoddy setup. The subcontractors employ the same workers who used to work for the big forestry companies, in the same jobs – but without benefits or job security, and reduced wages. The Silvercell workers' action sparked a powderkeg. Workers from HL&H, Mondi, Sappi and individual farmers joined the strike, in solidarity and to put their own demands. The strike became a political action by rural people of these areas rather than mere demands for wages. They want companies to take responsibility for subcontractors. Also, they want farmers in general to acknowledge their land rights. The strike lasted for a week.

Paper, Printing, Wood and Allied Workers Union and the provincial government intervened. An urgent meeting was convened between labour tenants (PPWAWU, Farmworkers Research and Resource Project, COSATU on the one hand, and HL&H, Mondi, Sappi and local structures of SA

Agricultural Union on the other). An interim forum was formed to look into these grievances. It was only then that the strikers agreed to return to work on condition that there is no victimisation, and that they receive full pay for the period during the strike. In return, the workers promised to work the hours lost during the strike. HL&H also agreed to pay outstanding wages owed by subcontractors. The forestry companies have guaranteed that they will facilitate recognition of unions by subcontractors.

But the issues run deeper than wages and subcontracting.

The Eastern Transvaal is renowned for conservative white farmers, who have responded to the "threat" of black majority rule by lashing out at workers. It is alleged that, when police fired on strikers, a few white farmers took advantage of the confusion to get in some shots themselves.

Workers link their low pay and poor working conditions to the legacy of racism. Many complained about the racist attitudes of "the Boers and Germans" in the area. And alongside the demands for an end to subcontracting and payment of outstanding wages go demands for land reform.

Labour tenants in the area have been fighting the forestry companies since the '80s, to defend access to land. Thousands have been evicted in the last decade. Labour tenants feel that they have as much right to the land as the companies. Most have lived there all their lives, as their parents and grandparents did.

Attacks on labour tenants gained pace with the prospect of a black majority government, since the forestry companies fear that the new government will entrench labour tenants' rights to land. Forestry and farm workers do not see their problems as separate from those of labour tenants. For many, it is the legacy of racist land dispossession which has left them at the mercy of white farmers and forestry companies.

One of the strikers' demands was for rights to be granted to workers resident on farms – including recognition of their right to land. Most



Pic: Abdul Shariff

Forestry workers, Eastern Transvaal

farmworkers live in tied housing – their accommodation comes with the job. But because of the Prevention of Illegal Squatting Act, losing your job also means evictions.

Farm and forestry workers want more than guarantees against evictions. They want rights to the land that they have lived on and worked for decades.

The strike was a culmination of many attempts by labour tenants in the South-Eastern Transvaal to highlight their grievances. It started in late 1993 when they petitioned the Transitional Executive Council to intervene on their behalf against escalating evictions and assaults by farmers and police. They also presented their specific demands for land reform to the Community Land Conference held in Bloemfontein in February 1994. These demands were also presented to various political parties (including ANC and National Party). The ANC promised to address their problem when it assumes government power.

However, three months after the ANC won this elections nothing has happened to address the problem. Instead, eviction and alienation

from the land is increasing. Both the Interim Constitution's property clause and the Restitution Act does not recognize the rights of labour tenants on the land.

It was against this background that a two-day stay-away and marches by labour tenants in Piet-Retief and Wakkerstroom to present their demands took place. Among these demands were:

- an end to subcontracting and the establishment of a commission to investigate possible regulation of this system
- review of the interim constitution
- an end to police collaboration with farmers and the eradication of the police reservists on farms
- a clear programme from government on how they are going to deal with their problems.

Unfortunately, forestry companies and farmers have little to worry about for the moment. ANC land redistribution policy is still up in the air and the process is very slow. ☆