

**OFF THE MAP - FARMWORKERS IN SOUTHERN AFRICA:
SOME PARTLY HISTORICAL THOUGHTS
ON THEIR INVISIBILITY AND VULNERABILITY**

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Being asked to write a paper for this conference provoked reactions of both surprise and shame at my ignorance concerning farmworkers. I am, after all, supposed to be a land expert! And yet my knowledge of farmworkers is severely limited, which I find revealing in itself and is precisely why I am attracted to this conference, in order to try to rectify some of that ignorance.

What follows is to some extent a rather personalised paper, reflecting some of my own experiences, in which I try to locate the current situation of farmworkers in Southern Africa in some historical context. It is structured under 5 main headings:

1. I don't know very much about farmworkers in Southern Africa, which is surprising, as I'm supposed to be a land expert.
2. There was extensive labour migration throughout Southern Africa in the 20th century involving farmworkers, but nobody bothered too much about citizenship or nationality then.
3. Farmworkers historically have generally been vulnerable, isolated, invisible and relatively powerless, but not mere passive victims.
4. Old fashioned labour migration has now ended in Southern Africa, borders have tightened, xenophobia is increasing, outsiders are being rejected, farmworkers have become even more vulnerable, governments have in some ways attempted to improve things, but to limited effect.
5. Not surprisingly, farmworkers have been largely ignored in the new land reform programmes in Southern Africa, Zimbabwe currently demonstrates the extreme dangers of this, and forced evictions could escalate disastrously across the region.

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1. I don't know very much about farmworkers in Southern Africa, which is surprising, as I'm supposed to be a land expert.

My own knowledge of and contact with farmworkers has been remarkably minimal. I have done little serious thinking or writing about them either in the past, as an historian, when I wrote a detailed study of the politics of land covering the first 50 years of colonial Zimbabwe, or currently, as Land Policy Adviser for Oxfam GB. In the latter role I write, study, lobby, advocate and seek to engage in current land issues, debates and struggles, and try to offer advice and support, when invited, to civil society organisations doing likewise. I have established a website at Oxfam called *Land Rights in Africa* (<http://www.oxfam.org.uk/landrights/>) which tries to document some of these struggles. And in the past few years in Southern Africa I have worked in South Africa, Malawi, Zimbabwe, Tanzania and Zambia – and beyond in Rwanda, Kenya, Uganda and Ethiopia, and in West Africa.

My 1977 book, *Land and Racial Domination in Rhodesia* continues to be frequently cited by current scholars, as I discovered last week at an excellent conference on Zimbabwe in Copenhagen.¹ The book has a reasonable amount to say about white Rhodesian farmers' search for labour in neighbouring countries and some of the labour legislation imposed on workers, but very little about farmworkers themselves, bar this brief nod towards Duncan Clarke in the conclusion:

‘Over time, a ‘quasi-feudal’ system of labour relations emerged on the farms with African workers totally dependent on their employer for social welfare, including health and educational facilities (rarely provided). Workers were ‘allowed’ to cultivate small plots on the farm thereby helping to keep wages low, while the farm stores tended to suck wages back thus reinforcing indebtedness and dependence.’²

In May 1999, I came to Zimbabwe to join Martin Adams and John Cusworth on a mission to advise DFID and the EU how best they might engage with the new land reform and resettlement programme agreed at the donors' conference the previous year. I was struck by the emphasis placed by both DFID and the EU on the rights of farmworkers. I willingly confess that I, a so-called expert who thought I had been following events in Zimbabwe reasonably closely, was somewhat surprised by this, and even a little suspicious of their intentions - was this perhaps a diversionary tactic by donors to take us away from the main issues?³

¹ Research seminar on *Rethinking Land, State and Citizenship through the Zimbabwe Crisis*, Centre for Development Research, Copenhagen, 4-5 September 2001.

² Robin Palmer, *Land and Racial Domination in Rhodesia* (London: Heinemann, 1977), 241, citing D.G. Clarke, ‘The Political Economy of Discrimination and Underdevelopment in Rhodesia with Special Reference to African Workers, 1940-1973’, Ph.D. thesis, University of St. Andrews, 1975, 311-20. Clarke's work became more accessible as *Agricultural and Plantation Workers in Rhodesia: A Report on Conditions of Labour and Subsistence* (Gwelo: Mambo Press, 1977). Not a great deal of substance has been written since then, with the exception of Rene Loewenson, *Modern Plantation Agriculture: Corporate Wealth and Labour Squalour* (London: Zed Books, 1991) and the work of Blair Rutherford, recently brought together in his book *Working on the Margins: Black Workers, White Farmers in Postcolonial Zimbabwe* (London and Harare: Zed Books and Weaver Press, 2001).

³ It was on this occasion that I first met Godfrey Magaramombe of the Farm Community Trust of Zimbabwe, who helped to open my eyes. Our mission (whose findings were not at that time accepted) argued, among other things, that provided government paid just and equitable compensation to the

2. There was extensive labour migration throughout Southern Africa in the 20th century involving farmworkers, but nobody bothered too much about citizenship or nationality then.

We are dealing with a region dominated in the 20th century by extensive, cross-national labour migration, in which colonially created national borders were extremely porous, and in which a wide range of employers, notably in mining and agriculture, aggressively sought to recruit labour far and wide. We know this from an extensive literature.⁴ I also know this personally from the quite amazing family histories of students I taught in a course on *Land and Labour in Central Africa* at the University of Zambia in the 1970s. Back then, citizenship and passports did not seem a major issue. There were plenty of jobs available in Lusaka and Zambia was full of exiles from the liberation struggle in Southern Africa. There were even a significant number of black Zimbabwean (mostly Shona-speaking) farmers who had settled in Kabwe Rural District in the 1950s, partly in response to increasing settlement in the Southern Rhodesian part of the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland by white war vets from the Second World War.

In July 1999, I was driving in Tanzania from Dar es Salaam towards Arusha. In Tanga Region, we passed through some old sisal plantations, previously nationalised, which had recently been privatised. My Tanzanian colleague told me about the plight of the sisal plantation workers, who had in effect been abandoned. Their family origins lay outside Tanzania, in Zambia or Malawi. They were in this respect like hundreds of thousands of other farmworkers in a region dominated by in the 20th century by extensive labour migration. But, because of their isolation on the plantations, they had established few ties with local communities, and now they were abandoned, tossed aside, no longer wanted.

3. Farmworkers historically have generally been vulnerable, isolated, invisible and relatively powerless, but not mere passive victims.

The main characteristics we tend to associate with farmworkers are those of vulnerability, of isolation, of relative powerlessness and - above all - of invisibility. As a general rule, farmworkers came from afar, generally from outside the country (such as Angolans in Namibia, Mozambicans in Malawi and Zimbabwe etc.), but sometimes from within a country, from either marginal areas (such as western Tanzania) or marginalised groups (such as San and Damara in Namibia). They were generally very much trapped on the farms, at the mercy of the farmer, subject to semi-feudal labour relations, and often to great brutality. In a word, they were exploited. But though their options, when compared to other, especially urban, workers were limited and circumscribed, this does not mean that they were mere passive victims, as an excellent literature as demonstrated.

landowner and that the rights of resident farmworkers were protected, options on which of the various approaches then on the table to support should be kept open.

⁴ My own small part in this was Robin Palmer and Neil Parsons (Eds), *The Roots of Rural Poverty in Central and Southern Africa* (London: Heinemann, 1977).

One thinks, for example, of Leroy Vail and Landeg White's brilliant, detailed study of peasants and plantation workers in the Quelimane district of Zambezia, in central Mozambique. They graphically describe how, shortly after independence, the managers of the Companhia do Boror,

‘proprietors of one of the world's largest coconut plantations, ... had loaded the full copra crop for the 1975 season on to four ships at the company's port of Macuse and had flown to Scandinavia to collect the proceeds of the sale, estimated at some £2 million.’

Meanwhile, ‘angry workers, their wages three months in arrears, demanded to be paid and fed.’⁵ Working conditions on the plantations of colonial Mozambique were notoriously bad, as Vail and White fully documented. But they also famously documented many of the protest songs workers had sung both to express their ill-treatment and find ways of fighting back at the systems which oppressed them.

Working conditions were only marginally better in neighbouring colonial Malawi, where the tea plantations in the south were entirely dependent on the hundreds of thousands of immigrant Lomwe who had fled from Mozambique in the early decades of the last century. Here a 1946 report concluded that people living on the estates felt that ‘they were mere slaves’ of the planters. Yet despite this, in my study of the Nyasaland tea industry (1930-53), I was able to find

‘evidence of effective local, day-to-day and passive resistance on their [workers'] part which left planters feeling impotent, unable to turn labour out on Sundays or in the rains or enforce unpopular *thangata* (labour rent) agreements, and obliged to reduce the daily tasks demanded of the worker.’⁶

In October 2000, Godfrey Magaramombe of the Farm Community Trust of Zimbabwe (FCTZ) brought a party of farmworkers from Zimbabwe and Namibia to Europe at the invitation of CIIR (the Catholic Institute for International Relations)⁷ to raise awareness and lobby the EU and the British Government about the plight of farmworkers in Southern Africa. On that tour, they agreed to give a lunchtime talk in Oxfam House. As I listened to their talk, it reminded me very forcefully - and rather depressingly - of talks I had heard in years gone by about the situation of farmworkers in apartheid South Africa - isolated, vulnerable, with little access to either education or health facilities, relatively powerless, and very hard to reach, let alone to organise or mobilise.

⁵ Leroy Vail and Landeg White, *Capitalism and Colonialism in Mozambique: A Study of Quelimane District* (London: Heinemann, 1980), 1.

⁶ Robin Palmer, ‘Working Conditions and Worker Responses on Nyasaland Tea Estates, 1930-1953’, *Journal of African History*, 27, 1986, 118, 126.

⁷ CIIR had recently undertaken a programme of research on farmworkers in both Zimbabwe and Namibia. See Steve Kibble and Paul Vanlerberghe, *Land, Power and Poverty: Farm workers and the crisis in Zimbabwe* (London: CIIR, 2000); Wolfgang Werner, *Rights and Reality: Farm workers and human security in Namibia* (London: CIIR, 2001); Miles Larmer and Steve Kibble, *Zimbabwe's Farmworkers: from Direct Development to Politicised Advocacy* (CIIR Paper for the Britain Zimbabwe Society Research Day, 16 June 2001) available at <http://www.oxfam.org.uk/landrights/ZimKibble.rtf>

4. Old fashioned labour migration has now ended in Southern Africa, borders have tightened, xenophobia is increasing, outsiders are being rejected, farmworkers have become even more vulnerable, governments have in some ways attempted to improve things, but to limited effect.

The situation at the start of the 21st century is that borders have become much tighter, that citizenship and having the correct papers really do matter now, and that labour migration, as we knew it before, has ended. As competition for jobs and for land and other resources has intensified, we have seen both increasing xenophobia and a disturbing rejection of people newly deemed to be ‘outsiders’. Farmworkers in a number of countries have been vulnerable to this trend – as they have to trends towards less labour-intensive methods of farming. Well intentioned attempts by independent African governments to improve the lot of farmworkers, in terms of labour conditions, minimum wages, or freedom of association, have generally foundered on the rocks of (until very recently in Zimbabwe) unaltered power relations on the land.

In a symposium on *Access to Resources: Land Tenure and Governance in Africa* at the University of Manchester in March 2001, the discussion turned to what was called ‘the new geography of African citizenship’:

‘As Camilla Toulmin (of IIED) noted, in Ivory Coast, Ivoriens are ranking their Ivorien identity - often invented - well above that of the long term and short term Burkinabé migrants that provide the majority of labour on the country’s plantations, and who fill many urban jobs. In a situation of political turmoil, Burkinabés are being ejected or are leaving the country voluntarily, amidst harassment and loss of livelihood. Citizenship is being used to adjudicate claims to land - with Ivoriens winning out, and the two million Burkinabés losing what they once had. These sorts of citizenship debates are clearly influencing land questions more and more - in the Zimbabwe land redistribution crisis, in South Africa, and in the Ivory Coast itself.’⁸

This echoes a rather gloomy comment I made when concluding the introduction to my 1997 literature survey on *Contested Lands in Southern and Eastern Africa*:

‘This rejection of ‘outsiders’, which goes against the grain of deep traditions in African history, has its echoes in many other countries [besides Kenya⁹], such as Zimbabwe and Malawi, as well as in much of West Africa. It is a very dangerous trend that could well become increasingly serious and destabilising in the future.’¹⁰

One of the lessons that we now seem to be learning from the various land reform programmes being undertaken in Southern Africa and elsewhere on the continent, is just how difficult it is to enforce progressive legislation designed to protect the interests of farmworkers in conditions where power relations remain fundamentally unaltered. So, in Zimbabwe in the 1980s white farmers circumvented new minimum

⁸ Available on the Oxfam Land Rights website <http://www.oxfam.org.uk/landrights/Access.rtf> and the LSE website <http://www.lse.ac.uk/Depts/destin/simon/access.htm>

⁹ I was referring to the ‘Land Clashes’ in Kenya’s Rift Valley, fomented by the ruling KANU party.

¹⁰ Robin Palmer, *Contested Lands in Southern and Eastern Africa: A Literature Survey* (Oxford: Oxfam UK and Ireland, 1997), 6.

wage laws by simply sacking workers or by turning them at the stroke of a pen from permanent to so-called seasonal labour. In Namibia, large numbers of farmworkers were just evicted. Wolfgang Werner documents the problems of implementing the 1992 Labour Act, which ‘not only gives farm labourers the same employment rights as other workers, but provides some additional rights.’¹¹ In South Africa, there were also various attempts to help farmworkers and labour tenants. Above my desk I have an attractive poster from the South Africa Department of Land Affairs concerning the Interim Protection of Informal Land Rights Act.¹² It asks:

- Do you live in communal or former homeland areas?
- Are you being threatened with eviction?
- Are decisions made about your land and you are not consulted?

You are protected under the Interim Protection of Informal Land Rights Act.

GET TO KNOW YOUR LAND RIGHTS!

Call the Department of Land Affairs
0800-111-021 TOLL-FREE

In reality, apart from the difficulty of getting any replies from the toll free number, the Department of Land Affairs has lacked both the resources and the capacity to ensure implementation of new laws in a context in which power relations on the land have changed little and in which, at least in some parts of the Northern Province (the old Afrikaner heartland of the Northern Transvaal) the white magistrates are in league with (and socially linked to) the farmers, and either ignorant of new laws or unwilling to enforce them. For all the work of NGOs such as Nkuzi (see below), or of human rights lawyers from the Legal Resources Centre and elsewhere to spread people’s awareness of their rights, the day-to-day realities on many farms, including the now internationally ‘politically correct’ vineyards of the Western Cape, remain very much as they were in the bad old days.

In July 2001, I spoke to Edward Lahiff, who used to work for the Nkuzi Development Association (an NGO) in the Northern Province of South Africa, which borders southern Zimbabwe. He told me of the scandal which Nkuzi had helped to expose of significant numbers of white South African farmers using hundreds of illegal (but very willing) Zimbabweans to work on the farms, in preference to black South Africans, who had been recently afforded certain legal rights under the new government’s land reform programme. The Zimbabweans were cheaper, much more vulnerable, and instantly removable if they gave trouble - or demanded any rights. (There is a comparable situation in northern Namibia, where commercial farmers employ unknown numbers of illegal Angolan immigrants, especially in the cotton fields).¹³

¹¹ Werner, *Rights and Reality*, 15-22.

¹² Strictly speaking, ESTA (the Extension of Security of Tenure Act) affected farmworkers more than IPILRA.

¹³ Werner, *Rights and Reality*, 11.

Edward Lahiff also told me how Nkuzi had persuaded local councillors of the need to intervene to try to prevent farmers evicting their (black South African) tenants. He remarked:

You could see this was new ground. Farmworkers were people on the other side of the fence whom the ANC councillors had not seen as within their area of jurisdiction. They were sympathetic but totally unaware of the law with regard to evictions from farms. Nkuzi played an important role here in raising awareness among local councillors, and they have now emerged as an important 'early-warning' system. A few councillors now intervene directly with farmers in cases of threatened eviction, without consulting Nkuzi, which has to be seen as progress.

A recent Human Rights Watch report on *The State Response to Violent Crimes on South African Farms* details extensively how, in contrast to white farmers, crimes against farmworkers generally either go unreported or are simply ignored by the police. Its main author noted that

'Attacks against farm owners have gotten most of the attention, but attacks against other farm residents are a much bigger problem. Farmworkers and other rural dwellers are more vulnerable to violence, including from their employers, and less likely to get help from the police and courts.'¹⁴

I was forcefully reminded of such continuities from the bad old days when I was recently sent a bizarre, unsolicited email from a South Africa-based company, Wildlife Africa Properties, introducing me to its property service and informing me 'of the latest properties that have come onto the market' in Southern Africa.¹⁵ Wildlife Africa Properties helpfully told me that:

Land ownership and business development can be incredibly simple in Africa - our expertise is to draw purchasers' attention to the not so obvious issues.

I have yet to find the time to research all the properties listed, but I was struck by one in Zambia where, I was told, 'The local people are friendly, have a good command of the English language and are very keen for employment.'

Comment seems superfluous!

¹⁴ Human Rights Watch, *Unequal Protection: The State Response to Violent Crimes on South African Farms* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2001). Available at <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2001/safrica2/>

¹⁵ For those who might be interested in such properties, Wildlife Africa Properties' website is <http://www.gameranch.wildnetafrica.com/list.html>

5. Not surprisingly, farmworkers have been largely ignored in the new land reform programmes in Southern Africa, Zimbabwe currently demonstrates the extreme dangers of this, and forced evictions could escalate disastrously across the region.

Given the past history of farmworkers in Southern Africa and in particular their relative invisibility, their lack of political power (comparable in this context to pastoralists) and doubts about their 'true' nationality, it is not in the least surprising that they have featured so little (South Africa excepted) in the thinking of those - across the political spectrum and the government/civil society divide - who have been involved in the new wave of land reform programmes and the drafting of new land laws and policies. The current events in Zimbabwe have revealed, all too tragically, the consequences which such neglect can bring. In Zimbabwe, farmworkers have become victims of what is now seen as a deeply compromised history. Their current vulnerability threatens stability throughout the region.

One could cite many examples of the current policy neglect of farmworkers, but one will suffice. In July and October 2000, the Government of Malawi issued the first and second drafts of its *National Land Policy*. Both conspicuously failed to address either the land rights and entitlements of agricultural workers and labour tenants on the country's tea and tobacco estates, or what might happen to them in the future. Once again, they were simply invisible to the eyes of policy makers.

In Zimbabwe, in the present crisis, the plight of the farmworkers *has* finally attracted attention, though incomparably less in the Western media than that of the white farmers. For as long as the predominantly white commercial farmers were in de facto alliance with the ruling ZANU-PF party, farmworkers were very largely left alone. But once the white farmers shifted their allegiance to the new opposition MDC and threatened to take 'their' workers with them, farmworkers willy-nilly entered the terrain of bitter conflict. This is illustrated in a passage in Catherine Buckle's book *African Tears: The Zimbabwe Land Invasions* which tells the story of a white farmer trying to cope with her undesignated, ungazetted farm being invaded by 'war veterans'. One of these, far too young to have liberated anything, and apparently seriously inebriated, demanded of her 'this is *my* farm... Give me your workers, NOW.'¹⁶

My prediction, quoted earlier, about the rejection of outsiders being likely to become increasingly destabilising in the future, is sadly proving true in the land invasions of Zimbabwe, where Mugabe has referred to farmworkers as 'people without totems', meaning foreigners, and they have been victimised and stigmatised and made to suffer for the historical sins of their white employers.

As I was writing, there was a headline in *The Guardian* of 22 August: 'Land grab makes black farm workers homeless: War veterans leave 20,000 to sleep by the roadside.' It quotes a white farmer as saying that the campaign in Hwedza district to drive the farmers out is led by Fanuel Chigwedere [brother of the Minister of Education] whose 'aim is to rid this area of white farmers and he doesn't care how

¹⁶ Catherine Buckle, *African Tears: The Zimbabwe Land Invasions* (Johannesburg and London: Covos Day, 2001), 137.

much misery he causes to our workers. Our workers are frightened and suffering and Chigwedere is preventing us from even offering them any assistance.’ A farmworker was quoted as saying:

‘We were thrown off our farm yesterday and our family was scattered. Last night we slept under a tree. We hope we can find some friends a few miles away where we can get some food and a place to sleep. Then we must keep moving because of all this trouble.’¹⁷

A report in the *Zimbabwe Independent* of 31 August said that

‘displacements of farm workers by the fast-track land resettlement programme and concomitant violence had spawned a catastrophe in the hinterlands. Farmworkers complained of sustained attacks and intimidation by government-sponsored mobs.’

Godfrey Magaramombe of the the Farm Community Trust of Zimbabwe was quoted by IRIN as saying

that those evicted were now living in appalling conditions in makeshift camps and squatter settlements along main roads. Evicted farm workers have repeatedly told FCTZ that after being labelled opposition supporters by war veterans, they are then told not just to leave the farms, but to leave the area completely.

He said ‘there’s certainly a role here for international organisations; these people urgently need feeding programmes and shelter.’¹⁸

One farmworker said the situation on farms had become untenable:

‘War veterans came and chased us away last week. We were told to go home but we said we came from Zambia, Mozambique and Malawi and we have nowhere to go. They said they didn’t care.’¹⁹

I was in fact in Malawi last year, where I was told that the Malawian Government was seriously worried about a worst case scenario unravelling in Zimbabwe,²⁰ in which, *in*

¹⁷ *The Guardian*, 22 August 2001. *The Farmer* cites intelligence sources saying ‘it was the view of some top government officials that the move by the war veterans to illegally evict farm workers from their houses would result in the ruling Zanu-PF losing votes in the coming presidential elections.’ *The Farmer*, 20 August 2001.

¹⁸ IRIN, ‘Zimbabwe: Growing calls to help displaced farm workers / CORRECTION’, 5 September 2001.

¹⁹ *Zimbabwe Independent*, 31 August 2001. A headline in its British namesake the following day read ‘Disaster feared as black farm workers are forced to flee.’ *The Independent*, 1 September 2001. It cited the Commercial Farmers’ Union’s estimate that 70,000 black farmworkers had been thrown out of their homes on white farms.

²⁰ What has happened already represents, in the eyes of many, a gross abuse of human rights, which has been documented in a number of recently published reports including: International Bar Association, *Report of Zimbabwe Mission 2001* (23 April 2001); Farm Community Trust of Zimbabwe, Women and Land Lobby Group and Friedrich Naumann Foundation, *Report on the one-day Workshop to Review the Land Reform Programme in Zimbabwe* (10 May 2001); Human Rights NGO Forum, *Politically Motivated Violence in Zimbabwe, 2000-2001* (July 2001); Geoff Feltoe, *The Onslaught against*

extremis, Mugabe might decide to deport up to one million people of Malawian origin back 'home'. This may be unlikely, perhaps particularly now in the light of the agreement reached at Abuja on 6 September, but were it to happen other leaders might be tempted to follow suit, the whole complex historical labour migration map could unravel, and Southern Africa would then rapidly descend into the kind of desperate situation which has for so long characterised the Horn of Africa. This is one of many reasons farmworker issues right across the region need to be addressed with renewed urgency and sensitivity. Unfortunately, there are very few incentives for politicians to do this; so the burden is likely to fall on the already overloaded shoulders of civil society activists.