

# Labour tenancy in Natal

**I**N Natal labour tenancy evolved over many generations into what was known as the "six month" system. By 1932 when the Report of the Native Economic Commission was tabled, it was already the norm in Natal for labour tenants to spend six months working for the landowner. In some areas of Natal this six months labour involved the whole labour tenant family, in others, the six months labour obligation was spread throughout the year.

The land available to labour tenants for their own use also varied between districts and farms. In general, though, a labour tenant family would have at least one field of about two acres to plough as well as access to common grazing land. Although landowners started to restrict the number of animals labour tenants could keep, by the late 1960s it was common for tenants to have 50 cattle or more.

Labour farms developed alongside labour tenancy in Natal's dry thornveld area, especially around Weenen and Muden. These labour farms were used by their white owners solely to house and provide some agricultural land for their labour tenants. These tenants then spent six months working away from their homes on commercial farms of the landlords. Over time, these labour farms came under increasing attack

from soil conservationists and more progressive farmers for being neglected, overpopulated and overstocked.

By the late 1960s labour tenancy was deeply entrenched in central and northern Natal. Although it was an exploitative system, it was one to which most labour tenants clung. They did so because it allowed them access to land and the possibility of cultivating that land and keeping livestock on it. It also allowed tenants to avoid regular employment on white farms where working conditions were extremely bad.

By 1960, after the government introduced laws to curb the numbers of labour tenants on white farms, there were 42 000 registered labour tenants in Natal. Since this figure did not include the labour tenant's family and since many labour contracts were not registered, the actual labour tenant population would have been much higher.

By 1970, the Natal Agricultural Union estimated that there were about 400 000 labour tenants (including families) on Natal farms.

The government passed laws in the 1960s to abolish labour tenancy. In Natal there was opposition to these from labour tenants and farmers. Many farmers said they couldn't afford to pay wages to a full time labour force.

Because of this opposition, elimination of labour tenancy as a relation on the land in Natal lagged far behind other provinces. In 1970 the government issued Proclamation GN 1224 which froze current labour tenant contracts and said that all contracts would come to an end after August 1970.

By the late 1970s, government planners assumed that labour tenancy in Natal had finally been abolished. By this time, most Natal farmers had moved to full time wage labour. But a significant number did not. These were small scale farmers, traditional farmers and farmers who had calculated that it would cost too much in time and energy to get rid of labour tenant households on their farms.

Two of the areas where labour tenancy persisted in the late 1970s was Weenen and Muden. In these areas, labour farms still existed.

The government's response to evidence that labour tenancy still existed was to issue Proclamation no. 2089 on September 21 1979. This reiterated that no new labour tenancy contracts could be entered into and that any existing contracts would automatically expire on August 30 1979. In practice though, labour tenancy has persisted in Natal, particularly on labour farms.