

Continuing racism in South Africa: White employer drags black worker to death

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Police in the town of Sasolburg, south of Pretoria, have charged building contractor Pieter Odendaal with murdering his black employee John Mosoko Rampuru. The murder took place in the late evening of Friday August 25. Rampuru, who was married with two young sons, died as a result of being dragged behind the pickup truck belonging to his white boss.

Police followed the three-mile trail of blood leading from where the body had been dumped to Odendaal's business premises. Rampuru had been hitched to the pickup truck with wire around his ankle and dragged around the streets of the town.

Police Inspector Stan Skinner said he had never seen such a mutilated body, saying, "The back of the head was a pulp, the buttocks had been worn away by the dragging along the asphalt. Only the lower legs of the victim's overalls were still on his body."

The murder is reminiscent of the killing of James Byrd by three white racists in Jasper, Texas, USA in June 1998. They beat him unconscious and then dragged him to his death over miles of rural roads.

Rampuru's brother Alfred Mphasa explained how Odendaal treated his brother. The pay was low, only 800 Rand (\$118) a month, and he often had to work until midnight. His brother was planning to leave the job, but had not yet told his employer. Odendaal would refer to his black employees derogatively as *Kaffirs*. Charles Moledi, a tyre-fitter who worked near Odendaal's premises, described him as being verbally abusive to his black employees. He described Rampuru as a "gentle man who was quiet and always took Odendaal's verbal abuse without hitting back."

When Odendaal appeared in court on September 4, police said they were waiting the result of an autopsy to show whether Rampuru was already dead when he was tied to the pickup truck or if he died as a result of being

dragged along the roads. The case was adjourned until September 28.

Rampuru's murder is yet another in a catalogue of killings and abuse of black workers by white employers. Many such incidents take place in remote rural settings and do not receive much publicity. In the week prior to Rampuru's murder, one black worker had his leg shot off by his white employer and another had his eye gouged out.

In another recent incident, a black teenage girl was covered in white paint by white shop staff who accused her of theft. Such crimes are not categorised by police as racist, however, a South African human rights group believes a significant number of the 24,000 murders and 28,000 attempted murders each year are racist.

The murder of John Rampuru took place the weekend before a major conference to discuss racism in South Africa. Six years following the end of apartheid social divisions still dominate. A thin layer of the black middle class has benefited but the majority of power and wealth remains in the hands of a white elite.

The conference heard examples of the physical and verbal racist abuse happening on a regular basis. One example was the case of 14 year-old Sisio Nyembe. A white farmer stopped the child and questioned him about some guns stolen from the farm. The farmer then set his dogs on the boy, watched by the farmer's children. Nyembe was then handcuffed and thrown into a cold storage room, whilst the farmer discussed whether he should continue torturing the youth with an electric cattle prod.

Pansy Tiakula of the South African Human Rights Commission gave evidence of racist attacks that had been gathered. Gideon Mthembu, 78, had lived and worked on a farm outside Ingogo for 70 years. When he asked his white farmer boss about retiring, he was

beaten up by him and left with permanent damage to his eyesight.



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