

South Africa: Farmworkers murdered by employers

Our correspondent
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The murder of two farmworkers by their employers has placed the spotlight on the awful plight of this section of the South African working class.

On February 19, a white South African farmer was convicted of culpable homicide after dragging a Mozambican labourer to death. The farmworker, Jotham Mandlazi, died of multiple internal and head injuries after he was dragged for 70 metres behind a pickup truck by the farmer, Gerrit Maritz, on February 8 of last year. Maritz delayed reporting the incident to police for 17 hours and attempted to sneak Mandlazi's body into a local mortuary.

According to testimony from farmworker Isaac Ngwenya, Maritz arrived at a labourer's compound on a farm near the town of Komatipoort on the South Africa-Mozambique border, looking for truant workers.

Mandlazi was called over to Maritz's pickup truck, whereupon Maritz grabbed him by his clothing and sped off in the vehicle, dragging Mandlazi behind him. Mandlazi fell under the vehicle and the wheels went over him. Maritz came to a stop about 70 metres later and ordered other workers to load Mandlazi's corpse onto the back of the truck, indicating that he was taking him to hospital.

Maritz initially pleaded not guilty, but after hearing the testimony of eyewitnesses to the murder changed his plea to guilty on the reduced charge of culpable homicide.

Judge Johan Els stated that he was satisfied that the killing was not racially motivated and fined him R36,000 (approximately \$6,000) and imposed a two-year suspended sentence.

A Congress of South African Trade Unions official, Patrick Craven, condemned the sentence, stating, "This case is typical of the contemptuous way employers and the courts continue to treat black farm workers as if

their lives are worth nothing. Over and over again, courts have reduced charges of murder to culpable homicide, and employers have been given minimal sentences, for the most horrendous crimes against their employees."

On February 31 of this year, Limpopo farmworker Nelson Shisane, 38, a father of three, was brutally beaten and strangled by Mark Scott-Crossley. Shisane was then loaded onto the back of a pickup truck and driven to the Mokwalo White Lion Project, some 15 kilometres away, where he was thrown into a lion enclosure.

Scott-Crossley, who runs a construction company based on his brothers' farm, and three of his employees allegedly watched as a lion mauled Shisane, and then dragged him into the bush. Several days later, parts of Shisane's skull and other remains were discovered in the lion enclosure. It is not clear when Shisane died.

According to reports, Shisane had been embroiled in a labour dispute with Scott-Crossley after having been dismissed last year. Shisane returned to Scott-Crossley's farm on January 31 to collect his belongings. This was the last time he was seen.

Police investigations commenced after Shisane's family became concerned about his disappearance. On February 10, Scott-Crossley and three of his employees were arrested and charged with murder.

Robert Mnisi, 34, was released by police after he agreed to cooperate with the prosecution. He told CNN that Scott-Crossley strangled Shisane (who is here referred to as Chisale).

"Then he say to me, 'Doctor pick it up [Shisane/Chisale's body] and throw it in the lions.'"

Scott-Crossley is alleged to have put a gun to Mnisi's head when he objected: "He say, 'Hey, if you don't want to listen to me, I'll shoot you. Get inside there.'"

A South African Human Rights Commission report last year noted the terrible living and working conditions faced by black farmworkers on land that is still mostly owned by white farmers. It condemns a culture of violence against black workers, compounded by high levels of alcoholism and poor education.

Over 1,500 white farmers have been murdered since the end of apartheid a decade ago, primarily, the report claims, as a result of crime. But there is a large degree of hatred of the farmers amongst black workers because of the gaping social inequalities that continue to exist.

In some provinces, such as Mpumalanga and Limpopo, assaults against farm workers are so common that they appear to be the norm. The report states that land owners operate outside the labour laws and child labour still occurs. It explains, “In some provinces...the incidences [of assault] are of such a nature and frequency as to indicate that there is a culture of violence in which acts are perpetrated in an environment of impunity.”

Farm workers do not usually report assaults to the police, and often, in cases where assaults are reported, the police fail to investigate. Even when investigations do take place, judges and magistrates frequently reduce charges and impose lenient sentences.

Given the furor that has been whipped up against the regime of Robert Mugabe by Britain and the Western powers, it is noteworthy that it is far more dangerous to be a white farmer in South Africa than in Zimbabwe.

Ten years after the end of apartheid, the slayings of Jotham Mandlazi and Nelson Shisane by their employers demonstrates that the ANC government has done nothing to ameliorate the brutal conditions that exist in the South African countryside—or to fundamentally challenge the domination of society by a largely white capitalist elite that apartheid was meant to defend.



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