

A sordid tale stuffed in bins

The bodies of three women workers were found in laundry bins on the morning of 3 January 2006. Behind this gruesome deed lies a story of workplace abuse and abject refusal to grant workers their rights and human dignity.

Mirriam Makhalemele

looks behind the scenes at the Protea.

Protea dry-cleaners is at Three Rivers near Vereeniging and employs about 20 workers. This is where three female workers were murdered allegedly by its owners while working on night shift. This followed their approach to management to ask for a wage increase and to discuss other conditions like long working hours without compensation.

Workers were generally treated badly by the Protea employers. During night shift they were locked in. If they had not finished their work when the shift ended they

were forced to remain until the work was done. They were not granted annual leave.

In November 2005 these workers took their grievances to the Department of Labour as they did not belong to a union, and the employer would not listen to their grievances. The next morning one worker who was perceived as 'too clever' was summoned to the employer's office. An argument ensued and the worker left the office crying and saying she had been insulted.

Workers were surprised as to how the employer knew about them going to the Department of Labour. On their way home they discussed the issue of joining a trade union.

One morning in December 2005, the employer arrived at the workplace out of the blue and started swearing randomly. He made racial remarks, and mentioned that a particular worker would not be working for the company in January 2006. He was referring to one of the murdered women. These utterances concerned workers, but to their surprise this particular worker was still working on New Year's day.

After this incident the situation worsened. Workers even had to report before going to the toilet. Days-off were not easily granted as before. Late coming was not tolerated although the area where the dry-cleaner is situated is awkward for transport and it is a

long distance for workers to travel if they are lucky enough to get public transport. There is therefore a strong possibility of arriving late especially on public holidays.

Workers became increasingly concerned and decided to join a union. The question was who would go and get information about unions. One worker volunteered to get information for the others. Owing to lack of time, this process was delayed and the tragedy struck.

On that fateful day three female workers were on night shift. A gardener who turned state witness at the trial of the accused employers, confessed to the police his role as accomplice. He told of how in the middle of the night seven whites, including the employer, came in and murdered all three workers and stuffed them inside commercial laundry bins. Two of the gardeners staying in the employer's backyard were made to clean the blood.

The morning following the murders, workers were met by a heavy presence of police guarding the premises. They learned from the police what had happened. They all stood outside hunched over in grief. Vehicles collecting the corpses were already at the scene.

Family members of the murdered also arrived and waited for the employer to brief them on what had happened. The employer did not bother to come and talk to them until they approached him. He then became aggressive