

Cosatu and xenophobic attacks

Is its response enough?

During the May 2008 xenophobic attacks Cosatu responded in an uneven manner. **Mondli Hlatshwayo** believes that while Cosatu is clearly opposed to any form of xenophobia its activities to counter it are simply not enough.

According to the report of the Coalition Against Xenophobia (CAX), xenophobic attacks of May 2008 led to more than 100 000 people being internally displaced and a loss of over 62 lives. A resolution of the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu's) tenth congress also acknowledges that the federation and its affiliates were affected by the attacks.

Forty-four interviews were conducted with Cosatu and its affiliates between July and October 2009 to assess their response to the xenophobic violence. They were conducted in Johannesburg, East London, Durban and Cape Town.

The research shows that certain Cosatu provincial structures and affiliates provided some support to migrants from other African countries. The form of support ranged from humanitarian aid to the initiation of discussions on xenophobia. However, Cosatu did not use its organisational spread and influence to actively mobilise its membership and civil society at large against the xenophobic attacks.

There was also no coordination of responses to xenophobia from the federation to the affiliate level. Despite all these challenges,

the Cosatu 2009 resolution on xenophobia promises some new perspectives on engaging migrants from other African countries but the struggle still lies in the implementation.

COSATU RESPONSE

In an effort of practical solidarity, some Cosatu affiliates and provincial structures provided humanitarian aid to migrants who were under attack during the May 2008 wave of xenophobia. This aid ranged from offering shelter to the provision of other basic needs such as clothing and food.

Cosatu in the Western Cape worked with the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC) and other civil society formations in providing aid. Members of the South African Municipal Workers' Union (Samwu) who also work for the Germiston municipality organised shelter for the migrants under attack.

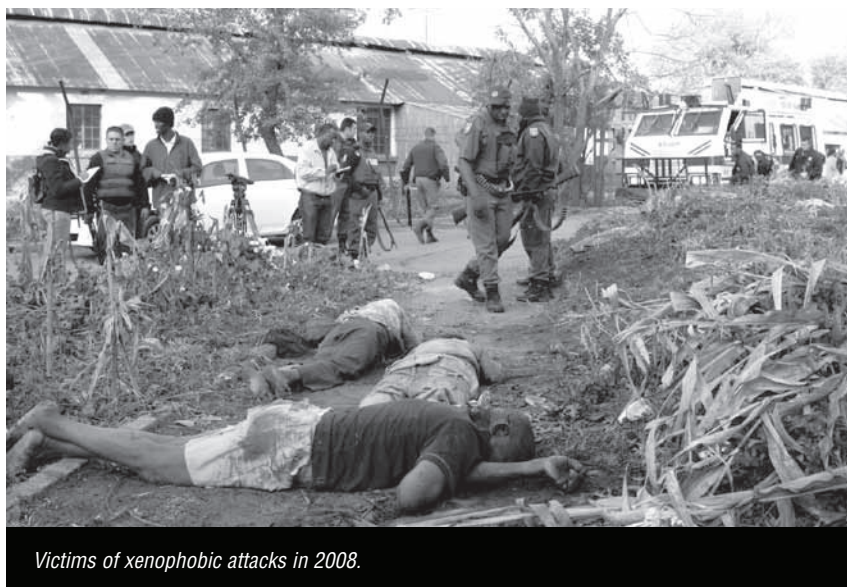
In July 2009 Cosatu in Gauteng visited the Central Methodist Church in Johannesburg, a church that houses migrants of Zimbabwean origin. The National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (Numsa) also provided humanitarian support to these migrants after the attacks.

Cosatu and its affiliates also used their own media and communication to agitate against the xenophobic attacks. In May, during the period of intense attacks, the Cosatu central executive committee (CEC) issued a statement which, among other things, condemned the attacks on migrants.

In addition to statements and condemnations, some of the affiliates such as Samwu and the South African Transport & Allied Workers' Union (Satawu) used other creative methods to spread the message by printing T-shirts and posters. Cosatu structures in areas like KwaZulu-Natal were also used to spread an anti-xenophobia message.

As soon as it became aware of the xenophobic attacks, the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) whose membership comprises migrants from countries in southern Africa, convened meetings. This was an attempt at ensuring that xenophobia did not spread to the mines.

Given that the Eastern Cape had not been immune to xenophobic attacks, Mandla Rayi, the Cosatu provincial secretary Eastern Cape, as soon as he was informed about the attacks in Gauteng and the



Victims of xenophobic attacks in 2008.

Western Cape, took pre-emptive measures such as organising meetings which spread anti-xenophobia messages.

COSATU'S FAILURE TO MOBILISE

CAX was formed in 2008 in Johannesburg during the xenophobic attacks. It comprised the Anti-Privatisation Forum (APF), Khanya College, and organisations of migrants, including the migrants who resided at the Central Methodist Church. The trade union movement only had one consistent representation in the coalition, Steven Faulkner of Samwu. Cosatu was not part of CAX's 5 000-people march through Hillbrow against xenophobia in May 2008.

The interviewees were asked about the lack of participation by Cosatu and its affiliates in CAX. In responding Bongani Masuku, Cosatu's international secretary, said, 'I think we must also accept that there are challenges with regard to the cohesion of the progressive movement.'

The APF, which was one of the leading organisations in the march of social movements and CAX, has had differences with Cosatu over attitudes to the ANC, government, the Alliance and methods of struggle.

INTERVENTIONS AT NEDLAC

Jane Barrett of Satawu participates in the development chamber of the National Economic Development and Labour Council (Nedlac) as a representative of Cosatu and labour. She introduced a discussion at the chamber which led to the formulation of a declaration and a plan of action against xenophobia.

However, the problem with Nedlac is that it is not a centre of South African politics. The adoption of the GEAR (Growth Employment and Redistribution) strategy in 1996 without a single discussion at Nedlac is an indication that the forum is not taken seriously by the South African state.

Samwu's written response to the xenophobic attacks also highlighted the plight of women migrants and their children. Samwu argued, 'We especially condemn the attacks that have been made on women, and the use of gender-based violence to intimidate working-class communities'.

Cosatu also condemned the raping and attacks on women from migrant communities. While these condemnations were positive it is clear that Cosatu and its affiliates do not have a strategy that focuses on the most vulnerable migrants, namely women. There is also a need

for Cosatu and its affiliates to look at organising women migrant workers who tend to occupy precarious positions in the workplace.

COSATU'S CRITIQUE OF STATE

When evaluating Cosatu's attitude towards the government's response to xenophobia, the internal struggles in the ANC between a faction led by President Zuma, who was supported by Cosatu, on the one hand, and the then State President Mbeki, on the other, needs to be taken into account.

Concerning the xenophobic attacks, Mbeki was seen as a denialist who really did not care about people on the ground. On the other hand, Cosatu saw Zuma as a person who was willing to give people a hearing and also cared. Although Zuma was not president at the time of the attacks, he acted as a 'caring' statesman. Zuma and the senior ANC leaders visited communities and xenophobic hotspots across Gauteng in May 2008. Cosatu Western Province's Mike Louw mentioned that they were not impressed with the manner in which Mbeki's government handled xenophobia.

ORGANISING MIGRANTS

Trade unions in a context of globalisation and its impact on migration, are faced with a huge challenge of organising migrant workers, particularly those who do not have papers or citizenship documents. Organising migrants and integrating them into the union structures is one of the most powerful weapons in the struggle against xenophobia as it strengthens workers' identity and solidarity.

Unions in countries like Switzerland and France have tried to facilitate the organising of migrants. In France migrants have organised themselves and presented their demands and issues to the unions. Unia, a Swiss union, has developed creative methods of organising Polish migrants, namely employing Polish organisers, producing publications in

Polish and working with the unions of migrants' country of origin.

The May 2008 Cosatu CEC does not mention a need to organise migrant workers as part of an important response to xenophobia. Cosatu's inability to subject itself to a paradigm shift remains an obstacle toward organising migrant workers. The calls for employers to stop taking advantage of migrants as well as demanding that employers fire the 'illegal ones' are an indication that the federation has not been able to imagine the real possibilities of building international solidarity within South Africa's borders.

There are some individuals and affiliates who have tried to organise migrants. These experiences need to be generalised.

In an interview, Xolani Nyamezele, the Cosatu provincial secretary of Gauteng, gave some insights into the organising of migrant workers which had been done by Satawu in Gauteng as an attempt at combating xenophobia. He exclaimed, 'It was not easy because our members who are South Africans did not like the idea. We did it because we had to organise workers regardless of their country of origin.'

The NUM had to deal with the question of migration because a big part of its membership is migrant workers. The mining industry is the foundation of South African capitalism, its cheap black labour and

the migrant system. The formation of NUM in 1982 was an important development in confronting the appalling conditions in which migrant workers from South Africa and other southern African countries worked and lived. NUM organises the mining and construction sector, which has a substantial number of immigrant workers.

VOICES OF MIGRANTS

Ahmed Dawlo, the director of the Somali Association of South Africa indicated that the absence of Cosatu in the anti-xenophobia march in May 2008 organised by CAX was disturbing. The fact that Cosatu represents a huge number of the working people makes it a powerful voice so he argued that 'Cosatu has to come out with a very strong message against xenophobia and the loss of innocent lives of migrants.'

Kenneth Tafira, a Zimbabwean migrant who was also a leader of CAX, indicated that the 'Proudly South African' campaign, which Cosatu is part of, is a problem because it leads to national chauvinism, which undermines working-class solidarity regardless of country of origin.

Concerning the working relationship between migrant organisations and Cosatu in the Western Cape, Barry Wuganaale of the Ogoni Solidarity Forum, had this to say, 'From observations I do not

know if I have become too friendly with them. Their leadership and the staff have welcomed the organisation that I represent... This has been very encouraging.'

NEED FOR NEW PERSPECTIVE

Perhaps the challenge is that Cosatu has not developed a perspective which views migrants from working class areas as social agents that can help in a broader strategy to shift the balance of forces in favour of all those that have been negatively affected by neo-liberal globalisation within South Africa.

Organising migrant workers from other African countries would help in building class solidarity within South African borders. Migrants from other African countries are a reality which cannot be wished away.

Migrants also come to economic centres like Johannesburg because they are following capital which is concentrated in Johannesburg. Historically South Africa has always drawn labour from its neighbouring countries. South Africa in the form of the New Partnership for Africa's Development (Nepad) continues to extract resources from other African countries. Therefore just like South African citizens, working-class migrants are also entitled to these resources. We cannot therefore blame migrants for the capitalist crisis which takes the form of unemployment, low wages and a lack of service delivery. ¹⁶



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