

Xenophobia Declaration

Working-class solidarity knows no borders

At the end of September the Congress of South African Trade Unions and the United Nations High Commission for Refugees held a seminar to discuss the state of xenophobia in South Africa and what measures should be taken to prevent further outbreaks of violence as seen in 2008. A shortened version of the declaration following the meeting is reproduced below.

Declaration of Cosatu/UNHCR against xenophobia, Johannesburg September 2010

BACKGROUND

We gathered as workers, activists, professionals, researchers, community networks, international organisations and civil society forces to deepen our understanding of the xenophobia crisis and to move towards a programme of action that will unite workers and popular forces into action against the scourge.

The struggle against xenophobia is inseparable from the struggle against the capitalist system. Capitalism is based on extreme inequalities with massive poverty for the majority and massive wealth concentration for the few, hence the inevitability of social tensions.

We explored the underlying linkages between class inequalities, tribalism, racism, sexism and xenophobia as manifestations of the crisis facing the capitalist system, including in South Africa.

APARTHEID AND XENOPHOBIA CRIMES AGAINST HUMANITY

Social tensions that gave impetus to xenophobic attacks that affected working-class communities in most big cities, resulted from disappointed expectations of improved living conditions after 1994 and the deepening crisis in the sub-region, particularly in Zimbabwe, Swaziland, Democratic Republic of Congo, Mozambique and Malawi.

Migration has always been a feature of human development and social existence, as people search for resources and livelihoods because of ever-changing social and environmental factors.

The boundaries within which we operate are not natural but the artificial creations of colonialism imposed upon people. They act as barriers to the movement, interaction and unity of people who have shared a common history, culture and destiny. Migration should enhance these experiences through the cross-pollination of lessons and responses to the changing situation facing humanity.

We live in a society that has not yet overcome apartheid divisions and a culture of impunity to perpetrators. This legacy lingers on resulting in structural and deeply rooted violence, particularly against women, children and other vulnerable groups in society.

Xenophobia is a scapegoat for frustrations arising from persisting socio-economic ills and a lack of understanding of why people from other countries have migrated. This shapes social relations as 'them and us' and 'outsiders and insiders'. The lack of capacity to heal wounds contributes to festering wounds that open up at intervals and create tensions in communities.

We are concerned by leadership's lack of willingness to acknowledge the magnitude of the problem and to confront it. In some instances, political leaders and councillors ride on populist rhetoric that scapegoats foreigners to justify their failure to provide services to communities. They become fraudulently popular as they ferment divisions and divert from the real issues.

Certain elements within law enforcement agencies have also contributed to these divisions. Unless

xenophobia is treated as a matter of national urgency, tensions will persist with regular outbreaks of xenophobia.

Xenophobia is a crime and has distinct characteristics which should be punishable. Xenophobia can also act as a cover for acts of criminality. However, some ANC branches, particularly around Gauteng, played an outstanding role in mobilising members and communities to denounce xenophobic elements.

The media has also played a destructive role in painting Africa in negative terms and contributing to dominant African stereotypes. We must deepen the confidence of the people of Africa to change these attitudes.

We must go beyond moral rhetoric to concrete action. We must use the lessons from the struggle against apartheid where workers and communities developed conflict resolution mechanisms that united people against divisive tactics that set whites against blacks, coloureds and Indians against Africans and so on.

XENOPHOBIA-FREE WORKPLACES AND COMMUNITIES

Migrants and foreign nationals as human beings are equally entitled to all rights and responsibilities enshrined in the South African Constitution and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Tasks towards the fundamental elimination of xenophobia and its causes:

- review migration regulations which deal with the care of foreigners;
- organise migrant workers to fight for their rights;
- transform the justice system to cater for the special needs of foreigners;
- fight downward variation of labour standards which undermine gains made over the years;
- promote a spirit of internationalism;
- promote working-class unity and deepen popular consciousness.

This means that we must:

- Build local community structures that aim to unite workers and communities against all forms of discrimination, including xenophobia. This includes creating dialogue forums where experiences are shared.
- Organise meetings where such issues can be openly discussed and confronted.
- Build a popular consciousness against xenophobia, racism and sexism through workers' education programmes. The aims should be to challenge the narrow, sensationalist version of issues including associating the rise in crime with foreigners.
- Support the self-organisation of migrant workers to bargain for their rights and create a welcoming atmosphere in our organisations.

- Call for a review of South Africa's immigration laws to become progressive and caring to people from outside, particularly Africans, who are the worst victims of xenophobia.
- Develop special support and legal assistance to deserving asylum seekers and their families to regularise their situation.
- Create the capacity for conflict resolution and mediation, especially when dealing with early warnings of xenophobia. We call for a Xenophobia Monitoring System that will include a call centre where incidents or indications can be reported.
- Call on political parties to make xenophobia a critical issue in campaign manifestos and ensure that councillors in local government elections pronounce on xenophobia and commit to decisive action against those involved in fermenting tensions around foreigners.
- Popularise African heritage in our communities, including the positive values of ubuntu, and celebrate the rich history of struggle, unity and shared values amongst the people of Africa.

We commit ourselves to working with all sectors of society towards the organisation of a Conference Against Xenophobia, which will outline a national programme towards the implementation of the ideals set herein. It must include business, government, labour, faith-based organisations, academics and civil society structures.

There is an urgent need for a development plan for the southern African region and the continent as a whole to reverse underdevelopment and growing inequalities that deepen poverty and social crisis, resulting in forced migration.

Struggles against undemocratic regimes and human rights abuses also force people to migrate. The Southern African Development Community (SADC) and the African Union (AU) must decisively intervene to avoid the massive migration of people due to political and socio-economic crises. We also call upon the South African government to play an active role.

We must struggle to defeat institutionalised xenophobia in all its manifestations as part of a commitment to end all forms of discrimination. We must engage government on these issues.

We commit to supporting initiatives and to partner with organisations involved in anti-xenophobic and other struggles for social justice. We particularly note Anti-Xenophobia Action (AXA) as an important network in advancing this objective. We will draw on faith-based organisations, youth and student movements, non-governmental organisations and social movements, academics and other role-players involved in effective joint programmes towards the end of xenophobia. ^{LB}