

Xenophobic violence

Trade unions found wanting

The recent xenophobic violence against migrants and refugees from mainly African countries has found the trade union movement wanting. It has exposed weaknesses in the unions in several political and organisational areas. These weaknesses relate mainly to the absence of clear policies and the lack of action with regard to internationalism and establishing creative new forms of trade union organisation. Post-1994 none of the South African trade unions have developed policies on xenophobia or strategies to organise African migrant workers into unions.

COMPETITION IGNITES VIOLENCE

It is common cause amongst most analysts that the reactionary xenophobic violence in townships arose from the fertile ground of extreme poverty in urban working-class areas, and from direct or perceived competition for scarce resources such as housing and jobs.

Working-class people turning on each other and fighting for the scraps of the capitalist system is not new to South Africa. For most of the 20th century inter-group violence based on racial or tribal identity was a feature of mineworkers in mining compounds around Gauteng. Competition for housing has also pitted 'coloureds' against 'Africans' or backyard-dwellers against shack-dwellers.

The restructuring of many companies with consequent job loss and the growth of insecure informal employment together with government's neo-liberal economic programme has deepened poverty in the black working class. With cuts in

Recent xenophobic attacks in townships point to deep divisions in the working class. **Martin Jansen** examines the causes of such divisions and concludes that South African trade unions need urgently to examine their political and organisational practices. He gives pointers to how they might do this.

spending and privatisation, it is surprising that such violence did not flare sooner. The tragedy was that marauding mobs turned on poor working class and defenceless African migrants instead of their class enemies, big capital and the neo-liberal ANC government.

Desperate competition for resources is an explosive situation and could again readily spill over into violent confrontation. All it requires is the lighting of the fuse by a reactionary element and some organisation and leadership. Such were the conditions in Germany in the 1930s which ultimately led to the genocide of millions of Jews, gypsies and communists who were scapegoats for the poverty and misery caused by capital.

UNIONS COUNTER WORKER COMPETITION

The strategy of trade unions from the early days of industrial capitalism was to unite and organise workers to eradicate competition amongst them. In the absence of such organisation workers compete for scarce jobs by selling their labour at the lowest

wage. In this way, in the context of high unemployment in South Africa and the rest of the African continent, workers are driven into poverty through competition for scarce jobs and resources.

In the process of struggle workers have to overcome divisions within their ranks based on craft and skill, national origin and gender. Such was Cosatu's (Congress of South African Trade Unions) political commitment to non-racialism and unity during the 1980s that, born out of struggle, the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) overcame tribal and national identities in the mining sector and unions in other sectors built solidarity in defiance of apartheid capitalism in industries where 'African', 'coloured' and 'Indian' laboured together.

WORKERS' FRAGMENTED

Since the late 1980s most working-class people have suffered severe socio-economic setbacks.

Privatisation, job losses, low wages and industrial restructuring have reversed labour's hard won gains. Workers have been fragmented into



Rob Rees

multiple forms of labour such as casual, permanent, contract, outsourced and home-based. The political consequence has been the severe weakening of organisation. In the last 20 years capitalists globally have pushed to regain control and take back the gains that the labour movement had achieved. Moreover, the HIV/AIDS pandemic has further aggravated poverty.

In South Africa over 8 million people are unemployed or underemployed. This is a weapon in the hands of the capitalists as it ensures a ready supply of exploitable cheap labour. There is also little prospect of the working class growing at the point of production as neo-liberal capitalism shows a tendency to low or no economic growth. Even when there is growth, such as in South Africa, it is virtually jobless.

Poverty and a lack of decent education has left up to 60% of South African black youth between the ages of 16 and 30 unemployed. The influx of hundreds of thousands of African migrants, and thousands of new matriculants coming onto the

market, has aggravated unemployment.

Xenophobia, working-class divisions and conflict can only be overcome by organisation and politicisation. The poorest sections of the working class and the majority of workers are outside of the union movement. The overwhelming majority of African migrants and refugees are also not organised.

Those severely affected by the ravages of neo-liberalism such as casuals and unemployed, temporary and contract workers are not represented by Cosatu unions. This demonstrates the conservative 'stop-order' politics of most union leadership who are reluctant to organise informal workers. Even their own members who fall prey to company restructuring and retrenchments automatically lose membership.

Cosatu needs urgently to organise the unemployed, casuals and informal workers. They are vulnerable to super-exploitation and they also undercut hard won gains achieved by organised workers. Unorganised workers are also

susceptible to right-wing politics, and reactionary organisations can easily exploit divisions between them and employed workers in trade unions. This is revealed in the frequent scabbing by unorganised workers during strikes. This lack of solidarity could in future, easily develop into an organised politically conservative force.

WHAT TO DO?

During the 1980s in the struggle against apartheid capitalism, workers linked with other sections of the working class in many communities. Organising in communities was seen by unions as politically strategic as a way to build the fighting unity of the mass democratic movement.

However, since the late 1990s with a rightward shift in the Tripartite Alliance, the community orientation of unions is no longer a priority. This was made worse by the folding of the United Democratic Front (UDF) in the early 1990s. Except for social movement organisation in a few working-class areas, most working-class communities lack organisation and progressive politics. It is this vacuum that has allowed mobs of angry, frustrated, unemployed young men to resort to violence against African migrants and refugees.

The building of trade union community locals needs to be urgently prioritised.

A group of activists in Cape Town came together in 2007 to create a platform for African refugees and migrant workers to organise in Cape Town and surrounding areas. It aimed to correct misinformation and injustices that led to xenophobia. It became known as the Committee for a United Front of African Refugees and Migrants (CouFarm). It called for migrants and refugees in South Africa to develop a common voice by uniting to fight for their rights.

CouFarm was driven by refugees

Rob Rees



and migrants with the assistance of organisations such as Workers' World Media Productions and the International Labour Research and Information Group (ILRIG). It was willing to work with any organisations fighting against xenophobia. CouFarm aimed to:

- mobilise African migrants and refugees into a mass movement for their defence and protection
- serve as bridge between local organisations such as unions, community formations and migrants and refugees
- give voice to migrants and refugees by fighting against xenophobia
- educate South Africans to welcome migrants and refugees into their communities and build unity to fight around common issues of poverty such as unemployment, housing, education and democratic rights

For a variety of reasons such as a lack of resources, absence of support from local organisations and the nationalistic tendencies of the migrants themselves, CouFarm never took off. In the light of recent xenophobic attacks, perhaps it is time for a similar initiative on a national basis.

Unions should organise African migrants and refugees on the basis of challenging their treatment by government. They should focus on fighting for migrants' rights in the way that the NUM did in the 1980s when it united workers of different African origins.

Unions could intervene in many ways as African migrants and refugees suffer from abuse by the South African authorities in areas such as:

- Identity documents that are key in securing employment. Even legal immigrants are often unable to secure IDs.
- Recognition of qualifications because many highly educated and skilled non-nationals do unskilled work because their qualifications are not recognised or because of requirements to do additional training. This pushes them into lower exploitative forms of employment, despite South Africa's apparent skills shortage.
- Discrimination as certain sectors exclude foreigners. The Security Industry Regulating Authority (SIRA) attempts to make South African citizenship a criterion for registration. Yet, the industry is one of the largest employers of refugees and asylum seekers where they are heavily exploited.
- Lack of social support for new arrivals and particularly refugees who have no social support and experience deep financial hardship.
- Bribery and corruption. The African Council of Hawkers and Informal Business gave testimony of local authorities demanding bribes in exchange for informal sector trading rights. This has created tensions between local and foreign hawkers with the local perception that foreigners are more able to afford the bribes.

- Super-exploitation by unscrupulous employers who pay low wages because undocumented migrants are fearful of expulsion. There are accounts of employers calling in the police to deport undocumented labour in agriculture just before pay day.
- Access to unemployment insurance as the Unemployment Insurance Fund (UIF) is often not willing to receive contributions or process unemployment claims from refugees and migrants despite them making contributions.

PROUDLY SOUTH AFRICAN CAMPAIGN

The Proudly South African campaign is xenophobic and unions should withdraw from it. It was initiated by the Southern African Clothing and Textile Workers Union (Sactwu) in the face of job-losses mainly due to cheap Chinese imports. The campaign unites South African capitalists, trade unions and government in encouraging South Africans to only buy South African products in order to save jobs.

The Proudly South African campaign deflects from the real causes of cheap imports and job-losses. It unites class adversaries in a campaign that mainly benefits capital and government who caused job-losses in the first place through the too speedy lifting of import tariffs way beyond the requirements of the World Trade Organization (WTO).

Instead of promoting the fighting unity of workers globally to ensure that Chinese and other workers who suffer from exploitation have labour rights, our unions support local capital in the hope of stemming the tide of job-losses. LB

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