

# From Zimbabwe to xenophobia

We hear smatterings of information about the aftermath of xenophobic attacks. In this interview **Steve Faulkner** talks to a Zimbabwean trade union activist caught up in the violence. He gives a moving account of the plight of Germiston refugees and speculates on what caused the violence.

## *How did you get caught up in the xenophobic violence?*

I had been in the country just three days when the xenophobic storm hit us. Without any warning a group of around 20 men stormed the house I was staying in with relatives. They threatened us, beat us, and then stole all of our belongings, including baby clothes. It was night time, and cold outside, but we had little option but to flee. If we had tried to resist we would have all been killed.

This is not the first time I have been here, but my first as a migrant worker. I had stepped from the frying pan in Zimbabwe into the fire in South Africa. One of the most distressing elements was the impact on my relatives here. They had worked hard to assemble their modest home and possessions, and to have them stolen in such circumstances was very demoralising and frightening.

## *Who attacked you?*

They were local men aged between 20 and 40, from the hostels and from the informal settlements on

the edge of Germiston. My relatives recognised them. They were poor people like us!

What united them was a hatred of 'foreigners'. They didn't care which country we were from. All that mattered was that we were not South African and therefore had no rights. We were no longer human beings. I realise this is a sensitive area, but we need to examine what is happening in the hostels and the squatter camps where many of the raids were launched from.

## *Where did you go?*

We joined thousands who had been displaced in the area and temporarily housed in Germiston Town Hall. By the time we arrived there were nearly 7 000 of us, trying to sleep and survive in a building that would normally hold less than 500.

## *What was it like in the town hall?*

Hundreds of people were completely traumatised. Some had been subjected to the most terrible experiences. Some had seen their

friends, family and neighbours murdered in front of them. Many women of all ages had been abused. How many were sexually abused is hard to assess, but many had been. To have to flee for your lives, when former neighbours and acquaintances turn on you, try to kill you, and force you from your home is what you expect to experience in a war zone.

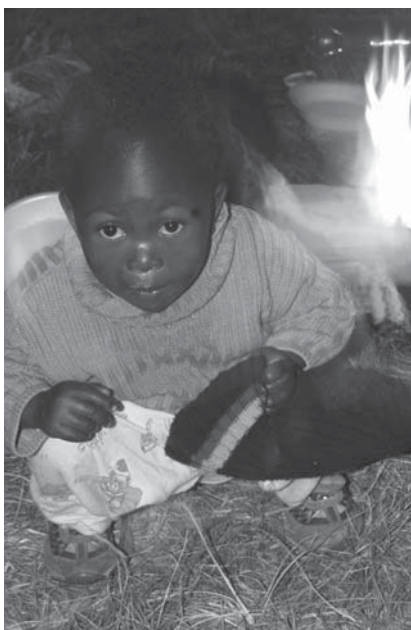
There was real fear that the hall would be attacked. That the gangs roving around would return. While we were in the hall, at least seven people were murdered close to the hall, and others were attacked as they tried to get to and from their jobs.

There was no accurate information or communication. No one in authority came to reassure us, to explain what was happening, and what was to become of us. Newspaper reports in those first days made little sense and were sensationalist. The coverage in the media did not reflect our experiences, and apart from comrades like Winnie Madikizela Mandela no one in an official position came to show solidarity with us. We felt very alone.

## *Describe a typical day in the hall?*

Well the days were long! With little sleep and very little space to move around in, sometimes it felt more like a prison than a refuge. But my trade union experience came in very useful. A committee was formed quickly, and I was involved in it.

Our first task was to make sure the hall was secure, that police



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were on guard outside, and that there was order inside. Next, that those traumatised, especially women and children were given a safe place in the hall. An upstairs room was for women only, where baby food, clothes, medication and a little counselling could be provided.

In those early days, we had to rely on supporting one another. I saw many older women talking to younger women, reassuring them, helping take care of their children. Some mothers had lost their partners, and were acutely distressed.

After a short time, we were approached by local voluntary organisations like the Salvation Army, and the Red Cross, who brought basic food stuffs, some bedding, and things like toothpaste and soap.

The hall had a small kitchen, that had to be transformed into a mass feeding centre on a 24-hour basis. We had to try and prepare food for up to 7 000 people! The toilets and washrooms were inadequate at first, and we had to work out ways of maximising their effectiveness, and

establishing rules to make sure that basic systems did not break down. It wasn't easy. There were few disputes between the residents. Everyone knew that we had to try our best to help one another. That life would be unbearable if we allowed the violence outside to be with us inside.

#### ***How did the volunteers relate to the refugees?***

The majority were younger white people, drawn from religious and community-based organisations. Some came from political organisations and a few just came as individuals. I suspect most of them had not been in such close contact with African people before in such circumstances. One young woman told me that she had seen refugees on the television in other parts of the world, and never expected to be helping in a refugee camp less than two kilometres from where she lived with her mother and father.

I wonder if the volunteers realise how their presence helped to 'normalise' life a little for us. To help some of us restore our belief in humanity. I will be forever grateful for their intervention. If they had not been there I shudder to think what would have become of us.

#### ***What do you think about how South African politicians responded?***

There was virtually nothing from government officially at first other than general statements condemning the violence. Some in senior positions speculated about what was behind the violence, including a mysterious 'third force', the crisis of service delivery, opportunistic criminal gangs, and a few talked about it being a plot of pro-Mugabe elements! But virtually no one came

from government or the media to ask us, the victims of attacks, who we thought had attacked us, and why. Our views did not matter!

I went to a meeting organised by *The Star* recently, and Comrade Moosa of the ANC said that when the attacks happened they suspended the NEC meeting to discuss the crisis, and were angry because the NIA [National Intelligence Agency] had not forewarned them. Surely, if they had any grassroots connections they would not have needed an intelligence report to tell them what was happening in communities they are supposed to represent. Are they so distant?

The silence of President Mbeki was deafening! Given that he often spoke about the need for African solutions to our challenges, his quiet diplomacy on Zimbabwe was shocking to many of us. In his eventual address to the nation he condemned the violence but he came across as cold and uncaring. He didn't mention Zimbabwe once, as if it had no connection to why many of us are here. At least Jacob Zuma tried to engage people.

#### ***What did you think when the army was mobilised?***

Most of us were relieved. The police had been paralysed at the time of the attacks. In some parts of Germiston, the police stood by when people were attacked. When we reported our theft to the police, even giving them names and the location of those who had attacked us, they did not respond for days. When I asked a white policeman why there was little action, he told me that they had been instructed not to intervene in 'tribal' disputes! So the deployment of the army reassured us that if the attackers returned, we might receive some protection.

***And the response from the union movement?***

As a trade unionist, I thought this was sadly lacking. There were press statements, and one or two union officials came to visit us, especially from public sector unions because their members were workers in buildings where we were taking refuge. The workers were sympathetic. They tried really hard to make us comfortable. But I am still not clear why national union leaders did not come and show solidarity. Why didn't they ask what we wanted from government and use their power to push for it? If they had called us, we would have come forward!

There is much to do to engage the union movement in this issue as part of its internationalist duty. The statement from Numsa [National Union of Metalworkers of South

Africa] honouring its popular shop steward of Mozambican descent, Comrade Walter Ntombela who was murdered, acknowledges this and should be taken further.

***After two weeks you were relocated to a safe site near the Rand Airport.***

There was no clear communication before we were moved. The decisions were taken elsewhere, and we were told that we were being relocated to a temporary camp site that had been prepared for us. When we asked basic questions like, how far it was, what facilities would be made available, what about the schooling of children, and access to transport for those who were working, officials just shrugged their shoulders and said they didn't know.

Many were concerned that they might be vulnerable to further

attacks, and it was becoming very cold at night. We were taken to a massive camp site next to Rand Airport and allocated tents provided by the UNHCR [United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees]. The tents are not bad, and although we were given sleeping bags, at night it was very cold and hard to sleep. Fires were not allowed until the cold became unbearable, and mattresses have only just been provided.

Each tent has been allocated to two families, divided by a hanging sheet, or to eight individuals. They are a bit cramped, and there is little privacy. There are a number of cold water taps dotted around the camp, and a makeshift clinic and more recently a part-time school for kids, but very little else. Food was provided initially, but only after very long queues, and now seems to have dried up. Each tent has been



*Victims of xenophobic violence camp outside Germiston's Primrose police station after attacks.*

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allocated basic emergency supplies and a small paraffin gel burner, so it is possible to make simple meals. I am lucky because a number of trade union comrades heard of my plight and have been very supportive.

***The tents were supposed to be for two weeks before re-integration.***

The question of reintegration is problematic, especially in those areas where there were violent clashes. There are many refugees in my camp who have returned to their homelands, especially women and children. Fear of further attacks, and continuing deprivation are the main reasons. But there are still many of us, especially Zimbabweans who see no alternative but to stay, and so the question is, to stay where?

In my camp, and in others, refugees do not want to risk reintegration into the communities they were expelled from. Near death experiences are not easily forgotten or forgiven. Another problem is that the camps are in inaccessible places, away from transport, schools and services. We feel isolated.

We need to be creative. There are lots of empty buildings near the centres of towns and cities. Why don't we establish public works projects involving refugees and local unemployed people, and convert them into emergency accommodation? At least that would help deal with the cold, and they could be made secure. Services could also be added. Once families have been settled in they could be improved on a phased basis or as a co-operative venture. If they were located near schools and transport hubs, they could provide opportunities for integration in an organic process. It can't be imposed.

We need to improve the registration of refugees. There are



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1 000 new applications every day, and the main office in Jo'burg processes 300.

***What do you think caused the xenophobic outbreak?***

I don't think there is just one factor. It has to do with the absence of service delivery, desperation and unemployment, and it must have something to do with fear. As a refugee, my interests are not being represented, and perhaps millions of people, both local and immigrants, ask the question 'Who is looking after my interests?' and there is silence. If democracy is failing the needs of the working class and the poor, then the vacuum can be filled by negative or positive forces. That's the challenge. This time it was filled by xenophobia.

I was interested in the argument that South Africans are in a state of 'democratic denial', that focusing on the successful birth of democracy and the building of a 'rainbow nation' has overshadowed the legacy of what one commentator called the 'family of pathologies' or illnesses that need to be addressed. The illnesses of racism, sexism, xenophobia, homophobia. Unless we

deal with them, and the conditions that keep them alive, we will see more of these terrible episodes.

Last week [27 June] I was one of 40 peaceful refugees who were physically attacked by a group of policemen on horseback while queuing outside the Refugee Centre at Crown Mines. It was unnecessary, cruel and illegal. This was an experience of institutionalised xenophobia. This is a very dangerous development.

In the meantime many refugees live in fear of a police raid, or a xenophobic attack, or exploitation by an unscrupulous employer. That's why the saying that no one is illegal is an important one. But who represents our interests? That's what unions should be doing. We are part of the working class.

The xenophobic attacks are a wake-up call. If we are serious about 'Never again' we have to do the work now. LB

*Steve Faulkner is an official of the South African Municipal Workers Union (Samwu). The Zimbabwean trade unionist's name has not been given for security reasons.*