

Workers, Bosses and the 2008 Pogroms

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Only 14 years after the end of apartheid some say that this is a new apartheid. Only 14 years after the genocide in Rwanda some say that this is a genocide South African style. But this time it is not just about the still existing economic gap between South Africans of different skin colours, nor about a war between different ethnopolitical groups like in Rwanda. It is about nationality and the fight between those who have the minimum security of being born in South Africa, and the unlucky ones who have no such security – who have, in many cases, had to flee to South Africa from violence or starvation elsewhere. The events of May 2008 show a deep xenophobic sentiment in South Africa that is largely due to social and economic circumstances. It is a poisonous cocktail of nationalism mixed with lack of service delivery.

Pictures went around the world in May that we are used to seeing from Rwanda or Liberia, but not from South Africa, at least not since the 1980s. Some, like one of a burning man, won't be forgotten quickly. Even though the police could extinguish the flames, the Mozambican man died a few hours later. Some said he became a victim of a cruel method from apartheid days: necklacing, the setting alight of a living person with a tyre around their neck, although no tyre was used in this case. Necklacing was also used in the genocide in Rwanda.

For more than 100 years Johannesburg, the "City of Gold", has drawn people from all over the world who were looking for a better life. Many would say that South Africa, the "rainbow nation", is known for being a hospitable country. Since colonialism, people from all over the world have settled here. Until the end of apartheid it was mostly Europeans: Germans, Serbs, Greeks, Italians, Portuguese, British etc. Since the end of apartheid it has mostly been people from other African countries, especially from those that are in a war or crisis. The number of immigrants in South Africa cannot be stated exactly, but it is estimated to be between 5 and 6.5 million, most of whom are from Zimbabwe and Mozambique.

But for all the long history of immigration, surveys have shown that South Africans are among the most xenophobic people on earth (The Times, 24.5.08). This hostility is especially common among younger people, those that have grown up being indoctrinated to be "proudly South African". Many older South Africans also think that they should be the first to enjoy the fruits for which they have fought so long and hard.

In recent years, attacks on foreigners from other African countries have happened again and again. Four hundred and seventy-one Somalis alone have been killed in the past 11 years (Cape Argus, 17.5.08). But xenophobic attacks took a leap forward in May 2008. Many observers aptly characterised them as pogroms, referring to a form of racist mob violence against Jews that was common in Europe for many hundreds of years. As pogroms happened in Europe, so they happened in South Africa. Instigated by a few provocateurs, a mob would form, which would go from house to house and attack individuals who were different, mostly because their skin colour was darker, or because they did not speak a particular language (usually isiZulu). They would rape, loot, kill and set houses alight. They would even attack children. In such circumstances, some South Africans fell prey to the violence. As shack-dwellers' movement Abahlali baseMjondolo said: "A war against the Mozambicans will become a war against all the amaShangaan. A war against the Zimbabweans will become a war against the amaShona that will become a war against the amaVenda." (see page 10) Also, on May 10, the very first night of the violence, a South African was allegedly killed in Alexandra for refusing to take part in the attacks. But most of the targets were immigrants, largely from Zimbabwe – just at the time when Zimbabweans needed help and solidarity from South Africans, whom they helped during apartheid and took

in when they had to flee into exile from oppression. (See interviews on pages 14 – 17 for more on Zimbabwe and its relation to the violence in South Africa.)

Many South Africans who live in slums; who don't have enough to eat because of food prices that, in line with global trends, have rocketed 81 percent in three years; who have lost their jobs – if they ever had jobs – because of neo-liberal programmes and privatisation; and who live in shacks without running water and electricity, blame foreigners for stealing their jobs, houses and women, and for crime. But they just want to find a scapegoat and blame those that are most vulnerable, instead of blaming the ones really responsible – the government and the capitalists. When you don't know who your enemies are, when you don't see that the government that says it's on your side is really working for the capitalists, when you don't understand how the global business cycle creates a downturn that makes poor people suffer all over the world, it is easy to misdirect your anger.

Myth and Reality

But this anger is based on myths. Foreigners in South Africa are often unemployed. Some are paid lower wages than South Africans, a sad result of capitalism that can be observed around the world. We should note that such divisions among workers help the capitalists to keep wages down for everyone. If immigrants are not with South Africans in unions, employers can hammer South African workers by employing cheaper immigrants – just as, in the past, they hammered white workers by employing cheaper blacks, and male workers by employing cheaper women.

Many foreigners who don't have documents and thus cannot get jobs set up small shops. If they run well then people become jealous. Most immigrants live in slums and send the little money they earn back to their families at home. Sometimes, however, immigrants live in RDP houses built by the government. Some rent these houses from South Africans; others, no doubt, get them from the government by bribery. But as Abahlali says: "Oppose corruption but don't lie to yourself and say that people born in South Africa are not also buying houses from the councillors and officials in the housing department." It is also not true that immigrants are responsible for high crime rates. Even statistics issued by the government say that out of all crimes only 3 to 4 percent are committed by immigrants. This includes arrests for not having papers – which strongly suggests that immigrants are responsible for an even smaller proportion of real destructive anti-social crime.

The Bosses' Nationalism...

But even if government statistics do not support hostility to immigrants, still the government, the media, and politicians of all parties are united in promoting this hostility. Nearly every day we hear how Zimbabweans steal and how Nigerians deal drugs – and the newspapers add to these rumours, always being sure to mention when a crime is committed by a "foreigner". In particular, the "Daily Sun" – South Africa's most widely read daily paper, aimed at the black working class – has been blamed for inciting xenophobia and reporting inappropriately about the attacks: its headlines have repeatedly referred to foreigners as "aliens". But the Sun is not alone, even if other papers are more subtle. A 2005 study by the Institute for Democracy in South Africa showed that anti-immigrant coverage was widespread in the South African press. This included derogatory

references to immigrants and calls for tighter border controls. There were exceptions, notably in the business press. But the study noted that business and the newspapers that cover business tend to support immigration because “we need foreigners’ skills or investments”. There may be some truth to this view, but it is not a view informed by concern for immigrants themselves.

Xenophobia in South Africa starts at the top, at the infamously incompetent department of home affairs, which is known for mistreating foreigners and which is often corrupt. Former minister of home affairs Mangosuthu Buthelezi blamed immigrants for high unemployment years ago. Since then deportations have increased. Buthelezi, the leader of the Zulu-chauvinist Inkatha Freedom Party, is no longer in government; but he is not alone in his views. The Democratic Alliance, the right wing liberal opposition, which takes pride in calling for an “open opportunity society” – meaning a society based on the “free market” – confines its “openness” to South Africans. It says the answer to the attacks is tighter border controls. This is also the view of the South African Institute of Race Relations, of many journalists and academics, and of many ANC politicians. Practically all these distinguished ladies and gentlemen condemned the May pogroms; but it is clear that they do not have a problem with violence against immigrants. They simply want this violence to be carried out by the state: the problem arises when disobedient poor people in the townships do for themselves what they are supposed to leave to their betters. And they are happy, not only with the state carrying out violence, but with the even more devastating consequences of closed borders: with the absence of any escape from war, oppression and starvation; with all the lives that are lost by those who, in desperation, still make the attempt to cross the border in the face of the state’s forces.

And this is how it works in practice. The South African police are hardly known for being nice to immigrants. It happens quite often that immigrants get threatened by the police and illegal immigrants are made to give them money – or face deportation. Even in the May attacks police have not been interested in helping immigrants. They have been filmed playing soccer in townships struck by xenophobic violence; on another occasion, they didn’t help a man who slowly died in front of their eyes. Foreigners complained that police not only incited violence, but did not intervene to prevent it. In the refugee camps to which immigrants fled after the pogroms, there have been problems between refugees and police. In some incidents, police have shot at foreigners. (Mail & Guardian, 22.5.08) In at least one, they used abusive language, saying: “Fucking kwerekwere go back to your country, this is our country.”

Long before the May pogroms, police attacked immigrants at the Central Methodist Church in the centre of Johannesburg in January 2008. This church has been home to over 1 000 immigrants for years and it is also a centre for various social projects, such as Aids help. The police stormed the church heavily armed, without a warrant, and arrested, without good reasons, about 1 500 immigrants, 200 of whom were women, some of them pregnant. But the church is still a place of refuge. During the pogroms, hundreds more refugees came to the church, which means that more than 2 000 people now stay there.

Many illegal immigrants are brought to the Lindela Repatriation Centre – or rather, concentration camp – in Krugersdorp. Immigrants without documents are held here for many months until they get deported. Again and again, gross human rights violations have been reported; people have died in Lindela. There are reports that South Africans get deported to Zimbabwe because they “look Zimbabwean” and because they didn’t have papers with them (Citizen, 14.11.06). Without papers, money and contacts they somehow have to find their way back to South Africa. It is certainly common for South Africans with darker skin than the average, or those who speak

Shangaan or Venda rather than Zulu or Xhosa, to be harassed by the police. The method used during the pogroms for identifying targets – testing potential victims’ knowledge of obscure Zulu terms – has been favoured by the police for many years. This insistence on papers and judgment due to skin colour recalls the dark days of apartheid and pass raids.

The police are building a new detention centre near Musina for Zimbabweans found crossing the northern border, from where they will be deported without being offered the opportunity to apply for asylum. (It is worth noting that many would have trouble getting asylum, since even after yet another faked election in which Robert Mugabe held on to power by force against massive popular opposition, the Mbeki regime continues to cover up for the tyrant in Harare and deny that he is a dictator. As for the economic ruin in Zimbabwe, the fact that many people can’t afford a loaf of bread is not accepted as justification for claiming refugee status. (See interviews, pages 14 – 17)

The police have probably killed more immigrants since 1994 than were killed in the pogroms of 2008; but these crimes get far less mention in the media. Politicians might condemn some “excessive” actions of the police – as if murder and brutality were anything other than the cops’ job! But in general, they want the violence to go on. Immigrants are not welcome, unless they bring something the South African ruling class needs. Their interests and hopes and dreams are not considered. The politicians and the press may support “black economic empowerment” and condemn anti-black racism; they may say women deserve equality; many of them support gay and lesbian rights; most at least say they want better conditions for the poor, even if they obviously don’t mean it. But hardly any will support equal rights for immigrants. The “liberal” position is that they can come here if we need their skills. Imagine the outcry if someone said that about blacks! But the border is absolute; those on the other side of the fence do not enjoy the same rights.

This is the poison of nationalism (see pages 24 & 25). It is the ideology that tries to tell us who we are and what our rights are on the basis of states and borders. It is an ideology that says a South African worker has more in common with a South African boss than with a Zimbabwean worker. It is an ideology that divides the workers in order to rule and exploit us. It has overwhelming support in the ruling class: from the ANC, from the Communist Party and the Cosatu leaders who give the ANC left ideological cover, from opposition parties, from the media. All these forces promote such initiatives as the “Proudly South African” buy-local campaign. This campaign undermines international working class solidarity by promoting the illusion that what workers need, rather than joining in solidarity and struggle across borders, is to create jobs inside South Africa by supporting the local economy. It fosters nationalist pride and patriotism for South Africa, the most industrialised country on the continent, as opposed to solidarity across artificial colonial borders – borders that the ANC, indeed, accepts uncritically. Not surprisingly, the campaign enjoys the overwhelming support of local capitalists: after all, it is they, not South African workers, who benefit from the campaign.

But although nationalism may be the greatest force of division, hatred and violence in South Africa, it is not alone. Racism and sexism continue, and showed themselves to be particularly dangerous in the months leading up to the May pogroms. In these months we saw the cruel racist pranks of white students at Free State University; the sexist violence at Noord Street taxi rank in Johannesburg; and many other incidents of chauvinistic violence, notably against women, and, in particular, black lesbians. According to People Opposing Women Abuse, 10 lesbians have been killed by homophobic violence against women since 2006, an estimated one every three months.

The times are hard, and it would seem that the culture of chauvinism is growing, or at least showing itself more clearly, throughout South African society. This may be linked to the ANC's new president, Jacob Zuma, who is on the way to the presidency of South Africa. Zuma is a notorious homophobe and a sexist, as revealed in the statements he made during his rape trial, which have surely fomented the spread of sexist and chauvinist attitudes. This aspect of his politics is far more significant than his supposed commitment to the working class, which has never revealed itself in action or even in any serious words. Like any politician, Zuma is out for his own power, and he has played on frustration and anger against the neo-liberal Mbeki regime to win working class support. In fact, his views scarcely differ from Mbeki's, except in his blatant chauvinism: if he has broken with Mbeki, his break is to the right, no matter what Cosatu's opportunistic sellout leaders might say. It is telling that, although Zuma publicly condemned it, the mobs carrying out the pogroms in May often sang 'Mshini Wami' ("bring me my machine gun"), Jacob Zuma's signature song. This was originally a progressive song, a song of the anti-apartheid struggle; but Zuma's supporters have turned it into a song of personality cult, of Zulu chauvinism, male chauvinism, and, perhaps, reactionary chauvinism in general. Anger that could have been directed into working class resistance against capitalism is being diverted into division of the class on gender and national lines.

Another song that was sung during the pogroms is the national anthem, "Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika" (God bless Africa). The message of this song, ironically, is not exclusive to South Africa; it is pan-Africanist and religious. This does not make it a song of the working class struggle, which knows no borders of continents any more than of countries. The exploding costs of food and energy, which have added fuel to the fire in South Africa, are not an African crisis but a global crisis, a consequence of the global capitalist system, which hammers the working class everywhere. But some irony appears in Africans singing "Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika" as they attack their fellow Africans. Evidently the message of the song has been forgotten. And this is no surprise, for since 1994, the song has become a symbol of the South African state, a device to rally the people around the flag, to make us follow the bosses and stop thinking for ourselves. Nationalism and the state are killers of thought; they demand not understanding but obedience; and from the death of thought emerges the misdirected violence of ignorant chauvinism.

...and the Workers' Internationalism

But rational thought and solidarity are not dead in South Africa. Working class internationalism has a long history in this country (see Pages 7 – 11). Internationalism lives on in the social movements of the popular classes, which are built on the struggle for better services in the townships. We know that this very struggle was one factor that motivated the pogroms; but we cannot join the bourgeois commentators who declare "Today's service delivery protest is tomorrow's xenophobic attack." For the social movements were almost alone in presenting an internationalist response to the pogroms: the first statement of such a view came from the centre of the storm in Alex, from the Alexandra Vukuzenzele Crisis Committee (AVCC), an affiliate of the Anti-Privatisation Forum (APF). The ruling class characterises the social movements as criminals and barbarians; we know they are no such thing. This is not to say they are perfect. Before the pogroms, xenophobic sentiment was publicly expressed by members of the AVCC itself, and we know that such confusion, such poison, is not easily eliminated. But in the crisis, the inter-

nationalist tendency came to the fore, informed to at least some extent by class analysis. While politicians, journalists and intellectuals, the Institute of Race Relations, members of the DA and the ANC, were calling for tighter border control, the APF was saying “no one is illegal”. Social movements joined with religious organisations, NGOs and middle class liberals to co-ordinate relief for victims of the pogroms.

What seemed to be lacking was a link between relief efforts and efforts to create safe havens and organised self-defence. Not that efforts at defence were altogether absent. Refugees at the Central Methodist Church watched the doors; some prepared to defend themselves from the roof. In some other places victims started to organise themselves because the police were overstrained. In a particularly eloquent statement of working class internationalism, Abahlali declared its intention to prevent any attacks in Durban (see page 11). In Cape Town the Anti-Eviction Campaign announced its mobilisation to prevent at least one attack. Similarly, social movement activists from Gauteng expressed their support for defence, some trying to mobilise people living in Johannesburg’s inner city slums to defend immigrants in their communities. Nonetheless, much remains to be done.

A notable expression of internationalism was a march in Johannesburg on 24 May, organised by the Coalition Against Xenophobia, which comprises social movements, NGOs, immigrants’ organisations, church groups, and left political groups including the ZACF. Thousands attended the march, but it had serious flaws: in particular, little attention was given to the underlying class conflict. Moreover, participation by the APF’s grassroots affiliates was disappointing. Some stayed away because of intimidation; but xenophobic sentiment within the fighting organisations of the class may have been a factor.

On the other hand, it was interesting that many of the demonstrators were white South Africans, largely middle class, usually not seen at marches. Further, some middle class whites – as well as some middle class and working class blacks – made extensive donations to refugees. No doubt these actions were motivated by sincere solidarity and horror at the pogroms. But we must wonder how this crisis came to attract so much more attention from the white middle class than the daily horrors of poverty. It is too easy for the relatively well-off to see something terrible and think it is extraordinary, a remarkable explosion, an isolated event to be dealt with in isolation. This is an easier line of thought than understanding the roots of the violence in the mighty and pervasive forces of nationalism, statism and capitalism. There are other escapes: no doubt many whites (but probably not those who came to the march) said “Look at these terrible blacks and how they’re killing each other; oh for the good old days when we were in charge.” Others condemned the pogroms, but were filled with fury when the state proposed to establish refugee camps in their own neighbourhoods. Like the perpetrators of the pogroms, they wanted the foreign barbarians to stay away; unlike them, they felt that the state could and should do the job, out of sight and out of mind; they felt no need to take violent action themselves. Here we see the mentality of relative privilege, of those who would hate to get their own hands dirty, but will turn their eyes away from violence as long as it is done quietly and routinely by the state. It is akin to the mentality that regards the pogroms as an extraordinary thing that came out of nowhere, and it is close to the attitude of nearly all the organs of the ruling class, that the way to prevent the pogroms is better control of the borders.

Still, the demonstration was a success. It moved through Hillbrow, a quarter in the centre of the city in which many immigrants live. Most of them supported the marchers. The demonstration also marched past the Central Methodist Church. It was an important sign of solidarity. Like the

relief sent to the refugees, it was a hopeful sign that there is more to human beings than hatred and violence.

It stands in contrast to the attitude of the ruling party, which refused to face the roots of the violence. Politicians first blamed the pogroms on a sinister “third force”, then attributed them to mere “criminality”, denying any political or economic roots. The notorious political opportunist Winnie Madikizela-Mandela, no stranger to violence, apologised for the attacks and said that not all South Africans were like that. But she also said publicly that these attacks were done by criminals and not South Africans (The Star, 15.5.08). With this she indirectly says that criminals are not South Africans and leaves it up to us to speculate if she means immigrants or not. She puts herself, as usual, in the ranks of the nationalists, saying that being South African is good and not being South African is bad, and setting herself up as the great leader who knows who is a true South African.

Hidden Agendas

We can see that the government was better at coming up with absurd excuses for the crisis than at doing anything about it. In their customary fashion – in contrast to when the working class is demanding its rights – the police responded slowly and inefficiently when people’s lives were in danger, their presence doing little, at least at first, to prevent further violence. It’s no wonder, given that the state is the world’s major agency of violence, that it would respond so slowly to prevent further violence. But why did President Mbeki choose not to heed the warnings given to government by the National Intelligence Agency, as early as January this year, that this kind of trouble was brewing, “especially in Alexandra”? It seems plausible that elements in the state either fomented the violence or deliberately refrained from intervening as some sort of experiment to see how far it would go, to see to what extent the popular classes could be whipped up in mass hysteria against ‘the other’. After all, this is a tried and tested state strategy for misleading the masses, keeping them under the thumb of the leaders and dividing them among themselves.

Ruling class politicians and media have added to the confusion by using the word “anarchy” to describe the attacks. This is a familiar response in times of turmoil. We even hear that “anarchists” are responsible. Even less intelligent observers used the word “anarchism” – which stands for an ideology. Anarchy is again a word used as a threat, as if these attacks were made by anarchists. Anarchy, a social system without a state, is not chaos but it is order without authority. It is merely a term to describe a society without a government.

To quote one anarchist communist who lived 100 years ago, Alexander Berkman: “The word Anarchy comes from the Greek, meaning without force, without violence or government, because government is the very fountainhead of violence, constraint, and coercion ... Anarchy therefore does not mean disorder and chaos ... On the contrary, it is the very reverse of it; it means no government, which is freedom and liberty. Disorder is the child of authority and compulsion. Liberty is the mother of order.”

The pogroms in May were chaos resulting from capitalism, the state, and the misery that necessarily goes along with them. Politicians maintain that we live in an ordered system of capitalism, when really it is chaos. It shows yet again that chaos comes not from anarchy, but from capitalism, which necessarily creates poverty and thus frustration. The state is necessary to uphold

capitalism and therefore also responsible for chaos. And we have seen that in this chaos, the greatest call for order came from the internationalist working class movement, of which anarchism is a part. Anarchists have warned about xenophobia and the threat of nationalism in South Africa over the years. Anarchy would be a society without borders, nations and capitalism, thus no fence to divide us, no ruling elite to incite us and no bourgeois class to exploit us.

But we have a long way to go. The pogroms have ceased, but violence against foreigners continues, particularly from the state. On 16 July David Masondo, the chairman of the Young Communist League, was arrested and beaten up by the cops, and insulted as a “foreigner”, because his home language is Shangaan. If this can happen to a prominent political figure, how much more must be happening to ordinary South Africans and immigrants every day? And we must note that, while Masondo’s own organisation condemned the assault, along with the Communist Party and Cosatu, none of them noted that this sort of violence is what the police do. Hardly surprising, since these supposedly revolutionary working class organisations are in alliance with the capitalist and statist ruling ANC. Indeed, Charles Nqakula, the minister in charge of the police, is a senior member of the very same Communist Party.

Worse still, the pogroms succeeded. After the media has lost interest, the victims are still too scared to go home – and thousands have no home to go to. Some immigrants think that there have been hundreds of deaths, and that the government wants to keep the number of deaths low for fear of scaring investors, or of undermining that glorious project of the South African state and capital, the 2010 Soccer World Cup. The Mozambican government has declared a state of emergency and built refugee camps. At least 30 000 people have fled to Mozambique alone. The government of Malawi has transported hundreds of its nationals home with buses. Before the phony election on 29 May, the Zimbabwean leader of the opposition, Morgan Tsvangirai, visited victims in Johannesburg and called on them to come back home with him and vote for a better future. (This was before Tsvangirai pulled out of the election, coming to the reasonable conclusion that President Robert Mugabe’s lies and terror left him with no hope.) Mugabe publicly declared that returnees will be given land and he organised buses for them – and many left, willing to risk the economic ruin and terror in Zimbabwe to escape the terror in South Africa.

The perpetrators have reached their goal: a few thousand immigrants less. Perhaps this will make more houses and jobs available to South Africans: who can tell?. But with 62 lives lost, what remains is poverty, which will lead to more violence in the future. The government has said, yet again, that they intend to fight poverty – but why should this be taken any more seriously than before? A capitalist government remains a capitalist government, concerned with the interests of the few. And the success of the pogroms could encourage more of the same, and worse. European anti-semitic violence began with pogroms and ended with the mass slaughter of six million Jews by a powerful nationalist state. In Rwanda a million were slaughtered by the same pogrom methods that we now see in South Africa. It has happened before; it has happened again; it could happen anywhere. Such violence is often manipulated by political forces in an attempt to foment poor-on-poor violence as a means of deflecting anger over lack of jobs and service delivery away from government and local leaders. If this happens in South Africa, the worst could be yet to come. It is not inevitable, but it is possible, and the rise of Jacob Zuma is an ominous sign. The only sure path to preventing mass slaughter is solidarity of the working class, solidarity across borders, solidarity against the real enemy: cops, bosses and politicians.

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