

Class Struggle, 'Xenophobia' and the Local Elite

Jonathan Payn

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The xenophobic violence and looting following King Zwelithini's statement that foreigners "pack their bags and leave" spread to cities and townships across the country. However, the recent attacks are not an isolated incident; nor is Zwelithini solely responsible for fomenting it. Local elites – particularly those linked to the ruling party – also encourage anti-immigrant attitudes and actions. This article, based on discussions with Abahlali baseFreedom Park activists, looks at how local elites stimulate 'xenophobia' to protect their class interests, as well as how progressive working class activists have responded.

Xenophobia and local elites

Freedom Park is among few townships where development is underway; RDP houses are being built etc. However, residents complain about corruption around tenders and contracts. The development agencies have been accused of playing local and foreign workers against each other to secure cheap labour. These agencies, linked to the local ANC elite, felt South African workers wouldn't accept the low wages they were offering and so approached immigrant workers, often more desperate because of their precarious situation, and offered them jobs below the wages locals were trying to negotiate. This is one way local elites play immigrant and local people against each other, creating fertile ground for the spread of xenophobic sentiments.

But activists convinced the community to demand that all workers get a living wage, regardless of their nationality, and to demand community control over development in Freedom Park. This pushed the developers and local elite into a corner, threatening to undermine their profits and political legitimacy. They had to find a way to divert the community's attention and redirect their frustrations.

An opportunity emerged in June 2014 when Freedom Park had no electricity for almost a week. Residents protested against this, to which the state responded with violence. The protesters fled through the township and some looted immigrant-owned shops, believing immigrants responsible for the crisis. This is because the local political elite had been carrying out propaganda, blaming the electricity crisis on Somali shop owners by saying they were using big industrial fridges that consumed the township's power.

Activists knew this was untrue as there had been electricity shortages before these immigrants arrived in the township. In fact, knowing that Freedom Park was a fast-growing township activists warned government ten years ago already that the infrastructure would not support the growing population.

Another opportunity to divert attention from the real issues affecting the community came in January 2015, when looting of immigrant-owned shops broke out in neighbouring Soweto. The local political elite, around SANCO and the ANC, allegedly told immigrant shop owners to close because their trade was not wanted and they would be looted if they didn't. They also tried to extort money from foreign shop owners in exchange for protection. However, people say it was the same local elite that tried to extort protection money from immigrant shop owners that also promised to buy people alcohol or give addicts drug money if they looted foreign-owned shops; which suggests that xenophobia, at least in some townships, is being fomented by local elites to protect their political and economic interests and is being carried out by an opportunistic minority, not the broader community.

Fighting xenophobia

Abahlali decided they had to respond. They started community patrols to deter looters and encouraged every household to have a whistle they could blow if they saw people looting so that all the neighbours could come out to stop it. They also called a community meeting to explain to people that the township's crisis was not caused by the presence of immigrant traders but by inadequate infrastructure and a profit-motivated system. The meeting was unsuccessful because those behind the looting – a small group being empowered by the local councillors and businesses – told the community there was no meeting and physically attacked activists.

Following that Abahlali started organising on a block-by-block basis as each block has foreign-owned shops and immigrant residents on it. They organised block meetings to discuss the real issues affecting community members. The community responded positively and people started saying that responsibility for the crisis in Freedom Park actually lies with government.

In addition to their struggle for community control of development and a living wage for all – immigrants included – Abahlali also tries to integrate immigrants into the community by, for example: encouraging them to register their children at the local schools so they can begin the process of integration, inviting immigrants to support their demonstrations and taking up issues like xenophobia as well as by supporting the People's March Against Xenophobia in Johannesburg on April 23.

Working class self-organisation is the solution

The case of Freedom Park – probably not an isolated one – shows that local elites use the spectre of xenophobia to misdirect the legitimate frustration of the local population caused by poverty, lack of service delivery and development and meaningful participation therein to protect their own political and economic interests; and that the solution to the problem is independent working class self-organisation and solidarity across nationality as exemplified by Abahlali baseFreedom Park.

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