

One Year after the 2015 Grahamstown Riots against Foreign Traders

Attacks Hurt Working Class and Poor, Only Capitalists and Politicians Benefit

Lucien van der Walt

December 15, 2016

Contents

BRIEFING	3
IS IT “XENOPHOBIA”?	3
IS IT “AFROPHOBIA”?	3
IS IT “CRIMINALITY”?	4
CLASS FORCES AT WORK	4
“SOUTH AFRICA FIRST” POLITICS	5
KNOW THE REAL ENEMY	5
SOUTH AFRICAN IMPERIALISM	6
TOWNSHIP-BASED BUSINESSES’ ROLE	6
BITTER FRUIT OF SUFFERING	7
NOTHING TO GAIN	7
EVERYTHING TO WIN	8

BRIEFING

The heroic struggles for justice being waged today by workers, students and neighbourhoods across the country show the possibility of a better future, based on justice and freedom.

But casting a deep shadow over these struggles, and helping block a better future, are terrible, ongoing incidents like anti-immigrant / anti-foreigner attacks. They show how far we have to go, before we can free ourselves from the darkness of oppression.

The 2015 riots in Grahamstown were directed against foreign nationals, accused in hateful rumours of murdering local people to steal their body parts for ritual purposes. From such sparks sprang the wildfires of violence and terror. Within days over 500 people were displaced or in hiding.

So what is the solution? A fire needs fuel to burn; without fuel, sparks sputter away, die out. So what was the fuel that the sparks ignited? To fix a problem, we must know its cause.

IS IT “XENOPHOBIA”?

Anti-immigrant views and violence are common in South Africa.

The most common explanation is provided by the media. And it is wrong. This explanation describes anti-immigrant ideas and attacks as “xenophobia.” It is important to understand that “xenophobia” literally means an irrational (mad) fear (“phobia”) of outsiders (the “xeno”). This approach is heavily tinged with hateful upper class beliefs that the workers and poor are an ignorant, foolish and dangerous mob.

The problem is presented as a mental / psychological / emotional one, like “arachnophobia” (irrational fear of spiders). This suggested solution is education to change attitudes.

But this does not explain where anti-immigrant attitudes – that immigrants are enemies, inherently unclean, dishonest, diseased, inferior etc. – come from in the first place. It does not explain why these sentiments appeal to many people. It does not explain why these views continue to reappear.

Ideas come from social conditions, not from the air. Posing the problem as “phobia” and bad attitudes misses the roots of the problems, in the way that our society works.

IS IT “AFROPHOBIA”?

A similar approach is the “Afrophobia” theory, popular amongst some black nationalists. According to this view, the cause is an irrational (mad) fear of other black Africans. The idea is that black African people hate themselves (because of decades of apartheid, colonialism and white supremacy), and take out this hatred on other blacks.

With the problem again presented as mental, the solution is again presented as better attitudes: have more self-pride, love Africa more, more black unity etc.

The “Afrophobia” approach is correct that anti-immigrant sentiment in South Africa focuses on black Africans from outside.

But it ignores the fact that the hatred focuses on some Africans – like Angolans, Congolese, Mozambicans, Nigerians, Somalis, and Zimbabweans – and not others – like Basotho, Batswana

and Swazis. And South Asians are also targets. For example, victims in Grahamstown included many Bangladeshis and Pakistanis, besides Nigerians and Somalis.

This approach also starts from the view that races should “naturally” be united – blacks with blacks, whites with whites etc. – because they have shared needs and hopes.

But every “race” is divided into classes with different interests. Obviously black South Africans can oppress other blacks e.g. Cyril Ramaphosa is a black mine-owner who works with black chiefs and foreign capitalists to exploit cheap black labour from South Africa, Lesotho and Swaziland. This led to the 2012 Marikana massacre of 34 black strikers by black and white police. This is why the old syndicalist union, the black Industrial Workers of Africa, described black capitalists as “rich and high people ... who suck our blood and sell us.”

Even white South Africans have oppressed other whites e.g. in 1922, Jan Smuts and white mine-owners used white soldiers to crush white strikers, locals and immigrants, killing 76, arresting 4,700, and hanging three for treason.

Many of the worst conflicts in history took place largely within races: massacres, revolutions and wars in Europe, Africa and Asia show this clearly. And obviously, local black people can oppress immigrant blacks through anti-immigrant attitudes and actions, including violence.

If races are “naturally” united, why are they almost never united in the real world? All this means that the nationalist ideas that there should be racial unity across class divisions, or that black people cannot be racist, are incorrect. There is no doubt that decades of apartheid, colonialism and white supremacy damaged people’s hearts and minds, but what keeps these ideas going today after apartheid?

IS IT “CRIMINALITY”?

Another explanation, by the South African government and police, blames anti-immigrant attacks on criminals. According to this approach, these are just ordinary criminal actions hiding behind the mask of “xenophobia.” Therefore there is, they say, no problem of anti-immigrant prejudice or violence.

This claim has serious problems. It completely ignores the fact that attacks like those seen in Grahamstown are located in a huge reservoir of anti-immigrant sentiment in South Africa. It cannot explain why immigrants are targeted in these attacks. Looting and violence like that in Grahamstown in 2015 specifically targeted African and South Asian immigrants.

CLASS FORCES AT WORK

The reality is that the problem cannot be explained in terms of individual madness, lack of self-love, the wounds of South African history, or criminality.

There are very powerful forces in our society that systematically promote anti-immigrant ideas and violence. And the social conditions of our unjust society are the harsh soil that nourishes the bitter fruit of anti-immigrant hatred and violence.

Close attention must be paid to the role of the small ruling class – the bosses and politicians, black and white – that controls the country’s government and a large part of its economy. They work happily with foreign capitalists, but meanwhile do their best to divide South African workers from foreign workers, as well as from each other.

As Govan “Oom Gov” Mbeki wrote in his “Prison Writings,” the “capitalist class” is locked into “class conflict” with the working and poor masses. Its weapons are not just the army and police: they include methods to divide and mislead. The system also generates “other forms of oppression.” Oom Gov was writing years ago, but as we will see, the system helps generate the oppression of immigrants/ foreigners today.

“SOUTH AFRICA FIRST” POLITICS

First, the South African government / state and the media continually promote the idea of South Africans uniting against everyone else. Promoting “South Africa first” from 1994 onwards is meant to unite South Africans across racial and ethnic and class lines.

This is done in a way that presents immigrants as threats. The media e.g. newspapers, radio, TV, is run by the ruling class. It continually presents immigrants as taking away jobs and business, as promoting drugs and prostitution and spreading disease. It draws on a South African political culture poisoned by decades of racist, nationalist and ethnic politics.

Police raids round up immigrants without papers, presenting immigrants as criminals to be deported. State departments and services, like hospitals, actively discriminate against immigrants, presenting immigrants as a drain on resources.

Politicians, black and white, actively stir up ideas that there are “too many” immigrants, presenting them as threatening “our people.” For example, at least one Democratic Alliance (DA) town councillor and one African National Congress (ANC) town councillor in Grahamstown made anti-immigrant statements during the 2015 riots. This come against the backdrop of figures like Goodwill Zwelithini, the Zulu king, and Edward Zuma, the son of the state President, making inflammatory statements.

KNOW THE REAL ENEMY

Second, it is the rich and powerful ruling class, black as well as white, which actually oppress the working class and poor masses. No Nigerian or Somalian “spaza” shop-owner pulled the triggers at Marikana. No immigrant running a small clothes or electronics store fired you from the car factory or the local municipality, or outsourced you at the university. No Malawian gardener or Mozambican builder or Zimbabwean waiter pushed up university fees.

Blaming immigrants who run small businesses, or who do piecework jobs and casual labour, for the big problems in South Africa, like no jobs, low wages and bad services is like blaming the moon for hot days. It keeps the working class and poor from seeing where the problems really arise.

In fact, attacks on these immigrants actually HARM local working class and poor people. Jobs in small foreign shops, and in the companies that supply them, are lost when these shops close. Local people then have to buy at more expensive local shops, with less credit. Fighting immigrants for access to low-wage jobs does not raise wages or create jobs: it weakens the fight for more, better work and cuts wages by dividing the working class.

The big problems in the country are caused by bosses and politicians, most of which are our fellow South Africans. We should fight the real enemy, the ruling class, whether black or white, South African or foreign.

SOUTH AFRICAN IMPERIALISM

Third, South Africa is the most powerful country in Africa, with the most advanced capitalist economy. Its rulers – the big bosses and politicians – have long engaged in imperialist actions in neighbouring countries. These include military interventions e.g. in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), and economic expansion e.g. into mines in Swaziland – all to ensure profits and power for elites.

It is true that South Africa has long suffered from Western imperialism. But this does not mean that South Africa is not a small, independent imperialist power in southern and central Africa. South African private companies (e.g. Shoprite), state companies (e.g. ESKOM) and political party companies (e.g. Chancellor House) are all heavily involved.

As Mikhail Bakunin noted, every state has a double-nature: inside its borders, it is ruling class “domination and ... exploitation, well-regulated and systematised”; outside, it is “ferocious inhumanity toward all foreign populations” (“Federalism, Socialism, Anti-Theologism,” 1867, online). Our South African republic is no exception.

South African imperialism goes hand-in-hand with contempt for other African countries and people, and pride in South African economic and political power. South Africa’s imperialist actions play a key role in creating and perpetuating the miserable conditions that drive millions to immigrate to South Africa for security and opportunity. And whole countries – like Lesotho, Mozambique and Swaziland– have long had economies geared to supplying labour to South Africa.

TOWNSHIP-BASED BUSINESSES’ ROLE

Fourth, an important social layer in black townships relies on small businesses, such as “spaza” shops (micro-convenience stores), and on larger ones, like the taxi industry, for wealth accumulation.

From the 1990s, these black capitalists – mostly small capitalists or “petty bourgeoisie” – faced competition from giant, historically white-owned shopping chains (now entering the townships after years outside), and from small businesses run by foreign nationals (now migrating to South Africa: mainly African, sometimes Asian). Like small white businesses in the towns, they deeply resent the competition.

This is why anti-immigrant hatred is often driven by black and white South African petty bourgeois owners of small businesses. They are threatened from above by big monopoly capital, and from below by foreign petty bourgeoisie. For example, much of the “spaza” trade in the Grahamstown townships, and many of the shops in the black downtown business district, are controlled by foreigners.

This is the competition this black petty bourgeoisie wants to crush. Unable to match the low prices of the immigrant shops, and fighting for space in the tiny market provided by the impoverished black working class, it wants to have its cheaper rivals chased out. Good for its own businesses, bad for the local workers and poor, who end up paying higher prices.

For example, just before the 2015 riots in Grahamstown, local taxi owners mobilised their drivers to paint slogans like “They Must Burn” and “They Must Go” on the mini-buses. The owners claimed that immigrants were moving into the taxi industry, and that drivers would lose their

jobs. The taxi owners' association is allied to other local traders, represented by the hawkers' association.

But the problems that workers like the Grahamstown taxi drivers face – low incomes, no unions, long hours, illegal deductions etc. – are not caused by the foreign shopkeepers. South African taxi owners exploit them now; foreign ones might exploit them in future; in either case, the problem is the same.

BITTER FRUIT OF SUFFERING

The South African ruling class benefits from anti-immigrant ideas and actions. These attitudes and actions divide and confuse the masses, hide class divisions and capitalism, and justify imperialism. Sections of the South African petty bourgeoisie also benefit, if they can use these ideas and actions to drive out foreign rivals.

But the South African working class and poor do not benefit at all from anti-immigrant attitudes and actions.

So WHY do these attitudes and actions take root among ordinary people?

Hatred for immigrants grows in the harsh soil of an unjust and unequal country, thrives in the land of suffering, of massive unemployment, low wage jobs, inadequate state schools, hospitals, services, housing and grants. The South African working class has faced major attacks over the last 30 years. And the apartheid legacy of massive black poverty is everywhere.

In black working class townships and rural areas, wages (including wage remittances, and the “social wage” of state welfare) remain the main source of income. But jobs are more and more insecure, and fewer and fewer; wages are generally low, and state services are appalling.

Harsh competition for jobs and state services is often seen by people as a competition between races, ethnic groups, men and women, employed and unemployed, established township residents and new arrivals – and between South Africans and immigrants. These are often deliberately pitted against each other by employers e.g. by the white petty bourgeoisie, which often prefers non-union immigrant labour in small construction firms and restaurants.

NOTHING TO GAIN

The problems of high unemployment, low wages and inadequate services are, in fact, mainly caused by the ruling class – and its capitalist system. Attacks on immigrants do not take us forward. They show that our minds shackled by the rich and powerful, the bosses and politicians, the ruling class – the very people who cause our suffering. Attacking the immigrants is, simply, attacking our own struggles.

The problem is not the nationality of the small or big politician who loots, or the small or big capitalist who exploits. The problem is the ruling class domination and exploitation, through the state and capitalism. The solution is not to support one politician or capitalist against another, but to unite.

The enemy is the ruling class, the big bosses and politicians, including South Africans, both black and white. The ruling class is anti-working class, no matter the racial origin of its members, the colour of their skin, or their political party. It is this ruling class that divides the masses, to entrench its power and maintain its exploitation.

EVERYTHING TO WIN

That is why we must build a conscious working class movement that can shake the ruling class in its seats of wealth and power. This means uniting working class and poor South Africans across the racial and ethnic spectrum, and uniting working class and poor South Africans with working class and poor immigrants. It means fighting against anti-immigrant ideas and actions, championing equality and full rights for everyone, no matter their origins, culture or religion. This is internationalism.

Only working class movements – like the UPM, the unions and the left, including the anarchists and syndicalists – can take the axe to the root of the tree of hatred. But we can only do so, if we understand the problems, build democratically from below, shoulder the burdens of struggle and present a strategy and vision for real change.

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Lucien van der Walt
One Year after the 2015 Grahamstown Riots against Foreign Traders
Attacks Hurt Working Class and Poor, Only Capitalists and Politicians Benefit
December 15, 2016

Retrieved on 26th June 2021 from www.anarkismo.net
Text commissioned by Unemployed People's Movement, Grahamstown, October 2015. Edited
version: November 2016.

theanarchistlibrary.org