

ANC whips up racism amid xenophobic attacks in South Africa

Part 1

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28 May 2015

This is the first of a two-part feature.

Members of the African National Congress (ANC) government, including President Jacob Zuma, have made inflammatory anti-immigration remarks in the wake of recent xenophobic violence in South Africa.

At least seven people were killed in April in a wave of xenophobic violence centred in the Durban and Johannesburg metropolitan areas. The violence was said to have been sparked by the provocative remarks of Zulu King Goodwill Zwelithini who denounced migrants for “changing” South African society and enjoying wealth that he said rightfully belonged to locals. The ANC’s response has been to wage its own attack on migrants.

On April 27, a public holiday in South Africa known as Freedom Day, soldiers, police officers and Department of Home Affairs officials descended on the Johannesburg suburbs of Mayfair and Hillbrow, arresting foreign migrants who were not in possession of permits in a crackdown dubbed “Operation Fiela” (Sesotho for “Sweep”).

No one was arrested in the Mayfair raid, but police said they arrested 50 suspected illegal immigrants in a sweep in Hillbrow. Police spokesman Lt-Col Lungelo Dlamini said, “The people we arrested were not in possession of the correct papers. We have handed them to officials at Home Affairs for processing.”

Speaking the following day at a press briefing in Pretoria, Minister in the Presidency Jeff Radebe said Operation Fiela had led to a series of seizures and an increase in arrests to 430, while “restoring order” in areas hit by xenophobic violence in recent weeks. Radebe is a member of the inter-ministerial committee on migration, established by Zuma allegedly to look into the causes of the recent attacks on foreign nationals and possible interventions, including changes in migration policy.

ANC rule since the end of apartheid

The deliberate whipping up of racism and xenophobia is in an attempt to divert attention from the disastrous impact of the pro-capitalist policies pursued by the ANC and its coalition partners, the Congress of South African Trade Unions and the South African Communist Party, since coming to power in 1994.

The incoming government of former President Nelson Mandela had come to power resting on a mass movement against apartheid rule. Having restricted the working class to a programme of limited democratic reforms, the ANC set about to restore the fortunes of South African capitalism. The economy had been hit badly by mass social and political unrest that could have ended in social revolution. Moreover it was in a highly weakened state due to a combination of foreign disinvestment, a falling currency, burgeoning external debt and the more limited impact of economic sanctions.

The private sector had to contend with saturated internal markets, labour unrest, few avenues for external investment, low growth, rising inflation, high interest rates and a lack of access to foreign capital.

In payment for services rendered, the ANC leaders sought the help of white-owned big business in creating a thin layer of bourgeois blacks that would also be used to lend credibility to the idea that capitalism could be made democratic and inclusive.

Aside from such tinkering the ANC left capitalism untouched. It agreed to repay foreign creditors led, among others, by Citibank, the US\$25 billion in debt amassed by the white-supremacist government of the National Party. This odious debt was incurred in part to purchase arms, which were then used in the suppression of the anti-apartheid struggle, both in the black townships as well as in illegal cross-border incursions across the

southern African region.

The new black rulers removed some exchange controls, enough to allow mainstays of local capital, including Old Mutual, South African Breweries, Investec and Anglo American, to escalate the flight of money overseas. Instead of implementing even the thin, watery version of reform they had promised in the run-up to the first democratic elections, the ANC government opened up the previously protectionist economy to the main transnational corporations banks and other investors.

With the accession of Thabo Mbeki to the presidency in 1999, the process of liberalisation continued apace. The neoliberal Trevor Manuel, then finance minister and a former United Democratic Front leader, repudiated the Reconstruction and Development Programme—the policy framework on whose basis the ANC had won power. As its replacement, he unilaterally announced the adoption of GEAR—the Growth, Employment and Redistribution strategy, described as “an ambitious blueprint aimed at stimulating South Africa’s economic growth to 6 percent a year as well as creating 500,000 desperately needed new jobs.”

Relentless growth of social inequality

In fact, ANC policies led to job destruction, and widened the gap between rich and poor—white or black—to a greater extent than at any time under apartheid. The local textile industry, for example, all but disappeared after the lowering of tariffs against lower-costing imports. At the same time, the ANC sought to attract foreign investment by suppressing the class struggle offering up South African workers as a cheap labor force for global corporations.

In a 2011 article titled “The Myth of Manuel’s Wizardry,” Patrick Bond, professor at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, writes, “Manuel also removed exchange controls, cut the primary corporate tax rate from 48 percent in 1994 to 30 percent five years later, and allowed the country’s biggest corporations to move their financial headquarters to London, thus ballooning SA’s current account deficit.

“That in turn required such vast financing inflows that SA’s foreign debt soared from the \$25 billion inherited from apartheid to \$80 billion 15 years later.”

This represents a massive transfer of wealth from the poor to the global rich. These amounts were and still are being paid for through the blood and sweat of the working class, via retrenchment, pay and benefit cuts, work speed-ups and casualisation.

While workers are forced ever deeper into misery, the number of dollar millionaires in the country has risen 9 percent since 2007. This is despite the 41 percent depreciation in the value of the rand, the local currency unit, in the period 2007-14, against the US dollar. By 2017 the number of dollar millionaires in South Africa is forecast to grow by 19 percent, to reach about 55,500, according to New World Wealth’s South Africa Wealth Report for 2015.

Business Day reports that the severity of other challenges facing the economy, like the electricity crisis and volatile labour relations, drew attention away from weak consumer spending, which has deteriorated recently. Household spending represents fully 60 percent of all South African economic activity, but during 2014 grew by just 1.4 percent—the slowest pace since the end of the 2009 recession.

Zuma and his ministers are unable to claim credit for any improvement in the lives of the bulk of the people. They are directly responsible for an ever-worsening social disaster over which South African workers are growing justifiably angrier by the day. This is why the ANC elite is trying to direct this fury away from themselves and against foreign workers who have migrated into the country.

That immigrants are “stealing” jobs from South Africans is a vicious lie. Most migrants find themselves in positions of unstable, “precarious employment,” accepting the jobs that are hardest to fill—without benefits or even formal work contracts. The desperation of these workers is in turn exploited to create a race to the bottom. The ANC has joined the campaign to scapegoat migrants for the lack of decent paying jobs, which is the result of its own pro-capitalist policies. Meanwhile, it is continuing with its single-minded focus on enriching the bourgeois and upper-petty bourgeois layers upon which the ANC rests.

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