Understanding Xenophobia in democratic South Africa

Part 1: Introduction

On the May 11 2008, xenophobic violence broke out in Alexander township, in Gauteng. Working class black South Africans, mostly poor and unemployed youth, violently attacked mostly poor, black African nationals living in the community. Within days the violence spread to surrounding townships and informal settlements. During Africa month, the image of a person in flames illustrated ‘our collective shame’. Locals laughed at the burning man while police tried to extinguish the flames. Later identified as a Mozambican, Ernesto Alfabeto Nhamuave, died of his burns. The xenophobic violence spread nationally and it took the Police and the SA National Defence Force almost a month to quell.

In the aftermath, thousands of African nationals crossed the border to escape the violence - to Malawi, Mozambique and Zimbabwe - some on their own and others with the assistance of their governments. The South African government did not provide any assistance for African nationals to return to their countries. Reports confirm 62 African nationals dead, including 21 South Africans. This included a South African from Alexander, who was shot because he refused to join the mob. There are between 40 000 to 100 000 men, women and children displaced, living in camps, community halls and/or at local police stations. There have been reports of refugees going on hunger strike, attempted suicide, occupations and calls on the government to assist the many African nationals, confined to tents with inadequate food and shelter.

Responses to the xenophobia

During the attacks many South Africans tried to protect and hide African nationals. The social movements formed a Coalition Against Xenophobia (CAX), which included immigrant communities, to mobilise against xenophobia. The CAX organised a successful march against xenophobia in Johannesburg. Protest marches and public meetings were organised in Johannesburg, Cape Town and Durban, and included civil society organisations such as COSATU and Wits University.

One community, Khutsong/Merafong, (still in a long battle with the ANC/government over their forced integration into North West province, from Gauteng), publicly offered African nationals refuge, safety and security in their community.

The general public response, including the media, was one of shock, horror, disgust and condemnation. The few who reiterated the rights of African nationals to live in SA - like the social movements –were labelled ‘irresponsible’. This has become an emotive issue and relations within communities are strained. There are strong feelings from many quarters in South Africa, for African nationals to be repatriated and for stronger border regulation.
South African Government response
The government response was slow, and in the heat of the moment, ngos, religious-based organisations, the Red Cross, the UN, and members of the public, took the initiative to provide humanitarian assistance to African nationals seeking refuge at police stations and camps.

President Mbeki took three weeks to publicly condemn the xenophobia. Former cabinet minister, Kader Asmal, who proposed that national citizenship be give to all African nationals as a goodwill gesture, was largely ignored. After the violence was quelled, the South African government announced that no compensation would be given to the victims of the xenophobic violence; either they accept reintegration into former communities in which they lived or they return to their respective countries. No preparatory work with local communities has been done to pave the way for the return of displaced immigrants. Many affluent white communities, who had ‘abhorred the violence’, opposed African nationals being put up temporarily in local government venues in their areas.

Part 2: The Need for Debate

While it was important for the social movements and the general public to respond immediately to stop the violence, a long-term response that deals with the root causes of the xenophobia and the violence is needed. An understanding of the sources of the xenophobia and the class forces propelling it is imperative to develop strategic and organisational initiatives to purposefully act, organise and unite all working people – including African nationals.

The xenophobic violence and the immediate responses to it were accompanied by vigorous public discussion and debate. Although, in the debate many condemned the violence, the discussion in the press and other forums also revealed a wide range of opinions about the sources of the xenophobia and how to respond to it in the long-term.

It was against this background that the Editorial Collective of the Khanya Journal convened a number of discussions on the causes of the outbreak, as well as how to respond to it in the medium to long-term. The position developed in this paper draws on these discussions and on two seminars on xenophobia with the Khanya Journal Study Groups (SGs) on the 1st and the 8th June 2008. The Study Groups included 120 members from three provinces, Gauteng (Alexander, Katlehong, Soweto, Inner City, Fairview, Pretoria, Sebokeng, Bophelong), Free State (Viljoenskroon, Welkom, Kroonstad) and North West (Potchefstroom, Rustenburg). The SGs were key in developing an analysis of the xenophobic violence, identifying the social forces involved, and the organisational issues. For the SGs this was an important exercise in praxis - in how to concretely use theory to understand social issues and to develop appropriate action.

In the course of the public discussion on the underlying sources of the xenophobia outbreak, a particular position has slowly gained dominance. This position argues that
South Africa is being ‘flooded’ by a large number of immigrants and refugees from the continent, and that this ‘deluge’ or ‘flood’, and its impact on a whole range of issues, is the basic cause of the outbreak. The basic position adopted by those who hold this view is that tighter control of South Africa’s borders, camps for immigrants, and other restrictions represent a long-term solution to the violent outbreak we have seen.

This widespread position has been summed up most succinctly by Professor Sakhela Buhlungu. In his recent interview podcast with The Sunday Times, on 23 May 2008, Professor Buhlungu sums up similar positions in the public domain that need to be engaged - why African immigrants are in South Africa, the outbreak of the violence and his solution to the problem. It is Professor Buhlungu’s position and similar positions that this paper seeks to engage.

**Part 3: The Sources of African Immigration into South Africa**

Historically, capitalist development in South Africa was based on migrant labour from South and Southern Africa, and up to now the presence of African migrants did not result in xenophobia. We therefore need to explain the outbreak of xenophobic violence against African nationals at this particular conjuncture. Also, why did the xenophobia break out in Alexander – a township with a proud history of mass based resistance to apartheid, stretching from the bus boycott in 1954?

The public debate around the outbreak revolved around two key questions. Firstly, what are the sources of African immigration into South Africa? Secondly, how should we deal with African immigration into South Africa? These two questions are clearly related, and one’s response to the first influences how one responds to the second. The different viewpoints on these questions are important in explaining broader perspectives informing our discussion.

**“Failed States” and African immigration**

According to Buhlungu’s theory, there are large numbers of African immigrants in South Africa because of the ‘failed states’ in Africa that are ‘imploding and falling apart’. African immigrants from these ‘failed states’ come here, attracted to the stability in South Africa. In this way South Africa ‘bears the brunt of all that instability’ in Africa.

Buhlungu uncritically and ahistorically refers to African states as ‘failed states’, without any substantiation. In Africa the process of decolonisation contributed to patterns of capital accumulation that have increased African economic dependence on advanced capitalist countries, and increasing impoverishment. Africa still largely provides natural resources, and is vulnerable to world market fluctuations. US intervention in Africa demonstrates the role of imperialism in Africa’s underdevelopment, and the importance of Africa for its interests. Elite comprador classes have shied away from a consistent struggle with imperialism for a number of reasons, including their fear of being overthrown by their own popular classes. Hence African elites have been complicit with neo-colonialism and imperialism. Through particular forms of the state - dictatorships and kleptocracies – local comprador classes use their political power and access to the
state to siphon off the wealth of their countries. Examples of this have been Idi Amin of Uganda and Mobuto sese Seko of the Congo.

By the 1980s the so-called debt crisis hit Africa; and the World Bank and the IMF imposed economic structural adjustment programmes (ESAPs) on Africa. This deepened the social economic and political crisis in Africa. The repayment of the debt resulted in the transfer of wealth from the south to the north just to repay the interest on the debt. The ESAPs curtailed state expenditure, especially cuts on basic social services, introduced privatisation and user fees. This impoverished the working population even more.

J.F. Bayart (and others) in their book on “The Criminalisation of the African State” demonstrates that these are not ‘failed states’. Instead, through the interaction with imperialist multinational corporations, particular patterns of capitalist accumulation continue and hence Africa remains highly integrated into the world economy. Bayart states that through the ‘criminalisation of the African state’ – the comprador elites’ use of state force for private aims and the continued siphoning off of state funds by political parties – accumulation has taken place, accompanied by and through high levels of integration of African countries into the world market. This is in contrast to the view of Immanuel Castells that Africa is a ‘black hole’ marginalised from the rest of the world.

For instance, in Angola, 1 million barrels of oil are produced daily, but this country is classified as the worst for a child to be born given the widespread poverty and the lack of basic services. In Angola, despite widespread corruption and administrative chaos, the oil industry has been ring-fenced to ensure the minimum disruption to its production. Foreign, skilled-workers, are recruited to the industry, and while millions of dollars are produced, poverty remains widespread. Bayart notes that the ‘peace’ in Angola has presented some problems for the ruling elites to divert funds, which was historically easier during the civil war. However the point to note is that these are not ‘failed states’, they are not ‘...imploding and falling apart’ but are organised in the interests of capitalist accumulation, of imperialist corporations and comprador elites. In these particular states the trampling on human rights is a necessary condition for the patterns of capitalist accumulation. For working people this means impoverishment and misery.

Buhlungu’s use of the ‘failed states’ theory in Africa is therefore also superficial as he doesn’t explain the patterns of capitalist accumulation, Africa’s integration into the world market, and the role of the African comprador classes. Secondly, Buhlungu’s focus on the ‘failed states’ theory hides South Africa’s particular role and complicity in the integration of Africa into the world economy, and what that means for working people on the continent.

**South Africa in Africa – integration and imperialism**

In the 19th century the British imperialist, Cecil John Rhodes dreamt of building a railway from the ‘Cape to Cairo’ – a symbol of his control of Africa. According to A. Adebajo, historically the old apartheid government pursued this dream. This dream is currently being implemented under the political leadership of the ANC government. According to
Adebajo, Apartheid governments viewed themselves as the Christian heirs to ‘civilise Africa’ with their western culture, economic systems and security; and hence they opposed the struggle for African independence. The South Africa Customs Union, formed in 1910, reflected one-sided trade deals with Botswana, Swaziland and Lesotho, while restricting access to the South African market. The apartheid government supported the free movement of goods and services but not people. The industrialisation of African countries was blocked, while (controlled) African migrants provided cheap labour to mines, farms and industry in South Africa. The Industrial Development Corporation provided millions of Rand for South African firms to invest in Southern Africa. However, by 1980 the frontline states formed the Southern African Development Co-ordinating Committee (SADCC) – to develop regional integration in response to, and independent of apartheid South Africa, which destabilised their countries through intervention, including military invasions. The anti-apartheid movement internationally and in Africa, especially through the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), contributed to sanctions against South Africa and closing African borders and trade with the pariah state.

In 21st century South Africa, under the (still predominantly white) bourgeoisie and the relatively ‘new black diamonds’, Cecil’s dream lives. Nelson Mandela, the country’s first democratic president, was influential in ‘opening up’ Africa to South Africa once again. Mandela’s first major strategic intervention in the 1990s was to prevent Patrice Lumumba’s one-time ally, Kabila, from entering the resource-rich Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), and ousting Mobutu. At the time South African multinationals faced competition from Canadian multinationals for mining interests in the DRC. In the deal brokered, Mandela offered Mobutu asylum in South Africa; and South Africa was positioned for the role as the moral authority and ‘peace-keeper in Africa. Of course, South Africa’s mining interests were secured. This was only the beginning of opening up Africa to South African multinationals. But South Africa and Mandela failed to stop the execution of human rights/environmental activists, Ken Saro Wiwa and six Ogoni activists, by the Sani Abacha regime in Nigeria. With the DRC deal and the failure to intervene in the Saro Wiwa execution, South Africa sent a signal to the comprador classes in Africa that trampling on human rights would not be penalised. Against this background we should not be surprised if ‘instability’ becomes the order of the day in Africa.

Mbeki, NEPAD & the African elite
But it was under the Mbeki leadership that South Africa has become Africa’s dominant power. Through the New Partnership for African Development (NEPAD) and the ideology of the ‘African Renaissance’, Mbeki has assisted in restructuring and ‘democratising’ the African elites to become more respectable without changing power relations, all under South Africa’s hegemony. South Africa has played key mediation roles in the democracy process in Burundi, the DRC, Rwanda, Cote Ivoire and Sierra Leone. The OAU was restructured into the African Union, with an African parliament, and a significant number of women MPs. The democratisation process was accompanied by engendering institutional power. Currently, the highest number of women MPs are in parliaments in Southern Africa, but this has not transformed into a significant
improvement in the quality of life of the region, where working women make up 60% of the region’s informal sector.

**A South African Imperial Project**

South African companies have major economic interests in Africa - in mining, banking, retail, communications, arms and insurance - often with the support of the elite classes of the host countries. In 1999 the South Africa – European Union Trade Agreement was signed. There was no consultative agreement with the countries of the region, but because of South Africa’s strategic role, this Agreement was bound to affect the region. Needless to say this Agreement contributed to the demise of, and changes within the local industries in southern Africa – including the footwear and textile industries in Zimbabwe and Zambia, sugar in Swaziland and beef in Namibia.

The NEPAD has also been important in facilitating South Africa’s interest in Africa. By 2000, South Africa was Africa’s largest foreign investor. By 2001, South Africa’s investment had increased by 300% from 1996 to R27 billion. 17% of South African exports go to Africa, while South African imports from Africa amount to 4%, clearly indicating a trade imbalance and inequality. The increase in South African investment in Africa was phenomenal. By 2005, only 8 of the top 100 companies listed on the Johannesburg Stock Exchange did not have a presence in Africa – that is, besides the unlisted South African companies active in Africa. Increasingly it is not just private South African companies investing in Africa, but through the Industrial Development Corporation, the South African government is promoting and providing funding and risk-sharing in 60 projects in 21 countries, through state-owned enterprises and partnerships in line with the NEPAD. This includes ESKOM, TRANSNET and SPOORNET. This is reminiscent of similar patterns of inequality and trade between apartheid South Africa and Africa.

South African investment in Africa is also concentrated in strategic sectors. For instance, by 2003 South African companies ran the Cameroon national railroad, Tanzania’s national electricity, and managed the airports of 7 African countries. Shoprite has 72 stores and sources South African products worth R429 million rather than buying some of these products locally in the host countries - thus contributing directly to underdevelopment in Africa as whole. Trade in Africa amounts to 12% of the Shoprite Group’s annual turnover. SABC Africa broadcasts to elites in 33 African countries while MTN and Vodacom could connect the entire continent with their phone network. SAA is the most reliable airline on the continent, constantly increasing its routes in Africa. ESKOM is active in 17 African countries as it secures South Africa’s electricity power and sources of revenue. South Africa’s dominance in Africa is very visible from the similar shopping complexes being built, the chain stores like Edgars, Pep Stores, Nando’s and Checkers. Basic goods such as toothpaste and fruit juice are imported from South Africa, and few local products (and local producers) are encouraged.

There is also the availability of a skilled and educated workforce in many African countries. Similarly, many African academics and students (from the African elite) have been drawn to South African universities – this also reflects a ‘brain drain’ from Africa.
South Africa therefore has a pool of potential and actual skills from which to draw on in Africa (and thus has little imperative to resolve the country’s education crisis).

South Africa’s hegemony in Africa has raised alarm bells amongst some African states. For instance, Adebajo notes the resentment to South Africa’s dominance expressed in Kenya, Tanzania and Nigeria, and especially towards the ‘export of apartheid labour practices and the destruction of local/infant industry. The trade imbalance between South Africa and the region is estimated as 7:1. South African companies’ profits are between 2-3 times higher than those earned in operations at home. According to the UN Under Secretary for Political Affairs, Ebrahim Gambari, ‘…the rates of return on investment in Africa are possibly the highest in the world.’ President Mbeki has tried to say that South Africa ‘has no great power pretensions’ in Africa, and in 2000 the government gave R30 million to the African Renaissance and International Co-operation Fund; and encourages South African firms to develop broad based African economic empowerment through strategic partnerships within African countries. But this cannot change the unequal relations that exists and deepens with increasing South African trade and investment in Africa.

**Globalisation, South African hegemony and patterns of migration**

Oupa Lehulere, in an article in the Khanya Journal on Xenophobia (no. 18), argues that under globalisation a rapid unification and integration of the capitalist world market takes place. Globalisation causes the collapse of local economies, economic stagnation and a surplus population. This results in the transfer of wealth, the movement of capital from poorer to richer regions; and this systematic impoverishment is the important imperative for the migration of people from poorer to richer regions. Hence the movement of people follows the movement of capital, and this generally affects all social classes. However, for the bourgeoisie, their freedom of movement across all countries of the globe, and their entry into any country is guaranteed and welcomed. Similarly, given the general location, roles and occupations of the middle classes (including students) in relation to capital broadly, the middle classes enjoy similar mobility.

Yet, while globalisation displaces people through the demise of local industries and wars (often caused by globalisation, and related to processes of capital accumulation), the working class and often refugees, do not enjoy freedom of movement. Cast as ‘unwanted’ and ‘aliens’, the working class and refugees are generally not welcomed in most countries. As potential ‘drains on the public budget and public services’ (as Buhlunlu puts it in his interview), visa requirements are used to police strict immigration policies. Immigration policies are therefore extremely ‘classist’, meant to keep out the working class; whereas only capitalists (and sections of the middle classes) enjoy freedom of movement, a basic human right. We have seen this in South Africa with regards to the presence of African nationals, and Buhlunlu demonstrates his anti-working class position when he differentiates between the social classes, and is fine with the ‘skilled’ African nationals: “…I mean you can leave the top end where the skills kind of category people come in – but at the bottom end, those categories have collapsed into one mass which is undifferentiated that is ‘immigrants…’ Basically, those with skills can stay but those without skills must go.
In fact, the process whereby the patterns of migration follow the movement of capital takes place all the time within countries, and not just between countries. Under capitalism, there is a constant movement of people, in particular from the rural to the urban areas. This has been characterised as the ‘process of modernisation’ but reflects capitalist development and the specific social relations between the town and the countryside. In the countryside, the base for agriculture and the production of food, these goods are exchanged or sold to the cities for much lower than their actual values. Hence the value of labour power or wages in rural areas is generally lower than in the cities. This is due not only to the labour market and unequal exchange, but also reflects the relationship of different sectors of capital, for instance, of industry to agriculture, in the production of wealth. This is the movement of capital from areas that are less to those that are more profitable, the extraction and transfer of surplus value. Unless highly capitalised and its different aspects organised into controlling monopolies as a means to secure its profitability, there is a tendency for capital to invest in industry over agriculture because of the potential higher returns. This explains the historical ‘pull’ or attraction of the ‘town’ over the countryside under capitalism – the folklore of ‘going to seek your fortune in the town’, and of course of ‘Jim comes to Johannesburg’. The ‘common place’ understanding that people move from the countryside to the town to improve their socio economic standard of living is so generally accepted – they move for better jobs, higher wages, better living conditions and basic amenities – that we no longer question its basis. This explains the constant movement of people from the Bantustans to the towns (and especially the cities) under apartheid, the movement of people from rural areas to the towns during the transition and the democratisation period from 1990s, and especially the movement of people from the different provinces to Gauteng, and to Johannesburg in particular. The underlying process of the movement of people to the towns and cities is governed by the movement of capital, the wealth produced (agricultural produce, including food) in the rural areas, in agriculture (and related sectors), is extracted or is siphoned off to the towns and the cities. Over time this impoverishes and depletes the rural areas.

**Zimbabwe, South African hegemony and the patterns of migration**
We have seen the dominant role of South Africa in Africa. Through South Africa’s interwoven trade and investments, Africa’s integration into the world economy is consolidated. Under conditions of globalisation, South Africa is the regional power that co-ordinates and/or organises the extraction of wealth on the continent, through the dominance of its economy. South Africa therefore organises the movement and direction of capital, and from South Africa, profits are repatriated to multinationals all over the world. South Africa’s hegemony in Africa has resulted in the collapse of local industries, local economies, and a surplus population or unemployment has increased. Hence the migration patterns, migrants follow the movement of capital and the surplus value extracted from their own countries to South Africa. This is the reason for the large numbers of African migrants in South Africa, and this is also the reason why they have an unconditional right to citizenship in South Africa, if they want it.
To illustrate the relationship of dependence to, and South Africa’s hegemony in Africa, and southern Africa in particular, let us briefly discuss Zimbabwe as an example. Buhlungu is one of the many who refer to the ‘Zimbabwe crisis’ when discussing the recent xenophobia in South Africa. (Similarly, COSATU believes that if it was not for the mess in Zimbabwe, these immigrants would not be here.) This argument suggests that if it wasn’t for the ‘Zimbabwe crisis’ there wouldn’t be Zimbabweans here, and of course the xenophobia would not have occurred. Similarly, if Mbeki’s foreign policy on Zimbabwe was not a ‘failure’, we would also not have Zimbabweans here, and there would be no xenophobia. What therefore has been the imperative for Zimbabwean nationals to migrate to South Africa?

Despite the formation of the SADCC in 1980, (now called SADC), to decrease economic dependence on South Africa, Zimbabwe still trades largely with South Africa. Since the 1970s, right up to the present (2007), South Africa has generally had a positive trade balance with Zimbabwe. This is confirmed by the Department of Trade and Industry website for the period 1992 to 2007. In other words, Zimbabwe has had a consistent trade deficit with South Africa, given the imbalance or unequal trade between the two countries. According to the Zimbabwe government, currently its main exports to South Africa are 32.3% of its total exports, (this is followed by its exports to China of 6.3%); whereas its imports from South Africa amount to 46% (and from China to 5.9%). SA imports from Zimbabwe are generally consumer goods (cigarettes, toilet paper, cotton), with a few exceptions such as nickel and pig iron. This contrasts with Zimbabwean imports from South Africa, which are intermediate and capital goods (white cement, parts and accessories of machines, combine harvest threshers, tractors, etc).

Although Zimbabweans have historically worked in South Africa, the numbers declined in the 1980s, and began to increase again in the early 1990s. This seemed to coincide with Mugabe’s implementation of the neoliberal economic reform in 1991. According to Levi Mayihlome’s work on the ‘Impact of Trade Relations between Zimbabwe and SA’, between 1992 and 1996, as a result of its protectionist policies the South African government was reluctant to renegotiate the tariff increase for clothing and textiles, and tariffs increased from 30% to 90%, with the result that 17 000 jobs were lost in Zimbabwe (11 000 in textiles alone). Mayihlome states that in about 1996, about 12 000 Zimbabweans came into South Africa on visitor’s visas and never returned. This is even before the so-called ‘Zimbabwe crisis’, that we associate with the national elections of 2000.

But a significant factor in Zimbabwe is the nature of South African investment. This has included ESKOM (providing much needed energy to Zimbabwe, including South African companies) and major South African retail groups. In his book called ‘Zimbabwe’s Plunge’, Patrick Bond discusses the contribution of South Africa’s major retail groups – Shoprite, PicknPay and Massmart (Makro) – to the de-industrialisation of Zimbabwe. As Bond says,

‘All took advantage of the ESAP years by opening shops in what was then a forex-rich Zimbabwe, and importing mass-produced consumer goods from their
own South African supplier networks, to replace goods which were previously made locally in Harare or Bulawayo. But Zimbabwe’s de-industrialisation meant that when forex began to dry up in 2000, it became more difficult to source those same goods as no local alternatives were available. Moreover, when in October 2001, price controls on basic foodstuffs were imposed by Mugabe, the retailers began complaining.’ (Bond,132)

This indicates concretely South Africa’s role with regards to the deindustrialisation in Zimbabwe (and in Africa). Not only did this cause the demise of the local economy, local industries and unemployment, it also contributed to food shortages, food insecurity and potential price increases. When price controls were introduced, to assist Zimbabwean consumers, the South African retailers complained - this is the nature of capital.

However, to illustrate the predatory and callous nature of South African capital in Africa, Bond quotes Massmart’s (Makro) deputy chief executive, Dan Barrett, in an interview with Business Day that profits continued to be good despite ‘the conditions of scarcity and inflation’:

In spite of the difficult trading conditions, Barrett said that there was no ‘financial risk on (the group’s) investment’. Massmart did not bring back the profit made by its Makro stores to SA. He said that Zimbabwe’s shortage of foreign currency was the main reason for this. Ironically, the stores were quite profitable when measured in Zimbabwean dollars. High inflation meant the stores merchandise were gaining value ‘by sitting on the shelf’, Barrett said.

(Business Day, 18 October 2001)

According to Bond, Minister of Trade since 1996, Alex Erwin, ‘was especially insensitive to Zimbabwe concerns over the growing trade deficit and further regional de-industrialisation caused by the South African/European free-trade agreement’ (in 1999). However this is the nature of unequal trade and capitalist penetration in general, specifically under neoliberalism. However, on the 15 June 2008 the SADC signed an agreement to allow over 80% of goods to be exported to SADC members states duty free as from 1 August 2008. Zimbabwe ratified this treaty to support the free movement of goods in the region. Given the deeply embedded trade inequalities in the region, this treaty is likely to entrench this.

Although South Africa dominates the SADC, Zimbabwe is its main and important trading partner in the region. Even if exports are small in terms of South Africa’s overall exports, Zimbabwe’s importance for South Africa in the region cannot be overestimated. Related to this, the South African government is directly implicated in the creation of refugees fleeing from Zimbabwe. In the Mail&Guardian (June 27 to July 3 2008), Mandy Rossouw’s report implicates the South African Government in providing ‘weapons of war’ to the Zimbabwean government, ‘despite the mounting human rights atrocities in that country’, against members of the opposition and especially civilians. The trade in arms must of course itself be seen as an aspect of the unequal trade between the two countries, and the consequences of this trade in creating political refugees must be seen
as a product of the process of capital accumulation in the region, and in Zimbabwe in particular.

South Africa’s unequal trade and investment in Zimbabwe (and Africa) is causing underdevelopment and de-industrialisation and this, together with their implication in the creation of refugees fleeing the repression in that country, has contributed to, and is responsible for the migration of Zimbabweans to South Africa. The resolution of the political ‘crisis’ in Zimbabwe is material to the extent that it may curb the creation of refugees fleeing the repression in that country. But on the whole it won’t stop the migration of Zimbabweans to this country, which started even before the ‘crisis’ and will continue as long as the current power relations consistent with South Africa’s globalising agenda continues in that country. Zimbabwe is therefore an example of how South Africa’s economic role in that country, the increasing trade deficit together with de-industrialisation and the creation of an (unemployed) surplus population, creates the imperative for Zimbabweans to migrate to this country.

In South Africa under apartheid, despite the influx controls and the pass laws, the government was unable to keep black people in the Bantustans. Similarly, tighter border controls will not keep Zimbabweans (and other African nationals) ‘out’ – the human instinct to survive and to live is too strong, is almost infinite. President Thabo Mbeki’s foreign policy on Zimbabwe, contrary to Professor Buhlungu and others, is a success and not a failure. The recent treaty on the free movement of (South African) goods into the region and into Zimbabwe in particular, shows beyond doubt that Mbeki’s foreign policy on Zimbabwe is both rational and successful. Mbeki’s foreign policy has been successful for the social classes he represents – the big bourgeoisie of South Africa.

**Part 4: Xenophobia and ‘economic competition’**

Buhlungu argues that the violence meted out against foreign African nationals was not xenophobia, but that ‘What you are seeing here is economic competition at the bottom end of the social scale, and you are exposing people there and it’s going to happen.’ (Let us accept his position on the xenophobia for the moment and return to it later.) According to Buhlungu, the ‘poorest of the poor’ in South Africa are forced to compete with foreign African nationals and the ‘economic competition’ he mentions is for housing, infrastructure and service delivery. We will explore here whether ‘the economic competition’ exists, and how this relates to xenophobia. In our discussion we will focus on the issues people have allegedly accused African nationals of doing – taking houses (as an instance of ‘service delivery’), jobs, businesses and women.

**Neoliberalism, the GEAR budget and ‘economic competition’**

Taking housing as an example, the general point Buhlungu makes about economic competition is that the ‘national and the provincial budget’ is affected by ‘…(the) injection of thousands or even millions of people (immigrants) who will just mingle into local informal settlements and go and register for those houses then you are a facing a ridiculous situation where your budget is totally out of kilter with the reality on the ground.’ Firstly, Buhlungu is protective and uncritical of the government’s neoliberal
GEAR budget, which is based on the privatisation of basic services including housing, and (increasing) user fees for water and energy. Secondly, the South African government reported a budget surplus (!) in the midst of increasing impoverishment, unemployment, poor healthcare and education etc. Over the past few years over R10 billion per year was given to the middle classes in the form of tax cuts, and company tax has decreased since 1994 from 48% to 29%. The gravity of the latter, confirming this government’s orientation to big capital, is more significant in the context of South African companies’ high returns on their investments in Africa. The orientation and interests of the GEAR budget, for sections of the middle classes and especially big capital, is clear. The (meagre) budget allocated for the working class in the context of huge wealth and huge inequality and poverty reflects the balance of class forces against the working class, a result of neoliberal economics, and cannot be blamed on African nationals. For instance, how do we blame African nationals for the health crisis (hospital crisis, lack of ARVs, nurse shortages, privatisation of healthcare etc), the education crisis (the book shortages, the teacher shortages, increasing user fees, violence at schools etc)? The SA government, under the ANC, is responsible for the overall declining living standards and the impoverishment and not African nationals.

In Alexander, the housing issue did spark off the xenophobic violence. According to reports, the Alexander Renewal Housing Project was launched in 2001 to provide homes to 22 000 families by 2008. The Alexander township itself was built for only 60 000 people but it is home to 450 000 people. From these figures we can see that the scene was set for major conflict, with or without the immigrants from Africa.

The process of the Renewal Project was that it clears shacks on a block-by-block basis to make way for new schools, sport grounds and housing infrastructure. Everyone displaced is then given a temporary house at a transit village. The South Africans eligible for a housing subsidy, are then moved to an RDP house. Undocumented migrants or African nationals don’t qualify for an RDP house and they are moved from the transit camp to the rental units. However, the first 500 rental units were not ready for occupation so the migrants stayed longer in the transit camp houses. To many South Africans in the shacks it appeared as if the migrants had been given the smart-looking transit houses, or were waiting for ‘their’ RDP houses in extension 7. This was reinforced by deeply-held popular perceptions that local councillors and officials right up to the Gauteng Housing Department were corrupt, and sell houses to South African and African nationals who want to jump the queue. Local people have a deep distrust of the housing department, and the manner in which housing has been delivered in South Africa, since 1994. This is a more general issue and indicates the general conflict and deep dissatisfaction with the government, and is not linked to xenophobia.

Particularly since 1994, RDP housing for poor communities has been a source of conflict in South Africa. The privatisation of housing has led to conflict and struggles about the size of the RDP houses, the quality of the houses as building materials’ costs escalated; which communities should access them and how they should be allocated, corruption and patronage. This is reflected in the housing struggles in Delft, in Joe Slovo, and in the
Gateway Project, all in Cape Town. In the Cape Town context this also fanned racism between so-called coloured and African people, about access to housing.

In Johannesburg, even when people from Alexander were legitimately given houses in Braamfischerville, Soweto, they were chased away and told to wait for a house in Alexander. Research indicates that some unemployed people sold their RDP house to access income, while others rent out their RDP house and move into a shack without basic amenities. These are rational decisions in the context of unemployment and poverty. In Katlehong on the East Rand, a community campaign opposes bank repossessions and reselling houses because people are unemployed and cannot pay the bond. Local activist were gaoled when they tried to prevent people from moving into repossessed houses.

It is clear that the South African government’s neoliberal approach to housing, (together with increasing impoverishment), has been a source of conflict in working class communities for a long time. The sources of this conflict have nothing to do with African nationals.

It therefore came as no surprise when, after the xenophobic violence had been quelled, the Gauteng Housing Department held a formal investigation in Alexander. The Report stated that only 9 out of 500 RDP houses were occupied by African nationals, this was legal occupation because they were in SA for at least 20 years. They had SA citizenship, and were therefore eligible for housing. Similarly, in Cape Town, despite the allegations by SANCO Western Cape chairperson, Rose Sonto, in the housing audit only one house in 500 was occupied by an African national. In fact, despite the outcome of this inquiry, Sonto was adamant that ‘they can own houses in Constantia…’ but not in the township.

It would have been important, for Buhlungu, a person of his academic training, to gather the evidence before repeating the reckless populist accusations against African nationals.

**Jobs**

There are basically two issues with regards to jobs. The first one is a perception that African nationals are ‘taking the jobs’ of local workers. The second issue is a perception that African nationals are prepared to work for low wages, and that this lowers wages (and living standards) for South African workers, and the unemployed as a whole.

In terms of the first issue, many studies indicate that African nationals create jobs for local black South Africans. Sometimes these jobs are in small businesses, shops, and informal sector stalls. But the important point here is that they create jobs.

But we also need to understand this issue in the broader context of capitalism and the wages struggle. In general capitalists constantly seek ways to depress and reduce wages. Hence they seek out those sections of the working class who will work for lower wages. Similarly, women workers have historically been accused of ‘taking men’s jobs’, doing the same work as male workers, for less wages and under poor working conditions, and thus displacing men. (To the extent that this process has been generalised under
neoliberalism – low wages, precarious work and poor working conditions – it is called the feminisation of labour.) But this problem always faces the working class and relates to the nature of capitalism, and is not caused by African nationals, or any other workers. Historically, the traditional working class organisations, the trade unions, have actively responded to this by, for example, organising women and immigrant workers into unions. This therefore raises critical questions about the working class and its organisations, about COSATU and other independent trade unions in organising African workers and building workers’ solidarity.

Progressive unionists are generally sensitive to the potential weakness within the working class, the downward pressure on wages, and the organisational imperatives this demands. What has happened to Buhlungu’s worker instincts as a former unionist, but also as a sociologist?

**Businesses**

African nationals – together with Chinese, Bangladeshis and Pakistanis - do have businesses in South African townships. They bring in capital and goods, and some of them create jobs for local South Africans. In terms of competing with locals, the business of African nationals in the townships are generally at the lower end of the scale, often in sectors where South Africans don’t tend to compete. In some of these business, South Africans don’t have access or would need to link up with business networks that do have access to importing goods or distributing goods from China, Taiwan and so forth.

In most townships South Africans own the taxis, the local taverns, small supermarkets, crèches, vegetable and fruit stalls and many of the tuckshops – this reflects some of the embeddedness within the township over a period of time.

In some townships Ethiopians go door-to-door selling blankets. Some of the local businesses owned by African nationals include hair salons promoting styles and products from West Africa, cell phones, blankets and other goods from China and Taiwan. They also have tuckshops, phone-calls, sell vegetables and food like grilled chicken ‘walkaways’ feet. Research indicates that it is difficult for locals to deal in businesses that sell products such as food, especially in contexts of poverty and unemployment as often one is faced with demands from (local) family and friends, and with time the business becomes unsustainable. Hence it is often immigrants who sell foods as they generally don’t have familial or friendship networks in the area that become a potential liability on the business.

There are some clear lines of differences between local businesses and those run by African nationals, for instance the taxis and the taverns.. In some sectors there are overlaps in business, but no clear lines of competition that one can readily see transforming into xenophobia.

In a recent study by T. P. Monareng on the informal sector in Vanderbijl Park, there was conflict between local and African national traders because the latter shied away from making demands on the local government for improved service delivery. Although the
African nationals had complied and paid for their registration for their stalls, they preferred to wait for the local government to implement their promises of service delivery rather than to join with locals to demand electricity points, for instance, which will improve their business. Many local traders perceived this to be too ‘compliant’ and ‘lacking solidarity’. For the African nationals, they preferred to wait and not make demands.

**Women**
While this is not necessarily an issue of ‘economic competition’, it does raise issues of competition and control of women. Given the long history of migrant labour in South Africa, inter-marriage and relationships with African migrants has not been unusual. During the recent xenophobic violence there were cases reported of South African women displaced and told to leave because of being married to, and/or having children with foreign African nationals.

The populist allegation is that African nationals have more money than locals and so they ‘tempt our women’, and are able to ‘provide more’ than local men. Incidents were also raised of local women engaging in transactional sex with foreign African nationals, in townships and informal settlements.

Research indicates that in general transactional sex (with South African men) is a survival strategy amongst black women because of increased poverty, especially amongst some women on the child support grant, and African nationals are not the source of this.

Secondly, to what extent does this reflect a response and/or a reaction to black women exercising their independent choices and being ‘punished’ for this, and told to leave? This reflects patriarchal relations, that black women are available to be ‘owned’ and ‘possessed’. These attitudes are an integral part of the patriarchal beliefs and attitudes that explain the rape of women during war and during xenophobic violence. There are enormous gaps between South Africa’s democratic Constitution, women’s rights, and existing patriarchal relations.

The ‘economic competition’ that Buhlungu presents as the basis for the recent violence is pretty thin given our discussion on service delivery, housing, jobs, business and women. Only amongst businesses in the township are there grey areas between locals and African nationals, but nothing to link this to xenophobia. Buhlungu’s argument is weak, populist, and does not rest on any concrete evidence. Consequently Buhlungu doesn’t contribute to a serious engagement of the sources of the xenophobia, and a broader understanding of why it occurred when it did and the social classes propelling it.

**Part 5: The Sources of the xenophobic Violence: the social forces and their class interests**

**Poverty and Xenophobia**
In the discussion about the causes of xenophobia that followed the outbreak in May most commentators identified the poverty of the working class in the townships, linked to the
lack of service delivery by the government, as the key factor explaining the outbreak of xenophobia. The South African government’s official position was that ‘criminal’ elements were to blame for the outbreak. Supporters of the government position were quick to make the point that poverty cannot explain the xenophobia, and pointed to the fact that poverty in Africa was widespread but there were no xenophobia outbreaks.

While much of the government’s position is convenient and self-serving, we need to look more carefully at the link between poverty and xenophobia that is argued by the government position. If there was a direct link between poverty and xenophobia, then we should have seen a much wider spread of the xenophobia attacks than we saw. If this position was true, then we cannot explain the many stories where poor working class people were seen to be helping immigrants in the midst of the xenophobic attacks. Indeed, this approach cannot explain the widespread xenophobic attitudes within the middle classes, as shown by the responses of some members of (white) communities to locating camps in their areas.

An explanation of the xenophobic outbreak has to examine, concretely, the patterns of the outbreak, its targets, the participants in the outbreak and its general dynamics. It has to identify the social forces who emerged as the key movers of the process, and to analyse the interests of these forces. It must also explain why these social forces have a propensity to take the kind of action we saw in the outbreak.

The petty bourgeoisie – ideological perpetrators of xenophobia
In all community reports the small business people, the petty bourgeoisie in the townships, emerged as the ideological perpetrators of xenophobia, aggressively egging on local people, especially the youth to violently expel the ‘foreigners’, in particular the immigrant business people. In most of the reports on the xenophobic violence countrywide, a clear pattern to the attacks emerged: the main targets were uniformly against ‘foreigners’, in particular business owners’, running relatively successful businesses in the township. Their shops were looted and burnt.

Indeed, the history of xenophobic violence in South Africa shows a strong presence of the small traders in various incidents of violence against immigrants. In the late 1990s the first incidents of violence against immigrants involved small and informal traders attacking the businesses of immigrant traders in central Johannesburg. Then, the targets of these attacks in central Johannesburg were Chinese traders. In the recent past immigrant traders in the Cape and the Southern Cape – in particular the Somali traders - have been subjected to violence and many Somalis have been killed in this violence.

In our discussion on ‘economic competition’ we saw that while there was overlap in the kind of businesses run by South African and non-South African nationals, in most cases the nature of the businesses were different. As with other perceptions about jobs, housing and service delivery and women, the sources of the economic pressures experienced by small businesses in townships cannot be ascribed to immigrant businesspersons. These pressures come from the broader economic crisis that has affected South Africa.
The economic crisis
In order to understand why the petty bourgeoisie in the townships became the ideological perpetrators of xenophobia, we need to discuss their specific economic situation, as well as their class interests. The immediate backdrop to the xenophobia outbreak in South Africa is that in the past six to twelve months there was a period of rapid decline in the living standards of working people, and an economic crisis affecting all social classes. A number of key issues peaked more or less at the same time. In the last week of January the year kicked off with the energy crisis and ESKOM’s black outs, and threats of further price increases. An increase in electricity in the last quarter of 2007, has meant that the cost of electricity in privatised, prepaid electricity meters, costs about R20 for 2 days. A family or household needs about R300 for electricity if it is to have a continuous supply throughout the month. Inflation is now at more than 11%, and there has been sharp price increases across the board. In addition, food prices in particular have soared, especially basic foodstuffs that affect the working class – pap, sugar, rice, cooking oil etc. food security is more and more becoming an issue. A recent report indicated that a basic food basket takes up more than 50% of a domestic workers’ salary. From January to May 2008, the price of petrol has increased to more than R9 per litre and this has meant sharp increases in transport/taxi fares. The pressures on all social classes has been relentless, especially over the past few months.

The crisis and the petty bourgeoisie in the township
In general the economic crisis has affected all social classes. What we need to explain is why does the petty bourgeoisie turn to xenophobia?

For the petty bourgeois, the economic crisis registers differently, and as a social class they have more to lose. Besides the rising prices of food and energy, between June 2007 and June 2008 interest rates have increased four times, to about 15% for mortgage bonds, and much higher for hire-purchase and credit cards. In general the poor sections of the working class, especially the unemployed, are not as sensitive to interest rates increases as the petty bourgeoisie as they don’t have housing bonds or cars on hire-purchase.

Where the working class has hire-purchase for furniture and clothing accounts, defaulting on these does not have the same impact on their daily social life as the lower middle class’ defaults have on their social life. The increase in the interest rate has significantly affected the petty bourgeoisie of the townships, in particular the trading petty bourgeoisie. Reports indicate that about 5 000 vehicles and 2000 houses are repossessed every month. Many taxi-owners, locked into the recapitalisation process, have been affected by the interest rate hikes and the increased cost of fuel. Recently many taxis have been repossessed, as owners cannot keep up with monthly instalments. In this context the petty bourgeoisie is subject to the financial pressures of high interest rates from banks and other creditors (whether for capital (loans), goods or personal consumption).

Another major pressure on the small shopkeepers and traders in the townships has been the entry of the major retail chains into the townships. This pressure has been building up over the last decade or so, but has now escalated due to the building of shopping malls in some of the economically important townships. The irony of post-apartheid South Africa
is that the ‘upgrading’ of townships since 1994 has had a negative impact on the trading petty-bourgeoisie of the townships.

The consequence of all these pressures – the economic crisis and the competition from the big bourgeoisie – has been a major pressure on the profit margins of the trading petty-bourgeoisie of the township. Many spaza shops and the old traditional corner shops have collapsed, taxis are struggling with recapitalisation (itself a process that will concentrate ownership among the more resourced elements within the township petty-bourgeoisie) and high fuel costs, and for the taxis some of the plans of the state for public transport threaten to drive margins downs even further.

The Nature of the petty bourgeoisie and its response to crises

The petty bourgeoisie is always in a precarious situation. Economic crisis such as these bring to the fore the fragility of its existence. It is the fear of being dragged back into the working class that makes the petty bourgeoisie vociferous and aggressive in defending its class interests. Hence the turn to xenophobia must be understood in the context of economic pressure on this section of the petty bourgeoisie.

Especially under conditions of economic crisis, the petty bourgeoisie does not have an independent class orientation. By definition the petty bourgeoisie aspires to be part of, and to emulate, the big bourgeoisie. It is therefore tied to capital ideologically and (organisationally), and in the absence of a relatively organised class-based alternative, in an economic crisis such as this, the petty bourgeoisie will not be the bearers of a progressive alternative. Therefore, when faced with a collapse of their businesses and a decline in their living standards members of the petty-bourgeoisie are too weak to turn their anger against the real source of its problems – the economic system and its main beneficiaries, the big bourgeoisie. Its tendency is to first try to off-load the problems, for example high prices, onto the working class.

In the context of consistent pressure on its profit margins (threatening its overall sustainability), and when it is unable to resolve this problem by off-loading it onto the working class, the petty-bourgeoisie in the townships has tended to fight other members of its class for control of the trading turf. For example, in the taxi industry in South Africa, this method has historically emerged as the preferred method of dealing with the pressure on profit margins. The high level of violence in the taxi industry is due to the enormous pressure on profit margins in this industry and the inability of the taxi owning petty-bourgeoisie to mount a battle against the big bourgeoisie and the state around the transportation industry. The big bourgeoisie and the state are the two forces that expect the taxi industry to subsides the low wages of the working class.

In the context of the economic pressure over the past 12 to 18 months on the township petty bourgeoisie, this strata of the township population resorted to the historical method of resolving the pressure on profit margins - violence. Violence was applied against the perceived, but also the weaker, enemy: the non-South African petty-trader. This is not the first time that the non-South African petty-trader had been blamed for the problems of the local petty-trader: this has been the practice since the 1990s.
Immigrant traders as ‘the face of the world market’

In many communities in South Africa, and especially in townships close to the major industrial centers, the immigrant communities have become a formidable if not dominant feature of the local petty-trade – spaza shops, corner shops, community teleshops in containers, and so on. There are two questions that we need to ask with respect to this domination of the local petty-trade by immigrant communities. The first is why immigrant traders (for many township residents the Somalis represent this class of trader) have come to dominate the township trade. The second is why these traders were available as scapegoats for the ‘problems of service delivery’ not just to other struggling (South African) traders, but also to township residents in general.

Given the pressure on profit margins within the townships, Somalis became the target for having ‘cornered the markets’. In many instances they have replaced local small businesses that have ‘gone under’. The ‘complaint’ is that the Somalis are able to slash prices and be so competitive that they end up controlling most of the businesses. There are some concrete reasons why immigrant traders are able to survive the pressure on margins that has been produced by the economic crisis and by the more systematic entry of the big bourgeoisie into the townships. To begin with, immigrant traders (in most cases) don’t have families with them, they work long hours, live together sharing living expenses, and are thus able to survive on low margins. They are also not subjected to certain ‘cultural pressures’ that exist amongst the township petty bourgeoisie, such as wearing expensive shoes and clothes, buying new cars, and the demands from local family members for assistance. In any price war, the immigrant trader was bound to win!

A second reason we have already dealt with in our earlier discussion: the immigrant traders have introduced new product lines, they have different business models that locals do not want to adopt (or which locals perceive as ‘below their standing in the community) like going door to door, carrying bags of blankets and selling on credit. Thirdly, many traders from the immigrant communities bring with them a rich trading experience, having operated under very difficult conditions in their own countries for long periods. Many of these traders have had to deal with the impact of structural adjustment programmes and the collapse of local economies brought about by wars and other socio-economic disasters. South African traders, on the other hand, are confronting neoliberal and structural adjustment conditions for the first time, and thus have no experience of trading in these conditions.

Fourthly, the immigrant traders sometimes bring with them supply lines that South African traders do not have access to. Indeed, of all the African countries the local petty-trader in South Africa has almost no international experience either in business models or in supply lines. This is in marked contrast to many West African petty-traders, for example, who have vast experience in operating with international supply lines, with multiple currencies, and with an international customer base. One only should have travelled on Air Afrique before its demise to see the internationalisation of (the informal) petty-commodity trade, especially in West Africa.
Fifthly, the South African petty-trader has high expectations of what the state should and can deliver. As a result their business model is based on these expectations. In Vanderbijl Park in the Vaal (Gauteng), for example, conflict developed between the immigrant traders and the South African traders over the latter’s struggles with the local council for ‘services’. The South African traders were not happy with the fact that the immigrant traders did not seem to want to join the struggle against the local council for more services for the traders. In a similar situation in Johannesburg city center, the South African traders complained that the immigrant traders did not want to join a march to demand better trading conditions from the City Council. The refusal by the immigrant traders to participate is viewed as ‘selling out’. The fact of the matter, however, is that the immigrant traders’ experience and expectations of what the state can deliver in the African context is very different, and as such they have developed business models that take account of this. Moreover, given their fragile legal status, very few immigrants would want to take on the might of the South African state.

The fact that the immigrant trader has managed to ‘corner’ the township market meant that the South African petty-trader could ‘mistake’ them as the source of their problem. For the South African petty-trader the pressures unleashed by the economic crisis would take the face of the immigrant traders. The truth of the matter is that the economic crisis is responsible for the demise of the South African trader. The immigrant trader did not cause their demise, and could not cause their demise. The difficult question, however, is why the immigrant trader, who is reputed to have out-competed the local trader because he could charge lower prices, became a symbol of xenophobic hatred for the non-trading part of the community as well? Put differently: if the immigrant trader brings to the cash-strapped township resident low prices, and thus slows down the rate of decline of living standards of the township resident, why would the same township resident turn against this trader?

Either the explanations of the ANC government - that the xenophobic violence was the work of criminal elements, and/or the violence was due to 3rd force elements - is valid, otherwise a different explanation has to be found. While criminal elements did take advantage of the outbreak to loot and to rob, this cannot account for the broadbased anti-immigrant feeling in township communities.

The key to this apparent riddle is that as food and fuel prices increased over the last few months the immigrant trader was put in a position in which they mediated the relationship between the township resident and the world market. The immigrant trader became the ‘face of the world market’. The immigrant trader, no manner how competitive their prices are, thus bore the anger of many township dwellers, often unemployed and eking out an existence based on a social grant or some other form of precarious income.

In this context, the position of the immigrant trader between the township resident and the world markets on the one hand, and the political and ideological weakness of the working class on the other, the stage was set for the South African petty-trader to transform his immediate class interest into the interest of ‘society as a whole’.
The economic pressure on the (trading) petty-bourgeoisie of the township, and the positioning of the immigrant trader as the face of the world market provides the material basis for the petty bourgeoisie to effectively becoming the ideological perpetrators of xenophobia against African nationals, and it also explains the crucial link between poverty to xenophobia.

**The petty bourgeoisie, organisation and allies**

In the townships the petty bourgeoisie are the most organised sections in the community. They are linked to organisations of capital such as local chambers of commerce, and organs of the state such as local government, community police forums and political organisations such as the ANC. These links consistently reinforce the petty bourgeoisie’s ideological ties to capitalism and the state.

In the townships, leading members of organisations such as the ANC, the IFP, SANCO, the Community Police Forums (CPF) and local councillors own businesses and form part of the petty bourgeoisie. There is often overlap, with the same people operating in different local organisations but wearing different ‘hats’ as councillors, as businesspeople and as members of the CPFs. In the townships the local organisations such as the CPFs exercise enormous authority and influence.

Once the petty bourgeoisie became the social bearers ideologically promoting xenophobia in their class interests, and could provide the ‘link’ between poverty and xenophobia for the working class, the mobilisation within the township was lethal. The absence of, or the weakness of the working class and its organisations, also facilitated this.

This link between these various organisations, the petty-bourgeoisie and xenophobia is borne out by the fact that days before the xenophobia outbreak, a meeting was held in Alexander, to deal with the ‘foreigners in the RDP houses’. This was not a public meeting, but included members of the ANC, the IFP, SANCO, and local councillors. Activists from the townships reported that it was at this meeting that the decision to expel ‘foreigners’ from Alex was taken.

There were broader social forces, than just business owners who formed part of the petty bourgeoisie responsible for, and associated with the xenophobia. Local councillors, mostly from the ANC, emerged as important actors who triggered off the xenophobia, either through corruption and taking bribes for RDP houses or through shifting the responsibility for the lack of service delivery onto the foreigners when they were confronted by residents in townships such as Alex, Kliptown, Braamfisherville.

In all the reports SANCO emerges as having either participated and/or instigated the violence against the foreign African nationals. The Western Cape chairperson of SANCO, Rose Sonto, reiterated his claims that foreigners are taking RDP houses even though an official inquiry has refuted this.
Although part of the ruling alliance (ANC, the SACP and COSATU), SANCO seemed to have dropped off the public agenda, beset by allegations of corruption and mismanagement. While for instance many COSATU members went to the national parliaments and influential positions within government during the transition, SANCO leaders generally did not share the same prestige. The degeneration of SANCO, the infighting in the organisation, the claims and counter-claims of corruption amid failed business ventures, became the norm in SANCO. Rose Sonto’s position was extremely telling when he said in a recent interview that he was not opposed to foreigners buying in Constantia (by definition, white foreigners), as long as they did not do this in the township. For SANCO ‘competition’ with ‘foreigners’ is acceptable in the suburbs, but not in the townships.

A significant number of communities reported the involvement of the CPF in the xenophobic violence in the townships. The CPF members are drawn from the community, many have links to the local ANC branches and some of them are also small businesspeople.

**Who carried out the violence?**

While the petty bourgeoisie were the ideological promoters of the xenophobia, they did not necessarily carry out the violence. They had to find and mobilise social strata that was ‘available’ within the townships to carry out the actual violence. In this context four groups of people were ‘available’ in the townships. These were the hostel dwellers, the unemployed youth, people in informal settlements, and criminals and thugs.

The unemployed youth played an active part in the xenophobic violence – the house-to-house searches for African nationals and in beating up African nationals. In only one township in the Vaal, were high school students involved in ‘confiscating’ the goods of foreign African nationals at their small local stores.

The involvement of informal settlement, though not on a scale that could have been given the size of informal settlement, is an indication of the history of progressive political organisation in these settlements. Many of these settlements sprang up after 1994 or in the early 1990s, and they do not have the traditions of resistance that could have acted as a counterweight to the influences of reactionary politics. The settlements are also places where unemployment is most concentrated, and lack of services is most acute. Further, the social movement have almost no presence in these settlements, which tells us the amount of political work that still needs to be done in these settlements.

**Hostels**

Historically the hostels have been involved in organising ‘third force’ violence, against the student struggles in the 1980s and the broader movement against apartheid. They were also key social institutions linked to the internecine violence between the ANC and the IFP, in KwaZulu Natal and Johannesburg right up to the 1990s. From the hostels, attacks against communities could be launched as the hostel occupants were mobile, and did not have families, women and children living there and this reduced the fear of retaliation. After 1994, funds were set aside to turn these symbols of apartheid
oppression and exploitation into family units. To date this has not taken place and the hostels remain the squalid dwelling of largely single-sexed, unemployed males, mostly Zulu-speaking, with access to weapons. The hostels therefore potentially remain hotbeds for fascist-type organisations to recruit and launch attacks, just as they were in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Just before the xenophobia attacks in Alexander, the IDASA report confirms that meetings were held at the Nobuhle hostel from where it is believed the attacks took place. The IDASA report also raises ‘the participation of hostel dwellers in the xenophobic violence as a cause for concern’. The hostels’ close proximity to where the attacks were perpetrated was more than mere co-incidence. For instance, we have Hostel 4 in Sebokeng, hostels on the East Rand close to Reiger park and Katlehong (historically where clashes took place between hostels and the community) and Dikathole hostel in Germiston. When a tavern, frequented and/or owned by African nationals, was attacked near the Dalton Hostel in Umbilo, (Durban), MEC Bheki Cele named the IFP as the perpetrators but this was denied. The Gauteng government has since announced that it was demolishing some hostels, and refurbishing others into family units. This seems to have been done quickly and quietly, perhaps to avoid a confrontation with those who have reason to keep these hostels going in their present conditions.

**Part 6: Creating a context for violence against immigrants – the South African state and public discourse**

Why is it that African nationals were ‘available’ for such abuse and violence? There have been consistent indications and signals – particularly from the SA government and the media - that African nationals are not welcome here, especially the refugees, the poor and the unskilled. Up to now, this was not voiced directly. There is also a national chauvinism, a superior attitude to African nationals that reflects South Africa’s imperialist project in Africa, the unequal trade relations and the dependence of these countries on South Africa. This is reinforced by the “Proudly SA” campaign, cultivated in the media and informs ‘public attitudes’ and the daily discourse. The recent IDASA Report on the Media and Xenophobia confirms that the media promotes xenophobia in its headlines and its use of emotive language.

This is borne out by a study cited by Adeabajo, based on data from 2001 that about 85% of South Africans believed that undocumented Africans should not have freedom of speech. The same study indicated that about 65% of South Africans believed that they should be denied social services and police protection.

**The role of the state**

In terms of immigration policy, while South Africans don’t need visas for many African countries, reciprocal relationships donot exist for many African countries, whereas visitors from the European Union don’t need a visa for SA. Visas for Nigerians to visit SA is the most expensive on the continent – in all probability a ‘prohibitive strategy’. Skilled professionals have to meet strict regulation and equivalence, for instance in the medical profession. It is therefore not true as Buhlungu suggests that African migrants
can ‘just walk into SA’, through the relaxed border controls. While the illegal trafficking in people exists - with the complicity of South Africans – this is a feature of globalisation, and is common with migrants moving from Mexico to the US, from Africa to Europe, from Russia to Europe, and so forth.

Despite public exposures regarding inefficiencies, bribery and corruption, relating to IDs and marriage certificates; and police corruption, harassment and confiscation of goods from African nationals and other immigrants from China, Bangladesh and Pakistan, the South African government has not made any significant strides to change this situation. In addition, some refugees have been waiting 10 years for their documents. The struggles around the nature of the documents and the rights of refugees (to work and to study) have been a major point of contention, involving the country’s courts. This however is not an issue related to efficiency and administration if one takes into account the world-class standards of the Department of Finance and the Receiver of Revenue. The fact that the Department of Home Affairs has been allowed to become so inefficient is therefore an expression of the political attitudes on the part of the South African state.

The result of this promotion of xenophobia by the state is that African nationals have borne the brunt of xenophobia for a long time. In 1998 two Senegalese and one Zimbabwean were killed, and thrown off the trains. Between 1994 to 2000, about 600 000 were deported. In Cape Town, by 2007, 370 Somalis had been killed. At the Lindela refugee camp, African nationals, including Nigerians have died. These are public signals that the lives of foreigners, especially African nationals, are not worth much. In the face of the recent xenophobia, the South African government’s response in the aftermath has been appalling, reflecting South Africa’s imperial project, and its attitude to African nationals.

Theorising xenophobia: Professor Buhlungu’s discourse and language

It is generally accepted that one’s language reveals one’s general political orientation, class interests, and attitudes and opinions on basic human rights such as gender equity, racism and xenophobia.

Professor Buhlungu’s contribution to the ongoing debate on the violence against immigrants and African nationals, is that he gives the chauvinistic and xenophobic views and practices expressed in public an academic respectability. For Buhlungu South Africa is cast positively as ‘stable’ versus the ‘failed states’ that ‘are imploding and falling apart’ from which African nationals come. Although he doesn’t say as much, this is a ‘proudly’ South African.

His language reinforces stereotypes about African nationals and is xenophobic. Buhlungu denies that the violent attacks against African nationals is xenophobia, despite the overwhelming evidence. According to the Oxford Dictionary, xenophobia is ‘an intense or irrational dislike or fear of people from other countries.’ This definition explains his language which conjures up images of African nationals as dishonest and calculating, ‘who just walk into South Africa and walk into the nearest settlement and find pieces of cardboard and wood and put up a shack.’
The language is classist and disparaging towards poor and/or unskilled African nationals at the ‘bottom end’. Buhlungu claims that foreigners compete for housing and service delivery with South Africans at the bottom end of the scale and this caused the violence. In the interview, Buhlungu refers to African nationals as ‘these people’, ‘a deluge of people’, ‘…at the bottom end…’. They ‘mingle’ and ‘they melt into the local population and this is ridiculous’. He continues, ‘These people come in …They sit in that informal settlement and wait for a couple of weeks…’ ‘They can network very quickly’ and, ‘in a couple of months, it’s uncomfortable there and so on, and then you catapult to the front of the line in the house arena, and you buy yourself an RDP house. And meanwhile your local is sitting there, stuck there and saying, how did this happen?’ Of course, the corruption and the complicity of South Africans are only mentioned in passing, ‘in the documentary on e tv’, and is not engaged with any seriousness. Blame and responsibility are placed on African nationals.

Despite Buhlungu’s history as a progressive, his language is that of a national chauvinist, and the images he constructs to communicate his ideas are insensitive and xenophobic. This interview was politically reactionary, especially as it occurred during the xenophobic attacks.

**Buhlungu’s “camp solution” to xenophobia**
Buhlungu’s analysis is disappointing, simplistic and ‘lazy’, to use his own terminology. His solution is conservative and consistent with the manner in which he understands the sources of the problems. Buhlungu proposes tighter regulation, border controls, register the legals and the illegals, ‘put them in a camp and provide basic amenities’. This is reminiscent of apartheid, where the dompas was used to control black people, their mobility and their presence in the white city. This time, it is to differentiate and regulate African nationals in a democratic South Africa.

Firstly, the history of similar ‘camps’ for foreign nationals or those seen as ‘different’, include Auschwitz camp for Jews in Nazi Germany in the 1940s, Sabra and Shatila for Palestinian refugees in Lebanon in 1982, and Darfur for displaced Sudanese in Sudan in 2005. In all these examples, the isolated camps facilitated massacres and genocide. If African nationals were indeed put into camps, more than 62 people would have died.

Camps also have ways of making themselves permanent. Refugees from Morroco’s occupation of Saharawi, in north Africa, has led to thousands of civilians and members of the liberation organisation, the Polisario Front, living in camps for more than 20 years.

The concrete experience of putting people into camps in Africa (and elsewhere) is not a ‘solution’, and must therefore be rejected unconditionally. Immigrants must be integrated into South African communities.

**Buhlungu’s discourse of imperialism**
Buhlungu’s use of the ‘failed states’ theory aligns his perspective with historically reactionary positions, namely US Foreign Policy. A ‘failed state’ is defined as one with a
‘democracy deficit’. The Failed States Foundation, a right-wing thinktank in the US, adds that the government has ‘lost control on the monopoly on the legitimate use of force, lacks the capacity to deliver public services or the authority to make collective decisions, many users fail to pay taxes and rely on the black market.’ Historically the US used the ‘failed state theory’ as a threat to world peace and the pretext for US intervention, including military invasion, to overthrow popular democratic regimes. US intervention was in the interests of US commercial and strategic interests ranging from oil, trade, markets, military bases and geopolitical interests, but it used the ‘theory of failed states’ as a cover for these imperial interests. This theory was also convenient during the Cold War and the fight against communism.

**Conclusion**

The South African working class is weak and vulnerable, and hence its most progressive traditions of solidarity have been subsumed, and the xenophobia is an indication of this weakness. What confirms this is that where communities were organised, they prevented the xenophobic violence, and goods looted were returned to their owners. This is the basis to build solidarity with African nationals and with Africa, based on the struggle for a progressive working class project in South Africa that is has the potential to become an Africa-wide movement (and beyond that a global movement).

Cheik anta Diop raised important criteria with which to judge ‘our country’, his intimate way of talking about the African continent and its history, “If one day the masses seize the initiative to react across the continent in solidarity with the victims of a local act of repression, … That day will mark the beginning of a new era in African politics”. While we have clearly not reached that day, the integration of the people from various parts of the continent raises the possibilities and the potential for a substantial Africa-wide movement based on the organisation and unity of all working people.

Maria van Driel
June 2008

**Some References**


Mayihlome, L, 1997. The impact of Zimbabwe-South Africa Trade Relations, a bilateral, regional or multilateral approach (MA Thesis: Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, California)