

South Africa's ruling class incites pogroms against migrants

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Xenophobic protests against migrants backed by the entire political establishment across South Africa have escalated in recent weeks. In some areas, this has taken the form of organised violence, with migrants assaulted in what can only be described as pogroms.

The xenophobic March and March movement has been organising protests since mid-April in Durban, Pretoria and Johannesburg. They are still ongoing across Gauteng province, with a planned national shutdown on May 4. Drawing on Zulu warrior imagery, the protests have been marked by a highly militarised atmosphere, with many participants carrying shields, spears and knobkerries to present themselves as battle-ready to fight off “invaders.”

During the protest in Durban a video emerged of participants beating a foreigner with a volley of punches, slaps and whips to the face. Women can be heard yelling “Mshaye!” (Beat him!). Shortly after, leaders of the group including Ngizwe Mchunu of Amabhinca started chanting “F* off foreigner” in Zulu, using “kwerekwere”, a derogatory slur.

Other videos have surfaced of foreigners being attacked with hockey sticks, and foreign shop owners originating from across Asia and Africa being told to hire South Africans only and dismiss other nationals

March and March was founded by Durban radio personality Jacinta Ngobese-Zuma and operates as a vigilante street force conducting raids on foreign-owned businesses. Earlier in the year it picketed schools it accused of sidelining South African students in favour of children born to migrants, claiming that foreign children are the cause of overcrowding in schools.

Mobs of other anti-immigrant groups like Operation Dudula and the Patriotic Alliance (PA) have prevented foreigners and naturalised citizens from accessing hospitals, demanding identity documents as a condition to receive medical care. Last year, this led to the death of a one-year old child in Johannesburg.

Thabo Moeketsi, a figure frequently seen on social media with the PA, and now ActionSA, was recorded regurgitating the language of the Nazis to describe his supporters: “These are South Africans by pure blood and soil. From both mother and father, we are all South Africans pure! Not mixed!”

At least four immigrants have been shot dead in Jo’burg over the past weeks. Three were killed while dining at a McDonald’s in the Central Business District, while an Ethiopian was shot in a market.

Despite extensive coverage in the capitalist media and widespread amplification on social media, particularly on X, owned by South African-born billionaire Elon Musk, and the backing of the entire ruling establishment, participation in these pogrom-style actions has remained limited to only around 300 to 500 people.

The political establishment is complicit

However, they have received the blessing of the political establishment, drawing support from a collection of right-wing populist and nationalist forces. These include the anti-immigrant vigilante group Operation Dudula; the uMkhonto weSizwe Party (MKP), founded by corrupt millionaire and former president, Jacob Zuma; the pro-business, anti-immigrant ActionSA; Zulu nationalist formations such as Amabhinca Nation and the Zulu nationalist Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP); as well as the PA.

Notably, both the IFP and PA are members of the ruling Government of National Unity led by the African National Congress (ANC).

The African National Congress-led government has formally distanced itself from the xenophobic campaign. In last Monday’s Freedom Day speech, ANC President Cyril Ramaphosa issued ritual condemnations of xenophobia and sought to dissociate the government from the actions of vigilante forces.

But the government’s own policy is rooted in anti-immigrant repression. In the same address, Ramaphosa declared that “we are clamping down on illegal migration and on businesses that flout our laws by hiring undocumented persons at the expense of our citizens”.

Ramaphosa has previously insisted that “South Africa cannot be a country where everyone who wants to come can come and stay here,” and has emphasised the need to “secure our borders” and enforce immigration laws more strictly. Former Home Affairs Minister Aaron Motsoaledi has agitated that undocumented migration places pressure on public services that the ANC has gutted.

The ANC’s allies in government are seizing the campaign to intensify anti-migrant policies. Inkatha Freedom Party leader Velenkosini Hlabisa declared: “We will work with all government departments to return [migrants] to their respective countries so that the job opportunities occupied by unskilled foreign nationals can be available to South Africans.”

Social disaster under the ANC

This scapegoating must be understood in the context of the social order the ANC has presided over since 1994. While the legal framework of apartheid was dismantled, the underlying class structure has been preserved.

South Africa remains one of the most unequal societies in the world: unemployment stands at around a third of the workforce, while youth unemployment exceeds 60 percent. More than half the population lives below the poverty line, and millions still lack reliable access to basic services such as adequate housing, electricity, and sanitation.

At the same time, a narrow layer has accumulated vast wealth, with the richest 10 percent controlling around 80–85 percent of total household wealth.

This extreme concentration of wealth continues to reflect the class and racial hierarchies of apartheid, that the ANC preserved after 1994. White South Africans, who make up less than 10 percent of the population, are still estimated to own between 60 and 70 percent of total household wealth.

At the same time, the ANC has overseen the rise of a new Black elite through Black Economic Empowerment policies, sharply increasing inequality within the black population. The share of Black South Africans in the top income decile has more than doubled since the end of apartheid, rising from roughly 14 percent in 1993 to over 30 percent by the late 2000s.

This sharpening class divide is unfolding within a broader economic collapse, now intensified by the US war against Iran that has already led to rising global inflation, particularly through spikes in oil, fertilizer and food prices.

As the capitalist class continues its job cuts, prices soar and livelihoods collapse, the crisis confronting the working class will only worsen, fuelling the conditions in which the ANC, its allies and fascistic mobs incite xenophobic scapegoating.

The bankruptcy of the SACP and EFF

The working class will find no opposition in what passes as the “left”, which is criminally involved in the xenophobic campaign.

The South African Communist Party (SACP), that works as a faction within the ANC, passed a resolution in its 2025 Special National Congress framing migration in terms of “poor border management” and an “increase in undocumented individuals” and linking it to pressures on public services. It calls for a “comprehensive programme” to document and biometrically register all undocumented non-South Africans.

Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) leader Julius Malema addressed the protests at the 14th Anniversary Gala of the Colleen Mashawana Foundation on April 30. He welcomed the attendance of Zuma’s MKP and “Our princess Duduzile Zuma-Sambudla”, a former high-ranking member of that party and daughter of its founder. This is the same party that has been leading protests and other campaigns against foreigners.

Malema then denounced the xenophobic protests, asking his audience. “Tell us after doing that how many jobs have you created by beating up these Nigerians, by beating up these Ghanaians, by beating up these Zimbabweans?... I joined politics because I saw it as a necessity to unite and fight the apartheid system and deliver the economic freedom to our people”.

However, Malema has on numerous occasions joined in the xenophobic chorus stating: “We don’t disagree that Zimbabweans should be given jobs, but they should be given jobs in their municipalities in Harare and other areas so we have opportunities to

get jobs in our own municipalities”. He went on, “When we say we want jobs where we pay for services, we are not saying we don’t want Zimbabweans. We are saying we should be given first preference before everyone else to get jobs”.

Framed as a defence of local workers, this accepts the premise that employment is a zero-sum resource to be divided along national lines, rather than confronting the role of capital in exploiting both migrant and local labour alike.

Learn the lessons of history—for working-class internationalism!

The anti-migrant campaign is a warning to workers across South Africa. At every point of deepening crisis and rising class struggle in South Africa, the ruling elite—today led by the ANC—has turned to division, scapegoating and repression to maintain its rule. Long before apartheid was formalised in 1948, the state responded to workers’ strikes and protests by tightening racial controls and structuring the labour market along racial lines, through measures such as the Natives Land Act and the reinforcement of the colour bar after the 1922 Rand Rebellion involving 20,000 white mineworkers.

Mass struggles like the 1946 African mineworkers’ strike were met with brutal repression, paving the way for the installation in 1948 of the apartheid regime and its machinery of racial segregation, strike bans and political suppression. Later waves of working class resistance—from the 1973 Durban strikes to the Soweto Uprising and the mass uprisings of the 1980s—were again met with states of emergency, militarisation and divide-and-rule tactics, including inciting tribalism.

Today’s xenophobic scapegoating follows this same historical pattern: an attempt to deflect mounting social anger away from the ruling class by turning workers against one another.

The defence of migrant workers is inseparable from the fight for the independent and unified political mobilisation of the working class on an internationalist and socialist programme. This means rejecting all attempts to subordinate workers to any faction of the South African political establishment, and instead forging unity across borders against the capitalist system. Only such a movement can put an end to the conditions that give rise to xenophobia and lay the basis for the provision of decent jobs, wages and living standards for all.



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