

Nearly 25,000 migrants flee South Africa amid xenophobic violence

Alejandro López
6 July 2026

Over the past month, nearly 25,000 migrants have fled South Africa amid xenophobic violence and pogroms. Thousands more have slept outside consulates, government offices, and border posts in the desperate hope of repatriation.

Governments across the African continent, including Malawi, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Nigeria, Kenya and Ghana have organised bus convoys and emergency flights to remove their nationals from a country now gripped by the largest xenophobic mobilisation since the pogroms of 2008, in which 62 people were killed nationwide.

The immediate trigger was a self-declared “deadline” of June 30, set by the fascistic anti-immigrant group March and March, ordering undocumented migrants to leave or face violence. On that day, 20 far-right groups led by March and March and vigilante group Operation Dudula, organised 120 protests across the country.

March to March leader, former Durban radio host Jacinta Ngobese-Zuma, billed the day as the launch of “a national march to freedom, a rolling mass action” that would continue until every undocumented foreign national had been deported.

The demonstrations did not enjoy broad popular support. But in Johannesburg, several thousand protesters carrying sticks and flags brought the city centre to a standstill, as shops shuttered and public transport was suspended, while in Cape Town only around a hundred marchers turned out, passing a counter-demonstration against xenophobia.

In Durban, the epicentre of the mobilisation, thousands of marchers turned out in full Zulu warrior regalia—the amabutho regiments in leopard skins, carrying spears, shields and whips—chanting “Abahambe,” “They must go,” as they moved through the streets stopping outside buildings believed to house undocumented migrants and ordering the occupants to leave.

The xenophobic campaign has led to at least four deaths since the protests intensified, including a migrant who fell to his death from the eighth floor of a Durban building after fearing he had been identified as a target. This followed weeks of attacks stretching back to March, including the burning of dozens of shacks in an informal settlement near Mossel Bay in the Western Cape, in which Mozambique’s government reported five of its citizens killed.

The pogromist groups act as the extra-parliamentary spearhead of the African National Congress (ANC)-led ten party Government of National Unity’s anti-immigrant policies. The fascistic vigilante

organisations translate this programme into direct threats in working-class neighbourhoods.

The party most closely associated with the violence is the Zulu-based Inkatha Freedom Party, which has pledged through its leader Velenkosini Hlabisa to work with all government departments to return migrants to their respective countries so that jobs held by foreign nationals could be freed up for South Africans.

The far-right Patriotic Alliance, whose leader Gayton McKenzie sits in Ramaphosa’s cabinet as Minister of Sport, has built its entire political identity on demands for mass deportation. McKenzie sought to distance his own party members from the June 30 mobilisation, formally instructing them in a livestreamed address not to assault children or undocumented foreigners while affirming days later that he would deny medical oxygen to an undocumented immigrant if a South African patient required it.

While the ANC publicly disavows their methods, it treats the demands of the pogromists as legitimate and implements their essential objective through the machinery of policing, immigration control and repression.

Together, they work to turn the anger of impoverished South Africans away from the capitalist system towards scapegoating migrants.

In May President Cyril Ramaphosa issued an open letter insisting that “there is no place in South Africa for xenophobia”. He attributed the violence to “opportunists” exploiting “the legitimate grievances, particularly those of the poor, under the false guise of ‘community activism’.” But in a June 7 national address, he stated that “many South Africans are asking difficult but legitimate questions” about migration, unveiling a “Comprehensive Approach for Migration Management” including intensified workplace inspections, prosecutions of employers of undocumented workers, an expanded and militarised Border Management Authority that has intercepted more than 450,000 undocumented migrants in the past year alone, dedicated immigration courts to fast-track deportations and the recruitment of 10,000 new labour inspectors.

The convergence of the government’s policy and the vigilantes’ demands was demonstrated immediately after the far-right protests. At a 1 July police briefing, police reported more than 900 arrests nationwide, including approximately 300 undocumented migrants for violating the Immigration Act. Thus, even as the police were compelled to intervene against the most violent protestors, they delivered on a central demand of the protestors:

the mass detention of undocumented migrants.

The Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) has also attempted to posture against the xenophobic campaign. Last month, it issued a statement describing unemployment and inequality as “real and legitimate grievances”, insisting migrants had not caused them. But COSATU has embraced the reactionary “South Africans first” programme.

In May 2025, the federation welcomed Cabinet’s approval of the National Labour Migration Policy and the Employment Services Amendment Bill, which proposed to empower the labour minister to impose limits on the employment of documented foreign workers by workplace and economic sector. COSATU’s parliamentary coordinator, Matthew Parks, described the measures as a long-overdue response to the “flood of undocumented migrant labour” and that unemployed South Africans with the requisite skills should be “prioritised” for available jobs.

The Stalinist South African Communist Party bears a particular political responsibility as the ANC’s long-standing alliance partner and de facto a faction of the ANC. In an October statement, the SACP condemned anti-migrant vigilantism, but then said that working-class frustration was compounded by “rising insecurity, inadequate policing, and poor border management practices,” which had “led to an increase in undocumented individuals.” It demanded the Department of Home Affairs “urgently implement a comprehensive programme to document and capture the biometrics of all undocumented South Africans and non-South Africans.”

The role of the ANC, the SACP and COSATU must be understood in its historical context. The present violence is not a spontaneous eruption of popular prejudice as claimed by the media. It is the organised expression of a xenophobic politics cultivated over nearly three decades by the South African ruling class, led by the ANC, to divert the immense social anger produced by capitalist rule onto the most vulnerable sections of the working class.

The negotiated settlement between the ANC and the white-supremacist regime dismantled apartheid’s racist legal framework in 1994, while preserving the underlying property relations and class structure on which it rested. The SACP and COSATU, bound to the ANC through the Tripartite Alliance, functioned as its indispensable political and industrial props, subordinating the working class to the new capitalist order and suppressing any independent struggle against it.

Having come to power promising jobs, housing, land and dignity, the ANC imposed the pro-capitalist Growth, Employment and Redistribution programme, privatisation and fiscal austerity. Its Black Economic Empowerment policies enriched a narrow layer of politically connected black businessmen while doing nothing to alter the mass unemployment, poverty and inequality inherited from apartheid. The result is a social disaster. Official unemployment stands at 32.7 percent, unemployment among those aged 15 to 24 has reached 60.9 percent, and the richest tenth of the population controls roughly 85 percent of household wealth.

It is on this foundation that xenophobia has been systematically fostered.

The Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), a splinter of the ANC,

offers no political alternative. Its leader, Julius Malema has opposed the attacks on migrants and denounced what he calls “Afrophobia,” stressing that the issue of the campaign is that it targets black African migrants while exempting white, Indian, Arab and Chinese foreign nationals. This substitutes racial solidarity for class solidarity and leaves untouched the nationalist framework that sets workers against one another.

Malema has repeatedly advanced the nationalist premise underlying the xenophobic campaign. At an EFF rally in Seshego, Limpopo, in August 2025, he declared that Zimbabweans should be given jobs “in their municipalities in Harare and other areas” while South Africans should receive “first preference” for employment in their own municipalities.

Three years earlier, in January 2022, Malema and the EFF organised inspections of restaurants at Johannesburg’s Mall of Africa to scrutinise what it called “the employment ratio between South African citizens and foreign nationals.” These methods inspired the vigilante tactics later taken up by Operation Dudula and March and March, to raid workplaces and prevent migrants from accessing schools and hospitals.

Long before the ANC assumed office, and before the formal establishment of apartheid, the South African ruling class relied on racial and national divisions to preserve capitalist rule. The 1913 Natives Land Act restricted African access to land and entrenched territorial segregation and labour control. The 1922 Rand Revolt was followed by the consolidation of the racial colour bar in mining. In 1946, the largest African mineworkers’ strike to that point was brutally suppressed by police violence, clearing the way for the National Party’s formalisation of apartheid after 1948.

At each of these turning points, the ruling class answered the danger of a unified movement of the working class by deepening racial and national antagonisms. The pogroms of the past two months are a continuation of this class strategy.

The way forward lies in the independent political mobilisation of South African and migrant workers alike against the capitalist system, the state apparatus of repression and every party that defends them. Only a socialist and internationalist movement, uniting workers across national, racial and ethnic lines in a common struggle for decent jobs, housing, healthcare and social equality, can put an end to the cycle of xenophobic violence once and for all.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact