

Campaigning Against Xenophobia

Unity against poverty, crime & xenophobia

During the first three months of the year a new 'wave' of xenophobic violence threatened to engulf the country. For several weeks there was near panic amongst foreign residents. The counter-campaign led by WASP founded the Coalition of Civics Against Xenophobia in Pretoria which culminated in a march to Union Buildings. Dozens of immigrant groups marched alongside South African community organisations under the slogan "Unite against poverty, crime and xenophobia". Whilst small, the march created an important reference point for the response of the workers' movement to future threats of xenophobic violence.

Tshwane WASP

Background

From the end of January, the Mamelodi Concerned Residents (MCR) group, from the huge township to the east of Pretoria distributed leaflets across the city blaming "foreigners" for unemployment, crime and drugs and calling on residents to march against "illegal immigrants". This followed xenophobic statements by the new mayor of Johannesburg, Herman Mashaba. That Mashaba could make these comments with zero consequences within his party is a symptom of the effect that Donald Trump's election to the US presidency has had in legitimizing anti-immigrant views and emboldening reactionary forces across the world (see page 14).

The capitalist politicians and parties find xenophobia and other reactionary ideas a useful diversion from the failures of their rotten profit system and their complete inability to put forward any sort of programme capable of overcoming it. They would rather incite a bloodbath by turning the working class against each other rather than face the possibility of united struggle.

Xenophobia is able to have some influence over some sections of the working class, and especially the unorganized poor and unemployed because of the grinding poverty that the crisis of capitalism means for the majority. In such desperate circumstances, and in the absence of mass organisations to lead disciplined struggle people will look for any way to push their way to the head of the queue to eat. Much of the looting that accompanies outbursts of xenophobia is not perpetrated



Coalition of Civics Against Xenophobia marches to Union Buildings, 9 March 2017

by xenophobic ideologues, but by the most marginalised and ground-down groups in communities – the unemployed youth, drug addicts etc. – who use the political cover given by the likes of Mashaba and the MCR to fill their empty bellies.

Coalition Against Xenophobia

The MCR's march was granted permission without any questions raised by the DA controlled Tshwane municipality and went ahead on 24 February. The ANC controlled Department of Home Affairs agreed to meet the leaders of the march and to respond to their memorandum. Reports from WASP members living in Pretoria indicate that even EFF activists were involved in mobilizing for this march. With no programme for struggle to break with capitalism and address the underlying social problems that can fuel support for xenophobia all of the mainstream parties capitulated.

In this vacuum WASP was able to take an initiative. Hundreds of worker activists in the #OutsourcingMustFall campaign distributed leaflets countering the MCR's lies and calling for organisation and struggle to deal with the very real issues of poverty, crime and unemployment. On 17 February we organised a public meeting, followed quickly by a second on 19 February appealing to foreign resident and immigrant groups. This meeting agreed to found an Anti-Xenophobia Coalition.

On 22 February, two days before the planned MCR march, the Coalition went ahead with a press conference. Over the next two days WASP leaders dominated the TV, radio and newspapers on the issue. In a major victory for the campaign, Mashaba was forced to 'clarify' his xenophobic statements as having been

misinterpreted. The Somali community in particular responded to the call to organise community self-defence. On the night of the MCR march WASP leaders attended a community meeting in Pretoria West and played a direct role in organising patrols to defend foreign residents and businesses

Marching forward

In the end, the MCR march failed to attract more than a few hundred. The organisers complimented WASP by blaming us for their failure! The Coalition decided to go ahead with its own march that would put the issues of crime and poverty at its heart. By now the Coalition had been joined by an organisation of hawkers and small traders from Mamelodi itself. This was crucial for showing the real views of the residents of Mamelodi – these traders marched under slogans including "the mall is taking our jobs not our African brothers".

Unlike the authorities' tacit support for the MCR march, the Coalition's march was obstructed at every turn. In the end it went ahead as an 'illegal gathering' and the Office of the President refused to even receive our memorandum. This was a very important learning curve for the Coalition – the government had not been silent because they were unaware of the growing xenophobia; on the contrary they supported it.

Whilst the immediate threat of widespread xenophobic violence appears to have receded, the task of organising communities – uniting foreign residents and local – is just beginning. With the successes of the campaign under the Coalition's belt, the strategic task of forming a country-wide socialist civic federation can take steps forward.