

## **Zwelinzima Vavi's address to Anti-xenophobia Rally, Yeoville, 16 May 2015**

Thank you for inviting me to this service to mourn all the victims of xenophobic violence that recently erupted in parts of our beloved country, South Africa. We gather here to pledge our solidarity with the families of all the victims of this carnage. We send to them our deepest condolences fully aware of the pain they endured in losing their loved ones.

This commemoration is highly important in that brings to the fore an issue about which we must all stand up and be counted. And I must congratulate all the organisations who are represented here today for mobilising people on to the streets around the famous slogan: "An injury to one is an injury to all!"

Xenophobia is a massive challenge to all revolutionaries and particularly the workers' movement. In South Africa, since 2008 and again this year, we have seen anger and violence being misdirected to non-South African workers and foreign-owned small businesses. While unreservedly condemning any such acts of violence, we also need to look at the underlying socio-economic context in which such acts take place.

Xenophobia, and its related problem of racism, is an international problem, caused by the massive and growing levels of inequality, which drive the poor to escape from poverty, hunger and insecurity to seek a better life in richer parts of the world.

It has been happening on the USA/Mexico border for decades. We have seen the tragic loss of life in the Mediterranean Sea as migrants from Africa and the Middle East try to enter Europe and now we see hundreds of people from Bangladesh and Burma desperately trying to get into Malaysia.

Tragically this creates a big danger of ethnic divisions, leading to some people in the host countries, who also suffer from high levels of unemployment and poverty, wrongly accusing the migrants of taking their jobs and business opportunities.

This in turn can lead to violent xenophobic and/or racist conflict, which has the potential to shatter the unity among workers and the poor which it is so vital for us to defend and strengthen.

The key to a solution to this problem lies in understanding the basic reason for its existence – the appalling levels of unemployment, poverty and inequality here and around the world. This is made worse by employers who callously get rid of jobs in one part of the world and seek out the cheapest labour elsewhere. They exploit starving migrants in low-paid jobs, especially the illegal immigrants who can be blackmailed into accepting whatever wages and conditions they impose for fear of being deported.

The immigrant workers can then become scapegoats for frustrations arising from

persisting socio-economic ills and the lack of an understanding of the root causes of the crisis facing people from other countries, which can then dangerously take the form of seeing “them and us”.

South African government's "operation feala" and its timing coming in the wake of the violent attacks targeting in particular people of African origin feeds into the misconceptions that migrants are to blame for all our social and economic ills. This unprincipled, opportunist and populist operation feala is not ideologically neutral but seeks to pull wool on the eyes of the working class in South Africa. Its intention is to tell the 8.5 million unemployed, the 50% of African women who earns below R2800 a month, the 60% youth that is unemployed, the 50% of workers earning below R3 033 a month, the women that are being raped and other victims of drugs and crime in Manneburg and elsewhere that all of these challenges would have not been there, if it was not the not documented migrants.

Xenophobia feeds on perceptions, and one of the commonest is that “foreigners” are taking jobs from South Africans. But, according to Hama Tamukomoyo of the Institute of Security Studies, “research by the Gauteng City-Region Observatory showed that rather than causing unemployment, international migrants contribute to the economy by renting shops from South Africans, providing jobs to locals and paying value added tax. Foreigners that run businesses employ more South Africans than South African-run businesses do.”

A 2014 Migrating for Work Research Consortium (MiWORK) report noted that while African migrants do better in the job market than local South Africans, “they are more likely to be employed in the informal sector and in precarious employment, both characterised by lower levels of earnings.” They are our fellow workers!

That is why it is so urgent to develop ways to work together to confront the crisis afflicting our common existence, across borders which, especially in Africa, are not natural boundaries anyway, but artificially imposed creations of colonialism which now act as a barrier to the movement, interaction and unity of our people who have always shared a common history, culture, heritage and destiny.

That is why we need migration policies which will combat and ultimately eradicate xenophobia and racism, but combine them with socio-economic policies to tackle the underlying structural problems which give rise to these evils in the first place: massive poverty for the majority and massive wealth for the few, with inevitable social tensions and profound crisis and more importantly, the centrality of class struggle.

This economic crisis is compounded by the continued existence of undemocratic regimes, coups, civil wars and human rights abuses that also force people to migrate to seek refuge elsewhere.

In Africa, migration policy must be part of a broader, comprehensive development

plan for the continent, to reverse the persisting problems of underdevelopment and growing inequalities and human rights violations.

We must work towards a future which ensures peace between and within nations, poverty alleviation, full employment, economic integration, access to education and the free movement of people within the continent and ultimately the world. Only then will we reduce the pressure on people to migrate in the first place and cut across divisive attitudes of blaming people from elsewhere for their problems.

So what practically must we do now?

1. Recruit and organise cross-border migrant workers, regardless of document status, into the trade unions, in particular the most vulnerable workers such as farm, domestic and hospitality workers;
2. Build popular consciousness against xenophobia, racism and sexism through community and workers' education programmes, to challenge racist and right-wing interpretations of the issues, particularly false alarms such as associating rising crime levels with foreigners;
3. Build community structures to unite against all and every form of discrimination, particularly xenophobia, and creating community dialogue forums where experiences are shared on each other's background and history;
4. Organise meetings where such issues can be openly discussed and confronted in our communities, and develop special support and legal assistance to deserving asylum seekers in order to regularise their situation and that of their families
5. Create capacity for conflict resolution and mediation, particularly early warning and monitoring systems that will include a hotline or call centre where incidents or even suspicions can be reported before they become major occurrences
6. Urge political parties to make racism and xenophobia a critical issue in their campaign manifestos and commit to take decisive action against those involved in fermenting tensions against foreigners in communities
7. Popularise and promote African heritage in all our communities, including such affirming and positive values such as ubuntu, to deepen and celebrate the rich history of struggle, unity and shared values amongst the people of Africa in general

8. Work with all organisations involved in this and other struggles for social justice in order to promote co-operation and unity in struggle. Draw into active participation all trade unions, faith-based organisations, youth and student structures, NGOs, social movements, academics and other role-players to build effective joint programmes towards this end.

Above all we have to fight relentlessly against attempts to shift the blame for poverty and unemployment on our fellow African and Asian workers and make them scapegoats. We must link the dangers of racism and xenophobia to the underlying social crisis and turn people's anger against their real enemy – the capitalist system of production, distribution and exchange.

**Workers of the world unite! You have nothing to lose but your chains!**