

https://dspace.org/

A labour perspective on xenophobia in South africa: a case study of the Metals and Engineering industry in Ekurhuleni

Di Paola, Miriam

2013-06-07
http://hdl.handle.net/10539/12776

Downloaded from a DSpace repository. https://dspace.org/

Abstract

This report looks at an issue that is hidden from the public eye as well as from most sociological research: xenophobia in an industrial workplace. The lack of research on xenophobia in the workplace is a striking phenomenon that could be explained by an assumption that it does not affect progressive trade unions and organized workers.

This report explores whether and how new forms of xenophobia in South Africa are related to the complex interaction between frustrated economic expectations, the reproduction of an apartheid practice that stigmatizes *the other* (albeit along new lines), and a strong nationalistic discourse.

Economic frustration, joblessness and competition over scarce resources (also in terms of government social provision) are elements often used to characterize a context that can be *conducive* to the rise of anti-migrant sentiments and attitudes. In fact, many South African workers consider foreign co-workers to be responsible for 'driving down wages and conditions'; a belief supported by many managers' claims that foreigners work 'harder for less'.

However, little research has been conducted on xenophobia in workplaces. One possible explanation for this may be related to the pervasiveness of a view that assumes that workers are less inclined toward xenophobia than unemployed people. Such a view is rooted in neoclassical economics and considers that workers are not inclined toward xenophobic sentiments because of their 'privileged' employment status. This report interrogates these assumptions by looking into actual relationships between South African and foreign workers in the abode of production and beyond, and at the role played by trade unions in this regard. The research question of this research report is therefore twofold:

- How do workers of different nationalities relate to each other in the workplace, and beyond?
- How does NUMSA position itself in the interaction between workers of different nationalities?

The research carried out at the Marco Polo bus factory in Ekurhuleni has shown that xenophobic sentiments and practices are indeed present in formal workplaces. It thus challenges the assumption underlining the prevalent neglect of workplaces among studies on xenophobia in South Africa, namely that xenophobia will be found among unemployed people or informal workers but not in formal workplaces. NUMSA officials who emphasize the difficulty in tackling xenophobia among members confirmed the finding. The difficulty is explained by the fact that members are embedded in a climate characterized by suspicion toward foreigners; such suspicion is amplified by the national discourse and reinforced in communities.

Examples of solidarity among workers of different nationalities have nevertheless also been documented, with individual shopstewards playing an active role in trying to bridge the national divide. However, it emerges that the union has not as yet developed a coherent strategy to address xenophobia in the workplace.

There is a gap between the leadership's understanding of xenophobia, which is grounded in class analysis and based on principles of class solidarity and worker unity, and the perceptions of workers on the ground. The latter tend to see foreign nationals as a threat; in this regard their views conform to the widespread xenophobic climate rather then to the official union stance.

This disjuncture between the union's national and local levels results in a failure to address xenophobia in workplaces and in communities. Otherwise the management of anti-migrant sentiments in the workplace is basically left to those individual shopstewards who choose to engage the workers about such biases. These sentiments are also *de facto* managed by employers.