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ARTICLE (REFEREED)

Capital's Preference for Foreign African Labour in South Africa: Reflections on Liberal Anti-xenophobia Research

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Abstract

In South Africa, in many economic sectors, foreign blacks are more likely to get a job than a similarly skilled black South African. This paper is about why employers prefer foreign African labour in South Africa, how this contributes to seeing South African black workers as inferior, and how job hoarding networks in employment niches have emerged. We examine this in the context of literature on 'xenophobia'. Both discursive and material practices of racist-ethnicist employers are significant. There is a new hierarchy of fictive labour imaginaries which reflects a new labour 'frontier' in a diversified post-apartheid southern African pool. The new frontier also reflects neoliberal flexible labour systems which operate within a human rights free-market framework.

Keywords

Foreign African Workers; Employers' Labour Preferences; Regional Labour Imaginaries; Intra-Working-Class Competition, Xenophobia

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Introduction

The starting point of much liberal scholarship is the Southern African Migration Project (SAMP, 2006) Xenophobia Survey which claimed that 'South Africa exhibits levels of intolerance and hostility to outsiders unlike virtually anything seen in other parts of the world' (Crush 2008, p. 2). Here, xenophobia is presented in apocalyptic images: eruptions, 'perfect' storms, rampaging mobs on killing sprees and looting foreign-owned African shops. Neocosmos (2008), one of the most cited scholars on xenophobia, argues that South Africans are gripped by fear of a deluge of foreign Africans taking away the fruits of freedom, and this along with a superiority complex vis à vis the rest of Africa (exceptionalism) leads to his characterisation of 'black South African working-class people' 'gripped by quasi-fascist ideas' (2008, p. 592) who have descended into 'evil' (2007, p. 593). Thus, the root cause 'of the recent xenophobic pogroms' in South Africa, is not poverty (Neocosmos 2008). Neocosmos calls for re-education in the 'politics of peace' to see all humans as equals. To fight xenophobia, Neocosmos appeals to abstract liberal humanism as an antidote to emerging nationalist extremism. 'A person is a person wherever they may find themselves…. It seems to me that holding on to the consequences of such an axiom is where an alternative politics of peace and equality should begin'. Many argue that at times extreme xenophobic ideas and attitudes alternating with xeno-denialism are publicly expressed by high-ranking politicians (Dodson 2010) and the media (Danso & McDonald 2000). These studies locate the problem primarily on the liberal terrain of false ideology, scapegoating, state failure and lack of human rights education and they do not place capital accumulation and capital's preference for docile labour and quest to weaken unions at the centre of the problem. The problem of capital's love for foreign labour (xeno-labour-philia) and the activities of capital (including large South African companies) in South Africa's neighbouring states is not examined.

Migrants mainly come to liberated South Africa from South Africa's closest neighbouring states (Lesotho, Zimbabwe, Mozambique) although Somalis, Ethiopians, Pakistanis and Nigerians have also migrated since 1994 (many as asylum-seekers). 'Zimbabwe is a massive exporter of labour to South Africa' (Cross & Cliffe 2017, p. 4) making it, from a labour-sourcing perspective, an additional 'province' of South Africa since national borders are extremely porous. It takes a few dollars to bribe a South African border official and as a newspaper headline noted 'xenophobia isn't keeping immigrants out of South Africa' (Business Insider 2020).

Moreover, migration as Portes (2010) has argued is always a networked process which helps new migrants to make the journey, find work and settle at lower costs than those who migrate as individuals without networks. But networked economic migrants 'self-settle' close to jobs or business opportunities in volatile, economically depressed and increasingly poorly governed townships in South Africa. South Africa's economic growth problems did not end in 1994 (Magetla 2010).

Migration patterns across South Africa are very poorly documented (Landau, Polzer, & Kabwe-Segatti 2010) but the debate on aggregate national numbers is misleading since it obscures the social weight of migrants in specific localities. In some black townships and informal settlements foreign African workers (hereinafter FAW) when concentrated may make up to 30% of the population (Dodson 2010). Integration, solidarity and xenophilia are similarly hard to track statistically (see Sichone 2020; Hlatshwayo 2013). Xenophobic violence has tended to occur in cities and cycles, with a peak in 2008 (with 62 deaths) and another wave centred on Durban in May 2015 and again in 2019 (Mlilo & Misago 2019). Forty-two 'incidents of xenophobia' were recorded by Xenowatch in 2018, with most in Gauteng and Kwa-Zulu-Natal (Mlilo & Misago 2019) – a number that undermines the standard view that sees South Africa as the most xenophobic nation on earth.

This paper is about xenophobia as a product of an economic structure that has roots in a southern African labour market and the system of labour exploitation. For lack of space, we do not look at the historical geography of South African capital in the region as this has been covered elsewhere (see Bond, Miller,

& Ruiters 2001). The paper identifies four interconnected faces or framings of work-related xenophobia/xenophilia and the organised intensification of divisions within the working class: first, capital's framing of the 'good worker' and its defence of free trade in workers; second, how migrants often internalise this; third the framing of the 'bad' worker (local labour); and fourth the vulnerable worker. All four faces provide different rationalities and standpoints that are dialectically related where causes and effects interact. Finally, drawing on interviews with immigrant organisations, the paper looks at how these organisations and labour movements suggest solidarity among old and new workers in South Africa can be improved.

We accord primacy to capital's preferences and networks with FAW in constructing the competitive labour market. Moreover, employers have always weaponised vulnerable unorganised workers in several ways: to block unions from forming, to weaken existing unions, and to exert pressure on unions during negotiations. Capitalists are under competitive pressure to cut costs but this has social consequences. South African workers are resisting the deepening of capitalist power, the rollback of trade unionism, and the complete domination of their country by not wanting to devote their lives to poorly paid and insecure jobs. What is happening in South Africa ties in with a global neoliberal shift. However, knowledge of the specificities of the interlinked southern African region will help find better solutions at the appropriate scale. We criticise existing literature for overestimating the role of ideology and media as if ordinary people simply imbibe what politicians say.

South Africa in context, a special case?

The South African context is critical to understanding the problem of employers' labour preferences. Yudelman and Jeeves (1986) show that over almost 100 years, South Africa's mining capitalists have tried to manipulate immigrant labour and frontiers (first trying to get Chinese workers in 1904 because local eastern Cape black workers were too 'cheeky' and then becoming entirely reliant on Eastern Cape workers only to shift to Mozambique and then Malawi and back again).

South Africa is not only highly unequal and highly racialised but also a very violent country (political assassinations, taxi wars, violent strikes, criminal violence, gender-based violence etc) with thousands of deaths (von Holdt & Alexander 2012). In Cape Town, for example, widely regarded as a pristine tourist hotspot, in one weekend in July 2019, 43 black South Africans were killed – mostly in gang and protection racket wars in townships (Carelse 2019). There are also constant protests against the government and many strikes – an everyday reality – which are often met with police violence (von Holdt & Alexander 2012). Von Holdt (2010, p. 130) notes 'Much of the violence in the past few years has taken place when relatively vulnerable workers have engaged in strike action – such as in the security guards' strike of 2006, which was the most violent strike in the post-apartheid period, in which 57 people died'. Interestingly, this number is close to the 62 who died in the 2008 xenophobic attacks.

As the most unequal country globally, the richest decile in South Africa (still mainly white) equates to the richest decile in Greece while the poorest decile in South Africa matches the poorest decile in Cameroon (Shah 2022). Unions are keeping up wages but mostly for public sector union members (von Holdt 2010).

Following the transition to democracy in 1994 the country introduced a new labour law regime to protect all workers with no reference to nationality or citizenship. The Refugee Act (passed in 1998) is generally considered to be a progressive piece of legislation (Palmary 2002). But the state either cannot or does not want to uphold its own laws and progressive policies (Magetla 2010) leading to local anti-crime movements. Unemployment has become dire. In 1994, when the ANC won the election, with massive black working class and minimal white support, unemployment was at 13 per cent. By 2004, it had jumped to almost 30 per cent (although unemployment is almost non-existent for white South Africans).

Since 1994 migration has been largely unregulated and flows to multiple sectors from farms to homes to restaurants and construction sites (Bond, Miller, & Ruiters 2001; Dodson 2010). It reflected a general trend by the early 1990s that 'employers argued that the new labour relations regime ran against the global trend of labour market flexibility'. This neoliberal drive for greater labour market flexibility undermined the core rights won by the South African labour movement over the previous two decades (Kenny & Webster 1998). The Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU, 1997) warned that 'unregulated access' would lead to 'unacceptable competition for jobs' (Section 3.2). The problem here is what is 'acceptable'? South African workers have become more desperate and compete aggressively for jobs, for instance almost 85,800 applied for 10,000 jobs in one case (Business Tech 2022).

There is a clear distinction in international and South African law between a refugee (or an asylum seeker) and an economic migrant (as well as legal and illegal economic migrants)[1]. Most migrants to South Africa are economic migrants, not political refugees (Crush et al. 2017)[2]. Almost 90% of Malawian youth have no job prospects in Malawi and about 79 per cent are destined for South Africa as economic migrants (Ndegwa 2015, p. 49).

A peculiarity of the South African context is that in most countries, immigrants are employed in low-end jobs (domestic work, security, care and taxi driving) that locals tend to avoid because they have better options. The supply of cheap foreign labour (invited as guest workers) provided by immigrants is seen as functional for capital when economies are growing (Castles & Miller 2003). However, paradoxically, foreign immigrants outcompete South Africans in low and semi-skilled sectors. Casual workers, many of them Mozambican and Zimbabwean, easily make up the majority of the construction labour force (Casual Workers Advice Office n.d.). Dodson and Oelofse (2000 p. 139) argue that in their study 'foreign nationals are less poor than their South African neighbours. The mean value of total household physical assets for foreigners was almost four times that of South Africans'. This probably exacerbates tensions.

The Organisation for Economic Co-ordination and Development (OECD) similarly points out the paradox that 'a foreign-born migrant with the same age, gender, and level of education, belonging to the same 'population group' and living in the same place as a South African, has a higher probability of being employed than a South African' (OECD 2018). Zimbabwean migrants roughly from 2005 onwards have seen migration to South Africa as permanent with more family and child migration to South Africa (Hungwe 2013). Undocumented workers are in effect a reserve army of labour for South African businesses able to keep wages low.

Recorded incidents of attacks by some South Africans since the late 1990s have been directed at working-class 'foreign' African businesses and notably Pakistani shops mostly in townships or ghettoised parts of the central business districts. 'Afro-phobia' is thus a misnomer. The working-class migrant from Zimbabwe for example typically lives in the dangerous townships exposed to all hazards the majority of South Africans face[3]. But middle-class foreign African professionals typically live in formerly white, safe areas (and rarely experience direct xenophobic violence).

1 According to Crush and Williams (2010, p. 21) South Africa has deported over 1.5 million migrants to neighbouring countries since 1994 (with Mozambique and Zimbabwe making up 90% of the total). Yet most find a way to come back.

2 According to the 2017 White Paper on International Migration, over 90 per cent of applicants for asylum since 2010 did not qualify for refugee status since the applicants were economic migrants. But as Hungwe (2013) suggests 'the distinction only serves to label some migrants as 'bad' and undeserving (economic migrants) while others are viewed as 'good' and deserving assistance (political and 'forced' migrants).'

3 In Masiphumelele (shack settlement) about 30% of people are foreign migrants (Mngqibisa, Mawere & Freeman 2017). So the specific weight of FAW and residents in specific places is the issue, not aggregate national numbers

Reflections on the Liberal anti-xenophobia scholarship

What we term 'liberal humanist scholarship' (LHS) is largely focused on visible violence and discrimination against foreign Africans by poor South Africans and denying that immigration of foreign workers can even be a problem for local workers. It has different argumentative strands but shares a common socio-pathological approach and hyperbolic metaphoric language (see Kerr & Durrheim 2013 for a critique based on the 2009 De Doorns farmworkers' revolt). A good recent example that follows in the steps of Neocosmos (2008), previously discussed, is Landau and Misago (2023, p. 1618) who argue 'With migrants viewed as a demon at loose in the body politic, many citizens long for something akin to an exorcism'. These authors who generally use scientific data resort to 'many' as well as biblical metaphors such as demons. In fact, most South Africans have other pressing issues (along with competition for jobs and racist employers) and they direct their protests at the ANC for the decline not exclusively or mainly at foreigners – hence the decline in ANC support in all urban areas and major cities (Runciman, Bekker, & Maggott 2020).

LHS believes that most South Africans are 'deeply' and irrationally afflicted by the hatred of strangers. Crush (2008, p. 7) holds that 'xenophobia and hostility to (particularly) other Africans is not the preserve of a lunatic fringe but represents the convictions of the majority of citizens'. 'Xenophobic attitudes and actions are all-pervasive in South Africa in civil society and the state' (Crush & Tawodzera 2014 p. 655). For Crush (2008, p. 7) 'The onus is therefore on the receiving state to design, implement and actively pursue policies and programmes at all levels of society aimed at fostering tolerance, diversity, multi-culturalism and regional and global citizenship.'

The use of the term xenophobia in research is misleading because the antagonisms are not directed at foreigners in general but at proximate persons often living alongside locals and hence are seen as 'easy targets'. Although many wealthy Europeans and Africans have recently acquired luxury properties in South Africa for example and pushed up house prices, no violence has yet been directed at them although several landless people's movements, political parties and housing movements are opposed to selling off the country to the highest bidders (Makhubu & Ruiters 2020). Violent attacks by South Africans have since 1994 been directed at working-class 'foreign' Africans who have sought refuge and or jobs or livelihoods in South Africa and live in townships or black parts of city CBD areas. Specific reasons frequently cited for violent attacks include the accusation that foreigners organise crime, drugs and prostitution. It is held that black South Africans lack a human rights culture and lean towards a superiority complex vis a vis the rest of Africa. Poverty/inequality, post-colonial nationalism, and opportunistic township politicians riding on xenophobic/law and order sentiments who want votes are also cited. Black disappointment with the poor outcomes after 1994 is a general explanation for the frustrations of black South Africans – hence the misdirected scapegoating of a 'weaker' other (Dobson 2010).

But among the most cited reasons articulated by South Africans for hating black foreigners in South Africa -- but dismissed by most liberal humanist analysts as false consciousness – is that foreigners 'steal' South African jobs. South African protestors cited in a BBC report in September 2019 said: 'I'm not xenophobic…But these foreigners are prepared to work for less. And they hire their own, so it's hard for us to compete.' (BBC, 2019). This complaint seems like a reasoned response to a structural situation. Crush et al. (2014) found that 60% of South Africans (wrongly) believe foreigners steal jobs and 16% claimed that they had personally lost a job to a foreign African. Crush and others counter that in fact, South Africans are mistaken and that FAW and foreign small businesses create jobs. However, a large-scale study found that migrants often create jobs for other migrants (Kalitanya & Visser 2010). Hungwe (2013) and Tame (2018) crucially show how ethnic social capital networks (also called bonding networks) among Zimbabweans are used to 'hoard jobs'.

The common blind spot in the mainstream literature is the failure to look beyond immediate perpetrators and ask who benefits from the presence of a mass of vulnerable FAW and which forces actively promote

the expanded labour frontier. An expanded labour pool can undermine trade unions and workers' rights. There can be no disputing that FAW are offered jobs directly by employers or contracted via labour brokers and thus do not 'steal" jobs. The employer has the power. But if preferring FAW is a trend, why is this so? Foreign Africans seem to attribute the employer's preference for them as a sign that they are 'better workers' than 'lazy' black South Africans. These arguments about regional labour imaginaries are relatively underexplored in the literature.

Secondly, LHS generally ignores the neoliberal economic policy context and multi-crisis (sketched briefly above) and how capital has set South Africa on a path of accumulation that means rising inequality, social and governance decline, mass protests and disaffection with the state and conflict, the collapse of infrastructure, massive jobs losses etc occurring independently of the foreign immigrant factor (Ashman, Fine, & Newman 2011).

Thirdly, LHS indirectly condones the neoliberal globalisation project (Palmary 2002; Zack & Landau 2022). Palmary (2002, p. 5) for example denies there is a problem with the number of immigrants and any possibility of competition: '(Mis)perceptions about the amount of migration into South Africa are reinforced by the belief that immigrants are poor and unskilled and will therefore compete with South Africans for scarce public resources such as work, health care etc'. The dominant human rights/liberal view (McDonald 2000; Peberdy 2001; Crush 2008; Landau, Polzer, & Kabwe-Segatti 2010) argues that South Africans have vastly exaggerated the numbers of foreign Africans in South Africa. Peberdy (2001) argues that in state discourse 'Immigrants and migrants are seen as takers, not creators, of opportunity, a view that fails to recognize the role of migrants and immigrants in generating employment opportunities for South Africans and contributing to the skills base'. Palmary (2002, p. 5) says 'high-ranking government officials and politicians have, portray (ed) refugees as a burden on the state'. The strange logic is that in fact, we need to encourage more immigrants (but not poor ones) in the name of economic progress for South Africa and because they do not require state services.

Given the absence of reliable statistics, the scale of migration whether documented or illegal is either understated or overstated depending on the group that is making the argument. Liberals tend to understate the overall numbers; xenophobes exaggerate. By 2015, South Africa's immigrant population numbered 3.2 million people, a staggering increase of 178% since 1990. UNDESA (2020) estimates that in 2019, the number of foreign migrants living in SA grew to 4.22 million, or 7.2% of the population significantly more than the 4% figure used by Landau, Polzer, & Kabwe-Segatti (2010). Most importantly the numbers do not consider the geographical concentration of migrants and how that impacts perceptions. For example, Bellville in Cape Town is named 'little Mogadishu'. Hillbrow and Johannesburg downtown similarly have a high concentration of foreigners. One 'hijacked' building in Johannesburg that burnt recently in 2023 killing 70 residents already had 140 undocumented foreigners nearly five years ago in 2018. Some informal settlements in Cape Town have around 30% foreign (Dodson 2010). The first step in dealing with an issue is to acknowledge it exists.

The LHS has focussed specifically on exclusion and violence (although Crush has explored many forms of institutional xenophobic exclusion e.g. medical xenophobia). Landau and Misago (2023, p. 1624) contend that 'exclusions are co-authored by sub-state, often informal authority structures. Very few attempt a class analysis of 'xenophobia' (an exception is Hlatshwayo 2013).

EMPLOYERS' PREFERENCES AND THE 'GOOD' WORKER

Employers in general decide whom to employ and hence play a key role in the emergence of immigration streams (McGovern 2007). But they do so under given conditions and opportunities which they in turn promote. As Ong and Peletz (1995) have suggested managers have an ideal image of the 'good worker' (nimble hands, work ethic, rural female etc) which is often ethnicised or located at a group level (Friberg

2018). For managers 'the work 'ethic' can have 'payoffs in terms of positive impacts on domestic colleagues working harder' (Dench et al. 2006). The willingness of migrants who leave their families behind to work flexible hours favours employers: effectively workers are 'on call' hence eliminating the notion of overtime work or stable employment hours (Thompson, Newsome, & Commander 2013).

In South Africa, a similar logic has played out in new labour market formation, but this is layered on old apartheid racial hostilities and dominant white society's preferences. Employers since 1994 have changed labour frontiers. As Hungwe (2013, p. 63) summarises:

> The common arguments put forward were that employers preferred Zimbabwean migrants because they were hard-working, intelligent, could speak fluent English, were respectful and maintained consistency in terms of coming to work and executing their tasks.

A key factor contributing to FAW's good reputation is their willingness to put in a lot of effort and follow instructions without objecting.

Foreign-born workers are employed across economic sectors with the largest proportion (30%) working in trade, 12% working in construction, 7% in farming and only 3% in mining (Budlender 2014). In 1999, Edward Lahiff noted that,

> Now that South African workers have rights, the farmers are saying `We want to keep the old system by using a super-exploited labour pool from Zimbabwe'. The farmers are pitching their wages so low – between R5 and R9 a day – because they know they can get Zimbabwean labour. (cited in Mail & Guardian 1999)

'Some farmers were explicit that an advantage of using Basotho migrants is that they are less interested in union activity' (Johnston 2007, p. 498). All of the (white) farmers interviewed by Johnston used ethnically organised work teams and dormitories.

In 2008, First National Bank chief economist, Cees Bruggemann just after the brutal xenophobic attacks asserted that migrants benefit businesses and 'keep the cost of labour down' (Business Report, 22 May). In a media statement, Janine Myburg (2015) noted that:

> It was important to understand that the people fleeing their own countries were among the best-qualified and most enterprising workers. They were strongly motivated, and they competed fiercely for jobs and trade. In many cases, this competition was unwelcome and created some local resentment.

Recently, Fedhasa (the hospitality industry association) rejected ending the special exemption permits for Zimbabweans;

> Requiring ZEPs to leave SA would not only have negative consequences for the hospitality and tourism industry but would cause trauma and pain to people whose only sin was to legally look for a better life for themselves and their families (Fedhasa statement 2023).

Employer groups have defended 'fierce' competition within labour markets and refugees for their capitalist competitive spirit.

Management discourse and practice at top restaurants in Cape Town claim that as a group 'foreign waiters, especially from Zimbabwe, are usually 'better spoken and offer phenomenal service to customers' and have a 'high work ethic' and thus get jobs (Dirk 2015). A Camps Bay restaurant had five of seven waiters from Zimbabwe (Dirk 2015)[4] with Black locals working mainly in the restaurant's kitchen.

4 A 2018 HSRC Social Attitudes Survey found that about 'a third (30%) of the general public said that the violence was caused by foreigners stealing jobs from hardworking South Africans'.

The managers ascribe the work ethic to all Zimbabweans as a national group regardless of individual qualifications (see Friberg & Midtbøen 2018 for a Norwegian study for similar generalisations). Several scholars confirm this preference for the 'good worker' in various sectors and even farms in South Africa (Johnston 2007; Hungwe 2013; Tame 2018; Taal 2012; Visser 2016).

Employers want to return to apartheid-style workplaces. However, South Africans have pride and expect the end of apartheid to have real meaning in the workplace and hence will resist (Hungwe 2013). In the construction sector, 30% of workers are FAW and 'only 2% of the 700 workers surveyed by the Construction Industry Development Board) reported any union activity on their site (Buckley et al. 2016).

In the case of South Africa, recent research shows that networks shape access to the labour market. Job seekers are, in fact, groomed within networks for their job interviews (Hungwe 2013). Networks might be used to hoard job opportunities. This might worsen suspicions that jobs are being stolen. As Chibber (2017) notes: 'organised competition in the labour market through such ties has the effect of intensifying the divisions within the class. It runs directly against the principle of class organization'.

HOW FOREIGN MIGRANTS SEE SOUTH AFRICAN WORKERS AS 'WANTING TO BE SPOONFED'

As noted by Thompson, Newsome, & Commander, (2013) the stereotypical good worker gains traction dialectically by comparing with the 'bad' worker. The deplored 'other' has become the South African lazy worker or 'unemployable' youth – a self-fulfilling prophecy deployed by both capital and foreign African workers (FAW). Counter-stereotypes of South African blacks and black workers specifically held by FAW portrayed local South African workers as 'unreliable workers who, after receiving their salaries, would not report for duty consistently.' (Hungwe 2013, p. 152). Hungwe's interviews (2013, pp. 152-3) show the majority (76%) of participants affirmed that employers preferred Zimbabwean employees. Moreover, an aggressive-conservative anti-welfarist sense of superiority is illustrated by middle-class Bongani, a Zimbabwean real estate agent:

> They (South Africans) want the government to provide them with food, shelter and everything. They don't want to work. They protest about everything… These things destroy the economy…if you take Zimbabweans and put them in the desert, they will survive. Take South Africans and put them in Zimbabwe they will die in masses... They just want to be spoonfed (in Hungwe 2013, p. 96).

One domestic worker from Zimbabwean argued that whites,

> look for Zimbabwean ladies to work for them because Zimbabweans, are hard workers. We work and the Xhosa, if she finishes at 4 o'clock, then she puts the mop [down] at 3 o'clock. That is why they don't like Xhosa people. And we don't steal (Tame 2018).

Such symbolic violence and negative stereotypes reinforce isolation and separatism among immigrants and the southern African working class ('us' and 'them') – arguably a potentially reactionary politics. It then becomes legitimate to undercut black South Africans and cosy up to white bosses since these 'lazy, thieving and 'dependent' South Africans 'hate us anyway'. In Hungwe's analysis (2013) of the Zimbabwean superiority complex, 'this perception exaggerates the qualities of Zimbabwean migrants', although saying 'we are not stealing jobs' meaning we are 'simply better' might also be a response to xenophobic experiences in South Africa and experiences of the anti-white Mugabe regime. Tame's fine-grained work on ethnic niches, racist folklore and employer preferences for certain workers provides important clues to these narratives and 'work imaginaries' get reinforced. As Dodson and Oelefse (2000) show Zimbabwean migrants often see whites as friendly and helpful compared to local Blacks. Whites as many studies show see themselves as victims of the ANC and affirmative action (Ruiters 2021) and hence can find themselves on the same side of the fence as other victims of hatred.

VULNERABLE WORKERS

A different approach is to de-centre cultural essentialism and the 'good' foreign worker to look at material facts and widespread abuses of FAW. More generally 'attitudinal advantages perceived by employers can be best understood as … the dependence migrants have on their employers' (Thompson, Newsome, & Commander 2013). What is presented as an inherent psycho-cultural attribute of the hyper-motivated worker reflects insecurity (Not being paid, underpayment, no signed employment contract, dangerous work, deportation etc). Given that businesses are poorly regulated by the state, as Bhorat notes (2011, p. 277) 'minimum wage violation in South Africa is disturbingly high. Some 45% of covered workers get paid wages below the legislated minimum ... violation is most prevalent in the Security, Forestry and Farming Sectors', where foreign workers are hired.

But if vulnerable workers' priority is to keep their jobs, it can only mean that they avoid inviting disapproval from the boss. In fact, making oneself more appealing to him makes absolute sense in this context. In South Africa, as Adam and Moodley (2015) put it, foreign workers can turn their powerlessness and exploitability into 'hard currency' making themselves more marketable to capital.

These feelings of being more marketable might be reinforced by 'social capital' such as extended family and church networks where leads for jobs and opportunities are shared (Hungwe 2013). As Hungwe notes Zimbabweans who are also the largest immigrant community in South Africa tend to be from the same church network that 'provides work and accommodation' (2013, p. 61). Hungwe (2013) believes Zimbabweans have a superiority complex but this 'is a defensive mechanism for the Zimbabweans'.

However, insecure workers over time can develop a sense of security, more knowledge and a sense of dignity which reduces their willingness to perform in the docile or preferred way of employers. There are signs however that Zimbabweans are organising themselves, working with NGOs to get permanent status, learning to know the system and workplaces and extracting more concessions. As this 'warm house' effect grows, employers may look to other nationalities for new docile workers (Friberg & Midtbøen 2018). This 'warm house' effect (Friberg & Midtbøen 2018, p. 1475) argues means that some national groups may be in fashion for a while but this wears out:

> **At first glance, the ethnic hierarchies may seem fixed and unchanging, but a more detailed investigation shows that the positions which various immigrant groups occupy, as well as employers' assessments of their respective qualities and workers, change over time. As new immigrant groups arrive and old ones become more established, employers' preferences seem to change.**

Using Zimbabweans to undercut the South African black working class and provoke xenophobia may not be easy to institutionalise given that there are many countervailing forces including forward-looking immigrant organisations as well as strong civil society groups in South Africa who oppose a xenophobic war.

Immigrant Organisations' views[5]

Uwimphuwe and Ruiters (2018) have highlighted immigrant organisations' roles in bridging networks, i.e., finding ways to work with South Africans and see the other side's viewpoint. Immigrant organisations' leaders navigate a dialectic of closure and openness (Werbner 1999, p. 29) trying to avoid the negative effects of inward-looking, 'bonding' networks or negative social capital (Portes 1998). They offer collective strategies for co-existence rather than opportunity hoarding that individual migrants might not express. As an immigrant organisation leader noted correctly:

5 This section draws on the second author's Phd Thesis, 2015.

> The majority of South Africans are poor and jobless. Instead of giving them jobs, employers are hiring undocumented immigrants so that they don't pay taxes or give them any benefits like UIF, provident funds contribution, paid leaves, etc. It is causing many citizens to lose their jobs. Whenever a foreigner comes to work, a South African is fired because they are afraid that he will claim his rights whereas a foreigner will work as a slave. (Bavugamenshi Interview, 2014).

Another Immigrant Organisation interviewee argued, 'Government must put pressure on employers so that they hire people with valid papers. In addition, wages must be standardised so that there is no discrimination between employees' (Kalitanyi 2014). Albayan Islamic Community Trust leader, Rachid, maintains ties with South African political authorities at the local level. 'Whenever there is a meeting organised by the Belville local authority, they get invited and participate like other local stakeholders' (Interview 7).[6]

Leaders were asked to identify the main concerns raised by members in South Africa. Surprisingly, while the xenophobic attack dominates the public discourse as the number one problem, Uwimpuhwe (2015) found a different reality: immigrants are concerned about having proper home affairs 'papers' (see the table below, which ranks the top issue).

Table 1. Organisational Views of Most Pressing Problems facing immigrants in Cape Town

Organisation	Identity Documents	Xenophobia	Drugs (Jad/Mirra)	Language barriers	Financial Support
Somali Community Board	-	X	-	-	-
Ogaden Community of South Africa	X	-	-	-	-
Somali Association of South Africa	X	X	-	-	-
Albayaan Islamic Council Trust	-	X	X	X	-
Pentecostal Church of Rwandans	X	-	-	-	-
Rwanda Heritage Foundation	-	-	-	-	-
Rwandan/Burundian SDA Ministry	X	-	-	-	-
Rwandan refugees of Cape Town	X	-	-	-	-
Congo Square News	X	-	-	-	X
Democratic Republic of Congo Community in South Africa	X	-	-	-	-
Amis BK	X	-	-	-	-

Source: Uwimphuwe 2015

6 Also see Somali Association of South Africa, founded in 1996 which focuses strongly on integration. (https://somaliassociation.org.za/)

The table shows immigrants want documents/papers above all. In the case of Cape Town's Somali Community Board, each affiliated organisation has initiatives to integrate its members into the South African community. To reduce the hatred against Somalis in townships, the SCB initiated a 'self-protection program'. In this program, this organisation motivates their members especially those in townships to join local community initiatives including churches and 'street committees' to promote the security concerns of Somalis who live in different townships.

> We encourage our members to attend churches of South Africans and donate to local churches. We encourage them also to be part of the local community where they are, and support their neighbours whenever they are in need, eg. Funerals, local community development projects, etc'. Furthermore, we are creating 'Street Committees' that will be composed of both Somalis and South Africans in order to encourage locals to protect Somalis (Abdi-Rashid, 2014).

The Congolese community organisation DRCASA has projects such as:

> Advocacy with home affairs: now many Congolese are getting refugee status. It was due to our effort in advocating for our people. This refugee status is very important, and we have cases of our members who managed to get scholarships at UCT, and UWC, some are doing their masters and these are some of our achievements. (Somwe, 2014).

Amis BK a Congolese group does free tutoring for South African students in science. The Amis BK's leader said of this program:

> In 2011 and 2012 we had a volunteering project in Langa Township to teach South African students in public schools maths and physics, which is part of integration. We wanted to show citizens that it is not that migrants came to take their jobs and their women (Namufakage 2014).

The Amis BK organises soccer with diverse local clubs. They run also workshops concerning HIV/AIDS. Some Congolese are married to South Africans. For example, 'the son you just saw now his mother is a Xhosa' (Numafakage, 2014).

Immigrant Organisations highlighted economic variables as a cause of xenophobia: Somali spaza shop (a housefront space or shack that has been turned into a tuck shop) owner in Cape Town blamed new shopping malls built after 1994 as a real cause of the township business decline.

> Nowadays, in each township, there are big shopping malls and everything is being sold there. This means that township dwellers will go to those malls where they will get everything in one place rather than go to local businesses. This led some citizens to sell their shops to migrants because they were no longer profitable. It is important to note that even though migrant business seems to prosper in townships, most of them are just surviving. The business in the township is a hand-to-mouth operation. (Anonymous 2014)

This process is not peculiar to South Africa but given its racial social historical-geography, there are distinct racialised outcomes. Most township informal businesses are survivalist although 'compared to the more survivalist local business model …the Somali business model has rapidly outcompeted local owners, bringing spaza prices down and forcing many locals to rent out their shop space to foreign shopkeepers. Consequently, while South African shopkeepers resent the Somali influx, most consumers appreciate the better prices and improved service' (Charman, Petersen, & Piper 2012, p. 47).

Migrants also have a part to play in reducing perceived or real competition with South Africans and also reducing criminal attacks on them. Some migrants set up their businesses in dangerous places with high crime rates. As one interviewee put it, 'To reduce xenophobia, we immigrants must recognise that we exaggerate our rights. Therefore, we must minimise the competition we are engaging in. This creates

unnecessary tension and stirs up the xenophobia attacks on them' (Anonymous 2014). Another interviewee suggests that they should not be thinking about special rights for migrants, but equal rights.

Immigrants have extensive exposure and interactions with locals including learning local languages. 'Among thirteen respondents, seven speak Xhosa, two speak Afrikaans, and one speaks Sotho' (Uwimphuwe 2015). IO feel that 'The government should create some television or radio programmes where both immigrants and citizens may exchange their experiences and feelings' (Kalitanyi 2014). These interviews provide ideas about how to build a common future or cosmopolitanism from below.

An important point raised by Hungwe (2015) is that migrant social integration is blocked by the host population (e.g. xenophobic attitudes among South African locals), yet in some cases, 'the migrants themselves could hinder their own social integration through their migrant social networks. I argue that this is an unintended consequence of migrant family and religious networks'.

Prospects and pathways to cosmopolitanism from below

The South African Federation of Trade Unions claimed employers

> **have been deliberately stoking xenophobic fires through discriminating against the locals and preferring to employ foreign nationals. They are doing this not because they love African foreign workers more but because it is far easier to exploit them and prey on their vulnerability in particular when they are undocumented (South African Federation of Trade Unions (SAFTU) press statement 2019).**

COSATU (1997) appealed to the state by suggesting that 'concrete steps should be taken by the authorities to halt this super-exploitation of migrants. The bosses who are employing illegal immigrants, clearly with the view of sidestepping fair labour market laws, must be severely punished'. Enforcement should focus less on irregular migrants and rather on their employers. On the other hand, the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA) took a different path: It marched on Zimbabwean Day on the same day as the xenophobic South Africa First campaign was marching to the Nigerian and Zimbabwean embassies in Pretoria. Numsa condemned the Mnangagwa regime for harassment and persecution of trade union leaders, activists and journalists during a crackdown on dissent in recent months. It supported the 2020 nurses' strike for better working conditions. The strike was brutally repressed by the police (Vuyo Lufele, NUMSA spokesperson; Elitsha 2020).

But the situation is not static. Precarious and foreign casual workers, as Cottle (2022) shows, have also gone on strike. Zimbabwean workers at Maswiri Boerdery were protesting against changes in pay for piecework. The South African working class still has the social and organisational muscle to play a leading role in the region (for example the strike and massacre at Marikana led by a new union). But the national basis of workers' organisations comes into contradiction with the international mobility of capital and the ability to divide workers by nationality and geography.

However, in the real world of uneven development, and different class capacities, not all workers are in a position to sacrifice income and join unions to 'fight' the bosses. Many might desire to join collective action but are too insecure to risk losing their job. They appease the bosses hoping this route will work for them. Others might see it more subjectively, as Hungwe, 2013 shows. But pathways to patiently build a common understanding and common front and action between sections of workers are needed. In this regard, 'Generally recognised moral precepts', argues Trotsky (1942, p. 15) are 'a shell without content[7] and 'the

7 Nussbaum (1996) defines cosmopolitanism as an ethos, a set of loyalties to humanity as a whole, to be inculcated through a distinctive educational program emphasising the commonalities and responsibilities of global citizenship. Her view has been criticised as utopian and impractical.

solidarity of workers, especially of strikers or barricade fighters, is incomparably more 'categoric' than human solidarity in general'. Von Holdt (2010, p. 134) similarly suggests,

> A strike is a power struggle and has its own morality, which is not affected by the fact that South Africa is now a democracy with the former liberation movement in government. In the words of a woman worker: There's no sweet strike, there is no Christian strike.... a strike is a strike.

Given this context, we argue that 'a scab is also a scab, no matter which nationality or colour' (Noon 2004). It is unhelpful to dismiss ordinary black South African's insecurities as irrational. It might well be that it is less about hating the foreign African than strike-breaking and scabbing that undermines hard-won black dignity in the face of the racist white master that is at stake. It is also assumed that when people shop at spaza shops in townships they are incapable of seeing that the shop is run by Pakistani or Somalian workers or that they get 'good deals' from these shopkeepers (Alexander 2014).

As Bond, Miller and Ruiters (2001) argued, 'International and regional solidarity is probably the only real hope for many of the less-resourced union movements, as well as the relatively weak Southern African Trade Union Co-ordinating Council (SATUCC) itself'.

This is not to dismiss real challenges. At its founding congress resolutions, the South African Federation of Trade Unions – a leftwing split from COSATU - declared its commitment to 'protect migrant workers and ensure that 'we organise them to form part of our unions' (SAFTU 2017 p. 5). Social movement unionism which includes foreign workers, casuals, and the unemployed holds much promise according to von Holdt & Webster (2008). The Consortium of Refugees and Migrants South Africa (CoRMSA), Centre for Migrant Rights Malawi, Swaziland Migrant Mine Workers Association and Southern Africa Trust have also given a fillip to the unionisation of Zimbabwean domestic workers.

Learning local languages, local history and intermarriage opens doors to cosmopolitism from below. Landau and Freemantle (2022) suggest that 'it is unfair to dismiss the poor's cosmopolitan potential even when it emerges from pragmatic concerns. A Malawian migrant noted, 'Africa is a family, just to uplift Africa as a whole…. You can't just let your sister or your mother starve'. Reciprocity could also be seen as solidaristic cosmopolitanism. Nigerians, for example, remind xenophobes that 'ANC activists were given full university scholarships in the 1970s and 1980s, opportunities that were not always available to Nigerian citizens. Mozambicans, Zimbabweans and even Namibians claim that they suffered from wars tied to South Africa's efforts to destroy the strongholds of the African National Congress (ANC) or its active military wing Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK) within their countries' (Landau & Freemantle 2022).

Yet, that workers today are divided, insecure and fragmented as ever is no surprise since as Chibber (2017) points out the

> Workers typically have to prioritise the security of their employment ...the most appealing means of increasing one's job security is not by taking on the boss, but by making oneself more attractive to him — by working harder than others, acquiring new skills, even offering to work for less.

Workers' organisations seek to protect immediate interests by limiting threats from non-members that could undercut their status, just as nation-states in theory are meant to look after their own citizens before 'outsiders'. Defending 'narrow' material interests is understandable as a rational response to their structural situation. Some countries (eg., Canada) ban foreign workers from acting as scabs during strikes.

Conclusions

The paper provides a corrective to the one-sided xenophobic liberal literature that neglects the political economy and the deeper class dialectics. The paper demonstrated that since 1994 capital accumulation has shown a distinct preference for flexible, non-unionised workers and foreign labour in several key sectors of

the economy. These preferences for flexible foreign Africans are divisively codified in discourse as like the 'good' worker. Employers of FAW, consciously construct these vulnerable workers as 'good workers' and these workers also internalise this superior identity (hence a seemingly self-reinforcing and cosy labour-capital relationship) at the expense of troublesome or 'bad' South Africans. Instead of building social trust, these processes create fragility and diminish human and class solidarity.

Abstract human rights, (the focus of much of the literature) leave aside the role of capital in using and in part creating divisions. Given the massive and growing unemployment problem against the backdrop of capital's preference for FAW, which is intentionally undermining the gains of the South African section of the working class, we can expect a defensive reaction from working-class South Africans. To label such a defence 'xenophobic' or mistaken may be unhelpful. Trade unions cannot sign their own execution orders by cooperating with capital when employers desire to recruit foreigners (undocumented or legal unskilled workers).

South African progressive actors have an interest in helping to organise resistance against oppressive forces in originating countries such as Zimbabwe. South Africa's capitalists have expanded throughout the continent, and this also offers additional opportunities for cross-border trade unionism against large businesses (Bond, Miller, & Ruiters 2001). Foreign workers (undocumented or clandestine) should be included as regular members of regional trade union and social movements.

As living standards continue to decline and basic services in townships become more unreliable, the prospect of social barbarism looms for both the South African working class and FAW. Recognising that foreign workers also have agency despite being vulnerable, and they can side with capital, it makes sense for the South African trade unions and movements to ensure much stronger ties with fellow workers including the local unemployed and FAW.

While there are pressures to maintain their distinctive organisations, a united front with the progressive working-class movement and participation in township life is also crucial. Objective structural connections and disconnections between FAW and South African black workers exist: most are low-skilled, many are unemployed, most live in the same insecure spaces and many have loyalties outside South Africa even if some inter-marry. South African workers and FAW both experience humiliation at the hands of their mainly white employers. Over time they have come to share a common life situation.

The ANC-led state has failed at several levels including not regulating workplaces and labour brokers and contributed to the precarity of both local and FAW. Tightening borders, repatriating economic migrants and appealing to state action, in general, are unacceptable in principle and unlikely to yield progressive outcomes. Only linking with FAW across southern Africa can provide a basis for a solution to emerge across a bigger scale than the nation-state. Different sections of the working class, local or foreign and the unemployed, need to enter into dialogue for solidarity and joint action and this could also start at a micro-level with sport, culture, educational skilling and so on (see Werbner 2006). Attacking another section of the regional African working class whose labour collectively built South Africa obscures the culpability of capital and capitalism – the real beneficiaries of new cheap labour from Zimbabwe, Mozambique and Malawi. The worker-cosmopolitans can undermine xenophobia by conducting a joint struggle of all progressive sections of the working class based on an anti-capitalist programmatic vision while constraining capital, the nationalist political entrepreneurs and the lumpenproletariat.

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