

## **Kopanang Africa Picket at SA Human Rights Commission on Africa Day**

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On 25 May 2022, Kopanang Africa Against Xenophobia (KAAX) held a picket at JD House where the offices of South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC) are in Braamfontein. The picket was organised in celebration of Africa Day.

The picket started around 11.30am outside the SAHRC building, with the students, activists and community members gathering to sing, and also reflecting on how they feel about the rising xenophobia and the inequality that exists in the country, schools and in their communities. Then there was speeches delivered by KAAX representatives.

KAAX chose this day to picket as the organisation feels that Africa Day can't be celebrated without paying attention to the realities of migrants in South Africa. The aim of the picket was to confront the SAHRC on their failure to address the xenophobic instigators such as Operation Dudula, to present a Memorandum of Demands and to raise the issues faced by migrants, including the rising of attacks migrants face under the banner of Operation Dudula, and the reckless statements currently being made by politicians and government officials which has often led to xenophobic attacks in communities. According to KAAX, these are all human rights violation which the SAHRC should have acted upon.

The main demand from KAAX is an engagement and speeding up of recommendations that have been delayed for years. A memorandum that laid all the demands and concerns from KAAX was read out to the crowd and received by Advocate Tseliso Thipanyane, CEO the SAHRC, who also addressed the picketers after receiving the memorandum.

General Moyo, a rep and organiser from KAAX said that they were joined by the school youth as "political consciousness has to be built within young ones and the platform to build that consciousness is at schools as those scholars will be able to educate their fellow peers."

He also added that it is important that the youth understands its history and background of Africa Day so that they know who are the people they should direct their grievances against human rights violation to.

"We hope that as we have given them one month to come back to us as KAAX [they will] sit with us and have community dialogues on xenophobia, and not allow this infiltration and penetration of Operation Dudula in our communities. We want to partner with the Commission as one of the Chapter 9 institutions that has got capacity and power to implement and make recommendations which can be enforceable. So we think as Kopanang we need to meet with SAHRC, and engage with them so we can we have some direction in terms of dealing with the systematic xenophobia", said Moyo.

The picket was mainly joined by students from Mpontsheng Secondary, Eketsang Secondary, Katlehong Secondary and Ponego Secondary Schools, all based in Katlehong. These schools work with KAAX in its anti-xenophobia programme.

Michelle Saal, a grade 10 pupil from Eketsang Secondary said she relates well to the anti-xenophobia struggle because she was mistreated and teased a lot at school and in her community for being 'a coloured'. Sometimes she would get chased when playing with

other children in grade 8 and grade 9 and she would be called an outsider but her school would not take action against her bullies.

“I’m just like [African migrant learners], we are all the same and I see no difference between us as we are all students and here to learn. I wish schools could take serious action against such bullying as it affects us a lot. We are even treated differently and unequally at school because of our skin colour, cultures and our tribes. So I am here to fight for our rights as an African”, said Saal.

A student from Ponego Secondary School, Khensani Nthlathapo, said “I’m Tshonga, and some of the kids would make fun of me when I’m in the spotlight.”

Nthlathapo said that they call out to her as “Yey wena Shangaan”, which does not make her feel good about herself. ‘Shangaan’ is a derogatory term used to refer to Tshonga people and is seen as disrespectful. Nthlathapo said that her reason for being at the picket is that she believes that being African is beautiful and it is good to embrace culture and have a strong unity.

Also present were women activists and community members who have parents from other African countries, or have children with men from other African countries. Some spoke about how they wish to educate and teach their community about the world that they live in so they understand the factors of the conditions of living and do not shift blame to fellow Africans.

Urika Pais is a 34-year-old mother of three children and a member of Keep Left (a socialist organisation that is part of KAAX). She participated in the picket along with her children. Pais’s father is from Mozambique and the father of her children is from the Democratic Republic of Congo.

When asked about her participation in the picket Pais said that “If our fathers are considered foreign nationals, that is a problem to me.” Pais posed the question of why people that are African are referred to as ‘foreigners’ and not people from other countries around the world. Pais further explained that people do so because there is a support for a capitalist system and that her reason for participation is to stand up against this capitalist system that divides.

Pais said that her hope from the picket and the deliverance of the Memorandum is that the SAHRC would go back and look at the issues that has been raised, work through the demands and realise that organisations like Operation Dudula are doing criminal acts and need to be seen for that. “This seed is [being] planted into communities and [is] spreading”.

Pais also believes that the role of women in communities is to help, love and care for each other and that women need to understand and stand up for each other and give a helping hand. She spoke about a woman in her community that has not had electricity for more than a month and is not being assisted because she cannot afford the fee for having the electricity fixed.

“As women we must stand together and we must fight together and treat each as, ‘This is another human’ and especially because there are many women in communities that need to be open to each other... I cannot have 10 cars while my sister has to walk everywhere.”

According to Phila Mahlangu who recently joined Keep Left, “the lack of engagement with young people and within the working class is a very serious issue as our struggles wont be defeated as long as we don’t engage in our problems.”

Mahlangu added that even though he is a science student at Wits University, he saw a need to engage and form part of an organisation that will build his consciousness as “politics affects every aspect in our life and ... it may be difficult to to participate in programmes like the KAAX’s anti–xenophobia programme without engagement.”

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