

MAY DAY - INTERNATIONAL LABOUR DAY

Rev 25"

May 1st is a day of international solidarity of workers throughout the world; a day on which workers express their solidarity with brothers and sisters around the world. It is a day which reminds us of the history and traditions of the working peoples' movement in their struggle for freedom and an end to exploitation. In South Africa it has been 80 years since May Day was first celebrated. Now, after a break of twenty years, May Day is once again being celebrated and this year more workers and their allies will be celebrating May Day than ever before - a sure sign of the growing strength of the workers.

Origins of May Day

One hundred years ago the Federation of Organised Trades and Labour Unions met in Congress and took this resolution:

"That from date, May 1st 1886, the legal labour Day shall be fixed at 8 hours and that all workers organisations should prepare themselves for it."

In those days American workers, like workers all around the world, worked under terrible conditions. Hours were long - 14, 16, even 18 hours per day - wages were very low and working conditions dangerous. Young children were forced to work and the lives of working people short and hard. The power of the bosses was unrestrained in its drive for more profit from the workers' sweat.

Leadership in the 8 hour agitation was given by Marxists; mainly German immigrants from the more experienced European working class movement. The demand for an eight hour day rapidly won support. At first they concentrated upon legislative reform, but at the 1884 congress P.J. McGuire, a founder of the carpenter's union said: "The only way to get the eight hour day is by organising. In 1868 the United States government passed an 8 hour law, and that law has been enforced just twice. If you want an eight hour day, make it yourself."

But there was opposition to the 8 hour demand. The bosses and their newspapers noisily protested that it would encourage "loafing, gambling, rioting, debauchery

and drunkenness" and mean lower wages and poverty. Some of the skilled workers protected by their craft unions agreed. On the other hand the far left felt it was a demand which meant accepting the wage system when the struggle was to end wage slavery and capitalism. They said: "To grant the point that the capitalists have the right to eight hours of our labour is more than a compromise; it is a virtual admission that the wage system is right." 2) Despite all this, the call mobilised American workers like nothing before.

A quarter of a million workers were involved in powerful agitation. Everywhere workers marched and sang - from New York to San Francisco - united with a popular slogan that gripped the hearts of American workers. They smoked "8 hour tobacco" and wore "8 hour shoes", so labelled by workers who had already won their demands. On the buses, trains and in the streets, workers sang this eight hour song:

We mean to make things over
we're tired of toil for naught
But bare enough to live on, never
an hour for thought.
We want to feel the sunshine
we want
to smell the flowers,
we're sure that God willed it
and we mean to have eight hours.

We're summoning our forces from
shipyard, shop and mill//
eight hours for work, eight hours for rest 3)
eight hours for what we will//!

Where the employers refused to give in to their demands, a strike was to be declared. On May 1st 1886, a Saturday, but normally a full working day, the factories were silent, shops closed and railways still. 350 000 downed tools in 11562 work places. In Detroit 11 000 marched in the 8 hour parade in New York 25 000 workers marched in a torchlight parade. Chicago was the biggest industrial city. There 40 000 people paraded peacefully through the streets on that hot Saturday afternoon, celebrating their unity and determination under the guns of the watching police. A further 45 000 had

had already won their demand before the strike.

It was a huge success. 185 000 of the 350 000 who struck won their 8 hours on the same day or soon afterwards and a further 2 000 000 got their hours reduced to 9 or 10 per day. 4)

Victory it was, but not without cost. Throughout the strike the police and army had been mobilised and ready to attack workers and "make an example of them". On May 3 workers on strike at the McCormick factory in Chicago were locked out and in the evening police fired on them, killing six. The next day at a peaceful protest meeting in Haymarket Square police rushed the crowd and a bomb was thrown. It was never discovered who by. The police used this as an excuse to attack working class organisations, smashing up their offices and arresting leaders and eight labour leaders were put on trial. It turned into a trial of the ideas of labour to "overthrow the established order". Four were hanged and the rest jailed for long periods. 5) The Haymarket affair, as it was called, stood out as an example to later socialists of capitalist injustice. Despite this repression, May 1st 1890 was fixed as the date for another great demonstration.

The problems American workers faced were felt by workers in Europe too. They had also been agitating for shorter working hours. So when the Second International was founded in Paris in 1889 the following resolution was passed:

"This congress decides to organise a great International demonstration so that in all countries and in all cities on our appointed day, the toiling masses shall demand of the State authorities the legal reduction of the working day to eight hours."

The day chosen was May 1st.

In 1890 May Day was celebrated internationally for the first time.

Meetings were held in Austria, Hungary, Germany, Denmark, Spain, Italy, Belgium, Norway, Sweden, Poland and Britain.

Why was May Day so widely observed? It was because it was a powerful demand touching workers so directly and able to unite the working class. It came at a time when there were big divisions between skilled craft workers and less skilled workers who were rapidly organising. The slogans of an 8 hour day and minimum wages were able to rally millions. To win these demands required political action, agitation of a new sort against the State, and it brought the mass movements in separate countries into the powerful international movement.

In England the 8 hour demand was taken up by the socialists. The Bloomsbury Gas Workers Union lead by Eleanor Marx was one of the first to win the demand. Facing opposition from the craft dominated Trades Council who resisted the demands like the American craft workers had before them, the socialists triumphed and 100 000 people gathered in the middle of London on May Day, visibly unifying the working classes, from unskilled workers to artisans.⁶⁾

May Day meetings grew steadily after the launch in 1890 which in a way showed developments in the labour movement in Europe. The day was to bring all workers together in International solidarity, but how they were to win their demands and what programmes they put forward were deeply debated. May Day slogans reflected this sharp division between revolutionary and reformist sections of the working class movement. The former always championing the cause of the mass of workers against narrow sectionalism and uniting workers against their oppressors.

It was not always easy. In some countries demonstrations were illegal. In Russia the strikes grew - by 1900 there were demonstrations against the Tzarist rulers. In 1905 strikes took place across the country and included

soldiers and peasants in illegal demonstrations against the Tzar.

In 1917 the Bolshevik revolution decisively changed May Day. It was freely celebrated for the first time as a very important holiday in 1917 and has since become a show of solidarity with the struggles of working people in capitalist countries and those fighting colonialism and imperialism.

In Europe the traditional celebration of the beginning of spring falls on May 1st and May Day has developed on top of this old festival. The day has become culturally important; with workers claiming the day for themselves, to express their working class and solidarity with other workers. It is a truly international celebration; from Mocambique to Canada, Portugal to China solidarity is proclaimed but in each case a tradition has developed out of the experience of the labour movement. This is what we are now going to look at.

May Day traditions in South Africa

This year it will be 80 years since May Day was first celebrated in South Africa. In every country workers have had to fight for their day, to claim it for themselves. In South Africa workers have done this, building May Day into the history of the labour movement and the struggle for national liberation. In South Africa, too, the message of May Day has not easily taken root. Unity of the working class, regardless of race, colour or creed, with the interests of the most exploited workers at the forefront, has never been easy in South Africa, where divisions between white and black workers are many. This is why May Day has historically only touched a small section of the working class, and its traditions have been built by workers at the forefront of progressive organisations, never really growing beyond them. Small though the tradition is; it shows a history which has been fought for and paid for in blood. - a history which is now being reclaimed.

Origins in South Africa

On Sunday afternoon May 1st 1904 in Market Square, Johannesburg, where people usually came to pass the time, a group of socialists held South Africa's first May Day meeting. They had come from Europe and had experience of the socialist and trade union movements there. They were a cosmopolitan bunch - in fact, two meetings were held, one in English and one where French, German and Russian was spoken. Using wagons decorated with red flags for platforms, the socialists made many fiery speeches above the noise of a Salvation Army Band. The crowd was told it had been decided that the time was ripe to introduce the movement of socialism to the people of Johannesburg. Mr. Maclean, a trade unionist declared: "They were there to celebrate their first annual Labour Day, to testify, as their comrades in almost every town and country in the civilised world were doing, to the unity and oneness of sympathy and aims of the working classes throughout the world." 7) Speeches were made attacking capitalists for the misery and degradation of the working class.

Mr. Maclean contended the capitalists manipulated the political machinery "to confuse the working men, to mislead and befog them, and make them believe that the interests of the capitalists and their own were the same. There was never a greater mistake. Their interests were irreconcilable, and therefore it was the bounden duty of the working men to organise themselves politically and destroy the disastrous social conditions to which not only themselves but their children were doomed." 8)

The meeting ended by passing a resolution with the aim of establishing a "cooperative commonwealth" and demanding representative government in the Transvaal.

Once begun May Day took some time to become established as an annual event, really only taking off after World War I. It was celebrated in Cape Town in 1906 and in Durban in 1909, where a strike of Natal Government rail workers created a favourable climate. A crowd of over 5000 marched from Albert Park

to Ocean Beach where speeches were made and the usual May Day resolution on high child labour, lack of political representation and unemployment taken. All support for the strikers was urged, and Mr. C.H. Knowles even encouraged the women to "form an organisation to help the workers union. He says they should refuse to work to or dance or play tennis with the men until they (the men) swore allegiance to, and were in, the fighting line of the political army of workers."

May Day was celebrated in the following year when English trade union leader Tom Mann visited South Africa and led a march in Johannesburg of trade unionists.

Next ~~there was a~~ ~~meeting~~ of socialists in Cape Town, who, under the banner of the Social Democratic Federation, organised a strike against the Rites Assemblies Bill which coincided with May Day.

When World War I started, the labour movement was split into a pro and anti-group. The same thing happened all around the world as the labour movement declared workers should not fight and die in a war started by capitalists fighting over how to divide up the profits. The Social Democratic Federation remained true to the principles of working class solidarity and so in 1915 "a little band of war on warites organised organised a picturesque but, as the press would say, attenuated procession through the streets of Johannesburg, ending with a meeting in the rain at Market Square, addressed by a number of stalwarts and enlivened with a small band." It was resolved to "fight for unity of all peoples and the abolition of capitalist exploitation, brutality and bloodshed." 10)

The following year those social democrats who had opposed the war formed an International Socialist League (1st) and held a quiet social function which passed a resolution "celebrating ... our bond with the militant proletariat of all lands 'and (we) pledge our energies to the New International for the building up in South Africa of such industrial labour solidarity as can alone destroy capitalism, militarism and war, and in the fullness of strength unfold itself into the socialist commonwealth." 11)

Up till this point the May Day celebrations had been exclusively white affairs and the units proclaimed strictly inside the colour bar. In 1917 this changed. Greater "realisation of the meaning of international socialism began to dawn on the I.S.L. and in that year the May Day meeting was to have as a speaker, an African, Horace Mbelle, an articulated clerk active in the Transvaal A.N.C. That year the 1st leaflet stated: "The power to labour, and the colour of the skin is the key to emancipation" ¹²⁻). The meeting, however, was broken up by mobs of soldiers and civilians in the midst of war fever, were doubly enraged by the non-racialism and anti-war position of the I.S.L. These efforts continued and in 1918 the ISL held a meeting outside the Pilkington Hall in Ferrerinstown where a crowd of 200, mainly coloured workers gathered. Speakers included Talbot Williams, an organiser for the African Peoples Organisation and William Thebedi of the A.M.C. While the ISL met, an exclusive meeting of white trade unions took place outside the town hall. Amalgamated Society of Engineers members on strike, who had got May Day as a holiday, complained because they would lose a day's pay.

On the Rand, as elsewhere, there was a great deal of worker action after the war, and this affected May Day. For Socialists the Bolshevik Revolution had altered May Day significantly, as it provided a great rallying point for workers around the world. I.S.L. agitation identified oppression as a weapon of exploitation and moved hesitantly away from white exclusiveness.

A large procession marched through the streets of Johannesburg in 1919 organised by the trade union body, the S.A. Industrial Federation. At the head were the building workers and mason's band. Since municipal workers had gone on strike to do observe May Day, the whole of Johannesburg knew of the significance of the day. The ISL marched with their own band and a banner which bore the slogan "Follow the lead of Russia, Down with Capitalism, Long Live the Workers International Revolution. Workers of the World Unite". It was a remarkable day for Johannesburg for the procession marched through the streets singing songs, followed by crowds, many of whom were wearing red badges. In his speech Bill Andrews made especial reference

to the "regrettable absence of African and coloured workers from the procession" and urged for next year to be a huge black and white demonstration. 13)

While white workers were demonstrating in peace in Johannesburg's squares and streets. Somewhere else in the city a meeting of 4000 Africans took place. Their meeting, however, was broken up by police, while an airplane circled overhead.

Due to the May Day strike the year before, employers on the Rand granted workers the day off in 1920. Again the day was an all white affair, as coloured labour organisations refused to participate because of their treatment in a dock strike in Cape Town earlier in the year. Struggles over political lines came out in that May Day meeting. The ISL accused the secretary of the Industrial Federation, Mr. Crawford of of sabotaging May Day by not encouraging workers to attend and/the blamed him for the farcical spectacle of a brewery dray carrying a glorified beer bottle advertising beer at the head of the procession.

In Durban the I.S.L. branch held a picnic in Albert Park accompanied by songs and speeches. During Day the people of Durban were treated to the sight of a trolley pulled by four oxen and decorated with flags on which were huge paintings of Karl Marx and the arms of the Soviet Republic of Russia.

In Cape Town there was a large rally where an estimated 8000 gathered to listen to speakers of various shades of opinion.

In 1921 things were slightly better. On the Rand, although it was the responsibility of the Executive of the Industrial Federation to organise May Day, the ISL took the lead in organising social evenings, meetings and processions. In that year next to the decorated car conveying singing children, a small group of African workers marched under the I.S.L. banner. In Durban a meeting was held at His Majesty's theatre, and in Cape Town a large demonstration with over 20 labour organisations took place. There the strength of the coloured and African workers' support, established without doubt their right to participate in May Day events. 14)

The Rand Revolt prevented May Day from being celebrated in 1922, and in the aftermath of its defeat, those white workers who had won it as a holiday, lost the day. Nonetheless the procession organised by the Communist Party was as colourful as ever with decorated cars, trolley buses and childrens choirs. The procession wound its way through Johannesburg and stopped to sing the red flag and International outside symbols of the capitalist establishment,, the Star, Rand Daily Mail newspapers and Corner House mining group offices.¹⁵⁾

In Cape Town the May Day meeting became a day of protest against unemployment with a large C.P. led demonstration on the Parade demanding work of national maintenance. In the evening a social was held.¹⁵⁾

From these meetings on the Rand, in Cape Town and in Durban a May Day tradition began to emerge. For all the backwardness of the early socialists, they were beginning to grapple with the problem of reaching the working masses. This was why they made efforts to make May Day meetings non racial, which, however, was unsuccessful were enough to distance them from the more conservative unions in the Industrial Federation. These attempts were from the top, however, and it took the growth of African trade unions on the Rand to really change things. In 1928 African workers marched in their thousands and among them a small number of whites who remained true to the principle of worker unity. Their celebrations dwarfed the Labour Party's exclusive little meeting. From that point onwards, with ups and down, black and white workers held united demonstrations and social events until 1950.

In South Africa divisions in the labour movement were so large that not even the unity of May Day could always bridge them. In the early 1930s it was celebrated in markedly different ways. The registered unions and bureaucratic labour movement celebrated May Day, and even passed resolutions on the International solidarity of labour, yet their meetings were exclusive

and barred African workers from attending. On the other hand, there were the mass meetings of the Communist Party. Thus at that time there were often two meetings - one called by the May Day Committee of the trade unions and an unofficial, but much larger and more militant, meeting of the Communist Party. A press report of the time conveys the newspapers' view of this.

"Communists held meetings at the Johannesburg City Hall steps on Sunday and yesterday, in accordance with their May Day programme, while yesterday afternoon the children of trade unionists and members of the labour party enjoyed their annual treat on the sports grounds near Zoo lake.

At the Saturday meeting, speeches got off to a slow start and they rattled off the 'usual' matter that is heard at such gatherings. It was mainly on unemployment.....

While this had been going on natives, some of them bearing furred banners, began to congregate on the private roadways in front of the City Hall. Then they drifted one by one, to the steps between the main entrance and President street, and one by one the banners which bore such slogans as "we want work, food, land" were unfurled. All the time there had been a fire on interruptions from sections of the crowd, and most of them referred to the presence of natives in the Communist Party. Shortly after the natives arrived, it was noticeable that there was a movement of police towards the South side of the main entrance to the City Hall, and how well thought this move was soon to be proved.

The leadership of the police and the tact of all ranks in dealing with the crowd was admirable. A native speaker was announced and at once there was a shout from an enraged section of the audience. Some of the Europeans pushed forward ominously towards the natives. Some people feared the natives would get a rough time. The police tactfully intervened and with their truncheons persuaded the natives to go away. They went in something of a hurry. There were no Europeans among the injured.

.....Meanwhile the official May Day Committee held its usual quiet and happy function about beyond Zoo lake....
(A) Comprehensive resolution was passed protesting about the "exploitation of the toiling masses." ... and the singing of the "Red Flag" followed the passing of the resolutions" (17)

Massive unemployment in 1931 led the Communist Party to demonstrate against these conditions and May Day that year was caught up in these events. As the United May Day Committee refused to allow Africans to participate the CP organised a counter demonstration. A large procession, swelled by the numbers of unemployed, from different ends of town and converged on to the City Hall. The marchers numbered 2000 Africans and 1000 whites gathered at the City Hall, where the quiet meeting of the May Day Committee was drowned out under the booing and yelling of the unemployed.

After a while the unemployed settled down to listen to speakers, among them Izzy Diamond, who drew cheers from the assembled Africans by referring to them as "black comrades".

At the speeches ended, a mixed crowd of around 1000 formed into a procession and marched towards the Carlton Hall singing the Red Flag and shouting "we want work, we want bread". The Carlton Hotel and the Rand Club, symbols of mining wealth were attacked and a number of demonstrators arrested. Izzy Diamond, Communist leader was jailed for a year. 18)

A decade of May Days

The depression, weakness of the Communist Party and labour movement are factors that account for the absence of May Day celebrations through most of the 1930's. As the situation improved it became possible to hold May Day meetings once more. May Day Committees in the black union federations worked together in 1937 to hold a meeting in Cape Town on the parade and a concert. The committees then formed a single body, the United May Day Committee, to organise May Day events annually. The Communist Party also participated as a forceful advocate of internationalism and May Day agitation. Furthermore, the 1940's were a period where May Day was most consistently observed.

A pattern began to emerge of the way May Day was celebrated during the period.

Leadership figures from the trade union and international liberation movements addressed May Day meetings around the country. Exchanges of greetings were published in the progressive newspaper and meetings and socials were enriched with drama and music as workers made these celebrations more culturally interesting.

A pattern was also established of the type of meetings held. In Johannesburg, typically, a procession through the streets to the City Hall steps would take place where speeches would be made. In the afternoon sports would be held at Wemmer Pan. In Cape Town there would be a meeting on the parade and this was frequently supplemented by meetings in the City Hall enlivened with singing and drama. In Durban mass processions often lead from Red Square and mass demonstrations were held in Albert Park.

It was the time when the garment workers union used to have a May Day picnic. A May Queen would be chosen and workers would march to Victoria Lake for a picnic and swimming and dancing. The Union won May Day as a holiday and used it to the full, since workers' day to celebrate their victory and solidarity with workers around the world. 19)

During this period when meetings were held regularly, the focus of speeches were on fascism, on the war and international issues. This is understandable in the context of war, but kept the traditions of May Day squarely on international issues. While the meetings were enriched with more dramatic content, they were far from developing a more authentic South African working class tradition. After the war the issues moved into more immediate concerns of the trade unions, housing, minimum wages and African trade union recognition, in step with the unregistered labour movement.

May 1st 1950 Freedom Day strike

Political developments rapidly overtook the celebration of May Day after 1948. Representatives of the white labour movement declined invitations to attend May Day affairs and the right wing of the labour movement ceased to observe it entirely.

On the political front, organisations previously distant were drawn together, under attack from the Nationalist Government. May Day 1950 was different to previous days. The S.A.C.P., A.N.C., The Natal Indian Congress and Transvaal Indian Congress undertook joint cooperation for the first time, declaring May Day as Hónddym Day and calling for a general stay away.. and demonstrations. The strike and demonstrations were to attack the Suppression of Communism Bill.

Hundreds of meetings were held throughout the country in the build up to the Freedom Day strike and extensive agitation took place in parts of the Transvaal. Feelings were high in support of the strike.

To counter this the State mobilised all its resources. Meetings were banned and police and army units patrolled the streets. Employers offered workers accommodation at the factory to cut them off from the strike, loudspeaker vans toured townships, ordering workers to go to work²⁰⁾, and the Army occupied townships in Pretoria. Despite attempts by police to force workers onto buses to be transported to the factories, and the heavy police intimidation, the strike was widely observed. In the evening police broke up a gathering in Benoni with fixed bayonets that left four dead and seven injured.²¹⁾ In Alexandra township a crowd was fired on and a cinema burnt down; In Sophiatown crowds were also shot at²²⁾, The final death toll was 13 killed and thirty seriously wounded.

In Cape Town 6000 people listened to speeches on the parade and then marched up Adderley Street shouting "Down with Apartheid". We want freedom."

In Durban 10 000 demonstrated against the Suppression of Communism Bill. Thus May Day 1950 became South Africa's first mass stay away, the day on which the international struggle for 8 hours is celebrated became a day of mass political struggle against oppression. May Day then took on a new meaning for the African working class. It was a day on which blood had been spilt too, and as a day of mourning was called for June 26th, to recall those who had fallen. This is how June 26 came into our calendar.

May Day under Sactu

After the Freedom Day strike of 1950, the celebration of May Day declined. In the early 1950's rallies and social evenings were held in Cape Town. These did not grow again into the large May Day parades of previous years. This was a result of the state's attacks on the trade union movements and national liberation movements, that weakened the unions and removed the leadership which had taken the lead in organising May Day events. Nor was there any increase in May Day from the registered unions, who chose to disregard their first May Day activities. Only Sactu kept alive a tradition of May Day and the progressive weekly paper, the Guardian continued to bring out May Day issues with notices and greetings from trade unions. From Sactu's beginning the importance of May Day was stressed, for the strength it lent to workers struggle, inside South Africa and the inspiration it gave workers. Sactu called few May Day meetings - instead Sactu messages were published by the Newspaper New Age, and the day was used as a day of review of the trade union movement and the struggles of oppressed workers. In this way it was linked to the 11 a day Campaign and so adopted that the traditional international aspects were placed as a background to the demands of South Africa's oppressed workers.

Sactu trade unionists were realistic in their assesment of how May Day had to be taken to the workers if it were ever to become a day the South African working class made their own. Port Elizabeth trade unionist Frances Baard had this to say:

" The nonEuropean workers of South Africa must not let down the workers of other countries by failing to join them in this great annual demonstration of the people of the world for working class solidarity.

Every worker must start preparing now for May Day. Celebrations must be held in homes, halls, factories and streets. Through meetings and personal contact workers must be told of the significance of this day.

Where public meetings are against the law, small private gatherings can be held, freedom songs sung in homes and factories, on streets and in busses and trains. Families can gather arround May Day dinners and tea parties where the meaning of this day can be discussed with children, relatives and friends." 23)

Absence and reemergence of May Day

When Sactu was beld white by repression and the New Age banned, May Day, a minor part of pbâ pèlitics and practice of the labour movement disappeared.

It is now reemerging as the workers movements grows in strength. In 1982 May Day meetings were held where few workers attended. Last year trade unions in several arts of the zountry held meetings on May Day. This year is set for to have more workers than before meeting on May Day. With such strength a new and stronger May Day tradition is sure to grow.

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