

May Day 1985

This year again May Day was celebrated in all parts of the country. In the many speeches and resolutions a number of themes emerged: the need for unity, for workers control and to build the new federation. A number of concrete demands also emerged: that May 1 be made a paid public holiday; for maternity rights; for a living wage; for adequate support for unemployed workers and for a 40-hour working week.

In the Transvaal

Over 500 people attended the May Day celebration at Khotso House organised by the May Day Co-ordinating Committee of the Transvaal. In a display of worker unity all trade unions co-operated to make the lunch hour meeting a success. A huge banner declaring: "Workers of the World Unite", together with the individual trade union banners provided a colourful decor. The singing and chanting which punctuated the speeches created an electric atmosphere. Speakers from CCAWUSA, FOSATU, CUSA, AZACTU and UDF unions all spoke of the need for worker unity and condemned capitalism as the cause of workers' problems.

Jethro Dalisa, regional chairman of TGWU and chairman of the meeting, read out the aims and objects of working class organisation to the approval of the audience:

- * to secure social and economic justice for all workers;
- * to strive for the building of a united working class movement regardless of race, colour or creed;
- * to encourage all workers to join trade unions and to develop a spirit of solidarity among all workers;
- * to secure just standards of living, social security and fair conditions of work for the working class as a whole;
- * to facilitate education and training of all workers so as to further the interests of the working class;
- * to change, advance or oppose any law, action or policy of the government or any other grouping in the interests of the working class.

During the meeting a large contingent of riot police - armed with guns; batons and dogs - cordoned off the area. As people left the meeting singing and chanting, the police forced them

back inside allowing only a few to leave at a time.

Members of the Chemical Workers Industrial Union at PG Glass had already won a paid half-day holiday for May 1. They celebrated the occasion with a meeting at Morena Stores (Katllehong) - attended by 400 workers from PG Glass and some dismissed workers from Litemaster (MAWU members). After the meeting - addressed by shop stewards and officials - workers held a braai. The proceedings were concluded with a film.

That evening CWIU members were again to the fore with a mass meeting of Sasol workers, held in eMbalenhle. In a massive show of strength, 2000 workers packed the community centre. Many more were left behind at the mines because of lack of transport. Also present were members of OCAWUSA and TGWU from Evanda and Secunda. The hall was decked with banners which declared: "Workers of the World Unite - Workers Solidarity in Action"; "Forward with the Workers Struggle"; and "An Injury to One is an Injury to All". The meeting was entertained by the CWIU choir of Vulco Latex and the SFAWU Choir from Kellogs (the "K Team"). Workers heard reports on the situation in the mines and the Sasol plant. The meeting was addressed by shop stewards, officials and by Chris Diamini, president of FOSATU. A message of solidarity was read out from the social security workers section of Force Ouvrier, the French trade union.

Other May Day meetings took place at the weekend: at Regina Mundi (Soweto), Katlehong, Alexandra, Sebokeng, Pretoria and Daveyton. Also meetings were held by NUM members on some mines.

In Cape Town

About 3,000 people attended this Year's May Day meeting in Cape Town at Rocklands Civic Centre in Mitchells Plain. Organised by the seven unions in the Western Cape who are party to the planned new trade union federation - NAAWU, PWAU, GWU, NUTW, OCAWUSA, FCWU and CTMWA - it was one of the biggest worker meetings Cape Town has seen. Workers came from as far away as Malmesbury, Tulbagh and Grabow. Amandlas punctuated the speeches and there was jubilant dancing in the crowded aisles. Workers from General Workers' Union put on a short play, showing the difference between organisation and individual struggle. In countless songs, workers committed themselves to further struggle for a new, non-exploitative South Africa.

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Backed by vibrant union banners, John Ernstzen, of the 14,000 - strong Cape Town Municipal Workers Association, said he was proud to be there because he was a worker, involved in the workers' struggle. He added:

Not that it's nice to be a worker. Its hard. But I'm proud because workers in South Africa have decided to get up and fight. Thousands of workers have decided to finish with waiting. History has taught us that nobody can better the workers' lot, only workers can do this.

May Day is different from other special days, such as Christmas. People say Christmas is a day of forgetting and forgiving. For us May Day is not a day of forgetting but of remembrance. To the people of Cradock, Crossroads and Uitenhage we say: your struggle is ours. To the ruling class we say: the children you shot in Langa and Crossroads are not just children at Langa and Crossroads. They are all our children. You can't divide us anymore. We have built unity. If you touch one worker, you touch us all.

He said workers had to strengthen their unions and build the new federation so that they could strengthen their struggle:

The federation is not a pretty ornament. It is not there for show. It is a vehicle to transport us to victory.

Part of our long-term struggle, comrades, is to fight for a new society where there is no exploitation and poverty. The struggle is for workers to control their own destiny. Why is it that workers produce the wealth of the country but can't have a say in what happens to that wealth?

He said that the workers had to continue the fight for:

- * an 8 hour day
- * May Day as a paid public holiday
- * the right to organise freely and picket in support of demands
- * decent housing and schooling
- * an end to pass laws, homelands and colour discrimination
- * to support the mine and Sasol workers.

Messages of support were received from: the South African Woolworkers Union (who recently broke away from TUCSA), the Unemployed Workers Movement, South African Chemical Workers Union, Cape Action League, United Democratic Front, Congress

of South African Students, Federation of Cape Civic Associations, Inter-School Co-ordinating Committee and the Western Cape Youth League.

Meetings were called by the Cape Youth Congress, the Clothing Workers Union and the Atlantis Residents' Association on the same night to discuss unemployment.

In Natal

In Durban some 5,000 workers assembled at Currie's Fountain to celebrate May Day. Many - particularly MAWU members - had taken the day off work to attend. The programme included the band, Abafana Bomoya, worker choirs and some new worker plays including one performed by dismissed OCAWUSA members which dealt with the struggle at Spar. Resolutions were adopted dealing with maternity rights; for May Day to be a paid public holiday; and calling for an 8 hour day. The main speaker - Maxwell Xulu, vice-President of MAWU - spoke on the theme of worker control, class struggle and the need for workers to organise independently. He also had some words to say about black capitalists:

In South Africa very unfortunately it has become common that the employer is known to be white. We never think of black employers. And the reason that we can't think of it that way is because they direct us to looking into racism rather than the class struggle. They build organisation, they lead organisation, and they tell us "We are with you in the struggle". They tell us "You must fight for your rights. You must fight for workers rights." Yet back in their own businesses workers are working more than 8 hours.

But the very same black employers are leaders of certain struggles for the liberation of the black workers in this country. So, therefore I cannot see how you can say you are going to lead me into liberation when you yourself have not liberated your own employees. How can you tell me I am being exploited by my employer when you are exploiting fellow workers?

In Pietermaritzburg 4,000 packed the Lay Ecumenical Centre. There was a large turnout from MAWU and NUTW factories, again with many taking the day off. Ten buses were required to bring striking Sarmcol workers from Howick. Shop stewards

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gave reports on their efforts to negotiate time off for May Day. Resolutions dealt with hours of work, unemployment and the living wage (R3.50 per hour). Miriam Mkize of Prestige spoke on the need to link union and community issues. The programme included a talk on the history of May Day, the Prestige choir, a children's choir and a performance of the play, "Hobo the man", by Kaba Mkize.

Successful May Day meetings were also held at Escourt and Ladysmith.

In the Eastern Cape

For Port Elizabeth and Uitenhage a May Day rally was organised by the unity talks unions - despite problems in securing a venue. The Gelvandale Community Centre was refused by the Director of Housing, Eddie Samuels, who was supported by the Coloured Management Committee. In the end 1,000 organised workers packed into a local church hall. The theme of "One union - one industry" was stressed and talks were given on womens rights, worker control, worker unity and the new federation, trade unions and the community, workers and students and, what is a union? A series of resolutions was passed:

- (i) solidarity with the NUM's struggle;
- (ii) condemning the Firestone Tyre Company in its refusal to negotiate with the Firestone workers in Sao Paolo, Brazil and expressing solidarity with Brazilian workers;
- (iii) support for the student demand for independent elected SRCs;
- (iv) support for the establishment of the new federation under worker control;
- (v) condemned detentions for political beliefs;
- (vi) to campaign for the following:
 - (a) May 1 as a paid public holiday
 - (b) an end to exploitation and apartheid
 - (c) maternity rights
 - (d) for a living wage determined by the needs of workers
 - (e) reasonable unemployment pay.

On the following Sunday, a May Day meeting was held jointly by MACWUSA and the Parents Committee. The aim was to give the Parents Committee an opportunity to contact workers as parents. 2,000 attended to hear speeches on: the meaning of May

Day; the role of workers in the struggle; the relationship between workers and the community; and workers as parents. The meeting was addressed by members of MACWUSA, Pebco, and the Crisis in Education Parents Committee.

In East London, local unions - SAAWU, OCAWUSA, AAWU, FCWU, GWU (and later NAAWU) - formed a steering committee to prepare for May Day; the Domestic Workers Union also attended one meeting. The theme was unity, with unions agreeing to work under the banner of the steering committee, and not to promote their own interests. It was agreed to approach local management's for half to one hour off work on May Day. On 29-30 April, 12,000 pamphlets and 250 posters were distributed.

On May 1, mass meetings were held in factories to launch the campaign for a paid public holiday. On Sunday 5 May, 600 workers attended a rally at the Duncan Village Community Centre. The different unions presented talks on May Day, the history of South African trade unions, union unity and factors affecting trade unions in South Africa. The talk on union unity, by a SAAWU member, sparked considerable discussion. He argued that the Feasibility Committee should intervene to help general unions industrialise themselves, and that the present organisation of the general unions should not be an obstacle to unity. He said that whilst there were reservations about registration this should not prevent unity.

The meeting was also addressed by a striking SAAWU member from the East London Abattoir. The meeting unanimously supported the 150 dismissed workers and the call for a red meat boycott.

In its assessment the steering committee called for a more permanent form of co-operation amongst unions in East London. Towards this end unions were asked to get mandates to negotiate local demarcation. As a minimum, unions were asked to report to each other on the areas where they are organising; and, where more than 1 union was involved, any conflict should be resolved. On this basis unions can go forward to organise the unorganised workers.

(SALB local correspondents, May 1985)