



MAY 1

MAY 1 is known by workers all over the world as May Day, or International Labour Day. May Day is a day of unity between workers. It is a day when workers in each country remember their struggle is linked to the struggles of other workers around the world.

Many workers see May Day as a symbol of the workers' struggle against capitalism, and of the workers' fight to win power and control over their own lives.

Celebrating May Day
Every year on May 1, workers around the world celebrate May Day in different ways. In many countries, trade unions and workers' political parties organise meetings and marches.

In socialist countries like the Soviet Union, Cuba or China, May Day is an official holiday for all the people in those countries. On this day, all factories, shops and schools are closed and the government organises mass rallies and displays.

In many capitalist countries in Europe, workers have won May Day as a paid public holiday. It is a public holiday in Britain, Portugal, Spain, Austria and Germany. In these countries, socialist parties organise meetings, mass marches and demonstrations which are often followed by fetes, dances and other celebrations.

In some countries, workers have used May Day to organise strikes and protests against their government. In 1980 in Brazil, a country in Latin America, 100 000 factory workers went on strike on May Day. They marched in protest against the harsh labour laws that their government was using to try and weaken their trade unions.

May Day is celebrated differently in each country. But in every May Day meeting or demonstration, workers talk about one common goal — the international solidarity of all workers around the world.

How did May Day begin?
May Day began over 100 years ago with the struggle by workers in North America and Europe for a shorter working day. They argued that the long hours of work were destroying workers.

Also, by forcing workers to work long hours, the bosses could employ fewer workers. This kept unemployment high and made it difficult for workers to organise.

In some places the struggle for a shorter working day was successful. In the United States, the government passed a new law in 1868 saying that workers should not work longer

than eight-hours a day. But most bosses took no notice of this new law.

Radical worker leaders called for a mass strike. The city of Chicago, which had many factories and workers was the centre of the strike. On May Day, 40 000 workers marched through the streets. Here, the police fired on the strikers and killed six workers.

When the Chicago workers organised a protest meeting in Haymarket Square, in the centre of the city, a bomb was

From this time on, May 1 became the day when workers around the world demonstrated solidarity with each other. In 1889, at the first meeting of the Second International (an organisation which united workers' political parties throughout Europe), it was agreed that all workers should fight for May 1 to be recognised as International Labour Day.

In 1890, there were May Day demonstrations in France, Britain, Italy, Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Portugal, Spain, Bel-

unions even won May 1 as a recognised labour holiday. Later, some industrial council agreements allowed workers to take the day off, as an unpaid holiday.

By the 1920's black workers were also starting to organise in trade unions and political parties. In the 1920's and 1930's, the Communist Party, together with some trade unions that organised both black and white workers started to hold regular meetings on May Day.

In Cape Town, black workers marched up Adderley Street shouting 'Down with Apartheid! Down with passes! We want freedom!'. In the evening police attacked workers. In Johannesburg, the police fired on workers and 18 workers were killed.

After 1950 there were no more large May Day rallies. Although, some unions, like the Garment Workers Union and later SACTU, held some meetings.

In the 1960's the right to celebrate May Day was removed from industrial council agreements. For many years, May Day was not celebrated by workers in South Africa.

May Day Today
Since the 1970's black workers in South Africa have begun to build up their trade unions again. And workers have once again began to demand May Day as a workers' public holiday.

Last year the independent trade unions held meetings and mass rallies on May Day. In Natal a May Day campaign was launched. Thousands of FOSATU workers wore May Day stickers, and handed out pamphlets in their factories, explaining the origins of May Day. In Cape Town, unions involved in the unity talks organised a joint May Day meeting which was attended by about 3 000 workers.

Since then many FOSATU unions have won May Day as a workers' holiday. The Chemical Workers Industrial Union was the first union to win May Day as a paid public holiday — this was at Pilkington Glass in the Eastern Cape.

The Meaning of May Day
May Day was born as a day of struggle. It began as part of the struggle of workers for a shorter working day. Today this struggle continues as workers fight unemployment. A number of FOSATU unions have begun to campaign for a 40-hour working week.

May Day has become a symbol of working class unity. On May Day this year, workers will commit themselves to greater unity, to build their organisations and to strengthen their struggle for a better life. They will also remind themselves that the success of their struggle is linked to the struggles of workers in other countries.

Lastly, May Day has become a symbol of the workers' struggle for a new society, where workers will enjoy political power, and control over their lives in the factories, and in their communities.

Most of this article was drawn from a new booklet called 'May Day: A History of International Labour Day' published by the International Labour Research and Information Group, Box 213, Salt River 7925.



Top: Workers in South America demonstrate on May Day, 1976
Bottom: The annual May Day march in the Soviet Union

thrown at the police. The police used this as an excuse to attack the workers and smash up union offices.

The police arrested a number of radical worker leaders and accused them of organising the bomb attack. Four of these leaders were eventually hanged for this although there was little proof that they had anything to do with the bomb attack.

In Europe, workers' industrial unions were also fighting a militant struggle for a shorter working day. When they heard the news, they organised strong protests against the hanging of the American labour leaders.

gium, Hungary, Germany, Poland, Australia and the United States. These May Day demonstrations strengthened the message of international solidarity in the working class movement.

History of May Day in South Africa
In 1904, May Day was celebrated in South Africa for the first time. In these early days, it was only the white workers who were organised in trade unions, and in a few, small socialist parties. Through these organisations, they began to celebrate May Day.

From 1919, they began to hold meetings every year. Some

At this time, meetings pledged support for the revolution which had happened in the Soviet Union in 1917. Leaders also spoke to the crowd about the struggle for democracy and workers' rights in South Africa.

But in 1948, the National Party came to power and tried to repress black trade unions and black political organisations.

In May 1950 the Communist Party organised a mass strike on May Day to oppose the government. On May 1 workers across the country stayed away from work. Many factories were quiet and many streets were empty.