

In the last edition of SALB we published a history of May Day. This year May Day was celebrated all over South Africa. This took different forms in each region - sometimes reflecting the local political situation and level of organisation. The SALB has compiled a report from its correspondents in all parts of the country.

1. Western Cape

May Day was marked by a mass trade union rally at Athlone, attended by 2500 workers. Bus loads of workers arrived from as far as George and Tulbagh. Local unions involved in the Unity Talks decided to build for a labour movement celebration and declined invitations for joint activity with the UDF or the Cape Action League. Unity was the major theme of the rally. In the words of Moses Mbothwe, (National Treasurer of the General Workers' Union): "The foundations of the new federation are in the workers in the factories".

Eddison Stevens, Assistant General Secretary of the Food and Canning Workers' Union stressed internationalism and stated that the workers' fight against apartheid was also a fight against capitalism. Virginia Engel of the National Union of Textile Workers analysed the government's "new deal". It was the same "rotten deal", she said: "We can have no part in making oppression work better." John Ernstzen, Secretary of the Cape Town Municipal Workers' Association said workers were no longer begging for their rights:

We have the power to achieve what we want.
The power lies in our hands. We must change
the system which oppresses us.

A meeting of 800 held at the University of the

May Day

Western Cape was attended by members of the new unions - Clothing Workers Union and Retail and Allied Workers Union. The meeting was addressed by a striker from Cape Underwear and by SACTU veteran, Billy Nair, recently released from the Island.

Other meetings were held by students at the University of Cape Town, and a cultural event was held at the Trade Union Library. The following Saturday the UDF held its own May Day rally attended by about 2000 people. The meeting was addressed by President Oscar Mpetha and Dr Boesak. Trade unionist and member of the United Women's Organisation, Liz Abrahams said that workers held the solution to the country's problems in their hands: "We must organise, that's the only solution."

2. Transvaal

In the Transvaal trade union activity was more diffuse. Some of the Transvaal FOSATU Locals (locally based inter-union organisations similar to British Trades Councils) held their own celebrations, whilst organisers in some of the areas spread the word amongst the membership.

The following unions jointly issued a leaflet to mark the occasion: Commercial, Catering and Allied Workers' Union, General and Allied Workers Union, Brushes and Cleaners Workers Union and the Council of Unions of South Africa. Solidarity is stressed:

On this day, together with workers throughout the world, we ... pledge to fight for bread for everyone, peace in the world, and freedom for all.

Meetings were held at the University of the Witwatersrand, and by JODAC (Johannesburg Democratic Action Committee, affiliated to the UDF) on May 2nd, which was addressed by Billy Nair. Billy had previously addressed May Day meetings in Durban and Cape Town. His speech concentrated on the history

of SACTU and its decision to enter the Congress Alliance. Faced with a fascist style of government and the betrayal of the TUCSA unions, it had been necessary to build an alliance of all those forces resisting state repression. Billy argued that trade union struggles to improve conditions were inextricably bound up with the struggle for political rights. He rejected the view that workers interests had been subordinated to nationalist politics within the alliance.

In Johannesburg political groupings were prominent in May Day celebrations. Azapo held a large meeting at St Hilda's in Soweto. Paul Tsotetsi called for workers unity and international solidarity against exploitation and oppression. Rev. Joe Seoka, President of the Insurance Assurance Workers' Union of South Africa condemned the Sullivan and associated codes which only serve to justify multinational companies' control of the indigenous people. Ishmael Mkhabela, Soweto Branch Chairman of Azapo, called on workers to fulfil their historic mission and gear themselves for the reconquest of the land. The meeting expressed concern at the failure of the big unions to organise a united May Day rally on the Rand.

The Release Mandela Committee (RMC) held two meetings, supported by the General and Allied Workers Union, Johannesburg Scooter Drivers Union, and Putco drivers from CUSA's Transport and Allied Workers Union. At the Khotse House meeting, one of the drivers spoke about how the Putco drivers had come to be despised by the community and were often the target for much abuse during the boycotts and other forms of township struggle. He went on to say that the existence of his union had helped to break down this kind of ostracism as the union took up demands that would benefit passengers as well as drivers. The President of the Soweto Youth Congress spoke more generally of the relationship between workers and the community. He acknowledged that

May Day

until recently the youth in the townships has seen themselves as the vanguard of the struggle - with the result that bus drivers often spent a lot of time ducking stones. He stressed the need for the youth to reconsider their previous attitudes and to recognise the leading role of the workers.

The RMC's other meeting, held at Dube, was addressed by Popo Molefe of the UDF. The meeting took place in candle-light due to a mysterious electrical failure. Despite this there was much singing of worker songs and traditional freedom songs. Apparently some of those attending the meeting were later detained.

3. Eastern Cape

There were two meetings held in Port Elizabeth. At the Centenary Hall in New Brighton. The Motor Assembly and Component Workers Union (MACWUSA) and the General Workers' Union (GWUSA) organised a meeting which was also supported by the UDF. Fikele Kobese spoke of the history of resistance in the area and the first Freedom Day strike in 1950.

Azapo held a workshop in Daku Hall in Kwazakele. They were addressed by Fezile Tshume who argued that the government had been driven by internal resistance to seek non-aggression pacts with neighbouring states.

The May Day celebrations in East London were scheduled for Saturday 28th April. Local unions applied to use the Community Hall in Duncan Village since it is impossible to acquire the use of a hall in Mdantsane. A programme had been drawn up, covering the history of May Day, the emergence of trade unionism, state repression and unity. GWU, AFCWU, SAAWU, NAAWU, Domestic Workers Union, UDF, and National Women's Association were all due to attend.

By coincidence, editors of the SALB were talking to

the organiser of GWU on Friday 27th when security police arrived at the union office with the information that the hall was no longer available. Twenty minutes later an ECAB official telephoned to confirm on the grounds that good relations with the Ciskei would be jeopardised if they were seen to be fostering unions in East London. The GWU organiser pointed out that they were operating on the "South African side" of East London. Access to venues is a fairly widespread problem in the smaller towns of the Eastern Cape. For East London the result was - in the words of the GWU spokesperson: "No hall, no May Day!"

4. Natal

In Cato Ridge workers also experienced intimidation this time at the hands of Uniply management, a subsidiary of the "liberal" Barlow Rand Group. Four shop stewards from the Paper, Wood and Allied Workers Union were sacked for organising a May Day rally at the plant. When workers reacted with work stoppages and a go-slow management threatened to close the plant unless workers behaved themselves.

In Natal May Day reflected the high degree of organisation of those unions involved in the Unity Talks. On Monday 30th April some 4-500 shop stewards met in joint councils in Pinetown, Durban and Pietermaritzburg. The theme of the meetings was the significance and history of May Day and report backs and discussion on the unity talks. Thirty-thousand pamphlets and stickers were handed out to the stewards who then distributed these in the factories next day and organised factory meetings. In Natal especially, May Day demonstrated the growing strength of the organised workers in South Africa.

(SALB Editorial Board)