

May Day 1988 around the world

May Day is International Workers' Day. LINDA COOPER and DINGA SIKWEBU report on celebrations and struggles around the world. ⁺

On the 1 May this year, millions of workers around the world came together to celebrate May Day - the workers' day. On this day, in marches, rallies, speeches, demonstrations and actions, workers everywhere gave voice to common problems, and a common goal, a better life, under workers' control. In this way, May Day unites workers in international working class solidarity.

But each year, May Day is celebrated differently according to the conditions in each country. This year in 1988, workers once again organised around their own particular problems and struggles, and stamped May Day with their own meaning.

Jobs and peace

In many countries in Western Europe and in North America, workers have won May Day as a paid holiday. But despite the advances won by these workers, today they are still facing many problems.

In these countries, the most important message coming out of this year's May Day meetings was, 'We demand the right to work! Give us jobs!' Like we have experienced here in South Africa, so workers the world over have carried the burden of the world economic crisis. Over the past 10 years as bosses have faced falling profits, they have tried to protect themselves by cutting the jobs of workers. So today many hun

⁺ The writers are staff-members of ILRIG (International Labour Research and Information Group) which is based in Cape Town.

dreds and thousands of workers face retrenchment, and a future of permanent unemployment.

In **Britain** this years' May Day rallies took place in the middle of a big strike by ferryboat workers, who are fighting against mass retrenchments and poor working conditions. On May Day itself, the owners of one of the ferry companies organised strike-breakers to work the ferryboats from Dover, in an attempt to break the strike. But in response, strikes broke out in other ports of England and Scotland, as workers took action in solidarity with the striking Dover seamen. With these actions, workers gave voice to the meaning of May Day, worker solidarity.

At May Day rallies in **Germany, France, Italy and Austria**, millions of workers protested against unemployment, and demanded the right to work. They also linked their demand for jobs to their support for disarmament and peace. They called on their governments to get rid of nuclear weapons which can cause mass destruction, and rather put money into the production of useful goods which can benefit all in society.

In many German towns in the industrial region of the Ruhr, steel companies are threatening to close down factories and dismiss thousands of workers. Here on May Day, German workers called on their government to stop wasting huge amounts of money on jew and

terrible weapons of war, and to invest the money in new jobs instead. Unemployed workers also demonstrated on May Day with the slogan, "We don't want charity - we want jobs."

In **Canada** on the eve of May Day the Canadian peace movement organised a mass rally and march for peace and disarmament. In the spirit of May Day, demonstrators called for peace and co-operation between the peoples of different countries.

"Glasnost" - democratising socialism

In most socialist countries, May Day is an official holiday, supported by the government. This year on May Day, workers in many socialist countries demonstrated their support for what has become known as "glasnost" - the changes being led by the Soviet government to restructure their society, and make it more open to democratic participation by the mass of the people.

In the **Soviet Union**, President Gorbachev and other top leaders of the party and government looked on as tens of thousands of people marched through Red Square in the annual May Day parade. The march took several hours, and many workers and young people pulled floats or carried banners which demonstrated their support for their government's programme of reform. One float showed the figures



Namibian workers celebrate Mayday

Photo: John Liebenberg

of bureaucrats trying to slow down or stop "perestroika" - the restructuring of the Soviet economy.

In other socialist countries like **Czechoslovakia** and **Bulgaria**, May Day celebrations this year were also occasions where workers demonstrated their support for economic reform, and the deepening of socialist democracy.

But in **Poland**, May Day 1988 was a day of confrontation between many workers and their government. For the last few years, the Polish trade union movement has been split between those unions who support the government's policies, and the Solidarity trade union, which is demanding the inde-

pendence of trade unions from the government, and the broadening of democracy in Poland. The Solidarity trade union has been banned by the government since 1981.

A week before May Day this year, strikes began spreading amongst members of the Solidarity trade union, particularly the steelworkers. Strikers were demanding an increase in their minimum wage, the recognition of the Solidarity trade unions, and the reinstatement of workers dismissed for Solidarity union activities.

On May Day, the Solidarity trade union called for a national day of protest. When thousands of Solidarity supporters organised

demonstrations in a number of cities, they clashed with riot police, armed with batons and teargas. As the wave of strikes spread to the giant Lenin ship-yards in Gdansk the following day, nine members of the Solidarity leadership were arrested.

So this year's May Day in many socialist countries was a reminder that even where workers have won great victories in their struggle, they still face the task of building deeper and more democratic workers' control.

Freedom from repression and imperialism

In many countries, workers have traditionally used their May Day demonstrations to protest against political repression. They also take the opportunity on May Day to challenge imperialist countries like the United States over the support they give to repressive governments around the world.

In the Philippines this year, workers organised huge May Day demonstrations. These took place at the beginning of a big wage campaign launched by the country's most militant trade union federation, the KMU. But speakers at rallies did not only call for wage increases, they also spoke out against the repressive policies of the Aquino government, and demanded the removal of American military bases in the Philippines.

As thirty thousand people marched through the streets of the capital, Manila, workers formed a protective shield around their union leaders - many have received death threats from the military, or from rightwing vigilante groups. The march took place in front of a huge line of soldiers, armed with water cannons and rifles, waiting behind coils of barbed wire.

The march in Manila ended without violence, but elsewhere in the Philippines May Day marchers were not so lucky. On one island, sugar workers were forced to cancel their planned rally, because they had received serious threats from armed vigilantes and reactionary landlords. On another island, police opened fire on 7000 plantation workers who were marching to their May Day rally. Hundreds were injured, and many demonstrators disappeared - snatched by police and men in civilian clothes.

In Chile, where people have suffered under a military dictatorship for the past 15 years, workers also clashed with government forces. Every year in Chile, May Day reminds workers of the time in 1970 when they elected President Allende into power to try to move their country towards socialism. But in 1973 Allende was violently overthrown by the Chilean army supported by the American CIA and big American business. On May Day this year, 20 000 people marched in the streets of the capital city

calling for an end to the military rule by General Pinochet, and for the return of democracy to the people of Chile. Armed police attacked the demonstrators, injuring three people and arresting 130.

Since November last year, **Palestinians** in Gaza and the West Bank have been in open rebellion against the Israeli occupation of their territories. Israeli troops have responded with great repression, and more than 15 Palestinians have died so far. On 1 May this year, Palestinian workers in these occupied territories turned their May Day demonstrations into a huge protest against Israeli domination. Israeli soldiers attacked demonstrators, and at least two people, including a 16 year old youth, were killed.

At the beginning of this year, a bitter struggle by the people of **South Korea** finally forced the ruling dictator to hand over power to a civilian government. But this new government still refused to legalise the democratic trade unions in that country. On May Day, 3000 students and workers demanding free trade unions clashed with riot police in Seoul, the capital. The police attacked with teargas, while students responded by throwing petrol bombs, setting alight three policemen.

May Day in Southern Africa

On May Day here in **South Africa** this year, outdoor rallies were

banned, but thousands of workers still attended indoor meetings and rallies organised by our unions. Speakers voiced the workers' demands for a living wage, and for more jobs. They also spoke of the urgent need to build worker unity and solidarity in the face of the government's attacks through the Labour Relations Amendment Bill, and the new restrictions on our organisations.

Elsewhere in **Southern Africa**, workers also demonstrated their commitment to working class solidarity at May Day rallies. In **Zimbabwe** workers attended big May Day rallies. In **Namibia**, May Day became the day when the NUNW (National Union of Namibian Workers) and its affiliated unions launched its "Campaign for a Living Wage". Close to 6000 workers attended a May Day rally in Windhoek. SWAPO Deputy Chairperson, Danial Tjongarero, told the rally that the workers struggle would be meaningless unless it was linked to the total independence struggle for a Namibia free from domination by the apartheid government in South Africa.

Solidarity between the workers of Namibia and South Africa was also strengthened when a representative of COSATU, Andrew Zulu, addressed the rally with a solidarity message. He said the workers in both Namibia and South Africa were gunning for freedom and independence. COSATU had passed

resolution at its Second Congress last year supporting co-operation with the NUNW in Namibia. An attack on the NUNW was therefore also an attack on COSATU. Workers in COSATU would not hesitate to take action in the case of an attack on NUNW, either by management or by the puppet government on behalf of its master in South Africa.

The president of the Namibian National Students Organisation (NANSO), also addressed the workers. He warned that as the workers' struggle reached new heights the capitalists would try to co-opt the students and the educated into the capitalist set-up. He called on students to be actively involved in the struggle and to build

an alliance with the workers.

In **Angola** tens of thousands of people demonstrated on May Day in Luanda, the capital city. They demanded the immediate withdrawal of the South African army from their country, and pledged themselves to rebuild their economy, which has been torn apart by years of war.

May Day this year helped to build solidarity between the people of Southern Africa. They all suffer the effects of the violence and war caused by the South African government's policies of aggression in the region, and they all share our common goal; the destruction of the apartheid system and the building of democracy and freedom in our country.

On May Day 1988 workers of different countries expressed their demands around their most pressing problems. But together, these different demands express the basic needs of workers everywhere:

- * the right to work
- * the right to a living wage
- * the right to build free and democratic organisations
- * the right to peace and security
- * the right to freedom from repression and foreign domination
- * the right to democratic workers' control over society.