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## WHY DO MILLIONS OF SOUTH AFRICANS REJECT "WORKERS DAY" AND, INSTEAD CELEBRATE "MAY DAY"?

In March 1987 the Government announced that, in future, the first Friday in May would be a public holiday known as "Workers Day". The announcement met with immediate rejection by the country's largest trade union federation, COSATU. Instead of recognising "Workers Day", workers around the country have demanded to celebrate "May Day", an internationally celebrated day for workers on 1 May. "May Day" is celebrated world-wide by millions of workers, including many Western countries. In most countries workers celebrate May Day officially, having long since won the right to a paid public holiday which recognises the role of workers in society. There are two questions we must ask ourselves: Firstly - why, if a day for workers, such as May Day already exists, does the Government insist on another day such as Workers Day?

Secondly - why do millions of South Africans refuse to recognise the Government's "Workers Day"?

The Government's "Workers Day" is an attempt by the SA State to defuse but not sincerely address the demands and struggles of SA workers. It is a response to pressures from trade union federations to have "May Day" recognised. However, it is a response that is purely cosmetic. In the 1980's the State has been faced with massive displays of workers' unity for a democratic South Africa in the form of rallies and stayaways on May Day. In addition, many employers had in effect already recognised May Day as a paid public holiday. In 1987 the Chamber of Mines agreed to recognise May Day as a paid public holiday and thousands of mineworkers were able to celebrate May Day.

The unity around May Day had come to pose a threat for the State. What is it about May Day that is so significant that the SA Government refuses to recognise it as a paid public holiday?

May Day has become an important symbol of workers' struggles against harsh and unjust working and living conditions. In SA May Day demands include improved wages, living conditions and political rights. In addition, workers demanded May Day as a paid public holiday, the right to full employment and a living wage, housing and transport they could afford, a 40-hour week, free and compulsory education for all and the scrapping of all racist laws.

In SA May Day is particularly significant because May Day demands challenge some of the most important pillars of apartheid, for example - cheap labour, Bantu education and limited political rights.

Workers Day does not address the hardships that SA workers face under apartheid and that is why so many workers reject it.

In addition, Workers Day only applies to certain sections of the labour force ie shop and office workers. Those workers who work under the harshest conditions and who earn the lowest wages must work on Workers Day. This year the Chamber of Mines, for example, will treat Workers Day as a normal working day.

Perhaps, most significantly, Workers Day must be seen in the context of severe State repression of the workers' organisations. COSATU has been restricted and the new labour bills, if passed, will erode many of the rights that workers have won over the past years. "Workers Day" is a clear example of reform initiatives that make no attempt to address the demands of most South Africans. It will be yet another "public holiday" against the background of severe repression of those who are struggling for democracy.

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