



MAY DAY

PACSA FACTSHEET

25

THE DAY OF THE WORKER

The first of May is known by workers all over the world as May Day. It is the day of international working class unity and solidarity. May Day is a great symbol of the workers' struggle for their rights and needs. The idea of a workers' day began in Australia in 1856 as part of the struggle for an 8 hour day. The only way of winning a shorter day, according to the workers, was to fight for it through calling a national general strike. The first such day was held on 21 April 1856. The Australian workers' struggle inspired others around the world; and in 1886 United States workers decided to hold their own general strike on the 1st May in support of the demand for an 8 hour day. Some 350 000 workers in nearly 12 000 places of work downed tools. However, it was only in 1890 that May Day or Labour Day was born internationally, and has since become a permanent feature in the workers struggle.

May Day in South Africa

- 1 May 1904 White workers had their first experience of international workers' day when a rally took place in Market Square, Johannesburg.
- 1917 The celebrations included an African speaker for the first time. Mr Horatio Mbele, an activist in the recently formed South African National Native Congress (later the ANC), spoke at the meeting.
- 1920 'Coloured' workers refused to participate because earlier in the year white workers had helped break a dockworkers' strike in Cape Town.
- 1922 The pressure for May Day to be declared a Public Holiday grew.
- 1926 The demand for such a holiday intensified to such an extent that a Bill was introduced in Parliament proposing a public holiday - but, instead of 1 May, the BILL PROPOSED THE FIRST MONDAY IN MAY. Workers protested, arguing that 1 May had become an international symbol of working class organisation and solidarity. The Bill was dropped.
- 1929 The White South African Trade Union Congress stated in a resolution, 'It regrets that the South African government has given so little attention to the workers' demands for an 8 hour day, the May Day holiday and amendment of various Acts affecting the workers.'
- 1950 Conservative Trade Unions ceased to observe May Day entirely. Various organisations declared 1 May a Freedom Day strike. The Nationalist government mobilised its resources, meetings were banned and army units patrolled the streets and occupied the townships.

In the 50's black unions under the banner of the South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU) continued to observe May Day while white unions found increasing lack of interest in this day. The 60's saw very little activity or protest, and overt May Day observances ceased. With the re-emergence of worker organisation in the 70's, May Day was celebrated only occasionally and quietly.

- 1984 The 80th anniversary of the first South African May Day celebrations saw the workers taking up the campaign to have May Day proclaimed a public holiday.
- 1985 At workers' meetings in various centres around South Africa, the call included, among other things, the demands that May Day become a paid public holiday.
- 1986 Up to 1.5 million workers throughout the country staged a stay-away in commemoration of International Labour Day (May Day) in one of the strongest demonstrations of black solidarity yet seen in South Africa.

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PIETERMARITZBURG AGENCY FOR CHRISTIAN SOCIAL AWARENESS
P.O. BOX 2338, 3200 / 170 BERG STREET, PIETERMARITZBURG

There were no major incidents of violence at any of the rallies held countrywide.

About 10 000 people turned out for a Cosatu May Day rally at Wadley Stadium in Edendale (Pietermaritzburg).

A survey of 38 Pietermaritzburg companies found that 74 percent were affected by the stay-away. Half of these companies made some agreement with workers while 42 percent enforced the 'no work no pay' policy.

The Associated Chamber of Commerce said absenteeism ranged between 70 and 100 percent countrywide.

1987 The State President announced that the first Friday in May is to be declared a public holiday. However this move was rejected by the independent Trade Unions like COSATU and NACTU.

1988

The Trade Unions are facing serious obstacles in the near future with the Labour Relations Amendment Bill which threatens to take away rights which have been won over the years. The Unions also face problems with the Promotion of Orderly Internal Politics Bill; and COSATU has been severely restricted since February.

The Church and the Labour Movement

In looking at the history of the relationship between the Church and the Labour movement in South Africa we can see that the Church often acted in the interests of the wealthy and powerful employers rather than in the interests of the workers. The one Church that consciously took sides with the workers was the Dutch Reformed Church in the earlier part of this century — however this was exclusively in terms of the white working class.

Although the so-called English-speaking Churches did not always consciously side with the ruling classes, they did depend on them and much of their decision-making was influenced by them. Some Churches and Church leaders did recognise the workers' needs for justice and human dignity but were seldom able to give a clear perspective on what that meant.

The Church, therefore, became more and more concerned with its own existence and internal life rather than the world around it. When it did recognise workers it often saw them as "souls" that needed saving rather than as earthly human beings.

With changes in working conditions and the growth of independent Trade Unions in the past couple of decades the Church has faced new challenges. Although it has by no means broken out of its close relationship with the rich and powerful, parts of the Church are taking the challenge of the labour movement seriously.

At its National Conference in 1976 the South African Council of Churches (SACC) called on Churches to investigate the institutions in which they invest in terms of wage practices, collective bargaining, discrimination in the promotion of staff and the making of excess profits.

At its 1982 Conference the SACC recognised the right of Trade Unions to organise and demand bargaining rights. It encouraged Churches to promote fair employment practices, make buildings available for Trade Union meetings, pressure employers and make them aware of grievances, assist strike-affected families, organise workshops for clergy on industrial relations and encourage them to learn about mediation practices.

The most far-reaching statement on workers by the Church is *Worker Rights — A Statement of Christian Commitment* published by Diakonia in 1983 and endorsed by several Churches and Church organisations. It lists several rights of workers including rights outside the workplace, the right to work, conditions of work and wages.

"You are not to exploit the hired servants who are poor and destitute, whether they are from your family or are strangers who dwell in your towns. . . otherwise they may appeal to Yahweh against you and it would be a sin for you." — Deuteronomy 24: 14-15.

