

May Day

1989

by DAVID FIG*

Every year workers around the world gather on 1 May to remember their own struggles and those of their comrades in other countries.

In South Africa, there were celebrations on May Day in big cities but also in some smaller towns for the first time. This year Botha's Day (so-called 'Workers' Day') was to be on Friday 5 May. But the government changed it to the 'first Monday in May' so it coincided with May Day. They wanted to avoid a stayaway on May Day. And next year - will they make Botha's Day the 'first Tuesday' of May? Or will they at last recognize the demand of workers to celebrate International Workers Day.

Solidarity in Southern Africa

At May Day rallies all over South Africa this year, for the first time there was a special focus on the conditions of workers in another country.

At most rallies, workers expressed solidarity with their struggling comrades in Namibia.

Speakers from Namibia addressed some of the rallies and told of changes in conditions for workers since the setting up of the new federation, the National Union of Namibian Workers (NUNW). They spoke about strong links that are being built between NUNW and COSATU. Speakers pointed out that because of the many years of South African control over Namibia, the Namibian labour movement faced the same enemies as South African workers.

Across the Orange River, in Namibia itself, a number of rallies took place under the banners of the NUNW. They were organised at Mondesa in Swakopmund, at Katutura in Windhoek, at Mariental, and at Oshakati in the north. At Oshakati a crowd of thousands ended their rally with a victory march and a motor cavalcade through the streets.

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The Katutura rally was addressed by Moses Mayekiso, general secretary of NUMSA, who was recently acquitted on a charge of treason. He stressed the need for workers to build strong organisational structures which are accountable to the masses. Comrade Moss also demanded that the United Nations must order South African troops in the north of Namibia back to their bases.

At the same rally, the general secretary of the Mineworkers' Union of Namibia, Ben Ulenga, spoke about the need for workers to defend the gains they had made. He warned employers there could be a general strike if government plans for privatising public services goes ahead. He urged workers to be vigilant because South Africa was still threatening the chances of independence.

Solidarity links between the workers of Namibia and South Africa help to combat apartheid and military aggression in the region.

Workers defy repression and challenge imperialism

As usual, SABC television ignored the peaceful May Day rallies in South



Build solidarity action with Namibian workers and youth

Africa and Namibia. This is no surprise since the SABC always ignores the celebrations and struggles of workers and the oppressed in our country.

But this year it broadcast pictures of violence in the streets of many other countries. The government was trying to show viewers that May Day is a day when workers riot.

What the news did not show was the background to these conflicts.

The most serious problems occurred in South Korea, Turkey and the Philippines. Each of these countries has a government which faces an economic crisis and wants the workers to carry the burden of this crisis. Repression of the unions and assassinations of leaders are common. In these countries the military is very powerful even though civilians are running the government.

In South Korea, the government tried to stop all May Day celebrations. In the capital city, Seoul, the site of last year's Olympics, over 6,000 workers were arrested when police tried to prevent a rally called by the labour movement. In the southern city Changwon, police prevented a rally from happening. Later strikers at seven

WE DEMAND 1 MAY AS A PAID HOLIDAY

firms mobilised a crowd of 10,000 workers on the picket lines. The riot police dispersed the crowd after mass arrests.

Workers in Turkey have become more militant after nine years of repression. The celebration of May Day has been banned since 1980. Even so, some of the big unions planned May Day rallies for 600,000 workers around the country, but the government forced them to call it off at the last moment. In Istanbul, the biggest and most industrial city, unorganised anti-inflation demonstrations went ahead. Over 18,000 riot police and commandos dispersed the crowds of workers using batons and firing warning shots. 36 people were injured and 8 of them were wounded by gunfire.

More police violence was used in Manila, the capital of the Philippines, against a crowd of 5,000 people who were marching on the US embassy. The march came at the end of a workers' rally organised by the First of May Federation - Kilusang Mayo Uno (KMU), a major trade union grouping. At the rally, KMU leaders called for a general strike to demand a higher minimum wage. Wages are not keeping up with inflation. The minimum wage is R7,50 a day. Workers are demanding an increase to R10,55 a day.

KMU blames the Aquino government for making workers pay for the debts of the former Marcos dictatorship. The debts are owed to the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. To help pay them, Mrs Aquino allows the US to rent three major military bases outside

Manila. These bases were used by the US to wage war against the people of Viet Nam. The KMU and the Filipino people have demanded their closure, claiming that the bases are evidence of US imperialism in South-East Asia. The march to the US embassy on May Day was aimed at expressing these demands. 70 people were hurt and worker representatives said at least 100 were arrested. According to KMU, nine workers are still "missing".

The existence of officially sponsored vigilante groups and the disappearance and assassinations of Filipino activists remind us of the position in our own country. On May Day we mourned the assassination of human rights activist Dr David Webster by a local death squad.

The Philippines was not the only country to have worker protests against the United States on May Day. In the small Central American country of Honduras, which for many years was used by the US as a base against neighbouring Nicaragua, the people used the occasion of May Day to demonstrate against the US military presence. In six cities over 50,000 people gathered to protest and burn US flags.

Socialism and democratisation

In the socialist countries, May Day is marked by public holidays and traditional parades.

This year the celebrations reflected the new emphasis on change, and the continuing debates around the



1989 May Day rally at Sharpeville

Photo: Labour Bulletin

questions of political participation and appropriate economic policies.

In the Soviet Union, the famous Moscow May Day parade through Red Square, reviewed by the Politburo, was kept as informal as possible. This year the military bands were replaced by athletes performing to rock music. Giant balloons were flown and a carnival atmosphere gave enjoyment to all the participants. Banners hailed the recent elections of a new representative body, the Congress of People's Deputies, which meets for the first time later in May.

Another slogan condemned the resurgence of nationalism in the republics of the Soviet Union. In the republics of Georgia and Azerbaijan, May Day marches were cancelled for

fear that they might be turned into nationalist demonstrations. The Soviet Union has recently clamped down hard against such demonstrations, especially in Georgia, where police had opened fire on a demonstration in April, killing a number of people.

As in the Soviet Union, reform is also on the agenda in Poland, where the government recently legalised the independent trade union Solidarnosc. Free elections have also been announced for some seats in parliament. In Warsaw, the Polish leader, General Jaruzelski, kept his remarks brief at the shortest official May Day rally since 1945. After the rally about 100,000 Solidarnosc members thronged the streets for the rest of the day, hoping to build support for their

LONG LIVE INTERNATIONAL WORKER SOLIDARITY!

candidates in the June elections.

But not all independent trade unionists supported the deal which made Solidarnosc legal. Many accuse union leader Lech Walesa of selling out to the union's traditional opponents - the Polish government. In the cities of Gdansk and Wroclaw, where this feeling is strong, worker demonstrations on May Day were broken up by police.

Like Poland, the government of Hungary has legalised independent trade unions, which this year held separate May Day rallies from official ones.

In Czechoslovakia, where the government has resisted Gorbachev-style reform, police attacked some May Day demonstrators. After the official rally in the capital city, Prague, police tore down the portraits of Mikhail Gorbachev held up in protest by a crowd of 100 young people who felt that the pace of reform in Czechoslovakia was too slow. "Gorbachev is watching you!" they shouted at the police. Protesters were chased and beaten and some arrests were made.

In the run up to May Day, there were massive demonstrations in China, mostly by students calling for the government to implement a more rapid reform programme. A 32km march of 100 000 demonstrating students demanded the legalisation of unofficial student unions. On May Day, the government called on workers not to give support to the students but to rally round the party and help to maintain order. Four days later even bigger student marches took place.

The Chinese leadership was very concerned about the student demands for greater reform, especially because President Gorbachev was expected to arrive in Beijing later in May for an historic state visit. This would be the first visit by a Soviet leader since 1961, when relations between China and the Soviet Union broke down.

Now hear this!

May Day rallies have been used by some government leaders to make important announcements of various kinds to the workers.

For example, in Pakistan, after eleven years of military dictatorship, the government is now under the leadership of civilian politician Benazir Bhutto. At a May Day march through the capital, Islamabad, Ms Bhutto announced that the government was legalising trade unions for the first time since the military takeover in 1977. Ms Bhutto also promised that her government would end forced labour, review the minimum wage level, and allow state employees full union rights.

Addressing workers at a May Day rally in Harare, Zimbabwe's President Robert Mugabe announced that workers and employers could negotiate wage increases and that this year these would not be fixed by the government. The agreements would have to be within the limits of the government's guidelines, and would depend on the profits made by the company. The government would still continue to determine the minimum wage for

low-paid groups like domestic workers (R150 a month).

In **Chile**, the military president Augusto Pinochet, responsible for ousting Salvador Allende in 1973, also used 1 May to announce a rise in the minimum wage. The rise of R26 brings the minimum wage to R188 per month, far short of the R305 which Chile's unions have been demanding.

Struggles in leading capitalist countries

May Day is a day when workers in the industrially advanced capitalist countries also have a chance to express their grievances and demands. This year was no different.

The biggest demonstrations took place in **Japan** where 1.1 million workers protested against corruption in the Japanese government. Prime Minister Noboru Takeshita was amongst top government officials involved in a shares scandal, which forced him to resign.

In **Spain**, members of the socialist and communist parties joined together for the first time in seven years. They marched through the streets of Madrid presenting a common front against the government.

There were peaceful rallies throughout **West Germany** where over 600,000 workers turned out at trade union rallies on May Day. It was only in West Berlin that violence occurred. Police used water cannon, tear

gas and truncheons against 2,000 protesters involved in looting and fire-bombing of motor cars.

The message of May Day

This survey of May Day celebrations around the world can only give readers a brief glimpse into the struggles going on in different countries. We would need much more time and study to understand all these struggles. But we can draw at least some conclusions about the events of May Day in 1989.

May Day was the opportunity for many workers to express demands and aspirations for a better world. In many countries there is still the need for freedom from repression and for the right to a democratic say in running the government. Workers are also calling for a living wage and the right to a better standard of living.

May Day was a chance for workers to understand their own struggles better, and to build solidarity with workers all over the world. For example, in this country we used May Day in 1989 to clarify our own demands on the Labour Relations Act and to develop solidarity with the struggling workers of Namibia.

Finally, in many places May Day was a day for celebrating advances and gains workers had won through struggle. It also helped workers to come together to build unity to ensure future successes and victories. ☆

MAY DAY IS OURS!