

It's Time to Rediscover May Day

By Oupa Lehulere

Release Date: 30 May 2023

Next week South Africans will join many countries and take the day off on May 1. As with many public holidays of its kind, many people who take off this day may at best have dim recollections of what it represents.

As the process of economic globalisation gathers pace, and with it the major changes taking place in the way work is organised, it may be time to remember what May Day stands for.

After all, May Day's central message, that of international solidarity of workers, has become more relevant today than it was 112 years ago when May Day began.

The history of May goes back to May 1, 1886, when more than 350 000 workers went on strike across the United States. The demand that united them was "8 hours for work! 8 hours for rest! And 8 hours to do what we want!"

The eight-hour day had been legislated by the US government in 1968 but, true to form, many employers just ignored it. They continued to make workers work for up to 18 hours a day.

After the strike at least half the workers on strike were immediately granted the eight-hour day by their employers.

It was, however, the events of the next few days that etched May 1 in the memory of the international workers movement. In Chicago, by many accounts the centre of the strike movement, a bomb was thrown at the police during one of the many demonstrations in Haymarket Square.

International campaign

The police took this as a pretext to smash the unions in Chicago. Trade union offices were broken up and five worker activists were arrested.

Although there was no proof of their involvement, five people were hanged for the bomb. After an international campaign to save them, workers' parties meeting in France in 1889 declared May 1 the International Labour Day.

From 1890 onwards demonstrations were held in many countries to remember the heroes of Haymarket and to struggle for the eight-hour day. May Day as the day of international worker solidarity began.

South African workers first joined the international commemorations in 1904. Then, only white workers, who had brought with them the May Day traditions from Europe and Australia, celebrated May Day.

Like South Africa's divided working class, May Day began with divided celebrations and remained so for a long time. As white workers were co-opted by the white

governments, and as black workers became more organised, the traditions of struggle associated with May Day were taken over by black workers.

As with other worker movements all over the world, May Day in South Africa came to mean more than just a struggle for an eight-hour day.

General Strike

In 1950 May Day became a day of struggle against the apartheid policy of the recently elected National Party.

A few months earlier, the NP had tabled the Suppression of Communism Bill, aimed at banning the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA).

On May Day 1950, thousands of workers heeded a call from the CPSA, the African National Congress (ANC) and the unions for a general strike.

Eighteen workers were killed in police attacks on rallies and marches, and the South African working class added its sons and daughters to the international heroes of Haymarket.

After banning of organisations in 1960 it also became quiet on the May Day front. Indeed, so determined was the South African regime to stamp out the tradition of May Day that it passed a law banning the recognition of May Day in Industrial Council agreements.

The awakening of the non-racial and independent labour movement in the early 1970s led to the revival of May Day traditions. By 1986, May Day was the occasion for the largest stayaway in South African history.

The demands for May Day 1986 went far beyond the call for the eight-hour day.

In addition to the demand for the eight-hour day, the demands included the right to work, the right to organise, the rights of students, the right to free political activity, the right to free movement and the right to decent housing.

May Day had become about how “the economy would be restructured in the interest of the working class”.

Like in many parts of the world, May Day was about working people’s struggle for socialism.

A three-year cat-and-mouse battle saw May Day, or what the NP regime called Workers’ Day, shift from the first Friday of every May to the first Monday of every May, and finally to the first day of every May. In 1990 South African workers finally forced the NP to capitulate to the demand for May Day to be a paid public holiday.

The defeat of the NP in the 1994 elections by the ANC ensured that the victory of May Day as a paid public holiday was secured. The seeds of a possible defeat were, however, already present on the day of victory.

Already at the rebirth of the non-racial labour movement in the early 1970s, changes had begun taking place in the world economy which threatened the gains made by the international labour movement around May Day struggles.

From 1945 to the end of the 1960s, the growth of the world economy made it possible for many demands of May Day to be won. The eight-hour day became legal in the industrialised countries, working conditions improved, living standards rose and it appeared that unemployment was a thing of the past.

By the early 1970s, the economy on which these gains had been based stagnated. Unemployment reappeared and the capitalists exerted downward pressure on conditions of work and on living standards.

Even as May Day as a public holiday was won, the real demands around which May Day struggles had been waged were being undermined.

In the US, the home of May Day, the hours of work are now rising, and job security is gone. Industrial work is now becoming seasonal.

In South Africa, notwithstanding a new government, the demands of May Day still remain a dream of the future. The eight-hour day has not yet been achieved, and the pressures of “international competitiveness” are pushing the eight-hour day further and further away.

The new Basic Conditions of Employment Act passed by Parliament allows workers to work for up to 12 hours at a time.

And the Growth, Employment and Redistribution strategy adopted by the ANC government is putting the achievement of the 1986 May Day demands out of reach of the working class.

The South African transition is not transforming the “economy in the interests of the working class”. It is transforming the demands of May Day into an apparently impossible dream.

After 112 years of May Day, it will be a big achievement if the international working class can retreat in solidarity. Such an achievement would be a victory, even if in defeat.

(Lehulere was a labour educationist at Khanya College at the time of publication and went on to become the director of the institution a few months later until his death in November 2021.)

This article is an opinion piece originally published in The Sowetan on 22 April 1998. The views expressed by the author do not necessarily reflect those of Karibu! Online or Khanya College. You may republish this article, so long as you credit the authors and Karibu! Online (www.Karibu.org.za), and do not change the text. Please include a link back to the original article.

Published: The Sowetan,