

SALITA 18c : SACTUWU

**SACTWU**

**SHOP STEWARDS**

# **Bulletin**

**MAY DAY  
SPECIAL  
(2nd Edition)**

**Celebrating  
115 years  
of May Day**

**No 10 - April 2001**



# **May Day is ours!**

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## Crush Poverty! Create Quality Jobs!

Cosatu has decided that May Day 2001 should focus on our campaign for jobs, and highlight the International Labour Organisation (ILO's) **Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work and its Follow-up**. This is an important document. Adopted by the ILO's International Labour Conference on 18 June 1998, it arose out of "...concerns in the international community over the processes of globalisation and the social consequences of trade liberalisation...." The Declaration commits member countries to respect the following four core categories of fundamental rights at work, to promote it and to work for it to be universally achieved:

- Freedom of association and the effective recognition of the right to collective bargaining;
- The elimination of all forms of forced or compulsory labour;
- The effective abolition of child labour;
- The elimination of discrimination in respect of employment and occupation

The Declaration, importantly, emphasises that all member countries have an obligation to respect these fundamental principles, irrespective of whether they have or have not ratified the relevant ILO Conventions.

As part of this special May Day edition of the Sactwu Shop Stewards' Bulletin, we reproduce the entire Declaration and its Follow-up.

Discuss, debate and report back!

**Andre Kriel**  
National Education Secretary  
April 2001

## ILLO DECLARATION

### ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work and its Follow-up.

(adapted by the International Labour Conference at its Eighty-sixth Session, Geneva, 18 June 1998)

Whereas the ILO was founded in the conviction that social justice is essential to universal and lasting peace;

Whereas economic growth is essential but not sufficient to ensure equity, social progress and the eradication of poverty, confirming the need for the ILO to promote strong social policies, justice and democratic institutions;

Whereas the ILO should, now more than ever, draw upon all its standard-setting, technical cooperation and research resources in all its areas of competence, in particular employment, vocational training and working conditions, to ensure that, in the context of a global strategy for economic and social development, economic and social policies are mutually reinforcing components in order to create broad-based sustainable development;

Whereas the ILO should give special attention to the problems of persons with special social needs, particularly the unemployed and migrant workers, and mobilize and encourage international, regional and national efforts aimed at resolving their problems, and promote effective policies aimed at job creation;

Whereas, in seeking to maintain the link between social progress and economic growth, the guarantee of fundamental principles and rights at work is one of particular significance in that it enables the persons concerned to claim freely and on the basis of equality of opportunity their fair share of the wealth which they have helped to generate, and to achieve fully their human potential;

Whereas the ILO is the constitutionally mandated international organisation and the competent body to set and deal with international labour

# SACTWU Bulletin

### Editorial acknowledgements

Edited by Andre Kriel  
(Sactwu National Education Secretary)

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In particular, we thank Silas Kuveya, the General Secretary of the Zimbabwe Textile Workers' Union, for his article on May Day in Zimbabwe.

Cover by Selvin November, a Sactwu member at Craveteur Ties, a tie manufacturing company in our Cape Town Branch.

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standards, and enjoys universal support and acknowledgement in promoting fundamental rights at work as the expression of its constitutional principles;

Whereas it is urgent, in a situation of growing economic interdependence, to reaffirm the immutable nature of the fundamental principles and rights embodied in the Constitution of the Organisation and to promote their universal application;

#### The International Labour Conference

##### 1. Recalls:

- (a) that in freely joining the ILO, all Members have endorsed the principles and rights set out in its Constitution and in the Declaration of Philadelphia, and have undertaken to work towards attaining the overall objectives of the Organisation to the best of their resources and fully in line with their specific circumstances;
- (b) That these principles and rights have been expressed and developed in the form of specific rights and obligations in Conventions recognised as fundamental both inside and outside the Organisation;

2. Declares that all Members, even if they have not ratified the Conventions in question, have an obligation, arising from the very fact of membership in the Organisation, to respect, to promote and to realize, in good faith and in accordance with the Constitution, the principles concerning the fundamental rights which are the subject of those Conventions, namely:

- (a) freedom of association and the



Michel Hansenne of Belgium, ILO Director-General from 1989-1999. The declaration was adopted during his term in office.



The first International Labour Conference (ILC) was held in Washington in October/November 1919. Six Conventions and six Recommendations were adopted, including Convention No. 1, which limited working hours to 8 per day and 48 per week.

effective recognition of the right to collective bargaining;

- (b) the elimination of all forms of forced or compulsory labour;
- (c) the effective abolition of child labour; and
- (d) the elimination of discrimination in respect of employment and occupation.

3. Recognizes the obligation on the Organisation to assist its members, in response to their established and expressed needs, in order to attain these objectives by making full use of its constitutional, operational and budgetary resources, including by the mobilisation of external resources and support, as well as by encouraging other international organisations with which the ILO has established relations, pursuant to article 12 of its Constitution, to support these efforts:

- (a) by offering technical cooperation and advisory services to promote the ratification and implementation of the fundamental Conventions;
- (b) by assisting those Members not yet in a position to ratify some or all of these Conventions in their efforts to respect, to promote and to realize the principles concerning fundamental rights which are the subject of those Conventions; and
- (c) by helping the Members in their efforts to create a climate for economic and social development.

4. Decides that, to give full effect to this Declaration, a promotional follow-up, which is meaningful and effective, shall be implemented in

accordance with measures specified in the annex hereto, which shall be considered and integral part of this Declaration.

5. Stresses that labour standards should not be used for protectionist trade purposes, and that nothing in this Declaration and its follow-up shall be invoked or otherwise used for such purposes; in addition, the comparative advantage of any country should in no way be called into question by this Declaration and its follow-up.

#### Annex

##### Follow-up to the Declaration

###### I. Overall Purpose

- 1. The aim of the follow-up described below is to encourage the efforts made by the Members of the Organisation to promote the fundamental principles and rights enshrined in the Constitution of the ILO and the Declaration of Philadelphia and reaffirmed in this Declaration.
- 2. In line with this objective, which is of a strictly promotional nature, this follow-up will allow the identification of areas in which the assistance of the Organisation through its technical co-operation activities may prove useful to its Members to help them implement these fundamental principles and rights. It is not a substitute for the established supervisory mechanisms, nor shall it impede their functioning; consequently, specific situations within the purview of those

mechanisms shall not be examined or re-examined within the framework of the follow-up.

- The two aspects of this follow-up, described below, are based on existing procedures: the annual follow-up concerning non-ratified fundamental Conventions will entail merely some adaptation of the present modalities of application of article 19, paragraph 5(e), of the Constitution; and the global report will serve to obtain the best results from the procedures carried out pursuant to the Constitution.

## II. Annual Follow-up concerning Non-ratified Fundamental Conventions

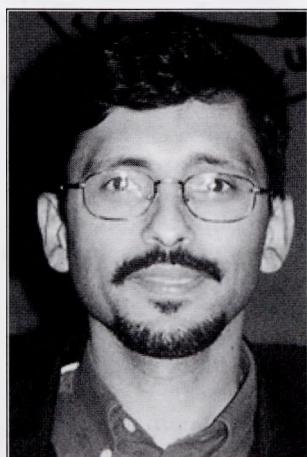
### A. Purpose and scope

- The purpose is to provide an opportunity to review each year, by means of simplified procedures to replace the four-year review introduced by the Governing Body in 1995, the efforts made in accordance with the Declaration by the Members which have not yet ratified all the fundamental Conventions.
- The follow-up will cover each year the four areas of the fundamental principles and rights specified in the Declaration.

### B. Modalities

- The follow-up will be based on reports requested from Members under article 19, paragraph 5(e), of the Constitution. The report forms will be drawn up so as to obtain information from governments which have not ratified one or more of the fundamental Conventions, on any changes which may have taken place in their law and practice, taking due account of article 23 of the Constitution and established practice.

Ebrahim Patel,  
SACTWU  
General  
Secretary,  
also the  
South  
African  
labour  
Represent-  
ative to  
the ILO  
Governing  
Body.



- These reports, as compiled by the Office, will be reviewed by the Governing Body.
- With a view to presenting an introduction to the reports thus compiled, drawing attention to any aspects which might call for a more in-depth discussion, the Office may call upon a group of experts appointed for this purpose by the Governing Body.
- Adjustments to the Governing Body's existing procedures should be examined to allow Members which are not represented on the Governing Body to provide, in the most appropriate way, clarifications which might prove necessary or useful during Governing Body discussions to supplement the information contained in their reports.

## III Global Report

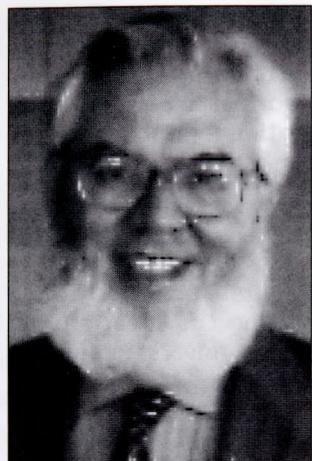
### A. Purpose and scope

- The purpose of this report is to provide a dynamic global picture relating to each category of fundamental principles and rights noted during the preceding four-year period, and to serve as a basis for assessing the effectiveness of the assistance provided by the Organisation, and for determining priorities for the following period, in the form of action plans for technical co-operation designed in particular to mobilize the internal and external resources necessary to carry them out.
- The report will cover, each year, one of the four categories of fundamental principles and rights in turn.

### B. Modalities

- The report will be drawn up under the responsibility of the Director-General on the basis of official information, or information gathered and assessed in accordance with established procedures. In the case of States which have not ratified the fundamental Conventions, it will be based in particular on the findings of the aforementioned annual follow-up. In the case of Members which have ratified the Conventions concerned, the report will be based in particular on reports as dealt with pursuant to article 22 of the Constitution.
- This report will be submitted to the Conference for tripartite

Juan Somavia  
from Chile,  
the ILO's  
current  
Director-  
General



discussion as a report of the Director-General. The Conference may deal with this report separately from reports under article 12 of its Standing Orders, and may discuss it during a sitting devoted entirely to this report, or in any other appropriate way. It will then be for the Governing Body, at an early session, to draw conclusions from this discussion concerning priorities and plans of action for technical co-operation to be implemented for the following four-year period.

## IV. It is understood that:

- Proposals shall be made for amendments to the Standing Orders of the Governing Body and the Conference which are required to implement the preceding provisions.
- The Conference shall, in due course, review the operation of this follow-up in the light of the experience acquired to assess whether it has adequately fulfilled the overall purpose articulated in Part I.

The foregoing is the ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work and its Follow-up duly adopted by the General Conference of the International Labour Organisation during its Eighty-sixth Session which was held at Geneva and declared closed the 18 June 1998.

IN FAITH WHEREOF we have appended our signatures this nineteenth day of June 1998.

*The President of the Conference,  
JEAN-JACQUES OECHSLIN*

*The Director-General of the  
International Labour Office.  
MICHEL HANSENNE*

# ....the beginning

One of the first key struggles of the working class was for shorter working hours.

In the early years of the development of industrial society, working hours were very long. Everywhere in the world, workers worked for twelve, fourteen, sixteen and sometimes even up to eighteen hours a day, for six days per week. Such workers included women and children as young as six years old. Besides the long working hours, conditions in the factories, mines and other workplaces were very bad and dangerous. There were no proper health and safety measures and equipment. Wages were very low. Workers were exploited like slaves.

In Europe, Japan, Australia, North and Latin America, the 1880's was a period of rapidly growing organisation and increasing struggles of the labour movement. The poor working conditions and long working hours fuelled this. Many countries experienced their first major strikes. In 1882, the streetcar (tramway) workers of Tokyo staged the first strike in Japan. In 1885, the workers of the Morozov plant (one of the main industrial enterprises in Moscow) went on strike. The French coal miners of Decazeville conducted a long and bitter strike in 1886.

Over the period 1884 to 1886, more than three thousand strikes took place in the United States of America alone. This involved about twenty-two thousand workplaces and over a million workers. In 1887, the London "match girls" and the glass-



workers of Belgium embarked on strikes of historic significance for the labour movements of their respective countries.

Most of these many strikes were in support of the demand for shorter working hours. Workers in England won one

of the first victories in the fight for a shorter working day. After many years of struggle, the British working class forced their government to pass a law called the **"Ten Hours Act"**. This Act came into force on 1 May, 1848. It restricted working hours in

Britain to ten hours per day. A little known fact is that the eight-hour day had been achieved in 1848 in a New Zealand company, and by the masons in the Australian State of Victoria.

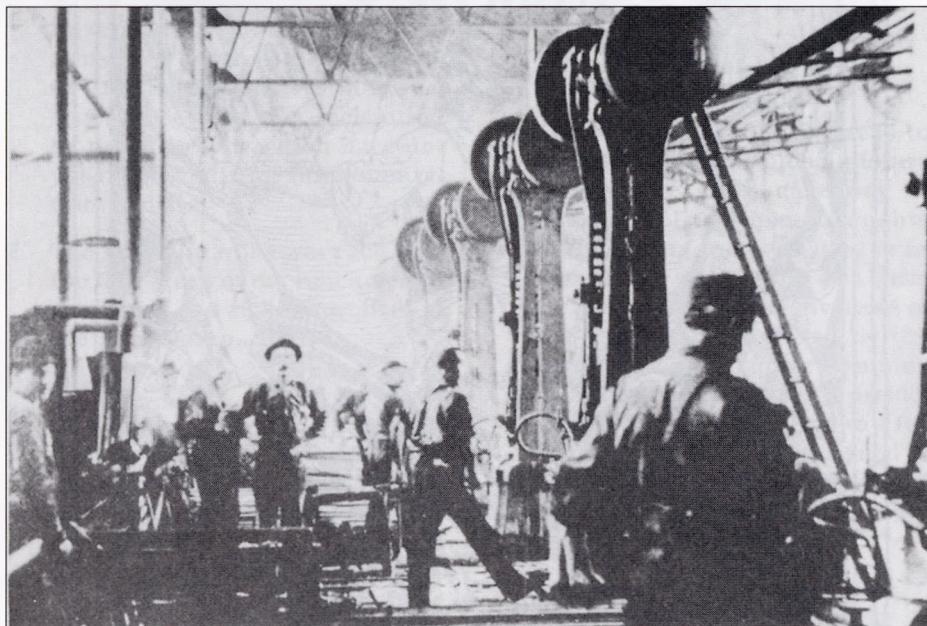
But even with these historic achievements in the reductions in hours of work, the idea of May Day as we know it today, was still a long way off.

Some people say that May Day really started in Australia more than 140 years ago. As part of their fight for a shorter working day, Australian workers organised a holiday festival on

of a shorter working day had spread to workers in the United States of America. Most people all over the world believe that May Day, as we know it today, has its origins in the early worker struggles in the United States of America. This is because of the brutal battles for shorter working hours which American workers fought in 1886.

May Day is therefore popularly said to have started in 1886 in the United States of America.

American workers originally tried to secure shorter working hours through legislation.



An American factory about 100 years ago

21 April 1856. The workers arranged entertainment to celebrate the day as a workers' holiday. At this holiday festival, they used music, poetry and plays to celebrate their struggles. The festival was well supported and very popular. Because of this, they decided to celebrate the event every year. They believed that it would help to highlight and strengthen their struggle for shorter working hours and better working conditions.

By the early 1860's, the idea

Their pressure for a legalised shorter working day initially paid off. In 1868, under President Andrew Johnson, the American government passed a law which said that federal workers should not work longer than 8 hours per day. But most American bosses took no notice of this new law. Unfortunately, the government did not put in place measures to enforce the law. This was a big weakness. American bosses still continued to force long working hours on their workers.

Despite the existence of this "eight-hour-a-day" law, many workers were still forced to work up to eighteen hours per day.

It was clear to many working class leaders that the eight-hour day could not just be won by the passing of a law. It needed more than that. The bosses could just ignore the law, like many American bosses did at the time.

That is why union leaders, like Peter J. McGuire, pushed for workers to fight harder to win an eight-hour day. McGuire was one of the founders of the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners. Later, he became the union's general secretary. He captured the sentiment when he said: **"The only way to get the eight-hour day is by organising. In 1868 the United States government passed an eight-hour law, and that law has been enforced just twice. If you want an eight hour day, get it yourselves!"**

In other words, the law meant nothing if it is not implemented effectively. It was time for workers to use their own strength to fight for the law to be properly enforced. Union leaders found it ridiculous that, almost twenty years after the government had passed the eight-hour working day law, bosses still just ignored it.

McGuire's union was later to play a pioneering role in the fight for the eight hour working day.

The American labour movement stepped up its campaign to win an eight-hour working day. At its national congress of October 1884, the Federation of Organized Trades and Labour Unions decided to organise a series of nation-wide demonstrations and strikes on

May 1st, 1886. This was in support of the demand for an eight-hour day. The Federation of Organized Trades and Labour Unions, forerunner of the American Federation of Labour, was the second largest trade union organisation in Canada and the USA in the 1886's (the 'Knights of Labour' was the largest).

In 1886, there was a huge wave of strikes across the United States of America. Worker leaders called on the American working class to go on a general strike on 1st May 1886. The goal of this general strike was to force the bosses to observe the eight-hour day, as set out in the law.

On 1st of May in that year, factories, mines and other workplaces all over the United States of America were silent. In fact, the campaign started gaining momentum long before 1st May. Many strikes were called during the first months of 1886, particularly in April of that year. By the end of April 1886, about a hundred and thirty thousand workers had already won the eight-hour day.

By 3rd May 1886, five thousand strikes were already in progress all over the United States of America. Three hundred and fifty thousand workers, from about eleven-and-a-half thousand workplaces, went on strike to demand an eight-hour working day. The slogan of the general strike was: **"Eight hours for work, eight hours to rest, and eight hours to do what we want!"**

The general strike was a huge success, even though it was supported by only about three hundred and fifty thousand out of the fifteen million US workers at the time. It was enough of a shock. Many bosses

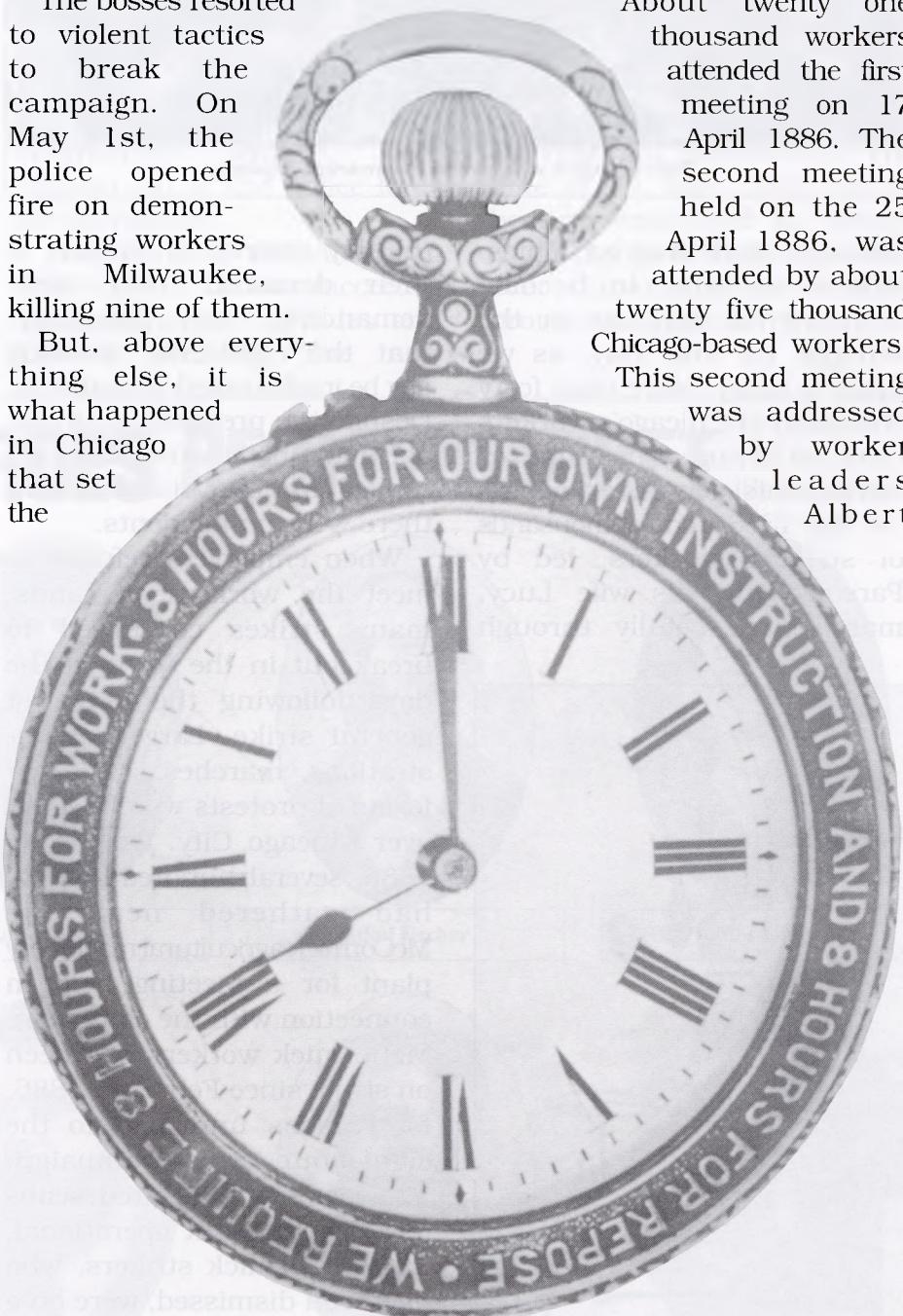
were forced to introduce an eight-hour working day in their factories. Just more than half of the three hundred and fifty thousand workers who joined the strike won their demand immediately. Elsewhere bosses conceded a nine to ten hour day, to a further two million workers. Thousands of other workers also eventually won their demand for an eight-hour working day.

The bosses resorted to violent tactics to break the campaign. On May 1st, the police opened fire on demonstrating workers in Milwaukee, killing nine of them.

But, above everything else, it is what happened in Chicago that set the

trend of the struggle for May Day, as we know it today. During this time in the history of the American labour movement, the workers from the city of Chicago were the most militant and well organised. Chicago City, which had many factories and workers, was the centre of the general strike. The unions called two 'warm-up' mass meetings before the planned May Day action.

About twenty one thousand workers attended the first meeting on 17 April 1886. The second meeting held on the 25 April 1886, was attended by about twenty five thousand Chicago-based workers. This second meeting was addressed by worker leaders Albert



"8 hours for work, 8 hours for rest, 8 hours to do what we want!"



Police attack workers in Haymarket Square

Parsons and August Spies, who were later to become instrumental symbols in the struggle for May Day, as we know it today. More than forty thousand of Chicago's workers came out in huge demonstrations during this general strike on 1st May 1886. Tens of thousands of striking workers, led by Parsons and his wife Lucy, marched peacefully through

the city streets, in support of their demand. They were demanding, very forcefully, that the eight-hour working day be implemented immediately. Despite the presence of almost one-and-a-half thousand heavily armed National Guardsmen, there were no incidents.

When employers refused to meet the workers' demands, many strikes continued to break out in the town in the days following the May 1st general strike. Large demonstrations, marches and other forms of protests were held all over Chicago City. On 3 May 1886, several hundred strikers had gathered near the McCormick agricultural machinery plant for a meeting held in connection with the campaign. McCormick workers had been on strike since February 1886, for reasons unrelated to the eight-hour day campaign. Management had hired scabs to keep the plant operational. The McCormick strikers, who had been dismissed, were on a picket, waiting for the scabs to come out at the end of a shift. The heavily armed police,



August Spies

clearly in an attempt to protect the scabs, attacked the strikers. They gunned down six of the workers.

In response to these brutal killings, the Chicago workers organised a protest meeting in Haymarket Square, a public place in the centre of the city. This protest meeting took place on 4 May 1886, and was entirely peaceful. At the end of the meeting, police provoked the crowd by charging the dispersing crowd. At that moment, a bomb was thrown at the police. Two policemen were killed immediately, and six others later died of their wounds. The police used this as an excuse to attack the protesting workers, their leaders and their unions. They started shooting at the crowd, and killed about ten protesting workers. They smashed up union offices. They detained, arrested and otherwise harassed union leaders. Union leaders were accused of organising the bomb attack. Hundreds of trade unionists were arrested in a nation-wide witchhunt.

On 4th May 1886, shortly after the Haymarket protest held earlier in the day, eight Chicago worker leaders were arrested. They were put on trial for allegedly having been responsible for the Haymarket Square bombing. Even though the prosecution could not prove that the eight had thrown the bomb, the jury found them guilty. They were sentenced to death. Nobody has ever been able to prove who threw the bomb. It could have been anybody, including a person who could have been paid to deliberately discredit the May Day campaign in this way.

The international labour

movement launched a campaign for the sentences to be revised. But this campaign was unsuccessful. On 11 November 1887, four of the eight (Albert Parsons, August Spies, Adolph Fischer and George Engel) were hanged in the courtyard of the Chicago prison. Louis Lingg, one of the eight, committed suicide in his cell. The sentences of the other three (Oscar Neebe, Micheal Schwab and Samuel Fielden) were later commuted to life imprisonment. At the hanging, only August Spies found the opportunity to say something before he was hanged. **"The day will come when our silence will be more powerful than the voices you are throttling today,"** he said. From this time, May 1st became an international day of

commemorating the Haymarket Square heroes, as well as the fight for better working and living conditions of workers all over the world. That is why, all over the world, May Day is said to have started on 1st May 1886 in the United States of America.

Six years after the execution of Parsons, Spies, Fischer and Engel, the new liberal governor of Illinois (John Peter Altgeld) pardoned Fielden, Neebe and Schwab. In 1889 the two policemen (a Bonfield and Schaack), who organised and led the assault on workers in Haymarket Square, were thrown out of the police force for corruption.

Before then, the American Federation of Labour succeeded the Federation of Trades and Labour Unions. The new

union federation resumed the struggle for the eight-hour day. At its St Louis congress held in December 1888, it decided that the Carpenters' Union would lead the struggle by demanding the introduction of an eight-hour day with effect from 1st May 1890. The Carpenters Union, the congress resolved, would be supported by the active participation of other affiliates in the campaign. Little did they know at the time that this decision, to hold protest action and strikes on 1st May 1890, was later to become of tremendous international significance. The date of 1st May 1890 was to become enshrined in history as the day on which the greatest-ever international worker protest took place.

## THE HEROES OF HAYMARKET

(Spies on pg 6)



Albert Parsons



Lucy Parsons



Adolf Fischer



Louis Lingg



George Engel



Samuel Fielden



Michael Schwab



Oscar Neebe

Attention Workingmen!

# MASS-MEETING

TO-NIGHT, at 7.30 o'clock,

HAYMARKET, Randolph St. Bet. Desplaines and Halsted.

Good Speakers will be present to denounce the latest atrocious act of the police, the shooting of our fellow-workmen yesterday afternoon.

Workingmen Arm Yourselves and Appear in Full Force!

THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

Achtung, Arbeiter!

Große

# Massen-Veranstaltung

Heute Abend, 7 S Uhr, auf dem  
Heumarkt, Randolph-Straße, zwischen  
Desplaines- u. Halsted-Stra.

■■■ Gute Redner werden den neuen Schurkenstrich der Polizei, indem sie gestern Nachmittag unserer Brüder erschossen, gezeigt.

■■■ Arbeiter, bewaffnet Euch und erscheint massenhaft!

Das Executive-Comitee.

Attention Workingmen!

# MASS-MEETING

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Achtung, Arbeiter!

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Das Executive-Comitee.

At the trial, a key piece of evidence was the pamphlet which called for workers to come armed to the rally. Spies ordered that this pamphlet be destroyed and not distributed. He ordered the words "Working men arm yourselves and appear in full force" to be deleted, as was done on the second pamphlet. Unfortunately not all of the first pamphlets were destroyed. A few were distributed and landed in the hands of the police. In court, it formed part of the evidence against the "Haymarket Heroes."

Above we see the two original versions of the pamphlet.



# ....becomes International Labour Day

Meanwhile, in other parts of the world, the idea of declaring a specific day as an international day of struggle of the labour movement was beginning to catch on. Workers in other parts of the world were also engaged in struggle for an eight-hour working day. With the news of the hangings of the **'Haymarket five'** in America, working class organisations all over the world stepped up their campaign. All over the world, workers protested against the hangings of the American labour leaders, and in favour of an eight-hour working day.

The first motion to declare May Day as international day of labour action and solidarity was made by the Belgians, at an international congress held in London in 1888. **"Let Britain, Switzerland, France, the Netherlands, Belgium, the United States of America force their governments to intervene by diplomatic means in favour of workers where freedom of association does not exist,"** said Anseele, the Belgian delegate to the meeting. Demonstrations in support of this demand should take place everywhere, at the same time and with the same slogan, he argued.

The Belgians tried to tighten their proposal further: **"Congress, after adopting the principle of the reduction of daily working time to eight hours, should have designated May Day 1890 as the date of giving effect to this decision by the workers,"** argued Pierron, a member of the Brussels labour federation

afterwards.

The Belgian resolution never became a congress decision. However, it is significant because it is the earliest recorded proposal to establish May Day as International Labour Day. This meeting, however, was unrepresentative and decided virtually nothing.

But this did not stop the campaign itself from spreading.

In France, on 1st May 1888, workers in fifty industrial cities sent delegations to the local town halls, demanding shorter working hours. The workers' strong support and favourable response encouraged the French worker leaders. The French Trade Union Federation's congress held in Bouscat in November 1888 decided that on 10 February 1889, all unions should demand the introduction of an eight-hour day and a minimum wage.

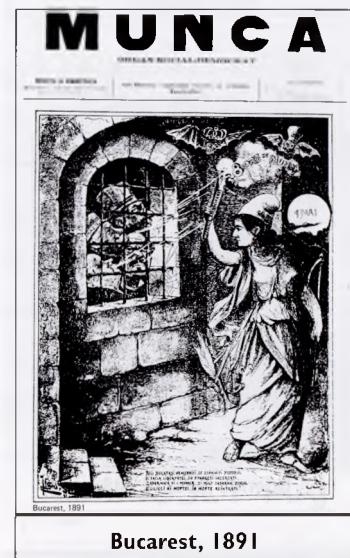
In April 1889, the congress of the Swedish Social Democratic Workers' Party decided that **"...workers organisations in Sweden should demonstrate on the same day, throughout the country, to make the ruling class recognise as soon as possible the natural and civil rights of the working class."**

In May 1889, the Belgian Workers' Party discussed a proposal by the Metal Workers' Federation for a date for a strike in support of the eight-hour day to be set.

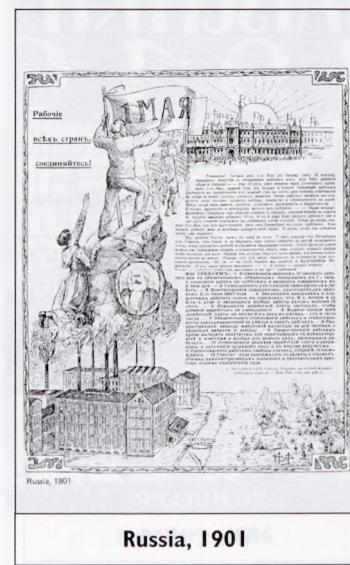
In June 1889, the Miners' International Congress decided to call a special congress of the Labour and Socialist International, to discuss a



København, 1899



Bucarest, 1891



Russia, 1901



Paris, 1906



Buenos Aires, 1908



Wien, 1910

proposal for a general strike to be held on 1 May 1891, in support of the eight-hour day.

Also in 1889, the Labour and Socialist International (often just referred to as 'the International') was reconstituted at a congress in Paris. The International was an organisation that aimed to unite worker organisations throughout Europe, and to advance worker struggles internationally. It is here that the idea of May Day becoming International Labour Day was given its final form. The delegate of the Socialist Labour Party of the United States, a J.F Busche, proposed that congress should set a date for an international demonstration in favour of a reduction in working hours. He pointed out that the American Federation of Labour (AFL) had already set 1 May 1890 as a date for a national demonstration in America.

The French delegate, surname Lavigne, supported him. The French were of course encouraged by the strong support their May 1888 protests had generated among workers. The congress generally agreed that 1st May 1890 should be the date for such a great international demonstration. Lavigne then introduced the following historic resolution to the congress:

**"A great international demonstration shall be organised at a fixed date in order that, in all countries and cities at the same time, on the same agreed day, workers should challenge the public authorities to legally reduce the working day to eight hours, and to implement the other resolutions of the Paris International Congress. Considering that a similar demonstration has already been decided upon**

**by the American Federation of Labour for May 1, 1890, at its congress held in St. Louis in December 1888, this date shall be adopted for the international demonstration. The workers of the different countries shall carry out this demonstration according to the conditions imposed upon them by the special situation of their countries."**

The resolution was modest in its aims. It was also flexible as to tactics. Demonstrations could take many forms, ranging from general strikes to marches. But, interestingly, it was also clear that the resolution did not call for the day to become a permanent annual protest event – it was specific to 1st May, 1890. It was also broader than just a demand for the eight-hour working day - the resolution also called for the implementation of other decisions of the International's congress. So it was only during the actual preparations that the wider significance of the decision emerged, and the idea of an annual International Labour Day started to take root and spread.

From then onwards, the day became known as **'International Labour Day'**.



# ....1890: the first-ever International Labour Day

Preparations for the 1890 International Labour Day started months before the time. It was not easy. Such preparations left eleven dead in Austria-Hungary. In Ostrava in Czechoslovakia, over thirty thousand coal miners went on strike in April 1890. This was to protest against the authorities who had seized their funds collected for the May Day demonstration. The army was called out in Paris, and major industrial cities were placed under military occupation. Similarly, in Italy and Spain, the army and police were also put on full alert. Several thousand carpenters went on strike in Chicago and New York, as early as April 1890.

In those countries where no labour movement existed, the worldwide effect of the May Day demonstrations formed the spur for the growth of new unions and labour parties.

On 1st May 1890, the first International Labour Day in history took place. It turned out to be a much more successful demonstration of working class power than its organisers could ever have hoped for.

Thousands of workers from many different countries held demonstrations to celebrate International Labour Day. May Day 1890 fell on a Thursday. So all organisations had to decide whether to call for a strike or not. For example, work stopped in a hundred and thirty eight French cities and in a few mining towns. In some Italian cities, workers

marched in procession through the streets – the Italian army had occupied virtually the whole country.

Demonstrations also took place in Sweden, Portugal, Austria, Hungary, Germany, Denmark, Spain, Belgium, Norway, Poland, and Britain. In Barcelona in Spain, more than one hundred thousand demonstrators marched under red flags. This march was so disciplined that one historian wrote: “...in such a peaceful, disciplined and imposing fashion that General Blanco, governor of Catalonia, watching the procession from the terrace of his villa surrounded by his general staff, as if struck and dazzled, instinctively put his hand to the visor of his cap and saluted...”

In Madrid, a crowd of over twenty thousand people met. Demonstrations also took place in the Scandinavian countries. In Stockholm, a meeting of over one hundred thousand demonstrators was addressed by the founders of the Social Democratic Party (August Palm and Hjalmar Branting).

In Germany, tens of thousands of workers went on strike in eighteen cities – many thousands more participated in demonstrations all over the country. There were also huge demonstrations in Australia and the United States of America. In Belgium, a strike by one hundred thousand coal miners and fifty thousand other workers paralysed the Belgian industry.



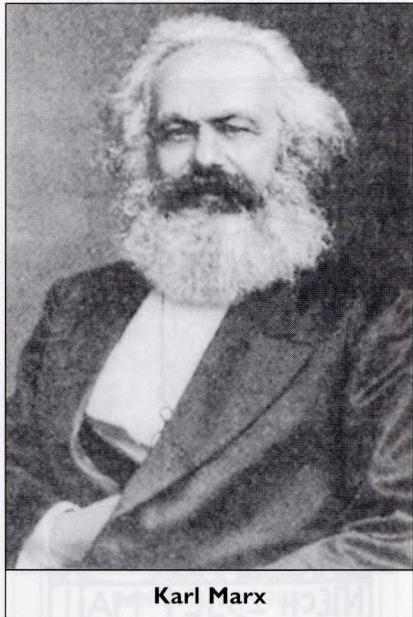
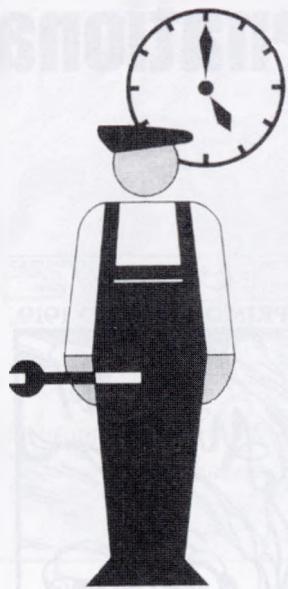
Milano, 1919



Poland, 1920



New York, 1936



Karl Marx



Frederich Engels

In The United States of America, over twenty thousand workers met on New York's Union Square. In Chicago, more than thirty thousand workers marched through the city. In Cuba (then still a Spanish colony), all cigar factories went on strike and more than twenty thousand demonstrators marched through the streets of Havana. The demonstration held in Hyde Park in Britain on 4th May 1890 was the most impressive: it was attended by over three hundred thousand workers (the British decided not to call a strike on 1st May, but rather to hold their protests on Sunday 4th May 1890).

These massive May Day celebrations and demonstrations strengthened the message of international solidarity in each working class movement, internationally. All over the world, workers used the struggle for a shorter working day to highlight their poor working conditions, and to fight for a better life. They said that long hours of work were destroying workers. Many workers died at a young age. Many could not spend proper time with their families and friends. Also, by forcing workers to work long hours, the bosses could employ fewer workers. This kept unemployment high and made it difficult for workers to organise. They said that the struggles of workers all over the world are linked. They protested against political oppression, where this existed.

May Day had become International Labour Day.

After the event, one conservative French daily newspaper, *Le Siecle* ('The Century') wrote: **"It would be foolish to deny that a new and considerable**

**event has taken place. On the same day almost on the same hour, workers' associations in Europe have been able to concentrate the attention of all governments, to become a cause for concern and to force them to take serious and costly police measures..."**

Frederick Engels summed it up as follows, when he wrote the second preface to the Communist Manifesto on May Day 1890: **"Today, as I write these lines, the European and American proletariat is reviewing its fighting forces, mobilised for the first time, mobilised as one army, under one flag, for one immediate aim: the standard eight-hour working day to be established by legal enactment, as proclaimed by the Geneva Congress of the International in 1866, and again by the Paris Workers' Congress in 1889. And today's spectacle will open up the eyes of the capitalists and landlords of all countries to the fact that today the proletarians of all countries are united indeed. If only Marx were still by my side to see this with his own eyes!"**

And so, in 1890, International Labour Day was born. This event can also be said to really mark the birth of the modern international labour movement.

May Day has continued to be celebrated in many countries around the world. More than that, the original demands of shorter working hours had become much more than that – the demands had grown to encompass virtually every aspect of working peoples' political, economic and social existence.

# .....the meaning

All over the world, workers and other people know the 1st of May as 'May Day', or 'International Labour Day'. It is a day of unity between all workers in each country in their struggle for a better life. May Day is also a strong symbol of solidarity between workers of different countries, all over the world. It is a day when the different struggles of all workers, internationally, are symbolically linked. The day has become a symbol of international working class unity. The slogan **"Workers of the world unite! You have nothing to lose but your chains! You have a whole world to gain!"** has become one of the rallying slogans of May Day and worker resistance in general.

Its meaning has become much wider than the struggle for an eight-hour working day. International Labour Day is now the day when, once a year, workers throughout the world stand together in their fight for better worker (social, economic and political) rights and improved working and living conditions. It is a day when workers celebrate their victories, reflect on their failures, and re-dedicate themselves to fight for a better future. May Day is when workers all over the world show solidarity with each other.

On May Day, workers in each country examine their problems, and commit themselves to the struggle to build their organisations, and to fight for better workers' rights. They talk about the new issues and struggles that face them, in the new times. They assess whether the victories, which

they have won, have been rolled back or not. They look at whether their rights have been weakened or strengthened. They discuss and think about new ways in which the rights and privileges that they have won can be protected and strengthened further. They think about their role to build their communities and their countries, and ways to take control over the things which affect their lives. May Day is also a day when we remember

remember that their struggle is linked to the struggles of other workers around the world. Factories and industries have arisen and spread all over the world, forcing many people into wage labour. Most people in the world rely on wage labour to survive. Millions of workers all over the world find that they share the same problems of exploitation and oppression. Workers have begun to see that they share a common struggle with workers



Madrid, 1977: A May Day rally in protest against dictatorship.

those workers in other parts of the world who are still struggling for their basic organisational and political rights.

In some countries May Day is held in celebration of the achievements of that country. For example, May Day celebrations in Cuba are held to strengthen the achievements of the 1959 Cuban revolution.

May Day is also the day when workers in each country

in other countries. They know that if some workers win a victory, that that victory will also benefit other workers elsewhere. They know that if some workers suffer a defeat, that it is a defeat for all workers everywhere.

Many workers see May Day as a symbol of the workers' struggle against capitalism, and of the workers' fight to win power and control over their own lives. On May Day, workers

commit themselves to international solidarity with workers elsewhere, in their struggle against the system that exploits and oppresses all workers. Workers' trade unions and workers' political parties have always celebrated May Day together. It has become a symbol of the workers' struggle for a new society, which gives workers political control and control over their lives in the factories and in their communities.

May Day was born as a day of struggle. It began as part of the struggle for a shorter working day, for the right to a better quality of life. Even though hours of work are now

not as long as it used to be more than a hundred years ago, the demand for a shorter working day still remains relevant today, for many workers around the world. In South Africa, many workers are still struggling to win a forty-hour workweek. The demand for a forty-hour workweek was one of the key Cosatu demands during the Nedlac negotiations for a new Basic Conditions of Employment Act.

It still remains a very important demand in many wage negotiations today. In some countries, workers are now demanding even shorter working hours. In Germany, average

hours of work have been reduced to below forty per week. Last year, in Denmark, workers went on a massive strike, which virtually shut down the whole economy - they demanded six weeks' annual holidays! They now have five-and-a-half weeks' annual leave, and work an average of 35 hours per week! The trend and practice, in many other European countries, is to reduce the workweek to below forty hours per week.

It is clear to every worker that May Day has now become much more than just a symbol of the demand for shorter working hours. It is a day when workers reflect on all the other aspects affecting their working and living conditions, like housing, crime, job creation, decent wages, political rights, access to water, health-care, the state of the economy, etc. In some countries workers have won the right to social security both when they become unemployed and in old age.

Workers have won the right to education and training. They have won the right to proper health and safety standards and protection at the workplace. They have won the right to have equal decision-making powers in institutions, which affect them, like industrial training boards. National health centres that serve workers and their families have been won in some countries. Workers have won the right to form and join trade unions and political parties of their choice. In some undemocratic countries, workers have played an important role in winning democracy.

Workers have also used May Day to mobilise very effectively against unpopular government



Montevideo, May Day 1983: A protest rally against political oppression.

policies.

For example, on 1st May 1974, in Portugal, trade unions organised a big march through the streets of the capital city to celebrate May Day, after they had managed to overthrow the fascist government that had ruled there for 45 years. In Lisbon, one million people, nearly the entire population of the city, celebrated their new-found freedom in the streets.

In Poland, May Day 1983 was a show of strength by the independent workers union Solidarnosc, which had been declared illegal in 1981. Over a hundred thousand people participated in protests throughout the country.

In 1980 in Brazil, a country in Latin America, a hundred thousand factory workers went on strike on May Day. They marched in protest against the harsh labour laws that the Brazilian government used to try to weaken their trade unions.

In Uruguay, another South American country, a hundred and fifty thousand people demonstrated on 1st May 1983. They marched through the streets of the capital city to protest against the military dictatorship in that country.

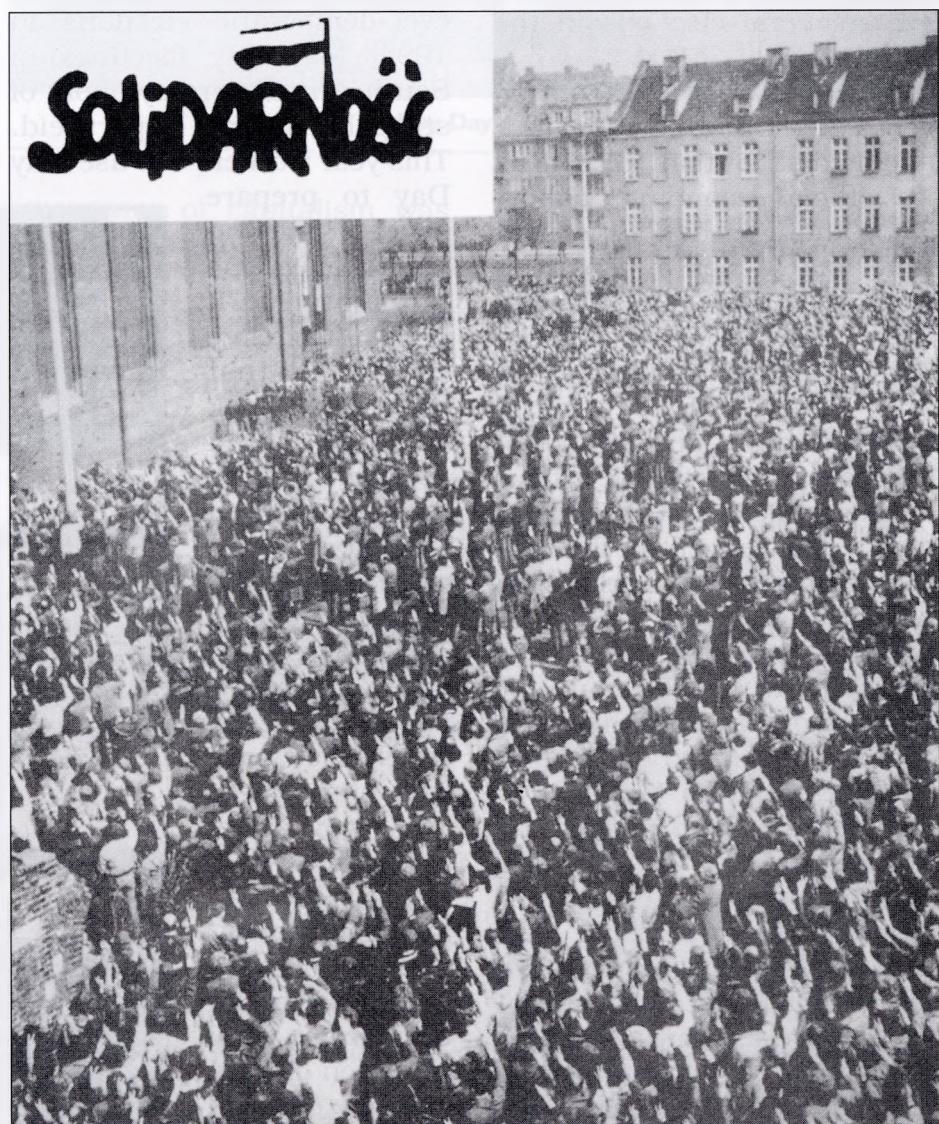
In 1998, at May Day rallies in Germany, France, Italy and Austria, millions of workers protested against unemployment, and demanded the right to work. They also linked their demands for jobs to their support for disarmament and peace. They called on their governments to get rid of nuclear weapons which can cause mass destruction, and rather put money in the production of useful goods which can benefit all in society.

In South Africa, almost three million workers stayed away

from work on May Day in 1986, to protest against apartheid and to call for the unbanning of political organisations and the release of all political prisoners.

Globalisation has brought new opportunities. But it has also brought bad effects for workers. The opening up of the world economy has brought about new dangers and challenges for workers and their organisations. This brings about a new dimension to the ideals and struggles which May Day represents. But, when May Day became International Labour Day as far back as 1890, it was

already a recognition of the challenges that the international economy posed to organised labour. In 1992, at its Economic Policy Conference, COSATU adopted an economic policy, which advanced many of the demands, which the federation had raised around May Day. This economic policy was aimed at promoting the interest of the working class. Taken together with other similar resolutions taken at various congresses and policy conferences, these demands were concretised into what became the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP). The RDP eventually became



Gdansk, May Day 1983: A big protest rally demanding political and economic freedom.



the platform around which the alliance campaigned for the 1994 general elections in the country.

Since then, government has adopted the Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) as its official economic policy. Even though they have said that this is not a departure from the RDP, COSATU has come out heavily against GEAR's neo-liberal policies of an export-led economy, privatisation, cutting social expenditure and flexible labour market policies. COSATU saw it as a departure from the May Day demands of workers in South Africa.

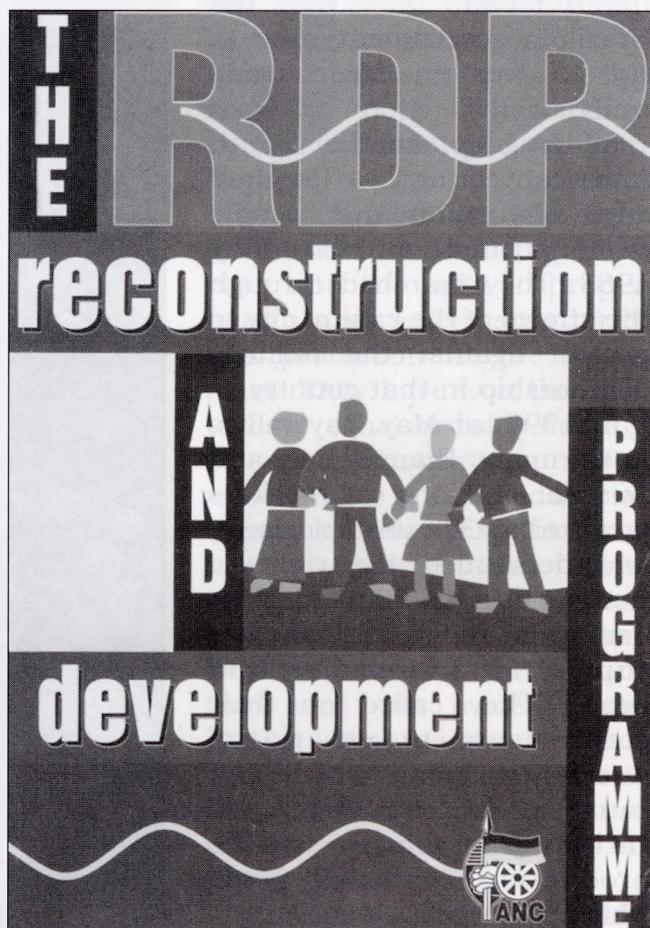
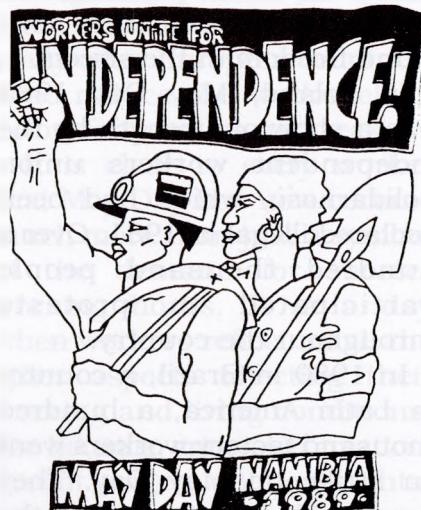
May Day is celebrated differently in each country. Workers organise around their own particular problems and struggles, and so May Day is stamped with its own meaning in each country. But in every May Day meeting or demonstration, workers would also talk about one common goal: the international solidarity of all workers around the world. Every year, the labour movement in each country decides what would be the theme for May Day in that country. This

normally follows the key issues that the labour movement wants to highlight at May Day rallies and in the media. For example, the 1989 May Day rallies focused heavily on solidarity with the struggles of the Namibian trade union movement. It was the first time that the May Day theme for South African workers focused almost exclusively on the struggles of workers in one other country. Last year's theme for Cosatu was; **"Save our jobs, create more jobs!"** This was to highlight the crises of unemployment and the importance of the Job Summit planned for later that year.

In the past, before our first-ever-democratic elections in 1994, May Day meetings in South Africa were symbols of struggle against apartheid. This year workers will use May Day to prepare for the June 2nd general elections in the country. It is therefore expected that workers will look at and think about what have been achieved for them since our first democratic elections in 1994. They will celebrate their many new rights, which they have won since then. They will reflect on the failures of our first democratic government, and how these weaknesses can be overcome. They will listen closely what the different political parties are saying about

worker rights. They will also think about what needs to be done for workers for the next term of the new government, and highlight these things in their May Day meetings.

That is why COSATU's theme for this year's May Day is: **"Workers mobilising for a decisive ANC victory."**



**The RDP became a very important political programme.**

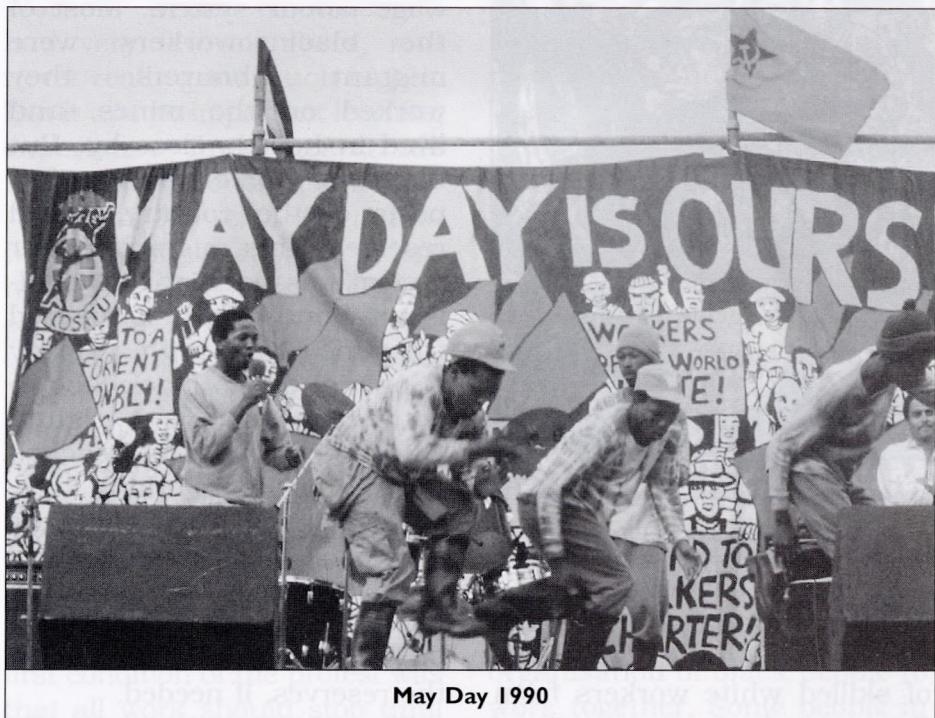
# ....in South Africa

In September 1889, Johannesburg engineering workers presented demands for higher wages and a reduction of weekly working hours from 54 to 48. After a two week strike, hours were reduced to 52½ per week. This was probably the earliest recorded strike for shorter hours in South Africa. At the time, a survey by a T. Kneebone showed that the working hours on a 108 Witwatersrand gold mines were 56 per week in early 1889.

May Day was celebrated in South Africa for the first time in 1904. In our country, it has not always expressed the unity of the working class. Sadly, it has historically reflected the deep divisions within South African working class organisations. These divisions were mostly along racial and ideological lines. It was also tainted by the history of oppression and apartheid in our country. Strangely, it is the massive support for the historic May Day protests called by COSATU on 1st May 1986 which marked a turning point in the struggle to smash apartheid and working class division.

Our labour history under capitalism in South Africa goes back many years.

The emergence of capitalism in South Africa began with the discovery of diamonds in Kimberley in 1867. Industrialisation accelerated with the discovery of gold in Johannesburg in 1886. These two events (the discovery of diamonds and the discovery of gold) laid the basis for the development of the wage economy in South Africa. The



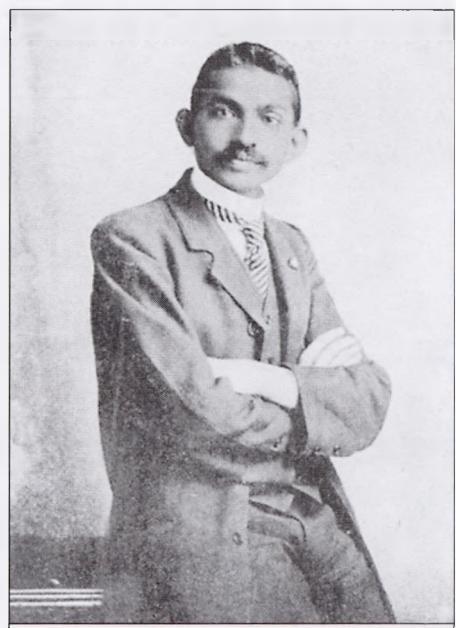
May Day 1990

emergence of capitalism was driven largely by foreign capitalists. **"Everything was foreign: the mine owners were foreigners, the capital came from abroad, and even the workers were imported. The miners from Cornwall, Yorkshire and South Wales, the engineers from Glasgow and Birmingham, and the other British artisans who came to South Africa, brought with them not only great skill but militant trade union spirit,"** wrote Solly Sachs.

There was a big difference between South African gold and gold mines elsewhere in the world. The South African mines were far deeper. This meant that they therefore required large amounts of capital. In addition, they needed a skilled workforce.

But these mines also needed large amounts of cheap labour. The mining bosses got

their capital and skilled labour from Britain. Black people from all over Southern Africa were driven off their land and were forced to become labourers on the mines. They were the supply of cheap labour, which the South African mining



Mahatma Gandhi as a strike leader in Natal in 1913



bosses needed so desperately.

From the beginning, South Africa's industrial workforce was divided between a minority of skilled white workers from Europe and a large majority of black workers from Southern Africa. This racial and skills division in the South African working class lasted throughout the history of our labour movement. It also affected the divisions around the struggles represented by May Day.

Capitalism in South Africa forced the black workers to live off low wages and in slave-

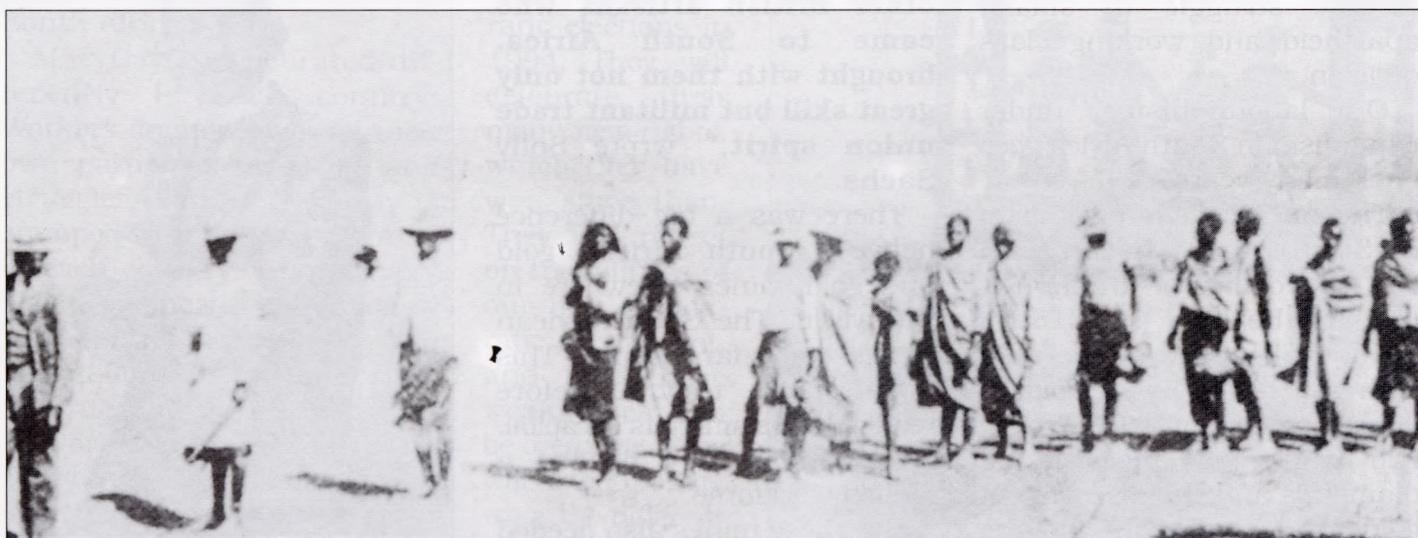
like living conditions. Just like in other capitalist countries elsewhere, these workers became totally reliant on the wage labour system. Most of the black workers were migrant labourers: they worked on the mines, and lived in hostels close by. But their real home was in other parts of the country, called reserves. This migrant labour system was peculiar to capitalism in South Africa: it ensured the mine bosses with a steady supply of cheap black labour, with no permanent rights. Once these workers reached the end of their working lives, or became ill, they could be sent back to their homes. They were discarded and forgotten about like waste. Fresh black labour was then drawn from the reserves, if needed.

The white workers, on the other hand, because they were few and skilled, were paid better wages and they had good living conditions.

But even better paid workers are exploited under capitalism, and the bosses are always looking for ways of pushing down their wages. By the early part of this century the mining bosses were

already trying to push down the wages of white workers. They did this by replacing expensive white labour with cheap black labour.

White workers resisted this attempt to push down their wages. Some of these white workers had brought with them traditions of trade union organisation from Europe. They began to build trade unions based on the British model of trade unionism. The Amalgamated Society of Carpenters and Joiners, formed in 1881, was allegedly the first union formed in South Africa. Skilled white workers formed it. Other trade unions were established later. For nearly forty years, until the early 1920's, the South African trade union movement was essentially British in spirit, organisation and tradition. In fact, many of them were branches of 'home' unions in Britain. They even formed a Labour Party, which affiliated to the Second International. They did however not use this experience to unite the entire South African working class. They used this experience to defend the interests of skilled white workers only.



Young migrants, 1905, on their way to the Rand, led by employee of a recruiting agency

And so in 1904, when the first May Day was celebrated in South Africa, it was only white workers who celebrated it. Socialists converged on South Africa's industrial capital, Johannesburg's Market Square echoed with socialist slogans and working class demands and speeches as experienced trade unionists from Europe rallied to assist South Africa's white workers. The owners of the mines and the industries were shocked. Never before had workers paid tribute to their fellow workers elsewhere in the world, while condemning capitalists at home. But it was still just a white May Day meeting. In those early years, it was really only the white workers who were organised in trade unions. These white unions never made an attempt to recruit and unite with black workers.

Black workers in South Africa began to struggle for

trade union rights in the 1910's. The first trade union organisation for black workers was called the Industrial Workers Union of Africa. It had very few members, and never really grew much bigger. But it was an important learning experience for black trade unionism in South Africa.

A Natal law of 1860 authorised the importation of indentured Indian labour for the sugar estates. In 1895 the Natal government passed a law (Act No. 17) which imposed a tax of £3 a year on those Indians who refused to renew their indentures but chose to remain in Natal. This law was applicable to men over 16 years, and women over 13 years. Mahatma Gandhi organised a protest in 1913: the first condition of the protest was that all work should stop until government promised to repeal this tax law.

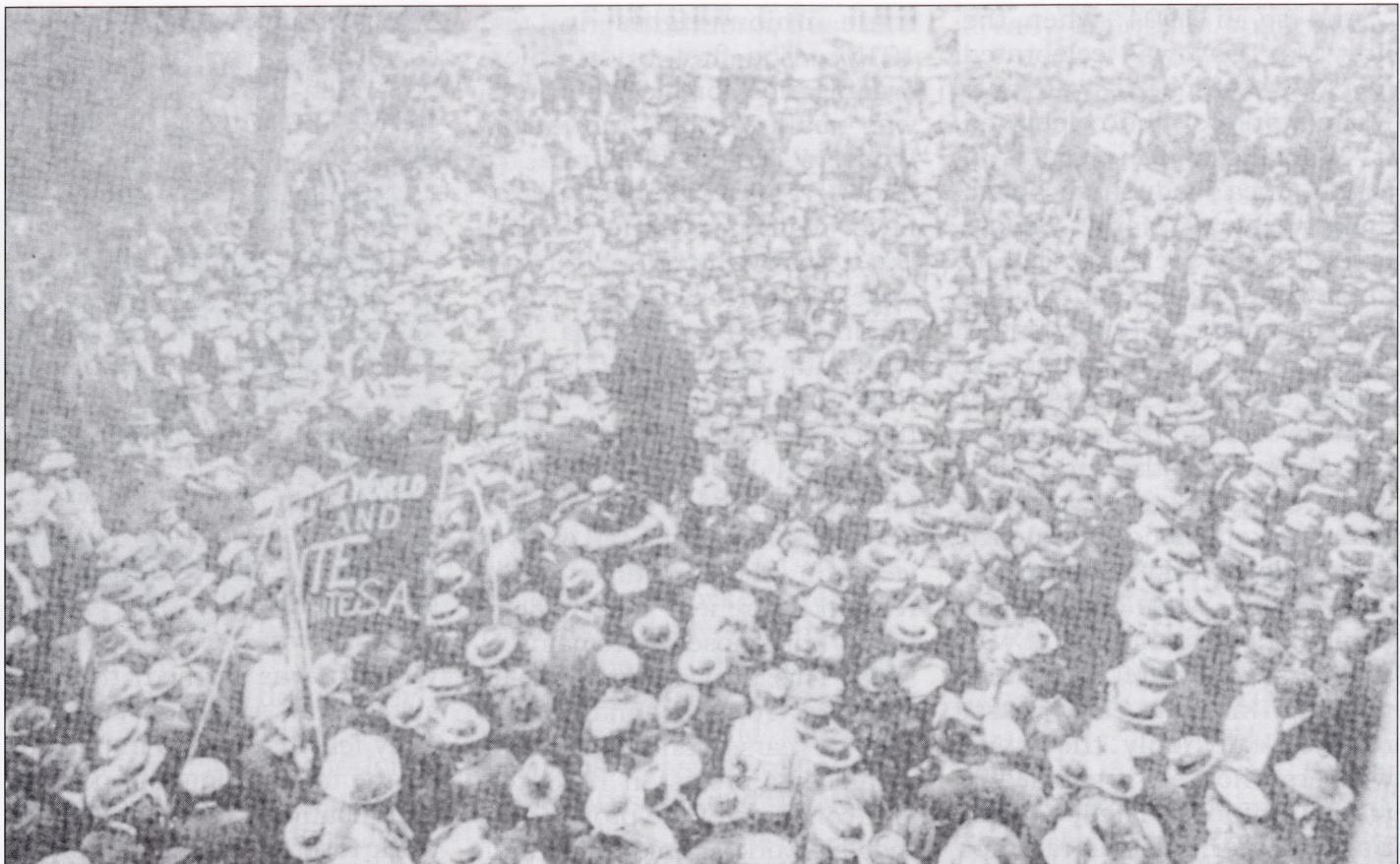
As the South African capitalist economy grew, the number of

black workers engaged in wage labour also grew. Black workers became an increasingly important source of cheap, unskilled labour.

By the 1920's, the then powerful Industrial and Commercial Union (ICU) had been formed by Clements Kadalie and a few dockworkers. The ICU (formed in 1919) was a general union (i.e. a union that organised all workers, irrespective of the industry in which they worked, or the skills that they held). In this early period, the ICU became a very important political and economic voice for black workers. When it was formed, the ICU asked the ANC for support. They felt that it was important for the trade union and political organisation of black people to work together. Some people in the ANC at the time also thought so, and gave their support. Some ANC members were ICU officials. But the official



Durban I.C.U. members outside an I.C.U. office



Even before the 1920's, white workers had used race to protect themselves. Here they protest against the scrapping of race discrimination laws with a banner saying "Workers of the World Unite and Fight for a white South Africa"

policy of the ANC at the time did not recognise the need to organise black workers outside of the ANC. Officially the ANC then did not see a need for a union like the ICU. But the ICU grew to a very big organisation, with thousands of African and Coloured members.

But the very diverse nature of the ICU membership base caused its downfall. It was union with many different classes of members. Its members comprised teachers, churchmen, peasants, and dockworkers, and even chiefs and businessmen. There were thus different interests represented in the ICU, and it eventually fell apart because of this. ICU members, because they had different economic interests, were not always united and fighting for the same thing.

The collapse of the ICU obviously caused a vacuum

and crises of worker organisation. Some workers turned to the Communist Party. Ten thousand of them joined together in a federation called the Federation of Non-European Trade Unions (FNETU) and then the African federation of Trade Unions (AFTU) led by the Communist Party.

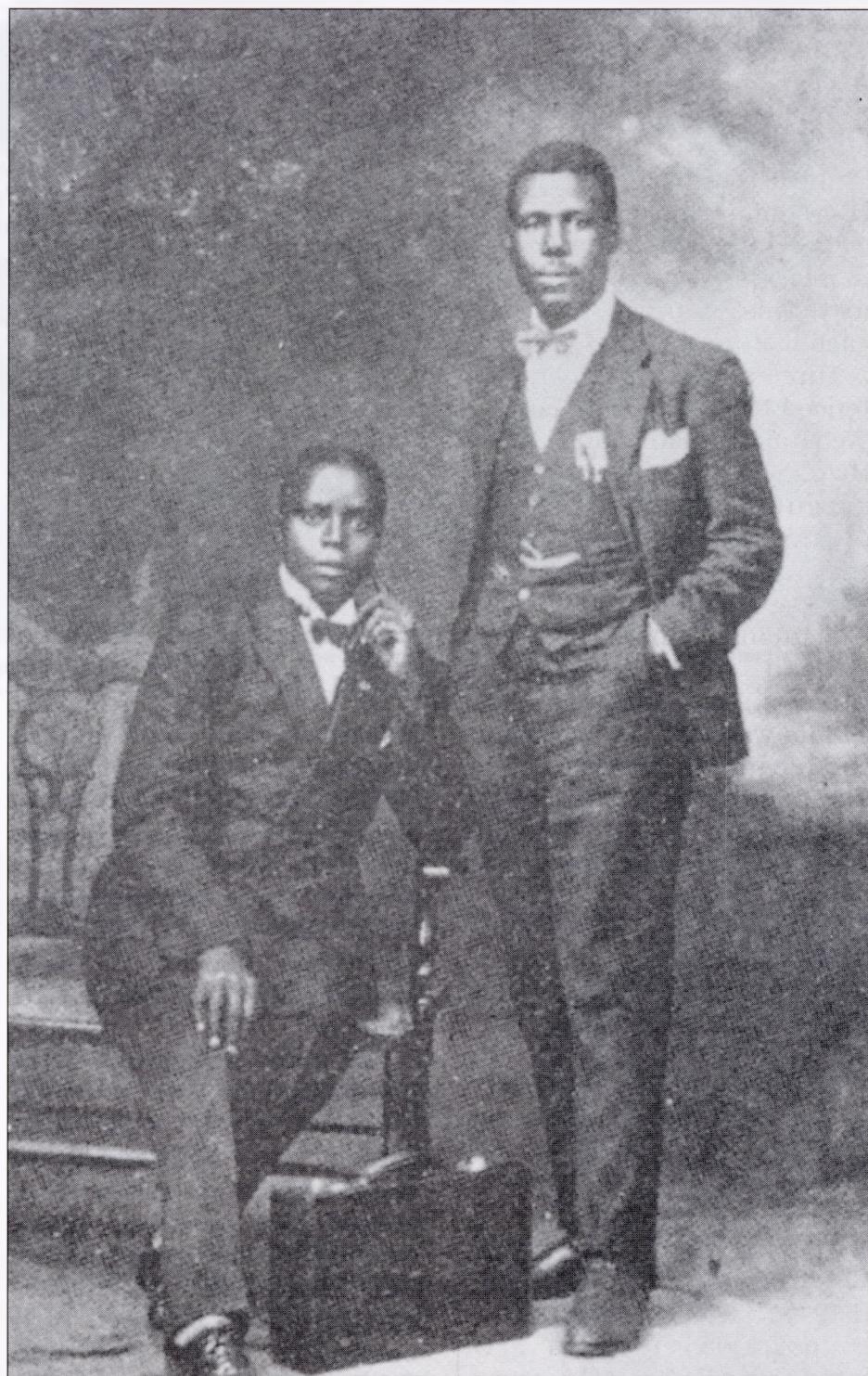
Before then, a difference of opinion about the role of black workers had caused a split in the South African Labour Party. As far back as 1917, at the congress of the South African Industrial Federation (SAIF), the role of black workers in the South African trade union was a heated debate. The SAIF was the first national labour centre or federation to be set up in South Africa. The SAIF was split, and in the end its congress adopted a compromised position of assisting coloured and Indian

workers, but not African workers.

This caused a breakaway from the Labour Party. The radicals who broke away formed the International Socialist League (ISL) in 1916. The ISL criticised the Labour Party for excluding black workers. The ISL activists, like Sydney Bunting, W.H Andrews and Ivon Jones, began to organise black workers into trade unions in 1917. The ISL also began the tradition of making May Day an annual event. In 1917, its May Day celebrations included an African speaker for the first time (Horatio Mbele, a Transvaal ANC activist). This meeting was broken up and disrupted by soldiers and civilians who, in the midst of war fever and nationalism, were enraged and threatened by the ISL's anti-war and non-racial position. From 1919 they began to hold May

Day meetings every year. The ISL and its successor, the Communist Party of South Africa (formed in 1921) tried to organise non-racial May Day celebrations – unfortunately, the event continued to be a racially divided one. The SAIF collapsed after the 1922 white miners strike, and the South African Trades and Labour Council was formed in 1925. This council (which lasted until 1953) was non-racial, but did not make any particular effort to organise African workers.

The gold mining industry constituted the centre of the South African economy. This section of the economy also saw the most militant worker battles, throughout South African labour history, right up to today. In the early 1900's, it dominated labour disputes in South Africa. But white and black mineworkers never really united in struggle. The historic mining sector strikes of 1907, 1913 and 1922 were largely conducted by white workers, and were mainly directed in protest against the increasing number of black mine workers. The mine bosses were intent on smashing the job colour bar, so that they could employ cheaper black labour. Of course, the white mine workers resisted this attack on their job security and wage levels. Mining profits fell heavily in 1921. The bosses planned to retrench many semi-skilled white workers, and wanted to replace them with unskilled black workers, at a cheaper wage. This unleashed one of the bitterest labour disputes in South African labour history. Twenty four thousand white mineworkers embarked on one of the most militant strikes ever. They were joined by



Clements Kadalie (left) and A.W.G. Champion (right) - ICU leaders

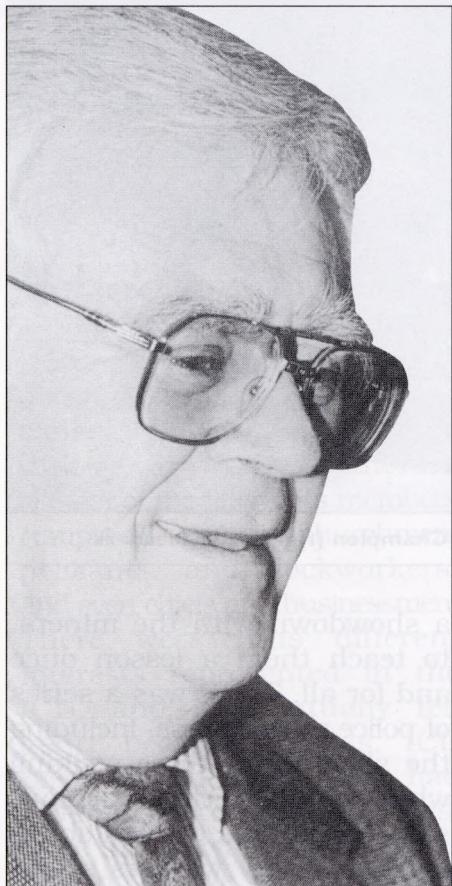
engineering workers on the Rand. The event grew into the now famous "Rand Revolt", under the slogan "**Workers of the world unite and fight for a white South Africa!**"

The government of General Smuts, in alliance with the mining bosses, was intent on smashing the strike. He wanted

a showdown with the miners, to teach them a lesson once and for all. There was a series of police provocations, including the shooting of three striking white miners during a demonstration outside the Boksburg jail. The angry workers seized rifles and other arms, and for a whole week, virtual civil war

raged on the Rand. Dozens of white and, ironically, some African miners were killed, before the strike was finally crushed by the armed forces. Smuts set up special criminal courts after this; eighteen men were sentenced to death and many others were sent to jail for terms of up to ten years each.

Three of the eight men sentenced to death, Taffy Long (a Welshman), Hull and Lewis (two South Africans) were executed at the Pretoria central Prison. They went to the gallows courageously, singing the 'Red Flag'. The executions of these three men caused such widespread protest and disgust that Smuts was forced to commute the death sentences of the other five to life imprisonment. In order to try and re-kindle his declining popularity and



Joe Slovo, a later General Secretary of the SACP.



Young men being recruited for their first job - 1906

political support, Smuts granted amnesty to all the imprisoned strikers in 1924. A crowd of about eighteen thousand people met the released prisoners outside the Johannesburg Town Hall. Six of the men addressed the crowd. They said something more or less as follows:

**"We have taken up rifles on behalf of the working class of South Africa and against the dictatorship of the Chamber of Mines, and, should the occasion arise, we shall do so again. We are not frightened of Smuts' gallows and prisons. Our comrades long, Hull and Lewis walked to the gallows singing the 'Red Flag' and that should serve as an inspiration to all the workers. The workers of South Africa have for far too long submitted to the oppression of the mining barons. We should take a leaf out of the book of the Russian workers, destroy the capitalist system and set up socialism."**

All of them ended their

speeches with the slogan, **"Long live a white South Africa!"**

Whites voted Smuts out of government in the general election of 1924. Instead they elected the Pact government of the Nationalists and the Labour Party. This gave the National Party an important foothold in government, from where it began to strengthen its political control over South Africa. Over the next few years, until it assumed power in 1948, they built up the ideology of Afrikaner Nationalism.

As a direct consequence of the events of 1922, the Pact government of the Nationalists and the Labour Party were forced to pass the 1924 Industrial Conciliation Act (ICA). The ICA gave rights privileges to white workers. It drew their unions into the legal industrial relations machinery. Ironically, it is the same ICA (essentially instituted to protect white worker interests) which formed the early roots of the later Labour Relations Act, and which first allowed for the

industrial council system (the early roots of centralised bargaining) to be set up!

Although they were defeated in the 1922 revolt against mine bosses, white workers continued to put pressure for May Day to be made a paid public holiday. In 1926 the government tabled a bill in parliament which proposed that the first Monday of May should be a public holiday. The workers protested and demanded 1st May to be May Day. The government refused to back down, and the bill was withdrawn from parliament.

The violent protest of the 1922 White Mine Workers strike and the Rand Revolt were not the first and last incidents of brutality dished out to workers in South Africa. The frequency with which the government and bosses turned to brutal repression to crush worker (white and black) protests is alarming.

In early 1884, company thugs shot four white mine workers during a labour dispute at a Kimberley diamond mine. In the 1913 miners' and engineers' strikes, general Smuts called out the Imperial troops 'to restore law and order' – twenty one people were killed and over eighty seriously wounded.

In 1919, seventy one thousand African miners came out on strike for higher wages. Smuts called out the police and six strikers were killed at the City Deep Mine. In 1920, during an ICU protest in Port Elizabeth, a number of coloured and African ICU members were shot in cold blood.

In 1931, the police murdered a young Zulu man, Johannes Nkosi, during a May Day demonstration in Durban.

There were many such inci-



**General Smuts, leader of the ruling United Party, during the 1948 election campaign. A Nationalist victory was a shock**

dents of state and employer violence against workers, black and white, throughout the turbulent history of the South African labour movement. This continued at an alarming rate, right up to and shortly after South Africa's first democratic elections in 1994. Since the installation of the new South African democratic order in 1994, the levels of state instituted industrial violence during labour disputes have virtually disappeared.

Throughout the 1920's and the 1930's, some unions and activists tried to organise both black and white workers and held regular May Day meetings. They organised big multiracial meetings on the parade in Cape Town and in Marshall Square in Johannesburg. Even though the racial divisions continued to widen between organised white and black workers, the general demand for May Day to be a paid holiday still persisted. Some unions won 1st May as a recognised paid public holiday.

Later, some industrial council (now called bargaining council) agreements allowed workers to take the day off.

In 1925, Clements Kadalie, the General Secretary of the ICU told the all white South African Trade Union Congress that African workers, as part of the international labour movement, would take part in the May Day celebrations. As the African working class grew in size and strength, so did their participation in the May Day celebrations. In 1928, African workers marched in their thousands. Among them was a small contingent of white workers who remained true to working class unity.

In Johannesburg workers celebrated May Day with marches and sport events. In Cape Town singing and plays in the City Hall followed meetings on the parade. In Durban there were often marches from Red Square followed by demonstrations in Albert Park.

The white Labour party and their unions of the more



Cyril Rhamaposa, ex-general secretary of NUM arrives at Sactwu's 1993 "Worker Rights Conference"



Mining soon had to be done deep below the surface of the earth



conservative white workers continued to hold separate meetings on May Day. They passed messages of international solidarity, but they refused to admit black workers to their meetings!

Sometimes the police would come and break up the meetings of the non-racial unions but left the white workers' meetings alone.

In the early 1930's, May Day was celebrated in a different way. White workers excluded African workers in the celebrations. Other rallies, which included African workers, were organised by the Communist Party. In one such rally, the police only attacked the African workers in the audience and on the platform. White workers were not attacked.

Despite the harassment, there were continued attempts to organise non-racial May Day celebrations. In 1931, when non-whites were expelled from the United May Day Committee, the African May Day Committee was set up in response, to organise joint May Day celebrations.

1938 saw the contradiction of white workers celebrating the victories of the working class and international worker solidarity while excluding black workers from the celebrations. Some unions, such as the Furniture Workers' Union, refused to take part in the May Day activities on the grounds that they did not recognise the job colour bar! The job colour bar was introduced on the mines in 1912, and reserved certain higher category jobs for whites miners only.

In 1939, the South African government joined the 2nd World War (1939 – 1945). As more and more whites were

drafted into the army, the numbers of black workers in the towns and the factories grew. The black trade union movement also grew in strength. Every year on May Day, big meetings were organised by the non-racial unions. Leaders addressed the crowds, and read out greetings of solidarity from workers in other countries. They spoke about workers' demands for better housing, minimum wages, and black trade union rights. They spoke about the struggle for democracy and worker rights in South Africa, and told them about worker struggles elsewhere.

A new trade union federation, the Council of Non-European Trade Unions (CNETU) was set up in 1941. The African Mine Workers Union (AMWU) was formed in the same year. In the 1940's and in 1946 black mineworkers staged one of the largest strikes in South African labour history. The strike was violently suppressed. But it was clear to everybody that black workers were becoming more confident and more militant. This militancy and confidence was also expressed in the annual May Day rallies that were organised by the Council of Non-European Trade Unions (CNETU). CNETU played a big part in popularising May Day. It tried to unite workers under such slogans as "**We want bread**" and "**Work for Wages**".

The National Party was determined to suppress and smash this emerging labour movement. After the crushing of the 1946 African mine workers strike, CNETU began to crumble. In 1945, it had a membership base of 150 000. A few years later it did not

exist any more.

After the Second World War, the unregistered – largely black – labour movement focussed on issues like minimum wages, housing, and recognition of African trade unions.

In 1948 the National Party came to power. This event effectively smashed what little prospect there was of black-white worker unity. By this time, many white workers had thrown their political support firmly behind the National Party and its policy of apartheid. This caused even bigger divisions between black and white workers. It made the chances of a united South Africa working class movement virtually an impossible dream. This period saw increased working class division. Political developments smashed what little was left of white/black worker unity. Only a few white unions and activists did not become involved with the growth of right wing, racist, anti-communist and anti-working class politics. The conservative wing of the South African labour movement stopped observing May Day entirely. Some unions even petitioned against it, saying that it had become a day for communist agitation.

Immediately after it came to power the National Party began repressing the political and trade union organisations of black workers, and blacks in general. May Day now became a symbol of struggle against apartheid, and would remain so until after the first-ever democratic South African general elections held April 1994.

The policy of the National Party was to keep the wages of black workers low, and to deprive them of political rights.

And the Apartheid State stepped up its programme of repression and oppression.

During the 1940's and the 1950's, the mass democratic movement ran many campaigns to try and secure trade union and political rights: these campaigns included the Defiance Campaign, the Freedom Charter Campaign, and the Pound a Day Campaign.

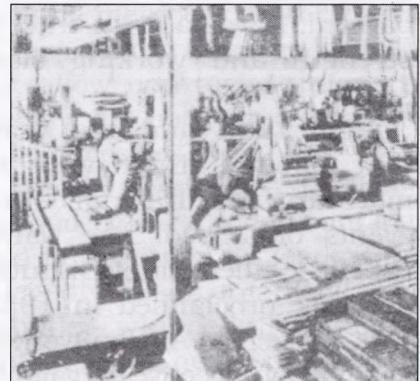
In 1950 the National Party introduced a bill in parliament to ban the Communist Party of South Africa. It was called "**The Suppression of Communism Bill**". Trade unions, the African National Congress and the Communist Party organised a mass strike on May Day 1950, to oppose the Bill. The mass democratic movement at the time called it a '**Freedom Strike**'. Many workers across the country supported this call for a stayaway from work. Even though the government brought out the army and the police to suppress the strike, this stayaway was one of the most successful in South Africa's resistance history. Factories were quiet and the streets were empty. In Cape Town, about six thousand black workers marched up Adderley Street shouting: "**Down with apartheid! Down with passes! We want Freedom!**"

In Durban, ten thousand people demonstrated against the Suppression of Communism Act.

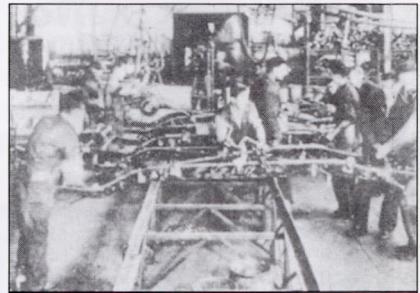
In the evening the police attacked the workers. In Johannesburg police broke up a meeting and six workers were killed. Other incidents of police violence also took place elsewhere in and around Johannesburg. In Sophiatown and Alexandra, police fired on a crowd. The final death toll



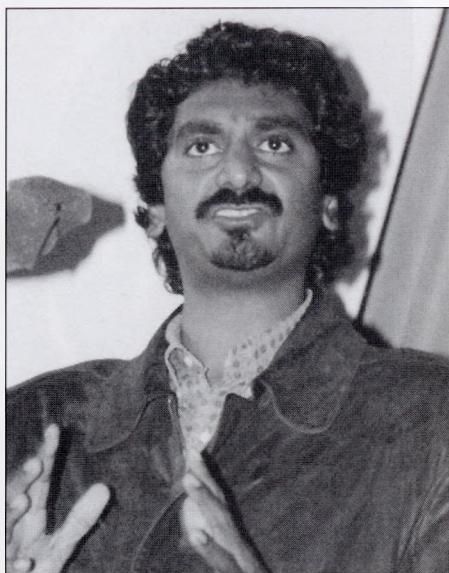
Mr S. P. Botha, a Minister of Labour under the old apartheid government. "...the world should know that South Africa has an outstanding record of labour peace...", he said in 1978.



A furniture Factory in 1927



Workers assembling motor chassis at General Motors in 1935



**Jay Naidoo, ex-General Secretary of Cosatu:**  
"The 1973 strike was a spontaneous explosion of workers' anger."

was nineteen people dead, and thirty injured.

Even though this general strike of May Day 1950 did not manage to prevent the Communist Party from being banned, it was a great show of strength and working class solidarity.

After 1950 and the years that followed, there were no more large May Day rallies and events organised. The Native Labour (Settlement of Disputes) Act was proclaimed in 1953. This Act denied African workers all rights of collective bargaining. In 1955 a new, non-racial trade union federation was established. It was called the South African Congress of Trade Unions (Sactu). Sactu

became closely linked to the mass campaigns against the apartheid government. It quickly grew to a membership of about forty thousand.

For a while Sactu unions continued to organise meetings on May Day. It tried to keep the May Day spirit alive during this very difficult period. Few May Day meetings were called, and Sactu used the day to discuss the "Pound a Day" wage campaign.

In 1956, Section 77 of the Industrial Conciliation Act further entrenched statutory job reservation, as the National Party stepped up apartheid labour market policies. This provision enabled the apartheid Minister of Labour, "...after elaborate and thorough research..." to reserve certain categories of work for certain categories of race groups. Guess which job categories were reserved for whites! **"This provision was enacted at a time when it was necessary to safeguard the various population groups of the country against inter-racial competition in the labour situation,"** explained the government in the then Department of Labour research publication, called **'Empact.'** **"From the outset, the philosophy was on protection: not only the protection of one race group from being flooded out by workers of another race group in a particular category of work, but also protecting the employer and his employees from the inevitable racial strife that could arise from racial competition in a common working place,"** they continued.

Between 1957 and 1975, a total of 28 such statutory job reservations were gazetted.

At the beginning of the 1960's the Nationalist Party government banned all black

political organisations including the ANC and the PAC. The 1960's were a decade of repression and no May Day celebrations took place. Sactu itself was not banned - but the harassment of its activists made it impossible to function inside the country - it was forced into exile.

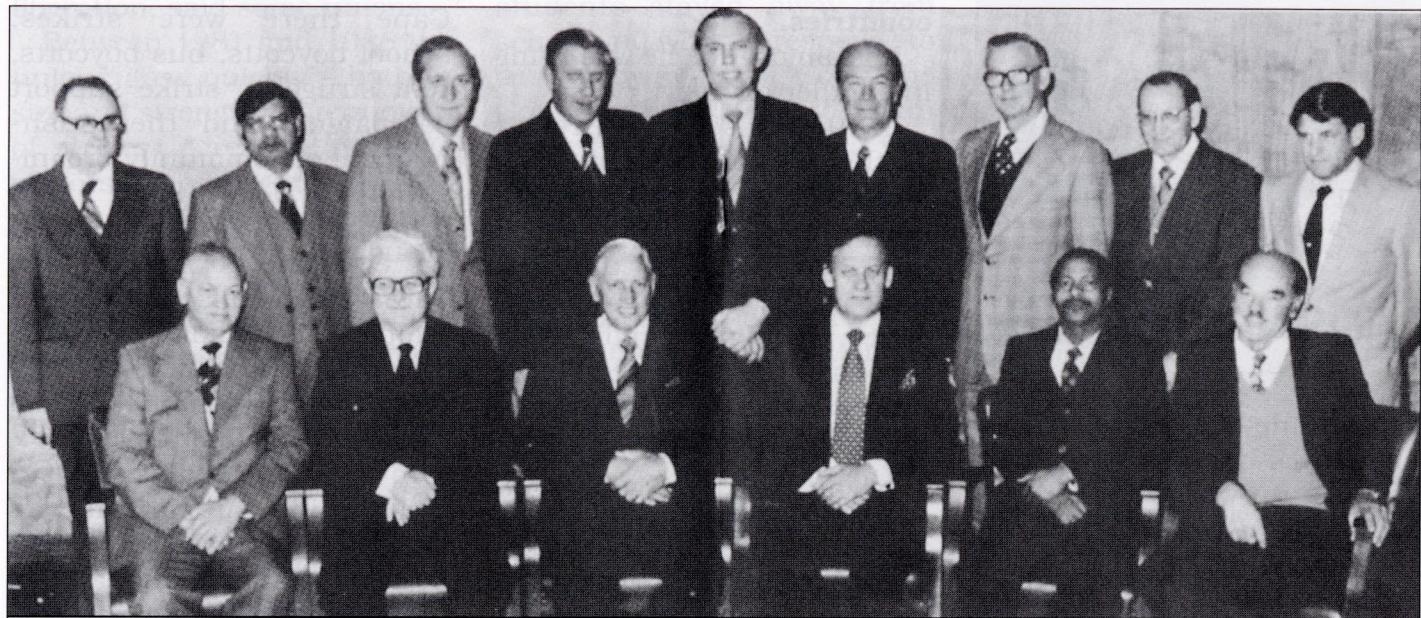
By this time many white unions had become even more conservative and most of them stopped holding May Day meetings. In order to make sure that no organisation, (not even the conservative white unions) would celebrate May Day, the government passed a law in 1961, which excluded May Day as a paid public holiday from industrial council agreements. More and more the government cracked down on workers' trade unions, their political organisations and their leaders. By 1964 Sactu was completely repressed. Its leaders were jailed, banned or exiled. Black trade union organisation had effectively collapsed.

For many years thereafter, workers in South Africa did not celebrate May Day.

For the next decade, resistance politics in South Africa, and independent black trade union organisation did not exist. There was an eerie lull in resistance political activity in the country.

After close to ten years of no organising activity, the black labour movement came to life again. In 1973, about sixty to seventy thousand workers went on a massive living wage strike in and around Durban. The strikes were illegal, since black workers did not have the right to strike at the time. They did not also have the right to negotiate their wage increases. **"It was a spontaneous explosion of workers anger at their**





The members of the all men Commision of Inquiry into Labour legislation. Front, from left: Mr C. A. Botes, Dr E. P. Drummond, Mr A. I. Nieuwoudt, Professor N. E. Wiehahn (chairman), Mr B. N. Mokoatle, Mr C. W. H. Du Toit. Back, from left: Mr R. V. Sutton, Mr G. Munsook, Professor P. J. van der Merwe, Mr J. A. Grobbelaar, Mr D. van der Walt (secretary), Mr C. P. Grobler, Mr T. S. Neethling, Mr N. J. Hechter and Mr T. I. Steenkamp.

**inability to earn wages that enabled them to survive,"** commented Jay Naidoo, COSATU's first general secretary. **"The most striking characteristics the 1973 strikes was the militancy of the workers, even though they were unorganised at the time. That set into motion a tradition of worker militancy which carries forward into COSATU up to today,"** he concluded. The Durban strikes became the most important awakening of black trade union organisation in the history of South Africa.

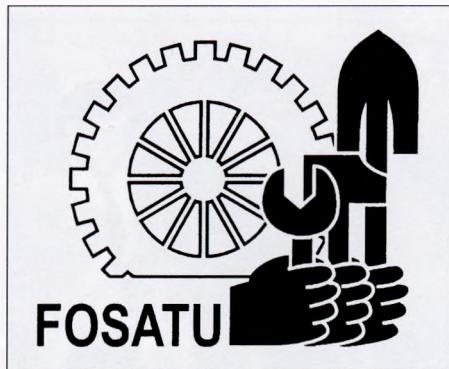
The 1973 Durban strikes were instrumental in the re-emergence of the independent trade union movement. It provided the seed from which black workers in South Africa began to build up their trade unions and political organisations again. The independent trade union movement and other worker organisations grew greatly in strength during this period. The Durban strikes led to the rebuilding of the non-racial trade union movement

as we know it today. The national student uprisings of 1976 gave this new emerging labour movement a further push. By the end of the 1970's, a number of national industrial unions had been set up. These new unions were further strengthened when they were brought together in a new trade union federation that was launched in 1979. Ten of the new independent unions formed a new trade union federation, called the **Federation of South African Trade Unions** (FOSATU). It was the first trade union federation since SACTU. Many of the Fosatu trade unions which emerged during the 1973 Durban strikes later played a key role in the formation of COSATU. These unions stressed the importance of democratic worker control, the need for strong shopfloor organisation, the building and training of shop steward structures, and the need to fight for recognition from employers. They brought a new and fresh organising style

to trade union organisation. From the beginning, the new independent unions made it clear that they would not exclude members on the basis of race. At the time the law did not allow non-racial unions – the law did not define them as 'employees'.

The state tried to suppress this movement through banning and imprisoning its leaders. It allegedly also organised hit squads, which killed many unionists. These repressive measures failed to stop the growth of the new trade unions. Student organisations, civics and political organisations also began to grow.

The state and the bosses feared this growing mass democratic movement. They were alarmed at the stronger emerging alliance among workers' organisations and other democratic organisations of the people. They attacked workers' organisations and its leaders. They met workers' struggles with dismissals and violence. They banned and detained worker leaders. To



undermine the shop floor structures of the new unions, they set up works committees and works councils, which they appointed.

The state was shocked at the determination of workers to build their unions, spurred on by the Durban strikes. It needed to work out ways on how best to control the growing new independent unions, as well as to prevent a recurrence of the events of 1973. Workers struggled and forced for a review and reform of the labour laws. The apartheid government set up the all men (fourteen of them!) Commission of Inquiry into Labour Legislation, popularly referred to as the 'Wiehahn Commission'. It started its work in August 1977.

The apartheid government appeared to be deliberately oblivious to the labour market turbulence which its repression of workers have caused over the years. In March 1978, the Minister of Labour, Mr S.P Botha said: **"The world should know that the Republic of South Africa has an outstanding record of labour peace, that workers of all race groups are socially better protected in South Africa than in any other country in Africa and that many of our statutes regulating the machinery for such protection serve as models for other highly industrialised**

### **countries."**

It is almost like he was living in another country!

In 1979, based on the report of the Wiehahn Commission recommendations, the government reformed the Labour Relations Act. For the first time in the history of South Africa, it allowed non-racial unions to be recognised on the proviso that they registered themselves with the Minister of Labour.

This unleashed one of the most heated political debates, known as the 'registration debate', among the progressive trade union movement. Some unions felt that if they registered, their unions would be subjected to control by the apartheid government. They felt that registration would threaten their independence. Other unions felt that registration would bring them certain legal rights, like access to the Labour Court system. The new rights which registration would bring are not enough, they argued, but could be used as a basis from which to launch the fight for improved rights. In addition, it would provide much needed legal space to organise and to gain employer recognition. This debate raged on and on. In the end most unions, mainly from FOSATU and CUSA, opted for registration.

It was almost as if registration gave an added impetus to union organisation. A wave of union organisation and mobilisation swept up the East Coast. Openly political unions like the Food and Canning Workers' Union, and SAAWU spread rapidly through Cape Town, Port Elizabeth, East London, Durban and even up the North Coast.

In the Eastern and Western

Cape there were strikes, school boycotts, bus boycotts, rent struggles, strike support campaigns, and the mushrooming of community organisations. The Food and Canning Workers Union called on everyone to boycott the Fattis and Monis products in support of striking workers. This was the first time in twenty years that a union had called a national consumer boycott.

In 1980, the GWU called for community support in its struggle against the meat bosses, and a national red meat boycott was organised. SAAWU also used the boycott weapon in the Wilson Rowntree fight.

Many unions in the early 1980's played an important role in political issues affecting their members, coming out strongly against Ciskei's so-called independence, taking leading roles in the Release Mandela Campaign in 1980, and in the anti-Republic Day campaign in 1981.

This was a very vibrant period of political activity, organisation and debate. Some unions joined the United Democratic Front. Other unions decided to stay independent. Others became aligned to the black Consciousness movement.

The Government's attempt to co-opt and control the independent unions failed. The democracy in these unions made sure that workers remained in control of their unions. And instead of being co-opted, these unions grew stronger on the factory floor. Some unions also started to form links with organisations and issues beyond the shop floor - like school and bus boycotts. Worker and factory struggles are not separate from the broader struggle for

liberation, said some unions.

Between 1981 and 1985 the unions grew quickly – both in size and strength. The number of strikes increased and new sectors were organised. The most important were the mines. In those years community and student organisations became more active, fighting hard battles with the government. In the beginning, most of the community-based and worker struggles took place in the then Transvaal. At first this activity focused on the East Rand, but later spread to the Vaal Triangle and then to the rest of the country after the SA economy went into deep recession. The conflict between workers and bosses sharpened. Short demonstration stoppages became long shows of strength as bosses refused to negotiate wages.

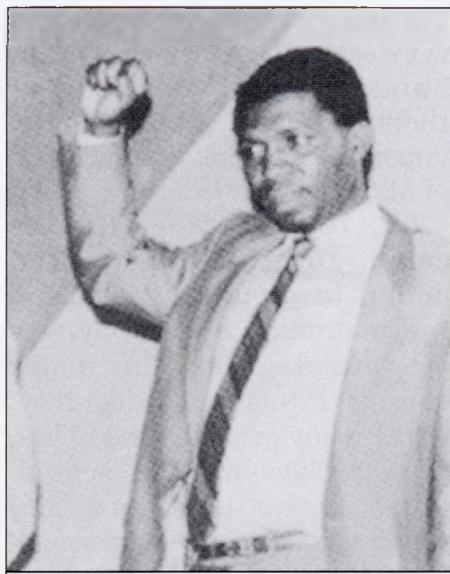
The recession brought with it increasing retrenchments. Many shop stewards and other worker leaders lost their jobs. And while the number of strikes grew each year, so did union membership. The growing worker organisation did not ignore politics. Some trade union activists saw no separation between the problems they faced at work, and those at home. Others differed, and wanted to maintain a distance from community and political organisation. A link was being formed between factory, community and educational issues. This was shown by the success of the stayaway in the then Transvaal in November 1984. The stayaway was not only a major protest against apartheid education and township conditions - it was a show of strength between organised workers, students and community organisations.

Over a million workers and

students stayed away from school and work in response to a stayaway call by the Congress of South African Students (COSAS), which was supported by the progressive trade unions.

The boycott of Simba products, called by SFAWU, a FOSATU affiliate, paved the way for that federation's participation in the stayaway.

By the beginning of the 1980's trade unions began organising May Day rallies in many parts of the country again. In 1984, Fosatu launched a May Day campaign in the factories in Durban.



Sydney Mufamadi at the conference for a Democratic Future in 1989.



Millions of workers took up the demands of the campaign and achieved huge gains

Thousands of FOSATU workers wore May Day stickers, and handed out pamphlets in their factories, explaining the importance, origins and meaning of May Day.

In 1985, trade unions came together in united action to organise May Day. International Labour Day was celebrated in all the major centres throughout the country. At the many meetings and rallies, worker plays were presented; union choirs performed and workers sang their own songs; and halls were covered in union emblems and banners which said **"Workers of the World Unite", "Forward with the workers struggle" and "An injury to one is an injury to all!"**

Unity and solidarity was a strong theme during the day. At a meeting held in Port Elizabeth, local Firestone workers showed their unity with striking Brazilian workers employed by Firestone Tyre Company in Sao Paolo.

In the meantime, from 1981, unity talks between the various unions took place. The plan

was to form a new national trade union federation. A key call was for the new trade union federation to be formed without delay. But this was not easy."At the Port Elizabeth talks in July 1982, delegates unanimously voted that there was no basis for unity. When we look back we realise how foolish we were. The mere fact of COSATU's existence is proof of that. The differences were not fundamental enough, and there were sufficient compelling reasons to set aside those differences and unite," said Sydney Mufamadi, COSATU's first deputy general secretary.

Meanwhile, at every meeting, workers put forward their key demands for improved wages, living conditions and political rights.

Workers demanded May Day as a paid public holiday. They demanded the right to full employment and a living wage, housing and transport they could afford, a 40-hour week, and free and compulsory education for all, and the scrapping of all racist laws.

They demanded a new society

where the interests of workers came first.

Many unions also began to demand that bosses should recognise May Day as paid workers' holiday. Some unions had even begun to win May Day as a paid workers' holiday. In 1984, the Chemical Workers Industrial Union (CWIU), a Fosatu affiliate, was one of the first unions to be successful in winning May Day. The Pilkington Glass factory in the Eastern Cape agreed to set aside May Day as a paid public holiday for its workers, who were organised by the CWIU.

As in many parts of the world, May Day in South Africa also represented a spirit of unity within the working class. In 1981, the different non-racial unions had begun unity talks with the goal of forming one national trade union federation. As part of forging this unity, the unions involved in the talks organised a joint May Day rally in Mitchell's Plain, Cape Town. About three thousand workers attended this meeting. At the meeting, a union leader stressed the importance of contact between workers and unions of different countries. He said: **"The same companies are operating around the world, and they do the same things to workers."**

Another a trade union leader urged workers to **"...fight for a new society where there will be no exploitation or poverty."** He said: **"Why is it that workers produce the wealth of the country but can't have a say in what happens to that wealth?"**

Other worker leaders also spoke about the need to build greater unity amongst workers.

Similar joint May Day rallies



Workers perform a traditional dance at a May Day Rally in Durban

were also organised in the Transvaal (now known as Gauteng).

The spirit of unity shown by the unions during May Day achieved concrete results when the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) was launched in Durban in December 1985. This launch took place at the height of struggles in the various townships all over South Africa.

**"There were many differences, on many different points, between us at the time. But what forced the issue of trade union unity on us, was the realisation that there were more that united us, than divided us,"** said Jay Naidoo.

The unity talks took four long years, before agreement was finally reached. After a year and a-half of township violence and black protest action, COSATU was launched. Workers brought the militancy from the townships into COSATU's launching congress.



May Day celebrations at Soweto's Orlando Stadium in 1986

**"We launched in the middle of a state of emergency, and this had a direct impact on our policies as a trade union federation, especially in the formulation of our political policy,"** said Jay Naidoo. The launch of the new federation gave organised workers even

more confidence and strength. It became a catalyst for the organising of the thousands of other unorganised workers.

**"We had four hundred thousand members when we launched COSATU. This grew into a million members within the short space of one year, representing one of the fastest unionization rate anywhere in the world,"** commented Jay Naidoo.

One of the first decisions taken by the new federation was to fight for May Day to be a paid public holiday. After a quietness of more than 35 years, May Day was again put on the annual agenda of the workers' movement.

At its founding congress COSATU recognised the growing importance of May Day for workers by passing this resolution:

**"This Congress noting**

- 1. May 1 is celebrated internationally as the workers' day and 1986 is the 100th anniversary of May Day.**
- 2. That workers have no interest in racist political**



Cosatu's first president Elijah Barayi being carried shoulder high by jubilant members of the crowd at the federation's launching rally at Durban's Kings Park Stadium on 1 December 1985



May day, 1988 at Umlazi Cinema

**public holidays such as Republic Day, Founders day and Day of the Covenant.**

**Resolves that:**

- 1. We should fight for May 1 to be a paid holiday.**
- 2. We should be prepared to sacrifice racist political holidays if necessary.**
- 3. The federation should initiate and organise celebrations on May 1 every year.**

May Day 1986 was however the first test for the new federation. Already, when COSATU was launched in 1985, South Africa was in the grip of harsh

repression. In 1984, following militant rent boycotts, the Nationalist government had sent troops to occupy the townships of the Vaal Triangle. Some of these townships were Sebokeng, Boipatong, Sharpeville and others. COSATU's resolve to try and arrange May Day rallies was thus an act of defiance against the repressive state machinery.

As May Day 1986 approached, it was clear that a major showdown between the state and the workers' movement was looming. At its Central Executive Committee meeting, COSATU made a call to all its

members to celebrate May Day as a public holiday. The Council of Unions of South Africa (CUSA), a union federation which was part of the unity talks but did not join in the formation of COSATU, called for joint May Day celebrations with COSATU. COSATU declined the offer. The COSATU call also received support from the National Education Crises Committee (NECC), which had been set up by a number of mass-based organisations to lead the struggle against apartheid education. Even traditionally conservative organisations like the African Teachers Association and the National African Federated Chambers of Commerce threw their weight behind COSATU's 1986 May Day celebrations call.

As May Day 1986 approached, the state banned many of the rallies planned for the day. In spite of the intimidation by the state, about three million workers stayed away from work to commemorate May Day. In addition to this, thousands of students also heeded the call and boycotted school. May Day 1986 was the biggest stayaway in the history



of the workers' movement, and in the history of the democratic movement in South Africa. More than a hundred thousand workers attended May Day rallies around the country despite intimidation by the state.

By May Day 1986, the tradition had been observed around the world for a full century (since 1886). COSATU was barely six months' old, but May Day celebrations in South Africa that year were the biggest ever, with huge rallies all over the country. South African workers had passionately embraced the day as their own.

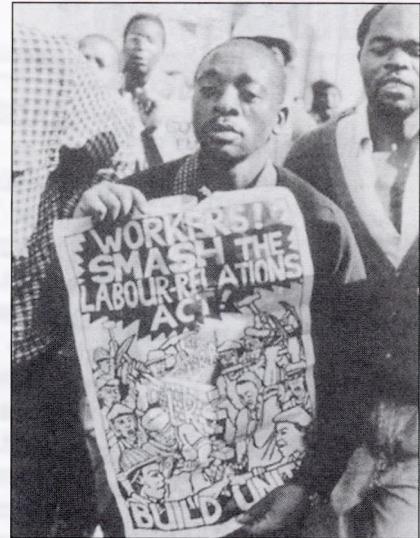
Towards the end of May 1986, Premier Millings recognised May Day as well as June 16 as a paid holiday for workers. The show of strength by the working class on May Day 1986 forced many other bosses to finally agreed to accept May 1st as a paid public holiday. Because so many workers stayed away from work on May 1st in any event, bosses' federations like SEIFSA said that they would approach the government to make May Day a paid public holiday in future. Even conservative bosses' organisations softened their attitude and adopted the policy of 'no work, no pay' against the striking workers, instead of their traditional policy of firing the strikers.

The old apartheid government, however, still tried to avoid the inevitable. They steadfastly refused to officially recognise May Day. Its attempts to decide for workers on which day they should observe Workers' Day became a joke spanning four years of Mickey-mouse play. Instead of declaring May Day as a paid public holiday, they declared the first Friday of May as a public holiday.

This suited the interest of the bosses, as a long weekend is easier for business interests than a holiday in the middle of the week. Workers rejected this and insisted that the public holiday be on May 1st. They still demanded that 1st May, irrespective of which day of the week it falls on, should be a paid public holiday. Luckily for the Nationalist Party apartheid government, May Day in 1987 fell on the first Friday in May! In 1988 May Day fell on a Sunday. So the workers celebrated May Day on the Sunday but, to the embarrassment of the government, also took off the first Friday in May (May 6) as a holiday! In the next year, in 1989, May Day fell on a Monday. It was clear that a confrontation with the government was looming. The Nationalist government again avoided confrontation by declaring that the public holiday would be on the first Monday in May! So, again a confrontation was avoided in 1989.

This cat and mouse game finally came to an end in 1990, when the old apartheid government finally gave in, and declared 1st May as a paid public holiday in South Africa. By this time, most organised workers had in any event already won May Day as a paid holiday in their wage agreements. After 86 years since the first May Day celebrations were held in South Africa, and more than a hundred years since the tragic hangings of the Haymarket Square Five, May Day was finally recognised in law as a paid public holiday for South African workers. Many workers had paid with their blood for this victory.

The attempts of the apartheid government to declare a workers'



The point has still not hit home and Cosatu marches against the LRA again in June 1990



Repeated action against the Labour Relations Act eventually bore fruit with the signing of the Laboria Minute in September 1990

# A MESSAGE FROM THE COSATU PRESIDENT



# C O S A T U

5th Floor Lekton House, 5 Wanderers Str. Johannesburg 2001 Tel: 294561

## MAY DAY MESSAGE PRESIDENT OF COSATU

Comrades, this is the 100th anniversary of May-Day, the 100th year since workers organised themselves to fight against the exploitation and domination of big business.

In SA itself we know that the discovery of gold in 1886 brought slavery to our people. Our people spend their lives in the dark pits of the mines, the inside of factories and working long hours in the sun on the farms. We made South Africa rich. We built the roads, the cars, the clothes we wear, the shops, houses, factories and the food we eat.

But in South Africa millions of workers and their families live in poverty, hunger and starvation. Our lives and families are broken by the pass laws and migrant labour, we live in matchbox houses with no families. Our children are given a slave education which condemns them to the factories and mines.

While a minority live in wealth so great that they are amongst the richest in the world. Their wealth is made through the blood, sweat and toil of the working class.

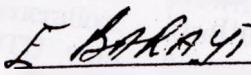
Therefore as Cosatu we must challenge this domination. Our demands are clear. We want our freedom from apartheid and the cheap wage system. We must mobilise and build organisation everywhere in the factories, farms, mines, schools, townships and rural areas.

We must build Shop Stewards, Shaft Stewards, street and area committees everywhere. This is the basis of our people taking power. The working class must play a leading role in the struggle for freedom. We must involve ourselves in all spheres of struggle from fighting for a living wage and the right to strike, to support the struggle of students for democratic SRC's, the unbanning of Cosas, to demand the release of Comrade Nelson Mandela, Oscar Mpetha and all political prisoners, the unbanning of all political prisoners, the unbanning of all banned organisations, and the end to influx control and the pass laws.

Cosatu is committed to campaign for these rights for our freedom, and we urge all worker leaders, members and all patriots in South Africa to work together, plan and co-ordinate our actions to win our freedom and break the chains of poverty and cheap labour which bind the majority of people in South Africa today.

Let us make this one hundredth May Day the biggest and most successful in our history. Let it inspire us to redouble our efforts to organise and mobilise South Africa's workers so that it will not be long before we achieve our liberation.

VIVA COSATU!  
AMANDLA NGAWETHU! MATLA KE A RONA!  
ALUTA CONTINUA!

  
COSATU PRESIDENT

holiday on a date other than 1st May is similar to how the American government has successfully conned the American working class. The great irony is that while May Day is accepted to have originated in the United States of America, Americans no longer celebrate May Day on 1st May! It is not even a public holiday! This is how Karl von Holdt explains it: **"May Day was born in 1886 out of militant struggles for the 8 hour day in the United States. In the 1950's the American government was at the height of its anti-communist campaign, and it declared 1 September a national public holiday. This day was called Labor Day. The American government had exactly the same aim as Botha to create a new public holiday for workers so that they would forget about May Day with its militant international socialist traditions. The American government succeeded. The reformist trade unions turned away from May Day, and Labor Day became a celebration of American patriotism and hard work. At the same time, there were militant groups in the American labour movement that continued to celebrate May Day. That is why, at the same time as it declared Labor day, the American government declared May Day to be 'Loyalty Day' (although it was not actually a public holiday). The government intended that the people should affirm their loyalty to the United States, rather than celebrating their links with the international working class movement."**

The demands which COSATU had put forward in its 1986 May Day resolution

adopted by its Central Executive Committee, were historic. It set out clearly the political nature of the type of trade unionism which COSATU was to pioneer. It was one of the most important mobilising moments in the broader mass democratic movements' struggle against apartheid.

Not all of the demands put forward in that historic resolution have been met fully. But many of the key ones put forward in that resolution have now been achieved. This include the key demands for the abolishing of apartheid, the unbanning of political organisations, the release of all political prisoners, the right to strike (which is even included in the country's constitution) and the right to free trade union activity.

Since its formation COSATU has fought many other battles and ran many campaigns to advance the May Day demands of workers. These include:

- The living wage campaign;
- The historic 1987 living wage strike wave led by CCAWUSA (now SACCAWU) in the retail sector, by NUM in the mining sector, and by SARHWU in the railways sector;
- The historic anti-VAT campaign, which laid the foundations for the formation of the National Economic Development and Labour Council (NEDLAC);
- The anti-LRA campaign, when the apartheid government tried to weaken unions by amending the Labour Relations Act;
- The Workers' Charter campaign which culminated in the setting out of the basic rights which workers wanted included in a new constitution;
- The fight for a new Basic Conditions of Employment Act (BCEA);
- The fight for a new Labour Relations Act;

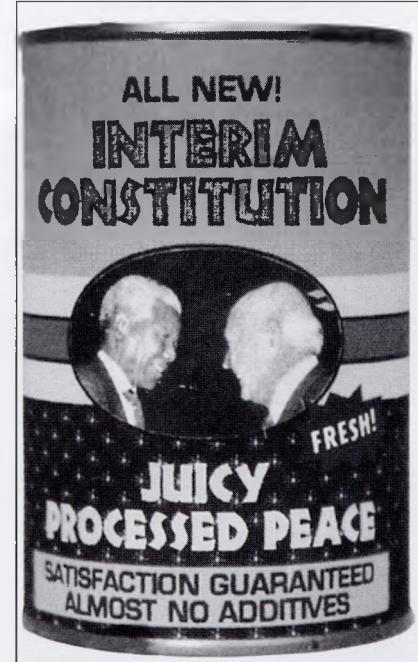
## The Constitution

of the Republic of South Africa, 1996



Act 108 of 1996

**COSATU won the right to strike in the Constitution**



Food for thought

- The fight to have the right to strike included in the country's constitution;
- The fight to have employers right to a lockout to be excluded from the constitution.

The biggest May Day victory that South African workers have ever won was, of course, the smashing of apartheid and the inauguration of a new democracy with our first-ever democratic general elections in 1994.

Shortly after the 1994 elections, the government appointed a tri-partite (government, business and labour) committee to re-look South Africa's Public Holidays Act. This committee served as a sub-committee of the then National Manpower Commission (NMC). The NMC was subsequently incorporated into the National Economic Development and Labour Council (NEDLAC).

Its mandate was to draw up a new set of public holidays, consistent with the values and traditions espoused by our new democracy. COSATU was represented by Sam Shilowa (then COSATU's newly elected general secretary), Andre Kriel (Sactwu's National Education Officer) and Archie Palane (then a NUM Regional Secretary, and now its Deputy General Secretary). **"May Day was one of the first public holidays agreed to, virtually without any debate. Employers obviously wanted to reduce the holidays to as few as possible. But I think that they realised the importance of May Day to workers, and they possibly remembered what had happened in 1986, when COSATU spearheaded the massive May Day protests, supported by more than three million workers. They obviously did not want another such showdown!"** said Andre Kriel, one of

the COSATU negotiators on the Public Holidays Sub-Committee.

COSATU has always constantly submitted its policies and organisational strategies to critical self-scrutiny, at regular intervals as, for example, was the case with the historic September Commission. This is seen as vital to maintain COSATU as a dynamic organisation, highly mobilised to take forward workers struggles on a wide range of fronts.

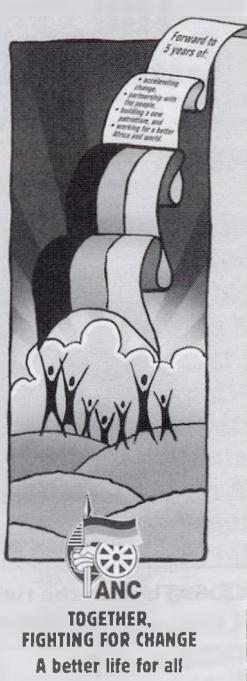
As the 1999 May Day celebration approaches, COSATU is repositioning itself for the new challenges that lie ahead.

Already, it is all systems go for the COSATU's Special National Congress, which the March 1999 Central Executive Committee has now called for August this year. This Special Congress is bound to set COSATU's organisational priorities for the next few years.

The Special Congress will present the federation with the added advantage of taking binding decisions on matters of policy and a robust analysis of socio-economic issues – especially those arising from the swearing in of the new government and its programme. In line with the Alliance Summit resolution COSATU will begin, now, to put together suggestions of what should be the content of the Alliance and government's five-year programme for transformation, for adoption at the Congress.

Thirdly, the Congress may also discuss the current international situation, the balance of forces at the home front, our approach to elections in future, and the September Commission report on other issues not dealt with.

But for now, the most



Why  
**Workers**  
should vote

**ANC**

A message from the COSATU CEC  
to workers and their families

immediate short-term challenge for COSATU is to campaign for a decisive ANC victory in the coming general elections scheduled for 2nd June this year.

### COSATU CEC Resolution, May Day 1986

The Central Executive Committee noting that COSATU:

1. Has in its inaugural congress resolved to celebrate May Day.
2. Has said that our May Day celebrations will commemorate:
  - 2.1 A 100 years of struggle by the international working class against the domination of monopoly capitalism.
  - 2.2.1 The historic Mine Workers Strike of 1946 and further salute the heroic militancy and resistance under NUM at present despite the brutality of the mining bosses
  - 2.2.2 The 1980 Municipal strike in Johannesburg.

And noting that:

- 2.2.3 The Inkatha linked UWUSA intends to use the symbol of international working class unity to launch itself, an act which is designed to deliberately undermine the unity we have built.

COSATU therefore resolves:

1. To celebrate May Day in 1986 as a public holiday and to arrange May Day rallies in all major centres where we are organised.
2. To mobilise our membership and the broad community around the following demands:
  - 2.1. *The right to work*
    - May Day as a paid public holiday
    - 40 hour week and a living wage for all
    - Social security, increased UIF and rent exemption for all unemployed
    - Equal and living pensions
- for all people on a monthly basis
- Full maternity benefits for working women

- 2.2 *The right to organise*
  - The right of all workers to belong to democratic trade unions irrespective of their industry or location.
  - The right to strike
- 2.3 *The right of students*
  - To support fully the demands by students to form democratic SRC's and build an alternative system of people's education now.
- 2.4 *The right to free political activity*
  - Unbanning of all banned organisations
  - Release of all political prisoners
  - Dropping of all treason charges
- 2.5 *The right to free movement and decent housing*
  - Immediate end to pass



Natal members form a Human Chain in support of the Workers' Charter campaign.



Cosatu Deputy General Secretary, Zwelinzima Vavi (centre) at the 1998 May Day rally.

laws, influx control and all laws that control the lives of people.

- Rents that we can pay

These demands mean the complete dismantlement of all apartheid laws, institutions and machinery and we commit ourselves to this struggle.

3. To urge all employers to recognise the right of all workers to celebrate May Day and to warn that any victimisation or harassment of workers celebrating May

Day will be viewed as an attack on the whole labour movement.

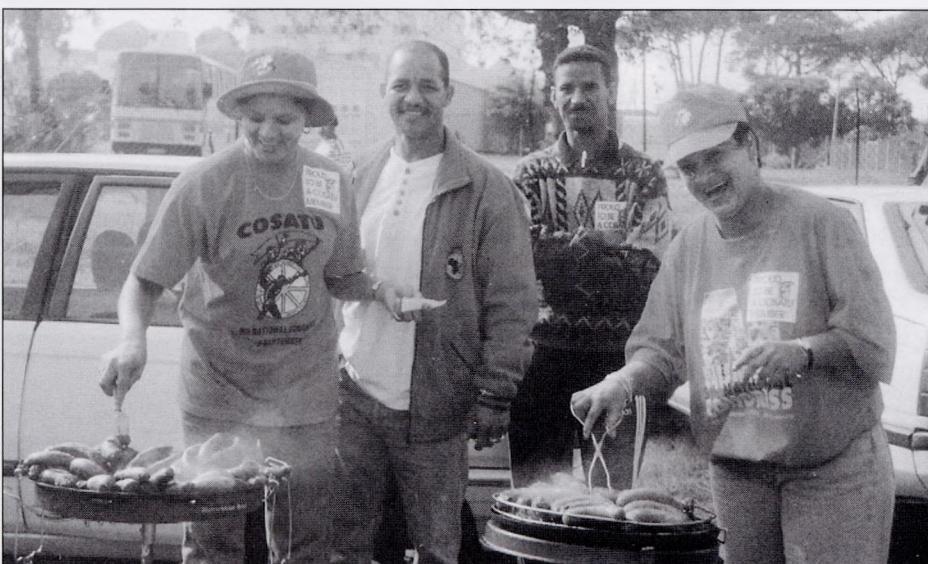
4. To welcome the decision of the NECC conference that the students and youth support COSATU's plan to celebrate May Day.

#### **May Day 1999: decisions of the March 1999 Central Executive Committee**

The COSATU Central Executive Committee (CEC) met from 29-31 March 1999. The CEC took

the following decisions with respect to this year's May Day celebrations:

- It is the sole responsibility of affiliates to mobilise their members for the May Day rallies.
- Affiliates would be responsible for getting their members to the May Day venues.
- Affiliates must pay for any transport arranged for members to the rallies.
- COSATU regions must ensure maximum co-ordination with the Alliance partners, for all rallies. Where it is still possible to have joint May Day rallies with the Department of Labour, these should be co-ordinated in good time.
- All those who are deployed to address May Day rallies must at least work for a week in the provinces and areas where they will be deployed in an effort to mobilise workers to attend May Day rallies.
- A request for just one rally to be held in the Northern Cape was rejected.
- Allocation of speakers shall take account of the seriousness of COSATU to mobilise workers in the four elections targeted provinces: Western Cape, KwaZulu Natal, Eastern Cape and Northern Cape.
- Affiliates were urged to follow the NUM example, which has deployed teams of up to 10 people to mobilise for the May Day in the critical provinces such as the Eastern Cape.
- The theme of this year's May Day will be "**Workers Mobilising for a decisive ANC victory**".
- The issue of the declining attendance in May Day rallies and the strategy to turn this around should be discussed as part of the consolidation of COSATU in the National Congress.



May Day has also become a fun day.

# A government May Day advert, Cape Argus, 1st May 1998.

## Department of Labour

# MAY DAY - WORKERS' DAY 1886 - 1998

May Day began 112 years ago with the struggle of workers for shorter working days in Chicago, USA.

Workers were generally working for 12, 14 or even 16 hours a day under terrible conditions for very low wages.

Workers through their trade unions started to organise and mobilise against these appalling conditions of work.

Campaigns for an 8-hour working day were embarked upon in many countries in Europe and North America.

Workers protested against negative effects that long hours had on their health. Workers protested against the employers overworking a few to save costs and keeping unemployment high.

Trade unions in the United States of America mobilised workers for mass action to attain an 8-hour working day under the slogan '8 hours for work, 8 hours for rest and 8 hours to do what we want'.

On 1 May 1886 over 350 000 workers went on strike to demand an 8-hour day in Chicago, USA.

In Chicago 40 000 workers marching were shot at by police and six workers were killed.

The workers then organised a protest meeting at Haymarket Square where a bomb was thrown at the police and police attacked workers and smashed their union offices.

Leaders of workers were arrested and charged for allegedly having organised the bomb attack and four of the leaders were eventually hanged for this incident. The news of the hanging reached other parts of the world and workers in Europe staged protests against the hanging of American workers' leaders.

From this time on, 1 May became the day for workers around the world to show solidarity with each other.

## MAY DAY - WORKERS' DAY IN SOUTH AFRICA

South African workers got the message of solidarity with their fellow workers around the world and celebrated May Day for the first time in 1904. From 1919 workers celebrated May Day by holding meetings every year.

Trade unions won May 1 in some industries and some industrial council agreements even allowed workers to take the day off. The tradition of celebrations grew in the 1920s and 1930s with organised workers holding rallies cutting across colour lines in all major South African cities. Greetings of solidarity from workers in other countries were read at rallies and workers were addressed on better working conditions, organisational rights, better housing and decent wages.

When repression on black trade unions increased in the era of apartheid May Day became linked with the struggle to establish a democratic society. In line with this thousands of workers heeded a call made by the liberation organisations to stage a general strike to protest against political repression on 1 May 1950.

Eighteen workers were killed by police on this day adding more martyrs to those of Chicago. The emergence of a progressive trade union movement in the 1970s rekindled the tradition of campaigning for demanding May 1 as a paid public holiday.

## MAY DAY - WORKERS' DAY AND DEMOCRACY - CAUSE TO CELEBRATE

The April 27, 1994 democratic elections victory created conditions for workers to realise their rights in the workplace.

The Labour Relations Act was passed in 1995 to promote economic development, social justice, labour peace and democracy in the workplace. The Act promotes the right to fair labour practices, to form and join trade unions, to bargain collectively, and to strike.

The Act prohibits unfair discrimination and victimisation with regard to the exercise of these rights.

The Basic Conditions of Employment Act was passed in 1997 to bring a better life to workers in the quest for social justice.

The Act reduces the working week to 45 hours, increases overtime payment, improves leave, and protects children against exploitation by employers.

The Employment Equity Bill was passed in 1997 to end discrimination in the workplace based on race, gender and disability.

The Skills Development Bill was passed in 1997 to contribute in making the necessary skills requirements available to meet effectively the needs of expanding domestic and international markets.

The Department of Labour ensures that workers work in healthy and safe workplaces, that workers injured get compensated, and the unemployed are given short term social insurance and assistance in their re-employment.

**SOUTH AFRICAN WORKERS YOU HAVE CAUSE TO CELEBRATE!!**

Issued by Directorate of Communication, Department of Labour, Private Bag X1112, Pretoria 0001

# ....in SACTWU

In the ten year's of its existence, SACTWU has played an important role in advancing the ideals of May Day.

SACTWU was formed in September 1989. The new union was the result of mergers of many unions in our industry, over many years. But unity in our industry took a major step forward in 1989, when the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers' Union (ACTWUSA) and the Garment and Allied Workers Union (GAWU- SA) came together to form the South African Clothing and Textile Workers' Union (Sactwu). The founding Congress was held in Cape Town, at the University of the Western Cape, on 16-17 September 1989. This historic merger Congress in itself was a practical expression of one of the key symbols of May Day:

the constant quest for working class solidarity and unity.

This year, our national congress will again be held in Cape Town, on the same date that our union was formed ten years ago. We will be celebrating and reflecting on ten years of fighting and struggle for the fulfilment of the ideals of May Day.

What does Sactwu believe in? What do we intend to fight for? These were the first questions that we had to answer. The answers to these questions were the first issues set out in the union constitution, under the "preamble" section. A closer reading of this section reveals that it clearly spells out all the ideals which May Day have come to represent to us: independence, non-racialism, democracy, equality, unity, security and good working and living conditions etc.

## A brief history of Sactwu

Our union's role in building on and advancing the principles of May Day cannot be narrowed down only to the period from 1989, when SACTWU was formed. The history and struggles fought by our founding trade unions, and those unions in our sector which came before them, is full of May Day symbolism.

The history of the garment union goes back 70 years to 1918 with the formation of the Witwatersrand Tailors Association (WTA). This was a craft union, because it organised members from the same industry with the same skill.

But matters were not that simple, as Solly Sachs reminded us when he said: **"On the 31st March 1927 I was appointed part-time secretary to the Witwatersrand Middlemen Tailors' Association, an organisation of about one hundred craftsmen who were in law neither employers nor employees but independent contractors. They had their own workshops, but considered themselves workers; indeed, many of them boasted of a militant trade union tradition. But despite these claims, some of them mercilessly exploited those who worked for them, especially the younger women."**

As Secretary of this association, Sachs came into close contact with the members of the trade union at the time. The union was then known as the Witwatersrand Tailors Association (WTA), working in the tailoring industry. When the secretary of the WTA, Dan Colraine



The Central Executive Committee of the Garment Workers' Union in 1935. Solly Sachs seated in the centre with Johanna Cornelius to his right and Hester Cornelius (the then National Organiser of the Garment Workers' Union) second from the end in the middle row.

resigned in 1928, the workers approached Sachs to stand as a candidate to fill the vacant post. He won 90% of the votes in a secret ballot, and started as duly elected secretary of the WTA on 14th November 1928. The membership of the union, at the time, was about one thousand seven hundred and fifty, nearly all of them Afrikaner. Less than a hundred were men.

This union later transformed itself into the Garment Workers' Union of South Africa (GWUSA). In 1928, under the leadership of Solly Sachs, GWUSA became a registered trade union. Solly Sachs remained the general secretary of GWUSA for 44 years, from 1928 until his banning in 1952.

Most workers employed in the industry at the time were poor white Afrikaner women. The Second World War forced a labour shortage, and the industry began to employ black workers. GWUSA stepped up its struggle to get black workers covered by the Industrial Conciliation Act. By 1955 the racial composition of the industry had changed almost completely: only 32% of the workforce was white.

Afrikaner garment women workers suffered extreme exploitation: they earned starvation wages and worked long hours. The poor working conditions meant that many of these women were open to the idea of a union. Hester Cornelius, Anna Scheepers and Katie Viljoen were shopfloor workers who, with Solly Sachs, worked very hard to organise clothing workers. They fought militant battles against employers, as well as against the state. From 1928 to 1932, for example, these

women organised more than 100 workstoppages and strikes, which shook the industry. These women saw themselves as workers first, and were not so much concerned about race. But the ideology of Afrikaner Nationalism was very strong in the 1930's and 1940's. The Broederbond set about to unite all Afrikaners, irrespective of class. This obviously interfered with the work of GWUSA, which had mainly an Afrikaner membership. On the one hand, Afrikaner Nationalism called on them to unite separately from 'foreign' influences and to remain loyal to Boer culture. On the other hand, their union was calling on them to overcome their personal prejudices and to unite as workers first, irrespective of the race of their fellow workers.

The union was also keen to avoid racial conflict. So, when African women joined the union, they were organised into a separate section of the union, called the 'Number 2 Branch'. Only black women could join this branch. The 1924 industrial Conciliation Act prevented black men from joining registered unions. They were therefore organised separately in the unregistered South African Clothing Workers' Union (Sacwu).

The 'Number 2 Branch' did not last long. In 1952 the Native Labour Act (Settlement of Disputes) outlawed multi-racial unions, and African women in GWUSA formed the Garment Workers union of African Women with Lucy Mvubelo as general secretary.

One of the most remarkable achievements of GWUSA happened in 1954. The wage agreement in the industry did not cover African workers. Employers could therefore still



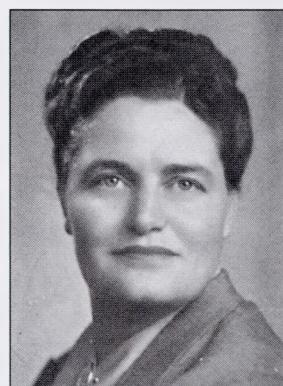
Emile Solomon (Solly) Sachs



Hester Cornelius, National Organiser



Anna Scheepers, President since 1939



Johanna Cornelius, who succeeded Solly Sachs as General Secretary



**Lucy Mvubelo, the leader of South Africa's biggest Black Trade Union, the National Union of Clothing Workers.**

apartheid.

In the 1950's Sacwu became a member of the South African Congress of Trade Unions (Sactu). Sacwu secretary Viola Hashe, one of the two women officials in the all-male union, became Sactu vice-president. She was banned in 1963 under the Suppression of Communism Act.

In 1961 Sacwu and the Garment Workers' Union of African Women merged to form the National Union of Clothing Workers (NUCW). Still forced by apartheid to organise separately, GWUSA and NUCW nonetheless maintained a close relationship, and operated as parallel unions (almost like two branches of the same union).

At this stage GWUSA, with its large number of coloured members, tended to dominate the NUCW. The NUCW could not negotiate wages in the industrial council – the law did not allow black workers to negotiate on the industrial council system. NUCW members were thus forced to accept wages and working conditions

negotiated by GWUSA.

Although workers were not free from racial prejudice, most recognised the need for class unity and solidarity. This provided the basis for a co-operative relationship. They shared resources and fought many employers as a single union.

One of GWUSA's most significant gains was in 1948: through arbitration it won a forty-hour working week, and substantial wage increase at industrial council level. This was of course, a major advancement in the core May Day demand for an eight-hour working day. To this day, Gauteng garment workers are the only clothing workers who enjoy the forty-hour week.

The union also fought the 1956 Industrial Conciliation Act. This Act made provision for job along racial lines. The union called for a strike: garment factories on the Reef were effectively closed for three days. Other protests followed and after a long battle GWUSA became the first union to succeed in getting the legislation lifted.

The union also fought a long and bitter battle against the Physical Planning Act. This law prohibited an employer from employing more than one black for every two and a half whites. After a nine-year battle, the Act was cancelled.

In 1952, GWUSA leaders Solly Sachs received a banning order and an order for him to resign from the union. A massive crowd of about twenty thousand garment, leather and textile workers gathered at the Johannesburg City Hall steps to protest against the banning. The meeting was violently dispersed by police,



**The Garment workers' Union Guard formed early in 1939 as a vigilance group to resist attempts of racialist disruption in the Union**

leaving hundreds injured.

GWUSA leadership, firmly committed to trade union and worker unity, was instrumental in organising and setting up trade unions in other sectors, as well as giving financial assistance. Workers in the tobacco, hat, wine and spirit, radio and television, brushes and broom, food and canning and textile sectors were organised by GWUSA officials and members. SACCAWU, today one of COSATU's most militant affiliates, was started with the assistance of GWUSA.

In the 1960's GWUSA lost much of its fighting spirit. After Sachs left, the union became more and more dominated by conservative white leaders who were involved in forming the Trade Union Council of South Africa (TUCSA). TUCSA policy was to exclude unions with African membership.

After almost 20 years of working together as parallel unions, in August 1985 GWUSA and NUCW merged. The Wiehahn recommendations had made racially mixed unions possible at last. GWUSA, with about six thousand white and coloured members, amalgamated with the twenty six thousand African members of the NUCW to form the National Union of Garment Workers (NUGW).

Shortly afterwards, in 1986, NUGW disaffiliated from TUCSA. At the time TUCSA was in crises: trying to please members across the political spectrum, and failing miserably, it was effectively neutralising union militancy.

NUGW was not the only union to accuse TUCSA of lack of direction. In particular NUGW condemned TUCSA's lack of support for June 16 and May Day commemorations.



**City Hall Steps Meeting: A view of the 20 000 crowd which gathered at the City Hall Steps on 24th May 1952, to protest against the banning of Mr E. S. Sachs**

Another significant union in the industry was the Textile Workers' Industrial Union (TWIU). It registered in 1936 and organised workers irrespective of race. However, also to avoid conflict with the legal authorities, coloured, white and Indian workers were in one section and African workers in another.

In 1950 legislation forced TWIU to form a separate union for its African members. TWIU then organised only coloured and Indian workers, and its African members formed the African Textile Workers Industrial Union of South Africa. The two unions maintained close ties and operated as a single unit.

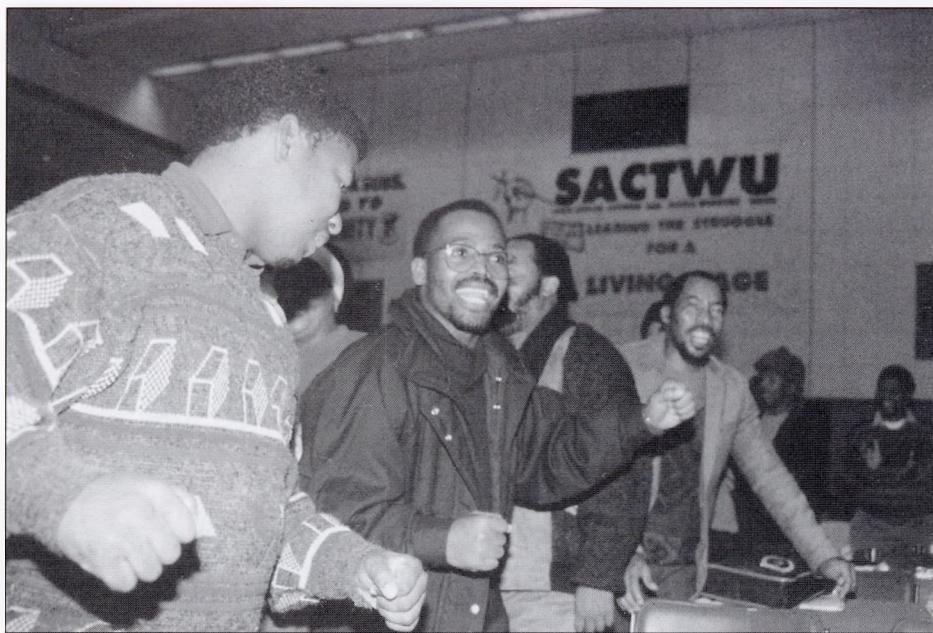
The Suppression of Communism Act also meant constant harassment for TWIU officials. Many were banned and some fled the country. By 1953 the African Textile Industrial Workers' Union had almost ceased to exist, and the TWIU had also lost many

members.

Nevertheless, the union was involved in many strike actions in the 1950's. Of particular note was the week-long wage strike by three thousand Amato workers, when police



**Dulcie Hartwell, first General Secretary of Tucsa**



intervened and injured 50 workers.

Leaders involved in the strike were jailed under the pass laws.

In the 1970's, when amended legislation allowed Africans to be members of registered unions, the union again opened its ranks to black workers. This strengthened TWIU and a major battle for union recognition started in Natal's textile factories.

The union remained politically independent and did not join the new federation formed in 1979 – the Federation of

South African Trade Unions (FOSATU).

In 1973, a wave of strikes in Durban gave rise to a new generation of textile workers. And from it a new union emerged in September of that year – the National Union of Textile Workers (NUTW). NUTW was characterised by militant workers and leaders with fresh ideas and a different approach to organising. The union adopted a non-racial policy from the start, and thus was not eligible for registration.

It was hard work organising as an unregistered union. Union subscriptions had to be collected by hand, employers refused all dealings with the union, and gaining recognition was a major battle.

The union was also a constant target for state repression – union leaders were detained, including acting general secretary Halton Cheadle, who was subsequently banned. Cheadle later became the country's leading labour lawyer. After the elections of 1994, he was also appointed to head the Department of Labour task team appointed to draw up a draft new Labour Relations Act.



**Johnny Copelyn, Acting and later Sactwu General Secretary, calls on the union to protect its rights, at the 1993 Worker Rights Conference**

NUTW was a founding member of FOSATU (the largest trade union federation before the formation of COSATU) and was one of its largest affiliates with 7000 members at the time.

FOSATU gave NUTW the impetus to expand beyond Natal. In 1980 the union opened a branch in the Eastern Cape. In 1981 a branch was started in the then Transvaal, and in 1982 a branch opened in Cape Town. From the start, the union operated as a centralised national union under a national executive committee.

One of NUTW's toughest battles was the fight for recognition at the Frame group – employer of over twenty thousand textile workers. After fifty-three legal cases over a two-year period, which cost management millions and drained union resources, Frame eventually granted recognition. NUTW could then organise the whole of the Frame group.

In 1985 NUTW became a founding member of COSATU. At the founding congress the union proposed a resolution calling for one union for each industry. The slogan "One union, one industry" became a central part of COSATU's policy of building industrial unions as the preferred form of union organisation.

NUTW leadership always stressed that the union should take an independent path, unaligned to any political organisation. They felt that members should be able to belong to different political organisations, but still feel comfortable in the union. A minority in the union disagreed and eventually left to form a splinter union – the

## Textile and Allied Workers' Union (TAWU).

One of the NUTW's organising tools was establishing shop stewards rights in factories. Shop steward councils were formed at each branch as a process of developing a national worker leadership. By 1986 the union had 400 shop stewards at factories in which it was recognised.

NUTW posed a serious threat to TWIU. Both organised in the same industry and both were based largely in Natal. There was intense rivalry and bitter fights over poaching of members and union recognition for majority unions. The two unions fought court battles at great financial cost, but NUTW expanded rapidly and began to win over TWIU members.

Finally, the two unions agreed to join forces, and ACTWUSA was born in September 1987 out of a merger between NUTW, TWIU, and NUGW. The new union's combined membership stood at seventy thousand. The union resolved to step up its recruitment of leather workers. Richard Kawie, a branch organiser in



**Rose Crawford, Secretary of the Garment Workers' Union of the Western Province until 1954, addresses a Reef meeting called to protest employers' threats to cut wages in 1953. She is flanked by Johanna Cornelius of the Garment Workers' Union of South Africa.**

ACTWUSA's Peninsula branch, gave the new union its first breakthrough in the leather industry in the Cape, when he recruited Cellini, a Parow-based leather factory.

The merger raised tensions in the South African Federation of Textile Garment and Leather Workers – because the garment Workers' Union (Western Province) had been excluded.

NUTW, critical of GWU (WP)'s form of trade unionism, asked the GWU leadership to clarify whether that organisation was a benefit society or a trade union. John Copelyn, NUTW spokesperson at the time said: "The leadership operates without mandates and encourages a view that there is no divide between labour and management".

In solidarity with GWU (WP) the Natal-based Garment Workers Industrial Union (GWIU) refused to participate in the merger, but did send a message of support to the ACTWUSA launch. In 1989, GWIU also merged with the Cape clothing union to form the Garment and Allied Workers Union of South Africa. (GAWU -SA).

One of the founding unions of GAWU (SA), the Garment Workers Union (Western Province) arose out of one of the oldest unions the industry. Its predecessors were also largely conservative, and came up against more militant unions like GWUSA.



**Louis Petersen, Secretary of the Garment Workers' Union of the Western Province, addresses members of the Union in 1969.**



**J. Bolton, General Secretary of the Garment Workers' Industrial Union (Natal) until his death in 1964**

The Garment Workers Union of the Cape Province started organising garment workers in the early 1920's. It was formally founded by Harry Evans in 1933. The union registered in 1935 as the Garment Workers' Union of the Cape Peninsula. It then had limited jurisdiction, only extending to Cape Town, Wynberg and Simonstown. It later extended its scope to cover George. This prompted the name change to Garment

Workers Union (Western Province). The Cape Clothing Industrial Council was formed in 1936. This union thrived on benefits and was criticized as being more of a benefit society than a trade union. For example, it provided creches, educational bursaries and housing loans. Later, in 1940, it established an unemployment benefit fund for garment workers. This was funded by contributions from employers and workers. When government introduced the UIF, the union's unemployment fund assets was transferred to the provident fund scheme. In 1942, it established the Clothing Industry Sick Fund. Bob Stewart was the union's second secretary until his death in 1946. He was succeeded by Rose Crawford, who retired in 1954. She was succeeded by Louis Petersen. Mr Petersen was a cutter in the 1930's and then helped the union's first organiser, Mrs Noble, to organise garment workers. The union's newspaper, Clothesline, was launched in 1979. Originally, it had mainly white members. But it was never really able to adequately organise and serve workers'



**M. S. Stanley, General Secretary of the Garment Workers' Industrial Union since 1974**

needs. And the absence of a strong garment union coupled with the economic situation in the Cape meant huge wage differentials between the Cape and the then Transvaal.

GWUSA tried to fill the gap left by GWU (CP) and began organising Cape Town milliners. But problems emerged during wage negotiations in the late 1920's. GWUSA's Solly Sachs and Anna Scheepers demanded higher wages in an attempt to equalise wages between Transvaal and Cape workers.

Employers refused to budge knowing that Mr Roberts, general secretary of GWU (CP) would accept a much lower wage offer. He did.

After the settlement, Cape Town employers urged their workers to join the GWU (CP).

Sachs and Scheepers tried to unite the unions, but failed. Talks with the leadership proved unsuccessful and communication with the membership was made impossible. Employers blocked their access to factories, and police harassment further made it impossible for them to find



**Harriet Bolton listens to a debate on South Africa during an annual ILO conference, in the Palais des Nations**

their way into Cape factories.

The GWU grew with employer support. Obviously its direction differed from that of GWUSA. Cape wages and working conditions remained far worse than that in the Transvaal. Differences between GWUSA and the GWU (WP) continued for many years. However, both unions were TUCSA affiliates and some unity was forged over certain issues in the Garment Workers Consultative Committee. Further merger attempts in the 1980's failed again. GWUSA went ahead and merged with the National Union of Clothing Workers. And GWU (WP), fitting comfortably within TUCSA, remained loyal until the Council's demise in 1986.

The Natal-based garment Workers Industrial Union (GWIU) was formed on 2 August 1934 under the leadership of James Bolton. It drew its membership mainly from indentured Indian labour that made up the bulk of the workforce in the industry at the time.

James Bolton was a furniture worker at the time. He came from Britain in 1928. He began organising workers in the garment and textile sectors in the late 1920's. The Industrial Registrar refused to register both garment and textile workers in the same union. GWIU's registration in 1934 therefore excluded textile workers.

The Natal Industrial Council was formed in 1936. In 1937, the council agreement was extended to cover African workers on the same wages and working conditions as other workers. In 1938, the joint contributory sick fund was established. The 1940's saw the introduction of an unemployment fund, similar



**The National Office Bearers of GAWU (SA) elected at the Inaugural Congress on 5, 6 December 1987.**

**Left to right: Desmond Sampson, Paul Adams, Ismail Muckdoom and David Perumal.**

to the one run by the union in the Cape. Bolton Hall was opened in 1971. James Bolton died in England in 1964, at the age of 64. He was succeeded by his wife, Harriet Bolton, who was general secretary until 1974. She was succeeded by Mr M. S. Stanley, who had been an organiser for the union for eighteen years.

In the 1950's, a large number of African workers entered the industry. The union employed Amos Dube to organise African workers into the GWIU. But in 1956, when the law prohibited mixed unions, GWIU excluded African workers from its ranks, and Dube had to resign.

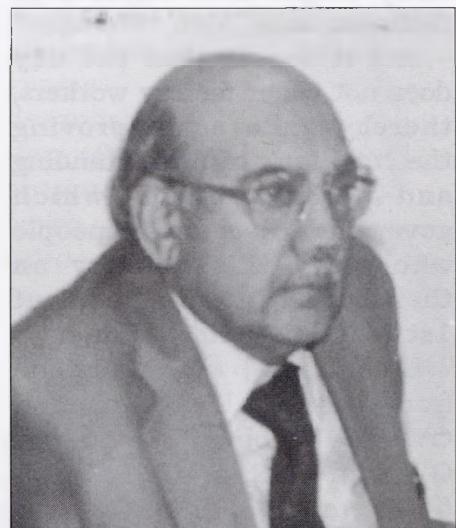
A working relationship was maintained and African shop stewards continued attending union meetings. After Wiehahn the union once again opened its doors to African workers.

GWIU avoided involvement in major strikes. Apart from a few minor stoppages at individual factories, the most significant gains made by the union were: the 1944 wage agreement which secured May Day as a paid public holiday; increases in the cost of living allowance by 22.5% and increased basic wages; and in

1948 the reduction of working hours from 48 hours to 42.5 hours for skilled workers. This was extended to unskilled workers in the 1970's.

GWIU left TUCSA in 1986 – the feeling was that the congress was strongly dominated by whites, and GWIU was not benefiting in any way from continued membership.

Harriet Bolton, the general secretary/treasurer of the GWIU, said the following on May Day, in the union's 1986/87 written annual report: **"The Garment Workers, together with**



**Ismail Muckdoom**



In the early years Liz Abrahams, who is fondly known as Nana by her many comrades and friends, was a member of the South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU). Together with such veteran fighters like Oscar Mpetha, they worked actively in SACTU who formed part of the Congress Alliance which spearheaded the campaign which led to the adoption of the Freedom Charter at Kliptown in 1955.

many other trade unions, had the 1st of May included in their agreements for many years in the past until the government banned May Day. Recently, the State President had seen fit to make some confusing statements about a Workers Day and in naming a day, the first Friday in May, he apparently forgot that workers in factories were also "Workers" - and it seems that the day does not cover factory workers, thereby once again proving the total lack of understanding and consideration which government has for the people who carry this country on their backs. In our agreement 1st May is a paid holiday."

Embittered by the exclusion from the ACTWUSA merger, GWU (WP) joined ranks with GWIU in Natal in 1987. On 5-6 December of that year the two unions merged, and GAWU was launched with

102 000 members, three months after the birth of ACTWUSA.

Prior to the formation of GAWU (SA), its two founding unions established the "Joint 'Unity First' Commission, to pursue the principle of 'one union, one industry'. Desmond Sampson, the Chairperson of the Commission, tabled the Commission's report at GAWU's 1987 inaugural congress. Commenting on the merger talks with the unions which eventually formed ACTWUSA, the report said: **"Tremendous pressure was brought upon us. Unrealistic timetables were placed before us. We were unable to fix and meet these unrealistic deadlines and refused to bow to illogical pressures. This is an indication of our dedication to bring about real unity amongst all the workers in the industry. That others did not have the same courage, patience and commitment to accept the challenge of "Unity First" is indeed unfortunate. The Joint Committee therefore**

**regrets that we could not today join hands with another 68 000 of our brothers and sisters in the fight against injustices. That mortal sin - division among workers - has unfortunately triumphed..."**

It was clear from the delivered and the resolutions adopted at the GAWU inaugural congress, that the union had decided on a more aggressive route for the future.

It invited Liz Abrahams, the militant ex-Sactu and Ex-Fawu organiser, to give a keynote address. She delivered a fiery and militant speech: "The outdated saying goes that a woman's place is in the kitchen. We say No! A working woman's place is in the union and in the home alongside our men. Our men must understand that when we come home from work and then have to rush to a union meeting. They must understand that while we should share responsibilities in the home, we should also share the responsibilities of the struggle and when men do the same thing, we must

## GARMENT WORKERS' INDUSTRIAL UNION (NATAL)



GWIU (Natal) members at a union mass meeting

understand. To take it further, a woman's place is in the COSATU living wage campaign. And while we call for a forty-hour week, a living wage, May Day, June 16 and Sharpeville Day as paid public holidays, living unemployment benefits and the other living wage demands. At the same time we demand things that affect women directly, such as maternity benefits. As women, we also call for equal pay for equal work...Forward to one non-racial union and non-sexist union in the industry. Forward to worker control, democracy and international solidarity!" There was no doubt that she brought the message over clearly, and militantly.

Jay Naidoo also addressed the inaugural congress.

Ismail Muckdoom, then president of the Garment Workers Industrial Union (GWIU) echoed this new found militancy when he said in his speech to the inaugural congress: **"Trade unions in South Africa have moved into a new era. It is an era of militancy and strength. Today, organised workers and their trade unions are prepared to fight for their rights and to demand what is rightfully theirs. We have learnt from bitter experience that going cap in hand to the bosses does not work. It is out of our experience and misery that our commitment to the struggle for our rights and a living wage was born. We commit ourselves today to new forms of organising and mobilising of workers in our industry. Gone are the days when we go cap in hand to the bosses. Now we shall demand and struggle for our rightful share of the wealth we produce."**



**GAWU (WP) members at a historic general meeting approve steps for affiliation to COSATU.**

Shortly after its launch, the union started employing new and radical trade unionists. Coupled with a more progressive leadership, it embarked on militant shopfloor struggles. This was a direction unheard of in the history of GAWU's predecessors.

The union won major wage increases, maternity benefits, and got signed undertakings from employers on certain clauses of the Labour Relations Act. At the time, the apartheid government had introduced amendments to the LRA, which would have much weakened trade unions. GAWU was instrumental in getting the wage agreement reduced from a two- to an annual one. Since its formation, GAWU started a process of developing democratic shop floor, local and regional structures. This grassroots build-up allowed the union to wage some of the biggest strikes in 1988 involving thousands of workers.

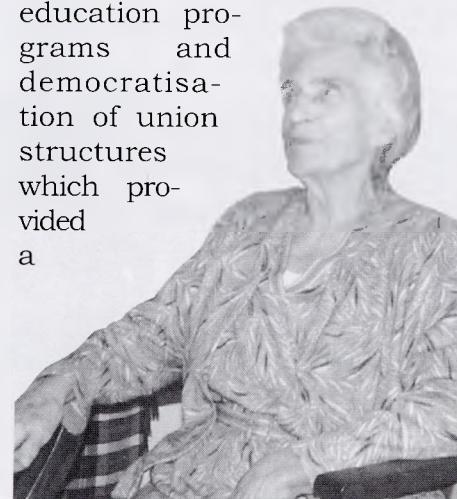
During 1988 GAWU established a base in the Transvaal, after the 5000 strong South

African Textile and Allied Workers' Union (SATAWU) joined the union.

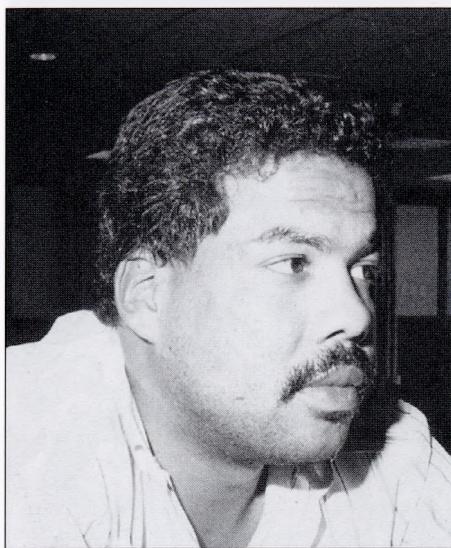
Until late 1987, the GWU (WP) newspaper, Clothesline, was filled with beauty contests and cultural and sports events which were noticeably unprogressive. During 1988 coverage of these events took on a new perspective and many stories in Clothesline began to focus on militant trade union activity.

According to Desmond Sampson, GAWU's general secretary, the sudden militant leap could be attributed to the change in union leadership, education programs and democratisation of union structures which provided

a



**Anna Scheepers**



**Lionel October, was elected as Sactwu's first General Secretary.**

means for union members to express feelings previously suppressed. But there were also deep struggles before the formation of GAWU (SA), which planted the seed of the new militancy. For example, the militant twenty one-day strike by Rex Trueform workers was unheard of in the industry. There were also militant strikes at companies like Cape Underwear. The early attempts by CLOWU to break into the industry also contributed to rising levels of militancy.

The new GAWU (SA) developed working relationships with community organisations in the Western Cape.

Trade union unity in the garment industry has historically been fraught with problems. The GAWU/ACTWUSA merger has been a particularly rocky one, not only because of their different backgrounds, but also because of their firm political positions, which ultimately demanded compromises from both sides.

At GAWU's inaugural congress in 1987, the union resolved to seek observer status with COSATU. A pre-condition to formal affiliation was merger with the COSATU affiliate in that sector - ACTWUSA. As tensions between the two unions still ran high, a merger seemed out of the question at the time.

GAWU was granted observer status in some COSATU structures and the union worked closely with COSATU affiliates in the Eastern and Western Cape. The strained relationship with ACTWUSA did not improve.

In mid-1988 the unions

accused each other of poaching members. At one Durban factory GAWU claimed majority support. ACTWUSA disputed this and the matter was only settled shortly before an impending court battle between the unions. Joint co-ordination and negotiation by both unions resolved the dispute.

Continuing conflict, especially in Natal, prevented formal merger talks.

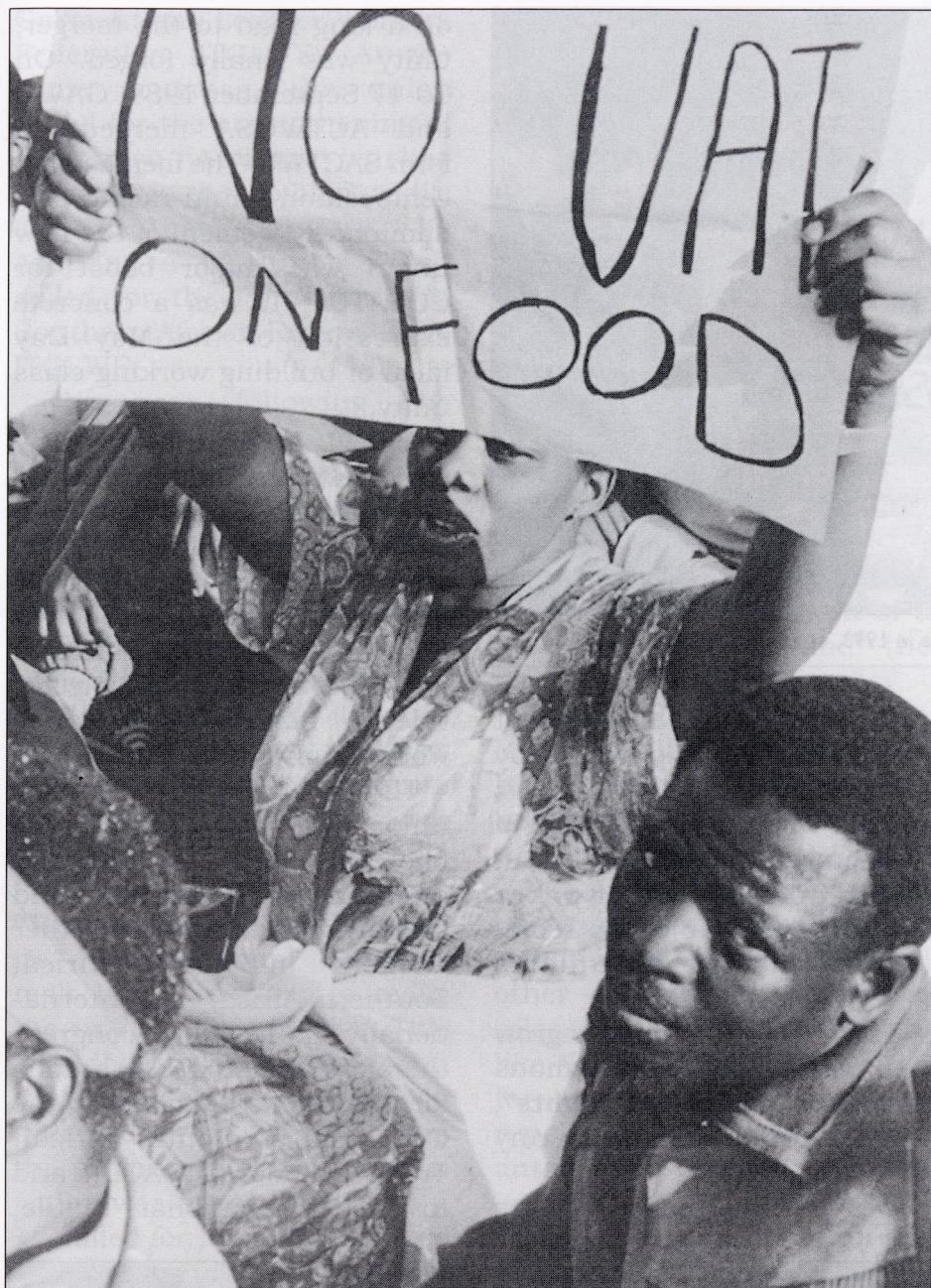
But late in 1988, after COSATU intervened, a positive merger process started. Following a meeting between representatives from GAWU, ACTWUSA and COSATU in December 1988, a committee of four delegates from each union and COSATU's Jay Naidoo and Sydney Mufamadi was established to examine all areas of conflict and to discuss the merger. The committee met four times, resolving several issues of tension between the unions. At the fifth meeting differences arose over political policy and structure.

Although most unions have moved beyond fights around crude 'workerists' and 'populists' positions, the different approaches of these positions were possibly the basis for initial political differences between GAWU and ACTWUSA. GAWU, clearly more closely allied to the mass democratic movement, strongly supported involvement in community structures. The union also drew up a charter similar to the Freedom Charter.

ACTWUSA on the other hand comes from a strong tradition of shop floor-based trade unionism. Its predecessor, NUTW, was often very critical of union involvement in what it termed 'political' issues. ACTWUSA, although recognising the historical



**Lecawu Shop Steward at Sactwu's 1998 Open School.**



significance of the Freedom Charter as a document raising demands for all oppressed South Africans, did not formally adopted it. This made it the only COSATU affiliate to maintain this position. Instead, it adopted a Worker's Charter resolution at its 1989 special congress. This Charter was later to grow into central COSATU policy.

The Metal and Allied Workers' Union (MAWU), faced with a similar situation at the NUMSA merger Congress in 1987, adopted the Freedom

Charter as its minimum demands, averting a split among unions in the metal sector. The Commercial, Catering and Allied Workers Union (CCAWUSA - now SACAWU) on the other hand decided not to adopt the Freedom Charter, a decision which split the union into two factions.

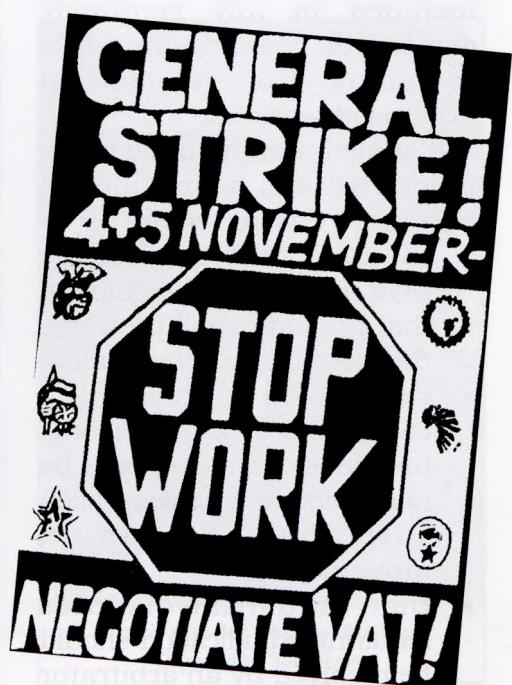
Both GAWU and ACTWUSA, now firmly committed to maximum worker unity, resolved at their special April Congresses that such differences should not stand in the way of

merger. As a show of unity, the unions exchanged speakers at the congress which were held on the same weekend.

Absent from the Congresses was the National Union of Leather Workers (NULW), whose conservative leadership backtracked from the merger plans. However, NULW rank and file members evidently defied the leadership position and indicated a willingness to join the new union. Today, the leather union is affiliated to FEDUSA, and is the only major union in the industry still outside the COSATU fold.

Both special congresses agreed to merger in September 1989, to allow members of both unions the opportunity to thoroughly discuss the merger at all levels. At the GAWU congress the major political policy resolution involved a decision to hold educational programs on COSATU's political policy, the Freedom Charter, and the ANC's constitutional guidelines for a future South Africa.

ACTWUSA neither rejected nor adopted the ANC's constitutional guidelines. Rather it





Gauteng members protest for their rights in 1993, at the World Trade Centre

focussed on the interests of organised labour in a blueprint for a future South Africa. The major resolution revolved around the adoption of workers' charter to be included in the constitution of a non-racial democratic South Africa. The union noted that the Freedom Charter raised many issues fundamental to all oppressed people in South Africa. But it is no substitute for clear protection of minimum worker rights. These ought to be included in any genuinely democratic constitution if it is to enjoy the respect of organised workers.

It argued that the basic trade union rights to be included in a workers charter were:

- the right to strike and the right to collective bargaining;
- that no state shall prescribe the constitution of any union;
- that no laws governing conditions of work (income tax, pensions etc) should be made without prior negotiation with the trade union movement;
- that industrial disputes requiring adjudication should be resolved by an arbitrator

or judge whose appointment has been jointly agreed by organised labour and employers;

- that workers participation in factory management is set out in law, with worker delegates subject to recall in terms of their union's constitution.

This resolution, later to grow into COSATU's now famous **"Platform on Worker Rights"**, was the first of its kind in any COSATU union.

Despite the many hiccups

on a long road to the merger, unity was finally forged. On 16-17 September 1989, GAWU and ACTWUSA merged, to form SACTWU. The membership composition (multi-racial, predominantly women) of the new union was major boost for COSATU. It was a concrete expression of the May Day ideal of building working class unity.

A key part of the May Day spirit is of course the strengthening of workers' organisational, economic and political rights. Over the ten year period since its formation in 1989, Sactwu (together with all the affiliates of COSATU) was to play a key role in helping to advance worker rights in South Africa.

The first thing that the new union did was to expand the May Day ideal of local and international worker unity and solidarity, to unite with other workers in South Africa, Southern Africa, and internationally. Its founding congress therefore adopted resolutions for the union to affiliate to the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), and to the International Textile,



General Secretary Ebrahim Patel addresses the 1998 May Day rally in Kimberley

Garment and Leather Workers Federation (ITGLWF). At the same congress, the union called for the strengthening of Southern African worker solidarity in the clothing, textile and leather industry, by adopting a resolution which called for the formation of a Southern African Region of the ITGLWF.

The year following the founding of the union was spent setting up and streamlining new constitutional structures, setting up the support departments like media and education, and positioning itself for a major offensive on the collective bargaining front. It also became clear that, in order to strengthen the new union, it had to re-organise the way its operations were structured.

Under the theme **"Restructuring the union"**, its 1990 national congress took bold decisions to make the union more effective. This was done to re-energise staff, structures and campaigns, in order to avoid stagnation in the union. A programme of action was adopted which:

- called for new shop steward elections to be held in every factory, branch and region;
- put in place a special education programme to strengthen shop stewards, and
- committed the union to rebuild national and regional campaigns, which characterised the aspirations of its members.

It was also decided to take the first steps in expanding the service provided to members by upgrading the union death and retirement benefit schemes.

The 1990 national congress will also be remembered for



Durban North members protest against short time, retrenchments and Vat.

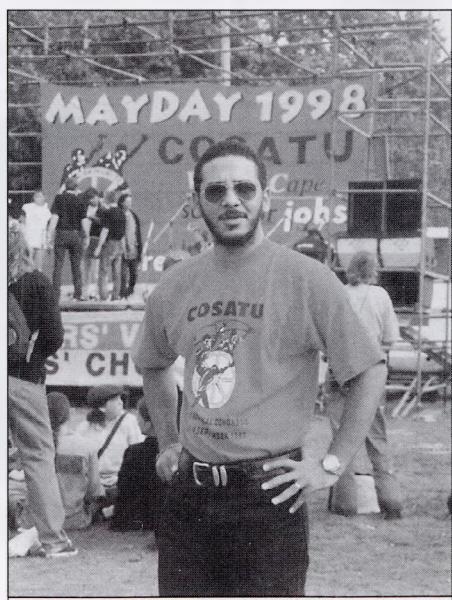
the adoption of two other key resolutions: the adoption of a Workers Charter, and the adoption of a political policy.

It was clear to the union leadership at the time that behind the scenes political negotiations between the African National Congress (ANC) and the then apartheid government edged towards the unbanning of the ANC and other organisations, and the release of political prisoners like Nelson Mandela. The need for the union to begin to reposition itself politically, in anticipation of a new political order, and to set out the key political requirements of its members, became more urgent. The union realised that, at the time, virtually all organisations have adopted guidelines for a new constitution for South Africa. The only exception was the trade union movement. This debate resulted in the adoption of the historic Worker Charter Resolution in 1990, which called for a set of fundamental worker rights to be included in the new South African constitution.

COSATU's third national congress in 1989 also called for the start of a campaign for the drafting of a Workers Charter, which would **'articulate the basic**

**rights of workers'** and **'be guaranteed by the constitution of a people's government.'**

The ANC's constitutional guidelines had also made provision for a Workers' Charter. Sactwu was the most active affiliate in the Workers Charter Campaign. On various occasions in July and August 1990, tens of thousands of Sactwu members left their workplaces in Cape Town and Durban 30 minutes before their normal lunch break. In the streets, they linked hands to form a massive human chain around the industrial areas. This innovative campaign



Wayne van der Rhee, National Organising Secretary

aimed to popularise the Workers Charter among SACTWU'S membership. It also provided visual proof of the power and sheer numbers of organised workers.

COSATU held a special Workers' Charter congress in 1990. It debated key demands of workers. Some of the demands of the Workers Charter later made its way into the RDP.

The 1990 Sactwu national congress also clarified the new union's position with regard to its political conduct. It decided to play a role both in and outside the workplace to advance the interests of workers, as the union had a duty and responsibility to also act in the community, in the areas of politics, culture and sport. It

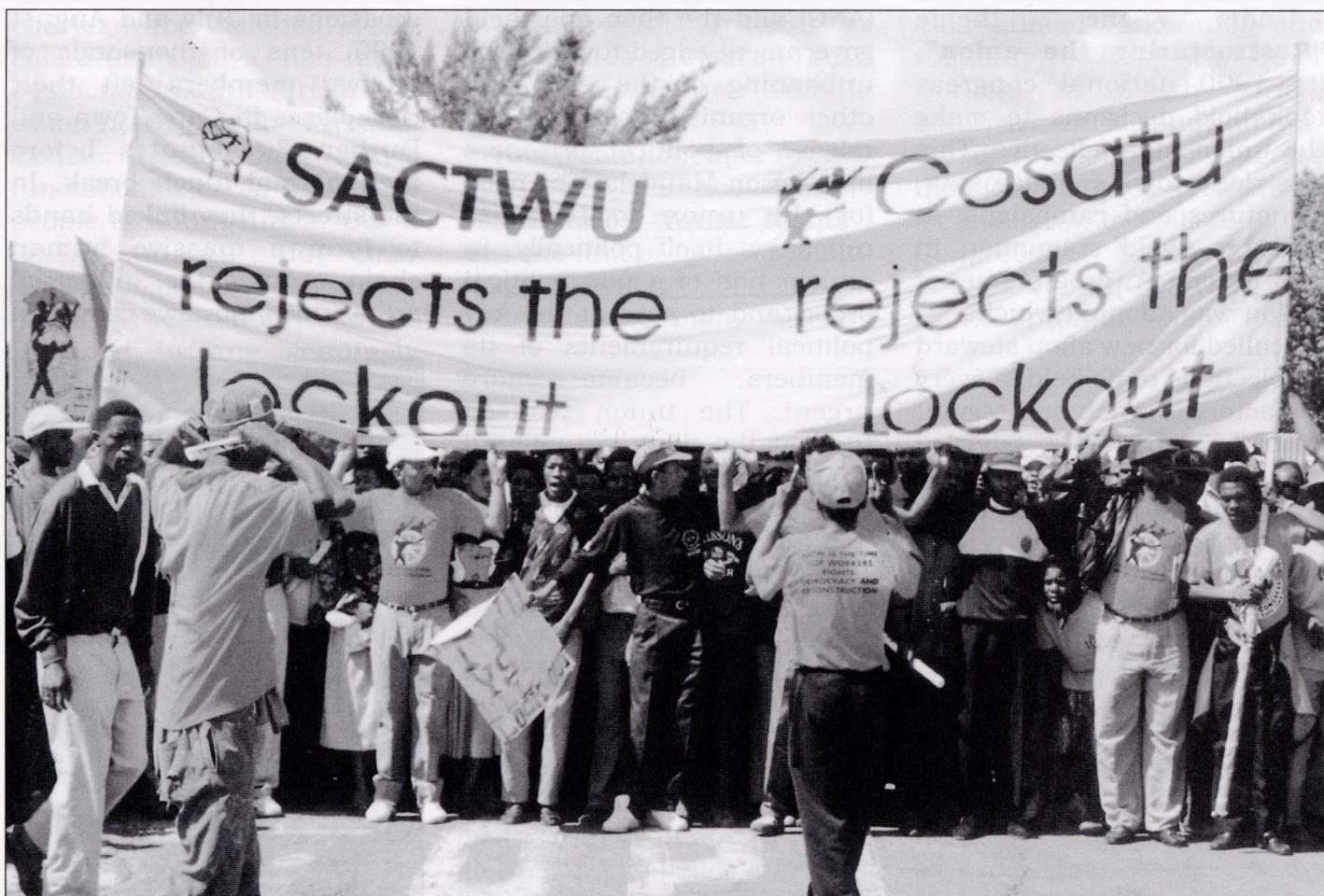
would work with all organisations from time to time, if to do so would further the workers' struggle. It recognised that workers were politically divided, and respected their right to belong to any political organisation of their choice. The congress placed the highest regard on the building of unity among workers as a crucial task in the struggle for liberation.

Political engagements were to take place without compromising the political independence or unity of the members.

In 1991, the apartheid government decided to introduce a new tax called Value Added Tax (VAT). They planned to introduce it in October 1991. They planned that VAT was to replace the General Sales Tax (GST). While GST exempted

certain foodstuffs and other necessities from sales tax, the planned VAT system would cover all foodstuffs. Workers were suddenly faced with the prospect of having to pay tax on such things as water, electricity, union subscriptions, medical services at private and public hospitals, rentals, all basic foodstuffs, and so on. SACTWU's 1991 Congress, which took place in the early part of that year, pointed out that :

- through this form of taxation, the majority of South Africans would grow poorer and the minority richer;
- workers and their organisations had not endorsed the new system.
- A fair consumer tax system must exempt basic food,



Sactwu actively campaigned against the inclusion of the lockout in a new constitution. Here, Guateng Sactwu members lead a Cosatu protest at the World Trade Centre, where our country's new constitution was being negotiated, in 1993.

medicine and services such as education, and also freedom of association rights such as trade union subscriptions.

Delegates resolved to fight the planned new sales tax system, and “**...To campaign for the right of workers to be involved in determining the appropriate tax system for South Africa and the use of tax revenue by the state and to require that any tax system shift the burden of tax from the poor to the rich...**” Delegates decided further to broaden the campaign to involve COSATU and other organisations.

Sactwu took its anti-VAT resolution to the July 1991 COSATU Congress. The Congress agreed to make the matter a federation campaign. This decision unleashed one of the bitterest battles fought by workers in South Africa. It had far-reaching consequences, ultimately winning space for workers’ to influence macroeconomic policy issues in the broader economy. COSATU eventually called a massive general anti-VAT strike for 4-5 November 1991. The demand broadened from the VAT issue, to a demand for workers to have a say in the broader economic decisions of the economy.

NEDLAC, as we know it today, has its roots in the anti-VAT struggle! Workers were stamping their authority on the type of post-apartheid economy they would like to see. Appropriately, the theme of SACTWU’s 1991 national congress, where the anti-VAT decision was first taken, was “**Restructuring our industry for a post-apartheid society**”.

In addition to the anti-VAT campaign decision, delegates at SACTWU’s 1991 national congress also decided to:

- step up or fight against retrenchments;
- fight for appropriate industrial restructuring in the industry;
- fight for better worker training, and union involvement in industry training institutions (training boards);
- fight for an appropriate trade policy, including a better tariff and technology policy;
- campaign for the beneficiation of wool, in order to encourage more local jobs;
- campaign for the preservation of jobs in decentralised areas;
- build up union industrial expertise capacity by strengthening our involvement in Zenzeleni, the union co-operative;
- call, with COSATU, for an Economic Conference to look at the issue of the relaxation



**Albie Sachs, Solly Sachs' son, addresses Sactwu's 1993 Conference on Worker Rights:** “This is quite an emotional moment for me. I think I can say that I was literally born into the union movement. When my mother was giving birth to me at the Florence Nightingale Maternity Hospital in Johannesburg, my father was involved in a strike and didn't have much time to come around to check on his first-born child,” he said. Albie is now a judge in the Constitutional Court



**Halton Cheadle addresses Sactwu's 1993 Worker Rights Conference.**

of sanctions and appropriate codes of conduct for future foreign investors in a post-apartheid South Africa;

- fight for centralised bargaining in our industry;
- extend our unionisation campaign to other parts of Southern Africa;
- extend our organising drive into the farming and retail sectors, and to initiate a campaign for farmworkers to be covered by the Labour Relations Act;
- strengthen the rights and opportunities of women in the union and industry.
- campaign for and defend the closed shop.

In support of these decisions, in particular to protest against job losses, a country-wide human chain was held on 4 September 1991.



Watson Chariechwe, from the Zimbabwe Clothing Union.

Our 1990 Workers 'Charter' resolution became a core part of the COSATU '**Platform on Worker Rights**'. It was finally adopted by the COSATU Special Congress of 1993. COSATU had called this special congress to prepare for the historic 1994 general elections. Sactwu put forward a resolution at this Congress, which set out the platform of worker rights we wanted the new government to incorporate into a new constitution. This resolution was seconded by the national Union of Metal Workers of South Africa (NUMSA), and adopted unanimously as COSATU policy. In the meantime, SACTWU's own 1993 congress took place, under the theme "**Preparing for Democracy, Worker Rights, Economic Growth and Political Elections**". This congress called for "...a joint platform/reconstruction accord to be negotiated between the alliance parties as a basis for joint campaigning for the Constituent Assembly..."

This 'joint platform/reconstruction accord...' later became the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) spearheaded by COSATU. The COSATU '**Platform on Worker Rights**', which arose

out of an earlier SACTWU resolution, became a crucial part of the worker rights provisions of the RDP. The RDP, as is widely known, of course became the election manifesto on which the tripartite alliance campaigned on and convincingly won the 1994 general elections.

In 1993, the union also decided to strengthen the role it is playing in uniting clothing, textile and leather workers in Southern Africa. It was time to step up the union's organisational response to the increasing integration of the Southern African regional economy. Companies had begun to move freely across the borders, relocating in search of more exploitative conditions elsewhere in Southern Africa. The union recognised the need for international solidarity to prevent exploitation by the multinational corporations. A very historic decision was then taken to change the name of the union from '**South African Clothing and Textile Workers' Union**' to '**Southern African Clothing and Textile Workers' Union**'. This was done in anticipation of a broader role

for the union in the sub-continent.

It was further decided to establish a fifth Region, called the "Central Region", of the union. This new Region was to accommodate the members of LACTU, a clothing and textile union in Lesotho, together with the existing SACTWU members in the Northern Cape, Botshabelo and QwaQwa areas. Armed with this decision, the union gave organisational effect to the expansion of trade union organisational muscle into other parts of Southern Africa. Over the next few years, Sactwu was to strengthen its alliance with clothing, textile and leather unions from other parts of Southern Africa, such as Zimbabwe and Mozambique. In particular, the 1993 Congress decided to "**...work co-operatively with fraternal unions in all SADC countries to realise our goal of a single trade union for the entire regional economy and a sub-regional organ of the ITGLWF...**"

In 1993, Sactwu also decided that it was time to place the issue of COSATU's international affiliation firmly on the



Eastern Cape members on the Project Jobs march in February 1996.

agenda. Up till then, COSATU had not yet decided where it wanted to affiliate internationally. **“Many of our founding unions had fraternal links with unions abroad. But COSATU decided not to affiliate to the WFTU, ICFTU or WC,”** said Sydney Mufamadi.

SACTWU’s 1993 Congress argued for the need for strong international solidarity defence of the rights of workers, and noted the contribution made by the International Confederation of Free Trade unions (ICFTU) in this regard. SACTWU already had a relationship with the ICFTU, since the union was affiliated to the ITGLWF, which in turn was affiliated to the ICFTU. COSATU was in any event also a member of the pan-African OATUU.

SACTWU decided to put forward a proposal that COSATU should affiliate to the ICFTU and to increase its solidarity work in Africa and throughout the world. This unleashed one of the most heated debates, which raged for many years in COSATU. NUMSA, the metal industry union, also put forward resolution at the 1993 COSATU congress in favour of the federation’s affiliation to the ICFTU, but failed to muster enough support. As a compromise, the SACTWU proposal that the matter be considered again at a specially convened International Policy Conference was accepted. This conference took place in April 1995. The issue emerged again at the federations 1995 International Policy Conference. After an initial cautious approach, and preferring to promote South-South relations, the federation eventually resolved to affiliate to the ICFTU.

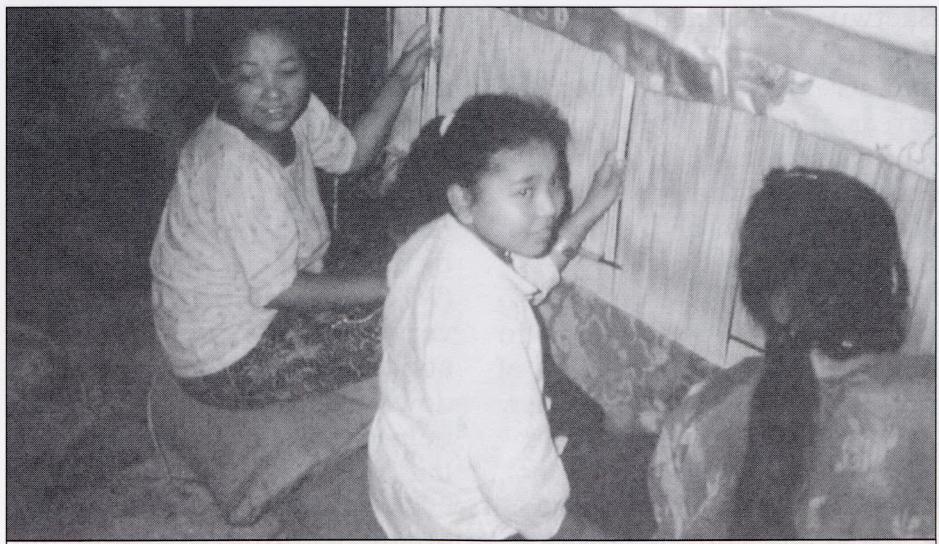


Gauteng members protest for worker rights at the World Trade Centre in 1993

Before the 1994 elections, the union also began to look closer at what a post-apartheid economy would mean for workers in its industry. For the first time ever, a tripartite industrial restructuring plan for the industry was negotiated with government and business. This industry plan incorporated a lot of the policy decisions previously taken around industrial restructuring issues. The union had already won an equal say in the industry training boards.

Sactwu participated actively in the COSATU Participatory Research Unit (PRU) project,

through people like Wayne van der Rhee, Ralph Alexander and the late Rani Pillay (ex-Natal Regional Treasurer). In 1995, the union took its first national policy decision on the relationship between training, grading, and wages. We argued for the introduction of a skills-based grading system in our industry. Many of the issues that are now embodied in the Skills Development Act were first conceptualised in the work of the PRU. The union also decided to campaign for the social clause to be included in all trade agreements. The Department of Trade and Industry had also



Small hands exploited for big profits

just announced that it had reached an 'in-principle' trade agreement with Zimbabwe. This trade agreement included lower tariff rates on clothing and textiles. The union was particularly concerned about this, as consultation with Sactwu on the matter had not been completed. The Zimbabwean Clothing and Leather Workers' Federation was not consulted at all. The union believed that there should be full and proper consultations with the trade union representatives of the workers in Southern Africa, who would be affected by the trade agreement. It was also concerned that a bilateral agreement was being negotiated – the union was of the view that it would have been better to negotiate a multi-lateral agreement with all the countries in Southern Africa, rather than piece-meal agreement on bi-lateral basis. The union was particularly concerned at the potential of worker rights to be eroded by the RSA-Zimbabwe bi-lateral trade agreement. It decided to embark on a serious campaign to ensure that trade agreements are more sensitive to jobs, which could be the result of such agreements. Sactwu demanded that the Zimbabwe union be recognised and seriously consulted on the agreement negotiated by both governments. The union emphasised the need for a social clause to be included in the agreement.

Importantly, the union also decided in 1995 to campaign for new Basic Conditions of Employment Act. Such a new BCEA, it was argued, should

- cover all workers in South Africa;
- be in line with the provisions of the RDP;

- be simple for ordinary users to understand;
- not be duplicated in other laws like the LRA;
- have effective enforcement mechanisms;
- cover contract and home workers;
- set a 40-hour workweek;
- provide for paid maternity leave with full job guarantees.

Of course the campaign was broadened to other unions in COSATU. It became one of the key post-apartheid struggles fought by the federation. In the end, not all the demands were won. But workers won a substantially improved BCEA, with many new and stronger rights. The new Basic Conditions of Employment Act came into effect on 1 December last year.

In late 1995, Sactwu became increasingly concerned at the rate at which jobs were being shed in the industry. The union launched "**Project Jobs**" to help stem the tide. On 14 February 1996, Sactwu embarked on massive protests nation-wide, to highlight the rate of job losses in the industry. Thousands of clothing workers marched throughout the country. The union was particularly concerned about the link between the job losses and the programme of tariff reductions decided on by government. There was no justification for government to introduce a tariff reform programme which was faster than what was required by the World Trade Organisation (WTO). In addition, there was very little social dimension support during the tariff phase down period. Project jobs helped to slow down the job loss rate.

Later in the same year, about a hundred thousand clothing workers embarked on

the first-ever nation-wide living wage strike in South Africa. After almost three weeks, they emerged victorious.

In 1997, thousands of striking Zimbabwean clothing workers were dismissed. SACTWU called for a review of the Zimbabwe Trade Agreement, and embarked on massive protest action. The union rejected the moves by government to enter into a separate trade agreement with Zambia, and again called for an integrated approach on trade and social rights for the entire region.

Over the years, Sactwu has grown into a union that has placed increasing importance on the necessity and importance of international solidarity. The union has built fraternal relations with clothing, textile and leather workers throughout the world. It was therefore no surprise that the 1997 National Congress confronted the issue of globalisation. Under the theme "**Global Challenges towards Economic Redistribution**", it focused heavily on the issue of how to strengthen international worker solidarity, and how to build the union in the context of globalisation and the neo-liberal agenda.

All this work were directed at realising the May Day ideals of international worker solidarity and the advancement of workers' social, economic and political rights.

Thus far, SACTWU has done well in its pursuit of the May Day ideal.

Now the union is preparing itself for the challenges of the new millennium. The 10th anniversary congress, which will take place later this year, is likely to set the new domestic and international priorities confronting the organisation.

## Some Sactwu May Day events

There are of course some key events in our union, which have taken place during the month of May:

- 11 May 1935: blanket workers strike in the then Transvaal – 250 white women strikers picket the factory every morning from 3 a.m.;
- 8 May 1952: the government bans Solly Sachs, general secretary of the Garment Workers Union of South Africa;
- 22 May 1980: 6000 Frame workers strike over wages and recognition of their union (NUTW);
- 2 May 1986: 3000 Rex Trueform workers start a 21 day living wage strike, which ends in victory for the union;
- 18 May 1989: Start of the 7-week long Hextex strike (one of the longest strikes ever in our industry) over a service bonus to workers;
- May 1990: Eastern Cape clothing workers embark on a massive three day wage strike;
- 2-3 May 1991: Sactwu hold its first-ever Economic Conference, and invites employers and international trade union speakers to attend;
- 18 May 1991: Over 1000 workers and their families take part in a “Big Walk” in support of the union’s Workers’ Charter demands;
- 4 May 1992: the historic 1992 national clothing wage campaign starts, with meetings in Natal with employers;
- 19 May 1997: National launch of the Sactwu Education Trust’s Scholarship Fund in Johannesburg, the first of its kind to be promoted and financially supported by any South African trade union.

## COSATU Platform on Worker Rights

Adopted by the COSATU Special Congress  
10-12 September 1993

### 1. Introduction

COSATU has been built on traditions of strong shop floor structures, a militant and active membership and a broad development perspective as a social movement.

Over the past decade, the trade unions have fought for increased influence in decision-making processes. This we have started to achieve:

- at workplace level through recognition agreements, collective bargaining and a powerful shop stewards movement;
- at an industry level through national bargaining and industrial policy forums;
- at a macro level through negotiations in the National Economic Forum, National Housing Forum, National Electricity Forum, and the National Manpower Commission.

Democracy brings new opportunities as well as new challenges and struggles to take forward our demands. For workers to benefit

from the installation of a new democratic government, the following is required:

- A strong trade union movement protecting workers and fighting for social equality.
- A growing economy characterised by efficient production, high wages and high employment.
- A government which has the capacity to implement our Reconstruction and Development Programme.
- Increased participation by organised workers in decision-making at shopfloor, industry and national level.

### 2. Platform of workers rights

Our starting point is the demands generated in the Workers’ Charter campaign. Many of the demands of the draft Workers’ Charter have not yet been entrenched in law and many of our existing rights are not satisfactorily entrenched in the legislation. They are dependent on agreements with employers, the discretion of the courts and the goodwill of the Minister of Manpower. To achieve the opportunities of democracy, the platform of workers rights listed on



**The Human Chain...24 000 clothing and textile workers participated in this event, highlighting our Workers' Charter demands.**

the following pages must be implemented by a new democratic government.

### 2.1. Basic organising rights

All workers should have the right to:

- 2.1.1. Join trade unions and organise.
- 2.1.2. Bargain collectively.
- 2.1.3. Strike and picket, on all social and economic matters.
- 2.1.4. Enter into union security agreements, including closed and agency shops.
- 2.1.5. Gain access to information from companies and the government.

### 2.2. Collective Bargaining

We need a system of collective bargaining which gives workers a key say in industry decision-making, and where unions are fully involved in designing and overseeing changes at workplace and industry levels. Only if this happens, will workers be committed to ensuring that companies operate efficiently or productively.

A new framework should include the following:

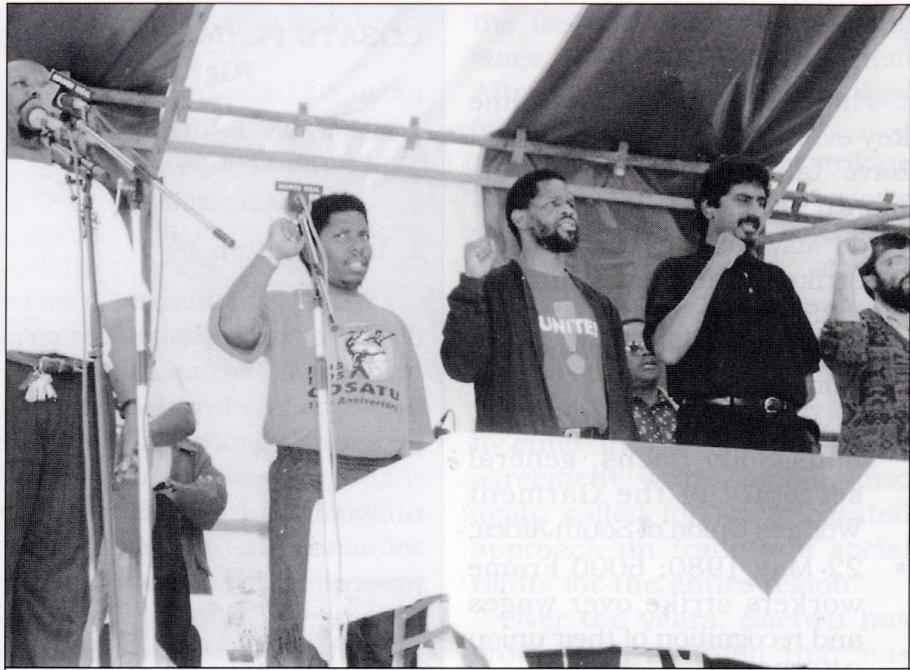
- 2.2.1. Centralised bargaining to promote equity for workers and increased trade union participation in decision making.

There should be industry bargaining forums responsible for negotiating:

- Industry restructuring for growth and development;
- Wages, working conditions, training and grading.

Agreements negotiated in such industry forums should be extended through legislation to all workplaces in that industry.

- 2.2.2. The National Economic Forum needs to consider macro-economic issues including the broad principles of industry restructuring



L to R: John Zikhali (Sactwu 1st Vice-president), Paulos Ngcobo (ex-Cosatu KZN Secretary), Jabo Ngcobo (Regional Secretary ITGLWF-Africa) and Jay Naidoo (ex-Minister and ex-Cosatu General Secretary) at a May Day Rally in Natal.

and how industries relate to each other.

- 2.2.3. Company or plant level negotiations to ensure work re-organisation, based on a nationally negotiated framework.
- 2.2.4. Government should play an active role in facilitating the above through legislative and administrative reform.

### 2.3. Workplace empowerment

To ensure that democratisation reaches workers, at factory level there needs to be:

- 2.3.1. An obligation on employers to negotiate substantial changes about production matters or workplace organisation with workers.
- 2.3.2. Facilities for organisation and communication with workers on economic and industrial restructuring issues
- 2.3.3. Shop stewards rights to attend union meetings and training without loss of pay and to address workers.

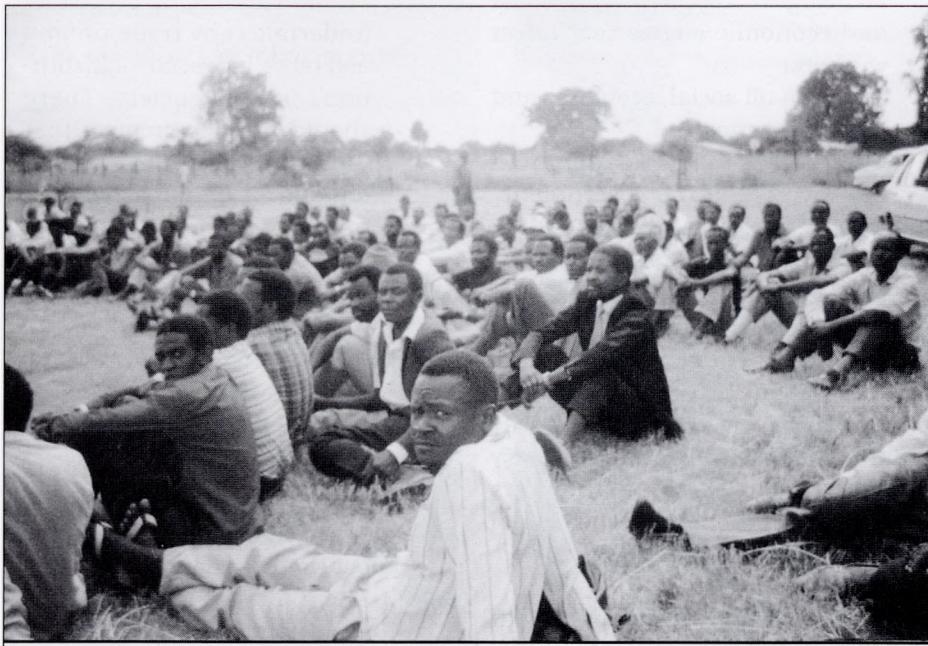
### 2.4. Human Resources development

Education and training of workers is the key to ensuring the successful implementation of workplace and industrial restructuring. On the basis of our 1991 Congress Resolution on adult basic education, education and training, our human resource development programme should have the following main objectives:

- To remove discriminatory practices built on racial and/or gender bias.
- To improve workers' wages and reduce the disparity between low skilled and high skilled workers.
- To enable workers to advance along career paths within the company, industrially and nationally.
- To enable workers to intervene more decisively in the production process.
- To ensure that an integrated system of education and training is linked to economic and labour market planning.

<p>To achieve these objectives:</p> <p>2.4.1. Barriers that restrict workers' access to education and training should be removed. There should be a right to paid education and training leave.</p> <p>2.4.2. The quality of workers' education and training should be improved by developing, for example, a system of nationally recognised certificates. Workers will then be able to transfer their skills between different employers and in all parts of the country as well as undertake further training.</p> <p>2.4.3. The benefits of education and training should result in better rewards for workers through linking training to grading and pay.</p> <p>2.4.4. Trade union education should be promoted in school curricula, on publicly funded radio and TV etc.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Join trade unions;</li> <li>Conclude union security agreements and bargain collectively on all social and economic issues that affect workers;</li> <li>Strike on all social, economic and political issues;</li> <li>Gain access to information from employers and the government.</li> </ul>	<p>have been selected in consultation with trade unions.</p> <p>3.3.6. Public funding of programs undertaken by trade unions and other independent institutions in civil society. There should be a requirement that the state and employers provide funding for the education and training of workers and shop stewards.</p>
	<p><b>3.3. The Constitution: Ensuring a central role for trade unions and civil society</b></p> <p>The new constitution and laws should ensure that civil society, including trade unions are able to be actively involved in public policy making. At a national and industry level we want to ensure that workers are able to influence the policies of business and the government.</p>	<p>This should occur by:</p> <p>3.3.1. Promoting the establishment and strengthening of tri-partite and multilateral forums where trade unions, and other representative organisations can participate in democratic public policy making. This shall include the involvement of trade unions in negotiations concerning restructuring international trade agreements, international loans, etc.</p>
	<p>3.3.2. Restructuring of the Department of Manpower and institutions which fall in its jurisdiction such as the Unemployment Insurance Board, Workmen's Compensation Board and the health and safety regulatory structures.</p>	<p>3.4.1. There must be one single statute governing labour relations for all workers throughout the economy;</p> <p>3.4.2. There must be laws that set basic conditions of employment such as the Basic Conditions of Employment Act, wage determinations under the Wage Act, health and safety laws, etc. These must apply to all sectors of the economy and must allow workers to be centrally involved in determining minimum standards at work places and in their industries.</p>
	<p>3.3.3. Restructuring of the National Manpower Commission to be a place where trade unions and other representative organisations can participate in the formulation of labour market policy for all workers in all sectors. The NMC must be responsible to parliament.</p>	<p>3.4.3. Employers will be obliged to negotiate with workers on any substantial changes at the factory or industry level e.g. on retrenchments, industrial restructuring or training.</p> <p>3.4.4. Provision should be made in legislation to put into place centralised bargaining arrangements in each industry.</p> <p>3.4.5. The industrial court system will be restructured so that workers who have complaints against employers should be able to have these disputes resolved in a cheap, accessible and speedy manner. Tripartite institutions should have a say in determining appointments to the industrial and labour appeal courts.</p>
<p><b>3.2. The Bill of Rights</b></p> <p>3.2.1. The Bill of Rights must guarantee the right of workers to:</p>	<p>3.3.4. Providing in the Constitution for the calling of a referendum by citizens to overturn unpopular laws or to ensure that certain laws get passed.</p> <p>3.3.5. Providing in the Constitution for a Constitutional Court which will include trade union or labour specialists, jurists who</p>	<p>Moved: SACTWU</p> <p>Seconded: NUMSA</p> <p>Approved unanimously</p>

# ....in ZIMBABWE



1994 May Day celebrations at Kadoma, Zimbabwe, one of ZCTU Regions (Northern Region).

*We had originally intended to bring out this edition of the Sactwu Bulletin as a special May Day focus on Southern Africa. We called for contributions from our sister unions in Southern Africa and SADC. Unfortunately we only had a response from the Zimbabwe Textiles Workers' Union. Following on his very successful seminar tour in Sactwu last year, Silas Kuveya, the ZTWU General Secretary, tells us their May Day story. We hope that this will encourage our other sister unions in Southern Africa to also tell us their May Day stories in future.*

Zimbabwe attained its independence in 1980, following the Lancaster House agreement brokered by the British government in 1979. ZANU (PF) won the elections of March 1980 and formed the first independence government. At independence, the ZANU (PF) government inherited a dualistic economy. A

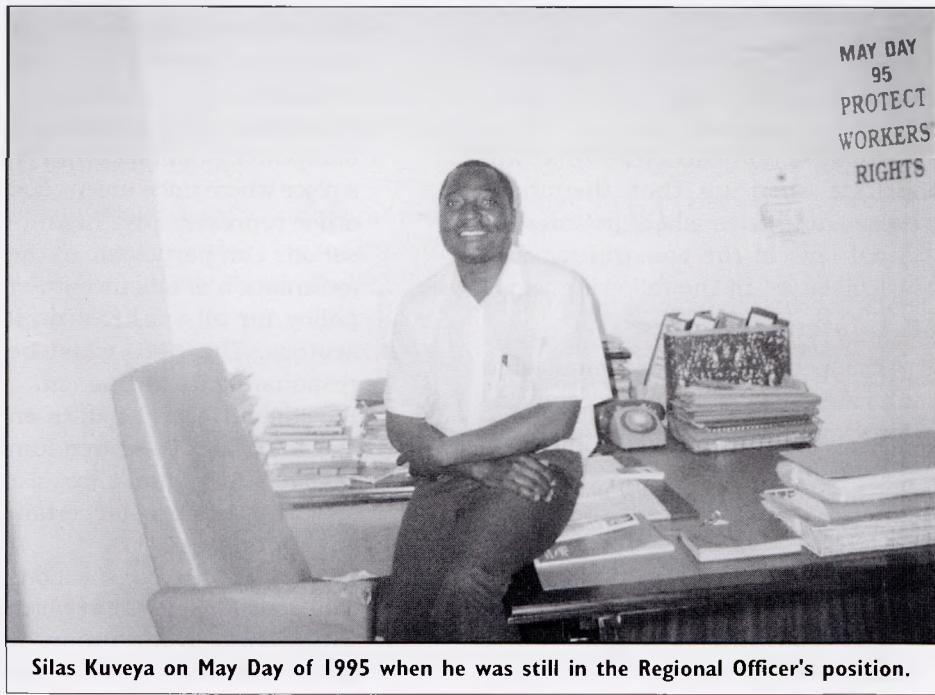
relatively developed formal sector co-existing with relatively under-developed communal sector. This dual structure was a deliberate development arising from the racist policies of the then Rhodesian government.

At independence, agriculture, manufacturing and mining together accounted for half the gross domestic product and 55%

of the formal employment. The Zimbabwe textile industry has a long history. Many of the factories were already well-established before independence in 1980. In 1995, the Zimbabwean textile industry employed approximately 15 000 workers. Even then it was sharply down from the 22 500 workers employed in 1992, before the massive retrenchments and factory closures brought about by the structural adjustment programme.

The Zimbabwean textile industry has historically been concentrated in Harare, Bulawayo and around the Midlands areas of Chegutu, Kadoma, Gweru, as well as Mutare and Glendale. The largest plant was Cone Textiles (Pty) Ltd, which employed about 6000 workers. Sadly, this company unfortunately went into liquidation in November 1994.

After independence the ZANU (PF) government managed to convince five national labour centres that we established before independence to merge and the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU) was formed on the 21st of February 1981.



Silas Kuveya on May Day of 1995 when he was still in the Regional Officer's position.

ZCTU is the only existing recognised labour centre in Zimbabwe. However there is new labour centre called Federated Unions of Zimbabwe (FUZ) established two years ago, but it is struggling to get membership, the government is not recognising it at the present and it is not involved in any tripartite meetings concerning national issues.

### May Day celebrations

In Zimbabwe May Day celebrations was initially taken as a state function. We started to celebrate May Day in 1982 and the Labour Movement was participating in such activities as an invited social partner. So it was a government event other than a worker's day. The government was using May Day events to announce minimum wages/salaries because there was no free collective bargaining then.

Through pressure from the trade unions in 1989 the government allowed unions to negotiate for wages/salaries. They put parameters to negotiate between 5-16%.

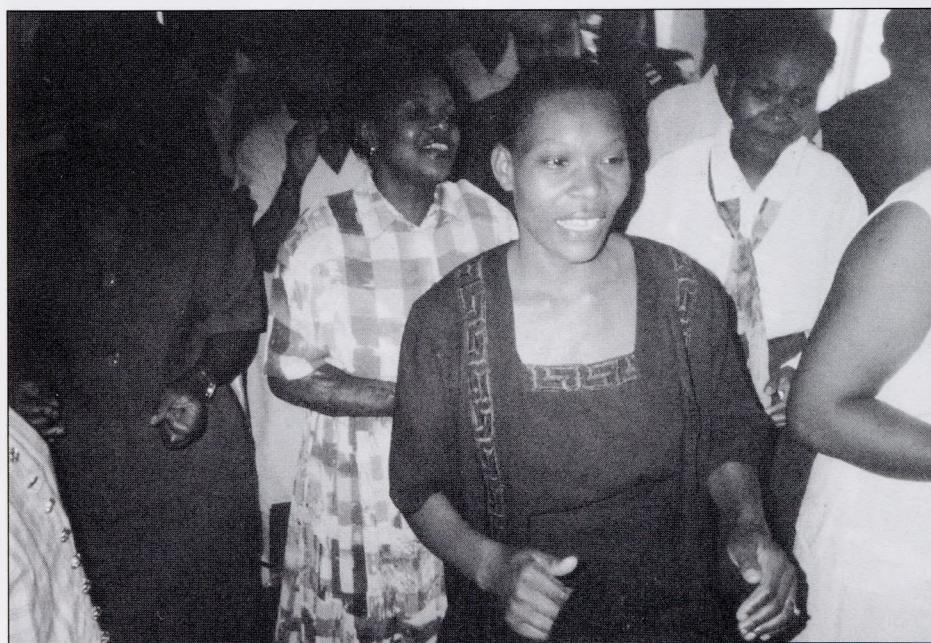
In 1990 the actual collective bargaining was being practised by the industries with established National Employment Councils (NEC's). Where there

was no NEC, like in the domestic workers field, the Wage Board determined the minimum wages. In 1993 the government pulled out of the May Day celebrations and stopped funding the event. This means that the Labour Movement in Zimbabwe started celebrating May Day in 1993. The State President was invited to attend the function but he turned down the invitation. Since then the government is no longer participating in the celebrations, they only attend on invitation.

In the year 2000 the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU) did not celebrate May Day due to the political situation which was prevailing in the country. People were being harassed, killed and gathering during that time was misconstrued as an opposition political gathering. Hence ZCTU decided to cancel all May Day activities for the safety of all workers of Zimbabwe.

The situation has since changed and we hope 2001 May Day celebrations will be held in all regions as normal. The Zimbabwe Textile Workers' Union has been participating in all May Day celebrations since May 1982.

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Workers celebrating the May Day of 1998 at Harare Z.C.T.U. (Southern Region).

# Mission Statement of the Zimbabwe Textile Workers' Union

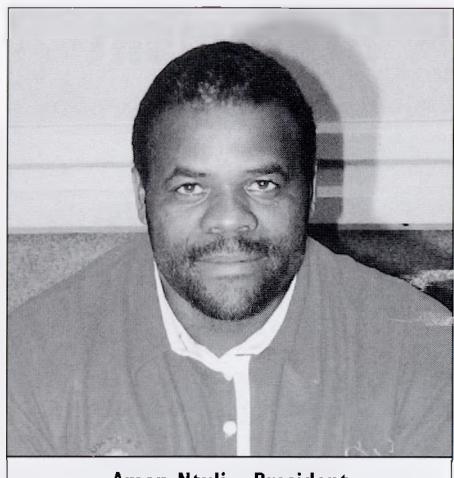
Over the period from the 14th to 17th December 2000, the Zimbabwe Textile Workers' Union held an important strategic plan evaluation and re-planning workshop. It adopted the following organisational mission statement:

In Zimbabwe the Zimbabwe Textile Workers' Union is the sole, legitimate and bonafide trade union for workers in the textile industry. Its sole purpose is to defend and advance workers' rights, interests and aspirations. This is done through uniting all workers in the textile industry, the provision of quality education and training, quality servicing of membership through grievance handling and litigation.

The union also strives to improve the working conditions and ultimately better living standards through collective bargaining and any other actions aimed at attaining the overall aims and objectives of the union.

The union strives to improve industrial harmony in the textile industry and endeavour to build solidarity with other workers nationally, regionally and internationally.

# .....message from the President



Amon Ntuli - President

*"May Day is historically important for the working class. We have seen from our achievements on the Basic Conditions of Employment Act, that everything is not conclusively achieved. Yes, we have achieved a lot, but this does not mean that our work is done. A good basis has been laid. Now*

*the fundamental work is left between workers and employers, to achieve fully such things as the 40-hour work-week, paid maternity leave, a living wage, and our other demands. Even if we achieve these, May Day is still an important day in the lives of workers - it should be celebrated by all workers for life."*

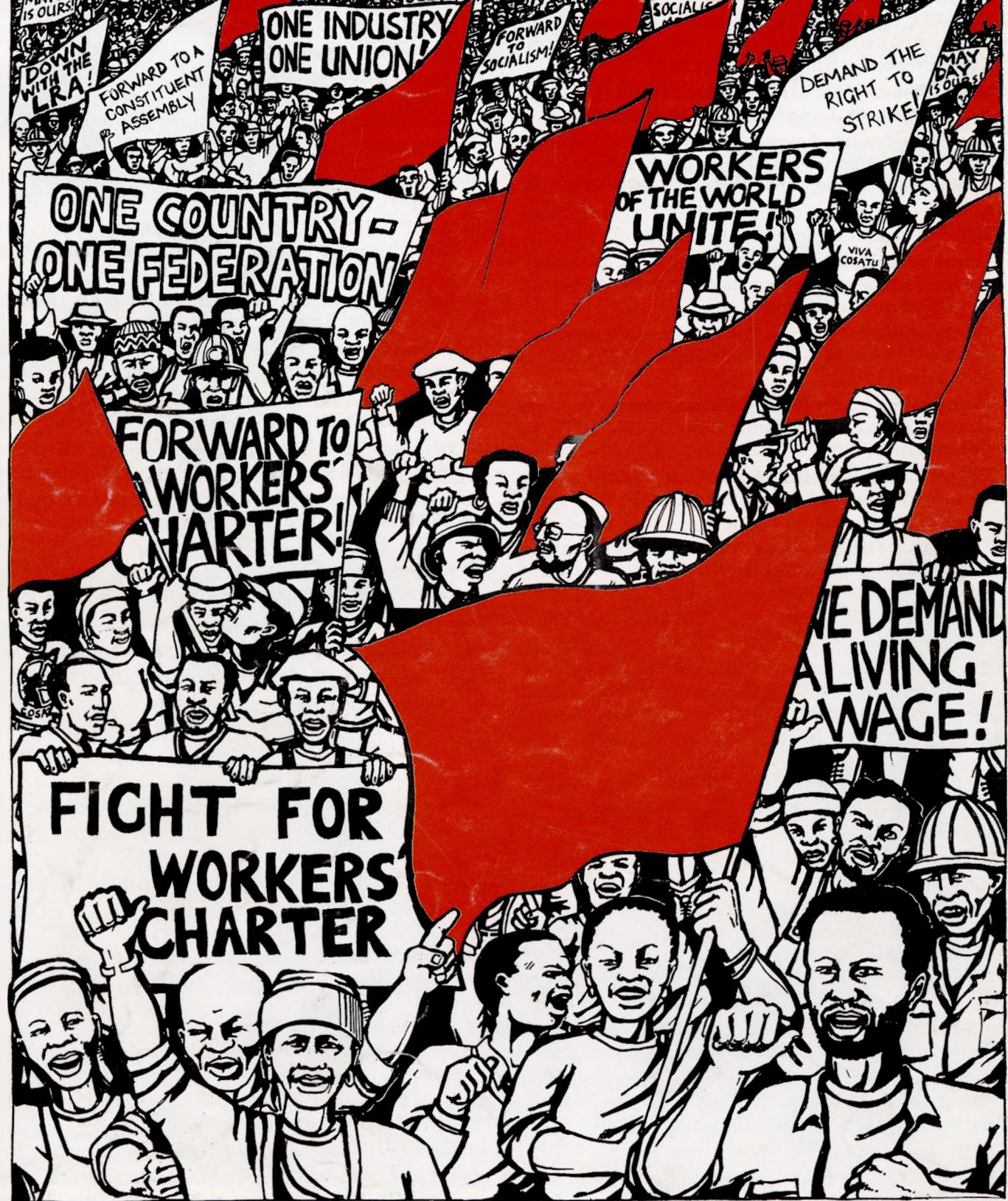


Members and Shop Stewards from Sactwu's Botshabelo Branch in our union's Central Region on their way to a May Day rally in 1999

The following sources have been used in the production of this edition of the Sactwu Shop Steward Bulletin. A special acknowledgement goes to Shareen Singh, whose article on the history of the garment workers has been used almost verbatim.

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# MAY DAY 1990



COSATU'S 1990 MAY DAY POSTER