

Troubled South Africa must take May Day seriously

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This is a time to embrace working-class unity and challenge the status quo of capitalist oppression.

May Day – a call to build an international movement of working class and poor people across lines of race, nation and religion for workers’ control and democracy from below, social justice and freedom from political and economic oppression – remains critical. In a country racked by anti-immigrant violence, racial and ethnic tensions, the fragmentation of the labour federation Cosatu, corporate scandals and political corruption, it is time to remember May Day’s roots and aspirations.

The day has become an institutionalised festival, yet its origins lie in powerful struggles for a united, anticapitalist, bottom-up, global justice movement, affirming the common interests of people, worldwide, against ruling elites and their divide-and-rule policies.

With the 2015 May Day set to be a showdown between South Africa’s rival union blocs, it is time to remember its roots and aims. Working-class unity is the only way to overcome problems such as class inequalities and national oppression in South Africa, a country ruled by the 1% and racked by periodic anti-immigrant violence.

Posing the problem as psychological – as in Police Minister Nathi Nhleko’s claim that recent violence is “Afrophobia” driven by “self-hate” – ignores attacks on Asian foreigners and assumes a natural state of African unity. It completely ignores the role of class and capitalist systems in which divisions between rich and poor, powerful and powerless, exist within races and nations. A Zimbabwean worker, a Pakistani worker and a South African worker have more in common with each other than any of them has with the Zimbabwean, Pakistani and South African upper class.

Ruling classes pit people against one another by means of economic policies that entrench historic inequalities, political mobilisation on the basis of race and nation by parties, states, ideologues and propaganda. Suburbs that are home to the black and white middle and upper classes sleep peacefully, far from the chaos and misery that arise from these policies, whereas the working class and poor turn on each other.

South Africa's incomplete transition out of apartheid has left deep racial inequalities and national divisions. The legacy of apartheid and segregation is visible everywhere: the black, coloured and Indian working class and poor are doubly oppressed, by race and by class; the main political parties provide no solutions, but are part of the problem.

Radical changes are needed. Those proposed by the Federation of South African Trade Unions (Fosatu) and, before it, the International Socialist League (ISL), Industrial Workers of Africa and the International Working People's Association (IWPA) include placing power, including self-managed control of the economy, into the hands of a multiracial working class and poor majority, rather than in parliaments or corporate boardrooms.

Changing statues will not address the issues. Indeed, political mobilisation of this sort, delinked from a radical programme of working-class rule, will simply reinforce the myriad divisions – immigrant versus national, race versus race, country versus country – that are the key to the power of the 1%.

Radical changes require a dynamic labour movement with a radical project, allied to other popular sectors altogether outside the party system and the electoral arena. These positions lie at the radical roots of May Day, which began as a commemoration of and protest against the 1887 execution of four IWPA anarcho-syndicalist labour organisers from Chicago.

One of them, August Spies, declared from the scaffold: *"If you think that by hanging us, you can stamp out the labour movement – the movement from which the downtrodden millions, the millions who toil and live in want and misery – the wage slaves – expect salvation – if this is your opinion, then hang us! Here you will tread upon a spark, but there and there and behind you and in front of you and everywhere, flames will blaze up. It is a subterranean fire. You cannot put it out."*

Spies stressed popular self-emancipation: nonracial mass organisations to fight the state, capitalism and all forms of oppression and to establish a participatory, self-managed, democratic socialism, without state or corporate rule. This "Chicago idea" became part of the anarchist movement, especially in the Global South.

All states, all parties, were seen as betrayers of the working class, elections as futile choices between lying politicians – an insight many South Africans now accept. Even a workers' party could not escape the logic of incorporation into a state machinery serving political and economic elites.

The IWPA practiced what it preached. IWPA militants such as the former slave Lucy Parsons, immigrants such as Spies and Samuel Fielden, and Americans such as Oscar Neebe and Albert Parsons led the main unions and working-class associations of Chicago, published radical newspapers and organised armed self-defence units. The IWPA took a leading role in a titanic 1886 general strike by black and white, immigrant and foreigner, centred on Chicago, and hence the organisation was targeted for repression. Eight IWPA militants were charged and four hanged.

In commemoration, the Socialist International, formed by anarchists, Marxists and others in 1889, launched May Day as a global day of action – in effect, it was to be a global general strike to build global labour unity.

May Day in South Africa started in the 1890s, among immigrant European workers. Early Witwatersrand events were whites-only affairs, ignoring the reality that the state felt no particular loyalty to white workers: more than 20 were shot down in the 1913 general strike, and martial law was used to suppress workers' uprisings in 1914 and 1922.

An alternative May Day tradition emerged in 1904 from Cape Town, where local unions and the anarchist-led Social Democratic Federation (SDF) brought coloured and white workers together.

The syndicalist ISL, formed in 1915, and Industrial Workers of Africa, formed in 1917, resolved to organise black workers, fight pass laws and secure complete equality through “one big union” fighting against segregation, capitalism and the state: the “Chicago idea” on the Highveld.

In 1917, the ISL organised a joint May Day rally in Johannesburg with the Transvaal Native Congress – the first local May Day with African speakers, including the ANC’s secretary general of the time, Horatio Mbelle. The Communist Party of South Africa, as it was then, continued the SDF-ISL tradition of May Day with a series of nonracial rallies to oppose race and class oppression. In 1922, the communist party demanded May Day become a paid public holiday, a demand taken up by the syndicalist-influenced black and coloured Industrial and Commercial Workers Union of Africa.

Massive May Days were held from the 1920s onwards, but the tradition withered under apartheid repression. May Day was revived by the South African Congress of Trade Unions in the 1950s and by the new unions of the 1970s. By the mid-1980s, May Day was again a day of mass action, as pushed by Fosatu and then Cosatu.

But, if the tragic origins of May Day are still commemorated today, its grander aspirations remain unfulfilled. The enormous power of a united working class remains shackled.

Labour-led organisations achieved surprising victories in difficult and divided contexts. These movements provide a resource base for ideas and strategies. By specifically organising among immigrants and by focusing on issues that disproportionately affected some groups of workers (racial oppression, for example), they built working-class counter-power, counterculture and solidarity.

This is a far cry from the situation today. The Cosatu labour movement has not succeeded in addressing its internal divisions. Indeed, its alliance with the ANC and the South African Communist Party has led to numerous splits, from the attack on figures opposed to President Jacob Zuma, such as then-president Willie Madisha, by Zwelinzima Vavi in 2007, to the expulsion of the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (Numsa) from Cosatu on the flimsiest grounds.

Within South Africa’s borders, ANC-driven neoliberal policies such as the Growth, Employment and Redistribution strategy and the National Development Plan have deepened poverty and inequality, creating a breeding ground for tensions on all sides. Regionally, South Africa is an imperialist power, deploying its superior economic power and military and political muscle across the continent, alongside the expansion of private and state-owned corporations in Africa.

South African military actions in the Central African Republic and the Democratic Republic of Congo from 2013 onwards are protecting ANC-linked businesses. South African silence on corrupt candidates in fraudulent elections (the DRC in 2001, Nigeria in 2007, Zimbabwe in 2011) is governed by crude ruling-class interests.

This cannot be separated from South African contempt for fellow Africans and attitudes to the rest of Africa.

Numsa’s return to a radical project, with some roots in Fosatu, its break with the tripartite alliance and its formation of a United Front revives the original spirit of the movements and struggles that made May Day. Let us hope Numsa carries forward the radical spirit of May Day by way of bottom-up, participatory trade unions at a distance from Parliament, capitalism and the state. May Day needs to be linked back to its radical roots, its one-time internationalism and the vision of an inclusive socialism from below.

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