Introduction

Local organisation comes first and it leads to organisation at the national scale. Nationalism is the building block of Internationalism. May the first is the International Workers Day. This year, we are proud to celebrate the South African May Day, because the story of May Day forms a central part of South African history.

May Day, 1950, is at the heart of the South African liberation struggle. We intend to honour the central place of the working class in the South African liberation struggle, and its consequently central place in the national democratic revolutionary alliance that continues our liberation struggle, which is not yet over.

This resource booklet will show that the history, and the personalities that carried forward the history of the liberation movement, have their centre of gravity in the organised working class; and that the tragic but heroic events of May Day 1950 stand as a historic sacrament, whereby the three principal components of our Alliance were permanently joined together. The unity forged on that day has been our strength. It will continue to be our strength.
With these words the International Socialist League, our early anti-Imperialist vanguard party of the working class and fore-runner of the Communist Party, raised the banner of non-racial trade unionism in South Africa.

1919 - The mighty ICU (Industrial and Commercial Workers Union) was formed by Clements Kadalie. Over the next few years it grew into the largest secular mass organisation the country had ever seen.

1921 - The non-racial Communist Party of South Africa was formally admitted to the Communist International in Revolutionary Russia. It soon adopted the Black Republic Thesis making it the first party in South Africa to call for black majority rule in the country.

Early 1930s - The ICU was destroyed when its leadership was persuaded to expel the communists. It fell victim to corruption and splits and was rendered effectively dead. The fall of the ICU is a warning to us today. Sectarian anti-communism, open or disguised, is a poison to the organised working class.

Late 1920s - Moses Maune Kotane and John Beaver Marks joined the Communist Party of South Africa. Both of them joined the African National Congress, as well.

1939 - Moses Kotane became the General Secretary of the vanguard party of the working class.

1941 - In a meeting of the Transvaal ANC, a union was planned and set up which was to be led by J B Marks.

1946 - Marks went on to lead the historic African Mineworkers Strike – the “Distant Clap of Thunder” that heralded the arrival of the real, and eventually victorious, organised mass movement for liberation in South Africa.

Kotane led the CPSA, and then the SACP, for nearly four decades until his death. Both Kotane and Marks held high offices of leadership in the African National Congress at various times throughout their political lives.

The Republic of South Africa’s profile of J B Marks, published earlier this year on the occasion of the repatriation and reburial of his remains in South Africa, records part of his contribution thus:

1st May 1950 - “Notably, the strike which brought the country to a halt and the June 26 strike in the same year in protest against the shooting of strikers on 1 May. It was a turning point and a great landmark in the long history of the struggle of the people of South Africa against racial persecution and for full trade union rights.”

It is this turning point that we are celebrating on the 1st of May 2015 as the South African May Day, because as much as was the Congress of the People, and the Freedom Charter, that were some of the later consequences of what happened on that day in 1950, this was the founding moment of our victory.
It is easy to forget that the African Mineworkers Strike of 1946 was crushed by the Smuts government of the day, and that this was the same Smuts who had been responsible for the terrible Bulhoek massacre and for many other atrocities.

The Smuts regime was a racist regime of brutality and cruelty. The National Party government that followed it, in 1948 – and which invented the word “apartheid” – was different in some degree, but it was not different in kind. The compound labour system was already in place. The deprivation of the majority of the population of most of the country’s land, had already happened. And so on.

What, then, was the purpose of apartheid? It was to create new and more severe pass laws. These were anti-working-class-laws. They were as much about labour, as they were about race. They were about the control of racialised labour. They were about the racialisation of labour, for purposes of control.

While the ANC was busy organising, and while the new ANC Youth League was producing its Programme of Action, and while Dr Moroka was replacing Dr Xuma as President of the ANC, the National Party government of D F Malan was quickly passing laws in Parliament that were directed against the main defender of the working class, the communist party.

In the process of legislating against the existence of a political party, the National Party was consciously building the instruments by which it could attack any and all organisations of the popular masses, whether expressly communist or not.

In these circumstances, the liberation movement as a whole saw that the attack on the communists was an attack on the entire movement. In 1947, the non-communist Dr Xuma had already sat down with Dr Naicker and with the communist Dr Dadoo to sign the “Doctors’ Pact” of alliance between the ANC and the two Indian Congresses.

As the time approached, they could all see that the Suppression of Communism Act that would come into force in mid-1950 would menace all of them and they determined themselves to act together.

The Stayaway Tactic

The 1946 Mineworkers strike taught the movement that masses of workers out in the open could be cut down, killed, wounded and dispersed by the armed forces of the regime. In response they invented the tactic of the stayaway, whereby workers, instead of picketing and demonstrating, would stay indoors at home.

This tactic, designed to minimise casualties, was used later, again and again, but as we shall see, on the first occasion that it was used – 1 May 1950 – it was not a full success from this point of view.


“Defend Free Speech” was in practice and in the first place, defence of the Communist Party, which the Party can never forget and does not forget. On that day, the ANC defended the rights of the vanguard party of the working class.

Part 2: A great landmark

“A Lerumo” continues:

“It will always be to the credit of the African National Congress that when the first major onslaught was launched to illegalise the Party of the working class, it did not stand aside but courageously took the lead and threw all its resources into the fight for the legal existence of the Communist Party. “...the strike was an outstanding success. Virtually all industry on the Witwatersrand came to a stop; hardly a dark-skinned face was to be seen in the streets of Johannesburg, Springs, Randfontein and other Reef towns.

“The police had banned all meetings and gatherings on the day; and for the most part the non-white public remained quietly in their homes, following the call of the leadership to do so. But in the evening the trigger-happy police opened fire on small groups of young Africans in Alexandra Township and elsewhere. Eighteen were killed and over thirty wounded. A wave of anger and indignation spread throughout the country.”

“Among the injured at Alexandra Township were: Michael Dlamini (24) shot through the thigh; Oscar Mashigo, a school child aged 10; Luca Mathibe, (54), who sustained head injuries, Jantjie Malaba (35) and Maduti aged about 30; Samuel Modiba injuries on the left shoulder blade; John (26) with abdominal wounds; an unknown boy of 12 suffering from multiple head injuries; two unknown men picked up by ambulance on their way home from work. All the injured were admitted at Baragwanath Hospital.”

These are some of the martyrs of South Africa’s May Day.

The Bantu World, a voice of the bourgeoisie, of 6 May 1950 said:

“Disregarding warnings repeated several times last week by African leaders, police officials, Ministers of the Crown and the press, Africans in several Reef centres bent on “Freedom Day” celebrations on Monday, May 1, landed themselves in trouble by their action. Thirty eight sustained injury and eighteen died. Areas particularly affected were Brakpan and Benoni on the East Rand, Sophiatown and Newclare in the Johannesburg western zone, as well as the Orlando area.
As soon as the terms of the Unlawful Organisations Bill became known in May 1950, the National Executive Committee of the ANC called an emergency conference in Johannesburg.

“The conference resolved on mass action, in protest against the law to suppress the Communist Party and other undemocratic measures. 26 June 1950 was set aside as a day of mourning for those killed by the police on 1 May, a day of nationwide strikes and protests. A joint committee was established to implement the decision.

O R Tambo in 1968: “Courage rising with danger”

“Chief Luthuli has told us over the course of his leadership over us, that what we need is courage that rises with danger. The Nationalist Party of South Africa, which came into power twenty years ago, came with a violence and viciousness that was new in many respects. We confronted them with a nonviolent approach to the struggle. They killed freely, and Chief Luthuli led us, the African National Congress led the people, and now this non-violent approach became a militant form of struggle and we launched more campaigns. The more killings there were, the more pressure there was. This was courage rising with danger. When the killing took place in 1950 on a fairly massive scale, we decided to demonstrate against this, to intensify the struggle against apartheid pressure, a national stay-at-home on June 26, 1950. This was June 26th.”

“Since then, June 26th has been the centre, the peg on which we have hung many a campaign against racism in South Africa. It has come to symbolise the determination of our people to fight harder, the more severe and brutal the oppression.”

(Speech to United Nations Special Committee Against Apartheid, Stockholm, Sweden, 18 June 1968).

The African Mineworkers Union and its federation, the CNETU, had not survived the 1946 strike. Now it was necessary to set up, for the first time, a national, non-racial trade union federation. This was SACTU, of which the COSATU of today is a direct descendent. It came into being in March, 1950 and it was present at the Congress of the People. SACTU is one of the signatories of the Freedom Charter adopted in 1955, three months after SACTU’s formation.
The decade of the 1950s began with the freedom of speech campaign, leading to the first death-defying Stayaway on 1st May, 1950, allied in defence of the Party of the working class, and the first brave Freedom Day on 26th June 1950.

This is why we always celebrate May Day, as the organised working class, together with our friends and allies, the ANC. Because it is we, or at least it is our organised working class forebears, who initiated this struggle. This is what the oppositionists do not understand.

It was for the workers that the Freedom struggle began, and it was by the workers’ strength, with that of our beloved allies who stood with us and marched with us, that we were able to achieve victory, as far as we have done so. And so long as we are allied, we will continue to be victorious.

COSATU was formed in recognition of the indivisible nature of the struggle as between its class question, and its national question. We say that the one will not be solved until the other is solved, and now we add the question of gender, which can also only be solved simultaneously with the other two.

Thus it is that the success of the entire struggle has rested upon unity, especially between its national and its class components. Anyone who fails to understand this, and who seeks to set the allies against each other, is worse than foolish, but is a danger to all.
Part 6: May Day and COSATU

The fight to make May Day a public holiday was one of COSATU’s first campaigns, and one of its first successful campaigns.

In 1986 which also marked the 100th anniversary of May Day, the five-month-old Congress of South African trade Unions staged one of the biggest-ever stay-aways to demand recognition of May Day as a paid public holiday. This action was supported by the formations of the Mass Democratic Movement under the leadership of the United Democratic Front.

Workers all over the country responded to the call and more than 1,5-million workers observed COSATU’s call, joined by thousands of school pupils, students, taxi drivers, hawkers, shopkeepers, domestic workers, self-employed and unemployed people. Rallies were held in all the major cities, even though many of these were banned in advance by the state.

The majority of South Africa’s workers had already unilaterally declared the day a public holiday and stayed away from work. Shocked by this wave of worker militancy, P.W. Botha responded by declaring the first Friday in May as Workers’ Day, a paid public day. COSATU announced that it would stop work on both the first Friday and the real May Day. Faced with this, the apartheid regime backed down and in 1987 recognised 1st May as a public holiday.

The majority of South Africa’s workers had unilaterally declared the day a public holiday, and employers bowed to these struggles as accepted it the reality of May 1 as the worker’s day. Today it is one of the 12 public holidays, which we celebrate in a thriving democracy.