

May Day Stay-away 1986

1986 is the year in which the workers of South Africa - with the support of the students and community organisations - put May Day on the list of public holidays. In the largest stay-away in South African history, a minimum of 1,500,000 workers celebrated the hundredth anniversary of International Labour Day, and were joined by thousands of students and community members nationwide. The call for May Day as a public holiday was a demand that emanated from the broad union movement, and was given added impetus by the support of hundreds of organisations attending the NECC (National Education Crisis Committee) conference in Durban in March, as well as by National Forum. This unity in action will again be demonstrated over June 16, when the workers will be in the supporting position to the students and community organisations on the 10th anniversary of the nationwide uprising which began in Soweto.

The Labour Monitoring Group was able, for the first time, to mount a national monitoring exercise. LMG units were in action in the PWV, Durban/Pinetown, Port Elizabeth/Uitenhage, Grahamstown and Cape Town - and reports from each area are presented below. In all, a total of 870 firms were surveyed nationwide. For the manufacturing sector, a random sample survey was used. In the smaller sectors, or where the sample was not available, a purposive sampling method was employed in an attempt to capture the greatest number of workers with the least number of phone calls.

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In the manufacturing sector, where our information is most complete, the extent of the black stay-away was better than 79 percent overall. In our sample 38,264 out of 48,167 black workers in 183 manufacturing concerns did not come to work on May Day. African workers stayed away in much higher proportions than did "Coloured" workers: 84 percent versus 30 percent. In our sample 37,095 African workers out of a workforce of 44,227 stayed away while 1,169 Coloured workers out of a workforce of 3,940 stayed away on May Day.

In the commercial sector, where our data is based on a smaller sample, we found that the overall extent of the black stay-away was 87 percent. The figure for African workers was much higher than the figure for Coloured workers: 98 versus 26 percent.

Of those firms in the public sector that responded to our inquiries, the overall extent of the black stay-away was 38 percent. So few Coloured workers appear in the sample of this sector that it is meaningless to calculate separate rates for Africans versus Coloureds. Overall 14,535 out of 38,235 black workers stayed away in our sample of the public sector.

In the mining sector it is always difficult to obtain a clear picture, because of the geographical dispersal of the mines, the shift system and, in some cases, a reluctance on the part of the management to discuss action taken on their mines. Nonetheless, we were able to gauge that substantial action was taken, and most noticeably where union presence was strong. On Anglo American mines, which is a stronghold of the National Union of Mineworkers, Anglo itself estimated an 80-85 percent stay-away on the gold mines, with a 50% stay-away on the coal mines. It is also interesting to note that where members of the Chamber of Mines had mines that were outside of the Chamber's ambit, their response was markedly more flexible. In total, it would appear that at least 209,000 miners took a holiday on May 1. (The NUM puts the figure at nearer 300,000 for the mines as a whole.)

Unions and the stay-away

While the success of the stay-away at particular factories did not seem to be directly affected by the unions approaching the management to negotiate, a better deal was sometimes obtained by workers in plants where the union had approached management and negotiated in advance. These negotiations took a number of forms: sometimes there appeared to be (at least as seen by management) genuine negotiation while in other cases there had simply been notification by either the union or employees that workers would not be coming in on May Day. In perhaps a quarter of the cases in the sample management claims to have been approached in one way or another. In far fewer cases there was actually a negotiated agreement between management and unions or management and employees without the involvement of unions (once again according to employers).

Managerial responses to the stay-away

Overwhelmingly the most common response by management to the stay-away was "no work, no pay." This was the official position prior to May Day of the large employer organisations such as the FCI, ASSOCOM and SEIFSA, and this was the most common managerial res-

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ponse to our query as to what action they would take against workers who stayed away. It is important to note, however, that significant variations exist within the broad response of "no work, no pay." A sizeable number of employers added that their policy was "no work, no pay" but also "no other penalties." Employees of such firms would not lose production or attendance bonuses or be otherwise punished. In other cases employers said nothing about such sanctions while in a small number of cases employers specifically stated that employees who had not showed up would be penalized by having their absence count against bonuses.

A substantial minority of employers thought that workers had a right to May Day as a holiday while the majority of managers that responded to this question thought that May Day was an appropriate subject for negotiations between management and labour. Many managers expressed the opinion that there should be a governmental review of statutory holidays and that May Day ought to be considered within this context. It was also understood that several existing public holidays might be seen to be offensive to blacks. Even in some cases where managers did not believe that workers had a right to May Day, they thought that their firm might be willing to swap May Day for another holiday. The most popular choice of holidays to swap among those managers who responded to this question was Kruger Day followed by Republic Day.

NATAL: DURBAN/PINETOWN

To gauge the impact of the national stay-away call we interviewed, on May 1, a third of all manufacturing firms with over 100 employees in Natal. Of these, 67% were located in Durban/Pinetown, 18% in Pietermaritzburg, 8% in Natal's and Kwazulu's North and South coasts and 6% in Newcastle, Ladysmith, Estcourt and Hammarsdale. A total of 165 firms were interviewed.

The Durban/Pinetown survey covered 58,766 workers in 101 firms (there were 10 refusals by employers to cooperate. Of these workers 35,517 stayed away or 60,4% of our universe of workers. The stay-away affected 71% of the factories interviewed. Assuming that our findings can be used as a basis for projective generalisation, we conservatively estimate that 81,694 workers stayed away in Durban/Pinetown manufacturing sector. This stay-away was by far the largest organised stay-away that has ever taken place in Natal.

We "guesstimate" also in our sample that 24,151 African and 11,350

Indian workers stayed away (African workers make up 68%, whilst Indian workers make up 30% of those who stayed away). This guess-timate is based on a smaller sample of 46% of the firms interview-ed. Our reliance on this was made necessary by the fact that not all firms interviewed were willing or able to give us a "racial" breakdown of their employment figures. Furthermore, some who did, could not give us a racial breakdown of those who stayed away.

The sub-sample covered 19,602 of whom 16,139 stayed away which reflects a higher rate than our global figure. 86,3% of all African and 74,3% of all Indian workers stayed away. This sub-sample then could only be used to test rates and proportions of participation of workers in "racial" categories. On this alone, the sub-sample provides evidence that there were high rates of participation in the stay-away irrespective of whether workers were designated "African" or "Indian".

Particularly high was the rate of workers staying away in the rubber/mineral industries (97,42%) and metal industries (97%) amongst African workers. Indian workers participation was at its highest in the clothing industry (96,74%). Particularly low was the participation of African workers in the wood and paper and footwear industries (45,83%, 37,83%). Amongst Indian workers the chemical (30%) and textile (2,24%) industries were the lowest.

Our North and South Coast industries' survey covered a total of 6,621 workers. There, 50% of the factories were affected by stay-aways involving 5,250 workers. Most of these were registered in the Northern Natal/Kwazulu Coastline and particularly concentrated in the lower Umfolozi/Richards Bay region.

A common feature in 80% of the factories affected by the stay-aways was that trade unions or shop stewards approached management be-forehand to negotiate such a stoppage of work. In all but two cases where INKATHA/UWUSA negotiated for workers to take off May Day - all stay-aways involved prior discussion between COSATU unions or the Garment Workers' Industrial Union (TUCSA affiliate) represen-tatives and managements. Thus, the eager linking of the stay-away itself to the King's Park rally (as the sole or primary cause for the stay-away) by local journalists is highly problematic. The stay-aways in industry followed their own logic: they were primar-ily a response to COSATU's national call (for which a prior two year build-up within FOSATU unions is important to note) with, locally, the Garment Workers Industrial Union adding its weight.

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Save in the case of one employer who threatened dismissals, most (70%) of those affected applied the "no work, no pay" principle. Irrespective of whether they were affected or not 50% of all employers were not against negotiating with trade unions over May Day becoming a public holiday. This figure rose to 80% if the unions were to concede a "swop" between an existing holiday and May Day.

PIETERMARITZBURG

Our sample for Pietermaritzburg was made up of 19 firms taken from the IMG national survey (not all of which could be traced), supplemented by a further 26 firms chosen by random sample. This was done in order to obtain a more representative picture of the local response. A stratified sample comprising 38 firms in all was used. All firms were contacted by phone and no refusals were recorded.

Findings

1. The 38 concerns interviewed employed 5,120 workers which accounts for 18% of the total workforce employed in both the manufacturing and commercial sectors.
2. Of the 5,120 workers, 2,702 stayed away, ie. 53% of the workers included in the sample. The racial breakdown of the workforce who stayed away is as follows: Africans - 68%, Indians - 43%, Coloureds - 37%, and whites - 2%.
3. 74% of the concerns contacted were affected by the stay-away. A breakdown of the concerns affected reveals that 79% of the manufacturing sector and 60% of the commercial sector experienced stay-aways.
4. Half of the firms interviewed had entered into an agreement with workers. The nature of the agreement as it affected workers was as follows: unpaid leave - 21%; workers would have to work an alternative day - 21%; paid holiday - 16%; loss of pay - 42%. This means that 84% of the workers had, in one way or another, been subjected to the "no work, no pay" policy.
5. Although 50% of the firms interviewed did not enter into an agreement with workers, 95% of them adopted a "no work no pay" policy. Only one firm indicated that workers would lose their jobs. However, this firm was not affected by the stay-away.
6. 47% of firms who had 100 employees or more are unionised. 88% of these firms had entered into an agreement with workers. Of these firms 33% would not lose a day's pay. The remaining entered into a "no work, no pay" agreement.

PORT ELIZABETH/UITENHAGE

The May Day stay-away in Port Elizabeth and Uitenhage was the largest worker action in the region in the contemporary period. The unity demonstrated by workers on May Day, as well as during the recent Langa Memorial stay-away on 21 March, contrasts strongly with historical divisions between Coloured and African workers in both cities. These divisions were especially sharp in the stay-aways during the "Black Weekend" and following the Langa massacre in March 1985. (see SALB 11.1)

The stay-away among African workers was near total across all sectors in both cities, while among Coloured workers support reached 45 % in Port Elizabeth and 79% in Uitenhage. Coloured support was strongest at COSATU organised factories and in manufacturing.

31% of the companies surveyed believed that workers had a right to May Day as a paid holiday, while 49% did not. 44% of the companies said they would be willing to swop May Day for another public holiday, while 33% were unwilling to do so.

The total number of workers covered by the sample in Port Elizabeth was 24,480 and 11,306 in Uitenhage giving a total of 35,786. The representativity of the sample in all sectors cannot be assessed as there is no reliable estimate of the total workforce in Port Elizabeth and Uitenhage.

The stay-away was virtually total among African workers in both cities across all sectors. In Port Elizabeth only 3 out of 13,340 Africans reported for work (99,9% stay-away) while in Uitenhage 11 out of 7,562 reported (99,8% stay-away). 45% of all Coloured workers in Port Elizabeth stayed away, while in Uitenhage the Coloured stay-away reached 79%. Among white workers, the stay-away was virtually nonexistent in both cities. The only whites who were absent were those employed in companies which had closed for the day by prior agreement with an independent trade union, thus it is impossible to assess the extent of support amongst these workers.

Regarding the African stay-away, it is difficult to assess whether workers heeded the call out of commitment to COSATU or community organisations, as the African response was total irrespective of sector of employment or whether African workers were members of unions or not. Undoubtedly many African workers at COSATU organised workplaces responded to the federation's call. But the massive

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size of the African stay-away, even at workplaces organised by non-COSATU unions or in unorganised factories lends strong support for the claim that the major mobilising force for the action came from community organisations in the townships, especially for the emerging street and area committee networks.

Among Coloured workers in Port Elizabeth, the 45% figure is considerably larger than either the recent Langa-Sharpeville memorial action on 21 March where 25% of all Coloureds stayed away, or the "Black Weekend" stay-away of 1985 when Coloureds worked as usual.

In Uitenhage, the 79% Coloured response rivals the recent 82% stay-away on 21 March 1986 and is far greater than the 16% stay-away registered after the Langa massacre on 21 March 1985. It is worth noting that unlike the 1986 stay-aways, the 1985 actions were not supported by the then-FOSATU unions.

The union influence

Not only is the Coloured stay-away larger than any previous action, but support generally follows union lines. In Port Elizabeth, of all Coloureds organised in COSATU factories, 84% stayed away from work, while only 19% stayed away in factories organised by rival unions or which are unorganised.

In Uitenhage the Coloured stay-away was strongest at COSATU organised workplaces, where 90% of all Coloureds stayed away, while at non-COSATU factories the response was 66%. The Coloured response in Uitenhage was far greater than in Port Elizabeth, at both COSATU and non-COSATU factories.

Thus the results support the argument that in Port Elizabeth the COSATU unions are at present the most powerful force in mobilising Coloured workers, but that the power does not extend beyond those factories where the federation is organised. In Uitenhage, COSATU clearly demonstrated its ability to mobilise its Coloured members. But the strong response among Coloureds at non-COSATU factories indicates that they either identify more closely with COSATU, or are more sympathetic to more militant trade union activity than their counterparts in Port Elizabeth.

The sectoral pattern

As stated previously, the African stay-away was near-total across

categorised in terms of their ideologico-political positions into two broad groupings:

- (a) those committed to the progressive movement and its objectives
- (b) those who are ambivalent with respect to the progressive movement.

In the first case (eg. members of the Western Cape Traders Association, a UDF affiliate) where traders were, for example, giving financial and other assistance to progressive organisations before the CBs were ever thought of, the effect of the CB has undoubtedly been to broaden and deepen this trend of solidarity. This has been due as much to the fact that the CB by its very nature involves and embraces the oppressed community as a whole and takes it into direct conflict with the ruling bloc as it has been to any purely economic motive.

In the case of (b) - the "ambivalents", who probably form a majority of the commercial petty bourgeoisie - it is undoubtedly the case that in many instances their support for the CBs derived from the fact that they stood to make a lot of money from the boycott of white shops. But it is not as simple as this. In Port Elizabeth, for example, where some of the traders have been detained and allegedly beaten, the economic motive has been transformed into a far more ideologically-based commitment to the aims and goals of the progressive movement. Thus - as is evidenced in the cases of (a) and (b) as they have occurred nationally - far from the role of the black petty bourgeoisie being mechanistically "determined by their class position" in the narrow economic sense, (24) a whole other range of factors are important in determining the kind of political role they will play. The CBs and developments surrounding them have exacerbated the structural alienation of black traders from the apartheid state. In many cases (notably among the coloured community in the Western Cape, and among Indian and African communities in the Eastern Cape) the boycotts have made traders far more inclined to identify their interests with the interests of the mass of the oppressed and to go along with the democratic movement.

But while one of the great strengths of the CB is that it has given impetus to a deepening of a class-alliance with black traders, it is crucial that in order to minimise any ambiguity or opportunism the democratic movement forges such alliances on its own terms. Two ways in which this has been done is to have township shops lower their prices (which amounts to financial assist-

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be seen, however, whether the unity of purpose demonstrated between these groupings can be maintained, especially for actions which have less direct appeal to Coloured workers.

THE EASTERN CAPE TOWNS

In the Eastern Cape hinterland, a total of some 70,000 workers celebrated May Day. There was a total African stay-away in the larger towns such as Grahamstown, Queenstown, Cradock, Graff Reinet, Somerset East, Fort Beaufort, Humansdorp, Port Alfred, Stutterheim, and King Williams Town. Aliwal North was the only town with an African population in excess of 10,000 where no action was taken on May Day.

Many smaller towns also celebrated May Day including Adelaide, Bedford, Hofmeyr, Tarkastadt, Steinsbergh, Burghersdorp and Cathcart. Exceptions were Middelburg, Sterkstroom, Alexandra, Kirkwood and Steyteville.

In some towns Coloured workers also came out in support of the May Day demand. Partial Coloured stay-aways occurred in Cradock, Graff Reinet, and Adelaide. Comprehensive Coloured stay-aways occurred in Cookhouse and Port Alfred.

Most stay-aways were initiated by community organisations only, due to the absence of trade unions in smaller towns. However, in some cases they managed to arrange public meetings where worker representatives explained the May Day demands. In other areas - most notably Grahamstown - where a public meeting was not allowed, the street committees mobilised people around a successful cleaning campaign.

The LMG survey included employers from local government and private commerce. All of the representatives of local government stated that a policy of "no work no pay" was being followed - and that they did not believe in the need for May Day.

The attitude among private employers was diverse: 20% paid their workers on May Day; 10% would allow another day to be worked in exchange; 70% adopted a policy of "no work no pay". Of those interviewed, in excess of 40% thought May Day should be a paid public holiday, while 30% disagreed.

Most employers believed that the reason for the stay-away was

"intimidation". A bogus pamphlet issued in the name of the UDF and COSATU which undertook to compensate workers for any loss of earnings was widely distributed through the Eastern Cape and was understood by employers to be one reason why workers stayed away.

THE CAPE TOWN REGION

Cape Town region experienced a May Day stay-away considerably lower than that of the rest of the country, with only 15% of all black workers in our sample staying away. African workers heeded the stay-away call to a much greater extent than did Coloured workers - 51% in the firms surveyed as opposed to a figure of 2% for Coloured workers.

Information on 79 workplaces, employing a total of 41,974 workers, was gathered. The workplaces surveyed for which full data was available employed a total of 22,284 black workers. These comprised 18,267 Coloured workers - of whom 16,892 were at work - and 4,017 African workers, 1,971 of whom attended work. Extrapolating from our sample, this would indicate that 71,000 workers stayed away in the greater Cape Town area. This figure does not include 11,000 workers employed by the Cape Town City Council, who were given May Day as a public holiday.

Workers organised by COSATU-affiliated unions responded to the May Day call in much greater proportions than did other workers. 92% of African and 31% of Coloured workers stayed away in workplaces in our sample organised by COSATU affiliates.

There were marked differences by industrial sector, with stay-away rates in construction high, those in manufacturing close to the average and in commerce and catering generally low. Although construction workers are not generally unionised in the Western Cape, stay-away rates in this sector were well above average at 39% for Coloured and 55% for African workers.

51% of African workers in manufacturing stayed away but only 5% of Coloured workers did so. This may reflect dominance in the garment industry and the tight hold on its workers of the conservative Garment Workers Union of the Western Province.

The limited response to the stay-away call was despite the fact that employers were not unsympathetic to it. Only one employer intended to dismiss workers who stayed away and in 51 workplaces

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the policy was one of "no work, no pay". A further 15 employers intended only to warn workers, or to take other measures (in at least one firm, workers were given the option of taking paid or unpaid leave).

Agreements on May Day were negotiated by trade unions in 17 workplaces in our sample. Most of these agreements (13) granted workers authorised unpaid leave. Employers surveyed were divided on whether workers have a right to a paid holiday on May Day, with 26 for and 31 against, but the majority favoured the exchange of another public holiday for May Day - 35 for and 17 against.

The Cape Town figures raise questions about the extent of organisation in the Cape by the emerging unions, as well as about the nature of community organisations in the region. The dominance of Coloured workers in Cape Town, and their very limited response to the May Day call, suggest that the very nature of consciousness and organisation among the workers should be examined.

BLOEMFONTEIN REGION

The IMG does not have an Orange Free State branch, but were nonetheless able to obtain a picture of the effect of the stay-away in the Bloemfontein region. While these impressions were given to us by the local COSATU officials, the magnitude of the stay-away has been corroborated with non-union persons. The stay-away in Bloemfontein was the first such action for five years.

Bloemfontein is mainly a service-oriented city, with a limited manufacturing base. The effect of the stay-away was therefore most noticeable in the city centre, amongst the retail sector. The union estimate for the Bloemfontein stay-away is in excess of 80%. Certainly, it would appear that Bloemfontein was deserted on the day, with many stores not opening or closing very early. Those that remained open were manned by white and Coloured workers.

After having been refused the use of the stadium, the people of Mangaung crowded into Rocklands New Hall, with an estimated 3-5,000 people attending the overflowing meeting. A taxi and bus boycott was very successful, while the only sour note of the day was the police firing teargas in Mangaung in a futile attempt to disrupt the holiday.

In nearby Botshabelo, residents report that the SADF paratrooped

soldiers in on the April 30, and then moved in with a fleet of Casspirs to erect an army camp which remained for six days. There are also reports of military jets doing tree-level swoops over the huge township in an obvious attempt at intimidation.

CONCLUSIONS

The size of the 1986 May Day action ensures it a prominent place in the history of resistance in South Africa. Through the success of the stay-away, the working class of South Africa have clearly demonstrated the strength of feeling in support of a day that celebrates the labours of its workers. It remains to be seen whether this day will officially be recognised as a public holiday, or whether it will be necessary to again enforce an unofficial holiday through united action.

However, the response of management to the stay-away suggests that there is implicit non-worker tolerance for the celebration of International Labour Day. With the majority of employers adopting a non-confrontationist policy of "no work, no pay", they indicated that the space clearly exists in industrial relations for a workers holiday.

The extent of support for the May Day 1986 action is the continuation of a pattern that had its roots in the Transvaal stay-away of November 1984. The 1986 stay-away is, however, quantitatively and qualitatively different. It is a tangible demonstration of the new pattern of resistance politics in South Africa, as the old distinctions between "populists" and "workerists" are increasingly being blurred in the common struggle against apartheid and capitalism.

One clear conclusion to be drawn from the evidence presented above is the effect of the trade union movement. While small towns in the Eastern Cape took action even without the existence of a strong union movement in the area, a definite pattern emerges in the larger towns where the unions have made significant inroads - where there is a union, the support for the stay-away is markedly greater to where the workers have as yet to be organised.

(Labour Monitoring Groups from the Universities of the Witwatersrand, Natal-Durban, P.E., Grahamstown, and Cape Town. Compiled by William Cobbett and Mark Beitel, May 1986)