

May Day and Botha's Day

The continuing struggle over public holidays, by KARL VON HOLDT

Public holidays are important days in the life of any nation. They are days to celebrate great historical events such as independence from foreign rule, or important victories and defeats on the battlefield. Holidays also commemorate heroes and leaders, or religious events that are culturally important for the nation.

Public holidays tell a nation about its history, its aims, its values and its identity. They are therefore politically and ideologically very important days. In a stable society public holidays will reaffirm the moral authority and values of the ruling class. In a country racked with conflict, public holidays will reflect the struggles between different social groups.

South Africa is such a country. The AWB and the National Party struggle over the meaning of the Day of the Covenant, and the demo-

cratic movement struggles with the government over Republic Day, May Day and June 16.

The struggle over public holidays

It started in 1980 when the democratic movement staged anti-Republic Day meetings. In the mid-80s the labour movement and the popular movement in the townships managed to display their growing power by staging massive stayaways on May Day and Youth Day (June 16). In many companies trade unions negotiated these two days as paid holidays. These days became de facto 'People's Holidays', a celebration of the people's resistance and a direct challenge to the legitimacy of the apartheid regime.

Last year the struggle over public holidays took a new turn when

President Botha declared the first Friday of May a public holiday to be known as Workers' Day. This was a clumsy attempt to pre-empt the annual May Day stayaway with an official holiday which would have none of the international or socialist traditions of May the First. At the same time, it was a recognition that workers' demands could not be ignored.

US government sabotages May Day

Botha's strategem does have precedents. May Day was born in 1886 out of militant struggles for the 8 hour day in the United States. In the 1950s 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.

This year Ronald Reagan again called on the American people to celebrate their loyalty to the American government on May Day - the same American government that supports UNITA and destabilises Nicaragua!

Botha is not so lucky

Botha is unlikely to be as lucky as the American government. Last year, of course, the first Friday of May fell on May 1. Workers could not mobilise a stayaway since the day was already a holiday; meetings were banned; and so a day of struggle appeared to have been lost from the calendar.

This year, too, the government and employers probably heaved a sigh of relief at the thought that May Day fell on a Sunday, and Workers Day on the following Friday. There would, therefore, be no stayaway on 1 May, and employees would probably stay peacefully at home on the official holiday on Friday.

That's what the government and the bosses thought. Workers in a

number of unions, however, seemed to be determined to continue the tradition of struggle over days of ideological importance. This was seen as a necessary way of demonstrating resistance in the face of the government clampdown on UDF, COSATU and other organisations, the threat of the new Labour Bill, and continuing repression under the State of Emergency.

Thus there were a number of large, militant May Day gatherings across the country, organised by both COSATU and NACTU. The government banned planned outdoor gatherings in Cape Town and Secunda, and these were moved indoors. In Port Elizabeth the COSATU Regional Secretary is being charged after a meeting that had been banned went ahead, attracting an audience of 5000.

In a number of factories, workers negotiated Monday 2 May as a holiday.

Workers ban Botha's Day

But the struggle over Workers' Day - or Botha's Day, as it is known by workers - was even more interesting. Many trade unions took an in principle decision to reject Botha's Day. These include CWIU, FAWU and PPWAWU. In many cases this took the form of workers negotiating to go to work on the Friday.

CWIU seems to have taken a particularly strong stand. A national decision was taken that workers

would work on Botha's Day, and that it would specifically be excluded as a public holiday in all Recognition Agreements. According to Transvaal Branch Secretary Chris Bonner, a number of companies had no objection to keeping their plants open, while others, often under pressure from white workers and staff to take the holiday, resisted the demand.

At Colgate in Germiston, for example, white workers insisted that the factory should close for the holiday; management wanted workers to make up the lost production on Saturday. Union members would not budge, though. So the factory remained open, and black and white workers worked as usual.

In a number of companies, however, management refused to keep the plant open. Several groups of workers responded by actually going to work and demonstrating on company property or outside the company gates. This happened at Mobil, Liquid Air and at several factories in the plastics sector that fall under the Metal Industrial Council where Workers' Day is a mandatory holiday.

It seems, then, that Botha's move has been a massive flop. In fact, it has backfired by heightening the struggle over nationally significant days. No doubt employers are looking anxiously at next year, when May Day and Workers' Day fall in the same week.

May Day Meeting of COSATU Wits Region

The Southern Transvaal Region of COSATU held a May Day Rally, which was attended by about 2 000 workers, at Wits University. The mood was at the same time relaxed and militant, as the audience sang freedom songs, listened to speakers, poets and choirs. The day ended with two football matches. Jabula Foods beat Isikhalo se Africa from Benoni 4 - 1. The score in the match between Springs Local and Joburg Local is not known.

The meeting was planned at short notice, so speakers had not been arranged. Each COSATU affiliate put forward a shop steward to speak on behalf of his or her union. Speakers spoke about shopfloor struggles, the struggle for freedom, the Labour Bill and the political restrictions.

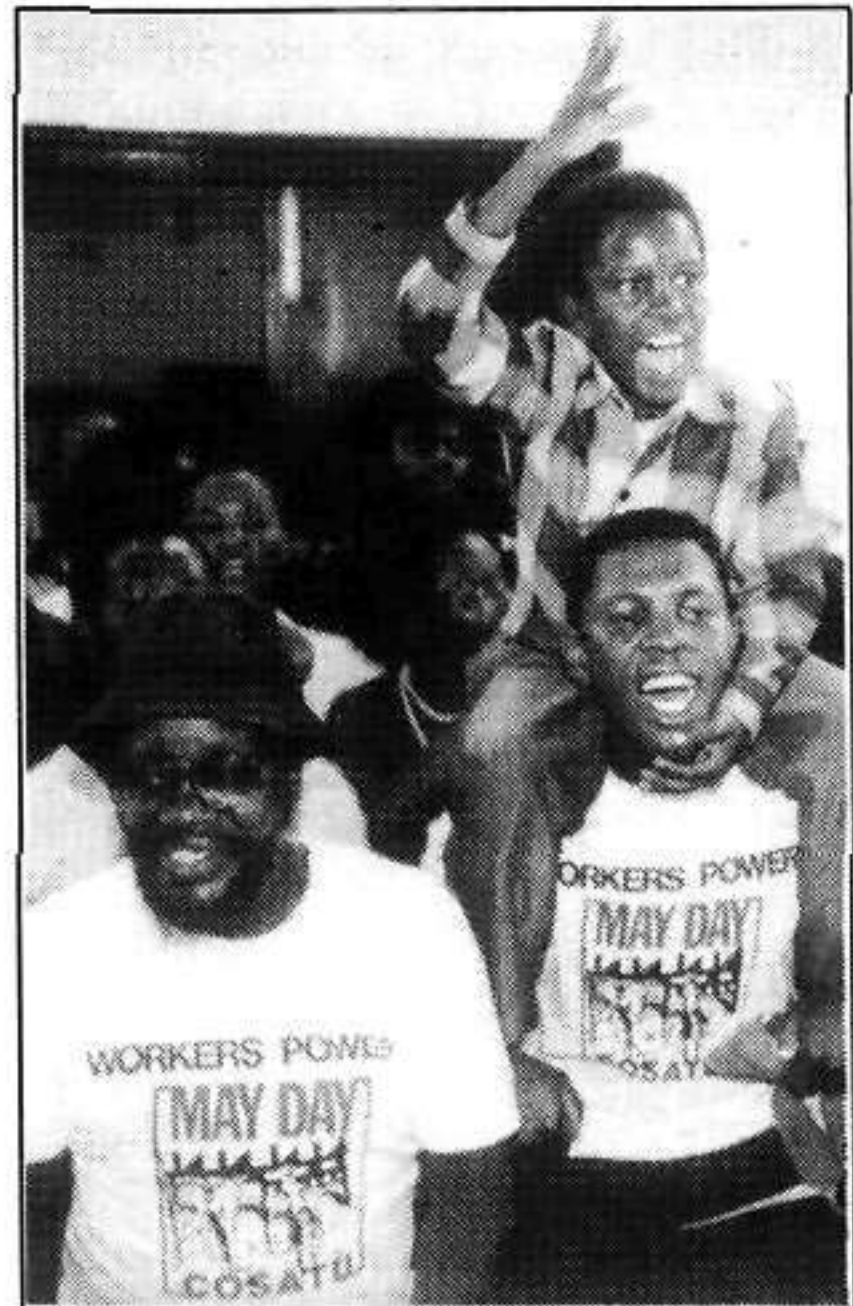
The FAWU speaker attacked Botha's Day: "Come you with hippos, come you with tear gas, May Day is the workers' day, and we will celebrate it.

"Botha is trying to sabotage May Day with his May 6. May Day is not just history or a story - it is actual struggle, because we are oppressed and exploited everyday in the factories. It is a day for fighting against

these things. We are going to work on the 6th, and we are going to celebrate today. We are talking about the day of freedom - either freedom will come to us, or we will go to it.

"In legal terms COSATU is paralysed. But on the shopfloor we will carry forward all the objectives of COSATU."

Later in the meeting a Young Lion spoke to the workers. This lion was truly young. He seemed to be



*Young lions and old lions
celebrate together*

about 10 years old, wearing a T-shirt that reached down to his wrists. He told the workers, "We preach about an injury to one is an injury to all, but often we do not

practice it. You struggle at work, but when you come home you forget about the struggle in the community." The audience whistled and shouted agreement. "You must not only fight for wages, you must fight for the liberation of the land."

The Young Lion continued: "I give you another advice: when there is a meeting in the townships you should attend it. We cannot fight alone without our parents. From now on we don't want to hear about striking for money, we want to hear about the liberation of the whole country!"

"You must not fight management only. There is a government too, which is making laws that protect the very employers you are fighting in the factory. You must fight the government and the employers. We want an end to capitalism. Forward to socialism!" The Young Lion ended his speech to roars of approval from the crowd of workers.

Then a NUMSA shopsteward addressed the meeting: "We must polish up our divisions. We know we are divided, but we do not want to accept criticism.

"The Labour Relations Act is a like a great rock hanging above the heads of the workers. It is sus-

pending by a thread, and Parliament is about to cut the thread, so it will fall and crush us. We must build pillars now that will support the rock when the thread is cut.

"If the Bill is passed we can forget about the workers' struggle. The Young Lion called on us to act - we have been slow in our struggle, but now the Bill is forcing us to take action. We have automatic members who wait to be told what to do. We need to educate our members so they can walk on their own and take initiative. We need one industry, one union; one attack, one defence.

"The struggle against the Bill could take about 8 years. Remember the struggle against influx control took about 5 years.

"I was surprised to hear the Young Lion say our strikes are about money. It is true. Most of our strikes are about money. You do not see demands for our rights in our strikes."

After the speakers the gathering was entertained by poets and choirs. Then the meeting adjourned to the sports fields for the football matches. The combination of politics, sport and culture at the Wits May Day celebrations shows how May Day has grown roots deep amongst the masses.