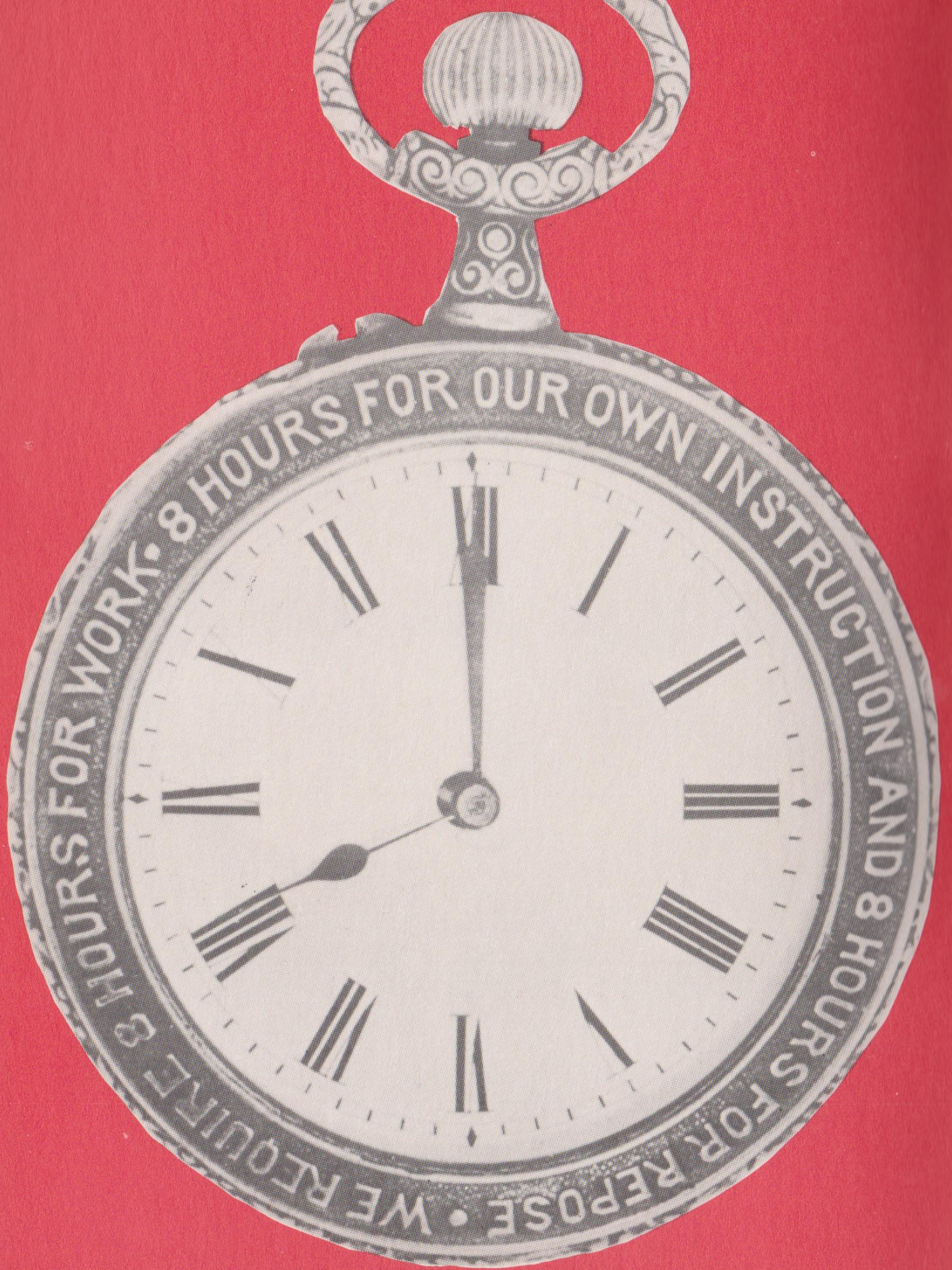


**WORKERS' DAY IN ALL COUNTRIES**

**MAYDAY**





# MAY DAY

## A HISTORY OF INTERNATIONAL LABOUR DAY



International Labour Research and Information Group (ILRIG)



## WHAT IS MAY DAY?

1st May is known by workers all over the world as May Day, or International Labour Day. May Day is a day of unity between workers in each country in their struggle for a better life. It is also a symbol of solidarity between workers of different countries.

On May Day, workers in each country examine their problems, and commit themselves to the struggle to build up their organisations, and to the fight for workers' rights.

May Day is also the day when workers in each country remember that their struggle is linked to the struggles of other workers around the world. Factories and industries have spread all over the world, forcing many people into wage labour. 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 in other countries.

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.

## CELEBRATING MAY DAY

Every year on 1st May, workers in many countries around the world celebrate May Day in different ways. In many countries, trade unions and workers' political parties organise meetings and marches on May Day.

In socialist countries like the Soviet Union, Cuba or China, workers have won greater power and control over their lives. May Day is an official holiday for all the people in these countries. On this day, all factories, shops and schools are closed, and the government organises mass rallies and displays. At some of these rallies, the people demonstrate their solidarity with the struggles of working people in capitalist countries, and those fighting against colonialism and imperialism. In Zimbabwe, 1st May is now also a public holiday.



*May Day march in the Soviet Union*

Workers in many capitalist countries in Europe have won May Day as a paid holiday. 1st May is a public holiday in Britain, Portugal, Spain, Austria and Germany. In many of these countries, trade unions and workers' political parties organise meetings, marches and demonstrations on May Day. People wave banners and flags, and leaders make speeches in the town square. These meetings are often followed by plays, picnics, children's activities, sports competitions and dances.

In some countries, workers have used May Day to organise strikes and protests against their government. 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 managed to overthrow the fascist government that had ruled there for 45 years.

In 1980 in Brazil, a country in Latin America, 100 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 another South American country, Uruguay, 150 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.



*Workers in South America demonstrate on May Day, 1976*

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 also talk about one common goal: the international solidarity of all workers around the world.

## HOW DID MAY DAY BEGIN

May Day began over one hundred years ago with the struggle of workers for a shorter working day. At that time, industry was growing quickly in North America and Europe. Many new factories were built, employing many unskilled workers. These unskilled workers struggled under terrible conditions. They often worked for 12, 14 or even 16 hours a day, in hot, dangerous conditions, for very low wages.



*An American factory about 100 years ago*

Workers in these factories began to organise against their dreadful conditions. Their unions began to wage a militant struggle against the bad working conditions. Many of the trade unionists were also active in workers' political parties. They saw the struggle against bad working conditions as part of a struggle to overthrow the whole capitalist system.



In many countries in Europe and North America, workers started a campaign for an 8 hour working day. They said that long hours of work were destroying workers. 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.

In some places the struggle for a shorter working day was successful. In the United States, the government passed a new law in 1868 saying that workers should not work longer than 8 hours a day. But most bosses took no notice of this new law. They still forced workers to work long hours. So the leaders of the American trade unions encouraged workers to take further action. One said:

**"The only way to get an 8 hour day is by organising. If you want an 8 hour day, you must make it yourselves!"**

Thousands of workers all over the United States began to agitate for an 8 hour day. In 1886 there was a huge wave of strikes across the country. The slogan of these strikes was:

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

Radical worker leaders called for a mass strike. On 1st May 1886, factories all over the United States were silent. 350 thousand workers went on strike to demand an 8 hour day. The strike was a big success in some places. Many bosses were forced to introduce an 8 hour working day in their factories.

The city of Chicago, which had many factories and workers, was the centre of the strike. On May Day, 40 thousand workers marched through the streets. Here, the police fired on the strikers and killed six workers. When the Chicago workers organised a protest meeting in Haymarket Square, in the centre of the city, a bomb was thrown at the police. The police used this as an excuse to attack the workers and to smash up union offices.



*Police attack workers in Haymarket Square*

They arrested a number of the radical worker leaders and accused them of organising the bomb attack. Four of these leaders were eventually hanged for this, although there was no proof that they had anything to do with the bomb attack.

In Europe, workers' industrial unions were also fighting a militant struggle for a shorter working day. When they heard the news, they organised strong protests against the hanging of the American labour leaders.

From this time on, 1st May became the day when workers around the world demonstrated solidarity with each other. In 1889, at the first meeting of the Second International (an organisation which united workers' political parties throughout Europe), it was agreed that all workers should fight for 1st May to be recognised as International Labour Day.

In 1890, there were May Day demonstrations in France, Britain, Italy, Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Portugal, Spain, Belgium, Hungary, Germany, Poland, Australia and the United States. These May Day celebrations strengthened the message of international solidarity in each working class movement.



*May Day march in New York in 1887*

## MAY DAY IN SOUTH AFRICA

In 1904, May Day was celebrated in South Africa for the first time. In these early days, it was only the white workers who were organised in trade unions, and in a few, small socialist parties. Through these organisations, they began to celebrate May Day. From 1919, they began to hold meetings every year. Some unions even won 1st May as a recognised labour holiday. Later, some industrial council agreements allowed workers to take the day off.



*White workers demonstrate on May Day*

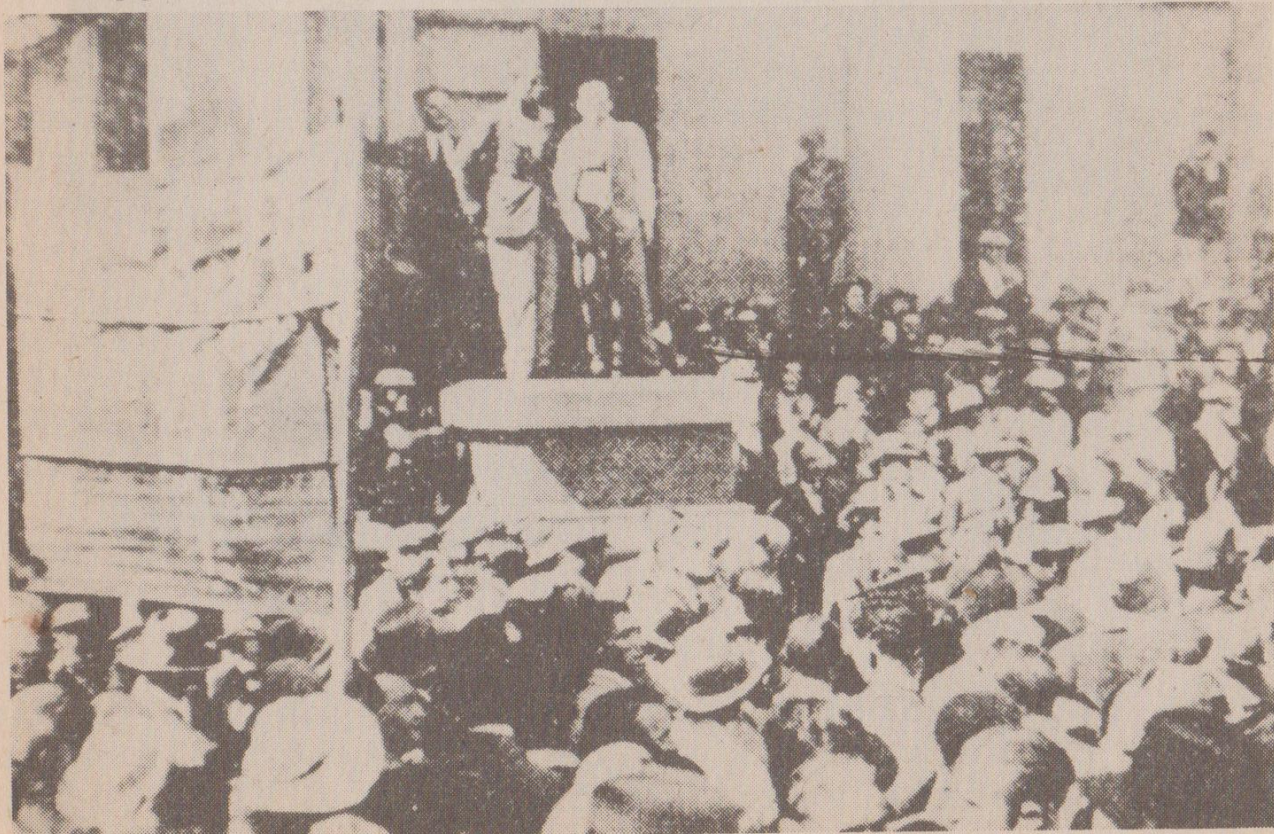
By the 1920s, black workers were also starting to organise in trade unions and political parties. In the 1920s and 1930s, the Communist Party, together with some trade unions that organised both black and white workers, started to hold regular meetings on May Day. They organised big multiracial meetings on the Parade in Cape Town, and in Marshall Square in Johannesburg. At this time, meetings pledged support for the revolution which had happened in the Soviet Union in 1917.



*MAY DAY IN CAPE TOWN*

CARRYING BANNERS affirming their allegiance to the Soviet Union, some Cape Town workers marched in procession to the Grand Parade to attend a mass

Leaders also spoke to the crowd about the struggle for democracy and workers' rights in South Africa, and told them about workers' struggles elsewhere.



*May Day meeting at the Johannesburg City Hall, 1931*

During the Second World War (1939-1945), the numbers of black workers in the towns and factories grew. The black trade union movement grew greatly in strength. Every year on May Day, big meetings were organised by the socialist groups and 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.

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



*Solly Sachs and members of the Garment Workers' Union at a May Day picnic*

The white Labour Party, and the unions of the more conservative, white workers continued to hold separate meetings on May Day. They passed resolutions about international solidarity, but they refused to admit blacks to their meetings.

Sometimes the police came and broke up the meetings of the non-racial unions but left the white workers' meetings alone.

In 1948 the National Party came to power and tried to repress black trade unions and black political organisations. Now, May Day became a symbol of struggle against apartheid.

In 1950, the ANC and the Communist Party organised a mass strike on May Day to oppose the government. On 1st May, many workers across the country stayed away from work. Many factories were quiet, and many streets were empty. In Cape Town, black workers marched up Adderley Street, shouting:

**"Down with Apartheid! Down with passes!  
We want freedom!"**

In the evening, police attacked workers. In Johannesburg, the police fired on workers and 18 workers were killed.

After 1950 there were no more large May Day rallies. More and more, the government cracked down on workers' trade unions and political organisations. In 1955, a new, non-racial trade union federation, SACTU, was established. It became closely linked to the mass campaigns against the apartheid government. For a while, SACTU unions continued to organise meetings on May Day. But by 1964, SACTU was repressed, its leaders jailed, banned or exiled.

By this time, many white unions had become even more conservative, and most of them stopped holding May Day meetings. In the 1960s, the right to celebrate May Day was removed from industrial council agreements. For many years, May Day was not celebrated by workers in South Africa.

## MAY DAY TODAY

Since the 1970s, black workers in South Africa have begun to build up their trade unions again. The independent trade union movement and other worker organisations have grown greatly in strength.

Since 1982, workers have started to celebrate May Day with meetings and rallies in many parts of the country. Many unions are demanding that May Day be a paid workers' holiday.

At one May Day meeting in Cape Town, a trade union leader urged workers to "fight for a new society where there will be no exploitation and 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?"



*An inter-union May Day meeting in Cape Town*



At meetings on May Day, worker leaders have also spoken about the need to build greater unity amongst workers. In 1986, after a period of hard effort, a giant new trade union federation was established - the Congress of South Africa Trade Unions (COSATU). 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 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.

## THE MEANING OF MAY DAY

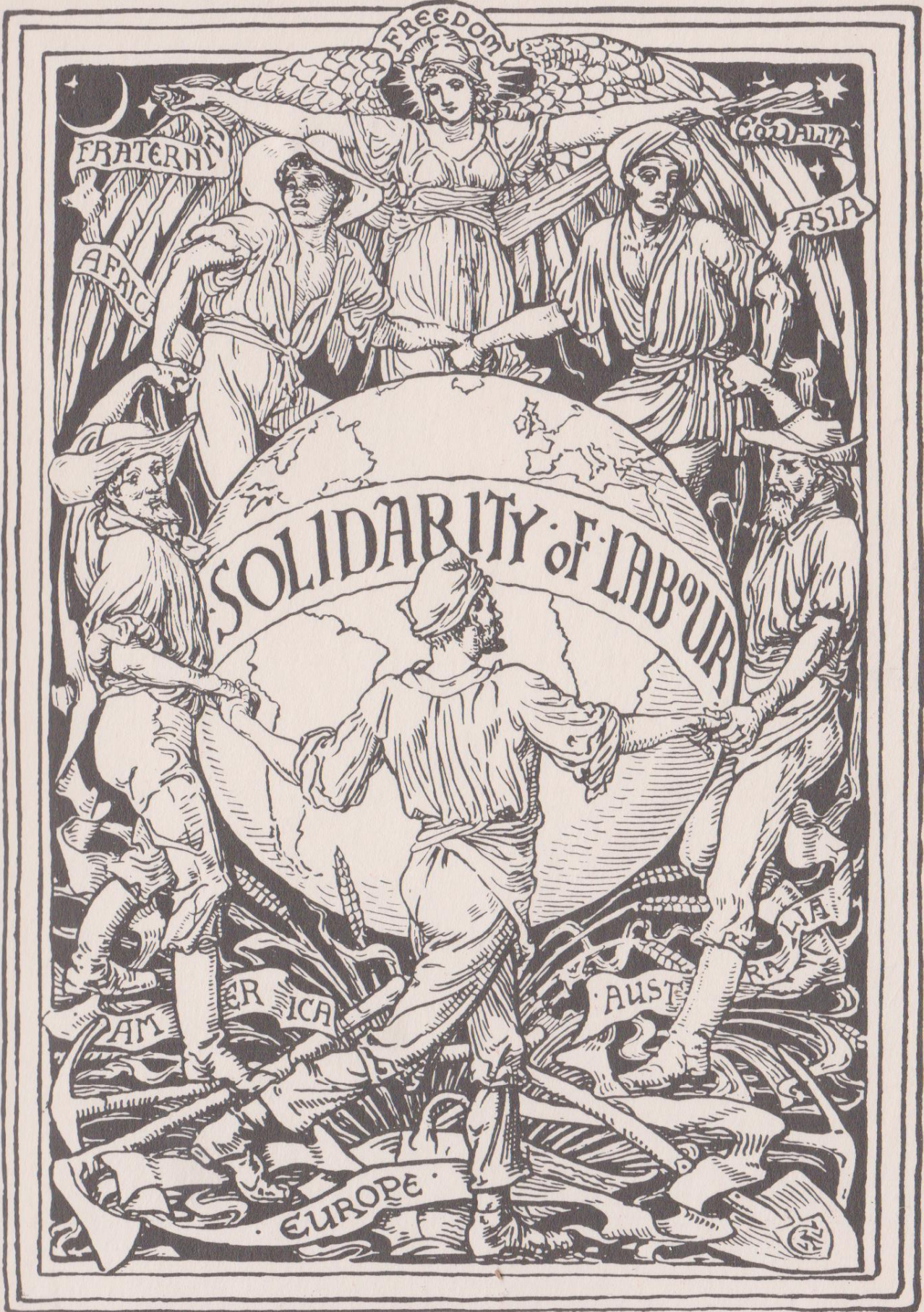
May Day was born as a day of struggle. It began as part of the struggle of workers for a shorter working day, for the right to have a better quality of life. Today this struggle continues.

In many countries, machines are replacing workers, and putting people out of work. In some countries, like Germany, workers have raised the demand for a 35 hour week. This is a demand for more workers to work shorter hours, to bring down unemployment, and strengthen the workers' position. On May Day this year, many workers in different countries will once again raise the demand for a shorter working day.

But May Day has become a symbol of much more than this. A hundred years ago, the demand for an 8 hour day had strong appeal, and was able to unite the working class across many countries. May Day became a symbol of working class unity. On May Day this year, workers will commit themselves to greater unity, to build up their organisations, and to strengthen their struggle for a better life.

They will also remind themselves that the success of their struggle is linked to the struggles of other workers in other countries. On International Labour Day, workers all over the world will again commit themselves to international worker solidarity.

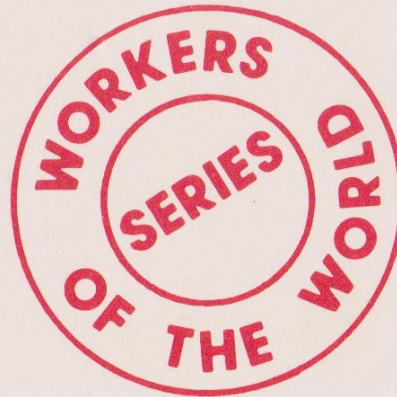
Lastly, May Day has always been celebrated by workers' trade unions and workers' political parties together. May Day has become a symbol of the workers' struggle for a new society, where workers will enjoy political power, and control over their lives in the factories, and in their communities.



LABOUR'S · MAY · DAY ·  
DEDICATED · TO · THE · WORKERS · OF · THE · WORLD ·

*An old European May Day poster*

The International Labour Research and Information Group (ILRIG) produces booklets, tape-slide shows, articles and other information on international labour. These materials discuss worker struggles in other countries and show how the international economy works. ILRIG also collects information produced by groups elsewhere. It makes all these materials available to trade unions and other interested groups. Please write to ILRIG for more information.



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