

May Day Courage in Northern Natal

About 3,000 workers in the Northern Natal township of Esikhawini attended a May Day meeting at the local township stadium. While the number might, on the surface, compare unfavourably, with a number of other May Day meetings, particularly the vast King's Park rally to launch the new Inkatha union, it is nevertheless a significant indication of support for the Congress of South African Trade Unions in the region.

The May Day rally in Esikhawini was banned by the Inkatha town council several days before it was due to take place. The Inkatha town council have the power to withhold venues for meetings and unless meeting convenors have approved venues, the local magistrate is unlikely to grant them permission to hold their meeting. As it happened in the case of COSATU's planned May Day meeting in Northern Natal, the unions were refused magisterial permission to hold it. The council has refused COSATU and its affiliates permission to hold meetings in Esikhawini since the beginning of March.

According to Northern Natal COSATU regional secretary, Jerry Ntombela, workers were incensed by the banning of their meeting. "They do not see why they should be the only workers barred from holding a meeting to commemorate May Day," Ntombela said, explaining their determination to go ahead with it.

The workers in Esikhawini, a large township between Richards Bay and Empangeni, thus pressed ahead with their decision to hold their meeting. Tensions mounted early on May Day as a large contingent of Kwazulu and South African Police took up positions in the township. There were also fears of reprisals from Inkatha supporters in the area, although that threat was not immediate as several busloads of supporters had gone to King's Park in Durban for the launch of UWUSA.

To the workers' surprise and relief the rally went off without incident. The fact that it did, is perhaps some measure of the type of support which COSATU has in Esikhawini, which is situated in the middle of an Inkatha stronghold. Moreover, three prominent UWUSA leaders - D J Mtiyane, general secretary Simon Conco and organiser, M P Gumede are based in the area.

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COSATU members in the nearby township of Mandini, who were also barred from holding a meeting, tried to join workers in Esikhawini, but were unable to arrange transport. According to Ntombela, a substantial number of them made their way to the COSATU May Day rally at Curries Fountain in Durban.

The build-up to May Day in the region was marked by increasing tension between COSATU and the new Inkatha-backed union. There are 10,000 COSATU members in the region, according to Ntombela, and many of them are Inkatha members. However, evidence at present indicates that union members, who are Inkatha members also are disturbed at Inkatha's attempts to divide workers by setting up a rival union. One sign of this evidence is the May Day meeting at the Esikhawini stadium. "We have got members of Inkatha here who are strongly saying they will leave Inkatha rather than leave COSATU," said Ntombela.

In an incident which has shocked workers in the area, Jeffrey Vilane, former Metal and Allied Workers Union president and a shop steward at a large aluminium smelter in Richards Bay was attacked about a week before May Day. His house and car were burnt and he received bullet wounds in his arms and chest. Vilane has always been a prominent Inkatha supporter, but has taken a strong stand against UWUSA, so incurring the wrath of the new union's backers.

Gumede, organiser of UWUSA, who is also a member of Esikhawini Town Council, said he thought the council had banned COSATU meetings "because there have been so many criticisms against the Chief Minister [Buthelezi] and Inkatha". He added, in reply to a question, that he did not think that the council would ban UWUSA meetings in the township, but that the new union had not yet asked. (Pippa Green, May 1986)

May Day Briefs

- * Most Black farm workers stayed away in the Steelpoort area.
- * The National Productivity Institute calculates a permanent loss to the economy of R150 million as a result of the stay-away.
- * In some CUSA factories workers took up the National Forum call

for 4 days of action and stayed away on Friday May 2 as well.

International

USA: In Boston on May 1, the Massachusetts Labor Support Project, the Boston Free South Africa Movement and the Massachusetts Labor for a Free South Africa held a "Freedom and Solidarity Day" to celebrate the hundredth anniversary of the eight-hour struggle and to focus on the Shell boycott (see SALB 11.5).

Philippines: For the first time in 21 years, all the trade union federations took part in a single May Day celebration, with the left wing May First Movement (KMU) strongly represented. The demonstration was earlier attacked by supporters of the deposed president Marcos.

Nicaragua: Nearly 200,000 people took part in May Day activities called by the Sandinista Workers Federation (CST). In mass rallies speeches called for sacrifice and commitment to defend the gains of the Sandinista revolution against US aggression.

Who is paying for UWUSA?

Rally expenses, for most organisations, are likely to run into the tens of thousands. But because of their sheer magnitude, it is difficult to put a figure on UWUSA's expenses for their rally in King's Park, Durban. Clearly transport was a major component. According to M P Gumede, UWUSA organiser, the new union hired 17 trains at a cost of R27,955 each. In addition, hundreds of buses were hired to ferry supporters to the rally.

There is some confusion about the trains, however. A SATS spokesman confirmed that while it did indeed cost R27,955 to hire a train, Inkatha had not chartered trains. "We laid on the trains at their request and they (the rally goers) paid the normal passenger fares," he said. An UWUSA spokesman in Durban, asked to clear up the matter, could not throw any further light on it.

The other major expense must have been the T-shirts. Tens of thousands of UWUSA T-shirts, bearing the UWUSA slogan, "Jobs, not hunger", were sold at R1 each. (Standard price is closer to R6.)

UWUSA has not been exactly forthcoming about their source of funds, although Gumede said a large proportion of the rally costs had been borne by Inkatha.