

Workers' Day: Power of trade unionism

The recognition of 1 May as International Workers' Day arose from a long tradition of the workers' movement of holding demonstrations on May Day to advance the demand for an eight-hour working day, equal rights for all, and working-class unity. A lot has still to be done to achieve substantive equal rights in both the workplace and broader society and to attain tangible unity of workers. However, the recognition of Workers' Day as official holiday and the achievement of an eight-hour working day illustrate the importance of trade unionism as platform and instrument of Workers' Power.

The power of unionism and workplace democracy is generally understood as the application of democratic practices, such as voting, debate and participatory decision-making systems, to the workplace. There are many ways to do this, some much more ambitious than others. In South Africa, Workers' Day on 1 May celebrates the achievements of the labour movement for workers.

Unions' battle for workers' rights and conditions of service has been an on-going process for decades. Since the demise of apartheid, labour has contributed immensely to the development of workers' rights. The involvement of labour at the National Economic Development and Labour Council has ensured that matters affecting workers and their inputs are considered when Parliament legislates on issues affecting them. The participation of unions in the creation of collective agreements ensures that workers play a vital role in the creation of codes of conduct that regulate workplace terms and conditions.

The introduction of the *Labour Relations Act* ensured that economic and labour democracy plays an important role in the formulation of rights applicable to workers. The Court case whereby PSA and other unions challenged the employer's failure to comply with a collective agreement signed in 2018, and the Constitutional Court ruling that the agreement was invalid, unlawful, and unenforceable, was a watershed case. However, the ruling did not disempower unions. It rather dictates that unions must negotiate better for workplace democracy and exercise more power. This was demonstrated by the PSA when it was the first Union to go on strike after public service salary negotiations deadlocked in 2022.

The PSA also exercised its powers by embarking on industrial action at the SA Revenue Service in May 2022.

Major improvements have been made in labour law, including various pieces of legislation and amendments to existing laws. However, the journey of liberating workers is not near the end as unions and workers still face huge challenges, including inequality, workplace health and safety, labour brokering, contract workers, and many more.

A review of union history in South Africa reveals that unions have good reasons to celebrate their role in reclaiming the dignity of workers. This is supported by the number of labour rights that have been achieved through active unionism. However, in South Africa and globally, there is currently a surge towards union-bashing and restricting and limiting collective bargaining and workers' rights. Employers and government display the tendency to target workers' salaries and demands in their efforts to cut costs instead of targeting the misgovernance, mismanagement and the uneven public service structure that are responsible for the financial woes in public service. Therefore, as part of their continued efforts to increase workplace democracy to deepen economic democracy, workers and the trade-union movement must unite against various forms of trade-union bashing and varied efforts at limiting and throttling collective bargaining and workers' rights.

The PSA, supported by its valued shop stewards, has been protecting and promoting the rights and interests of public-sector employees with success since 1920, whilst also encouraging workplace democracy. The PSA, as a mandate-driven Union, embraces participation and partnerships with members and employees and, on Workers' Day, applauds shop stewards for their role in the Union's continued success. As part of its longstanding commitment, the PSA commits to labour and social justice and to the fight for a living wage. The PSA further commits itself to combat all attempts to destroy collective bargaining as well as ploys by the employer to divide and weaken the labour movement.

Sources

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