



## Overview of U.S. Student Anti-Apartheid Activity

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## OVERVIEW OF U.S. STUDENT ANTI-APARTHEID

### OVERVIEW OF U.S. STUDENT ANTI-APARTHEID ACTIVITY

Joshua Nessen Student Coordinator Amer Comm on Africa Fall 1981

The U.S. Student Anti-Apartheid movement is faced with crucial challenges in the upcoming months as it attempts with community activists to stymie U.S. support of South Africa and lend support to the intensifying liberation struggle in Southern Africa. On the occasion of this National Student Anti-Apartheid Strategy Conference I thought it important to present this brief historical summary and analysis of the movement to help clarify the issues as we prepare to move forward.

#### HISTORICAL SUMMARY

U.S. student opposition to apartheid and colonialism in Southern Africa has a history going back to the early 1960's. In one of its first actions, SDS sat in at the Chase Manhattan Bank (a major lender to South Africa) and in the Sixties there were anti-apartheid demonstrations at Cornell, Princeton, Harvard and other universities. In the late Sixties the anti-war movement overshadowed anti-apartheid work on and off-campus, but as the struggle against Portuguese colonialism escalated there were massive demonstrations in support of the liberation movements, notably 50,000 people at the first African Liberation Day in 1972,

The real spark for the U.S. student movement, however, was the Soweto Rebellion of 1976 in which hundreds of students faced up to the guns of the apartheid regime and the struggle took a major step forward. Throughout the school year 1976-77 numerous student groups formed and began calling for divestment of their school's corporate stocks linked to South Africa. In that year, the successful occupation at Hampshire College and the massive sit-in at Stanford were catalysts to the spread of the movement to dozens of campuses throughout the country.

For the past four years the student divestment movement has had an important impact both on campuses and on the country at large. With the liberation struggle going forward in southern Africa, along with South African and corporate propaganda, it is important for us to clarify what our successes have been and how we can build upon them,

#### SUCCESSSES OF THE STUDENT ANTI-APARTHEID MOVEMENT

The "success" of the student movement must be judged on several levels, First of all, both the actual divestment-of stocks and the process of struggling for divestment are not ends in themselves but means to achieve the following goals:  
1)The withdrawal of U.S. corporations from and the cessation of bank loans to South Africa.

2) Affecting the political climate domestically, so as to curtail U.S. government intervention in southern Africa and build support for the liberation movements.

3) More broadly, the delegitimization of corporate power both in its foreign and domestic manifestations.

4) And related to this the activation of a student left that combats racism and other forms of oppression in this country,

Let me try to assess the extent to which we have succeeded in achieving these goals. 1) First of all to what degree have we forced corporate withdrawal from South Africa and curtailment of bank loans?

Partial or total stock divestment at nearly two dozen schools plus mass student pressure at many others have had concrete effects. Certain corporations, such as Polaroid, have curtailed operations, and the student movement has helped create pressure to hamper direct bank loans to South Africa, (It is important to note that universities such as Harvard, Columbia and Yale have found it very difficult to justify their holdings in banks that lend to the South African Government). In addition, the passage of Eximbank financing restrictions and regulations against corporate sales to the South African military are at least indirectly the result of student activism,

Of course, overall U.S. corporate investment continues to rise in South Africa and relatively few schools have been willing to divest all their holdings, To see this as evidence of our "failure" is to look at the movement too narrowly. For we have made

major progress in regards to our other goals:

2) Looking at our second goal of curtailing U.S. government intervention and building support for the liberation movements, we have had an important political impact.

We were at least partially responsible for the maintenance of sanctions against Rhodesia, and numerous campus groups have raised material aid and consciousness for the liberation movements, Beyond this we have sown the seeds for mass opposition to U.S. intervention when the struggle reaches its decisive stage in South Africa itself. One should note that there has been dramatic increase in community anti-apartheid organizing over the past year-in part due to the raising of the issue on campus. State legislative actions have been of particular importance, and individuals are beginning to play a more active role.

3) In terms of our third goal, the student movement has helped delegitimize corporate power in this country, especially on campuses,

The achievement of divestment as well as the process of building campus support have

undermined corporate claims of blamelessness while bringing the issue of corporate complicity in apartheid to millions of Americans, A new wave of student activists have come to share a radical perspective as they have challenged the myth of corporate benevolence and institutional neutrality.

It is crucial that our attack has been directed at the key ideological pillar of the

System, the University which is controlled by the same white male elite that runs Corporate America. The effect of demonstrations, educational forums and sit-ins has been to unmask power relations within the university and at least on the ideological front put its spokesmen on the defensive. A testament to the seriousness of this challenge is the immense amount of time and money university and corporate officials have devoted to dealing with our movement. These officials have held several large strategy meetings over the past year, and thus far employed the Sullivan Code as their principal shield. This Code and national tours by corporate apologists such as South African Helen Suzman are closely linked to U.S. foreign policy which aims to control change in southern Africa. In this regard what separates the student movement from university trustees and the Administration is not simply tactics but goals. We support revolutionary change in southern Africa, they do not,

(4)

4) Besides winning individual students to a radical outlook, the movement has been largely successful in achieving its fourth goal; the reactivation of a Student Left in this country.

The process of organizing against apartheid has helped spark renewed activism on many

fronts. Our work has fed into struggles against racism in the University, and more recently student activity against the draft and nuclear power. In the process, hundreds of students have gained valuable organizing skills and a commitment that extends beyond Graduation.

#### RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN THE MOVEMENT

Several Years

During the past A the ability of the student movement to maintain its momentum

has been apparent. A large part of this continued momentum has been due to political development within the movement which has had several interrelated aspects:

1) Increasingly activists have come to understand that stock divestment is not an end in

itself but a means to support the liberation struggle in southern Africa. With this understanding organizers have had the patience to engage in essential and painstaking

educational work--and avoided frustration over Trustee refusals to divest school

stock. 2) At the same time, anti-apartheid organizers have been making links to

other campus struggles notably against campus racism, nuclear power and the

draft. One key development has been the increasing initiative of Black students in the movement. In this respect

the New Jersey Coalition of Black Students (a grouping of 1 dozen schools) has been

central in drawing the links between racism at home and abroad,

3)In addition, there has begun to be greater coordination- with community anti-apartheid activists, particularly on actions dealing with banks and legislative work.

#### Summary

The extent to which the movement will be able to continue its political development along these lines will determine how effective we will be in combatting the Reagan policy in southern Africa. Most importantly we must remember that the struggle is one. The progressive changes we make in this country can only help our comrades in southern Africa. At the same time the victory of the liberation struggles in southern Africa will deal a body blow to racist Western capitalism and help our own struggle for a more just and equitable society. A LUTA CONTINUA