SANCTIONS AGAINST SOUTH AFRICA:

STRATEGY FOR THE ANTI-APARTHEID MOVEMENT OF THE 1980'S

By

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Between the anvil of united mass action and the hammer of armed struggle we shall crush apartheid and white minority racist rule.

Nelson Mandela
(statement smuggled from
Robben Island Prison)

As Piet Koornhof is fond of saying, "apartheid is dying." But not, as Mr. Koornhof would have us believe, because the Afrikaner elite is laying it to rest through reforms but rather because the students, workers and guerrilla fighters of southern Africa, along with their international supporters, are mounting a frontal assault on white supremacy which cannot and will not be stopped short of total victory.

In recent months we have witnessed remarkable advances in the liberation struggle:

* the victory of the combined nationalist forces in Zimbabwe and the new government's immediate commitment to regional development among the frontline states in order to lessen dependence on South Africa;
* the intensification of the armed struggle in Namibia by SWAPO and its military arm the People's Liberation Army of Namibia (PLAN);
* the daring June 1, 1980 attack by African National Congress (ANC) guerrillas on a most vital sector of the South African economy, the oil industry;
* a wave of militant strikes and confrontations by African workers who refuse to be appeased by petty reforms such as the Sullivan Principles;
* persistent and courageous protests by South African students who would rather face police bullets than tolerate the apartheid educational system any longer.

Having noted these encouraging developments, we must hasten to add that we are not predicting the imminent collapse of apartheid. That mistake has been made on previous occasions and we do not wish to repeat it here. But, we must surely learn from these recent events, as well as from the long historical struggle which preceded them, that the people directly involved in the struggle to abolish white supremacy and imperialism in

southern Africa are so dedicated to the cause of liberation that whether it takes two years or twenty years, we will be victorious!

It can easily be argued that had it not been for the NATO countries (including the United States), the apartheid regime would have crumbled long ago. There is a truly massive amount of research which documents the long-standing military, economic and political support of the NATO countries and Israel for the white minority regime in South Africa.[1] For the class who rules developed countries, such as the United States, France and West Germany, equality and justice for the majority in South Africa is not as important as having access to human labor and material resources of that country at favorable prices.

In this paper, we present evidence and analysis on how and why the United States government has over the years resisted attempts to impose sanctions against the South Africa regime. Drawing on this analysis, we conclude with strategic suggestions for the anti-apartheid movement in its continuing struggle to isolate the white minority regime. Although this paper is focused on U.S. ties to South Africa and the dynamics of the U.S. anti-apartheid movement, we believe there are at least two reasons why the information is of general interest. First, as the most powerful backer of South Africa, the United States government has considerable influence on other Western allies of South Africa and therefore plays a key role in the struggle; and, second, anti-apartheid forces in other countries often confront obstacles similar to the ones we face in the United States.

International concern over internal conditions in South Africa dates back to the very first meeting of the United Nations General Assembly in 1945. Although the requests and urgings of those early resolutions may seem quite tame today, they helped lay the foundation for the current stage of our struggle. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s governments, church groups, labor unions and liberation movements pushed for various types of boycotts and other measures designed to isolate South Africa. The late 1960s saw a relative decline in efforts to impose sanctions due mainly to the politico-military stability of the white settler regimes and "consistent opposition to sanctions."[2] In the mid-1970s, however, the situation began to change with a rapidity which few observers had foreseen.

The People's victories of MPLA in Angola and FRELIMO in Mozambique, together with intensified struggle in Zimbabwe, Namibia and within South Africa, provided the impetus for a renewed campaign to impose sanctions. Although the U.N. Security Council had established an arms embargo as far back as 1963, the major capitalist powers (particularly France) were extremely negligent in their compliance. In 1977, following the murder of

Steve Biko and a massive crackdown by South African security forces, the Security Council strengthened and expanded the arms embargo.

The conduct of the Western powers during the struggle over the 1977 arms embargo resolution typifies their approach to the issue of sanctions against South Africa. The arms embargo resolution was only passed after the United States, England and France had vetoed more comprehensive proposals put forward by anti-apartheid forces. The three resolutions blocked by the West called for a mandatory cutoff of foreign investment, credits and arms production licenses. The resolution which they finally allowed to pass did put limits on direct sale of weapons to South Africa but it only called for review of licensing arrangements through which South Africa produces heavy weapons (e.g., the French Mirage fighter-bomber) in collaboration with transnational corporations. In addition, the United States was careful to insert wording which technically makes the resolution a response to the then current political turmoil in South Africa rather than the general ongoing conditions of apartheid. This bit of diplomatic sleight-of-hand was intended to insure that the resolution would not set a precedent for more comprehensive sanctions under Chapter 7 of the U.N. charter.[3]

Ambassador Young clarified U.S. intentions by stating:

> *Let us hope that our resolution will not mark the beginning of a process of increasing international sanctions against South Africa but rather the end of a period of growing confrontation between South Africa and the rest of the world.*[4]

If the United States government was so opposed to even limited sanctions (and this during the relatively liberal early Carter administration), one can imagine the resistance it will wage to more comprehensive proposals. In a private interview, one state department official confessed that "nothing short of a South African invasion of the United States" would prompt the American government to endorse comprehensive sanctions.

In recent years, the U.N. General Assembly, the single most representative body on the face of the earth, has passed numerous resolutions pertaining to South Africa. A review of the contents and voting patterns on these measures reveals much about the policies of the United States and its major allies. On resolutions dealing with subjects as diverse as relations between Israel and South Africa, nuclear cooperation with South Africa, support for the anti-apartheid movement, a possible oil embargo of South Africa, apartheid in sports, military and economic cooperation with South Africa, U.N. assistance to the libera-

tion movements, and internal conditions in South Africa, the United STates and other Western powers stood alone in their consistent opposition to the proposed resolutions. In each and every case, the overwhelming majority of nations voted in favor. The West joined the others to vote yes only when the particular resolution was of a symbolic nature and contained no actions which could seriously weaken the apartheid regime.

John Seiler has summed up the behavior of the United States and its major allies as follows:

> *...the Western strategy (led by the U.S.) has been to accept some of the rhetoric while simultaneously ensuring that Security Council or General Assembly resolutions had no effective implementative sections and set no precedents for subsequent application.*[5]

Seiler further argues that a basic reasons for this resistance is that:

> *...the major Western governments in fact understand that the thrust of potential sanctions could be equally applied against their own more basic interests--whether against Israel, for example, or their own residual colonial situations.*[6]

One of the primary justifications the United States has relied on in its numerous efforts to block sanctions against South Africa is the claim that continued contact with the Western democracies will somehow have a liberalizing effect on the apartheid regime. But, this argument didn't seem to apply in the case of Iran when the United States was vigorously pressuring other U.N. members to impose sanctions as punishment for the detention of fifty-two American personnel. We are logically led to assume that the welfare of a few dozen of its employees is more important to the United States government than the basic human rights of tens of millions of black people in southern Africa.

We could also recall the long history of U.S. sanctions against Cuba. Although it is hard to imagine how the leaders of the world's most powerful nation can feel threatened by this small, resource-poor island republic, the United States has not only maintained a strict trade embargo on Cuba, but has seen fit to carry out countless acts of sabotage and even mount a full-scale invasion of Cuban territory. Though the obvious intent was to overthrow the socialist regime led by Fidel Castro, the U.S. government initially justified the economic blockade by saying that it was in retaliation for Cuban nationalization

of U.S. business holdings. But, this raises a comparison similar to the case of Iran. Is the seizure of some American corporate property a more heinous act than the countless invasions of neighboring states by the South African military, or the illegal occupation of Namibia, or the brutal repression the apartheid regime imposes on its own black population?

More recently we witnessed a concerted attempt on the part of the United States to pressure African governments into boycotting the Moscow Olympics. The hypocrisy of this campaign is evident if we recall the uncooperative response of the United States to repeated African demands for sports boycotts of the apartheid regime. In response to these pressures by anti-apartheid forces, the U.S. government consistently claimed that sports and politics are like oil and water and cannot be mixed. But when it was in U.S. interests to condemn the Soviet Union, *voilà*, a miraculous change took place. The same government and corporate media spokesmen who had always denied the political content of sport were now claiming, 'why of course international sport is political, it would be naive to think otherwise.'

Clearly, United States policy with regard to sanctions (contrary to the rhetoric) is not motivated by a concern for human rights or any other such lofty ideal. It is quite simply based on the principle of rewarding allies and punishing those perceived as foes. This however brings us to an important theoretical issue which must be clarified before we can safely move on to the question of devising more effective political strategies for isolating the apartheid regime.

When discussing international relations theorists, diplomats and laymen alike tend to use the nation-state as the basic unit of analysis. A typical discussion might include statements about the United States providing support to South Africa, Angola and South Africa being enemies, etc. But, clearly it is not the South African masses who are enemies of the people of Angola, and the majority of Americans have no material interest in supporting the white minority regime. Although the use of the nation-state category is a convenient form of discourse, we must take pains to remember that it is particular classes in each country which form alliances with their counterparts in other countries.

The Americans who benefit from official U.S. policy toward South Africa are mainly a small group of rich, corporate males. Not only are they the owners and operators of the transnational corporations which profit from apartheid but they are also the class which occupies the top policy positions of power within the U.S. government.

Despite cultural and other differences, the ruling class

in South Africa is also comprised of white males who, as in the United States, are either capitalists themselves or are directly dependent on and supporters of the capitalist system. Over the years, these two ruling classes have developed mutually beneficial relations (albeit including some genuine conflict) and logically resist attempts by opposing forces to destroy their unity. A class analysis of the various types of connections between the United States and South Africa shows quite clearly that on both sides of the relationship, it is a rich, white minority which benefits and a multi-ethnic working-class majority which suffers oppression.[7]

Keeping in mind that the basic lesson of all political struggle is to unite friends and divide enemies, we should explicitly state what is already implicit in the international struggle against apartheid. Namely, that the core political goal is to develop tactics and strategy which can simultaneously unite anti-apartheid forces (in whatever country they reside and whatever organizational form they take) and divide the apartheid regime and its allies. This statement may seem so simple as to be hardly worth mentioning but, as we hope to show in the next section, a class struggle perspective on the obstacles confronting the anti-apartheid movement offers definite advantages over alternative perspectives.

Toward A Mass Strategy

In the past, the struggle for sanctions has mainly taken place in the United Nations. The results of those efforts have been mixed as we saw in the precious section, but it was precisely those efforts which laid the foundation for where we stand today. Certain governments also have a long history of bilateral action against apartheid. As far back as July 1959, the Jamaican government declared an official boycott of all South African imports. Other efforts of various sorts have been made over the years by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs); everything from shareholder activism by church groups and other institutional investors,[8] to progressive trade unions refusing to handle South African goods.[9]

A major problem with these types of efforts, however, is that they have been unable to involve more than a small percentage of the citizenry in anti-apartheid action. In the case of United Nations and governmental efforts, it is practically built in to the situation in the sense that this is a realm of elite politics where the average citizen has very little input. However, in the case of NGOs, we must be very critical of our past organizing strategies and admit that we have failed as yet to develop styles of work which can make the issue of apartheid relevant to peoples' everyday lives in such a way that they will

want to devote serious time and energy to the struggle.

Another historical fact which bolsters this criticism is the wavering intensity of the anti-apartheid movement in the U.S. over the years. The movement has peaked and waned directly in response to the level of political action by the black population of southern Africa. This is not a totally negative phenomenon since it reveals a true sympathy and solidarity with the African people's struggle, but it also points to a weakness in our organizing efforts. Namely, if the movement were making the connections between what goes on in South Africa and the problems people confront in U.S. society, there would be more consistency to the movement over time and an ability to mobilize people more regularly and on broader issues.

Let us be clear that we are not arguing for the discontinuation of elite efforts or that they are somehow unimportant. Certainly they are important. Bilateral efforts such as those by the Nigerian government have put significant pressure on transnational corporations doing business with South Africa and shareholder activism by institutional investors has caused many transnational corporations to halt or reduce their involvement in South Africa. But, while these actions have made significant contributions to the struggle, they have done far less to educate and mobilize the working people of the developed countries to struggle against a system which oppresses all workers, whether in South Africa or the United States. In the words of Amilcar Cabral:

> *Since imperialism is trying simultaneously to dominate the working class in all the advanced countries and smother the national liberation struggles in all the under-developed countries, then there is only one enemy whom we are fighting.*

Our recommendations above may seem obvious and even trite to those of us who have been involved in anti-apartheid work due to a broader commitment to oppose racism and imperialism. But for those who do not see apartheid as a direct product of capitalist development (as was slavery), the mass-oriented organizing strategy we have stressed may seem based on nothing more than radical ideology. For this reason, as well as our belief that political strategy should always be based on sound research, in the following section, we present an analysis of American public opinion regarding South Africa and point to insights organizers can gain from this evidence.

Public Opinion on South Africa

Several public opinion surveys conducted in the United States in recent years reveal some interesting and perhaps use-

ful facts. Although Africa ranks low in terms of general public interest (a logical reflection of the low priority accorded Africa by the U.S. government and corporate news media), most Americans are morally opposed to apartheid.

A 1979 study sponsored by the Carnegie Endowment found that:

> *A clear majority of the public thinks that the United States should do something to get the South African government to change its racial policies.*[10]

Another poll observed that "forty percent of the public favors the United States taking an active stance in opposing apartheid in South Africa."[11] Still another survey found that by almost a two-to-one margin:

> *...Americans favor the United States and other nations putting pressure on the South African government to give blacks more freedom and participation in government. Specifically, large segments of the public support cutting off arms sales to South Africa (favored 51-24 percent), getting U.S. companies in South Africa to put pressure on the South African government (46-28 percent), and preventing new U.S. business investments in South Africa (42-33 percent).*[12]

Unfortunately, however, American attitudes on U.S. policy toward South Africa are not as encouraging as these initial observations may indicate. For one thing, most of the polls show that Americans are generally afraid of another Vietnam-style intervention and this reticence carries over to getting involved in overthrowing apartheid. This is one area where the class alliance theory of international politics expounded earlier comes home. By stressing to the public that it is basically the same class of people who benefited from U.S. aggression against Indochina as benefit from U.S. ties to apartheid, we can draw lessons from the previous intervention in order to ensure that it won't be repeated.

Another weakness in American sentiment toward apartheid is the reluctance to endorse armed struggle as a legitimate strategy for the African majority. Not only does this make mass organizing in support of the liberation movements more difficult, but public opposition to armed struggle also acts as a brake on pregressive elements within the U.S. government. Congressional and state department officials have admitted in off-the-record interviews that they personally believe the

guerrilla fighters will emerge victorious, but for a politician to publicly take a stand in favor of U.S. government support for the liberation movements would probably cost him his job.

It is understandable that people in general have an aversion to violence. Plus, some anti-apartheid groups (e.g., church-based organizations) are in principle opposed to any and all violence. However, there are several points we can make in our propaganda work which help clarify the role of armed struggle in the liberation of southern Africa.

1. The forces fighting for majority rule in South Africa relied on nonviolent methods for over half a century and only resorted to armed struggle after it became absolutely clear that the government would make no concessions to peaceful protest.

2. The United States itself fought an armed liberation struggle against Great Britain in order to gain its independence. This struggle was fought with the assistance of foreign troops. Indeed, the park directly facing the White House in Washington, D.C., is commemorated to the memory of Lafayette and the French troops he led during the American War of Independence. This point was conveniently forgotten by President Carter when he demanded that Angola expel the Cuban troops presently aiding that country.

3. It is thoroughly hypocritical for the United States, France, West Germany, England, etc., to denounce violence by anti-apartheid forces when it is those very governments that have consistently allowed their transnational corporations to traffic in arms to the apartheid regime of South Africa.

4. All cultures condone the use of armed struggle when used in self-defense. To deny the right of the African majority in South Africa to use armed struggle in its fight against the incredibly degrading conditions of apartheid is to deny a most fundamental human right--the right to defend one's family and one's self against violence and oppressive tyranny.

Another major obstacle for anti-apartheid organizing in the United States is the tendency for Americans to view all liberation movements as mere pawns in a world communist conspiracy centered in Moscow. The U.S. ruling class has so heavily relied on communist bogey-scare tactics over the years to legitimate its wasteful military expenditures that most people have been saturated with anti-communist propaganda and literally can't think straight on any issue that involves the Soviet Union.

This history of anti-communist brainwashing, plus the fact that the corporate media are not interested in giving the liberation movements unbiased coverage, are good reasons for increasing our educational efforts aimed at bringing the message of the liberation movements to the people by independent means.

Recognizing that knee-jerk anti-communism is a serious obstacle to anti-imperialist organizing in general as well as anti-apartheid work in particular, we must stress certain themes in our educational efforts.

> 1. Assistance from the Soviet Union and its allies to the liberation movements is accepted by these movements as fraternal aid. Moreover, this aid would not be necessary if the Western powers had not provided such massive amounts of arms and finance to the racist minority regimes.
>
> 2. Americans have almost no understanding of the independent character of African nationalism and the nonaligned movement. We can point to the policies of other progressive governments in southern Africa as evidence that a socialist transition in South Africa does not automatically carry with it hostility to U.S. interests.[13]
>
> 3. With regard to American fears that a radical regime in South Africa would mean a cessation of important mineral supplies to the West, there is a structural feature of the South African economy that should be pointed out to people. The mining industry is so crucial to the general economic health that "no South African government, however, radical, could afford to forego the revenue earned by mineral exports, and the only significant market for South African minerals is the U.S. and its allies."[14] Indeed, a majority government would be under great pressure to raise the living standard of the masses and would therefore be likely to increase rather than decrease mineral sales to the West.

Still another problem revealed by the opinion polls is the fact that most people are more concerned with issues which touch their lives directly than they are with the situation in South Africa. In one of the studies cited earlier the authors found that:

> *...few Americans have thought through their views about foreign policy issues. And because those issues seem to have less relevance to their per-*

sonal lives than domestic issues, Americans see little reason to give them more thought. Consequently, opinions about specific foreign policy issues are often very much "off the top of the head" and can be subject to dramatic change, especially as people get more information or the issue suddenly mushrooms into an international crisis.[15]

This of course has direct relevance to the crisis in South Africa and our own efforts to supply information on the issue.

Another opinion poll found that the three foreign policy goals ranked most important by the public were "keeping up the value of the dollar,""securing adequate supplies of energy," and "protecting jobs of American workers." These are all in contrast to the foreign policy goal ranked lowest in importance: "helping to bring democratic forms of government to other nations."[16]

By citing this evidence we are not suggesting that these people can't be mobilized on the question of apartheid. Nor are we implying that the movement should pander to the lowest common denominator of public opinion in order to get people involved.

Armed with an analysis which shows apartheid to be an integral part of the world capitalist system, we can demonstrate to people that it is possible for them to devote time to the struggle against apartheid and be working in their own self interest at the same time. The very same corporations which are laying off workers and closing plants in the U.S. (often destroying whole communities in the process) are simultaneously making exceptionally high profits in South Africa. The oil monopolies which are overcharging Americans for auto and home heating fuel are also supplying the South African military with the crucial fuel and lubricants it needs to carry out its repressive functions. Banks which reinforce institutional racism in the U.S. by refusing to lend money to poor neighborhoods are often quite generous when it comes to the financial needs of the apartheid regime. The list can be expanded indefinitely with just a little research.

The emphasis on a popular approach to anti-imperialism in our educational work should be matched by a mass-oriented organizing style. There are many groups and individuals whose own struggles make them potential allies in the struggle against apartheid. For example, the anti-nuclear movement in the U.S. has a very large following and the issue of U.S. nuclear cooperation with South Africa can easily be worked into the overall framework of anti-nuclear politics. Despite the fact that the

anti-nuclear movement has a different class and racial composition than the anti-apartheid movement, steps have already been taken by some activists to form working alliances in which both movements can benefit from each other's resources. In general, anti-apartheid groups need to seriously re-evaluate their outreach efforts and re-dedicate themselves to building alliances with other progressive organizations.

The point we are trying to drive home is really quite simple to enunciate, but very difficult to implement. The only way we can guarantee a strong, democratic mass base for the continuing struggle against imperialism and racism is by educating and mobilizing a majority of the citizenry. And the only way we can possibly mobilize that many people is when we help them to understand that it is in their best interests to fight imperialism and racism. If the difficulty of this task seems to border on the impossible, we must take strength from the fighting spirit of the South African youths whose most powerful weapon, commitment, is embodied in the slogan, "if necessary we shall lay down our lives for freedom."

Notes

1. A partial list of these studies includes: Western Mass. Association of Concerned African Scholars, U.S. Military Involvement in Southern Africa, Boston, South End Press, 1978; Ann and Neva Seidman, South Africa and U.S. Multinational Corporations, Westport, Connecticut, Lawrence Hill and Co., 1977; Michael Klare, "The Corporate Gunrunners: South Africa's U.S. Weapons Connection," *The Nation*, July 28-August 4, 1979; Beate Klein, U.S. Bank Loans to South Africa, New York, Corporate Data Exchange, 1978; Sean Gervasi, "Under the NATO Umbrella," *Africa Report*, Sept.-Oct. 1976; Patrick L. Smith, "NATO Flirts with South Africa," *The Nation*, Sept. 24, 1977; James Morrell and David Gisselquist, How the IMF Slipped $464 Million to South Africa, Washington, Center for International Policy, 1978; Senator Dick Clark, U.S. Corporate Interests in Africa, Washington, D.C., Government Printing Office, 1978; Lawrence Litvak, R. DeGrasse and K. McTigue, South Africa: Foreign Investment and Apartheid, Washington, D.C., Institute for Policy Studies, 1978; William Minter, Portuguese Africa and the West, New York, Monthly Review Press, 1972; Richard P. Stevens and Abdelwahab M. Elmessiri, Israel and South Africa: The Progression of a Relationship, New Brunswick, N.J., North American, 1977. For brief descriptions of these and over 200 other items see, Kevin Danaher, South Africa and the United States: An Annotated Bibliography, Washington, D.C., Institute for Policy Studies, 1979. Also, consult the UN Centre Against Apartheid for many useful resources.

2. South Africa and Sanctions: Genesis and Prospects, Johannesburg, South African Institute of Race Relations/ South African Institute of International Affairs, 1979, p. 32.

3. Aside from its ties to South Africa, the U.S. government wishes to avoid a Chapter 7 precedent due to the ramifications it would have for America's long-standing role as protector of the Zionist regime in Israel.

4. Department of State *Bulletin*, Dec. 12, 1977, p. 865.

5. South Africa and Sanctions: Genesis and Prospects, *op. cit.*, p. 70(a).

6. *Ibid.*

7. This overlap of class interests and racial-ethnic characteristics has allowed the U.S. government and the corporate news media to portray the conflict in South Africa as one of strictly racial strife. This emphasis on racial inequality is 'safer' for the transnational corporations because it disguises the class basis of inequality in South Africa from which they benefit. But at the same time by harping on racial differences and racial conflict, the corporate media exacerbate prejudice on both sides of the color line.

8. For a well-balanced critique of shareholder activism by a veteran anti-apartheid organizer see Prexy Nesbitt, "New Strategies for International Action Against TNC Collaboration with Apartheid," New York, UN Centre Against Apartheid, 1979.

9. Eileen Whalen and Ken Lawrence, "American Workers and Liberation Struggles in Southern Africa," *Radical America*, May-June 1975, gives some interesting details on how certain trade unions were able to support the liberation struggle and at the same time combat local problems like racism used by the company to divide the workers.

10. James E. Baker, J. Daniel O'Flaherty and John de St. Jorre, Public Opinion Poll on American Attitudes Toward South Africa, Washington, D.C., Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1979, p. 37.

11. John E. Rielly, "The American Mood: A Foreign Policy of Self-Interest," *Foreign Policy*, No. 34, Spring 1979, p. 77.

12. Deborah Durfee Brown and John Immerwahr, "The Public Views South Africa: Pathways Through a Gathering Storm," *Public Opinion*, Jan.-Feb. 1979, p. 55.

13. Regarding "U.S. interests" we can again make use of the theory of international class struggle. American leaders habitually attempt to legitimate their policies with the assertion that they are in the 'national interest.' It is imperative for anti-apartheid activists to decode policy statements couched in national or racial terms which serve to camouflage what are in fact class interests, i.e., big business interests.

14. Robert M. Price, U.S. Foreign Policy in Sub-Saharan Africa National Interest and Global Strategy, Berkeley, Calif., Institute of International Studies, University of California, 1978, p. 21.

15. Brown and Immerwahr, *op. cit.*, p. 55.

16. Rielly, *op. cit.*, p. 78.