Bill Would Ban NYC’s South Africa Purchases

From DC 37’s Public Employee Press

Labor’s proposal to ban New York City purchases from racist South Africa passed a major hurdle in April with the announcement that the bill will receive a full committee hearing in the City Council [on June 28]. The good news came from a group of union and political leaders who held a press conference on the steps of City Hall to publicize growing support for the bill, known as Intro. 619.

“South Africa’s apartheid system is a crime against humanity,” said DC 37 Associate Director Stanley Hill at the press conference. He pointed that DC 37’s Executive Board, representing over 100,000 city workers, unanimously endorsed Intro. 619 “because we believe the city must stop subsidizing racism in South Africa by ending its purchases of their products.”

The press conference was organized by the Labor Committee Against Apartheid, which also includes representatives of the Coalition of Labor Union Women, the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists, the Clothing and Textile Workers, Auto Workers, United Electrical Workers, AFSCME DC 1707, Ladies Garment Workers, Teamsters, Service Employees, Communications Workers and other unions.

A small group of the unionists met before the press conference with City Council member Peter Vallone, who chairs the...
Eric Frumin, health and safety director for the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union (ACTWU), travelled to South Africa in March of this year at the invitation of the National Union of Textile Workers. In the following interview, Frumin reports on what he saw during his visit.

How did the trip come about?
ACTWU was first contacted by the NUTW in 1982. They had learned of our efforts to deal with brown lung, an occupational disease that afflicts textile workers, in connection with our organizing campaign at J.P. Stevens. They saw the health and safety emphasis as an attractive organizing tool because the health problems of South African workers are very severe. They first suggested the visit in the Fall of 1983, and then making the physical arrangements for the trip proved very difficult.

Were you concerned about the call by black South Africans to ban any contacts with South Africa?
Well, we were invited by a union that we considered an essential part of the opposition to a system of oppression. Otherwise, the boycott would have presented a problem.

What was your itinerary?
I was there for 12 days. Half of that time was spent around Durban, which is a textile center and the site of the largest strikes in 1973 which were the beginning of the current period of union activity. The rest of the time was spent in Johannesburg or in Cape Town with a one day stopover in Port Elizabeth.

The Frame Company, which employs 35,000 of the country's 100,000 textile workers, dominates the Durban area. The company is as big, relatively speaking, as G.M. and as recalcitrant as J.P. Stevens. They won't deal with the union.

Many of the Frame workers live in one of the largest hostels in the area, a place called Kronskloof, which I visited. It's an incredible place which covers the top of a hill and houses 10,000 men and 1,000 women, six to a room. There's a police force there which can make raids at any time day or night, making sure that no one is there who's not supposed to be there. If people get fired by Frame, they are evicted from the hostel, and they must leave town within 72 hours.

The only place where the conditions are even worse is the mines. I went into a gold mine, 4,400 feet down, and the working conditions there were unbelievably bad. The white supervisors there spoke something called Fanagalo, a language developed out of English, Afrikaans, Zulu and Xhosa.

It's a language in which one only speaks in the imperative, to give orders. Everything is 'rat-tat-tat.'

What were the South African unionists most anxious to show you?
Their greatest concern was that I saw what things are really like, given the state's propaganda that things are changing for the better.

I also learned something about the unity of the people. I was in a little company town called Hammarsdale where 800 people showed up for a membership meeting. The meeting was illegal, and strikes in the past had been attacked by cops and dogs. But everybody came to hear what this American unionist had to say. Then I really began to feel a sense of solidarity, of workers talking to workers across the oceans.
Apartheid, an Afrikaner word meaning separateness, is the name given by the regime of South Africa to its system of racial segregation, oppression and exploitation. This system enables whites, who comprise less than one fifth of the population, to control the country's affairs.

Apartheid is all-important in South Africa since the rights and freedoms of all persons are established according to the racial group in which they are classified. Apartheid determines where they may live, what work they may do, what type of education they will receive, what political rights, if any, they will have, whom they may marry, the recreational facilities open to them and, more generally, the extent of their freedom of action and movement.

Every person in South Africa is classified by race and is entered into the population register according to that classification. The four main "racial" groups are: whites, denoting persons of European descent; Africans, denoting members of "any aboriginal race or tribe of Africa"; coloureds, who are mainly persons of mixed descent; and Asians, meaning persons of Asian origin.

According to the 1980 census and population estimates, the population by ethnic composition is as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>African</td>
<td>20,900,000</td>
<td>72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>4,500,000</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coloured</td>
<td>2,600,000</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indian</td>
<td>821,000</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>28,821,000</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Census figures for Africans are generally considered low.

Whites have followed a policy of racial segregation since the Dutch-speaking Afrikaners and the English-speaking elements joined to form the Union of South Africa in 1910. In 1948, apartheid became official State policy when the National Party took power. Twenty-nine million persons live in South Africa today. Yet only the 4.5 million whites have full rights of citizenship while the nation's twenty-one million Africans are treated as rightless foreigners.

In 1913 the regime instituted the Land Acts according to which 87% of the land was set aside for the white minority. The rest, that is 13% of the least productive land, was assigned to Africans.

Africans cannot purchase land in areas designated for whites and may not remain in those areas unless they have a permit. The Abolition of Passes and Co-ordination of Documents Act of 1952 provides that every African over 16 must carry a "reference book," a document containing his identity card, fingerprints, photograph, employment record, tax receipts, and permits to be in a "white area," and to travel for the purpose of employment. In 1956 this regulation was extended to African women. An African is guilty of an offence if he or she is not in possession of a reference book.

A complex web of legislation known as the "pass laws" is the key to the administration of apartheid and labour control. Since the National Party came to power in 1948 more than 13 million Africans have been convicted of "pass law" offences. Indians and coloureds must live in segregated areas in the territory reserved for whites.

The areas designated for Africans are called bantustans, homelands or national states. The ten national states are scattered in more than 80 separate and non-contiguous pieces of land. The regime has stated that its policy is to make the homelands "independent." As of 1983 fewer than 10,000,000 Africans, or 46% of the African population, lived in white areas and more than 11,000,000, or 54%, lived in the bantustans. Thus far, the homelands of Transkei, Bophuthatswana, Venda and Ciskei have been declared "independent," but this status has not been recognized by the United Nations or any other country.

In spite of world-wide condemnation, the regime continues to move persons forcibly to the homelands. According to authoritative reports from South Africa, since 1960 more than 3,500,000 blacks (meaning Africans, coloureds and Indians) have been removed from white areas to areas designated for blacks. At least one million more Africans have been forcibly removed within the bantustans. A further 1,700,000 people are under threat of removal.

The South Africa Act of 1909 and the Republic of South Africa Act of 1961 restricts voting for and membership in the governing parliament to whites. In November 1983, white voters endorsed a constitution which will establish a tricameral parliament with separate chambers for whites, coloureds and Indians. Whites retain a monopoly of real power, and the African majority is totally excluded.
Statement on Behalf of Oscar Mpetha

Delivered to South African Consul General Abraham Hopenstein July 20, 1983 by the New York Area Labor Committee Against Apartheid.

As American labor leaders representing hundreds of thousands of workers, we wish to express our concern over the case of Oscar Mpetha, a South African labor leader who was recently sentenced to five years in prison.

We reject as preposterous the charge that Oscar Mpetha, who has devoted his life to the cause of a non-racial labor movement in a non-racial South Africa, incited a crowd of young people to anti-white violence. The state's case was based largely on the testimony of black youths held in detention until they testified. Few of these implicated Mpetha. The New York Times described their testimony as "notable for its inconsistencies."

Oscar Mpetha is 73 years old, suffers from a diabetic condition that could force amputation of his left leg, is incapable of walking, and has developed hypertension during his three year detention. In spite of his age and ill-health he was shackled with leg irons during his trial. It is highly unlikely that Mpetha could survive five years of further imprisonment.

We view Oscar Mpetha's conviction and sentencing as an attack on the entire independent labor movement in South Africa. We are here today to demand that the South African government act immediately to overturn his conviction and cancel his sentence. We urge the American people to join in the campaign for Mpetha's release.

Jack Sheinkman, Secretary-Treasurer, Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers (ACTWU)
Bettye Roberts, President, D.C. 1070, State, County, Municipal (AFSCME)
Sam Meyers, President, Local 259, (UAW)
Ida Torres, President, Local 3, Retail Wholesale Workers (RWDSU)
Bill Nuchow, Secretary-Treasurer, Local 840, Teamsters (IBT)
Henry Foner, President, Furriers Joint Board, Food, Commercial (UFCWU)
Steve Dinzillo, Vice-President, Theatrical & Stage Employees (IATSE)
Jim Bell, President, N.Y. Coalition of Black Trade Unionists (CBTU)
Sylvia Allison, President, Local 741, Service Employees Union (SEIU)
Joe Tarantola, President, Jewelry Workers Union, (SEIU)
Ira Williams, Vice-President, Local 371, (AFSCME)
Norman Lewis, Manager, Local 155, (ILGWU)
Delroy Scott, Manager, Local 40, (ILGWU)
Ruby Jones, Education Director, Local 105, (ILGWU)
George Benson, Assistant Manager, Local 91, (ILGWU)
James Garry, Business Manager, Local 431, Intl. Electrical Workers (IUE)

Terry Fitzgerald, M.D., President, Committee of Interns & Residents (CIR)
Wilfredo Larancuent, Manager, Local 110H, (ACTWU)
Sam Hirsch, Director, Labor-Religious Coalition
Ed Allen, Corporate Campaign
Tom Turley, Business Manager, Local 15, Broadcast Employees (NABET)
Boris Block, Secretary-Treasurer, United Electrical Workers (UE)
Cleveland Robinson, Secretary-Treasurer, District 65, United Auto Workers (UAW)
Jim Butler, President, Local 420, City Hospital Workers, (AFSCME)
Bill Michaelson, President, Store Workers Union, (RWDSU)
Marjorie Acosta, President, Local 8-169, Oil, Chemical Workers (OCAW)
Edgar Romney, President, Local 23-25, Ladies Garment Workers (ILGWU)
Maurice Veneri, President, Industrial Union Council, New Jersey
Josephine Lebeau, Vice-President, Coalition of Labor Union Women (CLUW)
John Hudson, President, Headwear Workers Joint Board, (ACTWU)
Sandy Bermejo, Manager, Local 80H, (ACTWU)
Emagene Walker, President, New York City (CLUW)
Pension Funds Dumping South African Investments

Throughout the country, states and cities are passing legislation to sell all of the public employee pension funds' stocks and bonds in corporations that invest in South Africa. This is one of the most effective ways Americans can protest apartheid because it strikes directly at the U.S. corporations that subsidize South Africa to the tune of $2.5 billion in direct investment and $3.8 billion in bank loans.

Such legislation has passed in Massachusetts, Michigan, Connecticut, and Nebraska, and in the cities of Philadelphia, Washington D.C., Wilmington, and Santa Cruz, among others.

Labor has played a key role in passing these bills. AFSCME's support has been crucial, since that union represents the public employees whose pension money is being invested in South Africa. William Lucy, AFSCME secretary treasurer and president of the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists, recently assured over 100 state and municipal elected officials gathered in the Massachusetts State House that "Whenever we go we will try and continue to press for the kind of legislation that has passed here in Massachusetts."

The UAW successfully lobbied for Michigan legislation to withdraw state educational funds from corporations investing in South Africa and forbid the state to deposit funds in any bank making loans to the apartheid regime. They are currently backing a bill to remove pension funds from South Africa-related corporations.

Both New York State and New York City are considering similar action. Victor Gotbaum, executive director of District Council 37 AFSCME, Jack Sheinkman, secretary-treasurer of ACTWU, and William McGowan, president of the Civil Service Employees Association, have joined church and civil rights leaders in mobilizing support for the New York State bill.

Black Unions Agree to Unite in New Federation

After nearly a year of negotiations, black unions in South Africa representing over 300,000 workers have agreed to form a powerful new federation. The new federation, which will represent the vast majority of unionized black workers, will probably come into being early in 1985. Already the South African press is calling it a "super union" because of its size and because it will unite black workers in most key sectors of the economy.

The key to the successful outcome of the negotiations was the agreement that the new federation will include only industrial unions. Unions that are now active in the same industry will agree not to compete, and eventually it is hoped that mergers will create one union for each industry.

The unions involved are the Federation of South African Trade Unions and the Council of Unions of South Africa, the two black union federations, and the Commercial Catering and Allied Workers Union, the Food and Canning Workers Union, the General Workers Union, and the Cape Town Municipal Workers Association.

They are now starting to draft a constitution for the new federation, which will have to be ratified by each union's annual convention.

A group of general unions which organizes all workers regardless of industry into one union is refusing to come into the new federation. These unions would be welcome if they decided to reorganize themselves along industrial union lines. The best known union which is refusing to join is the South African Allied Workers Union (SAAWU).
Government Operations Committee. Vallone agreed to hold hearings on the bill at the first committee meeting after the mid-June budget crunch.

At the meeting with Vallone were DC 37 Associate Political Action Director Vincent Montalbano, John Hudson of the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers, SSEU Local 371 President Charles Ensley and others from the local, which gave Intro. 619 its start.

“A hearing means we can bring out all the facts and greatly improves our chances to pass the bill,” said Montalbano. “We haven’t counted heads yet, but we have received indications of very strong support on the committee, which is a good cross section of the entire City Council.”

The bill is sponsored by Council President Carol Bellamy and members Ruth Messinger, Wendell Foster, Arthur Katzman, Carolyn Maloney and Enoch Williams.

At the press conference, Messinger said that political leaders opposing apartheid “owe a tremendous debt to the leadership and the rank-and-file members of Local 371, whose outrage at being asked to serve cans of South African pineapple at a shelter for the homeless brought the problem to light and led to introduction of this bill.”

A group of black Institutional Aides at the Park Avenue Armory Shelter discovered the cans and asked their union to take action. Shop Steward Peter Freeman said the pineapple had cost the city little, “because black workers under apartheid are paid next to nothing.”

Ensley, who called South Africa “the most racist, oppressive and condemned government in the world today,” said that banning purchases from South Africa could pave the way for broader “divestment” proposals. These would prohibit investment of public funds, such as public employees’ pension money, in banks or companies which do business in South Africa.