FROM CAMPUS TO CAPE TOWN

Student movement broadens its base

by Joshua Nessen

Our goal was to get the students and community people to support the liberation struggle in southern Africa. Getting the university to divest was important, but we also wanted people to think about the larger issue of South Africa and its relation to the U.S., control of university investments, racism, morality.

— a member of Michigan's divestment movement.

Eight years after Soweto, the campus-based movement against U.S. support of South Africa is still thriving. Not just at Princeton and Harvard, but also at large state schools like the University of Kansas and Washington State University.

The main way student groups are supporting the liberation struggle of black South Africans is by working for divestment: They push their schools to get rid of stock in companies involved in South Africa and to withdraw school funds from banks doing business there. These efforts have forced nine schools to totally divest South Africa-related stocks and encouraged partial divestment of thirty others. The total value of divested stock is estimated to be $150 million.

In working against apartheid, campus organizers face a number of problems. For starters, the composition of the student body changes with every graduating class; when this year's most active seniors move on, a whole new surge of organizing is needed to maintain momentum.

Student bodies are also usually quite isolated from the population surrounding their schools; tensions between students and non-students can often prevent alliances which are crucial to any movement's success. What's more, campus organizing on national issues can feel like the tiniest drop in the bucket; students may wonder if their efforts could possibly make a dent in something as entrenched as apartheid.

Surprisingly, the student divestment movement has come a long way towards overcoming these kinds of obstacles. Campus-based groups are not isolated from the larger anti-apartheid movement, thanks to their ties with state and national organizations like the American Committee on Africa and the American Friends Service Committee. The national groups provide resource materials and links between groups at different schools, coordinate liberation movement speaking tours, and arrange for national strategy meetings. And when students graduate, the national organizations help provide continuity.

Student agitation for divestment has also been felt off-campus. Successful divestment efforts call public attention to the U.S. role in perpetuating white minority rule in South Africa. Even when divestment has not been achieved, student organizing has sparked broader anti-apartheid actions. In particular, over twenty states are currently considering pulling public funds out of companies and banks doing business in South Africa. In the states and cities which have already passed legislation requiring divestment — Michigan, Connecticut, Massachusetts, Philadelphia, and Washington, D.C. — well-publicized divestment efforts have helped create the political climate to make such laws possible.

A Long Road

South Africa is not a new issue on campus. The 1961 Sharpeville massacre, in which South African police gunned down sixty-nine people protesting pass laws, triggered student action at many universities. During the Vietnam War, the anti-apartheid movement faded to secondary importance, although it did not disappear completely. Students for a Democratic Society, for instance, organized a protest on Wall Street against Chase Manhattan Bank because of its loans to South Africa.

After the war, anti-apartheid activism picked up. Key events in Africa fueled student activity, including the 1975 war in Angola and the June 1976 massacre of hundreds of black high school students in Soweto who were protesting the forced use of the white Afrikaans language in their schools. The September 1977 police murder of black consciousness leader Stephen Biko also turned South Africa into a hot issue on campus.

Some student groups were able to bring enough pressure to force divestment relatively early. In April 1977, students occupying a campus building won divestment at Hampshire College in western Massachusetts. The University of Massachusetts followed...
suit that same spring.

At UCLA, in July 1980, anti-apartheid groups were able to elect or influence enough members of the board controlling student funds (on which students held six of ten seats) to transfer $25 million from banks lending to South Africa. Similarly, the Associated Students of Washington State University pulled out the entire student fund account ($300,000) from Seattle First National Bank because it makes loans to South Africa.

Kalamazoo Gets Divestment Too

Usually, students do not directly control school endowments. To get their schools to divest, they must influence administrators and trustees, who are generally white businessmen, many of whose companies do business in South Africa.

One case where steady and consistent pressure from campus groups forced divestment, even in the face of intransigent trustees, is Western Michigan University (WMU). WMU is a public university of 20,000 students in Kalamazoo, Michigan. It is usually overshadowed by its larger state siblings, the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor and Michigan State University in East Lansing, but in terms of forcing divestment, WMU students have especially stood out.

In 1978, a group of only twenty-five students and faculty organized the main anti-apartheid group on campus, the South African Solidarity Organization (SASO). According to Don Van Hoeven, a member of the campus ministry, "We wanted to keep the issue of South Africa in the front of people's minds and connect it with other issues like racism and how the university uses its funds."

SASO focused first on getting the school's Board of Trustees to divest stock in corporations and banks involved in South Africa. When the trustees refused to even consider the idea, SASO shifted, in the words of Van Hoeven, to a more "cold, belligerent stance."

In October 1979, SASO organized a rally to greet the trustees at one of their regularly scheduled meetings. A crowd of 125 demonstrators followed the trustees into the meeting, demanding that they consider the divestment question. When the trustees refused and tried to recess the meeting, the demonstrators staged a sit-in. The university administration called the police, who arrested eleven people on charges of "disrupting a lawful meeting."

The trials did not start until the beginning of the next school year, so the arrests enabled SASO to maintain continuity and get even more students involved. The people who were arrested claimed the demonstration was the only way they had to express their views on WMU's involvement in racism. Their defense worked. After extensive local and statewide media coverage, the jury found all the protesters not guilty.

The following spring (in 1981), student action went even further, pushing the trustees into a position where they had to publicly go on record against South Africa's policies. With local TV reporters behind them, students entered a trustee meeting and proposed that the trustees vote on a resolution condemning apartheid. The chairman of the board tried to avoid the issue, but he was put on the spot when a black trustee also asked for a vote. The board had no choice but to pass the resolution. SASO took the document and widely distributed it, sending copies to the Michigan Congressional delegation, the U.S. State Department and South Africa's ambassador to the U.S.

Once they had officially "condemned" apartheid, SASO had an easier time pressuring the trustees to divest. That same semester, the school's faculty senate passed a divestiture resolution. And once again, the presence of national coordination paid off. WMU activists were able to generate more interest among their classmates by plugging into a national speaking tour of South African activists.

In 1981 and 1982, the WMU Board of Trustees took its investments out of South African-related banks; in 1983, they went further, pulling out from corporations as well.

Moving Beyond WMU

With the help of faculty members in the campus ministry and school of social work, SASO was able to extend its divestment drive outside the university. With off-campus groups including churches, unions, and the NAACP, SASO was part of a coalition pushing a bill in the state legislature. The bill, which passed in December 1982, required all educational institutions in the state to divest their stock in companies involved in South Africa. Approximately $80 million in public education funds were affected by this bill.

The students went down to testify before the legislature, but their biggest contribution came from their successes on campus. The divestments, at WMU and one worth $12 million at Michigan State University, made statewide divestment seem plausible to the lawmakers. At the same time, the possibility of getting this legislation through the State house spurred organizing and action on campus.

The student divestment movement has played a similar role in other states. In the same year Michigan passed its divestment bill, the Massachusetts state legislature was overriding former Governor Ed King's veto of a similar bill—one that mandated the divestment of $90 million in state
pension fund money linked to South Africa through U.S. firms. As in Michigan, five years of persistent student organizing, and divestment victories at Hampshire College and University of Massachusetts made it easier for non-student groups to advocate divestment on the state level.

The Anti-Apartheid Coalition at Williams College in Williamstown, Massachusetts, has been one of the most hardworking student organizations. A hunger strike in 1981 by two members of the Coalition helped force divestment of almost $700,000 invested in the Newmont Mining Company—a firm running large operations in Namibia and South Africa. Another hunger strike in 1983 didn't bring any further divestment, but it did attract national publicity and sparked the re-formation of a regional student coalition in New England.

At Williams, the issue of apartheid has been tied in with racial incidents on campus. In November 1980, several "hooded and robed" people burned a cross outside a building where the Black Student Union was holding a party. Because of this and several other incidents, the Anti-Apartheid Coalition joined forces with the Black Student Union. Together, they demanded demand divestment and called for more black tenure faculty and an expanded Afro-American Studies program as well.

The Lessons Learned

There's every kind of indication that these kinds of victories are going to continue. In October 1983, 300 student and community organizers from twenty-four states came together at a National Student Anti-Apartheid Conference convened by the American Committee on Africa. The conference planned two weeks of demonstrations and other actions for this spring.

This meeting reinforced several trends in the student movement for divestment. Once again, national coordination and assistance is giving local groups a greater chance of being effective. Students have also learned that they can use the isolation of the college environment to their advantage; even small numbers can force an institution to pull millions of dollars out of South Africa. The ability of the groups to get good media coverage and support from other constituencies on and off campus is often the key to such victories.

Students are also seeing they can play a crucial role in catalyzing the broader anti-apartheid movement. The achievement of campus divestment and well-publicized organizing efforts help keep the media focused on South Africa.

Finally, the most successful student groups have not seen divestment as an end in itself. Instead, they have been able to use the process of mobilizing for divestment as a way of educating the community about the role of U.S. corporate investments in South Africa. This is of crucial assistance to the liberation movement because it has created an atmosphere that will help restrain further U.S. support of white minority rule as apartheid is increasingly challenged.