November 9, 1984

Dear Friend,

The South African government yesterday jailed without charge or trial nine labor, student and community leaders. Their "crime" was to lead a two-day general strike against recent South African police violence which has left over 130 black protestors dead since September. Another 24 people were killed as the police moved to crush the largest political strike in the country's history. The main targets of the police raids were the Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU), the largest black union federation in South Africa, the Congress of South African Students (COSAS) and the United Democratic Front (UDF), which leads the campaign against the new South African constitution.

Under South Africa's Internal Security Act people can be held in detention "for an indefinite period" in solitary confinement without any access to lawyers or family. South African political prisoners have faced torture and even death in detention. This leads to serious fears for the safety of the nine who have just been detained.

Those detained include: Moses Mayekiso, a member of the FOSATU national executive, Themba Nonhlantane of the Municipal Workers Union, Thami Mali of the United Democratic Front, Peter Mogopa, regional chairman of the Student Congress, and student leader Obed Bapela.

Strong international protests may be their best hope for early release. We urge you to send a telegram immediately to President P.W. Botha, Union Buildings, Pretoria, S.A. We hope you will send a copy of the telegram to the Federation of South Africa Trade Unions, 2 Goodhope Street, Belville South, Cape Town 7530, S.A., and to the United Democratic Front, 42 De Villiers St., Johannesburg 2000, S.A. This will let people who live in constant fear of arrest and detention know that they have support abroad.

It is also important to urge the Reagan Administration to issue a strong protest to the South Africans. A spokesperson for the UDF charged that these detentions were delayed until the results of the U.S. Presidential election were known. We urge you to send a telegram to Secretary of State George Shultz, Washington, DC 20520.

We hope you will act immediately.

In solidarity,

Jennifer Davis
Executive Director
Political Strike Leaves 17 Dead In South Africa

By Allister Sparks
Special to The Washington Post

JOHANNESBURG, Nov 6.—South Africa's industrial heartland was brought to a near standstill for the second straight day today as hundreds of thousands of workers stayed home in the biggest political strike by blacks in the country's history.

The two-day work stoppage, called by a joint committee of black political organizations and labor unions, was marked by rioting, arson and police shootings in some areas. Seventeen persons were reported to have been killed in the two days of clashes.

This brought to 97 the number who have died in racial unrest during the past two months. More than 500 others have been injured and about 2,000 arrested.

The strike was peaceful in black townships south of Johannesburg where more than 90 percent of workers stayed home. An estimated 85 percent of workers in townships east of Johannesburg, scene of the worst violence, and 66 percent of those in Johannesburg's main black township of Soweto, which has an estimated population of 1.5 million, also refused to work.

White managers manned the checkout counters at supermarkets in downtown Johannesburg. Several stores closed down for the two days in satellite cities along the gold-rich Witwatersrand which stretches in a narrow belt along both sides of this metropolis.

The strike was called to protest the government's heavy-handed response to attempts by the segregated township dwellers to air a range of grievances, which include their lack of political rights under the country's segregationist system called apartheid, increased rentals for their state-owned houses and what they consider to be their inferior system of segregated education.

Instead of meeting with community leaders to hear their complaints, the white authorities have taken the view that the grievances are not genuine and that the protests are the work of political trouble-makers who must be quelled.

South Africa's giant state-owned oil-from-coal corporation, Sasol, announced tonight that it had fired 90 per cent of its black labor force—estimated at 6,000 workers—for participating in the two-day protest.

In Washington, State Department spokesman John Hughes said, "We do not believe that violence holds the solution to the complex problems of South Africa.

"Rather, as President Reagan stated in his letter to Bishop [Desmond] Tutu on winning the Nobel Peace Prize last month, 'We continue to urge the South African government to engage in a meaningful dialogue with all its citizens aimed at accomplishing a peaceful transition away from apartheid.'"

No one here can recall a previous occasion when there was such a big response by black workers to a call for a general strike to make a political point.

There have been many attempts. The idea that the white government might one day be brought down by blacks withholding their labor has acquired an almost mystical place in the political philosophy of the black working class.

But economic insecurity has defeated these attempts in the past. A black man who fails to turn up for work in South Africa is likely to be fired; and the loss of his job can mean the loss of the right to remain in the city, followed by repatriation to a remote and poverty-stricken tribal "homeland."

Cassim Saloojee, an executive member of a large new black alliance called the United Democratic Front, believes that new political awareness and self-confidence has developed in the black community in recent years, which is only now beginning to reveal itself. He finds it particularly significant that the strike has been supported during South Africa's deepest economic recession in 50 years, with black unemployment at record levels.

"This has important long-term implications," Saloojee added. "The government is going to have to think its traditional method of dealing with black protests with a big stick, because it is not going to work any more."

One reason for the tougher attitude among black workers, Saloojee believes, is that a change in the apartheid laws six years ago allowed them to form labor unions, and a potentially powerful labor movement has emerged.

For the first time, three of the major unions, including miners, metal-workers and the 150,000-member Federation of South African Trade Unions, have allied themselves with the United Democratic Front and other black groups in calling for the work stoppage in Transvaal Province. The metal workers are particularly strong on the eastern Witwatersrand, which is thought to be one reason why the strike was so strongly supported there.

The township demonstrations have been laced with criminality since they began in early September. This has encouraged the government in its view that it is dealing with something less than genuine grievances.

The campaign organizers, for their part, accuse the police of inflaming emotions by breaking up demonstration groups with tear gas, rubber bullets, shotguns and leather whips. They say this causes some enraged youths to go on a rampage and when the police have arrested them, criminal elements join in the lawlessness.

The worst violence during the strike has occurred in the townships of Tembisa and Katlehong on the eastern Witwatersrand. Troops were moved into Tembisa today after youths blocked all streets with barricades made of stones, overturned automobiles and burning tires.

According to a police version, the youths stoned government buildings and buses that were taking a few strikers to work and set fire to three coaches of a train they had ambushed.

The unrest has also been showing signs of spreading to eastern Cape Province, the center of the South African automobile industry. Ford, General Motors and Volkswagen have laid off several hundred black workers from assembly plants there this week, and the men have joined students stoning buses and government buildings.