FORUM ON SOUTH AFRICA IN CHICAGO DRAWS 750 TO DEBATE DIVESTMENT

Carolc Collins/ Bob Van Meter - March 3, 1979

The largest political meeting on the University of Chicago campus in a decade took place on Tuesday, Feb. 27th when over 750 students, faculty and others heard six speakers address the issue of corporate involvement in So. Africa. The forum, initiated and sponsored by the University of Chicago Action Committee on South Africa with funding from the University administration, focussed on implications of the University's role as a corporate investor in South Africa.

Forum participants included former Senator Dick Clark (D-Iowa), currently a special representative for refugees in the Carter Administration; Jennifer Davis, Research Director of the American Committee on Africa in New York; John Chejtle, a lobbyist for the South Africa Foundation; Zola Zembe, executive member of the South African Congress of Trade Unions; University of Chicago President Hanna Gray; and Kinsey Wilson representing the Action Committee on South Africa.

The forum marked a new stage in the 2-year campaign for University divestiture. First organized in the fall of 1977, the Action Committee has collected 2400 signatures on petitions calling for University divestiture. Despite this, the Administration and Trustees had, until now, been unwilling to publicly defend their position. University of Chicago President Hanna Gray, inaugurated in October 1978 as the first women president in the history of the University, let it be know, however, that she was interested in a "discussion" of the issue of divestiture. The Action Committee responded by calling on Gray to participate in a public forum. In an effort to maintain an image of openness and responsiveness to students, Gray agreed to participate. The illusion of Gray's "responsiveness," however, disappeared Tuesday night.

While several speakers dealt with the harsh realities of life under Apartheid and the role of US corporations in South Africa, Gray virtually ignored the specifics of life for black South Africans and the corporate role in supporting Apartheid. She focussed instead on conveying her understanding of what constituted the "fiduciary responsibility" of the University Trustees. After reading from the relevant Illinois State law, Gray stated that divestment is "incompatible with the responsibilities of the trustees." Though admitting that exceptional cases, of a social or political nature, exist that would confer "extraordinary obligations" on the University Trustees to alter University investment policy differently, Gray refused to state what these were or why South African investment was not a case of "overriding importance."

Kinsey Wilson, speaking for the Action Committee on South Africa, drew an enthusiastic response from the large crowd when he pointed out "we must be prepared to act" and that "the discussion of divestment is not a luxury afforded black South Africans." He argued that racism in South Africa is the result of a system built on economic exploitation of black workers. "University divestment should not be viewed as an isolated act but as part of an international movement for the economic and political isolation of South Africa." said Wilson. Ending his speech to a standing ovation from the student audience Wilson called for open hearings on South African divestment at which the Trustees must be present to defend their position. The hearings should be followed by a University-wide referendum which would determine the final decision of the Trustees.
Former Senator Clark called South Africa "the most racist nation on earth." Clark told the university gathering that the United Auto Workers, the AFL-CIO and the NAACP have all endorsed corporate withdrawal from South Africa.

Clark said that he personally thought universities have a "great responsibility" to discontinue their loans to and investment in South Africa. While saying "at this point" he does not support full divestment, Clark added that it was "neither right nor wise to promote corporate activity in South Africa."

Clark argued that we must work to end such things as tax credits for investment in South Africa; encourage progressive labor and other guidelines for corporate investors in South Africa; limit capital flow to South Africa; and work to withhold private endorsements of such investment by bodies such as the United States Chamber of Commerce. Clark ended his statement by saying that Americans must acknowledge "the full extent of US support for Apartheid."

Clark, defeated in November's Congressional election, recently was appointed a roving Ambassador for Refugee Affairs administering a budget of $600 million for refugee aid.

John Chettle, a lobbyist and director of the South Africa Foundation, defended South African policies and continued foreign investment there, arguing that the fundamental question is whether blacks in South Africa desire corporate withdrawal. Stating that the process of desegregation in South Africa is the same as that which took place in this country in the 1950s and 1960s, he claimed that South Africa was ahead of the US in areas such as its national health scheme for blacks. Chettle, whose South Africa Foundation arranges tours for prospective investors in South Africa, told the audience that at least two prominent black Americans, Vernon Jordan and Kenneth Clark, found no support among South African blacks for corporate withdrawal.

Chettle quoted Kwazulu homeland chief Gatsha Buthelezi as supporting continued investment. Chettle claimed no responsible black leaders in South Africa advocate withdrawal, but this view was challenged by Jennifer Davis noting that South African law defines advocacy of corporate withdrawal as a terrorist act subject to prosecution. In closing, Chettle said that withdrawal wouldn't bring down the South African economy and indeed would impede the eradication of prejudice.

Davis, herself a South African exile, noted that corporate reforms such as the Sullivan principles are not helping black workers but "merely buying time for Apartheid." Davis said people are beginning to challenge the view that 'what is good for GM is good for the country' -- "not just on this campus but everywhere in the country." She noted that if anyone should have reformed themselves by now, GM should have, since Sullivan sits on their board of directors, but that their record is as bad as most other foreign investors in SA. American investment increased from $120 million in 1950 to $1.4 billion in 1975, Davis said. "If the Reverend Sullivan is right we should now have a black prime minister in South Africa. I haven't noticed any." Referring to the bantustan policy praised by Chettle, Davis cited a SA news story that reported that 1.4 million potential Transkeian citizens living in South Africa outside the Transkei 'homeland' boundaries, only 59 took out Transkeian citizenship in the last 2 years.
Zola Zembe, an exiled trade unionist who serves as an executive member of the South African Congress of Trade Unions, also attacked the idea that corporations play a "progressive role" in South Africa as he described conditions of life for blacks under Apartheid in SA. Zembe pointed out that the trade unions that do exist for African workers have no right to strike and no right to negotiate. He noted that Chief Buthelezi, oft-quoted by apologists for foreign investment, is an employee of the South African government. He characterized codes of conduct such as those proposed by the EEC and Reverend Sullivan as useless because of reliance on voluntary compliance. He went on "This is the first time I have been in this kind of meeting. And, most importantly, to sit next to my friend here [pointing to Chettle]. We don't know each other at all. In South Africa our relations would be that of a master and servant. I would have to enter his house from the back door."

In the following question and answer period, most questions were directed at President Gray. Several people asked what position Gray had taken when Morgan Guaranty Trust decided to continue loaning money not only to South African corporations but to the government. Gray refused to answer the question directly, responding with generalities about her role as an "independent public director" of the bank.

Speaking from the floor, South African poet and exiled activist Dennis Brutus addressed Gray "Is she aware that people in South Africa are not interested in cosmetic changes. We are not interested in having our shackles polished but in having them removed. It is clear that the fiduciary responsibility of the university involves profiting from exploitation.... These represent immoral earnings... and, through the creation of bantustans, the structure of oppression is being intensified while the University debates what should be done."

Following the forum, Gray was surrounded by a crowd of about 30 students who continued to debate with her for more than an hour. Finally Gray admitted that she had indeed voted with the rest of the Morgan board to continue loans to South Africa, including the government there.

Action Committee members termed the event "a victory." One member said "Gray's position is the same as the Trustees' position last year but our support has increased tremendously." The Action Committee plans to continue its campaign during the spring campus week of action April 4-11.