Resurgence of Anti-Apartheid Organizing Marked by Coordinated Student Anti-Apartheid Actions and National Legislative Divestment Conference April 15-16

New York, N.Y. April 22....A dramatic upsurge in anti-apartheid organizing is taking place throughout the country, particularly in the northeastern United States. April 15-16 was marked by coordinated student protests and a national conference focused on divestment legislation sparked by the successful passage of bills divesting $300 million of public monies in 1982.

On April 15th and 16th protests were held at Harvard University, Amherst College, Williams College, Dartmouth College and Wesleyan University calling for divestiture of all stock-holdings linked to South Africa, and in Albany a community alliance targeted Caldors store for its sale of headwear made in South Africa. These actions were a direct outgrowth of a Northeast regional conference organized by the American Committee on Africa (ACOA) in March that had targeted those dates. Following this coordinated action, students at Harvard University initiated a hunger strike on April 18 in opposition to Harvard's investment of $490 million linked to South Africa and on April 27 a rally will be held to back up the demand for divestment. The Williams College Anti-Apartheid Coalition is supporting the Harvard demand with vigils through April 27 and organizers at Columbia University are holding daily vigils this week which will culminate in an April 26 rally demanding that President Sovern respond to the University Senate's unanimous vote for total divestiture.

On the very days of the April 15-16 coordinated student actions, a national Conference on Public Investment and South Africa was held in Boston that brought together legislators from 23 states where divestment legislation has been introduced. The conference was organized by ACOA and Mass Divest, the state-wide coalition responsible for the passage of a bill divesting all Massachusetts pension fund money linked to South Africa. The legislators assembled there formally called on all U.S. schools to divest their funds linked to South Africa and also joined the student movement in condemning the Sullivan Principles--a code for corporate conduct in South Africa that has been used as a rationale for continued investment. In addition, the legislators fully supported the campaign to save six condemned members of the African National Congress of South Africa (the ANC SIX), a campaign that has been a major focus of student organizing this spring.
These actions on April 15-16 and subsequent follow-up built on a more general spring mobilization highlighted by an April 6 National Armband Day focused on the campaign to save the ANC Six.

In New York City on April 6 2000 people wearing black armbands held a candlelight vigil and rally outside the South African Mission to the United Nations calling for a halt to the execution of the ANC Six. On that same day in Baltimore a coalition of community groups spearheaded by the National Black Independent Political Party (NBIPP) rallied outside the City Council demanding passage of a resolution calling for clemency for the six condemned men. This action followed a March 20 protest against the importation of South African and Namibian uranium through the port of Baltimore. Albany was the site of a large commemoration of the Sharpeville Massacre on March 20 which was followed by an all-day teach-in and a vigil on April 6 in support of the ANC Six. A coalition of community groups and trade unionists then organized an April 16 picket of Caldors, a store selling headwear made in South Africa.

The ANC Six campaign also received strong support in Michigan, Illinois, Kentucky, Oregon, New Hampshire, California, Wisconsin, Ohio, Arkansas, Massachusetts and New Jersey--states where thousands of signatures were gathered and letters sent to the South African State President opposing the planned execution of the six ANC members. At Stockton State College, near Atlantic City, a march was held April 6 and students were also active in lobbying the Atlantic City Council which on April 15 decided to divest city funds in corporations and banks doing business with South Africa.

Student protests for divestment have paralleled the ANC Six campaign throughout the semester. At Rutgers University in New Brunswick, NJ students staged protests for divestment on March 9 and 16th that involved more than 300 participants each time. On March 16 an equally large rally was held at Oberlin College in Ohio for the same demand. A week later on March 23 over 300 Cornell University students also demonstrated for divestment of all stocks linked to South Africa. In late March the Columbia University Senate then voted 52-0 for total divestment, and several hundred students backed up the vote with a protest outside the trustee meeting on April 4.

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In January a hunger strike for divestment took place at Williams College and was followed by an April 6 forum in support of the campaign to save the ANC Six. The Williams Anti-Apartheid Coalition then organized a fast on April 14 that raised $1000 for southern African refugees and build support for a rally and vigil outside an April 15 trustee meeting. In response to student action the Williams College faculty passed a resolution on April 20 calling on the trustees to adopt a stronger policy than the Sullivan Principles on South Africa linked investments. Encouraged by region-wide actions, Amherst College students held an April 15 rally that surrounded the building where the trustees were meeting, and on that same day Dartmouth College was the site of a pro-divestment action. Students at Wesleyan University held an open meeting and protest against their trustees' refusal to back divestment on April 15 and 16th, and on the 15th the Harvard South Africa Solidarity Coalition also organized a rally for divestment. Harvard organizers have also called on graduating seniors to withhold contributions to the university endowment till all Harvard stocks linked to South Africa are divested. This activity set the stage for initiation of the hunger strike at Harvard University on April 18 which schools throughout the region are supporting.

The general anti-apartheid organizing effort this spring has been strengthened by a national tour of the anti-apartheid play "For Better Not For Worse", written by exiled South African playwright and ANC member Selaelo Maredi. The American Committee on Africa has organized performances at 50 campus and community theatres in the following states: Kentucky, Iowa, California, Illinois, Texas, Arkansas, Michigan, New York, New Jersey, Oregon, Washington, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Colorado, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, New Hampshire and Massachusetts.

In order to consolidate the gains made in anti-apartheid organizing this spring, the American Committee on Africa has organized a Northeast Regional Anti-Apartheid Conference for Saturday April 30 noon-6PM at Amherst College in Converse Hall (Amherst, Mass). A major strategy to be discussed will be a call for student groups nationwide to hold protests for divestment during upcoming commencement exercises.