SPRING 1985 U.S. STUDENT UPSURGE AGAINST INVESTMENT IN SOUTH AFRICA: 
THE REASONS AND SIGNIFICANCE

"In one Respect at least, the divestment forces have already won. They have prevented--discouraged, dissuaded whatever you call it--billions of dollars of new U.S. investment in South Africa."

The words are those of ardent divestment foe John Chettle of the South Africa Foundation, an organization comprised of leading South African and U.S. companies.

What Chettle grudgingly admits (and university trustees deny) underscores the fundamental political point about divestment that we organizers must keep in mind. The divestment of school stocks in companies linked to South Africa is not an end in itself. Rather it is one means to discourage corporate investment in South Africa. This is no abstract matter. For such discouragement concretely aids the liberation struggle by depriving the white minority regime of resources needed to sustain apartheid in South Africa and Namibia.

That is why the wave of protest this spring has been a phenomenal and important success. By blockading, sitting-in, and rallying on their campuses students each and every day discourage U.S. investment in South Africa. Our target, and I repeat target not goal has been and remains stock divestment. But if the trustees won't act, then we by our acts can and have been directly affecting the investment climate.

This is why President Oliver Tambo of the African National Congress nine days ago congratulated the Columbia University students for their significant contribution to the liberation struggle--a contribution unrelated to any action or inaction by the Columbia Trustee Board. As my friend and comrade David Ndaba of the ANC often comments, the process of organizing for divestment is a "no lose" way to support the liberation struggle and a "no win" situation for the South African Government.

Reasons For The Upsurge

Dear friends, we are now at an unprecedented moment for the anti-apartheid movement in this country. The convening of this hearing bears witness to the protests on over 100 campuses this spring including some form of blockade or sit-in at: Columbia, UC/Berkeley, Rutgers, Cornell (where over 1000 have been arrested), Tufts, Harvard, Louisville, University of Wisconsin, Oberlin, University of Iowa, UMASS/Amherst, UCLA, State University of New York, Vassar, UC/Santa Cruz, University of Florida and University of Kansas. We have stopped business as usual.

I have begun by stressing the general impact of this action. Let me briefly now try to explain why in Spring 1985 we have seen a qualitative growth in the power and breadth of our organizing on campus:

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1) First of all, the basic determinant has been the nationwide struggle in South Africa which has escalated since summer 1984 to the accompaniment of brutal repression and massacre by the South African Army and Police.

Beginning with organizing against the so-called "Reform" constitution, spearheaded by the United Democratic Front, the level of coordination between labor, student and community groups has been unprecedented. A key part of this has involved coordinated and unplanned mass action that has increasingly rendered the townships of South Africa ungovernable.

Let us be clear: It is the willingness of the South African and Namibian people to give their lives to achieve freedom that has spurred us to organize so intently, and finally forced the mass media of this country to take account of the daily horrors of apartheid.

This spring the massacre in Uitenhage on the 25th Anniversary of the Sharpeville massacre gave fresh impetus to our efforts right as two weeks of national action (March 21-April 6) began.

2) Mention of the mass media and Weeks of Action brings me to the second reason why in Spring 1985 we have seen this wave of activity.

Put simply, there has been a strong and nationally coordinated anti-apartheid student movement in this country since the 1976 Soweto Uprisings.

South African divestment has been the most consistent issue on college campuses for the past eight years. After an initial focus in 1977 and 1978, media attention disappeared. Whether it was on national news or not, between 1978-1985 steady educational work and rallies occurred on hundreds of campuses--and in fact over 40 schools wholly or partially divested a total of $175 million in South Africa linked holdings. It is this consistent work--which has totally delegitimized the Sullivan Code and Trustee approach--that is now bearing fruit.

During all this time, the American Committee on Africa, I am proud to say, has played the major role in coordinating national and regional student actions and in providing the data on U.S. corporate investment in South Africa and Namibia. The American Committee on Africa (ACOA) with the invaluable assistance of the UN Special Committee Against Apartheid organized national student conferences in 1981 and 1983 (this latter involving 350 students from 26 states), and the weeks of action in 1982 and 1984 gave a focal point to organizing and built some media awareness.

This year's Weeks of Action and the April 4 National Protest Day involved over 50 campuses and numerous cities, including a NYC march on Mobil Oil. The national protest day as conceived by ACOA at a mass student meeting in January was specifically designed to encourage civil disobedience. As students agreed in Northeast, Midwest and Southern Regional conferences, what had been lacking for several years in the movement were militant tactics that could heighten public and media awareness.

Following the example of the Free South Africa Movement (but at less symbolic targets) the time for direct militant action had arrived.
3) One can prepare the kindling, but one needs the spark to set the fire going. While national organizations might play an indispensable coordinating and initiating role, it is ultimately from the local level that the heat must come.

As we are all aware, the Columbia Coalition for a Free South Africa provided the spark. Clearly it was the political cohesion and commitment of the Coalition that explains why the blockade strategy emerged successfully at Columbia. But they also had to be in the right place. Columbia does have advantages (as it did in 1968) in that it is in a global media center and its ruling class connections mean that it commands attention. But most critically, Columbia University epitomizes the undemocratic corporate character that masquerades behind the liberal veneer of most U.S. colleges and universities. Underneath its educational facade, Columbia is a notorious slumlord, an anti-union employer and has a Trustee Board characterized above all by its corporate connections. Sitting in the midst of Harlem, Columbia has exactly one Black Trustee out of 22 members.

Students know and experience this, for of course this institutional arrogance emerges in the university response to divestment organizing. The environment as it did in 1968 makes for very determined organizers who know the system doesn’t work and that business as usual cannot go on. Once the pressure boiled over at Columbia, around the country students who all face the same basic institutional situation, were ready to move.

4) A fourth reason for the spread of the movement, has been the significant successes of the legislative divestment movement which has led to action in 5 states and over 15 cities affecting $1.3 billion in South Africa-linked holdings. This growing movement has provided the student movement with powerful allies (notably unions) and also served as a source of encouragement.

5) The fifth major reason that must be mentioned is our national misleadership. The presence of an avowed ally of South African apartheid (and fascism generally) in the White House, has made local student and community organizers feel that they must act directly and strongly to end U.S. ties to South Africa.

Those in brief are some of the major reasons behind the upsurge on campuses this spring. I have already mentioned that this organizing has further discouraged U.S. investment in South Africa and it should be noted that since Fall 1984 CUNY, Washington State University, Evergreen State College (all total divestments) as well as Yale, Brown, Harvard and in the last two weeks Dartmouth ($2 million) and Grinnell ($9 million) have taken divestment action. Most significantly, in the midst of state-wide divestment protests on campuses and elsewhere the Pension Board in San Francisco voted to divest $335 million in South Africa-linked holdings.

Beyond the impact on South Africa this upsurge has already had an impact in transforming the dynamics of campus life and laying to rest prevalent myths about student conservatism. This widespread political activity against apartheid can serve to involve students in a range of issues (from racism at home to Central America work) in a way that opposition to the Vietnam War played a catalytic role in the 1960s.

Hopefully, we can sustain politically and organizationally this momentum. And towards this end the American Committee on Africa is calling for an October 11 National Protest Day and requests the assistance of the Special Committee in organizing for a National Conference in November. This movement is critical. For when we argue for divestment, we are challenging the profit-based priorities of a corporation-based economic system and the unchanging position of successive U.S. administrations in support of those priorities. We are opening up a front in the war to transform U.S. society, and to the extent that we win this battle we are helping ourselves as well as the people of southern Africa.
I have been involved in this struggle since 1976 and have watched American students stand by their comrades in Soweto and now in Uitenhage. Let me say that as a long-time activist working closely with the Columbia Blockaders has been the highlight of my organizing in support of the southern African struggle and for change in this country.

When that blockade began April 4 I felt and I feel it here now with all of you, that we are changing history. No, you can't stop the rain and freedom's reign is coming.