U.S. YOUTH AND STUDENTS AT THE CROSSROADS

paper prepared by: Lisa A. Crooms and Joshua Nessen
The American Committee on Africa

for

Fighting for Freedom
International Student Conference in Solidarity
with the
Students of Southern Africa

31 July - 3 August 1987
Goldsmith's College, the University of London
Members of the U.S. anti-apartheid/southern Africa solidarity community have an important responsibility to fulfill in the international movement. This unique role is shaped within the parameters of the economic, diplomatic and ideological relationships between the U.S. and South Africa. South Africa's white settler dominated repressive apartheid state is fueled by U.S. dollars, is tacitly supported by the U.S. government and is seen as the last hope for ("democracy") capitalism in the southern Africa region. Apartheid serves as an outpost for Western imperialist expansionism under which all conflicts are placed in a simplistic East-West/Cold War framework at the expense of the peoples of the Third World, in general, and the masses of southern Africa, in particular.

Given these realities the U.S. southern Africa solidarity community has begun to wage a war against U.S./South African propaganda in order to let the truth be told. Needless to say, the current intricate disinformation network in the Western world is financed by millions of dollars which represent the blood, sweat and tears of the exploited international Third World community, particularly in the U.S. and southern Africa. These Third World peoples have taken up the gauntlet of protest against the powerful capitalist machine and are determined to see apartheid in all its various forms destroyed. Historically, people of color have been at the forefront of this U.S. struggle to assist in the dismantling of apartheid as well as cutting all U.S./South Africa ties. In particular, students and youth of African descent have played an integral role in this process.

The U.S. student/youth anti-apartheid movement is at a crossroads. Following two years of growth and impact paralleling the revolutionary upsurge in South and southern Africa, the U.S. movement is presently faced with a profound crisis and challenge. The crisis, manifested in the slowing down of anti-apartheid activity this year and divisions at the local level, is due to a combination of factors. These factors include:

1) internal contradictions/weaknesses, particularly racism within the movement as well as the continual problem of student turnover;

2) the very success of the campus-based movement in achieving divestment combined with the achievement of partial sanctions against South Africa; and

3) developments in southern Africa, especially the success of the apartheid regime's press blackout of mounting protest and repression inside the country.

The challenge before U.S. youth and student activists is how to remain a dynamic and catalytic force in support of the revolutionary process in southern Africa. Given the present crisis this means addressing the following issues:

(1) racism in this country;

(2) maintaining a militant local action focus in the face of total divestment successes and pseudo "total" divestments (those which
exclude allegedly withdrawing companies such as IBM, GM, Ford, and Coca-Cola); and

(3) relating more directly and creatively to the liberation struggle, particularly the activities of South African and Namibian youth and students.

Beyond this there is the pressing need to reach beyond college campuses and build support and encourage networking among untapped constituencies such as high school students and youth.

In order to determine how to proceed it is vitally important to assess how the student/youth movement has arrived at this particular juncture. With such an historical perspective, we can then determine how the movement can build on its strengths while also redressing its weaknesses.

**Historical Overview**

Student anti-apartheid organizing has always been inextricably linked to events in southern Africa. In the 1960's Students for a Democratic Society held demonstrations targeting banks lending to South Africa after the Sharpeville Massacre. This period was also marked by protests calling on schools to divest of stocks in apartheid linked companies. In addition, within the African-American community the African Liberation Support Committee's organizing of African Liberation Day in 1972 provided a catalyst for the involvement of many students and youth of African descent. There were also important initiatives within this same community in opposition to U.S. and South African intervention in Angola in 1975-6. For student organizing per se, the key development was the 1976 Soweto uprising which was the catalyst for the birth of mass campus-based activity focusing on South Africa with divestment being an essential handle. U.S. students were both inspired by the radicalism of South African youth and students and shocked into action by the regime's brutal massacre of unarmed schoolchildren.

During 1977 and 1978 the movement grew rapidly. This growth was spurred by key sit-ins on campuses such as Hampshire College, Princeton and Stanford. This activity was also assisted by intra-school coordination through regional coalitions in areas such as the Northeast and the Midwest as well as state-wide organizations such as that formed in California.

Between 1979 and 1984 there was considerably less media focus, intra-school coordination and militant actions. However, during this period there was a slow and steady process of organization building and political education which would contribute to the upsurge beginning in the Spring of 1985. This five year period was also marked by decentralized national mobilizations such as the Weeks of Spring Action (March 21-April 4) initiated by the American Committee on Africa which were designed to help provide a national focus for activity as well as a sense of national momentum.

During this stage both the strengths of the divestment demand and its political weaknesses became evident. By placing the organizing focus on the school itself, campus divestment movements were able to mobilize students around their outrage at their institution's direct complicity in
apartheid. In a more political sense, this complicity was also a way of highlighting the exploitative nature of U.S. based transnational corporations and their influence over allegedly "politically neutral" educational institutions. The most successful movements, such as that at Princeton University, highlighted not only U.S. corporate support of apartheid but also, the conflicts of interest of corporate connected Board of Trustee members.

As in the period immediately following the Soweto Uprising, the upsurge in campus organizing in 1985 was integrally related to the rising level of protest inside South Africa. The revolutionary upsurge inside South Africa from Fall 1984 onward has shaken the apartheid regime to its roots and inspired more militant and effective action on both U.S. campuses and in the community. The emergence of direct action tactics in Spring 1985, sparked by the three week Columbia University blockade, was also the result of lessons learned from the 1979-84 period.

Despite years of public rallies, petitions and other traditional approaches, Trustee Boards were not put under sufficient political pressure to divest in all but a few cases. Activists realized that given the undemocratic character of the institutional conflicts of interest, it was necessary to take the struggle outside of legal/administrative channels to obtain results. In planning discussions for 1985 Weeks of Action, students also took note the success of the Free South Africa Movement protests at the South African Embassy in Washington, D.C. in mobilizing political opposition to U.S. ties to apartheid.

As major demonstrations took place across the country, activists called for an April 24 national Protest Day which was marked on well over 100 campuses and in numerous communities often with protests precipitating a wave of Trustee decisions to fully divest South Africa linked holdings. The momentum of campus protest was maintained during the school year of 1985-6 with the assistance of National Protest Days on October 11, 1985 and April 4, 1986 and above all local creativity. The key development in terms of divestment organizing was the emergence of shantytowns which both symbolized Black living conditions in South Africa and served as a means to escalate the campus struggle beyond legal rallies. Following the well-publicized right-wing attack on the Dartmouth College shantytown, shanties were built on over 60 campuses in the Spring of 1986. One of the most militant struggles occurred at the University of California at Berkley where hundreds of students built a massive shantytown and resisted brutal police efforts to remove them for three days in early April. Shortly thereafter, the Republican Governor of California came out in favor of full divestment and Regents voted to divest of $3.1 billion in South Africa linked holdings.

This success was replicated nationwide such that between 1985 and the present over 60 schools have voted to fully divest, whereas between 1977 and 1984 only 15 had done so. In October 1986 the passage of limited federal sanctions over the veto of President Reagan also reflected the continued student, youth and community grassroots pressure, as did divestment action in dozens of cities and states.

On many campuses, however, the divestment demand was seen purely in moral terms and as an end in itself rather than a means to support the
liberation struggle. With divestment seen as the end, too many activists quickly became frustrated when university trustees would not give in to their demands. In addition, the view of divestment as purely a moral issue meant that insufficient attention was paid to building direct political and material support for the liberation movements of South Africa and Namibia, as well as dealing with relevant broader issues. The campuses that did take the political approach of solidarity were able to maintain activity in the face of trustee intransigence or the achievement of full divestment.

The transient nature of the student population and the related difficulty of developing effective long term campaigns is also an important factor. This transience is exacerbated by students who restrict their activities to the campus without attempting to institutionalize their organizations by, among other things, incorporating the community at-large into their struggles. If the campus-community gap is successfully bridged, the community helps to provide a stable base for longer term organizing.

The lack of a political approach was related to the even more fundamental problem of racism within the movement which for years has impeded alliances between white and Third World students, particularly students of African descent. Racism has manifested itself in several interrelated political, personal and structural ways within southern Africa solidarity organizing:

1) Given the narrow political approach of mostly white divestment organizations, relating to domestic racism and political change generally in this country was not seen as a priority. This racist failure to politically address overt and institutionalized racism was also linked to a tradition within the white Left of "one-issuism". That is the belief that one builds the broadest political movement by focusing on a single issue and by avoiding allegedly divisive issues such as racism;

2) The failure to politically address racism was related to insensitivity and racism on a personal level by white activists manifested at meetings and on other occasions; and

3) Both the political and personal levels of racism were manifested in the structural relations within largely white anti-apartheid organizations and in their relation to Third World organizations.

Too often white organizers would approach Third World organizations with the patronizing approach of "inviting" them to "join" anti-apartheid coalitions as opposed to approaching these organizations in an effort to form alliances based on mutual support, objectives and goals. Additionally, in approaching Third World organizations the question of decision-making and particularly the empowerment of students of African descent, was often left unresolved. There was very rarely attention paid to the need to ensure Third World participation in coordinating structures. In the prevailing ideology of anarchism/non-leaderism, leadership was not accountable since decisions were allegedly made by consensus.

There were other more general problems related to the structure of the U.S. anti-apartheid movement, particularly the youth and student sector. The structure of the anti-apartheid movement in the U.S. is such that there
are no chapters or members per se. This "movement" is an extensive network of a number of different organizations focusing on different aspects of southern Africa issues with limited coordination. Although the amount of coordination differs from location to location, formal coordination on a national level is by and large on an ad hoc basis (e.g. coordination around specific projects).

Because of this decentralization, the anti-apartheid movement in general, and the youth/student aspect of that movement in particular, are nothing more than pockets of activism scattered throughout the country without clear objectives or a uniform agenda. This movement is bonded by its issue - apartheid - but there are varying degrees of understanding, analysis and activism within this grouping. For this reason campus activism spans the broad spectrum ranging from highly developed and politicized organizations to no activity at all.

Though these problems were endemic for years, there were numerous groups that did take a highly political approach that both built solidarity for the liberation struggle while making the link to domestic racism and other broader issues. In addition, there were important efforts at coordination within the student movement.

At Princeton University, students of African descent initiated and provided leadership for the People's Front for the Liberation of Southern Africa. This front became a multi-racial organization which successfully mobilized students for mass, direct action for divestment while also addressing campus racism and other domestic issues. At Amherst College, the largely white South Africa Solidarity Committee was able to form a successful alliance with the Black Student Union based on a four-point program that included issues of institutionalized racism (e.g. African-American student and faculty recruitment and retention) as well as divestment. During the years 1979-84 many groups also made the link between anti-apartheid organizing and national anti-racist issues such as the work against the racist Bakke Decision that dealt a blow to affirmative action.

It is true that the unfinished business of the movement in terms of both its overly moralistic approach and racism would continue to hamper organizing. However, it is critical to realize that the organizing between 1977-84 made possible the upsurge of activity during the Spring of 1985. Objectively, the nationwide organizing resulted in widespread awareness of southern Africa, which subsequently isolated college and university Trustee Boards and administrators on the issue of divestment. Whether activists viewed divestment too narrowly as an end in itself, the actual effect of their organizing was to help delegitimize corporate links to apartheid and also help spread divestment beyond the campuses. Speaking tours involving liberation movement representatives and nationally coordinated local protests in which the American Committee on Africa played an important role in 1979, 1982 and 1984 also helped to heighten the impact of organizing. The consciousness at a national level was important in the explosion of activity, particularly in the Spring of 1985.
Racism and the Anti-Apartheid Movement

During the past school year there has continued to be relatively strong divestment protest with major direct actions at the University Texas, the University of North Carolina, Johns Hopkins University, Wellesley College, Reed College, Cornell University, Harvard University and host of other institutions. Students, even where divestment victories have been realized, have also been key participants in protests targeting U.S. based transnational corporations directly, notably Citibank, Coca-Cola and IBM.

However, it is incontestable that the movement has slowed down and that fundamental questions of racism and political direction must be urgently addressed. As stated earlier, neither racism nor the exclusively moral approach to anti-apartheid organizing a new phenomenon in anti-apartheid organizing. Ironically, in the excitement of direct actions and the seemingly non-stop nature of anti-apartheid initiatives, questions of racism have repeatedly relegated to a secondary issue by largely white anti-apartheid organizations in the push for divestment and other efforts.

Under the leadership of students of African descent, however activities during the 1986-7 academic year on a number of campuses illustrated the emergence of serious domestic anti-racism work. Campuses such as the University of Michigan, the University of Massachusetts, Columbia University, the Citadel, and Wellesley College witnessed racially motivated incidents of violence perpetrated against students of African descent. These occurrences mirrored the mood of the country, where the number of reported incidents of racially motivated violence increased, and people of African descent were brutally beaten and in some cases killed for nothing more than the color of their skin.

By and large the general populace of the U.S. takes its lead from the conservative and very reactionary Reagan Administration. The President signalled that it was acceptable to be a racist and that one should "come out of the closet" with one's racism. With the limited advances made during the 1960's and the 1970's threatened and often times rolled back by President Reagan, the U.S. was cloaked in a general intolerance for anything different, and specifically in racial intolerance. Supreme Court rulings acknowledged that the system of capital punishment was racially biased but refused to force the judicial system to take that bias into consideration in death penalty cases. African-Americans are disproportionately represented in the U.S. prison population, among the ranks of the indigent, in infant mortality statistics, on the welfare rolls and in other poverty indicators. This points to the marginal nature of the existence of those of African descent within the U.S. The concerns which confront Africa-American on a daily basis threaten the very existence of the race.

Realizing the life and death situation faced by people of African descent in the U.S., as well as witnessing attacks within the hallowed halls of their institutions where shouts of "We're going to kill you fucking niggers!" were heard, African-American students began to expand their focus beyond apartheid in South Africa and Namibia in both word and deed. On most campuses, given the multi-racial composition and limited focus of the existing anti-apartheid organizations, students of African descent were forced to make a choice - whether to be concerned with
protests around southern Africa issues out of context, or whether to organize around those issues of domestic racism within their context of anti-racism work which naturally includes anti-apartheid work. Most students faced with this choice chose the latter and incorporated their anti-apartheid activities into their anti-racism activities.

Largely due to the initiative of students of African descent locally and at regional and national conferences the question of racism within the movement as well as organizing around domestic racism has been explicitly articulated. Not only have students of African descent, as well as some politically conscious white students, fought to include demands around racism in general demands around southern Africa issues, but on many campuses these forces have struggled to force coalitions to guarantee Third World participation and leadership, particularly for students of African descent. Above all it has been concrete anti-racism organizing with African-American students at the forefront that has spurred some white anti-apartheid activists to broaden their horizons beyond divestment.

While the needs have been articulated, problems remain on a local and national level, and there is a continued difficulty of forming viable multi-racial alliances. This is hardly surprising given the systemic nature of racism in the U.S.

With anti-racism as the primary concern, the participation of white students dropped drastically. White students were unwilling to seriously challenge the system and begin to effectively deal with the remnants of the peculiar institution of slavery and modern day racism and exploitation. This reality led students of African descent to confront their white counterparts around issues such as the false dichotomy between domestic racism and apartheid, the acceptance of African youth and student leadership and empowerment, and the racist attitudes and behavior of their white "comrades." White students were clearly willing to protest, be vocal and in some cases go to jail and risk disciplinary measures in the name of being anti-apartheid, but were unwilling to face the reality of apartheid within the borders of the U.S. and their own hearts and minds.

The problem of racism within the youth/student anti-apartheid community is a large one. More often than not primarily white student coalitions turn an insensitively deaf ear to the concerns, suggestions, analyses and leadership of the students of African descent in order to cultivate and court the support of the white liberal student population - all in the interest of building broad-based coalitions. Alleged white progressive students thrash their white liberal counterparts for not being progressive enough and yet themselves fall prey to the same offense, thus joining the ranks of their liberal comrades.

Many within the anti-apartheid community feel that confronting racism within this grouping is divisive and unimportant - a side issue to be dealt with by another grouping outside of the established anti-apartheid community. Students of African descent as well as others are accused of obscuring the real issue - apartheid - all in an effort to realize some personal gain. But what is actually being obscured is the hypocrisy of racism within the anti-apartheid community. If racism is not dealt with in a constructive manner in the very near future, its continuation will result in a very important division in the overall movement such as that already
witnessed among the ranks of the youth and students. There is absolutely no way that people can effectively deal with South Africa's racist apartheid system, which in large part is mirrored in Native American reservations, "Jim Crow" segregations laws and other parts of the social history and present reality of the U.S. without dealing with apartheid in the U.S.

The development of concrete programs making the links between U.S. support for apartheid and domestic racism is a necessary part of any strategy that also confronts interpersonal racism within the movement. On a national and local level one can emphasize the links between the racist foreign and domestic policies of the Reagan Administration, organize speaking tours, and develop analytically resources all in consultation with people of African descent. But it is on a local level that organizers will have to develop programs of action focused on their institutions' variant of institutionalized racism and complicity with apartheid. As always, it is this level that is fundamental and defies a priori formulations.

The necessity of dealing with racism is also related to other obstacles before the movement. It remains true that divestment, even if it is more difficult to articulate given pseudo corporate pull outs, is an essential focus for campus activism. The ability to target one's institution has been fundamental to the success of anti-apartheid initiatives and should not be abandoned in the face of pseudo total divestments. However, as the struggle intensifies in South Africa and Namibia it is critical that students and youth embrace an approach of direct solidarity with the liberation struggle particularly its youth and student components. The formation of the South African Youth Congress (SAYCO) this year, with a membership of over 500,000, points to the continued significance of that component of the liberation struggle. There is enormous potential for building U.S. youth and student support for their comrades in South Africa and Namibia. Such support can help undercut the anti-communism that will increasingly be used in conjunction with the promotion of pro-capitalist moderates such as Gatsha Buthelezi to undermine U.S. solidarity with progressive movements in southern Africa. Just as U.S. students played a catalytic role in raising the issue of divestment, they can again be in the forefront of building support for the liberation movement and mass organizations struggling against apartheid.

There is also the related question of anti-apartheid organizers linking their efforts to other broader social change issues (e.g. imperialism and militarism). The ineffectiveness of organizers in these arenas points to a lack of political education around more controversial issues. In the U.S., to be against apartheid has become virtually as American as "apple pie," but to go even a step beyond this and use anti-apartheid organizing as a tool for raising consciousness regarding radical social change in this country or to challenge the role played by the U.S. in the Third World is often viewed as overstepping the boundaries and entering into "Communist" terrain.

The refusal of the majority of organizers to educate regarding the North-South nature of the majority of the conflicts in the world today points to the inability of the U.S. anti-apartheid movement to be considered part of the larger international anti-imperialist, anti-militarist movement.
But there is hope. In a number of cases the heightening of political consciousness around southern Africa issues has led to increased agitation around many issues of international social concern, coupled with more direct solidarity work with the struggle in southern Africa.

Three concrete programs of action come to mind as examples of the many actions in which students and youth can engage during the next stage of activism. These programs are:

(1) support for the release of South African and Namibian detainees and political prisoners;

(2) material aid for the support of the liberation movements and mass based organizations; and

(3) the conferring of honorary degrees from institutions of higher learning to individuals such as Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu and Govan Mbeki.

Educational and solidarity campaigns such as those mentioned above take on an added importance, given the potential to involve normally apolitical U.S. citizens in the support for the struggle against apartheid.

Beyond building support for the liberation struggle, youth and students can continue to play a vital role in severing U.S. ties with apartheid. Divestment is not the only organizing focus. Actions directed as U.S. based transnational corporations provide a handle for targeted initiatives (e.g. the Coke boycott). Additionally, youth and students have an important role to fulfill in the campaign to impose comprehensive economic sanctions against South Africa in an effort to completely isolate the apartheid regime. This legislative aspect also includes focusing on legislation providing funding for South African and U.S. backed UNITA forces fighting to overthrow the legitimate government of Angola as well as other legislative vehicles designed to exacerbate the level of destabilization in the southern Africa region.

It is also critical that the movement develop a dynamic program of outreach. Although anti-apartheid activity in the U.S. particularly among youth and students has been spread throughout the country, organizers have been unable to expand activism to a large number of areas. 120 colleges and universities have adopted full or partial divestment, and this is an impressive number. But the number is relatively small vis-a-vis the total number of colleges and universities in the U.S. This inability to make activism grow beyond some of the more traditionally vocal institutions and areas is due in large part to two factors:

(1) popular perception of the youth/student sector of the anti-apartheid community; and

(2) limited resources at the disposal of the U.S. anti-apartheid movement.

The popular perception of the youth/student sector of the movement is
by and large that of primarily white students engaged in campus activism. Given the reality of the percentages of whites and people of African descent in the U.S., this may seem reasonable, but a closer look provides a bit of insight into why this signals a disturbing development. As far as a number of African-American students are concerned, the anti-apartheid struggle is part and parcel of a larger international struggle for African liberation. Keeping this in mind, many campuses witnessed the emergence of anti-apartheid organizations outside of the traditional organizations for students of African descent. Because of the reluctance of these organizations to merge or of the zealous anti-apartheid organizers to consult with the existing African students organizations regarding anti-apartheid work, the media grabbing anti-apartheid organizations and demonstrations were viewed as primarily a "white thing." Many national organizers, not sensitive to these inter-campus developments, set up contacts with the anti-apartheid organizations and relied upon their information and analysis when assessing campus activity. This initial mistake is becoming quite evident and is responsible for the limited representation of activists of African descent in national anti-apartheid networks and at national anti-apartheid conferences.

Conclusion

In a decentralized anarchic movement in which participants often graduate just as their political consciousness develops, there are no blueprints for success. However, one overarching principle does stand out. It is essential that the youth/student anti-apartheid community grasp the idea that revolutionary change in southern Africa is inextricably linked to a U.S. struggle to transform this society and visa-versa. The youth/student movement can contribute to that transformation to the extent that it links its solidarity work to overcoming racism --- the primary obstacle to any radical change in this country.