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on
The Role of Transnational
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Report on the Research and
Organizing Work of the American
Friends Service Committee Southern
Africa Program

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Background
The Southern Africa Program of the American Friends Service Committee was begun in 1976. Since that time the national and regional programs have focused on education of Southern African issues and U.S. economic ties and programs of action designed to support the liberation struggles of the people of Southern Africa.

Because I have greatest familiarity with the work that has been done in Oregon, this report will focus on the research and organizing work that has been done in this state. Some educational work on Namibia has been done, but during 1982 the emphasis has been on seeking ways to lessen U.S. economic ties with South Africa. Therefore, in the hope that it will be useful to share some of our strategies, mistakes and successes, I will describe our work on divestment and on researching local trade ties with South Africa.

History

To put into context the work being carried out in 1982, it might be helpful to look at a brief history of Southern Africa work in Portland since 1977.

1977: An anti-Krugerrand campaign led to the passage of a resolution in the City Council that urged citizens not to buy, sell or advertise the coin.

A state-wide campus divestiture effort resulted in an 8-3 vote by the Oregon State Board of Higher Education in favor of withdrawal of endowment funds from companies that do substantial business with South Africa. The vote was subsequently challenged by an opinion of the Attorney General and taken to court. The affirmative vote was upheld on one count, but remains pending on a ruling of the prudent person rule.

1978: Anti-apartheid groups challenged U.S. National Bank of Oregon to end ties with the Private Export Funding Corporation (PEFCO), the ninth largest lender to South Africa. The bank agreed to try to sell its PEFCO shares, but claims today that the stock is impossible to sell.

1979: People For Southern Africa Freedom, in Eugene, Oregon, submitted a divestment bill to the State Legislature that was ultimately blocked by the State Treasurer.

1980: AFSC worked with the Portland Public Schools to develop a high school curriculum packet on South Africa. High school libraries bought some suggested books. Curriculum packet supplemented a dramatic performance on the life of Steve Biko done by a local Black American who was also a school board member.

1981: Another bill in the State Legislature requesting withdrawal of funds from companies that do business with South Africa. Tabled for lack of support within committee and from negative influence of State Treasurer.
Current

Winter & Spring '82: AFSC Southern Africa Committee decided to make a major effort to rectify 1981's rushed process of legislative divestment and set up a more thorough educational and action strategy. Using resolutions from other states as models, we wrote up a resolution asking for withdrawal of city, county and state funds from companies that do business in South Africa. We began taking the resolution out to a wide-range of organizations, asking for endorsement and often using the short version of the film "South Africa Belongs To Us" as an educational resource.

February '82: Oregon State Treasurer and Portland Chamber of Commerce representative travel to South Africa as guests of the Southern Africa Forum (group composed mainly of conservative Afrikaner businessmen.) Treasurer returned very critical of apartheid, but still anti-divestment. Chamber of Commerce representative returned very pro-South Africa and wrote a glowing account of South Africa in the Chamber magazine.

April, 1982: County Commission unanimously passed a resolution asking that the Public Employees Retirement System "strongly consider" divestment of their South African-related funds.

November,'82: Portland City Council to vote on resolution that encourages the Public Employees Retirement System to divest of any funds in companies that conduct business in South Africa.

November 18: State Treasurer to announce policy of withdrawing state funds from banks that do business with South Africa.

Fall '82: State-wide group, Oregonians For Responsible State Investments writes divestment bill and begins laying groundwork for winter state legislative session. Attempting to get broad-range support (labor, churches, civil rights groups, public bodies) for divestment.

Doing research on local trade ties with South Africa. Plans for educating the public on trade and presence of honorary South African consulate.

SOME THOUGHTS ON ORGANIZING -- LEARNING FROM OUR MISTAKES AND SUCCESSES

*Divestment successes often take time

It is easy to get discouraged when asking institutions to withdraw funds. Many times people will need a lot more information before even considering divestiture, or they will proceed on a cautious route first and then only later become more confident and convinced of the need to divest. In the case of Portland, it has taken three years, which include a variety of actions on the city and county level, and two previous bills in the State Legislature, for us to come to a point where there might be some chance of having a state bill pass.

*Accessibility of aides and staff

It may seem fairly obvious that many times aides and staff of legislators and commissioners are more accessible than the officials themselves. However, we have had to remind ourselves of this from time to time and work on forming a solid and trusting relationship with the assistants in order to even begin to make progress. We have found it helpful to show educational films, when possible, in city, county and state government buildings.

*Reaching New Constituencies

The need to reach new people may also seem obvious, but we have found it is often hard to do. It requires openness, brainstorming in groups and creative thinking. To not always try to "convert the converted" necessitates breaking
out of comfortable and familiar patterns of doing outreach. Sometimes this
has meant making contact to do educational work with individuals or groups
with whom we felt we had little in common, or who might be difficult to work
with. It has also meant trying to expand our geographic boundaries of outreach.
Nationally, AFSC has made a major effort to expand its outreach by making two
extensive tours in cooperation with the American Committee On Africa and other
groups and individuals: one throughout the Southwest and the other throughout
the South. The tours served as an effective method of mutual inspiration,
information/strategy sharing and networking.

* Working in Black/White Coalitions

Generally speaking, working in coalitions can be difficult, and sensitivity
is required by all to make them function. Black/white coalitions of various
scales have been formed in Portland to work on Southern Africa projects. However,
on the issue of divestment, there are black and white people working on the AFSC
committee, but there is no ongoing committee participation by predominantly black
organizations such as the NAACP or the Black United Front. In Portland, black
organizations that do anti-apartheid work have priorities that take precedence
over divestment and do not have time to do major organizing work in that partic-
ular area. They are, however, supportive in less time-consuming ways such as
testifying at hearings on divestment, in addition to doing work on other Southern
African issues.

* Dealing with Ideological Struggles

In the past, work on Southern Africa issues and projects has been, at times,
impeded by ideological struggles between groups working in coalitions or simply
between individuals of different political orientations or style. Undoubtedly
everyone doing organizing work has run into such situations where you wish you
could just get on with the more important concerns rather than dealing with what
seem to be irresolvable differences. It seems that sometimes these problems can
only be resolved over time, in which people either come to a parting of ways or
learn to trust, respect and reinforce one another. If the greater goal is
constantly kept at the forefront of organizing, this can be possible.

In concluding this report, I would like to mention that much of the
work mentioned in the history of the program's activities has been greatly
aided by cooperation and sharing of ideas, resources and research skills
over time with the AFSC Southern Africa Program in Seattle and with People
For Southern Africa Freedom in Eugene.

-Elizabeth Ussher Groff
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