GM Memos Reveal Cooperation with South African Military

New York, NY, May 19, 1978—Documents outlining General Motors' "contingency plans" to cooperate with the white South African government "in the event of civil unrest" by the country's black majority were released today.

The documents are copies of memoranda prepared one year ago by white managers of GM's South African subsidiary and hand delivered under conditions of considerable secrecy to GM headquarters in Detroit. Copies have been obtained in the last few weeks by the American Committee on Africa (ACOA), for 25 years a leading group opposing white minority rule in South Africa. They are being released simultaneously at the GM annual meeting in Detroit by representatives of the Interfaith Center on Corporate Responsibility (ICCR), which coordinates church agencies raising the issue of corporate support for apartheid through shareholder resolutions. Extensive extracts from the documents are contained in the forthcoming June issue of Southern Africa magazine, a monthly journal which provides critical analysis of U. S. cooperation with white minority regimes in the region.

According to the documents, GM's two plants in South Africa, which employ over 3,600 persons, have been designated "key points" by the military authorities of South Africa. The documents note that the GM plants "will be accorded protection in emergencies through the medium of the Citizen Force Commando System," commanded by the white-run army in South Africa. The memos note that "all White male South African citizens up to age 65 are liable for military service" and would supplement the commando unit. The commando unit covering the GM plants would be made of "plant personnel who have had military training" who are "encouraged by the authorities to volunteer to join a local commando unit."

"Thus the 'GM Commando' would assume guarding responsibility for the GM plants and would fall under the control of the local military authority for the duration of the emergency" the memos conclude.

Concerning operations of the plant, the documents state that in an emergency "the major elements of this industry would be taken over by an arm of the Ministry of Defence . . . which would completely regulate output . . . operating control of plants such as General Motors and Ford would most certainly be vested in South African nationals."

Commenting on the documents, ACOA research director Jennifer Davis, an exiled South African economist, states:

"They make a mockery of GM's claim to act as a force for change in South Africa. GM's white South African managers see the interests of the company as identical to those of the South African government. Not the least sympathy is expressed for black demands which might lead to a so-called 'period of civil unrest.' GM bases its plans on the assumption that it would cooperate fully in suppressing such protest, to the point where it would be willing to operate with South African troops directing workers in the plants in any period of black political action.

"The plans underscore once more the irrelevance of attempts to mollify critics of U. S. corporate collaboration with apartheid through talk of 'equal opportunity' for black workers. In the final analysis, the struggle in South Africa is a struggle for political power and the South African government views the presence of companies such as Ford and GM as strategic. It has well-laid plans to use these companies to protect its system of white supremacy, and these documents make it clear that GM intends to fully comply.

"It is for this reason that blacks in South Africa are increasingly demanding that the United States withdraw its corporate interests from South Africa, lest it be inevitably drawn into these plans to crush the movement for full rights in South Africa. Copies of the document are available upon request."