Face It: The Sullivan Principles Haven’t Worked

One of the most powerful supports for the maintenance of white supremacy in South Africa is the $6 billion of direct and indirect U.S. investment there. This investment provides capital and technology for nuclear, military, police and prison systems needed to maintain control of the black majority.

General Motors and Ford manufacture cars and trucks used by the police and military. Fluor Corporation is building coal-to-oil conversion plants to help South Africa withstand an oil embargo. Exxon, Mobil, Texaco and Standard Oil of California supply South Africa with oil. Control Data has sold computer equipment that is used by the South African police. The list goes on and on.

U.S. corporations deny collaboration with the minority government, claiming instead that they are agents of change. They adopt the Sullivan Principles, a code of conduct calling for labor reforms in the workplace, and argue that this justifies their continuing presence in South Africa.

Whatever the original intention of Leon Sullivan, the author of the principles, they have been an extremely useful tool for the South African government and the corporations. Instead of discussing the role that the corporations play in supplying the government with vital products and technology, debate focuses on the working conditions of blacks employed by the corporations that have signed the principles.

These workers represent fewer than 1 percent of the black labor force in South Africa. Sullivan himself admits that even if his principles were implemented to the optimum, they would not end apartheid. What he has yet to admit is that they provide an excuse for U.S. corporations to stay in South Africa and conduct business as usual with the most extreme racist state since Nazi Germany.

Writing in The Post, "It’s Time to Step Up the Pressure on South Africa," op-ed, May 10, Sullivan expressed the desire to hasten the end of apartheid. He could indeed make a dramatic contribution, but only by declaring that his principles have been tried and that they have failed, that stronger measures are needed.

The South African government has never opposed the Sullivan Principles. On the contrary, they were introduced with the approval of the South African state. What the state fears is not a code of conduct that makes it easier for foreign corporations to stay, but pressure on them to pull out. South Africa has spent hundreds of thousands of dollars hiring lobbyists in the United States, and one of their responsibilities is to fight divestment legislation. When they lobby, they find they are not alone. Representatives of U.S. corporations lobby with them. This partnership between U.S. corporations and the South African government is what must be broken.

The Reagan administration, adopting a policy of "constructive engagement" has refused to take strong measures against South Africa and rejects the imposition of sanctions. Because of this bankruptcy at the national level, action is shifting to state and city governments throughout the country. The possibility of pulling investments out of corporations and banks involved in South Africa is being debated in at least 21 states and eight cities. Massachusetts and Philadelphia have passed laws requiring the divestment of all public pension funds from corporations and banks involved in South Africa. Councilman John Ray has introduced a similar ordinance in the D.C. Council.

Inside South Africa today, hundreds of thousands of black South Africans are pursuing a struggle for freedom in the face of police bullets, mass arrests, torture and constant harassment. Withdrawing U.S. economic support for apartheid is a powerful action that will speed the day when all South Africans, black and white, can enjoy full rights in the land of their birth.

Jennifer Davis

The writer is executive director of the American Committee on Africa. An economist in South Africa where she was active in the struggle against apartheid, she has lived in exile in the United States since 1966.