March 10, 1987

NEW YORK--Trade unions, human rights organizations and anti-apartheid groups in South Africa have scheduled protests for Thursday, March 12 to focus attention on detainees and the mass dismissal of workers by South African and foreign corporations.

The Johannesburg-based Detainees Parents' Support Committee has called for a sunrise to sunset fast on March 12 as part of a "National Detainees Day" to focus attention on the more than 28,000 people detained without trial over the last year. As part of the campaign the DPSC had planned to run advertisements in newspapers throughout the country, but the government has threatened to use its sweeping press restrictions to seize copies of any newspaper that prints the ads. As of March 10 only two newspapers in South Africa had run the advertisements.

The continuing detentions of large numbers of people inside South Africa and the torture of detainees, including many young people, has been an issue of great concern for some time in South Africa. Over the last year the conditions in the jails have been so bad that detainees have gone on hunger strikes to protest their treatment. Most recently, two detainees at Diepkloof prison, outside Johannesburg, announced a hunger strike March 9. The National Detainees Day is being supported by a wide range of human rights groups, civic organizations and anti-apartheid organizations, including the United Democratic Front.

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South Africa's largest trade union federation, the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), has called a one-day stay-away in the eastern coastal city of Port Elizabeth on the same day to protest the dismissal of more than 500 workers by a company formerly owned by General Motors. The one-day action, which is being called by COSATU and its local affiliate, the National Automobile and Allied Workers Unions, will mean that workers will not show up to work on March 12. The unions are demanding that Delta, the company that took over General Motors South Africa operations and continues to manufacture GM products under license, rehire 500 workers who were dismissed during a protest over GM's refusal to provide the union with full information about its withdrawal from South Africa.

The unions are not opposed to companies pulling out of South Africa, but are demanding that they be provided with detailed information about corporate withdrawals that affect their members. Last November NAAWU issued a statement on divestment demanding that companies withdrawing from South Africa provide timely notice to the union and adequate information. The union also demanded no retrenchments, severance pay and union control over workers pension funds.

Initially, when GM fired 500 workers the union took the dispute to the local Industrial Council, a body set up to mediate labor disputes. But the unions in Port Elizabeth and the national federation COSATU feel that because the local company is now obstructing the process of mediation and refusing to negotiate in good faith they are left with no option but to strike.

ACOA has sent a telegram to GM Chairman Roger Smith demanding he pressure the local company to rehire the fired workers. "We will
continue to demand that these companies get out of South Africa," wrote ACOA Executive Director Jennifer Davis in the telegram to Smith. "But we also feel that GM has an obligation to inform its workers of its withdrawal and not treat them in the highhanded way that it has."

The New York-based American Committee on Africa is the oldest national anti-apartheid group in the country. In releasing this report on the March 12 actions Executive Director Davis called for tough action against South Africa: "It is critical that the American people know that despite the press restrictions there are continuing, sustained protests for the end of apartheid. People inside are looking for increased pressures from the US, divestment actions and tougher congressional sanctions to help their struggle for a nonracial, democratic society."

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