

Building Solidarity to End South African Apartheid

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The American movement to break a rapidly developing alliance between South Africa and the United States was launched in October, 1981 at an historic conference in New York.

Just days after the US stood alone in the United Nations by refusing to condemn South Africa's attack on Angola, the Conference in Solidarity with the Liberation Struggles of the Peoples of South Africa adopted a forceful anti-apartheid declaration and a comprehensive plan of action designed to isolate the apartheid regime and assist liberation struggles in both South Africa and Namibia.

Representatives of hundreds of labor, religious, academic, youth and grassroots organizations gathered at New York's Riverside Church from October 9-11 in an optimistic mood - despite the escalation of violence in southern Africa and the Reagan administration's willingness to move toward full relations with South Africa.

Still, there were few illusions. Although the National Program of Action adopted on the final day focused on sanctions, a cutoff of aid and investment, and an end to cultural and sports contact between the US and the apartheid regime, most delegates accepted - in fact, embraced - the necessity of armed struggle in order to liberate white-dominated Namibia and South Africa.



The unanimously-adopted conference declaration made this stance quite clear. "We are inspired," it stated, "by the example of the men and women of SWAPO and the ANC, who, having exhausted all peaceful means, have been compelled to take up arms to free Namibia from illegal South African control, and to free the people of South Africa from the racist dictatorship that has made it an outcast among nations."

Congressional representatives and labor leaders echoed the call. After describing her horror

at witnessing the destruction of a black settlement, Rep. Shirley Chisholm said she was now certain South Africa had no intention of changing its racial policies. Later Cleveland Robinson, long-time activist with the United Auto Workers, advised that, "If the freedom fighters of the ANC and SWAPO decide they have to take up arms, our obligation is to support them."

In fact, that phase of the struggle was already well underway. ANC and SWAPO representatives reported on the upsurge in labor, student and military actions, including the destruction of communication lines, police stations and, in Pretoria itself, a military headquarter.

The conferees nevertheless understood that resistance and pressure within the US was essential to the success of movements in southern Africa. The 21-page program emerging from the event detailed ways to organize a groundswell of opposition to apartheid that would isolate South Africa, force its withdrawal from Namibia, reinforce the much-abused embargo, and provide material assistance to both the liberation movements and the frontline states, which increasingly felt the effects of South African aggression.

A State Department policy paper reviewed in New York linked a Namibian settlement with the removal of Cuban troops from Angola and a demand that the Angolan government share power with UNITA. Furthermore, the paper suggested that US officials cover up that linkage: "We would insist that these are unrelated, but in fact they would be mutually reinforcing..."

Ultimately, the US State Department and South African regime hoped to forestall an expected victory for SWAPO in an election. Prior to President Reagan's election, terms for that vote had been worked out. But now South African flatly refused to move forward with the plan.

Sanctions, Delays and Propaganda

According to Randall Robinson of TransAfrica, the US was willing to give the South Africans about two years to "work something out - the get the government the US wants in Namibia." The assumption was that the longer it took the more possible became the defeat of SWAPO by internal forces. But conference delegates heard from SWAPO and observers that its base of support was actually growing, while the focus shifted from political to military strategy.

The approach to changing US policy toward Namibia from within America included work toward a criminal tribunal for mercenaries, congressional action to impose comprehensive sanctions - military, economic, political, social and cultural, lobbying to protect and extend the Clark Amendment, and nationwide educational efforts to counteract what many conferees called "propaganda" inspired by South Africa to cloak US-SA collaboration in national security assumptions.

Among the people to address the media's role was Michigan Congressman George Crockett, who bluntly stated that the "American people are misinformed and lied to about what is going on in other countries." Noting that the South African government had the money and media connections "to sell apartheid like a tube of toothpaste," he maintained that, in reality, the regime had to plans to abandon its homelands policy, pass laws, use of Namibia as a military staging area, or the exploitation of that country's natural resources.

Quoting Fidel Castro's statement that the main core of the current US government was fascist, Crockett said that actions by the Reagan administration had persuaded him to agree. And if that rightward shift continued, he concluded, a resource war could emerge.

In working sessions, experts in media and cultural relations with South Africa supported Crockett's accusation concerning the impact of propaganda within the US. For example, Rutgers University Associate Professor George Wilson explained how South Africa planted stories in the US with the help of the CIA. He also pointed to an increase in South African investment in US media. One US businessman, John McGoff, had received more than \$1.7 million from the South African government to purchase a controlling interest in UPI Television, the second largest news-film producer in the world.

South African businessmen working with their government had also gained control over six daily and 61 weekly US newspapers, Wilson claimed. In response, once working group proposed research to identify South African-influenced media with an eye to initiating legal action against some publishers as unregistered South African agents.

A Mobilization Begins

The UN's special interest in the role of the mass media was also reviewed. Having declared 1982 International Year of Mobilization for Sanctions Against Apartheid, it had held a conference on mass media in Berlin in August. That conference urged that all media workers "mobilize world opinion against apartheid."

Like most of the proposals adopted in New York, that would be difficult to implement. It seemed unlikely, for instance, that major US media would adopt such an advocacy stance. In fact, during the weekend of the conference not one word about it appeared in The New York Times.

On the other hand, features generally supportive of South African-backed UNITA recently appeared in The Washington Post, and columnists such as James Kilpatrick persisted in downplaying apartheid and South Africa's illegal occupation of Namibia while attacking the UN as an "impotent body" unworthy of support.

The delegates were nevertheless optimistic about the struggle. The overall mood was proud and angry; the participants were ready to support both congressional lobbying efforts through the black caucus and open war to topple the South African regime.

At the final plenary session, human rights lawyer Lennox Hinds called the event "the seed that will take root in every city, village and state across the United States." He reminded delegates that despite the myopic view often taken in US and reinforced by mass media, "the global struggles for liberation are winning."

His message, despite entrenched racism and US complicity, was powerful and compelling. Quoting an ANC slogan, Hinds told an enthusiastic crowd, "Victory is certain."

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