



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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Columbia University students win divestment from apartheid South Africa, United States, 1985

- South Africa Apartheid Divestment Movement (1970s-1980s)

8 April

1985

to: 25 April

1985

Country: United States

Location City/State/Province: *New York City, New York*

Location Description: *Columbia University campus*

Goals:

Total divestiture of Columbia University from corporations operating in South Africa

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 002. Letters of opposition or support
- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 004. Signed public statements
- 006. Group or mass petitions
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 036. Performances of plays and music
- 037. Singing
- 038. Marches
- 159. The fast (fast of moral pressure, hunger strike, satyagrahic fast)
- 171. Nonviolent interjection

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 002. Letters of opposition or support
- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 004. Signed public statements
- 006. Group or mass petitions

- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 013. Deputations
- 036. Performances of plays and music
- 037. Singing
- 038. Marches
- 062. Student strike
- 159. The fast (fast of moral pressure, hunger strike, satyagrahic fast)
- 171. Nonviolent interjection

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 002. Letters of opposition or support
- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 004. Signed public statements
- 006. Group or mass petitions
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 036. Performances of plays and music
- 037. Singing
- 038. Marches
- 062. Student strike
- 171. Nonviolent interjection

Methods in 4th segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 002. Letters of opposition or support
- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 004. Signed public statements
- 006. Group or mass petitions
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 036. Performances of plays and music
- 037. Singing
- 038. Marches
- 062. Student strike
- 171. Nonviolent interjection

Methods in 5th segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 002. Letters of opposition or support
- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 004. Signed public statements
- 006. Group or mass petitions
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 036. Performances of plays and music
- 037. Singing

- 038. Marches
- 062. Student strike
- 171. Nonviolent interjection

Methods in 6th segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 002. Letters of opposition or support
- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 004. Signed public statements
- 006. Group or mass petitions
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 036. Performances of plays and music
- 037. Singing
- 038. Marches
- 062. Student strike
- 171. Nonviolent interjection

Classifications

Classification:

Change

Cluster:

Democracy

Economic Justice

Human Rights

Group characterization:

- Students at Columbia University

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

Coalition for a Free South Africa (CFSA)

Partners:

American Committee on Africa (ACOA)

External allies:

Rev. Jesse Jackson, Rev. Desmond Tutu, nearby Harlem community, student grocery store, African-American Alumni, African National Congress (ANC)

Involvement of social elites:

Justice Bruce Wright was sympathetic enough to grant a restraining order preventing police from breaking up the blockade at Hamilton Hall.

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- ACOA
- ANC
- CFSA

Groups in 2nd Segment:

- African American Alumni
- Rev. Desmond Tutu
- Rev. Jesse Jackson
- nearby Harlem community
- student grocery store

Groups in 3rd Segment:

Groups in 4th Segment:

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:

Segment Length: 3 days

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

Columbia University Trustees and Administration

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

None known

Campaigner violence:

None known

Repressive Violence:

No physical violence, but threats of expulsion and pursuit of criminal charges were meant to intimidate.

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

6 points out of 6 points

Survival:

1 point out of 1 points

Growth:

3 points out of 3 points

On April 4, 1985, seven students at Columbia University, members of the Coalition for a Free South Africa (CFSA), chained closed the doors to Columbia's administrative building, Hamilton Hall, and sat on the steps, blockading the entrance. They were there to protest the University's investments in corporations that operated in Apartheid South Africa. Soon after, a march coordinated by other members of CFSA passed by Hamilton Hall. When the marchers saw the small blockade on the steps, they

rushed to join in. Within two hours, the seven initial protesters had seen their number grow to more than 250. The first major successful protest in favor of College divestiture had begun.

The problems in South Africa were not new when students at Columbia decided to take action. Dating as far back as the early 19th century, black Africans in South Africa were oppressed, first by the Dutch and British colonial governments and then by the Afrikaner government that took control of the country after their independence from Britain. Both officially and unofficially, black South Africans were radically oppressed in a grievous fashion. Though there was always some sentiment in the United States that conscientious Americans should not have been doing business with the racist Afrikaners, the protests at Columbia University were some of the first to bring the issue into the mainstream.

The blockade action was not the first action by CFSA, but rather the frustrated culmination of years of activism by student leaders at Columbia. CFSA was formed in 1982 and since their early days frequently led protests in favor of divestment. In 1982, CFSA was able to convince the Student Senate, the most powerful student body on campus, to approve a motion to support divestiture. The next year, the more conservative University Senate, composed of students, faculty, and administration, unanimously approved a similar motion. Unfortunately, neither Senate had any real power over the Columbia endowment. The Trustees, who did, stalled, calling the measures inappropriate.

In a concession to the Trustees, the University Senate put together a committee that would study the issue of divestment more carefully and report back to the Trustees. The CFSA later discovered that the committee's only real function was to give the appearance of concern for the divestment issue without ever having to actually act on it. In the fall of 1984, the CFSA gave up on the official channels, and began to plan more visible protests around campus. They believed that escalation was the only way to win over the Trustees.

The CFSA planned the blockade for nearly two months. A week beforehand, seven leaders began a fast to demonstrate their commitment to the cause. When they met with Columbia administration a few days later to ask what they had to do to win the support of the Trustees, the administration answered "keep on fasting". Not only did the CFSA keep on fasting, they escalated their push. They decided to blockade on April 4 to coincide with an already-planned march for that day. The leaders of the CFSA not only chained the doors to Hamilton Hall but were very careful to leave no opportunity for the University to claim that anyone's safety was threatened. There is a large network of tunnels under Hamilton Hall and the CFSA clearly marked an alternate entrance and exit.

The blockade drew immediate news attention both for its visibility and the strong campus participation. The school immediately responded by threatening to expel CFSA leaders and dozens more received disciplinary notices within the next few days. The University continued, despite a restraining order issued by a sympathetic judge preventing police action, to point out the various civil and criminal violations made by the student protesters. The blockade, however, continued unabated. Leaders made sure that there were many blockaders there at all times so that students were able to leave and return if necessary. The student grocery store donated food and supplies and an African-American alumni group assisted with publicity. The blockade was the predominant topic of discussion in classes, no matter the subject. Letters of support came in from around the country and leaders like Jesse Jackson and Desmond Tutu publicly declared their solidarity with the group. Petitions were circulated among the blockaders and CFSA made frequent statements of their goal of divestment and their intention to remain in front of Hamilton Hall until they were successful.

On April 8, the fasters finally earned a meeting with Columbia University President Michael Sovern. Though they ended their fast after a somewhat productive meeting, the blockade continued. As the legal threats mounted, more and more students were called to participate. They felt that there was no way they should miss out on being a part of such an important movement and no one wanted fellow activists to have to face the authorities alone. When Jesse Jackson came to speak to the blockade, there were more than 5,000 students in attendance. At the height of the blockade, there were 1,000 students sitting on the steps of Hamilton Hall at all times.

Eventually, though, the crisis atmosphere began to evaporate as it became clear that there was going to be no immediate action

on the part of the Trustees. People less devoted to the movement began to lose interest and the general fatigue of CFSA leadership was beginning to take its toll. The general sense was that the blockade had been tremendously successful, but maybe it was time to try something else. The blockade ended on April 25 with a march into Harlem to a rally. CFSA threatened continued action if the University did not take the appropriate steps to divest themselves from South Africa.

A panel composed of six Trustees was formed immediately after the end of the blockade to seriously consider divestiture. In late August, the panel returned a result that confirmed the student's position – that divestiture was not only the moral option, but an economically viable one as well. Because of the naturally slow work of the Trustees' system, the recommendation was not considered until a full meeting of all 24 Trustees on October 7. At that meeting, the Trustees adopted the panel's recommendation and proceeded to divest the University of the remainder of their investments with South African connections.

Research Notes

Influences:

Influenced by actions taken by the ANC and ACOA to end Apartheid. (1)

Influenced (and directly prompted) many other divestment campaigns on campuses throughout the country. (2)

Sources:

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Loeb, Paul. *Generation at the Crossroads*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994. Pg. 171-174.

Vellela, Tony. *New Voices: Student Political Activism in the 80s and 90s*. Boston, MA: South End Press, 1988. Pg. 19-30

Name of researcher, and date dd/mm/yyyy:

Kelly Schoolmeester, 07/02/2010

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