Harvard University community campaigns for divestment from apartheid South Africa, 1977-1989

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

1977 to: 1989

Country: United States
Location City/State/Province: Cambridge, Massachusetts
Location Description: Harvard University campus

Goals: The campaign demanded that the university completely divest its investments in financial institutions and corporations with holdings in apartheid-era South Africa (in order to pressure the South African Nationalist government to end institutionalized racial segregation).

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 024. Symbolic lights
- 029. Symbolic reclamations
- 039. Parades
- 043. Political mourning
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 162. Sit-in
- 168. Nonviolent raids
- 171. Nonviolent interjection
- 173. Nonviolent occupation

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 002. Letters of opposition or support
- 004. Signed public statements
- 006. Group or mass petitions
- 038. Marches
• 047. Assemblies of protest or support
• 062. Student strike

Methods in 3rd segment:

Methods in 4th segment:

• 089. Severance of funds and credit
• 159. The fast (fast of moral pressure, hunger strike, satyagrahic fast)
• 192. Alternative economic institutions

Methods in 5th segment:

• 001. Public speeches
• 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
• 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
• 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
• 021. Delivering symbolic objects
• 037. Singing
• 038. Marches
• 047. Assemblies of protest or support
• 089. Severance of funds and credit
• 178. Guerrilla theatre
• 192. Alternative economic institutions
• 199. Nonviolent confinement

Methods in 6th segment:

• 001. Public speeches
• 006. Group or mass petitions

Classifications

Classification:
Change

Cluster:
Democracy
Economic Justice
Human Rights

Group characterization:

• Harvard students
• alumni
• faculty

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:
Not known, because of length of campaign and involvement of diverse groups of Harvard students, faculty, and alumni. The
South African Solidarity Committee led many actions.

**Partners:**
South Africa Archbishop Desmond Tutu, members of Congress, Alumni Gay W. Seidman, Black Studies Association (BSA) and other student groups, and Harvard faculty

**External allies:**
Advisory Committee on Shareholder Responsibility (ACSR), Donald Woods, Chris Nteta, Dennis Brutus, Elizabeth Sibeko, and Reverend Jesse I. Jackson

**Involvement of social elites:**
Important speakers present at rallies and marches, such as Donald Woods, Christ Nteta, Dennis Brutus, and Elizabeth Sibeko, and Reverend Jesse I. Jackson

### Joining/exiting order of social groups

**Groups in 1st Segment:**
- ACSR
- Alumni Gay W. Seidman
- Southern African Solidarity Committee
- seven Congress members

**Groups in 2nd Segment:**
- Black Studies Association and other student groups
- Chris Nteta
- Dennis Brutus
- Donald Woods
- Elizabeth Sibeko
- Harvard faculty

**Groups in 3rd Segment:**

**Groups in 4th Segment:**

**Groups in 5th Segment:**

- Reverend Jesse I. Jackson

**Groups in 6th Segment:**
- South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu

**Segment Length:** Approximately 2 years

### Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

**Opponents:**
President Derek C. Bok and the ‘Corporation’ (Harvard University’s governing body)

**Nonviolent responses of opponent:**
Not known

**Campaigner violence:**
Not known

**Repressive Violence:**
Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:
3 points out of 6 points
Survival:
1 point out of 1 points
Growth:
2 points out of 3 points
Notes on outcomes:
Students, faculty, and alumni hoped to pressure Harvard to completely divest its holdings in South Africa, but only succeeded in achieving partial divestment.

Though turnover in participation occurred from year to year, Harvard students, alumni, and faculty survived as campaigning entities. It is difficult to ascertain whether the campaign survived beyond 1989, or simply tapered off.

The campaign drew a large number of participants from the student body, the faculty, and the alumni, and won the support of many allies and partners from outside the campus community.

In the late 70s and 80s, American colleges and universities were engulfed in a heated debate over the ethical implications of financial investments. Educational institutions had invested billions of dollars in financial institutions and corporations with holdings in South Africa. Since the mid 1900s, the South African Nationalist government had implemented apartheid – a form of institutionalized racial segregation that had forced over a million South Africans to move out of urban spaces to designated rural areas. Many saw U.S. investments in South Africa as an endorsement of the country’s official policy of white supremacy and institutionalized racial segregation. Although Harvard President Derek Bok denounced institutionalized segregation and professors avoided ties with South Africa, Harvard maintained holdings of stock in U.S. companies with plants and operations in South Africa. Students, faculty, and alumni pursued a more than decade-long campaign demanding that the university economically divest.

The opening action in the student campaign for divestment began in spring of 1972, in response to an unrelated issue: University investments with Gulf Oil Co., which supposedly helped the Portuguese put down rebels in Angola. Dozens of black students took over Massachusetts Hall—the oldest building on campus and the heart of Harvard’s central administration. President Bok had to find temporary office space in another building. Partly in response to the takeover, 1973 featured the creation of the Advisory Committee on Shareholder Responsibility (ACSR). As a body, the ACSR made nonbinding recommendations about ethical questions concerning the University’s investment portfolio, such as those that would arise in the apartheid divestment campaign of the late 70s and 80s.

In 1977, after a mid-decade lull, divestment from apartheid South Africa moved to the forefront of student activists’ agenda under the leadership of the newly formed Southern Africa Solidarity Committee (SASC). On a wintry day in 1978, students protested Harvard’s refusal to divest funds from South Africa. They planted black crosses into the snowy lawns of Harvard Yard to transform it into a symbolic cemetery. By the spring of 1978, more events reignited the movement. In South Africa, noted anti-apartheid activist Stephen Biko had been murdered in police custody, and there was rioting in Soweto. Meanwhile, Harvard’s corporate managers had emerged from a meeting in Cambridge to reject blanket divestment from South Africa (opting instead to review investments on a case-by-case basis). The Corporation (the University’s governing body) claimed to oppose divestment, not because it would cost the University money, but rather because it was an ‘ineffective means of pursuing ethical ends.’

On April 27, 1,500 students streamed into Harvard Yard in mass protest and took control again of Massachusetts Hall,
barricading President Bok from his office. In an action that followed, 3,000 people participated in a torchlight procession as they passed through the streets of Cambridge. The next day featured a daylong physical blockade of University Hall. Also in the spring of 1978, students built a shantytown in front of University Hall, which remained in place for several months. Meanwhile, Harvard alumni succeeded in electing Gay W. Seidman ’78, a supporter of divestment, to the Board of Overseers. During the summer, in what the campus newspaper called “the protest of the decade,” protesters forced the cancellation of a gala dinner for Harvard’s 350th anniversary celebration. By the end of 1978, on a policy proposed by the ACSR, the Corporation evaluated corporations for investments on the basis of the benefits provided for non-white employees.

At the time of this turmoil over Harvard’s investments, the law school announced its plan to dedicate a library at the Kennedy School of Government to apartheid supporter Charles W. Engelhard. Students incorporated denouncing the library’s name into their protests for divestment. On December 15, seven members of Congress wrote a letter of concern to President Bok, communicating their fear that the naming would be interpreted by supporters of the South African government as an indication of tolerance of apartheid by major American institutions. In a culmination of the fight over the building’s name, University officials compromised by placing a plaque in Engelhard’s memory rather than naming the library after him.

In the winter of ’78/’79, rumors circulated about the demotion of the Department of Afro-American Studies to an interdisciplary committee. Students coupled the rumors with calls for divestments as grounds for further protest. In early April, representatives from the Black Studies Association (BSA), SASC, and several other student groups called for a boycott of classes to shore up support for the department. On April 11, 1979 students participated in a SASC-sponsored rally, marching to Bok’s office and distributing divestment petitions signed by students and faculty. Speakers at the protest included Donald Woods, an exiled South African editor, Chris Nteta, a member of the African National Congress, and Dennis Brutus, an organizer of the international sports boycott against South Africa and a South African poet. All commended the students and urged Harvard to divest. On April 23, a boycott cut class attendance by more than 50%. After 450 students marched in protest, 700 students congregated to hear UN representative to Pan-Africanist Congress Elizabeth Sibeko speak in praise of the protesters.

Meanwhile, faculty members also expressed discontent over Harvard’s investments in South Africa. They discussed the morality of investments in South Africa in two full meetings in March and May, and also in an open letter to the University. Some posited that Harvard should use proxy votes (the right of shareholders to vote by proxy in corporate meetings) to pressure for corporations to withdraw from South Africa. Many others argued that capital flow from the U.S. enabled South Africa to systematically implement apartheid. By extension, they said, because of its international stature, Harvard’s investment policy ought to reflect an ethical stance against apartheid and go for complete divestment. In May’s faculty meeting, a majority of professors questioned the ethics of financial involvement in South Africa. 100 professors signed a letter endorsing a gradual, five-step policy to push for shareholder resolutions calling for corporate withdrawal, with a policy of selective divestment if efforts failed. Nevertheless, President Bok was still skeptical that divestment was the proper action for the University. In an open letter in March, Bok expressed that the purpose of a university was to protect its financial stability and transmit knowledge, not to reform society. In a second open letter in April, he supported the Corporation’s position of Harvard voting as a shareholder to leverage influence. Although Harvard refused to divest, in 1979 it did establish a fellowship programme for black South Africans to spend a year at Harvard.

In the spring of 1983 more than 19 undergrads and a professor engaged in a weeklong hunger strike. The end of the hunger strike overlapped with a meeting of the ACSR. The ACSR recommended that the Corporation follow the ‘Sullivan Principles,’ a list of humane guidelines for companies operating in South Africa. Also that year, students and alumni developed new strategies to pressure the university. Seniors established the Endowment for Divestiture – an alternative fund to the traditional senior gift. This new fund would remain withheld from Harvard pending divestiture, or until the United Nations lifted its demand for divestiture. In an effort to sustain pressure on the University to divest its endowment funds from companies doing business in South Africa, seniors in the class of 1984 also chose to donate their senior gift to the fund.

In May 1984, the ACSR voted in favor of unilateral divestiture. The Corporation opted for a policy of selective divestment involving withdrawal of investments from 15 companies—those with South African connections that applied unacceptable standards in their relations with employees. This was the first time that the university had divested itself of part of its stock
portfolio to back up its official stance against the apartheid system. The University also enacted a policy against investment in any companies that did more than 50 percent of their business in South Africa.

On April 4, 1985, five thousand students gathered in Harvard Yard to hear Reverend Jesse I. Jackson speak at a SASC-organized protest. Students engaged in actions throughout 1985 to pressure Harvard to not be just another brick in the wall of apartheid. To prove they were well organized enough to seize control of major administrative buildings if necessary, students sometimes participated in ‘pop and stops’ – actions where they would materialize, flood into offices of Massachusetts Hall, hand flowers to secretaries, and say “we’ll be back later.”

In May 1985, South African consul general Abe S. Hoppenstein made a visit to the Conservative Club on campus. In anticipation of his arrival, leaders of SASC and DSA (Democratic Socialists of America) held a nonviolent teach-out and passed out leaflets about his arrival. Upon his arrival, in the famous Lowell house blockade, SASC staged a protest where students rallied in Lowell House courtyard. Then, following the lead of the Spartacus Youth League (SYL), student protesters decided that Hoppenstein should experience the conditions of thousands of Black South Africans jailed in prisons. They blockaded him into Lowell House Common Room, preventing his departure until the administration, campus cops, and the Conservative Club all lined up to defend him. Fourteen protestors were charged. Following this incident, the University revived the Committee on Rights and Responsibility (CRR), a disciplinary body not called on since the Vietnam War, which eventually placed 10 students on academic probation for the Lowell blockade.

On June 28, 1985, a group of law students organized an anti-apartheid rally to protest the state of emergency recently declared in South Africa. 150 people, including participants from nearby schools and neighborhoods, gathered outside Massachusetts Hall. The crowd sang, listened to political speeches, and then carried candles and placards, and shouted slogans while marching through the Yard and into the Square.

In spring of 1986, SASC activists constructed a makeshift shantytown in front of University Hall – a tactic used during the Harvard Campaign in 1978, and commonly used by students in divestment campaigns on campuses across the country. The Conservative Club countered the action by constructing ‘anti-shanties’ – a Soviet gulag and black tower—to mock SASC’s white tower.

In 1989, students and alumni petitioned to put pro-divestment candidate South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu on the ballot for Harvard’s Board of Overseers. He ran on a pro-divestment platform and won a seat. Nevertheless, the university clung to its refusal to totally divest from South Africa. Due to ebb and flow of individuals involved, it is difficult to ascertain whether the campaign survived beyond 1989, or whether actions simply tapered off.

Throughout the campaign, the school argued repeatedly against divestment, repeating that it was costly, ineffective, and might even worsen conditions for South Africa’s already-oppressed blacks. Harvard never agreed to the demand of complete divestiture of its $400 million of South Africa related stock. The University’s policy of gradualism and partial divestment contrasted with the complete divestment of universities like Yale and Columbia resulting from student protests on respective campuses.

Research Notes

Influences:

The campaign was influenced by diverse divestment campaigns happening on university campuses across the country. Student involvement also drew inspiration from rioters of the 60s and 70s. Among other reasons, Harvard students may have also participated in actions in an attempt to revive the political style of a more active era. (2)

Sources:


Additional Notes:
The narrative paints a picture of the diverse range of groups involved in the campaign and tactics used by them over more than a decade. However, due to the extended and diffuse nature of the campaign, the narrative is by no means all encompassing. For more information on groups/individuals involved in particular sections of the campaign, see sources referenced.

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