MIT students campaign for divestment from apartheid South Africa, 1985-1991

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

1985
to:
1991

Country: United States
Location City/State/Province: Boston, Massachusetts
Location Description: MIT campus

Goals:
The CAA’s goal was to convince MIT to divest from South Africa to pressure the South African government to end apartheid there.

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 002. Letters of opposition or support
- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 004. Signed public statements
- 005. Declarations of indictment and intention
- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 011. Records, radio, and television
- 015. Group lobbying
- 016. Picketing
- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 048. Protest meetings

Methods in 2nd segment:
Methods in 3rd segment:
Methods in 4th segment:
Methods in 5th segment:
Methods in 6th segment:
• 006. Group or mass petitions
• 016. Picketing • Shanty towns
• 021. Delivering symbolic objects
• 031. “Haunting” officials
• 034. Vigils
• 037. Singing
• 137. Refusal of an assemblage or meeting to disperse
• 171. Nonviolent interjection

Notes on Methods:
It's not clear what methods were used between 1986 and 1990

Classifications

Classification:
Change
Cluster:
Human Rights
Group characterization:

• MIT students

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:
The MIT Coalition Against Apartheid (CAA)
Partners:
Not known
External allies:
Not known
Involvement of social elites:
MIT Adjunct Professor of Urban Studies Melvin H. King

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:
Groups in 2nd Segment:
Groups in 3rd Segment:
Groups in 4th Segment:
Groups in 5th Segment:
Groups in 6th Segment:
Additional notes on joining/exiting order:
Not known
Segment Length: Approximately 1 year
Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:
MIT President Paul E. Gray and the MIT Corporation (including Corporation Chairman David S. Saxon)

Nonviolent responses of opponent:
Not known

Campaigner violence:
Possible protester violence at rallies at MIT early April 1990

Repressive Violence:
Possible police brutality at rallies at MIT early April 1990; many protesters were arrested at these rallies; a symbolic shanty was torn down

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:
0 points out of 6 points

Survival:
1 point out of 1 points

Growth:
1 point out of 3 points

In reaction to the continuing apartheid in South Africa, many colleges and universities in the United States divested from South Africa, meaning that they removed the holdings they had from companies which operated there. Apartheid separated blacks and whites; the whites, however, had a monopoly on power and had much higher living standards. Divestment was viewed as a way to put pressure on the South African government to end apartheid by hurting them economically. In 1985, as other colleges and universities began divesting, an MIT student group named the Coalition Against Apartheid (CAA) formed to urge the MIT Corporation (which was in charge of MIT's investments), and MIT's president Paul Gray, to divest from South Africa.

The CAA was a loose organization and never claimed to have any specific leadership, although it did have the support of a few MIT professors, including Melvin H. King. Most of the CAA’s protests consisted of rallies, meetings, and public statements written to The Tech, MIT’s student newspaper. Opposition letters and articles were also written to The Tech.

Beginning in 1990, protests became more elaborate. A shanty, symbolic of those living in poverty under apartheid, was put up in the middle of campus and torn down by police, who arrested some of the protesters. Five policemen received minor injuries in a minor scuffle. There were many arguments over who started the violence: the protesters or the police. It is unclear, even today, who actually began it. MIT President Gray stated that he would allow future shanty-building protests, granted that the shanty be torn down at the end of the day. The protesters were still not happy. The entire relationship between the CAA and Gray mirrored this single protest: while the protesters made demands and participated in protests (some of which were called “confrontational”), Gray attempted to make the CAA feel like their demands were being met. He never succeeded in doing so, although he may not have had to; he had power that they did not. The CAA never managed to undermine the power of MIT’s administration and so it did not matter whether or not they were content; the administration would do as it pleased.

Other protests consisted of bringing letters in huge 15 foot envelopes to members of the administration, holding a vigil outside of Gray’s house, and trying to break into the MIT Corporation’s club on their lunch break (the protesters were stopped by police). One police officer was hurt and two students were arrested.

More civil meetings between the Corporation and the CAA took place, but the Corporation did not agree to divest MIT’s assets
in South Africa, claiming that such an act would only hurt blacks, and that the main function of the Corporation was to raise
money to support MIT’s student body (hence it needed the funds from companies operating in South Africa). Also, those
companies operated under the Sullivan Principles, which demanded labor equality for blacks and whites. Although only 1% of
blacks in South Africa were employed by these companies, the Corporation claimed that the difference those companies made
for those employed was significant. The CAA responded by stating that the Corporation only wanted to protect its own monetary
interests and did not fully understand the moral reason behind divestment.

MIT never divested its South African assets and the CAA ceased its widespread protests after 1991.

**Research Notes**

**Influences:**

The MIT protests were influenced by divestment campaigns at other colleges and universities around the United States, which
arose after a national call for divestment. (1)

**Sources:**


Assefa, Samuel, and Sue Nissman. "Life under apartheid has not changed enough to lift sanctions yet." Tech. 111.17 (1991):
7. Print.


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**Additional Notes:**
Further exploration may be needed to discover precisely why the campaign was not successful and to find out why the movement stalled between 1985 and 1990. Also, looking into the question of whether or not divestment was actually an effective measure against the South African government could be useful.

**Name of researcher, and date dd/mm/yyyy:**
Sophia Naylor, 7/2/2010

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