Swarthmore College students win divestment from apartheid South Africa, 1978-1989

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

**Time period notes:** (endpoint unclear)

22 February
1978
to: 9 September
1989

**Country:** United States
**Location City/State/Province:** Swarthmore, Pennsylvania
**Location Description:** Swarthmore College

**Goals:**
To pressure Swarthmore College into divesting from all companies with assets, interests, and investments in South Africa.

**Methods**

**Methods in 1st segment:**

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

**Methods in 2nd segment:**

- 001. Public speeches
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books

**Methods in 3rd segment:**

**Methods in 4th segment:**

- 004. Signed public statements
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 016. Picketing
- 018. Displays of flags and symbolic colors
- 024. Symbolic lights
- 034. Vigils
- 037. Singing
- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 162. Sit-in
- 177. Speak-in

Methods in 5th segment:

- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 178. Guerrilla theatre › die-in

Methods in 6th segment:

Classifications

Classification:
Change

Cluster:
Economic Justice
Human Rights

Group characterization:

- College students

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:
SAAC (Composition of the group changed over the campaign, but the group itself remained the leader)

Partners:
College Divestment Coalition

External allies:
Advisory Committee on South Africa, Ad Hoc Advisory Committee on Ethics and Investments, CEIR.

Involvement of social elites:
Raymond Hopkins - director of Swarthmore's International Relations concentration - wrote an article in support of divestment. Swarthmore College faculty passed a resolution for divestiture.

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- SAAC

Groups in 2nd Segment:

Groups in 3rd Segment:

- Advisory Committee on South Africa

Groups in 4th Segment:
Starting in the 1960’s, students in the United States started organizing against apartheid in South Africa. They targeted banks and other companies involved in South Africa, and by the 1970’s, many students were starting campaigns to encourage their universities to divest from all companies with investments in South Africa.

As early as 1965, students at Swarthmore College had signed a letter to the college president calling for a removal of investment with Chase Manhattan Bank, but the issue was overshadowed by activism against the Vietnam War.

In the late 1970s, however, students started bringing in speakers and opening up dialogue about apartheid in South Africa. In February of 1978, the Swarthmore Political Action Committee (SPAC) held a discussion on liberation groups in South Africa and South Africa’s colonial history. Students also emphasized the instrumental role U.S. corporate investment in South Africa had in maintaining the Botha regime’s power. This discussion resulted in the formation of the Swarthmore Anti-Apartheid
Two days later, SAAC started circulating a petition that outlined the injustices of apartheid, the investments Swarthmore College had in companies involved in South Africa, and cited Quaker principles (Swarthmore College was originally a Quaker school) as a reason to consider the moral consequences of their investments. They ended up getting 640 signatures in two days.

In March, SAAC brought its petition to the Board of Managers. The board tentatively decided to adopt the Sullivan Principles (guidelines set forth by a pastor from Philadelphia outlining egalitarian employment guidelines for companies to follow) for all future investments. SAAC contended that the Sullivan Principles were an inadequate measure of egalitarian business practices and a “naïve illusion” ignoring the roots of inequality, such as access to education, housing, and food. Still, the Board stuck with its decision.

Between 1978 and 1981, SAAC brought in speakers, films, and anti-apartheid groups to raise awareness about the injustices of apartheid. In 1980, the Advisory Committee on South Africa, made up of board members, faculty, administration, and students, was formed to deliberate about possible divestiture from several companies with investments in South Africa. In February of 1981, SAAC put out a flier asserting that, in fact, Swarthmore’s investments in companies involved in South Africa had grown to over 10%, and encouraging students to voice their outrage to the new committee.

By May, the college had decided to divest itself of its stock in Citicorp, Newmont Mining Corporation, and Timken Company, exceeding $2 million in stock. Between 1978 and 1985, the college had made four divestments, worth $3 million in investments total. All of these decisions were made based on the Advisory Committee on South Africa’s decision that the companies did not adhere to the Sullivan Principles. A second committee was formed in 1985 called the Ad Hoc Advisory Committee on Ethics and Investments to look into total divestment.

It wasn’t until 1985 that direct action occurred. On September 9, 1985, members of SAAC (partnering with the recently formed Swarthmore College Divestment Coalition) slept on the porch of Parrish Hall, the College’s administrative building, to start off a vigil that would last until the September 28th board meeting. The vigil was in protest of the college’s investment policy regarding South Africa, to educate students about the College’s investment policy and apartheid, and to call for complete divestment from all corporations with interests in South Africa. Students rotated shifts of occupying the porch, hosted nightly discussions and talks by professors, and gave red armbands to passers-by. The Friday night before the board meeting, a group of 500 students (including students from nearby Haverford College and Bryn Mawr College) slept outside on the lawn in front of Parrish Hall, culminating in a candlelight vigil and a human ring around the meetinghouse where the board meeting was taking place.

On September 28, the board decided to appoint another committee called the Ad Hoc Committee for Ethical Investment Recommendations (CEIR), consisting of board members, administration, faculty, and students to figure out a more effective approach to protesting apartheid than pulling assets out of the country.

On October 7, thirty-five students staged a sit-in (organized by SAAC) in the admissions office in Parrish Hall to protest the board’s decision. The students carried picket signs, sang, presented a three-year divestment plan, and distributed leaflets to prospective students encouraging them to tell the administration the importance of divestment in their college decision.

On December 6, 1985, CEIR decided to divest from all companies not adhering to certain Sullivan Principles, and would not accept any future solicitations from firms with investments in South Africa. Deeming this measure inadequate, 70 students marched into the Board of Managers meeting on December 7 wearing red armbands and singing. The board meeting was adjourned until the students left. From December 11-19, 50 students took turns occupying the college president’s office. They called for complete divestment, in addition to a more active recruitment of black students and professors on the part of the college. The administration gave a “sufficient” response to concerns over the black population at the college, but remained ambivalent on issues of divestment.

On March 1, 1986, students staged a die-in on the lawn outside of where the Board of Managers was to meet. Six students and
one faculty member then went into the meeting to demand that the college put a deadline of January 15, 1988, on complete divestment and that the college place all net income into a South Africa Free Fund. Later that day, the board announced its intention to move in stages toward full divestment. In 1989 it adopted a schedule for achieving total divestment, deciding to sell stocks worth $42.5 million in companies operating in South Africa. $2 million (later to be $15 million) of this was to immediately go to a South Africa Free Fund. The board then clarified that this divestment would only happen if a “prudent” way to divest were found.

Discussion over divestment continued into 1987, though talk was suspended due to a stock market collapse in October of 1987. In March of 1989, the Board of Managers set forth a plan for complete divestment by 1990. They followed through with their promise and maintained divestment for many years. In 1992, apartheid in South Africa was abolished.

Research Notes

Influences:
The Swarthmore students were inspired by a boycott at Berkley of personal IBM computers because of IBM’s activity in South Africa. It was also inspired by Hampshire College’s 1977 divestiture and Columbia University’s divestiture in 1985. (1)
The Swarthmore divestment campaign influenced both Haverford College and Bryn Mawr College’s divestment campaigns. (2)

Sources:
Engerman, David and Sharon Sachar. “Students Protest Investments.” The Phoenix. September 13, 1985


**Additional Notes:**
There were very few sources on this campaign between 1978 and 1981, and between 1981 and 1985.

For more on the divestment, the Friends’ Historical Library in McCabe Library at Swarthmore College has excellent sources on the campaign.

**Name of researcher, and date dd/mm/yyyy:**
Hannah Jones, 4/2/2010

A project of Swarthmore College, including Peace and Conflict Studies, the Peace Collection, and the Lang Center for Civic and Social Responsibility.

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