University of Illinois students gain partial divestment from apartheid South Africa, 1985-1987

Time period notes: The student coalition actually began in 1977, but most direct action was concentrated between 1985 and 1987.

March 1985 to January 1987

Country: United States
Location City/State/Province: Chicago and Urbana, Illinois
Location Description: University of Illinois Campuses

Goals: To convince the Board of Trustees to divest the University’s holdings in companies tied to South Africa

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

• 001. Public speeches
• 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
• 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
• 016. Picketing
• 018. Displays of flags and symbolic colors
• 019. Wearing of symbols
• 038. Marches
• 047. Assemblies of protest or support
• 177. Speak-in

Methods in 2nd segment:

• 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
• 016. Picketing
• 019. Wearing of symbols
• 038. Marches
• 047. Assemblies of protest or support

Methods in 3rd segment:
• 019. Wearing of symbols
• 038. Marches

Methods in 4th segment:

• 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
• 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications → Shanty towns
• 016. Picketing → Shanty towns
• 047. Assemblies of protest or support
• 137. Refusal of an assemblage or meeting to disperse
• 177. Speak-in
• 178. Guerrilla theatre → Mock riot

Methods in 5th segment:

• 002. Letters of opposition or support → Postcards
• 034. Vigils → Night rally

Methods in 6th segment:

Classifications

Classification:
Change

Cluster:
Economic Justice
Human Rights
National/Ethnic Identity

Group characterization:

• University students

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:
CU-CAA (Champaign Urbana Coalition Against Apartheid)

Partners:
CIDSA (Coalition for Illinois Divestment from South Africa)

External allies:
College campuses across the country

Involvement of social elites:
University president Stanley Ikenberry proposed divestment on September 11, 1986.

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:
In 1948, the newly elected National Party introduced systematized and legalized segregation in South Africa. The apartheid regime sought white minority rule and the suppression of other racial groups in order to maintain a cheap labor supply. Government officials segregated public institutions and removed the oppressed black Africans from their land onto racially divided reservations. This system sparked internal protests, often met with violence. International groups of people were outraged at apartheid and asked companies to withdraw their holdings from the South African government. American college students began protesting the financial involvement of the institutions they attended, calling for divestment.

Students from the University of Illinois at both the Chicago and Champaign-Urbana campuses joined the movement for divestment. In the spring of 1977, students formed the Champaign-Urbana Coalition against Apartheid (CU-CAA). They marched to the University of Illinois Foundation but were met with closed doors. Students turned a second march to President
John Corbally’s office into a five-hour sit-in, demanding an open debate on apartheid. Although Corbally refused to debate, other administrators agreed. In 1983, the Coalition for Illinois Divestment from South Africa (CIDSA) joined forces with CU-CAA at the University, broadening the support base to local organizations and activists.

Commemorating the Sharpeville massacre of 1960 during which 69 peaceful protestors were killed by South African police, the CU-CAA began a series of protests on March 21, 1985. Over seventy college campuses across the country showed solidarity through National Divestment Protest Day on April 4, National Anti-Apartheid Day on April 24 and Southern Africa Political Prisoner Day on October 11. Students showed support by marching, picketing, wearing black and red armbands and bracelets and holding press conferences.

After the University of Illinois’ Board of Trustees defeated two motions calling for divestment on June 21, 1985, students left their seats holding banners and chanting “divest now” while surrounding board members. Sixteen University of Illinois students were arrested by the Chicago police under the charge of interfering with a public institution of higher learning. Board president Nina T. Shepherd publicly condemned apartheid, but would not risk the university’s financial stability. $21 million of the school’s $131 million were invested in companies with holdings in South Africa.

When the Board voted to raise tuition by 6.4% on April 12, 1986, demonstrators erupted in protest, demanding an $18 million divestment. 60 protesters were arrested after refusing to leave the boardroom. Outside another hundred students encircled police cars chanting “free South Africa” and “divest now.” As part of a five-day protest, students erected shantytowns on campus, built from scrap metal and wood. On April 13, three hundred students staged a mock riot; some dressed as South African police, others acted as the oppressed.

University president Stanley Ikenberry proposed divestment on September 11, 1986, stressing business reasons as well as political and public relations ones. He argued that the divestment of other institutions in South African connected corporations would cause stocks to drop, thus decreasing the University financial portfolio. The board defeated the motion in the closest vote yet. In October the Champaign-Urbana campus held a night rally and sent 500 postcards demanding the release of political prisoners.

The Board finally passed a resolution on January 14, 1987. The school began an 18-month period of divestment on May 31, the deadline set by Reverend Leon Sullivan for United States companies. However the victory was largely symbolic; the board only divested $3.3 million.

**Research Notes**

**Influences:**

University of Illinois students were influenced by similar protests at colleges across the country, especially at Columbia University (see "Columbia University Students Protest for Divestment from South Africa, 1985"). (1)

**Sources:**


