



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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University of Toronto students win divestment from apartheid South Africa, 1984-1990

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

Time period notes: *It is unclear when the campaign began. Students began organizing the Anti-Apartheid Network in 1983, but I have not been able to find any action that they took before November 1984.*

November

1984

to: February 1,
1990

Country: Canada

Location City/State/Province: Toronto, Ontario

Location Description: University of Toronto campus

Goals:

The goal was to have the University divest entirely from all companies with ties to South Africa, regardless of their labor practices there.

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 004. Signed public statements

Methods in 2nd segment:

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 002. Letters of opposition or support
- 004. Signed public statements
- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 162. Sit-in
- 177. Speak-in

Methods in 4th segment:

- 047. Assemblies of protest or support

Methods in 5th segment:

Methods in 6th segment:

- 162. Sit-in

Notes on Methods:

Retired professor A.P. Thornton wrote a report urging divestment, which bolstered support on campus and may have helped the campaign. However, as the University President commissioned the support, and as Thornton was not involved with the campaign at the time he wrote it, I have not attributed it as one of the methods of the campaign.

Classifications

Classification:

Change

Cluster:

Democracy

Economic Justice

Human Rights

Group characterization:

- University of Toronto students and faculty

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

The leading organizing was the Anti-Apartheid Network. The leadership changed over the course of the campaign. Leaders included students Thomas Parkin and Mike Warner. Others not known.

Partners:

Not known

External allies:

Members of governing council Claire Johnson, Brian Burchell, Anne-Marie Kinsley, and possibly others; student unions; college staff association

Involvement of social elites:

Student Administration Council; Retired history professor A.P. Thornton

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- Claire Johnson (one time involvement)
- Student Administration Council (one time involvement)

Groups in 2nd Segment:

Groups in 3rd Segment:

- Student unions
- college staff association

Groups in 4th Segment:

- A.P. Thornton (one time involvement)
- Anne-Marie Kinsley (one time involvement)
- Brian Burchell (one time involvement)

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:

Segment Length: 10.5 months

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

The administration of the University, particularly University President George Connell.

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

Not known

Campaigner violence:

None known

Repressive Violence:

None known

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

6 points out of 6 points

Survival:

1 point out of 1 points

Growth:

2 points out of 3 points

Notes on outcomes:

The campaign achieved all of its original goals. It is unclear how much the organization grew, although it did grow. It is also unclear how much the infrastructure survived or did not. On the last day of the campaign, many students protested, both in the President's office and outside, for total divestment, but it is not clear from this action how intact the infrastructure was behind the campaigners.

Beginning in 1983, students and student allies at the University of Toronto began creating the organizational structures needed to pressure the University to divest from South Africa. Students created an Anti-Apartheid Network, or AAN, drawing membership from the Student Christian Movement, the Communist Club, the African and Caribbean Students' Association, and the New Democratic Party Club. The group had large support among the student body from very early on, but gained no traction with the University administration.

In November of 1984, students on the divestment committee wrote a brief that 1375 people signed, urging divestment within two years. The Student Administrative Council, representing the 29,000 undergraduate students, also recommended divestment. A part-time student on the Governing Council, Claire Johnson, made a proposal similar to the divestment committee's, suggesting that the council vote on whether to divest totally at their September 19, 1985 meeting. Instead, at that meeting the University of Toronto Governing Council, following University President George Connell's advice, decided to institute Canada's optional "Code of Conduct Concerning the Employment Practices of Canadian Companies Operating in South Africa." In this code, the government asked for divestment from companies with segregation or paycheck inequality operating in South Africa. By

following the code, the University withdrew investments from any Canadian companies operating in South Africa that violated Canadian employment policy, but remained invested in those that did not. It is not clear if the decision was a response to the students' brief. However, the pro-divestment students, including Claire Johnson, found the resolution to be weak and far from their demand of total divestment. Students continued advocating for complete divestment.

In December, the Governing Council decided to take a further step and divest from United States companies operating in South Africa that did not meet Canadian criteria as the Code of Conduct established, but did not take any further steps towards divesting from all companies with ties to South Africa.

Many members of the campus community found the policy of partial divestment dissatisfactory. In 1987, a poll reported that 64% of the student body supported full divestment. Various student unions and a college staff association had called for divestment. More than 70 members of the faculty signed a letter in the University newspaper demanding that President Connell resign if he did not change his stance on divestment. At this point, the university still had close to \$5 million invested in companies with South African operations.

On March 4, 1987, one faculty member and about twenty-five students marched to President Connell's office. The president arrived that evening to talk to the students, but the conversation brought them no agreements. Students demanded that the Council consider the divestment motion, but Connell adamantly refused. The students spent the night in his office, leaving the next day for the meeting of the Governing Council.

The University's Governing Council, meeting on March 5, 1987, refused to consider the student-brought motion demanding complete divestment from any companies directly invested in South Africa at that meeting, sparking student anger.

That same day, students held an on-campus demonstration protesting apartheid. Afterwards, approximately 250 students stormed the Governing Council meeting to protest the Council's refusal to consider their motion. The students stood on tables chanting "Divestment yes, apartheid no" and other slogans, as well as more personal remarks. President Connell, who had recommended during the course of the meeting that the council table the motion until October, left the room quickly. After about ten minutes, the council members adjourned the meeting and left as well.

Within the next week, Connell declared that the University's investment strategy would continue unchanged, explaining that a university is not political and ought not use its economic power to protest a government or policy. He said that if the Canadian government ordered divestment, the University would divest, but that it would not reach such a decision on its own.

The students on Governing Council disagreed on the divestment issue. There were four undergraduate students, two graduate students, and two part-time students on the Council. Of them, one undergraduate, Michael Bilaniuk agreed with President Connell. Another undergraduate, Brian Burchell, opposed Connell's policy, saying that the University had a moral responsibility for its effect on the surrounding world, and that investment was legitimizing apartheid. Undergraduate Councilmember Anne-Marie Kinsley agreed, saying that the very nature of having investments in South Africa was a political act. She disagreed with Connell's position that a university was an improper place to pass moral judgment.

In September of 1987, President Connell asked a retired history professor, A.P. Thornton, to prepare a report on the situation in South Africa and possible alternatives to U of T's policy. In late November, Thornton released his report, urging that the University end all investments, direct or indirect, in South Africa. He said that those who invested in South Africa were allies of the regime, and that divestment was the only alternative. Connell refused to comment on the report. Anti-Apartheid Network coordinator Thomas Parkin announced his support of Thornton's findings and took issue with Connell's refusal to act or allow a vote on the issue. Parkin cited the fact that most students, as well as many Council members, supported divestment. After Thornton released the report, campus support for divestment increased.

In January of 1988, the Governing Council voted 30-12 on Councilmember Rachel Barney's proposal to divest all holdings in South Africa. During the vote, students stood on the steps outside, calling for divestment. When the vote came through, spectators expressed their support with a standing ovation. However, the pension fund, with salary portions from faculty, staff,

and administration, did not divest at this time. Robert Wilson, an investment administrator, explained that the trustees of the pension fund were obliged to ignore moral considerations and think only of good returns on investment.

Approximately two years later, on February 1, 1990, 25 students staged another sit-in in President Connell's office, this one lasting only three hours, to protest the failure of the administration to divest the pension funds. After the sit-in, they met more students outside the office to hold a peaceful demonstration. Later that afternoon, U of T declared its intention to withdraw all pension fund investments out of South Africa. This final move represented complete divestment and the success of the campaign.

Research Notes

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Additional Notes:

This was one of many divestment campaigns happening on campuses in Canada and the United States during the 1980s. Canadian universities that had totally divested by this point included Queen’s, McGill, Dalhousie, Mount Allison, and York. Among those with selective divestment policies, like the one Toronto had initially, included Carleton (see "Carleton University students call for institutional boycott and divestment of apartheid South Africa, 1985-87"), Simon Fraser, Trent, and Lakehead.

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