



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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White Cape Town University Students Sit-in for Reappointment of Black Professor, 1968

May
1968
to: August
1968
Country: South Africa
Location City/State/Province: Cape Town
Location Description: University of Cape Town
Goals:
Re-appoint Archie Mafeje to senior lectureship in the department of social anthropology and establish August 20th as Mafeje Day at the University of Cape Town as an annual day of protest against the government's interference with university authority.

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 010. Newspapers and journals › Created Alternative Newspaper
- 162. Sit-in

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 162. Sit-in

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 038. Marches › attempted, but blocked by the mayor
- 162. Sit-in

Methods in 4th segment:

- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 162. Sit-in

Methods in 5th segment:

- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 162. Sit-in

Methods in 6th segment:

- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 162. Sit-in

Classifications

Classification:

Change

Cluster:

Democracy

Human Rights

Group characterization:

- students

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

Modern World Society, Radsoc (Radical Society), National Union of Students

External allies:

Witwatersrand University Students

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- Modern World Society
- National Union of Students
- Radsoc (Radical Society)

Groups in 2nd Segment:

Groups in 3rd Segment:

Groups in 4th Segment:

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:

Segment Length: 36 hours

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

Jan de Klerk (South African Minister of Education), Prime Minister Balthazar Vorster, Afrikaner students from Pretoria University and University of Stellenbosch, counter-demonstrators

Repressive Violence:

Forced head shavings, shots fired at demonstrators, fruit and eggs thrown at demonstrators.

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

2 points out of 6 points

Survival:

1 point out of 1 points

Growth:

2 points out of 3 points

Notes on outcomes:

UCT publicly protested the government's control over hiring and created an award in Majefe's honor, but did not re-appoint Majefe or name a August 20th Mafeje Day.

During the 1960s, apartheid and political repression were near their height in South Africa. The National Party's apartheid regime severely repressed political dissent and expression, sometimes with violence. Racial justice and democratic leftist movements suffered a severe setback in 1960 with the Sharpeville massacre, when hundreds of political protesters were injured and killed. Due to lack of public means of challenging the regime, The African Resistance Movement initiated an unsuccessful and unpopular bombing campaign in 1964.

Amidst this political climate, the University of Cape Town (UCT) Council unanimously appointed Archie Majefe, a black man, to senior lectureship in the department of social anthropology in May 1968. Majefe was the first black professor at the white-only UCT. He graduated from UCT before the government forced the university's segregation. By law, the UCT could only admit white students, but the law did not explicitly bar the UCT from hiring non-white faculty.

Within days of Majefe's appointment, the South African Minister of Education, Jan de Klerk, wrote to the university threatening to amend the law in a way that would force the UCT to fire Mafeje and permanently bar them from hiring black professors in the future. In his letter, Klerk decried their appointment of a "Bantu" and called it "tantamount to flouting the accepted traditional outlook of South Africa."

The government also made statements implicitly threatening students. Knowing there was a large number of Jewish students at UCT, the South African government reminded these students that the government had just relaxed restrictions on sending funds to Israel to help fund their 1967 war and could again make them more strict.

As a result of government pressure, the UCT Council rescinded the offer to Majefe just weeks later. Its justification for this decision to the students and faculty was that, by complying with the government's request, the government would leave current laws the same, thus giving the UCT the theoretical right to hire black faculty. This, the UCT administration argued, would allow them to maintain greater autonomy over the hiring process.

In response to student frustration about this decision, the Student Representative Council (SRC) held a joint forum with the administration. However, the leftist group Radical Society, led by Raphael Kaplinsky, undermined this cooperation when Kaplinsky spoke out during the forum against cooperation between students and the administration, causing other students to turn away from the administration as well.

Despite pressure from students, the University did not respond. On 15 August 1968, 1000 students gathered for a mass meeting. Following speeches by Duncan Innes, the President of the National Union of Students, Kaplinsky, and others, most of the attendees, led by the National Union of Students, marched across campus, and an estimated 600 students occupied the administration building. They pledged not to leave until the University publicly attempted to rehire Mafeje and declared August 20 Mafeje Day, an annual day of protest against the government's interference with university authority. During the occupation, students cooked communally, hosted alternative lectures, and published a newspaper.

The sit-in spread beyond the UCT campus. During the sit-in, students in the city of Johannesburg staged demonstrations in solidarity with students in Cape Town. On August 19, demonstrators gathered outside Witwatersrand University and attempted to begin a march through the center of the city protesting Mafeje's removal. Counter-demonstrators pelted the protesters with oranges and eggs. The city council planned to allow the march to continue, but Prime Minister Balthazar Vorster ordered Johannesburg to block the student-led march right before it was to begin. The next day, Afrikaner students from Pretoria

University attacked Witwatersrand University students and forcibly shaved their heads as they attempted to deliver a petition to Prime Minister Vorster in support of the UCT sit-in.

The UCT Council refused to publicly confront the government by reconsidering its decision to withdraw Mafeje's appointment and instead agreed to establish an Academic Freedom Research Award in Mafeje's honor and installed a plaque recognizing that the government had taken away the UCT's ability to freely appoint professors.

Though the UCT administration did not actively repress the students, the government and many from the general white population in South Africa tried to disrupt the protest. Students from the Afrikaans University of Stellenbosch were sent, potentially by the government, to break up the sit-in and beat the UCT students. Opponents of the protest fired shots at the administration building's doors. While these violent responses did not cause harm to the protesters, who had locked themselves inside, they scared away some demonstrators and potential supporters. As the sit-in persisted, the government threatened to directly intervene to end it if the UCT did not. The threat of government force, attempts by Afrikaans students to enter the building, and the unwillingness of the UCT to reconsider its decision caused support for the demonstration to diminish and for many students to leave the sit-in. On August 23, the ninth day of the sit-in, the National Union of Students ended the sit-in. The UCT did not make another black appointment until 1980.

Research Notes

Influences:

(1) Influenced by the sit-ins in Europe and America throughout the 1960s. (2) The sit-ins influenced later social movements against the Apartheid regime in South Africa, including the United Democratic Front.

Sources:

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

Stephen O'Hanlon, 15/02/2015

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