

# THE STATE OF APARTHEID:

Assessing sanctions at year one.

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A year after Congress overrode his veto and imposed limited sanctions on South Africa, US President Ronald Reagan remains adamantly opposed to the use of economic pressure against his 'old friends' in Pretoria. In a report to Congress in early October, Reagan declared, 'I continue to believe that punitive sanctions are not the best way to bring freedom to South Africa'.

The President said that while sanctions had had minimal impact on the South African economy they had nevertheless somehow contributed significantly to black unemployment and in some cases had concentrated 'marginally' more economic power in white hands - although the report concedes that black South Africans are disenfranchised economically as well as politically under apartheid. Reagan also noted that the sanctions had accelerated corporate disinvestment, which he charged hurt blacks by eliminating many of the educational and social welfare programs US corporations had been funding.

'In addition', the report continues, 'our sanctions measures have made it more difficult for the United States to persuade the South African government to act responsibly on human rights issues, to move towards negotiations, and to restrain its behaviour in the region'.

But if the arguments against sanctions are tired and familiar, the harsh tone of the report is not. After one year of sanctions, Reagan acknowledges

I regret that I am unable to report significant progress leading to the end of apartheid and the establishment of a nonracial democracy in South Africa. No clear and credible plan has been devised for negotiating a future political system involving all people equally in South Africa, and many of the legitimate representatives of the majority in that country are still banned, in hiding, or in detention. The Government of South Africa has not ended military and paramilitary activities aimed at neighboring states. Instead, such activities have been stepped up ... (including) the increase in unexplained deaths and disappearances of anti-apartheid activists throughout the region.

Strong stuff, coming from an administration which has been one of the staunchest defenders of the 'reformist' Botha government. But policy changes have not accompanied the changes in rhetoric. Instead of additional sanctions - 'that would be harmful to United States strategic or economic

interests' - all the administration can offer is 'a period of active and creative diplomacy' somehow leading to negotiations between the government and its black opponents.

The administration's refusal to recommend new sanctions prompted House Africa subcommittee chairman Howard Wolpe to accuse Reagan of 'apologizing' for apartheid and has set the stage for a confrontation with Congressional liberals. Both the House and the Senate have begun to hold hearings on the Presidential report, and a range of additional measures will be proposed.

A comprehensive sanctions bill, introduced by Representative Ron Dellums, is already before Congress. This legislation would mandate complete corporate disinvestment and cut off all trade (except 'strategic metals').

Other bills would deny tax credits to US companies in South Africa, would prevent US oil companies from operating inside South Africa, and would ban the importation of South African diamonds. A fourth bill, introduced by Texas Democrat Mickie Leland, would prohibit investments in the United States by 'certain South African mining interests'.

In the House, meanwhile, action on any of the proposed additional sanctions measures has been postponed until at least Spring 1988, and Congressional staffers are not optimistic about passage of new sanctions even then. Significantly, since its introduction last spring, the Dellums bill has garnered only two co-sponsors in the 100-member Senate, and just 65 in the House.

At the heart of Congressional indifference towards sanctions is the demobilization of American public opinion around South Africa. It's now been eighteen months since South African censors effectively removed the compelling images of racial violence from the nightly news, and the public has moved on to other more visible issues. Indeed, US television networks have been so cowed by South African press restrictions, that CBS refused for almost six months to air an hour long documentary on children in detention filmed secretly by Walter Cronkite for fear of official retaliation.

Compounding this problem is the public perception that US policy shifted against apartheid with the passage of sanctions. The clear moral imperative that inspired such critical efforts as the Free South Africa Movement during 1984-85 has ironically been diluted by the very success of last year's sanctions campaign.

Over the past year US anti-apartheid activists have struggled to find new issues and new campaigns to revive public outrage about apartheid. A number of campaigns to focus attention on detentions have been initiated, including some involving prominent members of Congress and TV personality Bill Cosby. TransAfrica is attempting to inject Southern Africa into the presidential race through its 'Faces Behind Apartheid' television ads

targeting Kansas Republican Bob Dole for his voting record on sanctions. But those efforts have met with only limited success.

Attempts to revitalize the sanctions and divestment movements in the US have been further hampered by the conflicting signals about sanctions coming from the democratic movement inside South Africa. Over the last year there has been an increasingly visible debate within, particularly the trade union movement, over the impact of sanctions and disinvestment on black workers and the state. As international sanctions, combined with the deterioration of the South African economy, have begun to cost jobs in such industries as automobile assembly, some trade unionists have begun to question the desirability of sanctions and disinvestment.

A resolution on sanctions passed by COSATU in 1987 called for comprehensive mandatory sanctions against the regime, but went on to say that *'selective sanctions ... as currently applied will not be effective against capital or the state; that they cause serious regional unemployment, and that they often serve the interests of the imperialist states rather than the South African working class'*. The resolution, echoing arguments that sanctions are ineffective and hurt blacks most, is often cited by the administration and big business as proof that black workers oppose sanctions.

COSATU's increasingly ambivalent attitude towards corporate withdrawal from South Africa has also begun to undermine the divestment movement - by far the most important and successful anti-apartheid campaign in the United States. Divestment and selective purchasing actions by hundreds of private institutions and dozens of state, local and city governments now deny tens of billions of dollars in investment capital and hundreds of millions of dollars in sales to US corporations who operate in South Africa. But COSATU's sanctions and disinvestment resolutions make no call for corporate withdrawal, and disinvestment is pointedly excluded from a list of selective sanctions endorsed by the COSATU congress earlier this year.

The recently announced 'disinvestment' agreement between the Ford Motor Company and the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA), a COSATU affiliate, appears to be even more damaging to the sanctions and divestment movement. As reported by the US press, the accord requires Ford to transfer 24 percent ownership in its South African subsidiary to NUMSA, with the remainder of Ford's shares to be sold to the Anglo American Corporation, which already holds a majority stake in the Ford operation.

The agreement thus eliminates all of Ford's direct investments in South Africa, but *at NUMSA's insistence*, will continue the parent company's licensing, sales and transfer agreements with the South African firm. Anti-apartheid activists in the US point out that many local divestment and selective purchasing laws include corporations with such licensing and sales

agreements. They also charge that the transfer of shares to South African unions is part of an increasingly sophisticated US corporate strategy to neutralize the divestment movements and drive a wedge between the unions and the international solidarity movement.

Adding to this perception of softening support for sanctions within the labour movement have been increasingly vocal attacks on sanctions and disinvestment from the 'workerist' faction of intellectuals clustered around the black labour movement. Indeed, in recent months the strongest opposition to disinvestment and incremental sanctions has seemed to come from the intellectuals - and not from black trade unionists themselves.

This summer, several studies critical of the impact of sanctions and disinvestment were prepared by white workerist intellectuals for COSATU and the Catholic Bishops Conference. The studies, intended for internal discussion and review and not as position papers of the federation, were then leaked to the press in an apparent attempt to influence the debate in the United States. These reports received wide press coverage, particularly in *The Wall Street Journal* and the ultra-right *Washington Times* and are being cited by conservatives and big business as evidence that inside South Africa the trade unions and the churches oppose sanctions.

In the United States, the surge of academic, corporate and institutional interest in South Africa has created a growing demand for information and research on virtually every aspect of South African society, from the economy to education, to black public opinion. This is giving the researchers, drawn from South Africa's predominately white academic community, an influence in the debate here that appears to be disproportionate to their numbers and to their role back home. Their relationship to the liberation movement, and to the democratic movement inside South Africa, is often unclear to their US audiences. The ideological and tactical debate within the progressive movement, and the political views of the academic 'experts' who come to the United States are often poorly understood. Moreover, the rigorous defense of clearly defined political positions inside South Africa can have a much different interpretation outside, with conservatives eager to portray disagreement as division within the ranks.

This is not to discount the importance or legitimacy of the debate on sanctions inside South Africa. It is easy to understand the dilemma of a shop steward at a US multi-national in South Africa explaining COSATU's support for sanctions. But there is growing sentiment in the United States that the debate is not being accurately represented here, and that individuals and organizations hostile to the ANC and to sanctions are using their privileged access to the West to weaken the international sanctions drive. The unprincipled manipulation of this important debate by people with uncertain mandates is beginning to pose problems for the US movement and for future sanctions efforts.