

Friends of the ANC and the Frontline States*

LESSONS FOR THE ANTI-APARTHEID MOVEMENT: Notes from Los Angeles -- June 1990

Introduction: When the word came to Los Angeles that Comrade Nelson Mandela would be visiting, there was a great feeling of euphoria and expectation among those many individuals and groups who have for a decade and more worked together against racism in Los Angeles and apartheid in South Africa. Here was a tremendous opportunity to infuse the movement locally with new energy, an opportunity for grass-roots people to pull together, not only to welcome Mandela, but more importantly, to mobilize people around concerns close to home such as homelessness, racism, poverty.... and solidarity concerns in South Africa, toward the final demise of apartheid.

Those hopes have been shattered; elite politicians have taken over. The driver's seat is occupied by those looking for photo-opportunities with Mandela to further their own political ambitions, by those who repudiate the genuine supporters of the African democratic revolution (including the true allies of the African National Congress), by those who seek to establish themselves (despite their self-serving motives and pro-establishment views), as Los Angeles' undisputed proponents of South African liberation. Mandela will come and go. But, our goal is to plan for the future --- to look beyond the Mandela visit to the ongoing struggle, asking ourselves what can be learned from this experience and from previous experiences.

Objectives: Along with ANC leadership, with leadership of the national anti-apartheid organizations in the U.S., and with those fighting racism in this country, we in Los Angeles feel the need for a strengthened grass-roots movement ready to continue the struggle through the 1990s, a movement that can maintain the line on sanctions against apartheid, that can stand with the victims of apartheid during its death throes, that can offer strong solidarity toward the transformation of society in a free South Africa as well as throughout the destabilized Southern Africa region, and that can pursue the links with poverty and racism in this country. Toward that end, we stand ready to work together locally and across the nation in a consultative network involving strategic decision-making and wider coalition building. Despite recent setbacks, we stand fully committed to the struggle, most especially the cause of the ANC.

Background: During the past year, an intensive effort has been expended in Los Angeles in order to build an "umbrella" network known as the Friends of the ANC and Frontline States. Following a very difficult period in terms of relationships between the ANC and numerous local anti-apartheid groups, this effort took on great importance. The result: of some thirty identified anti-apartheid organizations in Southern California, seventeen groups (and numerous individuals) are active in the Friends of the ANC and the Frontline States; in addition, several other groups and many other individuals have worked with the network on an ad hoc basis. An attached list of the most active organizations will illustrate the point.

Even prior to this development, many groups worked in coalition style, e.g., on the occasions of visits by Alfred Nzo (mid-80's), Oliver Tambo ('87), and other special events; this, despite the attempt on the part of some to grab

the leadership roles and exclude others. However, in the memory of most, the current form of network structure is the strongest ever for Los Angeles---namely, the Friends of the ANC and the Frontline States.

In response to the international appeal, a local Nelson Mandela Reception Committee was formed some months ago, under the leadership of the Southern California unit of the ANC, involving member groups of the Friends of the ANC. Several events were sponsored on the occasion of Mandela's release from prison. Several press conferences were held by this committee, including one on the occasion of the announcement that Mandela would be visiting Los Angeles. This committee, however, was completely ignored and bypassed, with the formation of another reception committee, chaired by Maxine Waters. Recent weeks have seen deterioration of communication, position grabbing by those hardly ever seen in the anti-apartheid struggle, etc. Meanwhile, the Friends of the ANC (those with the long history of support to the ANC...and the commitment for the future struggle) have been marginalized.

Specific Learning Experiences: Perhaps we have been too slow to learn from past experience; thus, mistakes have been repeated. By looking at some specific examples, we hope to lift up general principles which might serve as guidelines for the future.

(1) Elite vs. Mass Involvement. Plans put forth by the initial Los Angeles committee to welcome Mandela included involvement of Mandela with activists, students, religious leaders, and a mass rally. However, leadership roles have been grabbed by those who would control and exclude the grass-roots. Perhaps ANC leadership is not fully aware of local class issues as they impinge upon organizing in a city like Los Angeles; the issue of "color" is a dominant one, but not the only one. Some African-Americans, because of their class links, seem ready to play into the hands of the ruling (predominantly white) class and power structure.

This has resulted in top-level involvement of some who have ignored the cultural boycott against apartheid, by some who have wavered in their support of the ANC, by others with no track record of anti-apartheid work with the ANC. **Possible lesson: Consultation between top ANC leadership and grass-roots anti-apartheid networks is essential.**

(2) Chauvinism. Decisions made at national level (or, more precisely, east coast level) have complicated local organizing; even in the case of the June 22nd nation-wide meeting (strongly supported by all of us, through our delegation), the choice of invitees was made on the east coast, without reference to the Los Angeles network; in at least one case, this was corrected when the invitee brought the matter to the Friends of the ANC, who then selected an alternate delegate. Los Angeles cannot be organized from the East Coast. General guidelines from national-level leaders is very much needed and desirable. Implementation must be done by those involved in the local situation. **Possible lesson: Dialogue between national anti-apartheid leadership and grass-roots organizations is crucial.**

(3) Use of local political figures. When a local political figure (and even a current candidate for higher office) is named as leader of a major event, there is a tendency toward polarization. Other political figures necessarily avoid involvement, some decisions are probably tainted by the candidate's

ambitions, some other contributions of space, time, services are withheld. In this recent case, for example, major corporation pledges had been made and there was a nearly-free commitment of the coliseum and buses made to the earlier planners, but lost to the committee headed by a political figure. Even when such a political figure has a record of individual anti-apartheid effort, it would seem important to check out any negative connotations, perhaps utilizing his/her commitment in another way. **Possible lesson: Be careful about using political candidates; consult locally!**

(4) Coalition and network building. We understand that the Free South Africa movement elsewhere is often an "umbrella" similar to our Friends of the ANC and the Frontline States. In Los Angeles, the Free South Africa Movement is one of many anti-apartheid organizations, which, unfortunately, has repeatedly become the channel for exclusion of other groups from joint involvement. In the case of Tambo's visit ('87), even though others had been very involved in the planning, top leadership was grabbed by those who excluded even some local members of the ANC unit. **Possible lesson: For special events, national organizers are encouraged to work with the broadest possible local coalitions.**

Conclusion: We in the Friends of the ANC and the Frontline States reaffirm our dedication and commitment to the cause of the total eradication of apartheid...and to curtailing racism here at home. We want to join with others across the country in dialogue and strategic planning, beginning with a hold-the-line action re: sanctions against apartheid. **A luta continua!**

* Organizations in the Friends of the ANC and the Frontline States include:

- African National Congress (special relationship)
- American Friends Service Committee
- California Democratic Council
- Council of Black Trade Unions
- Committee for Health in Southern Africa
- Los Angeles 435 Observer Committee to Namibia
- Los Angeles Student Coalition
- Mozambique Support Network
- Patrice Lumumba Coalition
- Presbyterian Synod Task Force on Southern Africa
- South African International Student Congress
- Southern African Resource Center
- Southern Africa Resource Project
- Southern Africa Support Committee
- SWAPO Support Committee
- Unity in Action
- U.S.-Angola Friendship Society

Comments/sharing of other ideas and materials are most welcome and should be sent to The Friends of the ANC and the Frontline States, 2824 South Western Ave., Los Angeles, CA, 90018. Phone: 213/733-2107.