

## FROM THE GROUND, REVOLUTION IN SOUTH AFRICA

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Like the United States, **SOUTH AFRICA** is a wealthy, industrial nation; one with a mild climate and gorgeous terrain; one of the world's richest in gold, diamonds and natural resources; a nation able to sustain itself-despite universal international condemnation - because it grows its own food, builds its own arms and is generally self-sufficient.

In the 1600s European settlers came to SA seeking its wealth, land and beauty; first came the Dutch and later the British and others. Over time Europeans took the land by force and turned local farmers into sharecroppers. Like those who came to America, most Europeans didn't believe then that Africans were "human." They built a dual system based on race and religion, as was slavery. Blacks at times took up arms in protest, but could never match the fire power and guns. SA slowly but surely became a golden mecca for whites and a horror for blacks. *European turned into*

In the 1940s, SA constitutionalized a system with roots 300 years old. It was called **APARTHEID** - a Dutch term meaning separateness. Imposed by whites on native Africans, apartheid was unique to SA, but the racism upon which it was based is no stranger to the world (~~racism~~ *apartheid* meaning suppression of one race over another).

Thousands in the democratic movement were locked up in apartheid jails, where many like Steven Biko died. Others were simply assassinated. Tens of thousands fled into exile. In the 1950s when a young Nelson Mandela was convicted of treason for opposing apartheid tyranny, he was sent to Robbin Island and **BANNED**. Banning meant his picture could not be seen, his name not mentioned, signs on his behalf not carried. He did not "exist." All media coverage was denied; the media were owned by the regime. Many people and groups, and political parties for non-whites, were banned. *were tortured and died*

But in the urban townships, where most blacks were forced to live, banned organizations became part of an underground opposition. There, the "idea" of Mandela (for 27 years that's all he was) lived on in people's imaginations. So too did the Freedom Charter which had been adopted in the 1950s as the people's vision of a **NEW DEMOCRATIC, NON-RACIAL SOUTH AFRICA**.

The vision, courage and determination of SA freedom fighters inspired millions of people around the world - despite whatever their governments' positions were - that a Free South Africa was a just cause. From SA townships to American living rooms, to community meetings in Zimbabwe, to corporate boardrooms in France, to Norwegian and Australian union halls, to Canadian churches, to concert halls in Britain and around the world -- South Africans living under apartheid succeeded in getting out the truth to the international community. Here is a little bit about how they did it.

The freedom struggle had four primary wings: 1) the underground, made up of people and organizations who were banned; 2) on-the-ground democratic structures

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of students, civic organizations and workers organized mostly into what became the labor federation COSATU; 3) armed struggle, which focused on apartheid's military operations; and 4) the international community, inspired largely by exiles and whose major aim was to isolate South Africa in every way in the world community through *sanctions*.

The struggle in total came to be known as the **MASS DEMOCRATIC MOVEMENT**; it proved the apartheid regime's match. We in the international community needed to be quick learners. When an organization was banned, we learned it would inevitably rise under a new label. We had to keep our ears to the ground to stay on the road being taken to freedom by South Africa's people and to avoid the forks set up by the regime.

With tactics such as school, sanitation and rent strikes (rents were paid to the government), and most importantly **SANCTIONS**, the Mass Democratic Movement made the regime sweat. The theory was that if you make whites **PAY** the price for apartheid and make the economy collapse, they would eventually let it go. That is what happened.

Outside SA, SA athletes could not participate in sports; musicians could not play; whites were not welcome travelers; banks could not exchange currencies. Corporations started to divest. SA paid dearly for oil. **STAYAWAYS** by millions of organized workers periodically shut SA down to "Keep The Pressure On." Sanctions and stayaways cost companies doing business in SA untold billions. Everywhere South Africans went, they met protest. South Africa became a pariah in the international community.

Outside SA, one could either abide by sanctions against SA, or break them: by voting to keep pension funds in companies doing business with SA, traveling to SA and so on. Around the world millions made choices to stand up for freedom, on college campuses, in churches, in labor unions, in city councils, in state legislatures, in shareholder meetings, in investment decisions. Impassioned advocates of a Free South Africa included Rev. Martin Luther King, singer Harry Belafonte, tennis champion Arthur Ashe, and union leaders Owen Bieber, Richard Trumpka and Bill Lucy.

Step by step the United Nations, despite U.S. opposition, stopped trade with SA. SA workers who lost their jobs because of sanctions voted time and again through their democratic organizations that they would rather lose their jobs even though no others were available, than to allow their children to live under apartheid. Since 1976, when security forces shot hundreds of school children in the back, the resistance movement danced the "toi toi" but did not rest. South Africans sacrificed greatly for their freedom.

Over time most whites became convinced of the evils of apartheid - through their consciences, or their wallets, or their fears of what might happen if they didn't change. During the 1980s thousands of young whites fled the country; many others refused SA's required 2-year military conscription. A few whites joined the freedom struggle or the anti-apartheid movement in countries to which they had fled. In 1992, in the last all-white election, whites finally voted to end apartheid.

It was only seven short years ago the regime eliminated a few laws, giving President Reagan again an excuse to take apartheid's side and oppose sanctions in the UN. Of

course, SA was not ending apartheid then; it turned right around and added new bans and new laws, including stringent ones to muzzle the burgeoning labor, student and civic movements. The February 1988 crackdown turned out to be apartheid's last big gasp.

The SA regime had long had a master plan. It is a story too long to tell here, but the "homelands" and Gatscha Buthelezei were a major part of the plan. Gatscha was armed by the regime and would be given an independent black nation (one reason why he so opposed democratic elections), while other blacks would be left to dictators also imposed by whites in small scattered areas. The whites would keep most of the land, wealth and resources, and govern themselves in a majority white state if need be.

During all these years, millions of people were killed in apartheid wars inside SA and in the frontline states surrounding SA in a campaign to destabilize the region. This too is a story far too long to tell here, but cannot go without mentioning the heroic role of the people of Namibia, Zimbabwe, Mozambique and Angola in the fight against apartheid.

But apartheid did fall, like fascism in World War II, before the master plan could be completed. The rest you know. Mandela was released from jail to let off steam. He came out and awed the world with his calm dignity, determination and willingness to negotiate with his captors. With the release of prominent political prisoners and return of thousands of exiles, SA finally arrived at freedom's door.

What the regime had not foreseen was that the MDM would make SA ungovernable except through alternative democratic structures created by on-the-ground and underground groups. These structures in effect ran large parts of SA while risking police brutality and military tanks. The MDM would inspire the international community through international organizations such as the World Council of Churches and International Metalworkers Federation to increase the pressure on apartheid. President De Klerk was smart enough to read the writing on the wall; Mandela was smart to offer to negotiate a way out.

For generations, mining companies (mostly western corporations) brought in millions of impoverished workers to live in single-sex, male-only hostels. Their families were moved to 'homelands.' Miners were allowed to visit their families only once a year. Work in SA mines was and is brutal, as it once was in the U.S. Inspired by striking SA miners in 1987, 350,000 of whom risked their jobs and their lives to exert pressure on the owners and the apartheid regime, many unions formed the IL Labor Network Against Apartheid to do what we could to aid SA workers throw off the brutal labor system under which they worked and support their political objectives to end apartheid.

Perhaps we didn't expect the result -- defeat of apartheid tyranny in our lifetime -- but we kept going because they kept going. We welcomed SA union representatives; rejoiced when political prisoners were released. We watched the squeeze of sanctions which cause we furthered and political pressure which we helped exert. We celebrated Mandela's release; and greeted him in the U.S. in 1990. We were honored to be his host in Chicago in 1993. Then, came the 1994 election. Much changed in a relatively short time, but generations of protests had led to that swift reversal.

Prior to the Labor Network, many unions and their members had long been involved in anti-apartheid work. Some members occasionally asked why we were working on SA. The answers were many and clear: SA's cheap labor system competed with American wages; union pensions funds were invested in companies doing business in SA; our corporations were their corporations; and issues of workers' rights and human rights.

Our trip to South Africa in 1995 was about seeing firsthand the people with whom we worked in the movement to free South Africa and to visit workers in various industries and areas, including some that work for U.S. companies such as Caterpillar.

One leader went on trial for undermining apartheid in his union and his community; he was tried for treason, a serious charge (death by hanging). While the regime in 1987 escalated its crackdown on community and labor activists, we took up his case. This man was then president of SA's 2nd largest union, National Union of Metalworkers, and leader of the militantly anti-apartheid township of Alexandra. Union activists throughout the world conducted a campaign for two years for his release. When he and his brother won their release, they came to thank us and ask us to "Keep The Pressure On."

During the campaign we exerted pressure through petitions by the thousands, political influence, arrests at the consulate and so forth. The UAW-led campaign sent the President of Yale University to monitor the trial in SA and let the regime know that people were watching. In 1989, Moses Mayekiso became one of the first political prisoners released from apartheid's jails; he is now a leading member of the new Parliament.

By 1994, the SA people had voted in one of the most moving elections in history -- truly one of the most hopeful and remarkable stories of our lifetime. Today, SA is creating a new nation and writing a new constitution to protect the rights of all South Africans.

That is why we went going to SA in 1995, so we can keep informed from the ground up and report on the status of this revolution which is in the making on the other side of the world. Our trip included Johannesburg, Capetown and Durban, many townships including Alexandra and Soweto, and a visit to rural areas. We visited a lot of workers, and union stewards including those at Caterpillar.

It is my belief that to fight racism and the exploitation of workers, we must fight it first in our own back yard. But racism and exploitation of workers is also an international issue. For that reason and others many of us became involved in the movement to free South Africa. While we have worked with South Africans to defeat apartheid, there is still much to be done. Illiteracy and land rights are the most serious obstacles faced by the new SA government.

In the U.S., we too must come to grips with the endemic problems of racism which will perhaps be even more difficult in the long-term than in SA. With more than 60% of African-American youths unemployed and with no expectations for employment, something badly needs to be fixed. Perhaps we can learn some lessons from SA on how to proceed.

by Kathy Devine