

Columbia University in the City of New York | New York, N.Y. 10027

COALITION FOR A FREE SOUTH AFRICA

THE HISTORY OF THE STUDENT STRUGGLE FOR DIVESTMENT  
AT COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

In 1976, in Soweto, South Africa, there was a major uprising by Black schoolchildren protesting the racist education policies of the South African government. During a peaceful protest rally dozens of African demonstrators were shot down in the streets. This massacre stimulated widespread protests on college campuses across the United States, including at Columbia. Students grew increasingly aware of the seriousness of the situation in South Africa and began to demand that universities sever their economic ties with that country. In 1978, largely in response to student protests, Columbia divested \$2.7 million from banks with financial connections to South Africa. However, from 1978 to 1981 there was very little campus activity on the South Africa issue.

In 1981 the Columbia University Coalition for a Free South Africa was formed. The group was originally a committee of the Black Student Organization but gradually evolved into an independent multi-racial organization with a broad base of support on campus. Our main objectives are to educate students and faculty regarding the situation in South Africa and to mobilize opposition to Apartheid. It is our firm belief that U.S. companies operating in South Africa lend legitimacy and tangible support to the racist government of South Africa. Therefore, we feel that one of the main ways we, as students, can support the liberation struggle in South Africa is by pressuring Columbia and similar institutions to divest their holdings in such companies. As of June, 1983 Columbia had over \$44 million invested in corporations that operate in South Africa.

Over the past three years we have organized numerous anti-Apartheid events on campus. We have held rallies and forums attended by more than 200 and have obtained over 600 names on a petition calling for Columbia to divest. We have also hosted a number of prominent speakers including representatives from the United Nations, the African National Congress, former U.S. Ambassador Elliott Skinner, Congresswoman Shirely Chisholm, and Donald Woods, author of Biko. Also, in 1982 the U.N. made a tape recording telling of our activities which they were able to broadcast into South Africa from a boarding country.

By the Spring of 1983 we began to look for concrete ways to influence University policy regarding South Africa. On March 25, 1983 three members of the Coalition who were also elected representatives to the University Senate introduced a resolution urging the Trustees of Columbia to divest totally of South Africa-related

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continued

stocks. This resolution was passed unanimously by the student and faculty members of the Senate. However, despite the majority consensus on campus, the Trustees and administration have rejected the Senate's recommendation.

In response to the administration's refusal to divest we are redoubling our efforts. This year we hope to broaden our base of support for divestment, not only among Columbia affiliates, but among members of the surrounding Harlem community as well.