

Symposium Honoring the Social Justice Career of Prexy Nesbitt

University of Illinois at Chicago
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*Southern African Solidarity:
Prexy and the World*

“Yes You Can:
Challenging Young People
to Fight Apartheid
and Take on the World”

Remarks by
Elizabeth Schmidt

I would like to tell a personal story, because I think that mine reflects so many others. It is a story of Prexy’s unique ability to inspire young people, to make them believe that their efforts *do* matter, that they truly can help to make this world a better place.

I met Prexy in the fall of 1978. I had just turned 23 and was one year out of college, working for an NGO in Washington, DC on a project that focused on human rights and US foreign policy. My assignment was to look at human rights and US policy in South Africa. I made a trip to the American Committee on Africa in New York to do some research. After sitting in the conference room for a couple days pouring over ACOA reports, I was approached by a striking looking man who said, “Sister! I see you so hard at work there--what are you doing?” He introduced himself as Prexy Nesbitt, encouraged me, and urged me to send him my report when I was finished. Of course, I did.

A few months later, Prexy called me—from Washington D.C. He had just taken a job as the head of the Africa Project at the Institute for Policy Studies, and he wanted to talk. One thing led

to another and in March 1979, I began working with Prexy at IPS. His magnetism was breathtaking. If he had been working on Nicaragua or Chile, that is probably what I would be doing today. But he was working on South Africa.

My first day on the job, Prexy gave me an assignment—unmask the Sullivan Principles. I had heard of this fair employment code that US corporations were using to justify their presence in apartheid South Africa. I had even defended the principles to a friend who was a critic. They looked like basic Equal Employment Opportunity practices—nondiscrimination in the workplace, equal pay for equal work, job training and advancement for those who were underrepresented.... But, since Prexy told me they had to be unmasked, there was obviously something wrong with them. Embarrassed, I kept my doubts to myself and got to work. It soon became apparent that US corporations were indeed using the fair employment code to camouflage their strategic support for apartheid....

Three weeks later, Prexy was distributing my report to the to the International Freedom Mobilization SUMMIT CONFERENCE OF BLACK RELIGIOUS LEADERS ON APARTHEID in New York City, where some 200 civil rights leaders were convening to formulate a position on US policy vis-à-vis apartheid South Africa. The Reverend Leon Sullivan, civil rights leader, author of the employment code, and member of the General Motors board of directors, was to be the keynote speaker. Prexy knew that, without an alternative, the religious leaders, longtime colleagues in the civil rights movement, would endorse Sullivan's employment code as their strategy for opposing apartheid.

Prexy, who had been invited to run one of the conference workshops, stood outside the auditorium door, distributing my critique with the oblique comment, “This is the Sullivan information.”

As Prexy tells it (--not that he EVER exaggerates--) the reaction was a firestorm. The Reverend Wyatt T. Walker stood up, waving the report, and challenged Sullivan as he entered the hall, “Leon! What do you have to say to THIS?” After his remarks, Reverend Sullivan left without taking questions.

Prexy was ready. He had already authored two alternative resolutions. The first respectfully noted that the Sullivan Principles, while well-intentioned, were not the answer. The very presence of US corporations in South Africa legitimated “the apartheid system of white supremacy.” Instead, US policy should be the “total economic, political, military, cultural and diplomatic disengagement from South Africa until the white supremacist government with its policy of racism, brutality and exploitation is ended.” The second draft resolution declared the Black Religious Leaders’ “unequivocal support of the national liberation struggle waged by the South African people under the leadership of the African National Congress.” Both of Prexy’s resolutions were adopted.

When Prexy suggested that I update and expand my analysis, I leaped at the opportunity, never even considering that a twenty-three-year-old with a bachelor’s degree in US history might not have the qualifications to do so. The result was my first book, *Decoding Corporate Camouflage: U.S. Business Support for Apartheid* (1980), which was banned in South Africa.

However, before the book as published, the Africa Project had been terminated. The Institute for Policy Studies worried that we were jeopardizing its funding from liberal (corporate-backed) foundations. Having riled the bosses once again, Prexy moved on to the World Council of Churches Programme to Combat Racism, where he continued the struggle, and I went off to graduate school to “get my union card.”

Unable to return to South Africa following an undercover investigative trip in 1981, I did my doctoral research in newly independent Zimbabwe, then turned to Guinea in French-speaking West Africa. Along the way, I became an accidental academic. However, my roots remained with Prexy. In later years, I returned to the source and began to write once more about the devastating impact of foreign intervention on the Africa continent.

I want to conclude by saying this: Prexy changed my life. Never have I had such a mentor, such a teacher, who believed in me and helped me believe in myself as he did. I KNOW that he has inspired hundreds of young people in the same way. I have met many over the years—and he continues to send them my way. Prexy has contributed an enormous amount to the liberation struggles of Southern Africa; he has also contributed to the liberation of this country, through his own work and through his extraordinary ability to inspire others. Here’s to Prexy and those he has galvanized in the next generation!