

Remembrance

African Activist Archive Project

A Brief History of the Boston Coalition for the Liberation of Southern Africa

By Richard Clapp

The anti-apartheid activists who eventually formed the Boston Coalition for the Liberation of Southern Africa (BCLSA) came from groups such as the Africa Research Group, whose Boston members were active in the early 1970s, and the Southern Africa Solidarity Committee, which organized on the Harvard-Radcliffe campus in the mid-1970s. Boston was also the base for the Polaroid Revolutionary Workers' Movement, which drew attention to the Polaroid camera systems being used in the pass system in South Africa. There were several African National Congress members and other South African liberation organization members active in Boston, along with FRELIMO and ZANU members and supporters, who participated in early educational and fund-raising events.

One organized group that eventually joined to form BCLSA was the Gulf Boycott Coalition, which was active in promoting the boycott of Gulf gasoline because of the company's support for the Portuguese colonial regime in Angola. This group was active from about 1972-1975 and formed a coalition with other campus-based organizations and took the name Southern Africa Solidarity Coalition (SASC). A parallel organization of progressive Africans in the Boston area, called African Students and Workers for African Liberation joined in some activities. The SASC events included evening events and speeches by various members of Southern African liberation organizations, fund-raising concerts by Dollar Brand, and, with groups called Haymarket Peoples Fund and Amandla Peoples Security, a major concert by Bob Marley. SASC also sponsored clothing and material aid drives for Zimbabwe and shipped several tons of clothing in the late 1970s.

After the Soweto uprising, the ANC members in Boston, led by Themba Vilakazi, called for a broad organization with a steering committee to guide the Boston-area solidarity work. This group took the name Boston Coalition for the Liberation of Southern Africa, and had representatives from organizations such as the AFSC, Citizens for Participation in Political Action, and several other organizations and campus chapters. The BCLSA chose to focus on the ties between the First National Bank of Boston (FNBB) to the Standard Bank of South Africa, as well as its red-lining policies and support for nuclear power in the U.S. The campaign to boycott FNBB was the main work of the BCLSA from 1977 to 1980, and involved showing a slide show, organizing events, getting

endorsers, and meeting with various bank officials about their policies. BCLSA members also attended FNBB stockholders' meetings and distributed leaflets.

In 1980, BCLSA and others, including progressive state legislators and TransAfrica, decided to mount a pension fund divestment campaign and convened a new coalition called MassDivest. This group also sponsored outreach activities, showed a slide show, garnered endorsements from public employee unions, churches and community organizations over the period 1980-1983. The group got wide support for the campaign, did background research about the effect of divestment on the pension portfolio, and met with the State Treasurer and the Governor of Massachusetts at various stages of the campaign. In January, 1983, the campaign was successful and the state legislature finally passed a comprehensive divestment bill that served as a model for other states and cities to follow.

Also in the early to mid-1980s, BCLSA members organized demonstrations against selling Krugerrands in Boston, and worked with the developing Fund for A Free South Africa in sponsoring efforts to enact Federal government sanctions against the apartheid regime. Individuals got arrested at demonstrations outside the South African consulate in Boston, and numerous letters were sent and meetings were held with the Massachusetts Congressional representatives to urge them to support sanctions. BCLSA stopped meeting as a separate organization in the mid-1980s and various members joined with other activities by other groups in the Boston area, primarily FreeSA and TransAfrica. FreeSA continued to do fund-raising events and supported non-governmental organizations active in South Africa in the late 1980s.

Other activities that followed the institution of U.S. sanctions in the 1980s included meetings of health care professionals and formation of a Boston chapter of the Committee for Health in South Africa (CHISA), the mobilization of support for Nelson Mandela's visit to Boston in 1990, and the development of a "sister state" agreement between Massachusetts and the Eastern Cape in the mid-1990s.

Copyright 2004 Richard Clapp