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Statement at a special meeting of the Special Committee against Apartheid to pay tribute to Paul Robeson on his 80th birthday, April 10, 1978

We meet here today, 10 April 1978, to pay tribute to one of the great men of this century, a valiant fighter for freedom and peace and a pioneer in the movement of solidarity with the oppressed people of South Africa and their national liberation movement, Paul Robeson, on the occasion of the eightieth anniversary of his birth on 9 April.

Robeson was a great athlete as a student at Rutgers University where he won letters in four sports - football, baseball, basketball and track. He was one of the greatest actors and greatest singers of all time. He was also a great scholar who mastered over twenty languages, including the languages of East and West Africa - and made a significant contribution to the study of African history, linguistics, music and folklore.

A son of a slave who ran away to freedom, he rose to heights of glory, despite all the handicaps laid by the racists, as one of the most accomplished men of his time. Yet he remained, throughout his life, a loyal son of his oppressed people in the United States and in Africa. He declared:

"...in my music, my plays, my films I want to carry always this central idea: to be African. Multitudes of men have died for less worthy ideas; it is even more eminently worth living for".

Paul Robeson thus became the living refutation of racist myths and a personification of the unbreakable link between Africa and the black people of the United States which could not be destroyed by centuries of cruelty and inhumanity meted out to the people of African descent. Because of him, millions of people in all continents learned to reject the prejudices inculcated by the racists and to respect the black people, their culture and their dignity.

Paul Robeson dedicated his superb talents and all his energies to the freedom and human dignity of the black people, to the struggle for the emancipation of all oppressed peoples, and to the cause of peace and international co-operation. When he died two years ago, the Secretary-General of the United Nations, Dr. Kurt Waldheim, declared:

"Throughout his life, Paul Robeson defended with courage and dignity basic principles of equality among all men which are at the very heart of the United Nations Charter...

"Mr. Robeson's career as a distinguished artist and an eloquent spokesman for human dignity contributed enormously to greater understanding among peoples and significantly advanced the human condition".

The Board of Directors of the Screen Actors Guild pointed out that "Paul Robeson exemplified in life the Universal Declaration of Human Rights".

Contribution to solidarity with the struggles of African peoples

We, in this Committee, have been particularly aware of the magnificent contribution of Paul Robeson as a pioneer in promoting solidarity with the struggles of African peoples. Paul Robeson was the founder and chairman of the International Committee on African Affairs formed on 28 January 1937 - and of the Council on African Affairs which was established in 1943 - to inform American public opinion about freedom struggles in Africa and to encourage support for those struggles.

Wherever the colonialists tried to suppress the African people, Robeson and the Council on African Affairs raised their voice in firm denunciation - when a strike of workers in Ghana was suppressed in 1948 with the arrest of Kwame Nkrumah and other leaders; when African miners seeking a living wage were killed in Enugu, Nigeria in 1949; when the British Government plotted in 1950 to deprive Seretse Khama in Botswana of his chieftainship, because he married a white woman; when the British colonialists unleashed terror against Mzee Jomo Kenyatta and his followers in Kenya in 1952; and when the French colonialists killed nationalists in Tunisia in 1952.

They provided humanitarian assistance to the struggling African peoples and pressed for action by the United Nations in support of freedom. The publications of the Council were an important source of information on the colonialist manoeuvres in Africa and on the struggles of the African workers and freedom movements. Above all, Paul Robeson and his associates were unswerving in their solidarity with the struggling people in that bastion of racism, the Union of South Africa.

The International Committee sponsored lectures by Professor D.D.T. Jabavu and Dr. Alfred Xuma, two prominent leaders of South Africa, as early as 1937.

The Council on African Affairs submitted a memorandum to the United Nations Commission on Human Rights, as early as May 1946, calling for an investigation of racism in South Africa, to be followed by appropriate action by the Security Council. On 9 June 1946, it organized a massive rally of 15,000 people in Madison Square Garden to denounce the racist regime of South Africa and oppose its plans for the annexation of Namibia.

Later in 1946, the Council hosted the first delegation of the South African liberation movement to the United Nations consisting of Dr. Xuma, then

president of the African National Congress of South Africa; Mr. H. A. Naidoo Mr. Sorabjee Rustomjee, leaders of the South African Indian Congress; and Mr. H. M. Bassner, a Senator representing the Africans in the Transvaal and the Orange Free State. It organized meetings in support of the freedom struggle - and a large picket line in front of the South African Consulate to protest racist laws and the brutal massacre of African miners during their historic strike in August 1946.

It tore the mask off the then Prime Minister of South Africa, Field Marshal Jan Smuts, who was being paraded in the West as a liberal. It denounced the hypocrisy of the so-called "Free World" which betrayed its professions and its promises and allied with the racist regime of South Africa in its oppression of black people of South Africa and Namibia.

In 1952, when the South African people launched a "Campaign of Defiance against Unjust Laws", the Council raised funds to support the liberation movement and organized petitions to the President of the United States.

We have today anti-apartheid movements and solidarity movements in many countries of the world which are playing a crucial role in the international campaign against apartheid in co-operation with the United Nations. The first of these movements, we must recall, was founded by Paul Robeson and the black people of the United States.

On this occasion, we must recall also the dedicated work of the colleagues of Robeson: Dr. W. E. B. DuBois, the father of Pan Africanism and co-chairman of the Council on African Affairs; Dr. Alphaeus Hunton, the Executive Secretary of the Council, whose wife, Dorothy, is with us today; Mrs. Eslanda Goode Robeson who, along with Dr. Hunton, was the representative of the Council at the United Nations; and many others.

In the course of this year, the Special Committee intends to publicize the contribution of Paul Robeson to the struggle for liberation in South Africa, and to bestow on him a special award on behalf of the Special Committee.

FOOTNOTE: Mr. Robeson was posthumously awarded a gold medal by the United Nations on October 11, 1978, in recognition of his contribution to the international campaign against apartheid.

But we recognize that Robeson's contribution goes far beyond the struggle of the South African people and the mandate of this Special Committee.

Robeson's conviction and faith

No words can adequately describe the personality and the life of Paul Robeson - a man of immense sincerity and generosity, an incorruptible leader of his people, a true internationalist, and an epitome of courage and conviction. I will only attempt to point to some lessons he has left in his legacy to us.

When the racists and colonialists were busy spreading contempt for the heritage of the black people, Robeson pointed with pride to the nobility of the African civilizations and reminded the world that much of what was distinctive in American culture was the creation of the black people. He had, therefore, great faith and confidence in the potentialities of his people, when they break their chains to enrich the world culture.

He recognized the truth that the freedom and human dignity of the black people of the United States was inextricably tied up with the freedom and human dignity of the people of the continent of Africa and the Caribbean. Thus, while he was demanding a law against the criminal lynching and mob violence against the blacks in the United States in 1946, he was also calling for the freedom of the people of Africa and the Caribbean. Indeed, as a friend of many of the leaders of the revolutions in Asia, Africa and Latin America, he saw that the struggle for emancipation of the black people had become a part of the irresistible march of all oppressed peoples to freedom.

His great voice immortalized not only the songs of his people but the songs of freedom of many other peoples in many of the world's languages - Spanish and Russian, Finnish and Yiddish, German and Chinese - in many battle fields of freedom.

When many others were overawed by the power of the colonialists and racists, he never wavered in his faith that the oppressed peoples would triumph. He rejected so-called gradualism, which was still being advocated after repeated betrayals of the black people, and called for "freedom now," saying:

"... too long, too long have my people wept and mourned. We are tired of this denial of decent existence."

He was not one who would beg the oppressors for freedom nor accept the crumbs from the master's table. He recognized that there can be no freedom without a struggle, without sacrifice. "Our freedom," he said, "is going to cost so many lives . . . When we talk of freedom we do not discuss lives."

While fighting for his people's freedom, Paul Robeson - like Dr. DuBois and Dr. Martin Luther King, whom we have honoured in the past few weeks, and like many other leaders of the oppressed peoples - had a vision which encompassed not only the liberation of his own people but the building of a new world. He believed that "the common people of all nations are truly brothers in a great family of mankind." He wrote in *Here I Stand*:

"This belief in the oneness of humankind, about which I have often spoken in concerts and elsewhere, has existed in me side by side with my deep attachment to the cause of my own race."

We cannot but recall that petty and short-sighted men in his own homeland - steeped in the alliance with colonial powers and with racism - sought to silence this great patriot and humanist. They tried to take vengeance on him for the advance of the irresistible movement of liberation. Paul Robeson stood up - never wavering, never compromising - and declared:

"I will never retreat 1000th part of an inch."

His towering figure became the symbol of Africa and of the black man - determined to be free, determined to assert the dignity of man. The more he was scandalized by the racists the more he was revered by humanity as the "purest kind of a guy". In his own lifetime, Paul Robeson could see the defeat after defeat suffered by his persecutors, and the victories of the forces of freedom. He wrote in 1955:

"... the verdict of history, which we are reading in the stormy events of our day, is unmistakably clear. Those forces which stand against the freedom of nations are not only wrong - they are doomed to utter defeat and disaster."

In his public statement on 28 August 1964, he pointed out:

"The issue of 'freedom now' for Negro Americans has become the main issue confronting the nations, and the peoples of the whole world are looking to see it finally resolved.

"When I wrote in my book, *Here I Stand*, in 1958, that 'the time is now', some people thought that perhaps my watch was fast (and maybe it was a little), but most of us seem to be running on the same time - now."

In his last public message in June 1974, he said:

"It has been most gratifying to me in retirement to observe that the new generation that has come along is vigorously outspoken for peace and liberation . . . To all the young people, black and white, who are so passionately concerned with making a better world, and to all the old-timers who have been involved in that struggle, I say: Right On!"

That is the testament of Paul Robeson we shall cherish.

His watch was a little fast perhaps but his confident prediction will surely come true. To that end the Special Committee makes its pledge today in the name of Robeson, in the presence of his loyal friends and colleagues.