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NOTES ON

THE ORIGINS OF THE MOVEMENT FOR

SANCTIONS AGAINST SOUTH AFRICA¹

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[Note: This paper deals with the developments until November 6, 1962, when the United Nations General Assembly adopted resolution 1761 (XVII) requesting Member States to impose sanctions against South Africa.]

Introduction

The international movement for sanctions against South Africa began in December 1958 when the All African Peoples' Conference in Accra called on all countries to impose economic sanctions against the Union of South Africa in protest against racial discrimination. In the same month, the African National Congress for South Africa, a sponsor of the Accra Conference, called for a nation-wide economic boycott of business houses dominated by the leading "Nationalists" (the racist ruling party).

Boycott movements against South Africa - directed mainly at consumer boycott of South African products - sprung up in the United Kingdom and other Western countries. They were later to be transformed into anti-apartheid movements with wider objectives.

The movement in South Africa, in Africa and in the West led after the Sharpeville massacre to proposals in the United Nations for sanctions against South Africa.

The Boycott Movement in South Africa

The call for an economic boycott was advanced in South Africa in 1957 when the Nationalist regime had closed most legal avenues for the African people and opponents of apartheid. The nation-wide arrest of 156 leaders of the movement in December 1956, the institution of the notorious Treason Trial, which lasted until after the Sharpeville massacre, the restriction of political leaders and the banning of meetings left the ANC and its allies with few possibilities of legal action.

¹ This paper was circulated to members of the UN Special Committee against Apartheid.

In calling for an economic boycott, ANC was following the long tradition of boycotts by the African, Indian and Coloured people in their struggle for equality. It was conscious of the substantial African purchasing power which could be used for resistance against oppression. Boycott had, indeed, been part of the positive action programme adopted by the ANC in the 1940s.

There was also the tradition of boycotts by Afrikaner nationalists and racists against business houses dominated by the English-speaking minority and against Indian retail traders.

The ANC call had itself developed from a series of actions.

In 1957, a bus boycott had been launched in Johannesburg against a rise in fares and tens of thousands of Africans had walked in protest. Solidarity boycotts were organised by ANC in several other cities. The boycott succeeded in April 1957 when the rise in fares was rescinded.

Meanwhile, the newly-formed non-racial South African Congress of Trade Unions, allied to the ANC, launched a campaign for a minimum wage of £1 a day.²

From their trial in Drill Hall, Johannesburg, Chief Albert Luthuli and other ANC leaders called for a stay-at-home on 26 June 1957 (Freedom Day) in protest against apartheid and in support of the SACTU's demand for a pound a day.

The stay-at-home was reported to have been successful on the Rand and Port Elizabeth and there were demonstrations in other cities.

There had been local ANC actions, such as the boycott of oranges in eastern Cape which forced local farmers to raise wages of workers.

The ANC National Conference in Durban in December 1958 was encouraged by the results of these actions and by the decision of the All African Peoples' Conference³ to call for a boycott of South African goods. It directed the Executive Committee to appoint a committee to prepare a nation-wide economic boycott of such commodities or institutions as might be decided from time to time.

² The demand was at the time rejected by the government and employers. In 1963, several firms instituted a minimum wage of 2 rand a day, equivalent to one pound. The government decided in 1964 to increase wages of its non-white employees to 2 rand a day as of July 1, 1964. By that time, prices had risen so much that the minimum wage was only about half of the living wage for a family.

³ The ANC was a sponsor of the African Peoples' Conference and was represented by Ezekiel Mphahlele, Alfred Hutchinson and Mrs. Mary-Louise Hooper.

After the 1958 conference, the leaders set about preparing lists of products from the farms and factories of the ruling Nationalist Party supporters to protest "the tyranny of Nationalist oppression" - to be boycotted as from 26 June - "Freedom Day". This caused considerable concern amongst certain firms who suspected or were told that their names were being considered for inclusion. One of these was the Langeberg Co-operative Ltd., one of the largest canning firms in the Union with extensive membership among Western Province farmers. The directors wrote to the ANC denying that the firm was Nationalist-controlled.

After the Co-operative had agreed to make certain concessions to its black staff, for example in regard to the recognition of their trade unions, its name was removed from the ANC list.

Meanwhile, on May 30, 1959, the ANC Conference in Johannesburg considered a report on the ill-treatment of farm labourers, particularly on the potato farms, and decided to launch a boycott of potatoes. Conditions had hardly improved despite the shocking disclosures of ill-treatment published in 1947. In fact, the regime and the farmers had devised a system by which pass law offenders were induced to accept labour on farms. The slave labour conditions on the farms were abominable.

The potato boycott proved a great success. Africans refused to buy potatoes though potatoes were their staple diet. Stacks of potatoes piled up in markets. The boycott was called off after the government announced reforms in the farm labour system, though these were limited and did not last long.

Preliminary lists of four concerns and 24 brands of goods to be boycotted were circulated early in June 1959, each ANC branch accepting individual responsibility for instituting the boycott. This was to prevent the firms concerned from obtaining a Supreme Court interdict restraining the ANC from distributing the lists, as had been done during 1957 by the manufacturers of certain brands of cigarettes and tobacco which the Congress group had then decided to boycott.

The ANC called upon its members to observe June 26 as a day of self-denial, and to commence the boycott on that day.

The boycott was supported by the other members of the Congress Alliance.

The Liberal Party considered the matter and agreed that "in view of the denial of all means of political expression to Africans, Indians, and Coloureds, the boycott was a legitimate political weapon".⁴

At the next conference in December 1959 in Durban, the ANC welcomed the international boycott of South African goods and urged members to intensify the internal boycott of listed "Nationalist products."⁵

⁴ Patrick van Rensburg, Guilty Land, (Penguin, 1962), p.175

The boycott had only a limited success in South Africa, since repression prevented organisational efforts, and it was overtaken by developments following the Sharpeville massacre of March 21, 1960. But it helped generate international boycotts which alarmed the regime and the businessmen.

The State of Emergency and the banning of the ANC and PAC led the leaders of the organisations to contemplate other means of struggle.

Soon after the Sharpeville massacre, some leaders of the national liberation movement were able to go abroad. They campaigned and lobbied for economic sanctions against South Africa. Their efforts were crucial in promoting the exclusion of South Africa from the Commonwealth in 1961 and the decision of the United Nations General Assembly to call for sanctions in 1962.⁶

Africa

In December 1958, the All-African Peoples' Conference at Accra called upon independent African states, the United Nations and all other countries which professed democracy to take positive action against South Africa. It called on independent African States to impose economic sanctions against the Union of

⁵ The National Executive Committee had reported at that Conference:

“The launching of a nation-wide economic boycott on the 26th June marked an important step in the use of this method of action. The international response was beyond all expectations.

“The May Conference decided to use a potato boycott for a limited period as a demonstration and protest against the Transvaal potato farmers whose treatment of the African workers as revealed by a number of court cases shocked the world. It was a resounding success to an extent that it was a difficult task to convince the people about the desirability of switching off from the potato boycott to the boycott of the Nationalist products. Clearly the calling off was unpopular and could not be understood by some of our members and the public.

“The Nationalists have been selected because they are the spearhead of oppression and exploitation, and they are a Government which is the most vicious in the history of our country. It is important to select your enemy and to deal him a telling blow.

“It is important to understand that the economic boycott weapon will not be directed against the Nationalists only, It will be used at appropriate times against any institution which infringes upon the rights of the people.

“The Economic Boycott Committee adopted a method of selecting articles such as cigarettes, coffee, tea, and fish. It was necessary to do this in order to avoid confusion and to intensify the campaign step by step.”

⁶ After the Sharpeville massacre, there was for some time a South Africa United Front in exile, composed of ANC, PAC, the South African Indian Congress and the Southwest Africa National Union.

South Africa as a protest against racial discrimination, and suggested that migrant labour from other countries should be withheld.

In January 1960, the second All-African Peoples' Conference in Tunis again resolved to boycott South African goods.

The boycott movement soon spread in Africa and the Caribbean.

In July 1959, four West Indian territories - Jamaica, Barbados, Grenada and Dominica - announced that they intended to ban imports from South Africa. The conference of the Ghana Trade Union Congress urged workers to refuse to unload cargoes from the Union of South Africa and to boycott South African goods when stocks already carried by firms there had become exhausted. The Kenya Federation of Labour passed a resolution calling for a complete boycott of South African goods.

In September 1959, the Conference of the Pan-African Freedom Movement of East, Central and South Africa (PAFMECSA) in Tanganyika, decided that from 1 November 1959, its members would boycott South African liquor, which was easily distinguished, and the widely-used South African-made hoes. It decided to institute a wider boycott after details of imports had been worked at.

On November 15, 1959, the African trade union conference of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions, held in Lagos, appealed to all African peoples, the international free labour movement and all democratic governments to use their influence and power to refuse markets for South African goods. It urged all democratic unions of seamen and dock-workers to withdraw their services from firms importing from or exporting to South Africa.

In April 1960, dock-workers in Trinidad refused to handle a cargo of South African goods or to refuel a ship carrying these goods. A consignment of hardboard had to be returned to South Africa.

An important step in the campaign was the resolution at the Second Conference of Independent African States at Addis Ababa, June 15-24, 1960. Paragraphs 3-6 of the operative part of the resolution read:

“3. *Calls upon* Member States to sever diplomatic relations or refrain from establishing diplomatic relations, as the case may be, to close African ports to all vessels flying the South African flag, to enact legislation prohibiting their ships from entering South African ports, to boycott all South African goods, to refuse landing and passage facilities to all aircrafts belonging to the Government and companies registered under the laws of the Union of South Africa and to prohibit all South African aircraft from flying over the airspace of the Independent African States;

“4. *Invites* the Arab States to approach all petroleum companies with a view to preventing Arab oil from being sold to the Union of South Africa and recommends that the African States refuse any concession to any company which continues to sell petroleum to the Union of South Africa;

“5. *Invites* the Independent African States which are members of the British Commonwealth to take all possible steps to secure the exclusion of the Union of South Africa from the British Commonwealth;

“6. *Recommends* that appropriate measures be taken by the United Nations in accordance with Article 41 of the Charter.”

Both before and after this Conference, several States announced bans on South African goods.

Early in 1960, Nigeria decided to ban all imports from South Africa. Ghana announced that, effective the beginning of August 1960, applications for import licences for goods from South Africa would be entertained only in the most exceptional circumstances.

The Ghana Government also announced in July 1960 that it had decided that all its ports and airports would be closed to South African shipping and aircraft except in cases of distress. South African citizens would be permitted to enter Ghana only if they declared before Ghana officials their opposition to apartheid and other forms of racial discrimination.⁷

Nigeria was also reported to be considering refusal of facilities to South African aircraft, but South Africa itself decided in July 1960 to bypass Kano airport.

Sudan too imposed an official ban on South African goods. The new State of Somalia decided in June 1960 to exclude South Africa from the 15 per cent preferential tariff to be granted to Commonwealth countries.

Outside Africa, the Government of Malaya decided in June 1960 to ban entry of goods from South Africa. As indicated earlier, several Caribbean territories had announced boycotts in 1959. The Government of India had broken trade and diplomatic relations with South Africa several years earlier.

Western Countries

⁷ The South African Prime Minister, Dr. H. F. Verwoerd, announced on 14 August 1960 that legislation would be introduced for action against South Africans who signed the anti-apartheid declaration or applied for British passports while living in Ghana.

A boycott movement was launched in Britain in 1959 by a small group of people, mostly South Africans in exile, including Abdul S. Minty, subsequently Honorary Secretary of the Anti-Apartheid Movement.

In 1959, Patrick van Rensburg - a former official of the South African Foreign Service who had resigned in protest against racism and joined the Liberal Party - arrived in Britain on a private visit and became the Director of the Boycott Campaign.

By 1960, the Labour and Liberal Parties in the United Kingdom, the Trade Union Congress and several co-operative societies decided to support the newly-formed Anti-Apartheid Movement in its campaign for a boycott of South African goods. With their support, the Movement organised a month of boycott of South African goods in March 1960, and distributed lists of South African-made products.

Leaders of 3,300,000 trade unionists of Sweden, Denmark, Norway and Finland called on the workers to join a boycott of South African goods from April to August 1960. The Swedish co-operative societies pledged their support. Norwegian dock workers refused to off-load consignments of South African fruit.

In June 1960, a conference sponsored by the American Committee on Africa and a number of other organisations urged the United States Government to cease buying gold and strategic raw materials from South Africa if other sources were available; advocated a consumer boycott of South African goods; and urged dock workers to refuse to unload South African goods. It decided to try to persuade the organisers of the World Trade Fair not to grant South Africa a pavilion, and to dissuade businessmen from investing in the Union.

Effect of the Early Boycotts, 1959-60

The boycott abroad - mainly by the smaller trading partners of South Africa and non-governmental groups in the West - had only a limited effect and caused some uncertainty, though it had significant moral and political influence.

The Afrikaanse Handelsinstituut was reported in July 1959 to have sent a memorandum to the Minister of Economic Affairs that the disclosures that goods were made in South Africa were, in many instances, found to be disadvantageous in the overseas market, especially in certain parts of Africa. The Executive Council of the South African Federated Chamber of Industries recommended in 1959 that the manufacturer of goods for the overseas market should be allowed to decide whether or not to place a mark on them indicating that they were made in South Africa.

The Minister of Transport told the Railway Staff Association on June 7, 1960, that he could not give concessions to the Railway staff as it would be foolish

to incur any increase in expenditure in view of the very serious position in which South Africa found herself. He said: "If these boycott movements gain momentum and get more support, South Africa can be placed in a very bad way economically."

The Minister of Economic Affairs said on September 2, 1960, that certain individual producers who had concentrated on the African market were being affected by the boycott, though only a small dent had been made in the total export trade.

From Boycott to Sanctions

By 1961, as a result of the Sharpeville massacre and the State of Emergency in South Africa, the banning of the ANC and PAC, and the resolutions of the Conferences of Independent African States, the boycott campaign moved on into the phase of the campaign for international sanctions against South Africa.

The first major step was in the Commonwealth, following the decision of the South African regime to proclaim a Republic on the basis of a referendum from which all but whites were excluded.

The African and Asian members of the Commonwealth then called for the exclusion of South Africa from the Commonwealth. They were able to oblige South Africa to announce withdrawal from the Commonwealth.

More and more States announced boycotts of South Africa.

On February 7, 1961, the South African Minister of Economic Affairs told the House of Assembly that boycotts had been imposed by legislative measures in India, Jamaica, Antigua, the Sudan, Ghana, Malaya, Barbados, and Netherlands Guiana.

Later in 1961, Ethiopia, Nigeria and Sierra Leone decided upon similar trade boycotts. Sierra Leone and Liberia closed their ports and airports to South African ships and aircraft except in cases of extreme urgency. Senegal and Sierra Leone decided to debar holders of South African passports from entering their territories.

The United Arab Republic withdrew its diplomatic mission from South Africa when it declared a Republic and placed a total ban on entry of South African goods at any of its ports. The withdrawal of the U.A.R. mission left South Africa without a single non-white diplomat.

The Minister of Economic Affairs told the House of Assembly on 23 January 1962 that boycotts of South African goods had been imposed by USSR,

“Communist China”, India, Malaya, Antigua, Barbados, Jamaica, British Guiana, Surinam, Ethiopia, Ghana, Liberia, Nigeria, Sierra Leone and Sudan.

Later in 1962, Tanganyika and Somali Republic decided to impose boycotts. Somali Republic barred South African ships and aircraft, and stated that no South African citizens except political refugees may enter.

In June 1961, the International Labour Conference passed a resolution, proposed by Nigeria and amended by India, that South Africa's apartheid policy was inconsistent with continued membership in ILO and requesting that South Africa be advised to withdraw from membership until such time as it abandoned its apartheid policy. (South Africa announced that it had no intention of withdrawing).

The struggle for international sanctions by the United Nations proved rather more difficult.

At the fifteenth session of the General Assembly, the African States submitted a draft resolution calling for specific diplomatic and economic measures against South Africa. The proposal received a majority, but was not adopted as it fell far short of the required two-thirds majority.⁸ An alternate resolution by five Asian States was adopted, merely calling on Member States to take separate and collective actions open to them.

At the next session in 1961, the African proposal again failed to obtain the two-thirds majority. Two amendments were moved to the alternate Asian draft - one by USSR calling for an arms embargo and one by Pakistan calling for an oil embargo. Both the amendments failed to obtain a two-thirds majority and the draft was adopted in its original form without a listing of specific measures.

The tabling of an alternate resolution by some Asian States had enabled many countries to reject the African proposal and associate themselves with the alternate draft.

The Asian States, particularly India, felt that the adoption of sanctions - by the General Assembly rather than the Security Council - would be inappropriate and that a resolution which would not be implemented by the major trading partners may be counter-productive. Some Asian States also had hesitations about the exclusion of the South African regime from the United Nations at a time when they were pressing for the representation of the People's Republic of China on the grounds universality.

⁸ The fifteenth session, the first after the Sharpeville massacre, began in September 1960. But the question of apartheid was deferred to a second part of the session in March-April 1961.

Intensive consultations by the African States and the South African liberation movements with the Asian States were required before a common position could be reached.

At the next session of the General Assembly in 1962, only one resolution was presented by Asian-African States, incorporating the African proposal. The sponsors rejected moves to have separate votes on the provision on sanctions. They were thereby able to secure the adoption of resolution 1761 (XVII) of November 6, 1962.

Some Comments

This paper makes it clear that the initiative for boycott and sanctions came from the national liberation movement of South Africa, and carried forward internationally with the support of African and other States, as well as men and women of conscience in Western countries.

The international movement was an extension of and support for the movement of the oppressed people of South Africa. The leaders of the national liberation movement always acknowledged that the main brunt of the struggle would be borne by themselves.

The boycott movement was initiated in South Africa when possibilities of legal agitation to secure redress of grievances were restricted by repression. It was seen as a peaceful means of depriving the oppressors of the benefits of exploitation and persuading them to reconsider their policies. Soon after the launching of the boycott and in the aftermath of the Sharpeville massacre, there was in fact, a further escalation of repression and the outlawing of the liberation movement. This led, by 1961, to a decision by the national liberation movement to give up its strict adherence to non-violence and to prepare for armed struggle for liberation. Sanctions increasingly had to be viewed in this new context as a means for weakening the oppressor and facilitating the triumph of the liberation struggle with a minimum of bloodshed and suffering.

But the basic arguments of those opposed to sanctions have shown no development.

The favourite argument is, of course, that sanctions would "most hurt the people it was meant to help - the Africans."

Patrick van Rensburg pointed out that this argument was first advanced by Mr. Eric Louw, the notorious Minister of External Affairs of South Africa. On the other hand, sanctions were advocated by the Africans who knew well that all their struggle involved sacrifice, even of life. They also knew that resources in the

hands of the regime merely enable it to finance and develop its repressive apparatus, as it has shown no intention to abandon racism.

The real issue has been not so much the pros and cons of sanctions, but why certain Powers and vested interests treat South Africa as a favoured partner for provision of trade preferences⁹ and loans, and for transfer of technology.

Principal Sources

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United Nations documents

⁹ The Commonwealth preferences were extended by the United Kingdom and other “white” Commonwealth nations to South Africa long after it left the Commonwealth.