THE BRITISH ANTI-APARTHEID MOVEMENT: 30 YEARS OF BOYCOTTING[1]

By Mike Terry

On June 26th this year the Anti-Apartheid Movement will mark its 30th Anniversary. Michael Terry, the AAM's Executive Secretary since 1975 looks back on 30 years of campaigning by the AAM.

In June 1959, a small meeting took place in Finsbury Town Hall in London to mark South African Freedom Day and to launch the 'Boycott Movement.' Speakers included Julius Nyerere from Tanzania and Father Huddleston.

They had come together to try launch a movement in Britain in response to the appeal by Chief Albert Luthuli for an international boycott of South Africa. The prime movers were South Africans, mainly students, associated with the Congress Movement but, they had succeeded in involving other London-based African organisations spearheading independence struggles in their respective countries, Fenner Brockway's Movement for Colonial Freedom and Canon Collins who through Christian Action had already done invaluable work raising funds for the Treason Trial.

Early Beginnings

From such modest beginnings the AAM was formed. The first organisers set themselves the task of co-ordinating a month of boycott in March, 1960. Mobilising meetings and conferences were called and locally-based boycott committees set up across the country. The Labour and Liberal Parties gave their backing as did the Trade Union Congress (TUC) and the Co-operative Movement. The first council, the famous port city of Liverpool, came out in support of the campaign by itself deciding to boycott all South African goods.

It was an imaginative and effective campaign. The organisers were able to build on earlier efforts of solidarity with the freedom struggle in South Africa reaching back to Sol Platje's visit to Britain in 1910 when he addressed literally hundreds of meetings across the country. But above all it provided a simple but effective way in which the growing revulsion in Britain to the tyranny of racial injustice in South Africa could express itself.

It was against the background of thousands of individuals and organisations actively campaigning for the boycott during the first month of action in March 1960 that the Sharpeville massacre occurred - to be followed shortly by the declaration of the state of emergency and the banning of the African National

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Congress (ANC) and Pan African Congress (PAC). The impact was immediate. It expressed itself in numerous protest actions both spontaneous and organised. It made Britain's relations with South Africa a major domestic political issue where it has remained, despite ebbs and flows of interest, ever since. Most significantly of all it convinced those who had set up the Boycott Movement of the necessity for it to take on a permanent and comprehensive role as the AAM.

It is difficult to trace a history of 30 years' in a few paragraphs especially given the tremendous variety and scope of the AAM's campaigning activities. Although launched as the Boycott Movement it soon found itself shouldering a range of other campaigns. The most significant in those early days were the 'Arms Embargo' and the 'Rivonia Trial.' It was also during this early period that it looked beyond the borders of South Africa and began campaigning on the regional dimensions of the apartheid crisis. The pamphlet *The Unholy Alliance* marked the start of campaigns against Portuguese colonialism and racist Rhodesia which became a more and more important element in the life of the AAM right up to Zimbabwe's independence in 1980 and of course continue today with a very different content when we mobilise in solidarity with the Front Line States.

Turning Points

There have been many turning points over the past three decades, for instance the great rally in 1963 when the leader of the Labour Party, Harold Wilson, declared that a future Labour Government would impose an Arms Embargo against South Africa - only to be bitterly disappointed by Labour's record in government on Southern Africa and in particular Rhodesia. There were the two International Conferences initiated by the AAM on sanctions in 1964 and Namibia in 1966. which demonstrated that the AAM was much more than a protest organisation in that it had a key role to play in de' eloping international policy or Southern Africa.

There were the militant demonstrations of 1969-70 against the Springbok rugby tour which sounded the death-knell for major sporting links between Britain and South Africa. There were also the huge protests in the early 70s against the moves by the Heath government first to lift the Arms Embargo and then to negotiate a sell-out to Ian Smith in Zimbabwe.

There were the excitement and challenges as a result of the collapse of Portuguese colonialism in Africa and consequent independence for Mozambique and Angola in 1975. This fundamental shift in the balance of forces in the region created new prospects for the liberation struggle in Zimbabwe and Namibia, and in South Africa itself but also new campaigning tasks for the AAM as South Africa launched its policies of aggression and destabilisation against the Front Line States.

Hard Times

But, there were hard times too. Whilst the Soweto massacre of 1976 shocked public opinion, the AAM proved unable to arouse it in such a way as to compel any fundamental change in British policy. In the end, and only after the cold-blooded murder of Steve Biko and the banning of the South African Student Organisation (SASO) and other Black consciousness organisations did Britain finally agree to a mandatory Arms Embargo in November 1977 but then singularly failed to ensure that it was effectively implemented. Likewise as the struggle intensified in Zimbabwe it was never possible to generate such a powerful solidarity movement, either in Britain or internationally, that it could be a really decisive force on the side of the liberation movement. And the same can be said of Namibia in the sense that it took 11 years from the adoption of the United Nations plan for the independence of Namibia in 1978 to the beginning of its implementation. And then it started with the carnage of SWAPO guerrillas by South African forces operating under the authority of the United Nations.

The 1980s, however, have seen the AAM develop and expand in such a manner that it will be able to meet its responsibilities during the final and most crucial stage of the freedom struggle in the region - the destruction of the system of apartheid itself. It has demonstrated an increasingly effective capacity to mass mobilise. When Mrs Thatcher had the audacity to invite P.W. Botha to Britain in June 1984, she had to abandon plans to wine and dine with him in Downing Street; instead he had a fleeting visit to Chequers - the British Prime Minister's country residence - and was not even prepared to meet the press. Meanwhile some 50 000 people filled the streets of London to protest at his very presence in Britain.

Solidarity is the Key Factor

By November, 1985 with South Africa increasingly ungovernable and support for sanctions reaching unprecedented levels up to 150000 people tried to march on to Trafalgar Square for a huge rally addressed by Oliver Tambo and Jesse Jackson. And with the Thatcher administration as adamant as ever in its opposition to sanctions 250 000 gathered on Clapham Common in June 1986, within a fortnight of the publication of the Commonwealth Eminent Persons' Group Report and the declaration of the state of emergency to demand sanctions at the huge AAM/Artists Against Apartheid Freedom Festival. And even these massive mobilisations were crowned by the 'Nelson Mandela Freedom At 70' campaign in 1988.

How has all this been possible? The most important and key factor is that the AAM has been true to the principles of its founders - that it is a solidarity movement in support of the freedom struggle.

That struggle is being waged under the leadership of SWAPO and the ANC and

the role of the AAM must be a complementary and supportive one to that of the liberation movements.

Secondly, the AAM has sought to build and develop a mass popular base amongst the people of Britain. However important lobbying and delegations to the government may be, they are no substitute for popular campaigns.

All the successes of the AAM can be attributed to such work. The Gleneagles Agreement on sporting links was adopted seven years *after* public protest had made such sporting links impossible. Britain's major bank - Barclays - withdrew above all because of the impact of the boycott campaign.

Other British companies have been forced out due to the success of disinvestment campaigns. Today, the mass base of the Movement is evident: one hundred and seventy five (175) local anti-apartheid groups in most towns and cities; strong national structures in Scotland and Wales and regional co-ordinating committees covering most of the country; some 30 000 national and individual members, and over 1 000 affiliates.

Thirdly, the AAM has been consistent in its policies. It has stood firmly for comprehensive sanctions and for the total isolation of apartheid South Africa. It has fully supported the right of the liberation movements to use all forms of struggle including armed struggle. Such policies have not always been popular. Many have advocated "softer" policy options which would be more acceptable in western decision-making circles. Yet experience has demonstrated time and again that there are no short cuts to freedom in Southern Africa and that if we are to be genuine in our solidarity then we must remain firm and clear in the policies we advocate.

Finally, we have stressed the need to develop the understanding of our members and supporters of the issues at stake. Despite numerous difficulties *Anti-Apartheid News* has gone out ten times a year to our members and supporters in Britain and internationally since it was first published.

Countless speakers from the AAM and the liberation movements have addressed meetings, large and small, conferences, seminars, etc. across the length and breadth of Britain. In this way we have been able to ensure that there is an informed and educated public that cannot be easily swayed by distorted and biased reporting of events in the national press and media.

Future Challenges

The future for the AAM is daunting. The 1990s must be the decade of the final stage of the liberation struggle. This represents above all a challenge to the struggling people of South Africa and the region but it is almost as great a challenge to the international solidarity movement.

From that first meeting in Finsbury Town Hall, there has grown an unprecedented movement of solidarity with the freedom struggle in South Africa, reaching across all the continents of the world. However, with Mrs Thatcher wishing to cast Britain in the role of the number one protector of apartheid, a very heavy burden will fall on the AAM in Britain. After three decades of campaigning it is as well placed as ever to accept this challenge, but it will be no easy task.