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'A Great Cause': the Origins of the Anti-Apartheid Movement, June 1959–March 1960

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(London, UK)

The Boycott Movement was initiated in June 1959 by exiled South African supporters of the Congress Movement with the aim of internationalizing the boycott campaign which the African and Indian Congresses had launched in South Africa. In South Africa the 1959 boycott campaign came at the end of a decade of intensifying repression which had closed off almost all peaceful means of protest against apartheid. In Britain, the late 1950s was a period of disillusion with mainstream politics. A network of organizations and individuals campaigned on three interlinked issues – peace and nuclear disarmament, racism and freedom for Britain's colonies, particularly in Africa. Working with organizations like the Movement for Colonial Freedom, Committee of African Organizations, Christian Action, the Africa Bureau and the Communist Party, a group of committed Congress Movement supporters joined by Patrick van Rensburg of the South African Liberal Party, worked within this network to launch a campaign for the boycott of South African goods. This culminated in a month of action in March 1960. It was taken up by the Labour Party, which had lost the October 1959 General Election and was split over nationalization and nuclear disarmament and by the Trades Union Council. To keep its broad base of support, the campaign stressed that it was a moral crusade of individual protest. The aim was to influence rather than overthrow the South African government. The situation was transformed by the shootings at Sharpeville, which led to the banning of the African National Congress and Pan-Africanist Congress. The Boycott Movement became the Anti-Apartheid Movement which in April 1960 called for international economic sanctions against South Africa.

On 26 June 1959, a group of South Africans and their British supporters held a public meeting in Holborn Hall in Theobalds Road, London in order to call for a boycott of fruit, cigarettes and other goods imported from South Africa. The meeting was organized under the auspices of the Committee of African Organizations (CAO). The main speaker was Julius Nyerere, then President of the Tanganyikan African National Union (TANU).¹ He was joined by Kanyama Chiume of the banned Nyasaland African National Congress, Tennyson Makiwane and Vella Pillay from South Africa's African and Indian Congresses, Michael Scott and Trevor Huddleston.² None of the speakers had a base in British politics. The choice of date was unfortunate in terms of the British political calendar. The 26th of June was South Africa Freedom Day, but it clashed with the preparations for a big peace

1 TANU had won all the elected seats in the Tanganyika Legislative Council; Tanganyika became independent in 1961.

2 The meeting was advertised in the *Daily Worker*; the only contemporary report seems to have been that by Herby Pillay in the *Bulletin of the Transvaal Indian Congress*, July 1959. I am grateful to E. S. Reddy for this reference.

rally on Sunday 28 June in Trafalgar Square. Nevertheless, the meeting was timed to coincide with the launch of a boycott of products of firms supporting the Nationalist Party by the African National Congress (ANC) and its ally the South African Indian Congress (SAIC), in South Africa.

Like the date, the choice of tactic had wholly South African origins. Although boycotts of slave products, particularly sugar, had been attempted at the end of the eighteenth and first quarter of the nineteenth centuries by anti-slavery campaigners,³ there was no continuous tradition of boycott in Britain. Rather, as the imperial power *par excellence*, Britain and its agents had been the object of boycotts.⁴ In South Africa, on the other hand, the boycott had a long and sometimes successful, history.

‘A Devastating Weapon’

The South African Congress movement was deeply influenced by the first and biggest independence struggle of modern times, that of India, where Gandhi had led boycotts of political institutions, taxes, foreign cloth and banks. In South Africa mineworkers linked to the Transvaal Native Congress had boycotted concessionary trading stores as long ago as 1918.⁵ The Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1953 made a repeat of the Congress Alliance’s Defiance Campaign impractical, by imposing stiff penalties on anyone who committed an offence ‘by way of protest or in support of any campaign against any law’, so the movement had to consider other forms of action. In 1953, the ANC’s national conference in Queenstown instructed Congress to campaign for a boycott of selected businesses in an attempt to force them to train and pay decent wages to Africans and to ‘generally recognise their dependence on African purchasing power’.⁶ The following year the ANC’s New Brighton branch in Port Elizabeth led a boycott of local shops where African customers were badly treated.⁷ The boycott tactic was also used in support of striking workers. In July 1954, the United Tobacco Company (UTC) in Durban dismissed its African workforce after it had gone on strike for union recognition. The ANC, the SAIC and Congress of Democrats (COD) called for a boycott of UTC products in response to an appeal from the Tobacco Workers’ Union and UTC suffered heavy losses.⁸ For the next few years, however, the ANC and its allies were preoccupied with other campaigns: the collection of demands for the Freedom Charter and organization of the Congress of

3 T. Brady and E. Jones, *The Fight Against Slavery* (New York, W. W. Norton, 1975), p. 89. A Question and Answer briefing document issued by the Boycott Movement in 1960 attempted to establish the historical link, answering the question, ‘Are there precedents for such boycott action?’ The answer given was ‘In Britain, according to Ralph Waldo Emerson, writing of the emancipation of slaves in the West Indies: “In 1791, 300,000 persons pledged themselves to abstain from all articles of island produce. The planters were obliged to give way.”’

4 Captain Charles Boycott was ostracized by the local community in County Mayo in 1880 as part of a campaign organized by the Irish Land League. A boycott of foreign-produced goods was one of the tactics used in Ghana in its independence campaign.

5 V. L. Allen, *The History of Black Mineworkers in South Africa*, vol. 1 (Keighley, The Moor Press, 1992), p. 276. Afrikaners also used the boycott – against Indian traders in the Transvaal, in 1946, in retaliation for India’s imposition of a trade embargo against South Africa. See M. Scott, *A Time to Speak* (London, Faber and Faber, 1958), p. 237.

6 T. Karis and G. M. Gerhart, *Challenge and Violence 1953–1964*, in T. Karis and G. M. Carter (eds), *From Protest to Challenge. A Documentary History of African Politics in South Africa 1882–1964*, vol. 3 (Stanford, Hoover Institution Press, 1977), p. 16. The resolution is reproduced on p. 126.

7 K. Luckhardt and B. Wall, *Organize ... or Starve! The History of the South African Congress of Trade Unions* (London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1980), p. 340. NEC report to ANC National Conference, December 1954. See Karis and Gerhart, *Challenge and Violence*, pp. 141–161.

8 Luckhardt and Wall, *Organize ... or Starve!*, p. 274. The NEC report to the ANC’s 1954 Conference includes a report on the UTC boycott. See Karis and Gerhart, *Challenge and Violence*, p. 153.

the People in 1955, the ineffective campaign against the Bantu Education Act, attempts to stop removals from Sophiatown and the Western Areas of Johannesburg and campaigns to stop the extension of passes to women. Black workers also staged a fight back against the misnamed 1954 Industrial Conciliation Bill, with the formation of the non-racial trade union federation, the South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU) in 1955 and the launch of a campaign for a minimum wage of £1 a day. But by the last years of the decade the mass arrests of activists, the banning of Congress leaders and restrictions on nearly all forms of public political activity were taking their toll on the movement's ability to act.

Meanwhile two of the most dramatic and successful actions of the period showed how the boycott tactic could be used to good effect. These were the refusal by residents of Evaton and Alexandra to pay increased bus fares. In Evaton, 2,500 residents who normally travelled the 30 miles to work in Johannesburg by bus, boycotted the buses for just over a year, commuting instead by the slower and less convenient train service. A year later the bus company withdrew the fare increases, agreed to build bus shelters and to run buses to a timetable drawn up in consultation with residents. In Alexandra, 50,000 people walked up to 18 miles to work and back through Johannesburg's white northern suburbs for over three months rather than pay a penny rise in fares. In April 1957, the Johannesburg Chamber of Commerce came to a temporary agreement by which it would subsidize fares and two months later the government passed an Act of Parliament requiring all employers to make a monthly transport payment.⁹

The Evaton and Alexandra boycotts were initiated not by the ANC but by local residents for whom fare increases were an intolerable financial burden. But the Alexandra action, in particular, alerted Congress strategists to the potential of the boycott weapon at a time when new forms of action were badly needed. Paradoxically, in 1958, ANC morale and membership figures were high, even though the immediate way forward seemed blocked. This was at least partly due to developments in the world outside South Africa when African countries were moving towards independence. This made apartheid seem more and more of an anachronism. The ANC leadership calculated that in a violent confrontation with the state it would lose. At the same time it believed that apartheid was incompatible with economic growth. A strategy of boycott could be used to accelerate this contradiction, while at the same time having the great advantage of legality. So, after telling delegates 'new methods of struggle must emerge ... we can no longer rely on the old forms', at the end of 1958 the leadership re-launched the boycott campaign, with a new purpose and on a much more ambitious scale. 'The economic boycott,' it said, 'is going to become one of the major political weapons in the country'. Looking beyond South Africa, the ANC leaders warned, 'The investors in this country and elsewhere must be taught to look at the situation realistically and to adjust themselves or face the consequences of the situation.'¹⁰

At the heart of apartheid were the pass laws, designed to control the movement of Africans into the urban areas. The 1958 ANC conference set up an Anti-Pass Planning Council as well as an Economic Boycott Committee.¹¹ When it reported in May 1959, the Council rejected the confrontational approach of refusing to carry passes. Instead it advocated a campaign of industrial action and boycott. It was not the pass itself, it argued, which should be the campaign focus but the role of the pass in the functioning of apartheid.

9 T. Lodge, *Black Politics in South Africa since 1945* (Johannesburg, Ravan Press, 1983), pp. 153–158. Bus boycotts in Alexandra Township had a long history – the first was in 1943.

10 NEC report to ANC National Conference, December 1958, reproduced in Karis and Gerhart, *Challenge and Violence*, pp. 435–456.

11 NEC report to ANC National Conference, December 1959, reproduced in Karis and Gerhart, *Challenge and Violence*, pp. 463–492.

If passes were discarded or burnt they would just be re-imposed. But the economic boycott could be used to hit against the whole pass law system. In particular, the Council stated, 'by withdrawing our purchasing power from certain institutions we can, as Chief Lutuli said, "punch them in the stomach"'.¹² Significantly the report added, 'The economic boycott has unlimited potentialities. When our local purchasing power is combined with that of sympathetic organizations overseas we wield a devastating weapon.'¹³

The ANC's implicit appeal for support for the boycott from outside South Africa reflected an increasingly internationalist outlook. Through the 1950s, it had developed a growing awareness both of the potential and the need for support from the outside world. In 1946, a multi-racial delegation of ANC President Dr Xuma, H.A. Naidoo and Senator Hymie Basner had travelled to the United Nations (UN) to support India's protests against the 'Ghetto Act'. Since then the UN had been a focus for anti-apartheid lobbying and in 1953 it set up a Commission on the Racial Situation in South Africa. In the same year the ANC's Secretary-General, Walter Sisulu, accompanied by Duma Nokwe, left South Africa on a five-month tour which took them to Britain, Holland, Israel, Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union. They also attended an international youth festival in Bucharest, a student congress in Warsaw, and ended with a five-week visit to China.¹⁴ From London, Sisulu wrote to the UN Commission in session in Geneva asking for a travel document to enable him to give evidence in person but was turned down. However, the ANC sent lengthy written evidence and the UN Commission issued substantial reports on South Africa in 1953, 1954 and 1955.

More encouraging was the Bandung Conference of Asian and African countries in 1955. The Congress movement was represented by Moses Kotane and Maulvi Cachalia who presented a memorandum arguing, 'We are convinced ... that the Government of South Africa could be forced to reconsider its reactionary and inhuman policy if all the nations who do not approve ... particularly the Governments of the United States and Britain, would boldly take a firm stand against such practices'.¹⁵ As Sisulu had done two years before, Kotane and Cachalia used the occasion of the conference to travel more widely, going first to London where they met Labour MPs. They visited Cairo, India and Singapore *en route* to Indonesia and returned to India for talks with representatives of the Indian Congress. Kotane then attended the World Youth Festival in Warsaw and travelled on to China. Throughout the 1950s, a trickle of Congress movement members attended youth festivals and international trade union conferences, usually in the countries of the eastern bloc.¹⁶ Solidarity worked both ways. In 1958, the ANC Youth League expressed its 'sympathy with the Negro people in Little Rock and those of Nottingham [*sic*] Hill'.¹⁷

By the end of 1958, there was real hope that the apartheid edifice would be cracked open by the combination of external pressure from a world in which the balance of forces seemed to be moving in favour of self-determination and a coherent and organized movement inside South Africa. In October 1958, the US reversed its policy of abstaining on UN resolutions about South Africa and voted for an expression of 'regret and concern' that South Africa had not modified its racial policy. In independent Ghana, the All-African People's Conference, held in Accra in December 1958, called on independent African

12 Karis and Gerhart, *Challenge and Violence*, p. 292.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 472.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 15.

15 B. Bunting, *Moses Kotane* (London, Inkululeko, 1975), p. 209.

16 Karis and Gerhart, *Challenge and Violence*, pp. 84–85, n. 31.

17 Report of Provincial Secretary to ANC Youth League (Transvaal) Annual Conference, 25–26 October 1958, reproduced in Karis and Gerhart, *Challenge and Violence*, pp. 428–431. In 1958, there were race riots in both Nottingham and Notting Hill.

countries to impose economic sanctions against South Africa, including a boycott of South African goods. The ANC was represented at Accra by a delegation headed by Ezekiel Mphahlele and including Alfred Hutchinson and Mary-Louise Hooper, a Californian volunteer who had been working as an aide to Chief Lutuli.¹⁸ Michael Scott and three members of the Liberal Party also attended the Conference. The ANC had reservations about references to 'our African personality' and 'pan-African socialism' in the pre-conference material. In its submission to the conference it stressed that the aim of the ANC was to establish a multi-racial society. It made no mention of sanctions. However, Mphahlele chaired the committee that drafted the sanctions resolution and afterwards Chief Lutuli commented, 'It heartened us to see that a [boycott] made sense to liberatory forces outside our own country.'¹⁹

The proposal of the ANC's Anti-Pass Council for a boycott was approved at a mass conference held in Johannesburg at the end of May 1959. The conference also agreed to call for a boycott of potatoes, in protest against forced African farm labour. This was widely observed but was called off, amid some confusion, at the end of August. The ANC's Executive Committee had already decided that a boycott of 'products of Nationalist controlled institutions' should begin on 26 June. The plan was announced at an Africa Day rally addressed by Chief Lutuli in Durban on 15 April.²⁰ Africans were also asked to observe 26 June as a 'Day of Denial' by not buying anything in the shops and not going to the cinema or to beerhalls.

Meanwhile the Africanists in the ANC had broken away to form the Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC) in April 1959. The Africanists had advocated a boycott of shopkeepers who were abusive towards blacks but only as a way of changing their behaviour and not as part of a more general economic boycott campaign.²¹ At the first annual conference of the PAC in December 1959 its leadership welcomed the All African People's Conference's boycott call stating, 'We have supported and encouraged the boycott of all South African goods by countries abroad.'²² However, boycott was not a central part of the PAC's strategy for action within South Africa. At the 1959 conference, the leadership made a generalized call for 'a dynamic programme destined to crush, once and for all, white domination'.²³ A few months later this was translated into plans for a campaign to be launched on 21 March 1960, when Africans would be asked to go to police stations without their passes and give themselves up for arrest. This was widely seen as an attempt to pre-empt the ANC which had designated 31 March as Anti-Pass Day. The PAC leaders were as aware as their former ANC colleagues that confrontation could end in bloodshed. On several occasions in 1959 police had opened fire and killed demonstrators in Natal. On 10 December police shot 12 people dead when residents refused to move from their homes in the 'Old Location' in Windhoek. In the build up to 21 March the PAC's President, Robert Sobukwe, wrote to the Police Commissioner in Cape Town asking him to instruct his men not to allow themselves to be provoked into violence.²⁴ The PAC leaders were either reckless or naïve. Nevertheless

18 E. Mphahlele, 'Accra Conference Diary', *Fighting Talk* (February 1959), pp. 6–8. Alfred Hutchinson's *Road to Ghana* (London, Gollancz, 1960) is a moving account of his escape from South Africa to attend the conference.

19 Albert Luthuli, *Let My People Go* (Fount Paperbacks, 1982 [1962]), p. 196.

20 *Peace News*, 1 May 1959; Karis and Gerhart, *Challenge and Violence*, p. 293.

21 Editorial in *The Africanist*, December 1957, reproduced in Karis and Gerhart, *Challenge and Violence*, pp. 498–500.

22 Report of the National Executive Committee of the PAC, December 1959, reproduced in Karis and Gerhart, *Challenge and Violence*, pp. 548–55.

23 *Ibid.*, p. 555.

24 Letter from Robert Sobukwe to Major-General Rademeyer, reproduced in Karis and Gerhart, *Challenge and Violence*, pp. 565–566.

with the advantage of hindsight it is difficult to believe that the ANC's attempts to bring about change through economic and moral pressure alone could have worked. In retrospect it seems clear that within South Africa the boycott tactic had, for the time being at least, come to the end of its usefulness. The significance of the 1959 call was that it was taken up in Britain and the wider world.²⁵

'Freedom, Nothing but Freedom'²⁶

Among the white Dominions, independent republics and African and Asian colonies which were the legacy of the British Empire, South Africa was a special case. To the Conservative government, it was a sovereign state in whose internal affairs Britain could not interfere. To the British business community it was a trading and investment partner whose stability was important to the British economy. British people, many of whom had family and friends in South Africa, accepted it as part of the British Commonwealth family, but many saw it as a stepchild whose apartheid policies were to be condemned as much for being anti-British as for being anti-black. Nevertheless, to committed Christians, some students, Britain's growing black community and to many on the Left, apartheid was variously a moral outrage, a violation of human rights or a special form of racism or colonial oppression.

As such it became one of the causes taken up by a network of organizations and individuals involved in a ferment of activity on three inter-linked issues: the anti-colonial struggle; peace and nuclear disarmament; and opposition to endemic and growing racism in Britain. By the end of the 1950s, Africa had become a central issue in British politics. Sudan won its independence in 1956, followed by Ghana in 1957. In 1960, sixteen colonies belonging to Britain, France and Belgium were to become independent states. But Central Africa, where the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland had been formed in 1953 and where white colonists had put down roots, was a more intractable problem: 1959 was a year of crisis; colonial authorities declared a State of Emergency in Nyasaland and 48 Africans were shot dead by police.

The Committee of African Organizations (CAO) brought together representatives of freedom movements throughout Anglophone Africa. In 1959, it campaigned for the break up of the Central African Federation, collected money for the Kenya Defence Fund, protested against the shootings in Nyasaland and arranged a memorial for Kelso Cochrane, victim of a racist murder in North Kensington.²⁷ In August, it organized a rally against French nuclear tests in the Sahara, with Canon Collins as one of the speakers. The following month it distributed a special leaflet for 'Southern Rhodesia Freedom Day' on 12 September.²⁸ To CAO, all these issues were at least as pressing as the situation in South Africa, where the government had answered the non-violent protest movement against apartheid by arresting the people's leaders and giving them what appeared at least to be a fair trial.

Working with CAO was the Movement for Colonial Freedom (MCF), formed in 1954 as a merger of the British branch of the Congress against Imperialism with committees campaigning on Central Africa, Kenya, British Guiana and Bechuanaland.²⁹ Its chairman

25 Advocacy of boycott was made a criminal offence under the State of Emergency declared on 30 March 1960.
26 Letter from Nigerian Second World War volunteer Theo Ayoola, quoted in B. Davidson, *Let Freedom Come* (London, Little, Brown and Co., 1978).

27 *Daily Worker*, 26 May 1959.

28 *Peace News*, 28 August 1959

29 MCF Archive. Box File 29. School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), London. MCF was formed partly in reaction to the British government's suspension of the British Guyanan constitution after the election victory of the left-wing People's Progressive Party in 1953.

was Fenner Brockway who had begun his political life in the Independent Labour Party (ILP), with its peculiarly British brand of Methodist-influenced socialism and long tradition of anti-imperialism.³⁰ Its General Secretary, John Eber, had been expelled from Malaya by the colonial authorities. By the end of the 1950s, MCF had supplanted the Fabian Colonial Bureau as the major pressure group on Labour's colonial policy. It was sponsored by 100 Labour MPs, most of them from the Party's left wing and by two of the 'big six' trade unions, the engineering union, the Amalgamated Engineering Union (AEU) and the shop workers' union, the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers (USDAW). Its founding resolution pledged it to campaign for 'the application of the Four Freedoms and the [UN] Declaration of Human Rights including freedom from contempt by the abolition of the colour bar'. It promoted annual meetings about South Africa on Human Rights Day, 10 December. It campaigned in the British academic community against the introduction of apartheid into South African universities and pioneered opposition to sports apartheid, working with the South Wales area of the miners union and the Socialist Medical Association to protest against the participation of an all-white South African team at the 1958 Cardiff Commonwealth Games.

The network also involved prominent churchmen, working as exceptional individuals rather than as representatives of their churches. Trevor Huddleston returned to Britain from a 12-year ministry in Sophiatown, Johannesburg in 1956. His elegy for Sophiatown, *Naught for your Comfort*, sold over 100,000 copies in its hardback edition and many more in paperback. Back in Britain he was passionately concerned to continue the fight against apartheid as well as doing all he could to oppose racism in Britain, speaking at meetings like the conference called to form a committee to fight race hatred in north London in November 1959.³¹ Michael Scott first went to South Africa in the 1920s to work with the priest in charge of Robben Island's leper settlement. Later he testified at the UN on behalf of the Herero people of Namibia and was expelled from South Africa. He set up the Africa Bureau in 1952 as a base of support for lobbyists outside the Left and pressure groups, which he described as 'the stage army of the good' and 'the most extreme or near-lunatic fringe'.³² Both Huddleston and Scott were early advocates of sanctions and boycott. At a meeting attended by 4,000 people in Central Hall, Westminster held in April 1956, just after his return to Britain, Huddleston called for a cultural and sporting boycott of South Africa and asked people 'to use economic pressure against the South African government'.³³ In 1957, Michael Scott wrote to Kwame Nkrumah as leader of newly independent Ghana, suggesting that West African countries should boycott South African goods.³⁴

Canon John Collins set up Christian Action in 1946, with the aim of promoting reconciliation with the people of Germany. Collins' concern for South Africa was primarily a humanitarian one. His reading of Alan Paton's *Cry, the Beloved Country*, profoundly impressed him. When in 1952, he received a request from Trevor Huddleston to raise funds for the families of people gaoled for taking part in the Defiance Campaign, he willingly agreed. Two years later Collins visited South Africa as the guest of a South African businessman, anxious to persuade Collins that the racial situation in South Africa was not as bad as he had been led to believe. He returned more determined than ever to support the

30 The ILP supported the Boers in the 1899–1902 South African War and helped Clements Kadalie when he visited Britain in 1927.

31 *Daily Worker*, 13 November 1959.

32 Scott, *A Time to Speak*. Mary Benson, who worked as the Africa Bureau's Secretary, also describes its work in *A Far Cry: The Making of a South African* (London, Viking, 1989).

33 *Africa Digest*, May–June 1956.

34 Scott, *A Time to Speak*, Appendix 14. Memorandum to Dr Nkrumah, 1957: South Africa versus the Conscience of the World.

resistance to apartheid. His first step was to report back on his visit at a meeting chaired by Victor Gollancz, in Westminster Central Hall. When 156 Congress Movement leaders were arrested in December 1956, he took the initiative of sending money to Bishop Ambrose Reeves in Johannesburg for their defence.³⁵ He became the paymaster of the anti-colonial movement, serving as MCF's Treasurer and persuading the Labour Party to channel funds through Christian Action's Defence and Aid Fund.

Anti-colonialism was not an issue for the Left as a whole, although Labour MPs who took up colonial issues were generally left-wingers. An exception (he was not then on the left of the Party) was Anthony Wedgwood Benn, whose father Lord Stansgate had been Secretary of State for India in the 1929–1931 Labour Government. Benn records in his diary how he and other MPs handed in a letter of protest to South Africa House at the opening of the Treason Trial.³⁶ Others were former members of the ILP like Fenner Brockway and Jennie Lee, or those with a special interest like Sir Leslie Plummer whose family had lived in British Guiana. Tom Driberg was unusual as a left-winger, showing as much interest in international as in domestic affairs. He became interested in Africa after Seretse Khama was barred from returning to Bechuanaland in 1950 and was one of six MPs to vote against the Labour government on the issue.³⁷ Tribunites Harold Davies and Reg Sorensen were active in the Union of Democratic Control (UDC), speaking on South Africa at Labour Party, trade union and Workers Educational Association branches.³⁸ Barbara Castle made high-profile visits to Kenya and Cyprus, and in 1958 persuaded the *Sunday Pictorial*, for which she wrote a column, to send her to Johannesburg to report on the Treason Trial.³⁹ On colonial issues, the Labour Party National Executive Committee (NEC) had taken a radical step forward with the adoption in 1956 of its policy document 'The Plural Society'. This called for universal suffrage to be established before independence in colonies with mixed European, Asian and African populations.⁴⁰ But in South Africa until at least 1958, the Party had closer ties with the all-white South African Labour Party than with the Congress Movement.⁴¹ At the grass roots of the Party, the racial attitudes of some working class members had been transformed by the 1939–1945 war. 'The lads in Africa', said a conference delegate in 1956, 'were accepted by us as buddies because they were fighting for democracy'.⁴² Constituency parties put forward resolutions condemning apartheid at the 1951, 1952, 1955 and 1956 Labour Party conferences.

In 1953, the Trades Union Congress (TUC) sent a special mission to South Africa to investigate the position of trade unions. It reported that they were in danger of being destroyed.⁴³ The TUC was more concerned to protect the interests of those already organized in trade unions than to campaign against apartheid. Only a handful of trade union leaders, almost all of them from small craft unions and most of them close to the

35 D. Collins, *Partners in Protest. Life with Canon Collins* (London, Gollancz, 1992).

36 T. Benn, *Years of Hope. Diaries, Papers and Letters 1940–1962* (London, Arrow, 1995), p. 223.

37 F. Wheen, *Tom Driberg. His Life and Indiscretions* (London, Chatto and Windus, 1990).

38 I am grateful to David Kitson for information about the UDC. Its Secretary in the early 1950s was Basil Davidson. In 1950 he organized a conference on Africa which crossed the Cold War divide to involve both Marxist academics like Thomas Hodgkin and Labour MPs Reg Sorensen and Fenner Brockway. Later it held a meeting in Caxton Hall on South Africa with speakers including Vella Pillay and Basil Davidson, chaired by Harold Davies MP.

39 B. Castle, *Fighting All the Way* (London, Macmillan, 1993), pp. 276–282.

40 P. S. Gupta, *Imperialism and the British Labour Movement, 1914–1964* (London, Macmillan, 1975).

41 In his Secretary's report to the Labour Party NEC Commonwealth Sub-committee on the forthcoming South African General Election in April 1958, John Hatch wrote: 'The most important feature of this from our point of view is the fate of Alex Hepple and Leo Lovell, the two leading Labour Members of Parliament.' Labour Party Archive. LP/CSC/57/35. National Museum of Labour History, Manchester.

42 Labour Party Annual Report, 1956, p. 159.

43 *The Times*, 26 March 1954.

Communist Party were concerned with African rights. An exception was the South Wales Area of the National Union of Mineworkers with its record of international solidarity in the Spanish Civil War. The Tobacco Workers' leader Percy Belcher spent three weeks in South Africa in 1955 at a conference of the Food, Drink and Tobacco Workers International where he met Mrs Elizabeth Mafekeng, President of the South African Food and Canning Workers Union.⁴⁴ Four years later, when Mrs Mafekeng was banished to the Northern Cape, he campaigned for her to be allowed to return to her home in Paarl. Harry Knight who was General Secretary of the scientific and supervisory workers union, the Association of Supervisory Staffs, Executives and Technicians (ASSET) (later the Association of Scientific, Technical and Managerial Staffs [ASTMS]) played a leading part in MCF. By 1957, the Musicians Union was barring its members from playing in front of racially segregated audiences. In 1958, the draughtsmen's union, the Association of Engineering and Shipbuilding Draughtsmen (AESD) became the first trade union to sell its shares in South African companies in protest against apartheid, a new form of action which prefigured later anti-apartheid campaigns.⁴⁵

The British Communist Party had a policy of unambiguous support for independence for Britain's African colonies and majority rule in South Africa. In the mid-1950s, it had resolved an ideological dispute over the relation of the struggle in the metropolis to the anti-imperialist struggle in the colonies by agreeing that the pursuit of the latter need not wait on the establishment of socialism in the imperial centre. Unlike the Labour Party, therefore, it saw anti-colonial movements as allies in its strategy for building socialism in Britain.⁴⁶ Its International Committee had sub-committees covering every area of Britain's former empire, including committees for Africa and South Africa to which, where possible, it recruited members from the territories concerned, including South Africa. From the early 1950s, the Ghanaian, Desmond Buckle, was a leading member of its Africa Committee and Vella Pillay served on both the Africa and South Africa Committees.⁴⁷ After 1957, he was joined by Mac Maharaj on the African Committee. The Party saw its role as producing and circulating information, which could be used to stimulate solidarity action in the wider labour and trade union movement. From 1947 to 1954, the Africa Committee published an *Africa Newsletter* and from 1954 to 1957, promoted the more ambitious *Africa Bulletin*.⁴⁸ Its efforts were constrained by its relatively small membership, especially after the exodus following the Hungarian uprising in 1956, and by the hostility of the leadership of most of the big trade unions and of the Labour Party, which proscribed members from working with any organization it deemed to be Communist-controlled. The *Africa Bulletin* therefore was published under the imprint of the Association of African Freedom with a Hampstead address. But in the trade union movement at least, the implacable hostility to the Communist Party of the Labour movement's leadership was not shared by many grass roots activists and the Party did succeed in building some working class support for anti-colonial struggles.

On South Africa particularly, the Communist Party played an invaluable role both in helping the increasingly beleaguered Congress Movement keep in contact with the outside world, in providing a voice for the underground South African Communist Party (SACP)

44 Percy Belcher recalled the meeting in a profile of Mrs Mafekeng which appeared in the *Daily Worker*, 20 November 1959.

45 T. Foley, *A Most Formidable Union: the history of DATA and TASS* (London, MSF, 1992), p. 91.

46 It expressed its position succinctly in a pamphlet published on the 1958 All-African People's Conference: 'this struggle is inflicting heavy blows against British imperialism, equally if not more effective than the important economic and political struggles in Britain. It is a common struggle against the same enemy and in our common interests'. Communist Party archive, National Museum of Labour History, Manchester.

47 Communist Party Archive. CP/CENT/INT/67/04.

48 Communist Party Archive.

and in campaigning for support for Congress campaigns. South Africans who travelled to international conferences in the 1950s usually left without passports or money and came via London where they were helped on their way by the Communist Party. The first issue of the *African Communist*, a journal produced by SACP members, was published within South Africa; thereafter it was printed in London with the Party's help, using the name and address of a British Party member.⁴⁹ The Party also used its publications to promote Congress campaigns. In March 1956, the *Africa Bulletin* reprinted the Freedom Charter, saying, 'Father Huddleston is urging every South African to sign the Charter ... buy a copy from us and support it yourself'. The Party's newspaper, the *Daily Worker*, gave regular coverage to Congress activities.

In Britain's universities, students had been protesting against racial segregation in South Africa since the Royal Family's visit there in 1947. Ten years later they campaigned against the introduction of apartheid into university education in South Africa. Over 250 academics from six universities signed a protest circulated by MCF against the so-called Extension of University Education Act.⁵⁰ Cambridge University set up its own scholarship for a student from South Africa with money raised mostly in small donations from undergraduates.⁵¹ In Scotland, where missionary links with educational institutions in Africa had been especially strong, the Scottish Union of Students protested to the South African authorities at every stage of the apartheid education Bill's progress through the South African Parliament. On the day of the Bill's re-introduction in May 1959, students throughout Scotland wore black armbands and at Glasgow University a fund was launched to help South African students.⁵²

From the 1940s, individual South Africans who were opposed to the regime had been arriving in Britain. An early arrival was Cassim Jadwat who came in 1945. Yusuf Dadoo, who urged him to get international support for the anti-racist struggle, saw him off at Cape Town docks. He worked with the Student Labour Federation to counter a touring South African exhibition 'Meet South Africa' by writing a pamphlet titled 'Meet the Real South Africa'. He also helped in the organization of a meeting on South Africa by the India League in March 1949 at Friends' House in London at which Yusuf Dadoo and Paul Robeson were the main speakers.⁵³ M. D. Naidoo settled in London after appearing at the UN in 1947, returning to South Africa in 1956 where he later passed on contact addresses to other Congress members wishing to travel abroad.⁵⁴ Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA) members and sympathizers like Max and Saura Joffe, Patsy and Vella Pillay, Cynthia and Simon Zukas and the trade unionists Guy Routh and James Phillips followed him. David Kitson came to Britain in 1947 and set about campaigning in his union, AESD. He and other South Africans spoke on South Africa to Labour Party branches on behalf of the UDC (the UDC also published a pamphlet, 'South Africa – The Facts', by Guy Routh). Rosalynde Ainslie came to study in 1954 and acted as the representative in Britain of the anti-apartheid quarterly *Africa South*, edited by Ronald Segal. In the early 1950s, a South African Students' Association (SASA) was formed, which organized public protests on South Africa with the help of the India League and Indian students living in London.⁵⁵ A committee was set up to support the left-wing journal *New Age* and held fund-raising parties where British sympathizers met South African exiles.⁵⁶ The exiled trade union leader Solly

49 Information from Mac Maharaj. The CPGB member was Ellis Bowles. See also R. Bernstein, *Memory Against Forgetting* (London, Viking, 1999), p. 134.

50 MCF Archive. Box File 10.

51 *The Times*, 16 February 1960.

52 *Daily Worker*, 20 May 1959.

53 Interview with Dr Cassim Jadwat by E. S. Reddy, New York, August 1999.

54 Interview with Mana Chetty, London, 1998.

55 Interview with Vella Pillay, London, 1998.

56 Interview with Saura Woolf, London, 1998.

Sachs initiated a Fund for South African Democracy to raise money for African trade unions. But by 1957 these initiatives had collapsed, partly because of disputes over the Soviet response to the uprising in Hungary.⁵⁷

Late in 1957, the *New Age* Committee was revived. Early in 1958, an urgent message was received from the Movement in South Africa warning of its fear that the apartheid government would crack down on the stay-at-home planned by Congress as a protest against the all-white elections in April, resulting in a blood bath. The message appealed for international action in order to constrain the South African authorities' reaction. In response, Vella Pillay and others called a meeting to which they invited South Africans of all political persuasions who they thought would respond to the appeal from home. The meeting set up a South African Freedom Association (SAFA) with Solly Sachs as its Secretary, succeeded at a subsequent meeting by Mac Maharaj who had arrived in London in August 1957.⁵⁸ The stay-at-home in South Africa was called off after the first day and the immediate threat of bloodshed passed but SAFA, which soon affiliated to CAO, was to play an important part in initiating the Boycott Movement.

At the end of the 1950s, more young South Africans started arriving in Britain in search of education and experience outside South Africa's newly segregated universities. Among them were Kader Asmal, Nanda Naidoo, Joan Nair, Tony and Hassim Seedat, Mana Chetty and Freddy Reddy. Most of them were supporters of the South African Indian Congress. Two of the few African South Africans in London were the poet Mazisi (Raymond) Kunene and Lionel Nga Kane. A consequence of apartheid was that only whites and to a lesser extent Indians, could afford the luxury of going into exile. New arrivals were soon drawn into a network which met at the North London home of Patsy and Vella Pillay to discuss the application of Marxist ideas to the situation in South Africa and how to support the struggle back home. An important new arrival in the spring of 1959 was Tennyson Makiwane, a leader of the ANC Youth League and former treason trialist who had been involved in the Alexandra bus boycott. He had just attended the World Youth Festival held in Vienna in April. Alfred Hutchinson, another treason trialist who had worked closely with Walter Sisulu, also reached London from Ghana at about this time.

By the beginning of 1959 the movement against apartheid in Britain had been growing for more than a decade. It embraced a network of organizations across the political spectrum though mainly on the Left, including MCF, Christian Action, CAO, the National Council of Civil Liberties, the African Bureau, student bodies, some trade unions, the Communist Party and sections of the Labour Party, all of which had taken action against apartheid. They had close links with the committed group of South African Congress supporters in London, who provided information and worked with them in their campaigns. Most of those who had arrived in the early 1950s has been close to the CPSA⁵⁹ but they were well aware of the strength of anti-Communism in Britain, both in the Labour and trade union movement and beyond. Hence, they deliberately set out to reach a wider audience. In this they were helped by the arrival of Tennyson Makiwane who, as an African who represented the ANC, could respond convincingly to the argument that the boycott would hurt those it was intended to help by saying that Africans were suffering already and were willing to pay a further price for their freedom. Other new arrivals like Alfred Hutchinson

57 Information from Mac Maharaj.

58 Information from Mac Maharaj.

59 The Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA) dissolved itself in 1950. It re-formed as the South African Communist Party (SACP) in 1953, but did not announce its existence publicly until 1960. It was outlawed in South Africa between 1950 and 1990 and it is therefore difficult to say with any certainty who was, or was not, a member. Makiwane was a member in 1959–60. Information from Vella Pillay.

and Abdul Minty were also important. Abdul Minty had known Trevor Huddleston in South Africa and now drew him in to the new campaign.

There had been previous attempts to organize boycotts in Britain in response to earlier boycotts within South Africa but these had largely failed. Some time in the mid-1950s, South African supporters of the congress movement picketed shops in North London.⁶⁰ In 1957, Hackney Central Labour Party sent a resolution to conference urging Labour movement members not to buy South African goods. It was remitted and then rejected by the National Executive Committee.⁶¹ Now Congress members living in Britain and their British supporters again took up the idea of acting in solidarity with the boycott campaign in South Africa by launching an appeal for a boycott in Britain. It was the dynamic of events in South Africa that prompted the timing as well as the idea of a boycott initiative. The campaign was launched under the name of the Committee of African Organizations and this time, after a slow start, the call for a boycott fell on more fertile ground.

‘Don’t Buy Slavery’

Exactly when and by whom the decision to launch a new boycott campaign was made is unclear. However, CAO’s report of activities for 1959 states clearly that it set up a Boycott Sub-committee in response to a request from the ANC and that it worked closely with Tennyson Makiwane representing the ANC and the South African Freedom Movement.⁶² That the South Africans turned to CAO, an organization of African expatriate students and activists was significant; just as CAO’s activities were organized by Africans in exile, the boycott campaign was also essentially South African-driven.

No time was lost in getting things moving. Under the auspices of CAO and with support from MCF, the South Africans held a 24-hour vigil outside South Africa House and a meeting at Holborn Hall on Friday 26 June. On the Saturday, CAO organized poster parades at several shopping centres where demonstrators held placards telling shoppers ‘Don’t Buy Slavery, Don’t Buy South African’. They distributed a leaflet that listed ‘Outspan’ oranges, ‘Cape’ apples, avocado pears, onions, wine and sherry and ‘Craven A’ cigarettes as some of the South African products that shoppers should avoid. The leaflet quoted the ANC’s Anti-Pass Council’s report saying, ‘When our local purchasing power is combined with that of sympathetic organizations overseas, we wield a devastating weapon.’⁶³

The next pickets were organized by CAO’s Boycott Sub-committee, which was chaired by the Nigerian Femi Okunnu. Rosalynde Ainslie attended its meetings on behalf of SAFA. Without grass roots of its own, CAO turned to contacts in the labour and trade union movement and the peace movement for support. Its next venture, on Saturday 11 July, was a picket in conjunction with Finchley Labour Party. Supporters were asked to meet at 11 a.m. at Tally Ho Corner in North London.⁶⁴ On 19 July, Tennyson Makiwane was one of an all-star line up of speakers, with Julius Nyerere, Joshua Nkomo, Kanyama Chiume and Labour’s shadow Colonial Secretary, James Callaghan at a demonstration in Trafalgar Square. Poster parades followed on three successive Saturdays in August: on 1 August, with the support of St Pancras and Holborn Trades Council, meeting at Camden Town tube

60 Interview with Patsy Pillay, London, 1998.

61 Labour Party archive. LP/CSC.57/24.

62 AAM Archive. Brief report of the activities of the Committee of African Organizations from the latter part of 1958 to the beginning of 1960.

63 One of the pickets was reported, with a picture, in *Peace News*, 10 July 1959. The leaflet is in the AAM Archive.

64 AAM Archive. Letter dated 9 November 1959 from Femi Okunnu, CAO Publicity Secretary.

65 AAM Archive. Letter ‘date as postmark’ from Femi Okunnu.

station; on 8 August, with Hampstead Peace Committee, meeting at Hampstead tube station; and on 15 August, with the local Labour Party, meeting at Brixton Town Hall.⁶⁵ The campaign had some success. The film technicians' trade union, the Association of Cinematograph, Television and Allied Technicians (ACTT), the Tobacco Workers Union, Brighton and St Albans Co-operatives and the Political Committee of the London Co-operative Society all decided to support the boycott. So did a handful of constituency Labour Parties.⁶⁶ But by the end of July CAO's Boycott Sub-committee was already over-stretched. At a meeting on 29 July, the Committee's Chairman, Femi Okunnu, said that after its initial impact CAO had not been able to mobilize enough forces to broaden the campaign. It was agreed to approach 'eminent sponsors' for support but to suspend activities if the Committee was not strong enough to make the boycott a platform during the October 1959 General Election campaign.⁶⁷

In the autumn, the Committee was reconstituted with Dennis Phombeah from CAO as Chair and with a group of young South Africans as a hard-working and enthusiastic core. Another recruit was Patrick van Rensburg of the South African Liberal Party who was approached by Tennyson Makiwane to try to revive the campaign.⁶⁸ Van Rensburg was working in Christian Action's basement in Amen Court. He threw himself into action with gusto, firing off letters to prospective sponsors. By November, the Committee was meeting on alternate Wednesday evenings and Saturday mornings and endorsed a plan to hold a delegate conference as a preliminary to a month's intensified boycott campaign early in the new year when fruit imports from South Africa started to arrive.

'A Truly National Movement ...'

From the beginning, it was felt important to get a wide range of sponsors, from the world of the arts as well as trade unions and all the political parties. Among the first to agree were sympathizers like Michael Scott, Trevor Huddleston, Canon Collins, Fenner Brockway and Donald Soper. Then came celebrities and academics, among them Brendan Behan, Johnny Dankworth, John Berger, journalist James Cameron, Bertrand Russell, Professor A. J. Ayer and the cartoonist Vicky. Liberal MP Jeremy Thorpe, later to become a Vice-President of the Anti-Apartheid Movement, readily agreed but the Liberal Party's leader, Jo Grimond and Clement Davies, its former leader, both refused.⁶⁹ The biggest problem lay with the Conservative Party. The Committee was convinced of the importance of showing that the boycott had support from at least some Conservatives. It had the support of Lord Altrincham (later better known as the journalist and biographer John Grigg) who became very active in the campaign, initially as Chair of its London Committee; but on his own admission he was a semi-detached member of the Party. A letter to Geoffrey Howe, then active in the left-leaning Bow Group, elicited only the response that although he personally sympathized with the campaign's objectives, he was 'frankly doubtful if the boycott could be made to work in this country'.⁷⁰ Conservative MP Chris Chataway used his maiden speech to express the hope that the England cricket team would refuse to play a segregated South African team on its 1960 tour and to suggest that 'ordinary people could take actions that governments were unable to'.⁷¹ But he stopped short of backing a consumer boycott. So, for the first few months of the campaign, Lord Altrincham spoke at every major event.

66 AAM Archive. List dated 20 July 1959 headed 'Supporters and sponsors of the boycott'; *Peace News*, 31 July 1959.

67 AAM Archive. Minutes of CAO South African Boycott Sub Committee meeting, 29 July 1959.

68 P. van Rensburg, *Guilty Land* (London, Jonathan Cape, 1962), p. 44.

69 AAM Archive. Letters to Patrick van Rensburg, 2 November 1959.

70 AAM Archive. Letter to Patrick van Rensburg.

71 *Peace News*, 11 December 1959.

With the start of the autumn term the campaign took off among students. In November, the National Union of Students (NUS) Council called for an 'individual boycott' by its members, with few votes against but many abstentions.⁷² At Oxford University, the Joint Action Committee Against Racial Intolerance (JACARI), a co-ordinating group supported by 44 university clubs, decided to campaign for the boycott. Not to be outdone, Cambridge's Joint Action Group for Understanding Among Races (JAGUAR) circulated a petition asking colleges to stop buying South African fruit and wine for their kitchens and butteries. At the beginning of December, the Cambridge Union voted by 100 votes to 83 to instruct its kitchen committee not to buy South African. The London School of Economics (LSE) Students' Union banned the sale of South African food and cigarettes in its halls of residence, followed by London's University College.⁷³

The previous July, the Labour Party's NEC Commonwealth Sub-committee had reacted cautiously to a motion from the Isle of Thanet constituency party supporting the boycott, saying that it was a matter for individual choice.⁷⁴ The Party did not consider 'colonial policy' to be an important issue when it drew up its plans for the October 1959 General Election campaign.⁷⁵ The issues of nationalization and unilateral nuclear disarmament dominated left politics and the Party was split from top to bottom. Labour lost badly and unexpectedly in the October election and the Party looked for an issue around which it could unite. 'We need' declared General Secretary Morgan Phillips, 'something that will make a moral appeal to the country. I therefore suggest that consideration be given to making 1960 an "African Year".'⁷⁶ The Party stumbled into supporting the boycott as a ready-made campaign that fitted into its 'Africa Year'. It remained cautious, however, and was reluctant to take any action that would have a serious impact on the South African economy. The Secretary of its Commonwealth Sub-committee, John Hatch, reported that the effect of the boycott 'is likely to be more political than economic' and proposed that Party members should be asked to observe the boycott 'as a political gesture of solidarity' for one month only.⁷⁷ In a statement issued on 16 December, the Party called for a boycott of South African goods from 20 February to 19 March 1960 and its International Department Secretary, David Ennals, joined the Boycott Committee. The following week, the TUC General Council, responding to a call from the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU), followed Labour's lead. They appealed to trade unionists and the general public to 'express by a consumers' boycott of South African goods their personal revulsion against the racial policies being pursued by the government of South Africa'.⁷⁸ The ICFTU had asked its affiliates to consider taking the more radical step of refusing to handle South African goods; the TUC fudged by commissioning a document looking at the implications of such a ban. Of the three organizations that made up the National Council of Labour, only the Co-operative Union refused to back the boycott. However, nineteen Co-operative societies, among them the Manchester and Salford, and South Suburban Co-operatives, rejected its advice and decided to take South African products off their shelves during the boycott month.

72 *Guardian*, 16 November 1959.

73 *Daily Worker*, 29 October 1959; 12 November 1959; 23 November 1959; 1 December 1959.

74 Labour Party Archive. Labour Party NEC Commonwealth Sub-committee, 7 July 1959. LP/SCS.58/22.

75 A memo circulated to the Labour Party NEC summarizing campaign issues for the October 1959 General Election addressed the problem of how to persuade unilateralists to vote, stating that they might do so because 'they support us on other moral issues such as Central Africa, economic aid etc.'. It stated that colonial issues would only be an election issue in Scotland.

76 Labour Party Archive. NEC report, December 1959. Sec. No. 81.

77 The Party was probably also influenced by the decision of the South African Liberal Party in December 1959 that the boycott was 'a legitimate political weapon'.

78 TUC press statement, 23 December 1959.

By December, the Boycott Committee had evolved from its origins as a CAO Sub-committee to become a group still chaired by Dennis Phombeah of CAO but made up of committed and hard-working South Africans, together with a few others, among them Johnny James from the British Guiana Freedom Association, Yvonne Redman from the *Universities and Left Review* and Keith White and Joan Hymans from MCF. The South Africans who formed the core of the Committee realized that it needed a broader base with more formal representation from a wider range of British organizations. There was also a feeling that it must be strengthened if it was not to be swept aside when the Labour Party joined the boycott month. The Committee depended heavily on the unpaid commitment of its members, especially its Secretary Rosalynde Ainslie and on the goodwill of CAO, which had made available the small back room of its office at 200 Gower Street, in the basement of the building where Dr David Pitt had his surgery. It relied on MCF to help send out mailings and provide speakers to interested organizations. In November, Christian Action, which had already given the Committee support in kind, in the form of paper for leaflets and letter-heads, had offered to take over the running of the campaign. A majority on the Committee was keen to remain independent; it was agreed that a subgroup would meet Canon Collins and discuss a formula whereby Christian Action would be asked to give its support.⁷⁹ When Christian Action's proposals were put to the Committee in writing in mid-December, members were divided. Patrick van Rensburg argued for acceptance, on the grounds that it was irrelevant who controlled the Movement in Britain, as its link with the Congress Movement and the (South African) Liberal Party was a guarantee of its arriving at correct policies. Other members, who argued that the Boycott Movement was a British campaign and pointed out that the ANC had not yet made any direct call for an international boycott, hotly contested this. In a decision crucial to the Movement's future development it was agreed that policy would be 'the result of argument among members in an essentially autonomous body'. It was also agreed to invite other organizations to send representatives to the Committee and that existing members should ensure that they had proper credentials.⁸⁰

This decision bore fruit at the 29 December meeting of the Committee (now calling itself for the first time the Boycott Movement Committee). Those present were listed in the Minutes as representing their organizations and the Africa Bureau, Christian Action and the National Council for Civil Liberties were formally represented for the first time. David Ennals attended as a representative of both Christian Action and the Labour Party. It was agreed to ask the Liberal Party, the TUC and the London Co-operative Party to nominate representatives: of these only the Liberal Party responded by appointing Tom Kellock. The Communist Party, which had announced its support for the campaign at its 26 June launch, was not invited to send a delegate, presumably because of proscription.⁸¹ The Party's newspaper, the *Daily Worker*, continued to give full, often front-page coverage to the boycott and for much of 1960 appeared with the slogan 'Boycott South African goods' stamped above its masthead. At the same time, the campaign was put on a sounder organizational footing with the appointment of Tennyson Makiwane as Director, Keith Lye of the Africa Bureau as Deputy Director and Martin Ennals as Organizing Secretary. Rosalynde Ainslie continued as Honorary Secretary and Vella Pillay as Honorary Treasurer. Patrick van Rensburg, who had been acting as Director, was about to leave the country. The South Africans on the Committee had the vision to see that, if it was to grow, the

79 AAM Archive. Minutes of Boycott Committee meeting, 25 November 1959.

80 AAM Archive. Minutes of Boycott Committee meeting, 16 December 1959.

81 In response to a letter from the London District Communist Party Secretary in March, the London Anti-Apartheid Committee agreed that he or his nominee should be invited to attend its meetings, while stressing that all members of the Committee attended in a personal capacity. The District Secretary, John Mahon, and later Kay Beauchamp thereafter attended meetings of the London Committee.

Movement must put down British roots. At the same time they were determined that it would remain aligned with Congress. Later this caused tensions on the Committee; but for now, it was able to note that 'this arrangement of personnel linked satisfactorily South African and English participation'.⁸²

At the end of December, the Committee put flesh on its plans for the campaign. It was agreed that there was an urgent need to set up local committees. For legal reasons these were to be autonomous and Keith Lye was given the task of travelling around the country to promote them.⁸³ David Ennals reported that the Labour Party would write to local parties asking them to take the initiative in forming committees in their areas. The first initiatives taken outside London seem to have been organized by groups focusing on Africa and were independent of any other organization. In Newcastle-upon-Tyne, the Tyneside Africa Council sponsored a march of students and young people carrying placards saying 'Tobacco Tyrants Rothmans Stuyvesant'.⁸⁴ In Edinburgh Tennyson Makiwane spoke at a meeting organized by African students. The campaign also received strong support from the black community. The *West Indian Gazette* pointed to 'growing evidence that the boycott of South African goods ... is spreading throughout Britain'. A reader from Huddersfield urged, 'If ever there was a time and need for Afro-West Indian corroboration [*sic*] this is it.'⁸⁵

The launch meeting, now planned to take place on 17 January, was announced at a well-attended press conference on 12 January. The Committee stressed that the delegate conference would be reconvened after the boycott month (now scheduled to take place from 1 to 31 March 1960) to discuss the next steps in the campaign.⁸⁶ Meanwhile letters had been sent to organizations asking them to declare their support for the boycott and to send delegates to the conference. The Committee cast its net wide, at the same time showing where it expected to find its strongest support. Letters went first to trade unions, Co-operative Societies, women's organizations and Constituency Labour Parties, followed by local Liberal Parties, Conservative Associations and Young Conservative branches. A different letter was prepared for churches and religious organizations.⁸⁷

The 17 January, Conference was held in Denison House, Vauxhall Bridge Road. It attracted 250 people from 168 organizations⁸⁸ and was chaired by Trevor Huddleston and Dennis Phombeah. Anthony Wedgwood Benn, speaking on behalf of the Labour Party's NEC, said that the breadth of support for the boycott made it 'the most remarkable political demonstration for many years'. Lord Altrincham said he represented 'not the Tory Party, but many Tories' and Harry Knight of the supervisory and scientific workers union ASSET said that Oswald Mosley's opposition was proof of the correctness of the boycott.⁸⁹ Delegates were asked to set up local boycott committees, to organize meetings on the boycott, to approach local shops and to picket shopping areas. The Committee signalled its determination to carry on after the boycott month with a session introduced by David Ennals on the theme 'What after March?'. The conference was the Committee's first big public event and it was judged to have been a success.

An energetic London Campaign Committee was set up the following weekend and by the beginning of February Martin Ennals reported that there were around 35 local committees, with a further 25 in the process of formation. Over the next four weeks the

82 AAM Archive. Minutes of Boycott Movement Committee meeting, 29 December 1959.

83 AAM Archive. Minutes of Boycott Movement Committee meeting, 29 December 1959.

84 *Peace News*, 4 December 1959.

85 *West Indian Gazette*, January 1960. The *West Indian Gazette* was edited by Claudia Jones, who was a member of the CAO Boycott Sub-Committee.

86 AAM Archive. Minutes of Boycott Movement meeting, 13 January 1960.

87 *Ibid.*

88 AAM Archive. Minutes of Boycott Movement meeting, 19 January 1960.

89 Tony Benn helpfully supplied his notes for his speech at the meeting; *Daily Worker*, 18 January 1960.

number of local campaign committees mushroomed to 160. These were said to be broad-based groups, with other areas being covered by local Labour Parties.⁹⁰ The extent to which Labour Party members dominated the committees is unclear. However, there was certainly participation by other political parties, for example, by Plaid Cymru in Bangor. Considerable support also came from trade union branches and trades councils, like that given by the National Association of Local Government Officers (NALGO) in Aberystwyth and the South African Action Committee set up by Walthamstow Trades Council.⁹¹

In February, the Committee issued a press statement that attempted to clarify its relationship with the Labour Party. The original South African call for a boycott had clearly been intended to deal a body blow to South Africa's economy. In a statement dictated either by realism or political pragmatism, the Boycott Committee argued, 'The boycott in this country is essentially a gesture No-one imagines this boycott will bring an unjust and detested system swiftly to an end.' At the same time it made its strongest statement yet about its non-partisanship: 'The Boycott Movement is ... as everyone working for it will certify, a truly national movement, in which the people of this country are free, for once in a while, to forget their domestic political wrangles in order to devote themselves to a great cause.'⁹²

In fact, the support of the Labour Party and the TUC transformed the scale of the campaign. In February and March, the Party organized 27 conferences on Africa nationwide. From the beginning it accepted that the campaign publicity material would be written and produced by the Boycott Movement Committee; this was important in establishing the Movement's expertise and authority. (The Liberal Party asked interested members to communicate directly with the Movement.) Already in February there was a huge demand for the Committee's broadsheet, *Boycott News*,⁹³ and for leaflets and posters. By mid-February the Committee was told that sales of *Boycott News* had reached 100,000, with 30,000 more on order. They were also informed that 700,000 introductory leaflets had been circulated, as well as 550,000 leaflets with a list of goods to be boycotted; 350,000 of these were a special Labour Party version and 200,000 were for general distribution.⁹⁴ The AEU ordered 117,000 leaflets. A later report estimated that over two million leaflets were distributed in March and that *Boycott News* sold 250,000 copies. These were huge quantities, even by the standards of the Anti-Apartheid Movement's heyday in the late 1980s. In addition, the TUC printed its own leaflet, which it distributed to all its affiliated unions.

Labour Party support meant that Labour-controlled councils gave serious consideration to the request to boycott South African goods. Liverpool led the way and altogether 22 councils did so, including Staffordshire County Council, which had a Conservative majority.⁹⁵ London County Council voted to boycott produce from South Africa during March. Interestingly several of the towns that supported the boycott were ports with long-established black communities. Proposing a boycott in South Shields, a local Councilor said that the port had 'a big population of coloured seamen. We have a good spirit of co-operation here and no colour bar. That is why we oppose South Africa's apartheid policy.'⁹⁶ As the campaign took off it moved up the Labour Party's agenda. It was decided

90 AAM Archive. Anti-Apartheid Movement, undated report.

91 AAM Archive. List of Anti-Apartheid committees and contacts.

92 AAM Archive. Press statement, dated February 1960.

93 Three issues of *Boycott News* were produced. Issue 3 appeared after the Sharpeville shootings.

94 AAM Archive. Minutes of Boycott Committee meeting, 17 February 1960.

95 AAM Archive. Anti-Apartheid Movement Report, April 1960.

96 *Daily Worker*, 29 December 1959.

that Hugh Gaitskell as Party Leader would speak at the March Boycott Month's launch rally and that Africa would be the theme of Labour's party political broadcast on 9 March 1960.

The first edition of *Boycott News* carried the headline 'A Direct Appeal from South Africa'. In November 1959, Patrick van Rensburg had written to Chief Lutuli asking him to send a statement calling 'freshly and clearly' for a boycott.⁹⁷ The South African Liberal Party had been split on the issue but, in November, the Party's National Committee passed a resolution approving the boycott 'both here and overseas, as a legitimate political weapon'.⁹⁸ So the message carried in *Boycott News* was signed jointly by Chief Lutuli and Dr G. M. Naicker, Presidents of the African and Indian Congresses and by Peter Brown, National Chairman of South Africa's Liberal Party. It said that an economic boycott was one way in which the world at large could 'bring home to the South African authorities that they must either mend their ways or suffer for them'.

The response to the campaign placed huge strains on the Movement's very limited organizational capacity. It kept going only because of the energy and commitment of young South Africans like Ruth Ballin, who took on responsibility for the Movement's organizational mailings to the detriment of her teacher-training course.⁹⁹ Mana Chetty worked shifts on the London Underground and used his free travel pass to deliver parcels of leaflets all over London.¹⁰⁰ The Committee was still based in the back room of CAO's Gower Street office and shared a telephone with CAO which was cut off and reconnected only after the Treasurer Vella Pillay, personally guaranteed payment. There was no space for volunteers to work in and the frenetic activity on the boycott threatened to take over all the space available and to disrupt CAO's other campaigns. The Movement had become a cuckoo in the CAO nest. Financially it was just about coping. It had received a loan of £500 from Christian Action, put out an appeal for funds in the press and asked for donations from trade unions. In mid-February the Treasurer reported that its leaflets and posters were more than covering their cost.

'A Great Moral and Positive Weapon'

The boycott month kicked off with a rally in Trafalgar Square on 28 February. Around 2,000 people marched from Marble Arch to Trafalgar Square and up to 15,000 gathered there to hear speeches from Hugh Gaitskell, Liberal MP Jeremy Thorpe, Lord Altrincham, Rita Smythe of the Women's Co-operative Guild and Tennyson Makiwane. (Mary Stocks had been asked to speak but was unwell.)¹⁰¹ Trevor Huddleston chaired the rally and there was a recorded message from the ANC's President-General, Chief Lutuli, calling for a boycott.¹⁰² Hugh Gaitskell said that the purpose of the boycott was not 'to bring the South African government to its knees but to encourage the white nationalists to adopt a new and better frame of mind towards the Africans'. Lord Altrincham said that Macmillan, in his 'magnificent' Cape Town speech, had blundered when he said 'Boycotts will never get you anywhere'.¹⁰³ A shadow was cast over the proceedings by a counter-demonstration staged by Oswald Mosley and his supporters who drove in lorries around the Square. Scuffles

97 AAM Archive. Letter to Chief Lutuli from Patrick van Rensburg, dated 4 November 1959.

98 R. Vigne, *Liberals against Apartheid. A History of the Liberal Party of South Africa, 1953-68* (London, Macmillan, 1997), p. 108.

99 Interview with Ruth Ballin, London, 1998.

100 Interview with Mana Chetty, London, 1998.

101 According to *The Times*, 29 February 1960, estimates of the number of those present ranged from 6,000 to 15,000. *The Times* also recorded for posterity that some of the marchers sang a boycott song: 'Don't buy goods from South Africa/Till they drop their wicked plan/Tell your neighbour when you can/Don't buy goods South African'.

102 AAM Archive. Anti-Apartheid Movement Report, April 1960.

103 *Guardian*, 29 February 1960.

broke out between demonstrators and Mosley's henchmen, which dominated press reports of the rally. Afterwards the Committee complained to the Press Council and to the BBC about the media coverage.¹⁰⁴ Demonstrations also took place in Manchester, Birmingham, Liverpool and Nottingham.

For the next three weeks local groups all over the country held poster and car parades, meetings and film shows, wrote letters to the local press and distributed leaflets to Saturday shoppers. There was wide press and radio coverage, and on 1 March, the *Guardian* editorial commented, '“The boycott” begins today, and it is an indication of the organisers' success so far that no-one needs to ask “boycott of what?”' Local Labour Parties took up the campaign. Watford Labour Party's broadsheet, *Watford Citizen*, asked readers to protest against the three issues highlighted by the Movement: the bannings, the extension of passes to women and poverty wages.¹⁰⁵ In Darlington, the Labour Party unanimously decided to boycott South African goods.¹⁰⁶ Gillingham Labour Party distributed 20,000 of the Movement's boycott leaflets house to house.¹⁰⁷ Activity extended way beyond the Labour Party. In the West Wales town of Lampeter, theological students marched in support of the boycott.¹⁰⁸ In West London, the Communist-led Acton and Park Royal Confed declared:

As some of the working class of Great Britain, we feel that by supporting the Boycott it will strengthen the ultimate aim of our South African brothers. Naturally we are aware that this boycott may cause hardships to our native brothers. Despite this, we also believe that as this was a request from them it was only our duty to support them.¹⁰⁹

Before the boycott month began, the Movement had written to importers of South African goods but came up against a brick wall. Among retailers, only Sainsbury's responded and after tortuous negotiations agreed to stock alternatives to South African produce where these were available. This was a stand to which it returned in the 1980s. Insofar as the aim of the campaign was to remove South African goods from shelves, it probably achieved little outside some Co-operatives. In Finchley Road, where the Hampstead Boycott Committee distributed leaflets, one greengrocer said, 'I have never encountered anything like this before ... I haven't sold a grape and not one single tin of South African fruit has come off the shelf.' More typical was the response of another shopkeeper who denied that his trade had been affected.¹¹⁰

The campaign was not asking for government action; it said modestly that it was 'fully mindful of the difficulties involved in official recognition or approval'.¹¹¹ Its purpose was to raise people's awareness of apartheid and to give them a way of taking action against it. The boycott month caught the popular mood. Africa was in the news. Macmillan had toured the continent in January and February, proclaiming the blowing of the wind of change on 3 February (women members of the ANC in Johannesburg met him with placards saying 'We never had it so bad'). The Lancaster House talks on Kenyan independence were successfully concluded at the end of February and in March Colonial Secretary Iain Macleod toured the Central African Federation.¹¹² The Conservative Party's third successive election victory left many people disillusioned with parliamentary politics.

104 AAM Archive. Minutes of Boycott Movement Committee meeting, 16 March 1960.

105 *Watford Citizen*, January–February 1960.

106 *Daily Worker*, 23 January 1960.

107 *Chatham News*, 22 January 1960.

108 *Daily Worker*, 22 February 1960

109 AAM Archive. Letter from R D Johnson, Secretary of the Acton and Park Royal Confed Committee, 24 March 1960.

110 Hampstead & Highgate Express, 4 March 1960.

111 AAM Archive. Press statement, dated February 1960.

112 R. Shepherd, *Iain Macleod* (London, Hutchison, 1994).

Some reacted to Macmillan's brand of 'You've never had it so good' Toryism by searching for a cause. For many that cause was nuclear disarmament but CND's strength as a grass roots movement seems to have helped the Boycott Movement rather than detracted from it and peace activists spread their energies to campaign for the boycott. Among committed Christians and a wide swathe of political opinion, from the centre to the far left, apartheid became an issue and the boycott was taken up as the main way to act against it. In his speech to the Cape parliament Macmillan had specifically rejected the boycott, saying, 'I deprecate attempts which are being made in Britain today to organise a consumer boycott of South African goods.'¹¹³ Conservatives followed his lead but they too now felt that they had to condemn apartheid. Hampstead Conservative Councillors, while rejecting a Labour motion to back the boycott, said there were 'few members of the Council who did not abhor apartheid' and several abstained in the vote.¹¹⁴ As a consciousness raiser, the boycott month had been a success.

Only in West London, where Oswald Mosley stood as a candidate for the Kensington constituency in the 1959 General Election, was there significant opposition from the ultra right. Fascists smashed the windows of the office of the *West London Observer* because it reported Boycott Movement meetings and painted slogans at Fulham Labour Party's headquarters where a Boycott Movement exhibition was on display. In Westminster's Porchester Hall, they tried to break up a meeting addressed by Ian Mikardo MP. A boycott meeting in Portobello Road had to be abandoned when ultra right hecklers tried to overturn the platform. Chelsea Borough Council refused a booking for Chelsea Town Hall for a Brains Trust with Lady Violet Bonham Carter and Elizabeth Pakenham because of the threat of violence.¹¹⁵

'An Entirely New Situation ...'¹¹⁶

As the month drew to a close, the news of the shootings at Sharpeville flashed across the world. On 21 March, 69 unarmed protesters taking part in a demonstration against passes called by the PAC were shot dead by police in Sharpeville and nearby Vanderbijlpark in the Southern Transvaal. Hundreds were injured. Two more demonstrators were gunned down at Langa, outside Cape Town. There had been massacres in South Africa before; striking miners had been shot in 1946. But this time reporters were at the scene and pictures of protesters shot in the back were immediately transmitted to the world's press. Newspapers across the political spectrum denounced the killings and the *Daily Sketch* turned over its leader column to Trevor Huddleston. The boycott month had created a heightened awareness. The day after the shootings 400 people stood in silence outside South Africa House, among them Labour Party Leader Hugh Gaitskell, James Cameron and Lord Altrincham. For the next six days demonstrators kept up the protest. There were scuffles with police and Martin Ennals and Mavis Singleton, Secretary of the Boycott Movement's London Committee, were among those arrested. On Sunday 27 March, the London Committee, with MCF and CAO, organized a march from Marble Arch to South Africa House and the Labour Party held a 15,000-strong rally in Trafalgar Square. The Anti-Apartheid Movement (AAM) produced its distinctive black-and-white badge and thousands were sold in and around the Square. On the Monday, Christian Action and the National Council for Civil Liberties (NCCL) went ahead with a meeting in Central Hall, Westminster,

113 Keesing's Contemporary Archives, 20–27 February 1960.

114 Hampstead and Highgate Express, 4 March 1960.

115 *The Times*, 10 March 1960.

116 AAM Archive. AAM Memorandum on Sanctions against South Africa, undated.

planned before the massacre. Here a big collection was taken for the Defence and Aid Fund. In South Wales, delegates at an NUM conference called for a one-day strike in solidarity with demonstrators in South Africa.

At the UN Security Council, Ecuador introduced a resolution 'deploring' the action of the South African government and urging it 'to abandon its policy of apartheid'. The US voted with the majority, but in spite of the public outcry in Britain, the UK along with France abstained.

It is sometimes argued that it was the Sharpeville shootings that transformed the Boycott Movement into the Anti-Apartheid Movement. In fact, almost as soon as the decision to hold the March boycott month was taken, the Boycott Movement Committee was working to ensure that the campaign carried on beyond March and that it had a wider remit. In February, it was agreed that local committees should be encouraged to carry on campaigning after the end of March. On 16 March, the Boycott Movement Committee decided to transform itself into an Anti-Apartheid Co-ordinating Committee 'to co-ordinate activities of all organizations opposing apartheid and, in particular, those of the committees formed throughout the country during the Boycott Month'. It resolved that 'other campaigns would also be organised from time to time'.¹¹⁷ At its next meeting it renamed itself the Anti-Apartheid Committee. It had already decided to hold a 'recall conference' on 30 April at Unity House, the National Union of Railwaymen's (NUR) headquarters in Euston Road. Local committees were to be asked to carry on the boycott, 'while acknowledging that it is not possible to maintain a full-scale intensive campaign after March 31st'.

But Sharpeville, and the events which followed it inside South Africa, did determine the future direction of the Anti-Apartheid Movement. On 30 March, the South African government declared a State of Emergency. In the days that followed, thousands of Congress Movement and PAC activists were detained, as well as leading members of the South African Liberal Party. On 8 April, the government moved to ban the ANC and PAC. The organizations were unprepared for the severity of the crackdown. Their leaders were in gaol and it was clear that from now on non-violence would be met with guns. Over the next eighteen months the Congress Movement's leaders would reassess their strategy and turn to sabotage as the first step in the attempt to build a guerrilla movement. But for the moment the locus of the struggle had shifted. The Committee in London felt that if apartheid could not be changed from within, it must be changed from outside. The strategy of launching an international campaign of economic sanctions against South Africa with the aim of crippling the apartheid economy acquired a new urgency and potential. This was a strategy which had always been in the minds of some of the South African founders of the Boycott Movement.

In a draft action programme the Movement (now calling itself the Anti-Apartheid Movement) proposed a campaign to 'Shun Verwoerd's South Africa', which would demand the withdrawal of British diplomatic representation in South Africa, ask the UN to 'issue a call to member-states to impose economic sanctions against South Africa', work for international action for an end to oil shipments to South Africa and landing facilities for its aircraft, and impose a cultural boycott.¹¹⁸ This went far beyond the appeal to individuals and organizations to boycott South African goods made by the Boycott Movement. For the first time the Movement suggested that international action against South Africa could be justified on the grounds that apartheid threatened 'the stability and security of the whole of the African continent'. It followed this up with a Memorandum on Sanctions, which argued that 'the moral pressure of the consumer boycott is no longer enough. The South African

117 AAM Archive. Minutes of Boycott Movement Committee meeting, 16 March 1960.

118 AAM Archive. The Programme of the Anti-Apartheid Committee, April 1960.

Government must be forced to change its policies, by practical pressure' and concluded that 'the only sanctions available, short of military, are economic'. South Africa's race policies were 'no longer an exclusively internal affair of South Africa's but a threat to international peace and security'.¹¹⁹

For a brief period, from January to March 1960, the Boycott Movement mobilized people in Britain to act against apartheid on a scale not seen again until the 1980s. It assembled a remarkable cross-party coalition stretching from the Communist Party, which although not represented on the National Committee was active in the London Committee and at the grass roots, to dissident members of the Conservative Party. Its links with the Congress Movement, and particularly the presence of Tennyson Makiwane as the representative of the African National Congress, gave it a legitimacy which it used to overcome the reservations of the Labour Party. The Labour Party feared both the economic destabilization that it thought would follow black majority rule in South Africa and the Communist influence which it detected in the South African movement.

In South Africa, opposition to apartheid, although weakened by bans and proscriptions, was still above ground and committed to non-violent mass action of a kind which inspired international support from across the political spectrum. In Britain, the smug conformity of the 1950s had given way to a new mood of grass roots activism manifested in the campaign against nuclear weapons and in the movements against racism in Britain and for African freedom. At this moment, the South African Congress Movement launched its campaign of boycott within South Africa, which was taken up and used in a different context by its members living in exile and their British supporters. After its election defeat in October 1959, the Labour Party, with a strongly anti-unilateralist leadership, tried to heal its wounds and find a moral purpose by launching its Africa Year. The boycott was represented as a moral crusade with the limited objective of putting pressure on the South African government. It is arguable that this was not inconsistent with Congress's aims in 1959. A strategy developed in one country was transplanted and flourished in a quite different political situation. But the shootings at Sharpeville, which for a short time provoked huge international protests, were the prelude to more difficult times. With the liberation movements driven underground, the AAM transformed its strategy to call for sanctions in a situation that had changed both in South Africa and in Britain.

The Boycott Movement established some key features, which were to characterize the AAM for the rest of its 35-year history. It built a structure that involved other organizations working in related areas but which made the future of South Africa its main concern. It established itself as a non-partisan organization that set out to appeal to people of any or no Party affiliation. Most significantly it was an organization which aspired to be an autonomous and democratically run British mass movement but which had at its heart its relationship with the Congress Movement. In 1960 as later, this produced tensions. The AAM's policies continued to be South-African driven. This may sometimes have led to misjudgements and failings. However, in an era dominated by the Cold War and by domestic political and economic considerations in Britain, it is arguable that this was the only path the AAM could follow, given that it was acting in solidarity with what was essentially a national liberation struggle.

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119 AAM Archive. AAM Memorandum on Sanctions against South Africa.