Photo: David Vita, Impact Visuals

The free South Africa movement was able — for a time — to bring together white and Black activists in a unified struggle.

In its heyday in the early to mid 1980s, the anti-apartheid movement had astonishing breadth and depth. Hundreds of campus and community organizations worked on local campaigns to demand divestment from holdings in South Africa and freedom for Black South Africans. Prominent national politicians such as Jesse Jackson and Ted Kennedy, and headliners such as Danny Glover, Tony Randall and Gil Scott-Heron lent their voices to the cry for a free South Africa. Political analysts and "campus watchers" were forced back to their dusty rooms to reassess their profile of the student left as a moribund, reactive scattering of unhappy individuals "stuck on the sixties."

It was also a movement with strong leadership and involvement from the African-American community, both on campus and in community groups, and through other institutions such as churches and civil rights organizations. The movement had a simple message — apartheid is wrong and must be abolished — and clear local and national goals. The local targets were any and all institutions with investments in South Africa or in corporations that did business in South Africa, and the national objective was to force the U.S. government to impose trade sanctions on South Africa as a way of pressuring the apartheid government to grant full political rights to the Black majority.

BLACKS STILL CAN'T VOTE

Given that Blacks are still not allowed to vote in South Africa, few activists are willing to claim that this goal has been achieved. But when the Bush administration quietly lifted U.S. trade sanctions on South Africa in 1990, saying that enough progress had been made in undoing apartheid, there was barely a peep from the anti-apartheid movement. What happened to all that energy, that outrage, that sense of moral abhorrence for a system that deliberately disenfranchised most of its citizens on the basis of their skin color? What happened to the hundreds of groups, networks, coalitions and organizations bearing the name "anti-apartheid?"

The short answer is that the situation in South Africa has gotten a lot more complex over the past few years, and it has become much more difficult for anti-apartheid activists to maintain their sharp focus on the evils of the apartheid system. From the "greening" of South African President F. W. de Klerk, to the "Black on Black" violence that has taken more than 5000 lives in the last five years, the drumbeat of distorted news on South Africa has helped stall the movement's popular momentum by making it harder to tell the good guys from the bad.

The rapid developments in South Africa since the 1990 release from prison of African National Congress (ANC) leader Nelson Mandela have altered the political landscape of anti-apartheid work, turning what used to be a simple situation of moral abhorrence into a complicated kaleidoscope of inter-Black conflicts, differing actors with dissimilar goals and rapidly changing short-term circumstances. The clear targets and handles that defined the movement a few short years ago are gone, to be replaced by vastly more difficult questions of economic development, ideological nuances, sectarian violence and the fine points of negotiations between the liberation forces and the government. While the media has been quick to paint de Klerk as "Africa's version of Michail Gorbachev," it has also presented highly negative views of former Black luminaries such as Winnie Mandela. As well-known Africa analyst Kevin Danaher puts it, "the days of 'ANC good, apartheid bad' are over."

In a sense, what has happened to the anti-apartheid movement is similar the the history of the civil rights movement in the United States. The period of extraordinary unity over questions such as voting rights and legal segregation quickly gave way into acrimonious debate over the tactics and strategies appropriate to changing circumstances. "It was easy for white liberals to march with you against racism in the South. It was another thing for them to join the struggle against institutional racism and economic injustice as the movement spread to the North where these same liberals were part of the power structure and found every reason under the sun to move on to another issue," says long time activist Phil Hutchings, a leader of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee in the 1960s. For a time, the question among core activists was whether to jettison the broad alliance to avoid diluting the movement's politics or to maintain a united front, which eventually crumbled anyway "as the Black power movement pressured many to move in a different direction," Hutchings says. "The point here is that the [anti-apartheid and civil rights movements] had to define new strategies for a new era."

In South Africa itself, the African National Congress (ANC) has led a valiant struggle against apartheid, whose demise as a formal philosophy and judicial system is almost certain. But beyond lies what could be a very long struggle indeed for full political democracy and social equality, subjects which relate explicitly to the role of the ➡

LOOKING TO LABOR

Many anti-apartheid activists, when asked about the future of the movement, point to the successes of organizers within labor unions in the U.S. The South African labor movement has long been on the frontlines of the freedom struggle, led the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU). Some U.S. union activists have managed to build strong ties with these unions.

U.S. labor activists say that not only have they managed to use the issue of South Africa to push the international policies of their unions in more progressive directions, but that the fight against apartheid has had significant repercussions in domestic struggles against racism and discrimination on the job.

Kate Pforsdresher, co-coordinator of the New York City Labor Committee Against Apartheid, says that the solidarity relationship between South African and American workers is moving towards one of "bilateral support." "The emphasis should be on reciprocation," says Pfordresher. She cites short strike actions by South African workers in support of fellow workers at 3M plant in Freehold, New Jersey and another recent action in support of the Caterpillar workers.

Like other members of the establishment, AFC-CIO leaders got their pictures taken being arrested in front to the South African Embassy, and later announced a boycott of Shell Oil for its repressive practices in South Africa. Nomonde Ngobo was then the international representative for the UMW. She calls the boycott "a tool to educate working people about the conditions of workers under apartheid, and how it affects workers here."

Anti-apartheid organizing has also served as an powerful organizing handle for many of the people of color involved, who used their victories in forcing changes in AFL-CIO policy to build stronger caucuses to fight for changes in their own unions and to organize African-American workers.

As Labor Notes editor and outreach coordinator Mary Hollens explains, "the Free South Africa movement was the first instance that organized labor in recent times did active outreach to the African-American community on a wide scale. African-Americans really pressed for this as a part of labor's agenda. It was one issue where labor could not turn its back — the issues were so black and white that they had to come across. It was something they did to strengthen, buoy — and in some cases appease — the black rank and file workers."

According to Hollens, labor's involvement in the anti-apartheid movement was the most significant political movement among workers of color since the civil rights movement, and she says that the level of contact and solidarity between South African and U.S. workers continues to increase, albeit not as visibly as before.