

A Powerful and Inspiring Campaign

A Short History of SCRIP's Efforts to End Stanford University's Support of South African Apartheid in 1977

On Monday, May 9, 1977, over nine hundred Stanford University students rallied in White Plaza and then occupied the Old Union administration building. They were protesting Stanford's support of corporations with operations in apartheid South Africa. When the building closed for the day, 294 students refused to leave and were arrested, while several hundred more vigiled outside throughout the night. This nonviolent demonstration garnered international media coverage and widespread support. It inspired similar demonstrations at universities all across California, the United States, and the world. These demonstrations launched the divestment movement which was crucial in undermining outside support of the racist South African regime. Without this support, the white-controlled regime could not continue and it was eventually replaced by the current democratic government.

To most outside observers, the demonstration at the Old Union seemed to have arisen out of nowhere. But in fact, it was the result of an excellent campaign carried out over several months by the Stanford Committee for a Responsible Investment Policy (SCRIP). This completely nonviolent campaign, initiated by just a few students, gradually built understanding and support so that by the time of the May demonstration, a large portion of the student body supported their efforts. This campaign was straightforward, employing basic, time-tested organizing techniques.

The campaign was initiated primarily by students living in Columbae House: a cooperative house of 43 students with a theme of social change through nonviolence. Students living in Columbae made vegetarian meals together, cleaned the house together, and made all decisions by consensus. By the time the anti-apartheid campaign began, these students had developed a strong trust in each other and their collective vision of a better world. They connected with other students who had worked on the David Harris for Congress campaign, students working against Marine Corps recruiting on campus, students protesting the Bakke court decision that had declared that affirmative action programs constituted reverse discrimination against white people, students who had tried to get Stanford to vote its stock in favor of a resolution condemning a textile manufacturer, J. P. Stevens, for its union-busting, as well as students working on several other issues.

In Winter Quarter, a few students taught a class under the auspices of the Stanford Workshops on Political and Social Issues (SWOPSI) program. This class researched South African apartheid, the role of multi-national corporations there, and Stanford's investments in these corporations. The class prepared a well-documented paper that argued that corporate involvement in South Africa

was not a positive force for change, but actually supported the apartheid regime. It was distributed to the Stanford Trustees and top Administrators. Copies were also placed in most dorms and in Meyer Undergraduate Library.

Then, based on this research, SCRIP launched a major education effort. They prepared three leaflets that described apartheid, the role of multi-national corporations in supporting the South African regime, and Stanford's support of these corporations through its investments. These leaflets called on Stanford to develop a more responsible investment policy. Specifically they urged Stanford to vote in favor of church-sponsored shareholder resolutions, and then, if those resolutions failed, to sell its stock in these companies. This would focus attention on and pressure those corporations to withdraw from South Africa which would, in turn, put pressure on the South African government to end apartheid.

On three separate occasions, canvassers walked door-to-door in all the dormitories distributing these three leaflets. Whenever possible, they talked directly to students, explaining the issue, answering questions, and asking for support. They pointed out the moral culpability that everyone associated with Stanford had for its policies. To show the consequences of passivity, they showed the film "Last Grave at Dimbaza" over 40 times in large lecture halls and in the lounges of dormitories.

As support grew, they circulated a petition and collected over 3,000 signatures of students as well as the signatures of 80 faculty-members. They also gathered support from twenty campus groups, including the student council and the United Stanford Employees labor union. They wrote letters to the editor of the Stanford Daily and longer opinion page columns explaining the issue and Stanford's inadequate response. SCRIP was particularly fortunate that a reporter for the Daily was not only a member of SCRIP, but a good reporter who honestly reported both sides of the controversy rather than, as most newspaper reporters do, snidely dismissing anyone who disagrees with authority.

SCRIP held several rallies in White Plaza with speakers describing the situation and encouraging students to get involved. There were also guerrilla theater performances, music, and gigantic posters provided by SCRIP artists. To increase attendance at these rallies, the guerrilla theater troupe went to many dormitory dining halls at mealtime and enacted a particularly dramatic play:

Several white members of the troupe would blend in with other students and sit down at tables as if they were eating. Then suddenly, several black members of the troupe, dressed in camouflage uniforms and carrying mock rifles would rush into the hall, grab the white members of the troupe, throw them up against the wall,

and shoot them with their rifles. Then they would turn to the other students in the hall and report there were rumors of an upcoming rally in White Plaza and that if anyone attended it, they would meet the same fate as those just shot. This drama graphically enacted the same kind of scenario that occurred in South Africa on a daily basis, except the roles of whites and blacks were reversed, letting white students more easily empathize with the fate of blacks under apartheid.

SCRIP meetings were very democratic. Women and racial minorities were supported and encouraged to speak out. New members were taught basic skills and encouraged to learn more. Many students took on leadership roles after only a few weeks of involvement.

SCRIP arranged several meetings with top administrators. They tried to meet with the Trustees to point out the growing consensus of the Stanford community in favor of the church-sponsored resolutions that called for corporate withdrawal from South Africa. But in response, the Trustees only agreed to abstain from voting.

In the week leading up to the sit-in, over 50 people engaged in a three-day vigil and fast. Five students decided to continue their fast for a week, including one undergraduate who had served two years as a Mormon missionary in South Africa. SCRIP also prepared a thick packet of information about the situation in South Africa, the arguments in favor of corporate divestment, and the role that Stanford could play in helping to end apartheid. They mailed a copy of this packet to the homes of every Trustee.

On the day of the sit-in, several students traveled to the Trustee's meeting in San Francisco. One student, suffering from his week-long fast, was allowed to address the Trustees. He discovered that almost none of them had even looked at the materials they had been sent. The Trustees agreed to form a committee to study the issue, but refused to vote in favor of the resolutions. This, of course, greatly angered the students who had occupied the Old Union. After a great deal of discussion, weighing the value of arrest versus leaving, 294 students decided to stay.

Two SCRIP members, who were experienced in working with the media, sent out press releases and called reporters. Using Stanford's reputation as a "world-class institution," they were able to get stories in papers across the country and even overseas.

This campaign for change was so powerful and inspiring that it helped to create a massive movement for divestment across the country. Participating students went on to work in the safe-energy movement, the anti-nuclear weapons movement, the women's movement, the anti-racist movement, and many other change efforts. Many students found it to be the high point of their Stanford education.

This campaign was especially remarkable because political activity at Stanford had been quite muted since the Vietnam War had wound down in 1972. Most students at the beginning of the year were completely focused on their studies. They knew nothing about South Africa or apartheid, and they didn't care to learn. Since many of the demonstrations in the 1960s were violent, many students

feared disruption of any kind. They studiously avoided rallies and any discussion of politics. When hundreds of students eventually decided to allow themselves to be arrested, they knew they were risking jail time, fines, cut-off of their financial aid, or possibly even expulsion from Stanford. Still, they had been moved enough by the campaign to risk all this to help bring down the racist South African government. And their efforts eventually paid off. Most observers see the divestment movement as crucial in ending apartheid.

— Randy Schutt 2-3-98