

[Back to table of content](#)

By Howard Clark

The first calls for an international boycott of apartheid South Africa were made as early as 1958, and in Britain it was seen as a major strategy to be pursued when the Anti-Apartheid Movement was launched in 1959. At the intergovernmental level, South Africa's system of apartheid was widely condemned, especially after the 1960 Sharpeville massacre: in 1961 South Africa was thrown out of the Commonwealth (then called the British Commonwealth) and in 1962 the UN set up a Special Committee Against Apartheid, the next year agreeing a "voluntary" arms embargo. Yet it was not until the 1990s that apartheid finally ended.

There were three main areas for international sanctions against South Africa: economic sanctions, including trade and investment; the cultural boycott, and the sports boycott. The cultural and the sports boycott had primarily a psychological impact on South Africa. A sports mad country, South Africa's exclusion from the Olympics from 1964 onwards, and above all from international rugby and cricket from 1970 onwards, was brought about by a combination of pressure from other African states and demonstrations, including disrupting rugby matches.

The impact of economic sanctions remains a matter of debate, especially because the declarations of intergovernmental organisations such as the UN or the Commonwealth were repeatedly circumvented by two powerful states, Britain and the USA. However, there were waves of movements for "people's sanctions" - beginning with the revulsion at the Sharpeville massacre when even the British Labour Party leadership supported the moral gesture of refusing to buy South Africa fruit.

My own involvement began in a later wave. As a student in 1969, I was one of those who wanted to transfer the momentum gained from the sporting boycott actions into economic boycott. Our students union had already passed resolutions against the university buying apartheid fruit, and now we took up a campaign against Barclays Bank, the most popular bank for British students at that time and, as it happened, the bank used by my university. Our first success was in dissuading new students from opening their first ever bank accounts with Barclays, and persuading others to change. Our second was in holding a rent strike, refusing to pay rent for student rooms into an account with Barclays bank. Eventually the university authorities conceded, triggering the resignation of prominent members of the University's ruling council. Throughout the country, trade union branches, clubs, associations and churches debated changing their bank account. I remember getting into trouble with both the Quakers and the Peace Pledge Union for writing in Peace News in 1972 that they had no legitimacy in talking about nonviolence in South Africa unless they would take that small step of moving their bank account. Local authorities decided to do so too. In 1986 - some 16 years after the Boycott Barclays campaign began - the bank sold off its South African subsidiaries. Finally, too, the Cooperative supermarket chain decided not to stock South African products.

This type of boycott was very much influenced by the waves of concern about apartheid. For instance, after the Soweto killings of 1976 and the murder in custody of Steve Biko in 1977, and again in the 1980s with the emergence inside South Africa of the United Democratic Front and spokespeople such as Desmond Tutu. But all the while in the background were local anti-apartheid activists, putting resolutions to their trade union branches and their churches, recognising that both trade unions and churches were large corporate investors capable of exerting pressure on companies.

In Britain, the anti-apartheid boycott was a "long march", usually rather unspectacular - and having succeeded in persuading municipal councils to do something, we then had to witness Thatcher's government take away their power to make decisions on such political grounds. Nevertheless, we kept the issue of Britain's connections with apartheid in people's minds.

The story was different in other countries. In the 1970s we Brits looked enviously at the success of the Dutch boycott of coffee from Angola, a Portuguese colony in close alliance with South Africa. In the 1980s,

workers at one of Ireland's main supermarket chains - Dunne's - were locked out in a four year dispute over selling apartheid goods, a conflict only resolved when the Irish government made South African products illegal.

The USA was a particularly important terrain of struggle. The "people's sanctions" movement had three main focuses: college and campus; banks; and municipal and state corporations. Their achievements were considerable. In 1985, after a 19-year campaign, the main bank involved with South Africa - Chase Manhattan - announced that it would not renew its loans to South African projects. By 1991, 28 states, 24 counties, 92 cities and the Virgin Islands had adopted legislation or policies imposing some form of sanctions on South Africa. By the end of 1987 more than 200 US companies had formally withdrawn from South Africa - many of them found other ways to carry on their business, for instance, General Motors licensed local production while IBM computers had a South African distributor. What was most important about these campaigns, however, was the public education carried out through them and the sense of solidarity engendered with the anti-apartheid movement inside South Africa.

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