

# BLACK PERSPECTIVES

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## US Worker Movements and Direct Links Against Apartheid

By Mattie Christine Webb 📅 April 26, 2024 💬 0

*This post is part of our forum on the "The End of South African Apartheid Anniversary."*



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*Bishop Desmond Tutu speaks at an International Conference Against Apartheid held in Atlanta, Georgia in 1986 (Digital Library of Georgia)*

This year marks the thirtieth anniversary of the end of apartheid in South Africa, represented by the country's first democratic elections. Although made possible through decades of internal struggle for Black liberation, international support for majority rule played a crucial role in isolating the apartheid regime. Worker movements in particular were at the forefront, advocating for Black freedom and human rights beyond the workplace and across borders. This tradition of global labor solidarity has renewed resonance today, with worker calls for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza proliferating on both sides of the Atlantic. Notably, the US-based United Automobile Workers (UAW) [called for a ceasefire in Gaza](#), while the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) similarly released a ceasefire resolution, [condemning "apartheid and occupation" in Gaza](#).

These acts of global worker solidarity against crude violations of human rights have a deeper history. This essay specifically traces some of the history of US labor solidarity against apartheid in South Africa. Included were unions like the UAW and the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) Local 10 that viewed apartheid as not only a human rights issue, but a worker issue as well. The US labor movement challenged apartheid through a variety of means. Workers employed by US companies doing business with South Africa exposed corporate complicity in violence against Black South Africans. Many called for the withdrawal of pension funds from banks that invested in South Africa, passed resolutions advocating for a break of economic ties with South Africa, or refused to handle South African goods. Unions and other worker organizations turned to what sociologist Roger Southall defined as direct links, or [transnational workplace solidarity](#), in some cases launching campaigns on behalf of South African workers. Through these mixed methods, the US labor movement played a pivotal role in helping to sustain a burgeoning Black-led South African trade union movement.

Some [earlier historical scholarship](#) on the US-South African relationship viewed the 1980s as the beginning of prolonged US trade union action against apartheid. Recently scholars like historian [Peter Cole](#) have [instead insisted](#) that US unions were engaged in anti-apartheid action

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from at least 1962. These early worker movements condemned corporate America for its complicity with apartheid. Polaroid's Black workers in the United States protested the use of Polaroid film for passbooks, South African identification that constrained the daily movement and freedoms of Black people. The **Polaroid Revolutionary Workers' Movement (PRWM)** demanded that the Cambridge, Massachusetts-based company immediately cut all business with South Africa. Due in part to worker pressure and to the exposure of Polaroid's failed multi-year "experiment" with responsible engagement, the company completely abandoned business in South Africa in 1977. The Polaroid result spotlighted the possible power of US worker movements in holding US corporations accountable for their engagement with South Africa.

Following the PRWM's action, US trade unionists used worker power and connections to companies with South African ties to further isolate the apartheid regime. Around the same time as the Polaroid experiment, the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists (CBTU) would draw attention to the plight of Black workers in South Africa. The CBTU initiated direct contact with workers and unionists in South Africa and linked domestic Black worker concerns to human rights violations abroad. Frustrated with the conservative direction of the AFL-CIO, the CBTU became the **first US labor organization** to advocate for an economic boycott of South Africa. In 1975, the CBTU passed a **resolution in support** of the South African Congress of Trade Unions federation, which was aligned with the African National Congress (ANC) liberation movement. By 1980, the CBTU was actively supporting strikes in South Africa and sending funds to workers and unions. President of the CBTU, William Lucy, would go on to become a founding member of the grassroots Free South Africa Movement in 1984.

US labor leaders aimed to ensure that South African worker and unionist livelihoods were prioritized in US policy. One way to establish this was through a crucial lobbying arm, the Labor Committee Against Apartheid. Formed in June 1983, the labor organization launched with a meeting of fifty labor leaders from the greater New York area, representing nearly twenty unions.<sup>1</sup> The organization combined forces with the CBTU and raised funds to support wrongfully-detained Black South African workers. With the goal of forging direct ties, the Labor Committee sent letters to South African apartheid officials, calling for the release of detained trade unionists. One of their primary campaigns

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Du Bois **white**

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was in support of detained Black South African trade unionist Oscar Mpetha.<sup>2</sup> They also provided details on US multinational operations to Black-led South African unions working from inside the country. Together with the CBTU, the Labor Committee Against Apartheid viewed attacks on the South African labor movement as attacks on workers everywhere.

Other US unions opted to send visitors to South Africa to assist the emerging unions with worker safety and collective bargaining. US unions like the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers' Union (ACTWU) [sent a health and safety expert](#) to South Africa at the request of South Africa's National Union of Textile Workers. The US union representatives witnessed deplorable working conditions in the factories, and helped South African unionists develop a health and safety program. ACTWU representatives also spoke with leaders of the emerging Black trade unions and returned to the United States to share what they gleaned about working conditions in South Africa.<sup>3</sup> The US-based UAW similarly maintained strong ties to South African automobile workers and sent a delegation to a Ford South Africa plant in 1980. Nelson Mandela famously acknowledged the union's support, and [visited the UAW Local 600](#) in 1990.

The reach of US worker activism against apartheid was expansive, with individual locals using their influence to fight for parallel worker rights in South Africa. The AFSCME District Council 37 headquarters organized a conference where unionists called for US unions to provide [direct financial assistance](#) to unions in South Africa. [UAW locals](#) organized clothing drives, and even wrote articles in support of liberation. Finally, Local 10, a majority-Black American local branch of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union, [refused to unload ships](#) carrying products from South Africa. The local also organized a strike fund for South African workers. Its legacy in fighting apartheid is still felt today. Many current unionists from the Bay Area [attended 2023 conferences in South Africa](#), held to commemorate a series of pivotal South African strike actions against apartheid work conditions.

Through a combination of raising funds for South African workers, visiting unions in South Africa, advocating for Black South African workers in official US policy, or sabotaging South African commerce through the workplace, US trade unions were active in uniting worker issues with human rights concerns in South Africa. Concerned workers used their positions in the workplace and in the union to advocate for



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oppressed people beyond their borders. As both unions and the current South African state lend support to Palestine today, they can certainly draw on the very same tactics and forces that helped end apartheid in South Africa thirty years ago.

1. Labor Against Apartheid, "New York Labor Leaders Protest 5 Year Sentence for 73 Year Old Black South African Labor Leader," Box 5, Folder 20, Coalition of Black Trade Unionists Collection (LR001754), Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Reuther Library. ↩
2. William Lucy to PW Botha, 7 August 1985, Box 5, Folder 20 Coalition of Black Trade Unionists Collection (LR001754), Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Reuther Library. ↩
3. Special Presentation: Black Workers in South Africa, with Eric Frumin, Health and Safety Director, ACTWU, November 30, 1984, Box 5, Folder 20, Coalition of Black Trade Unionists Collection (LR001754), Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Reuther Library. ↩

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