

The African National Congress (ANC), Nelson Mandela and the African American Struggle

National and class oppression shaped the evolution of the movements in South Africa and the United States

By [Abayomi Azikiwe](#)

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With the passing of Nelson Mandela on December 5, 2013, the impact of his life and political work was recognized by not just the people of South Africa and the African continent but oppressed and struggling peoples throughout the world. People of African descent outside of Africa, particularly in the United States, cherished the legacy of Mandela and saw within him much that was reflective and inspirational to the African American people's movement for genuine equality and self-determination.

Yet what is often not recognized is the more than a century-old linkage between the South African and African American peoples which extends back even prior to the founding of the South African Native National Congress (SANNC) in 1912, which was later named the African National Congress (ANC) in 1923. Key figures within the South African and African American anti-racist movements intersected inside both the U.S. and Africa.

Early ANC Leaders and African Americans

One of the founders of the SANNC was Pixley ka Isaka Seme who was born in Natal in 1881. At the age of 17 he was able to travel to the United States where he obtained a bachelor's degree from Columbia University in New York City.

Seme was influenced by leading African American public figures during the early 20th century. He would later write in 1932 that the impact of his experiences inside the U.S. was life-changing.

He called for the unity noting that "I mean all African people who have the pride in the African blood which runs through their brains. My conviction is that here in Africa, as in America, the Africans should refuse to be divided. We need a strong body of men and women to give the leading daily thought and guidance to all our people in their daily duties and struggles as a nation." (Taken from pamphlet by Seme entitled "The ANC, Is It Dead?, 1932)

This same pamphlet also referenced his experience in the U.S. saying that "I cannot ever forget the great vision of national power which I saw at Atlanta, Georgia in 1907 when the late Dr. Booker T. Washington L.L.D., presided over the Annual Conference of the Negro Business League of America with delegates representing all Negro enterprises in that New World and representing 20 million Africans in the United States of America, the most

advanced of my own race.”

Seme was not alone in his interactions with African Americans. John L. Dube (1871-1946) was also a co-founder of the SANNC and through his connections with the U.S.-based African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME), which was founded by African Americans during the late 18th and early 19th centuries in Philadelphia, was able to travel to the U.S. and study.

AME Bishop Henry McNeal Turner (1834-1915), who was an early Pan-Africanist and politician during the Reconstruction era in the South, had traveled to Africa encouraging cooperation between Africans on the continent and those in the Diaspora. Dube was influenced heavily by the African American colleges and universities established during the Reconstruction era.

Dube who attended Oberlin College in Ohio during the 1890s would return to South Africa to establish a school that was inspired by Tuskegee Institute founded by Booker T. Washington. Dube wrote later that he “was inspired by Washington’s initiatives, and after meeting Washington in 1897, he returned to South Africa and founded the Zulu Christian Industrial Institute (1901), renamed the Ohlange Institute. Like Tuskegee, Dube’s Ohlange focused on improving blacks’ labor efficiency and increasing the skills of black laborers. This assisted the indigenous African population by giving them more opportunities and increasing their abilities.” (Taken from Oberlin.edu)

In this same article published by Oberlin College it says that “In their early years Tuskegee and Ohlange stressed both academic learning and its application in manual and other types of labor. Washington and Oberlin maintained positive relations as they worked towards a common goal, education, and specifically the education of Blacks. Washington writes of Oberlin College ‘The University has been...a great moral support to the work of education of the Negro in the South.’”

Perhaps one of the most well-known figures during this period was Solomon Tshekisho Plaatje, who was born in the Orange Free State in 1876. He was a SANNC leader who also visited the U.S. and interacted organizationally within African Americans.

During his visit to the U.S. and Canada in early 1921 he met with Marcus Garvey and W.E.B. Du Bois. Plaatje wrote articles for the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) newspaper, the Negro World, which was founded by Garvey and circulated broadly throughout the U.S. and the world.

The Post War World II Rise of National Liberation Movements

During the 1940s the-then African National Congress (ANC) underwent significant changes with the formation of the ANC Youth League led by figures such as Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu Anton Lembede and others. A Program of Action was drafted in 1949 transforming the ANC into a mass political organization.

Solidarity actions carried out by the Council on African Affairs (CAA) in 1946 during the Rand Miner’s Strike raised money and material aid to assist the South African workers. The CAA was founded by Paul Robeson, William Alphaeus Hunton and would later enjoy the membership of Du Bois.

During the course of the 1952-1956 the Defiance Against Unjust Laws Campaign led by the

ANC, the Congress of Democrats, the Natal Indian Congress, the Colored People's Organization, the Federation of South African Women and the South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU), developed tactics employed by South Africans which would influence the mass Civil Rights Movement of the late 1950s and 1960s.

In 1962 Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. made a joint statement with the-then ANC President Chief Albert J. Lutuli. According to Electronic Intifada "Martin Luther King actively supported the struggle of the South African people against apartheid. (March 25, 2007)

This same source says that "In 1963 the UN Special Committee against Apartheid was established and one of the first letters the committee received was from Martin Luther King, according to Nigerian ambassador Leslie O. Harriman. Together with the winner of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1960, the ANC leader Chief Albert J. Lutuli, Martin Luther King made an 'Appeal for Action against Apartheid' on Human Rights Day, 10 December 1962."

They said: "Nothing which we have suffered at the hands of the government has turned us from our chosen path of disciplined resistance, said Chief Albert J. Lutuli at Oslo. So there exists another alternative - and the only solution which represents sanity - transition to a society based upon equality for all without regard to color. Any solution founded on justice is unattainable until the Government of South Africa is forced by pressures, both internal and external, to come to terms with the demands of the non-white majority. The apartheid republic is a reality today only because the peoples and governments of the world have been unwilling to place her in quarantine."

On March 19, 1965, 750 people protested in New York City at the Chase Manhattan Bank on the fifth anniversary of the Sharpeville massacre. The demonstration was organized by the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and gained the support of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) the Congress on Racial Equality (CORE), the Pan-African Students Organization of the Americas (PASOA) and other organizations. The aim of the demonstration was to demand withdrawal of financial support for the apartheid regime by the U.S.-based financial institution. (allacademic.com)

Later in June 1967, a delegation from SNCC consisting of International Affairs Director James Foreman and Atty. Howard Moore would travel to an international conference in solidarity with the people of Southern Africa held in Kitwe, Zambia. Later that year Forman would address the 4th Committee on Decolonization at the United Nations where he expressed support for the armed struggle in South Africa and Rhodesia (later Zimbabwe). (The Political Thought of James Forman, 1970)

Rendering the Apartheid System Ungovernable

By the mid-1980s, the solidarity movement with South Africa inside the U.S. had reached unprecedented levels. The primary focus of the struggle was the demand for total disinvestment from corporations doing business with South Africa, the isolation of all racist South African business dealings inside the U.S. and solidarity with the liberation movements fighting settler-colonialism in South Africa and Namibia.

Student organizations on campuses throughout the U.S. began to take decisive actions through demonstrations, sit-ins and speaking engagements by representatives of the liberation movements. Municipalities began to be pressured to ban all economic and political dealings with apartheid.

Organizations such as the Patrice Lumumba Coalition in New York, the U.S. Out of Southern Africa Network, the American Committee on Africa (ACOA), the Pan-African Students Union and many others took a leadership role in these efforts. It was the work of such organizations on the grassroots, academic, workplace and legislative levels that led to the passage of the Anti-Apartheid Act of 1987, the first federal legislative sanctions imposed on apartheid South Africa in the history of the U.S.

When Nelson Mandela visited the U.S. in June 1990 after being released from 27 years in prison he was met with a tumultuous welcome. In New York, Detroit and other cities tens of thousands of African Americans and other progressive forces came out to see him and to express their solidarity.

With the passing of Mandela, memorial programs have been held throughout the country over the last three months. There is much to be learned from the struggles of the South African people and the international solidarity movement that grew up in its defense.

As the ANC celebrates its 20th anniversary in power in South Africa there will be much commentary and analysis on the political and socio-economic developments inside the country. These same workers, youth and grassroots forces which played a decisive role in the implementation of sanctions against apartheid should participate in these discussions as a means to strengthen the struggle to eliminate racism and social injustice in the U.S. and around the world.

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