

U.S. Business Urges Civil Disobedience against South Africa

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Although they still refuse to leave South Africa, a growing number of major U.S. corporations are urging civil disobedience and breaking other laws in support of the anti-apartheid movement.

The companies freely admit that they are driven not only by their distaste for apartheid, but also by pressure from stockholders and the relentless divestiture movement in the United States. "I can't at all discount the shareholder pressure that is being put on companies to increasingly demonstrate our commitment," said Barbara Kommer, investor communications manager of Hewlett-Packard Co. of Palo Alto, Calif.

At the urging of the American Chamber of Commerce, both U.S. and South African companies, including Hewlett-Packard, are engaged in a variety of what they call "social justice activities" that go far beyond their past community efforts to finance scholarships and clean-water projects.

*General Motors Corp. has publicly offered to pay the legal expenses of any black South African who defies a "whites only" law at beaches in the city of Port Elizabeth.

*Some U.S. and South African companies have signed apartment leases or bought houses in neighborhoods legally off-limits to non-whites and handed the keys to their black employees.

*The Gillette Co. of Boston, along with university law students, has opened South Africa's first free legal clinic. The Johannesburg clinic promises to help blacks challenge the apartheid system. The clinic has generated so many cases that the government established South Africa's first small claims court across the street.

Other U.S. companies agreed in June to follow Gillette's lead and finance more free law clinics.

*At the request of residents of the white town of Sandton, Hewlett-Packard, Dow Chemical, Burroughs and other major U.S. companies will petition the South African government to reverse an earlier ruling prohibiting the Indian suburb of Marlboro Gardens from merging with Sandton. In May, the companies placed ballots inside the white residents' electric bills urging them to vote in favor of giving non-whites a vote in municipal issues. Only whites can vote in South Africa.

"If we were doing what we're doing in any other country, I think ... a lot of people, including the State Department, would be outraged," Hewlett-Packard's Kommer said.

U.S. companies began to stick their necks out more last August when the white minority government

declared a state of emergency. In response, American minister Leon Sullivan called on U.S. companies to engage in corporate civil disobedience. Sullivan leads one of the main American anti-apartheid groups, which grades U.S. companies in South Africa on their efforts to improve working and living conditions for non-whites.

Another reason U.S. companies are advocating civil disobedience is for self-protection. They want to be sure that, in the eyes of angry blacks, American business is clearly separate from South Africa's ruling white minority.

Managers of U.S. companies in South Africa "saw actions had to be taken by U.S. businesses to reach the people who want change so they wouldn't see U.S. companies as part of the apartheid apparatus," said David Fausch, Gillette's vice president of corporate public relations. "American companies can't justify their presence in South Africa unless they are doing what they can to dismantle apartheid."

South Africa's outlawed African National Congress repeatedly has warned that American companies will be targets of retaliation if blacks revolt and establish a socialist state.

"Businessmen are concerned that unless they distinguish themselves from the government, blacks will equate the capitalist economic system with the racist apartheid system - an attitude they fear could lead to disastrous consequences for them," said David Hauck, manager of research on South Africa for the Investor Responsibility Research Center Inc. IRRC is an independent, non-profit group that investigates corporations for investment groups.

"While we can't eliminate apartheid, we can in one way demonstrate, with things like non-racial housing and education and merging white areas with black, the viability of a post- apartheid society," Kommer said.

Some U.S. companies are even negotiating with the South African government to get permission to build an apartment complex for blacks and whites to share, according to several sources. Interracial housing is illegal in South Africa.

Despite the U.S. companies' campaign for civil disobedience, proponents of divestment and U.S. trade sanctions against South Africa want U.S. corporations out of the country.

Halting all trade with South Africa is a quicker, more decisive way to end apartheid than using "social justice" activities to chip away at the system, they say.

Some also complain that although these latest actions by American companies are helpful to some blacks, they come years too late.

"If American corporations had been doing this in 1976 at the time of Soweto, apartheid would have been over by now," said Max Miller, press secretary to Rep. Ronald Dellums, D-Calif.

The U.S. House of Representatives on June 18 passed by voice vote Dellums' bill calling for a total economic embargo against South Africa, including forcing all U.S. businesses to withdraw from the country. The approval came two days after black South Africans commemorated the tenth anniversary of the bloody Soweto uprising that turned world attention to longstanding apartheid laws.

But for some in South Africa, actions speak louder than motives.

"Because American companies are taking such a strong role in social justice, South African companies are very much more alert to their roles," said Lente-Louise Louw, the national director of PROTEC, a South African group that helps black students get technical educations. "One sees changes at the grass-roots level that are having an amazing ripple effect.

"What's important about American companies is that people are starting to break statutory laws ... and the laws are disappearing," she said.

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