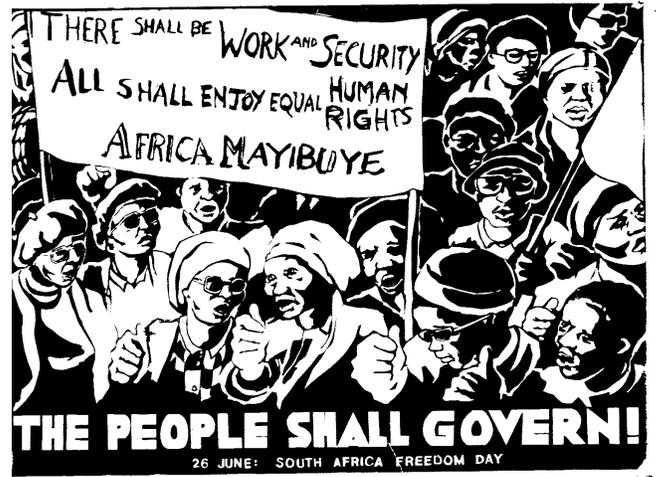


LESSON

SOUTH AFRICAN UNIONS STRUGGLE FOR JUSTICE

By **Bill Bigelow**

The South African anti-apartheid movement is often mischaracterized in the United States as simply a fight for political rights, culminating in the election of Nelson Mandela as the country's first freely chosen president. However, a crucial component of the broader anti-apartheid struggle was the black union movement. Black unions linked their political objectives for an end to racial oppression to their campaigns for higher wages and better working conditions, and aimed to democratize power relations in the workplace. This lesson invites students to imagine themselves as black union activists at the height of the anti-apartheid movement in the 1980s and poses them problems that confronted real-life organizers at the time.



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Note that throughout the description of the activity, a number of racial designations are used. About 10 percent of South Africans, people the government decided were of mixed race, were classified “Colored.” Almost 75 percent of South Africans were classified as “African.” The government then divided them further into tribal groups such as Xhosa, Zulu, and Venda—an effort seen as divide-and-conquer by the anti-apartheid movement. Even though South Africans of European ancestry spoke two languages, Afrikaans and English, and had important cultural differences, the government counted them as one unified group: white.

For background activities on South African apartheid, see *Strangers in Their Own Country: A Curriculum Guide on South Africa*, by Bill Bigelow (Africa World Press, 1985), from which this activity is adapted. The book is available from www.teachingforchange.org.

This 1982 poster, labeled June 26 South African Freedom Day, marks the adoption of the Freedom Charter by the Congress of the People in 1955.

Goals and Objectives

- Students will become familiar with the Freedom Charter, the most influential document in the movement for equality in South Africa.
- Students will encounter some of the difficulties of black unions in working for workers' rights during the apartheid era in South Africa.
- Students will explore the relationship between working for immediate union objectives and long-term political objectives.
- Students will practice democratic decision-making.



Handouts on the internet.

Materials Needed

The handouts for this lesson are on www.civilrightsteaching.org.

- Student Handout 1: The Freedom Charter
- Student Handout 2: Black Union Activist
- Student Handout 3: Planning the Strike: Questions

Time Required

Two to three class periods.

Procedure

1. Have students read Student Handout 1: The Freedom Charter. (Depending on your preference, this may be assigned for homework or read aloud in class. Whichever you choose, make sure students are familiar with the document before proceeding with the lesson.)
2. Some discussion questions for the Freedom Charter might include:
 - How do you think the white minority South African government would respond to this document? What objections, if any, would be raised?
 - The document urges the formation of a “democratic state.” What kind of democracy do the writers seem to be talking about? How would it compare to the kind of democracies the United States, Canada, or Great Britain have?
 - How does this document compare to the Declaration of Independence?
 - Are there freedoms demanded in the Charter that we don’t have in the United States? (e.g., women’s rights, right to work, free health care, etc.)
 - If you were a black South African, which of the freedoms described in the *Charter* would you value most highly? Are there any you might be willing to risk your life trying to achieve?
 - A number of the demands emphasize the desire to travel freely. Why was that so important to many black South Africans?
 - The document calls for the mineral wealth, banks, and monopoly industries to be “transferred to the ownership of the people as a whole.” What groups in South Africa might have objected to that? What do you think would be the position of foreign corporations on that demand?
 - If you were a black worker in a large corporation in South Africa, what changes might need to occur at your workplace to realize the demand in the Freedom Charter that “all industry and trade shall be controlled to assist the well-being of the people?” Who should be allowed to determine the “well-being” of the people?
3. Seat the students in a circle. Ask them to imagine themselves as black workers in South Africa who support the Freedom Charter and want it to become a reality. They will each be receiving a role sheet (Student Handout 2) describing the conditions at the factory in Port Elizabeth, South Africa, where they work. (Point out Port Elizabeth on a map and show its proximity to the Transkei and Ciskei, two of the black “homelands” created by the white South African government.)



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The United Democratic Front (UDF), a coalition of South African anti-apartheid organizations formed in the early 1980s, celebrates the anniversary of the 1955 adoption of the Freedom Charter at the Congress of the People, and calls for the unbanning of the ANC.

4. Distribute a copy of Student Handout 2: Black Union Activist to students. Read the handout aloud or have them read it to themselves. “Interview” a number of students after they have read the handout to insure that the class is clear on the role everyone will be assuming. Note: The roleplay is based on a conflict at “Jamison’s,” a make-believe factory in Port Elizabeth. Though the situations described are fictional, the conditions faced by workers at Jamison’s and in the ensuing strike are based on actual strikes in the early 1980s in South Africa. In this respect the Jamison’s story was typical of problems faced by black workers in South Africa during the final years of apartheid.
5. Explain to students that now that the strike is on they will be facing a number of difficult decisions. Because theirs is a democratic union and because they believe in equality, no one will be around to tell them what to do. If the strike is to succeed it will only be because they were able to make it succeed—together. Therefore, you, the teacher, will play no role in their discussions. Once their strike meeting begins you will only be an observer. It will be up to the entire class to decide how to make decisions and what decisions to make. Explain that they will be given a handout to help them figure out the important questions to answer, but the answers will be theirs.

Once they understand that you won’t assist with their deliberations, you might want to discuss some of the ways they could go about making decisions. For example, they could select a chairperson who would then call on individuals to speak, and propose when votes might be taken. Perhaps they want to avoid leaders entirely—students might raise hands with the last person to speak calling on the next speaker and so on. Or a rotating chairperson might be chosen—one chair per question, for example. The teacher’s job is merely to help students make their own decisions. This is an essential part of the roleplay.

6. When you feel they have a good understanding of their role and you’ve discussed some of the decision-making methods they might use, distribute Student Handout 3: Planning The Strike: Questions. Emphasize one last time before they begin that their goal is twofold: 1) to win the strike, and 2) to contribute toward ending apartheid and building a nonracial democracy. Also remind them that they should answer each question as fully as possible. Tell them you will be available only if they have difficulty understanding one of the seven questions on the handout.
7. Allow them to begin their meeting. Because students generally are not used to organizing a discussion without the assistance of an authority figure, they may experience some rough going. That’s fine. Let them discover their own problems and solutions. Intervene only if you sense that students are hopelessly frustrated, and then only to help them get a clear decision-making process set up. As the meeting progresses, take notes on both their decision-making successes and failures as well as on the different ideas and arguments raised in answering the questions.
8. At the conclusion of the strike meeting you might have students write an evaluation of the decisions they made and the process that brought them to those decisions. Taking this break for reflection sometimes enables students to discuss their experience a little more thoughtfully.

Any discussion of this roleplay will depend upon the specific decisions students reached in their talks. However, the following might be some generally relevant questions and points to raise with students. These are organized in the order that students answered them.

- A. What demands would you have fought hardest for in your strike?
 - How did the Freedom Charter help guide the demands you made in your strike?
 - During apartheid, some unions in South Africa believed in demanding things that could only be won immediately—others believed in “demanding the

impossible” in order to keep those goals alive. Which route did you choose? Why?

- Point out to students that many employers in South Africa fired union members or leaders in an attempt to break strikes. Workers who originally may have been striking for higher wages or union recognition later included demands for rehiring of all fired workers as an important goal.

B. Should you call your strike off for the time being in order to try to get the government to legalize the walkout?

- Did anyone hold out hope of being able to win your demands with a legal strike? Why or why not?
- What knowledge do you have about the South African system that might make you skeptical about trying to stay legal?
- Students may be interested to know that between 1976 and 1984 there was only one legal strike by black workers in South Africa. In one instance, workers were fired as they began the paperwork which they hoped would legalize strike action.

C. How will you respond to the company’s new offer and the refusal to rehire Tembu?

- How important was Jacob Tembu to you? Did you think that maybe he should be “sacrificed” for the good of the other four workers?
- It was a common tactic for companies in South Africa (sometimes American) to fire workers they felt were too “political.” In one of the most famous instances, Ford told a worker that if he didn’t quit his job as head of the Port Elizabeth Black Civic Organization (PEBCO) he would be fired. When he resigned in protest, the entire workforce of 700 at the Ford Cortina factory walked out with him. Why do you suppose companies would want to fire workers who wanted not only higher wages and better working conditions but also basic social changes like an end to the pass laws and the entire apartheid system?

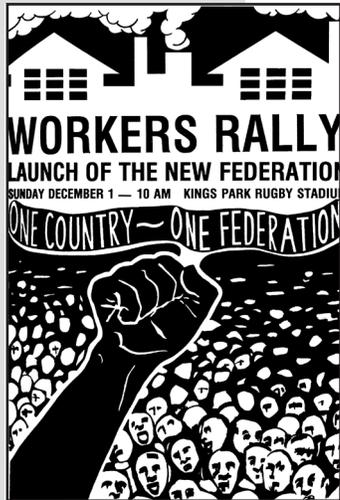
D. What arguments will you use to convince the Colored workers that they should come out on strike with other African workers?

- What are common grievances that might have united African and Colored workers, not just at Jamison’s but throughout South Africa?
- Do you think the plans you developed in class would have been effective in getting Colored workers to ally with African workers instead of with management?
- If you were Colored, what might be some of the pros and cons in considering whether or not to support the strike?

E. In what ways will you respond to this (government) harassment? Will you continue to picket at Jamison’s?

- Why do you think the government would so blatantly take the side of the company in the strike?
- Did the harassment frighten you and make you want to give up?
- When you learned of the actions of the government, did you think of raising new demands in your strike?

F. What arguments can you use in the townships to convince the community that this is their struggle too? Are there ways you can involve community members in



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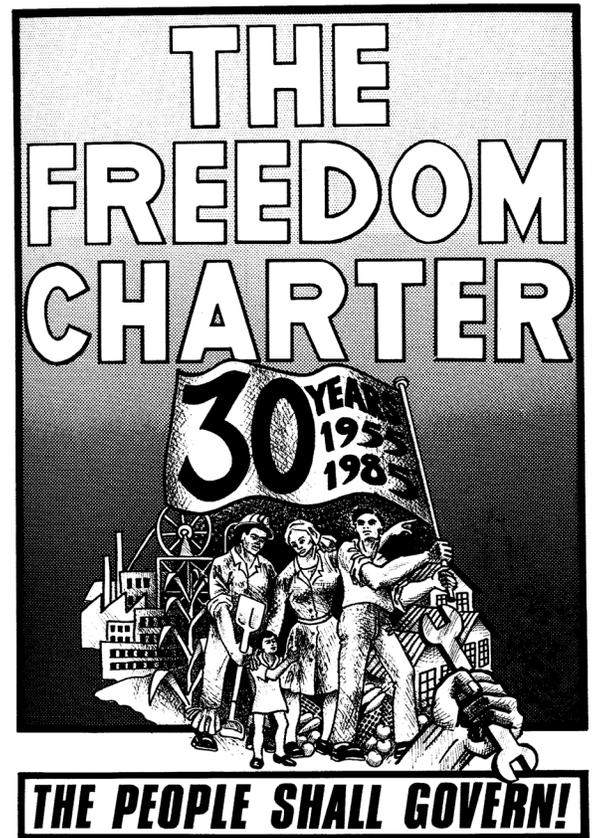
On December 1, 1985, the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COASTU) was launched in Durban. It brought together 33 unions representing some 450,000 organized workers, making it the largest trade union federation ever formed in South Africa.

your strike actions? Are there actions you could encourage people to take in their own interests which might also help you?

- As you talked about the questions raised in #6, what did you decide some of the reasons were that other people around Port Elizabeth might have for supporting the strike? Might they have reasons for opposing the strike?
- In the incident at the Ford Cortina plant mentioned above, PEBCO organized the Port Elizabeth community so well that not a single person in the African townships of New Brighton and Kwazakele was reported to have accepted work at the Cortina plant while workers were on strike. PEBCO also threatened a national boycott of Ford parts if all the workers—whom by this time Ford had fired—were not hired back. What reasons might a community have for offering such enthusiastic support to a strike? What interests might community people have in a union growing stronger?
- In another strike, involving workers in meat packing plants in the Cape Town area, workers organized a national boycott of red meat. Black longshoremen announced their support of the boycott by saying: “We will not be happy to load the meat if it is sent to us by scab workers employed in place of striking (meat) workers.” What reason would one group of workers have had to support a strike by another group? Suppose you, as a Jamison worker, were trying to convince the longshoremen to support your strike: what arguments would you use?
- In the meat workers’ strike mentioned above, Cape residents also refused to ride busses in protest of fare hikes and students boycotted classes protesting the quality of education. In what ways do you think people saw these acts as supporting each other and the meat workers’ strike?
- Again, were you a Jamison worker trying to convince a students’ organization to boycott classes, what arguments would you use?

G. How will the strikers respond to these threats of “deportations”?

- In a number of strikes, workers were rounded up and sent back to their various bantustans, the phony homelands that each African was assigned to by the South African government. For example, in 1980, when the municipal workers struck in Johannesburg, police ultimately deported 1,265 workers to different homelands. The authorities also recruited strikebreakers from the Venda homeland to work in the place of the deported workers. How could unions have effectively opposed deportations?
- Could workers at Jamison’s have made any additional demands when confronted by these threats? (You might point out to students that in one strike, at Fatti and Moni’s flour products, the union addressed the deportation issue by demanding and winning the right for contract workers to have transportation home at Christmas to spend two weeks with their families—at company expense.)



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The democratic movement celebrates the 30th anniversary of the Freedom Charter. 1985.

9. Questions about the students' process of decision-making could follow discussion of their actual decisions:

- Black unions like the South African Allied Workers Union (SAAWU) placed great importance on workers making decisions themselves—without professional union people telling them what to do. They called this “mass participation” or “workers’ democracy.” Based on your experiences trying to make decisions together, do you see any reasons SAAWU thought this process was so important? What difficulties did you have making decisions as a group that a group of workers might also have? What did you learn that a group of workers might also learn?
- Is it a common part of your education to be taught decision-making skills—how to work and think as a group without an authority figure leading you? If not, why isn't this skill taught more?
- Would any groups in our society feel threatened by high schools graduating students who were both comfortable making decisions collectively and who expected to continue to operate that way in their work lives?

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Resources

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