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Non-Stop Against Apartheid: Practicing Solidarity Outside the South African Embassy

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ABSTRACT *From April 1986 to February 1990, the supporters of the City of London Anti-Apartheid Group [City Group] maintained a Non-Stop Picket outside the South African Embassy in London calling for the release of Nelson Mandela. Whilst the Non-Stop Picket was one of the most visible expressions of British anti-apartheid activism at the time, the Picket was never endorsed by the national Anti-Apartheid Movement. Positioned on the pavement directly outside South Africa House, the Picket was strategically placed to draw attention to apartheid and bring pressure to bear on the regime's representatives and allies in the UK. The Embassy repeatedly brought pressure on the British Government to ban the protest, and for nearly two months in 1987 (6th May–2nd July), the Picket was removed from outside the Embassy by the Metropolitan Police. During this period, the Picket relocated to the steps of nearby St Martin-in-the-Fields Church and activists repeatedly risked arrest to break the police ban and defend their right to protest outside the Embassy.*

KEY WORDS: Anti-apartheid, protest camps, solidarity, Non-Stop Picket, City of London Anti-Apartheid Group

Introduction

The rhizomatic unfolding of the Occupy movement across urban public space in cities large and small on several continents, along with the protest encampments of the last year in Tahrir Square, Athens and Madrid (amongst other cities), has inspired growing interest in sites of long-term urban protest. In this profile, we consider the geography of one of Britain's longest running protests—the Non-Stop Picket of the South African Embassy.

For nearly four years from 19 April 1986 the members and supporters of the City of London Anti-Apartheid Group [hereafter City Group, as they referred to themselves] maintained a Non-Stop Picket on the pavement outside the South African Embassy in Trafalgar Square calling for the release of Nelson Mandela. They stayed on that pavement 24 hours a day, 365 days a year until he was released (and then some—the Non-Stop Picket did not actually end until several weeks after Mandela's release). Unlike the contemporary Occupy movement, though, there were no tents, and no one slept or lived on the Picket.

City Group was formed by Norma Kitson (an exiled African National Congress (ANC) member), her children, friends and supporters (including, crucially, members of the radical left Revolutionary Communist Group) in 1982. From the beginning City Group linked the

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struggle against apartheid with opposition to racism in Britain. Later, their politics developed to extend unconditional solidarity with all liberation movements in South Africa and Namibia [not just the ANC and South West African People's Organisation (SWAPO), but also the Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC) and the Black Consciousness Movement amongst others (Maaba, 2001)]. They highlighted Britain's key economic and political role in sustaining the apartheid regime—a position which inevitably brought them into conflict with the British state. The group's anti-imperialist analysis recognised the role that the Labour Party had played in maintaining British support for apartheid. Taken together, these political principles strained the group's relationship with the national Anti-Apartheid Movement (AAM), which had senior Labour MPs in its leadership (Fieldhouse, 2005). They eventually expelled City Group from the national movement in 1985. City Group deployed diverse tactics, including direct action on and off the Picket, to express its solidarity with those opposed to apartheid. Its support for those sidelined by the exiled leadership of the ANC (such as imprisoned PAC members and the socialist union leader Moses Mayekiso) was valued by activists in South Africa. The Picket played a key role as a 'convergence space' (Routledge, 2003) through which transnational activist discourses and practices addressing the politics of race and national liberation were articulated. As such, an analysis of its political culture is important and overdue.

In this Profile, we examine the distinctive culture of solidarity created by the material space of the Picket and the practices that sustained it. Both authors participated in the Non-Stop Picket (Gavin Brown as a teenager and young adult; Helen Yaffe, through her parents' involvement, as a younger child). This profile is informed by critical reflections on our own participation and interviews with former activists; but, it draws primarily on a new historical analysis of the Non-Stop Picket enabled by the work we have undertaken to compile a comprehensive archive of the City of London Anti-Apartheid Group for the first time.

Unruly Geographies of Solidarity

The Picket was a highly visible protest against apartheid. Through its permanent presence, the Picket developed a distinctive appearance, culture and sense of community. Bright hand-sewn banners (often in black, green and gold, the colours of the ANC) provided a backdrop to the Picket, declaring its *raison d'être* and picketers carried placards which declared their solidarity and commented on topical events and campaigns in South Africa. Members of the Picket would leaflet and petition passers-by, whilst others made impromptu speeches on a megaphone or sang South African freedom songs (Figure 1).

Although the Non-Stop Picket could look shabby at times, it was highly organised. The Picket was organised through a weekly rota. Each day was divided into 3 or 6 hour shifts. Individual supporters (and, in some cases, organisations like Student Unions) would pledge to a regular shift. Some shifts survived with a couple of people, others had over 20 regulars. On each shift one picketer was designated as the Chief Steward. Their role was to organise the other protestors to ensure that whenever possible they were engaged in political work (not just hanging out), and they served as the main line of communication between the Picket and the police. They kept a contemporaneous note of all activity on the Picket and carried a camera to record incidents—two practices that were vital for City Group's high success rate in court! In these days when social networking sites help spread news of protests rapidly around the world and it is possible to watch live-streamed footage of Occupy Wall Street anywhere, it is easy to forget how important print media and direct



Figure 1. Rally to celebrate the second anniversary of the Non-Stop Picket, 19 April 1988 (Source: Gavin Brown, 2012).

contact between activists were just over two decades ago. The Non-Stop Picket was organised not via Twitter and smart phones, but on landlines and with the aid of a pager held by the Picket rota organiser (quite high tech for time). The group's office was staffed throughout much of the day, capable of mobilising additional support for the Picket through a 'telephone tree' if necessary; and a number of key activists were on call to offer legal advice as needed. In this way a wider group of people were permanently engaged in the protest than were ever physically present on the Picket at any given time.

Positioned on the pavement directly outside South Africa House, the Picket was strategically placed to draw attention to apartheid and bring pressure to bear on the regime's representatives and allies in the UK. The Embassy repeatedly brought pressure on the British Government to ban the protest, and for nearly two months in 1987 (6th May–2nd July), the Picket was removed from outside the Embassy by the Metropolitan Police (following an action in which three City Group activists threw several gallons of red paint over the entrance to the Embassy). During this period, the Picket relocated to the steps of nearby St. Martin-in-the-Fields Church and activists were repeatedly arrested for crossing Duncannon Street to stand on the pavement outside the Embassy gates, breaking the police ban to defend the right to protest outside the Embassy. The idea, promoted by Norma Kitson, was to get people arrested in this way in order to test the police prohibition in a law court. The police used an arcane Victorian by law, 'Commissioner's Directions', which allowed the Metropolitan Police Commissioner to curtail public gatherings within a mile of Parliament, to allow MPs free movement to go about their business, to ban the Picket during this period. Eventually, the ban was broken when four MPs protested outside the Embassy alongside other picketers and the police were unable to justify the ban any

longer. In total, 173 people were arrested (some of them more than once) during City Group's campaign to break the police ban and defend the right to protest. All charges were eventually thrown out of court and City Group continued their Non-Stop Picket in front of the Embassy.

City Group's activism was not restricted to Trafalgar Square: picketers took direct action against apartheid across the UK and toured the country mobilising solidarity. These extended campaigns of direct action away from the Non-Stop Picket included 'trolley protests' against the sale of South African goods in supermarkets across London, where activists filled trolleys with South African produce, took them to the checkout and then refused to pay for them, publicly declaring why to other shoppers. At their most effective, these protests could tie up the majority of checkouts in a targeted supermarket simultaneously. In a similar vein, City Group organised frequent occupations of the South African Airways offices in Oxford Circus through their 'No Rights? No Flights!' campaign. These offices were frequently closed through successive occupations several times in a day. Finally, City Group activists took direct action at sporting venues around the UK, including pitch invasions at various athletics tracks and cricket grounds, in protest at sportsmen and women who had broken the international sports boycott of South Africa.

The geography of the Non-Stop Picket extended beyond its location and its relationship with the struggle in South Africa. The combination of the Picket's central location and its expression of solidarity through confrontation with the representatives of apartheid attracted a broad and diverse group of (mostly) young activists from the UK and beyond. The Picket provided 'uncommon ground' (Chatterton, 2006) through which friendship networks developed that crossed boundaries of nationality, ethnicity and class difference. At times, the Picket became something of a haven for young street homeless people living in the West End, although their involvement was often shortlived and marked by the reassertion of social hierarchies by more settled and privileged members of the Picket. The social and political life of the Picket had a particular emotional geography through which individuals overcame social isolation, transformed their sense of self and aligned their interests with those of distant others. Through providing a space in which to be 'unruly' in public, the Picket gave participants a sense of purpose (Brown, 2012). These entangled personal and political motivations are crucial to a holistic analysis of the Non-Stop Picket and transnational solidarity activism more broadly (especially, in the context of the rise of individualism within Thatcher's Britain).

(Re)orientating Solidarity

The badges, t-shirts and other ephemera produced by social movements say a lot about the political ethics that they embodied. One popular t-shirt produced by City Group encapsulates the particular vision of solidarity activism performed through the Non-Stop Picket. 'Brixton-Soweto: under attack, we fight back!' The slogan names Soweto, the sprawling Black township on the edge of Johannesburg in South Africa, alongside Brixton, an ethnically diverse working class neighbourhood in South London. For anyone interested in or familiar with the struggle against apartheid in South Africa, Soweto was synonymous with the school students' uprising that started there in June 1976, protesting against the apartheid regime's attempt to enforce teaching in Afrikaans (the language of the oppressor). As a place it was emblematic of the struggle against apartheid. In 1980s Britain, Brixton conjured up images of the riots that took place there in 1981 and again in

1985, responding to high unemployment locally and the racist targeting of local Black youth by the Metropolitan Police (Figure 2).

By linking Brixton and Soweto, this t-shirt speaks to an understanding of solidarity work that was core to City Group's activism. For City Group, opposition to apartheid in South Africa could not be separated from anti-racist work in Britain. By naming these two



Figure 2. 'City Group t-shirt (Source: Gavin Brown, 2012)'.

distant locations alongside each other, the slogan points to similarities between the experiences of their respective populations. It draws out continuities in the resistant politics associated with both locations. In contrast to the global links fostered by corporate and political elites, the slogan articulates a ‘counter-topography’ (Katz, 2001) that links equivalent struggles against racism and oppression across spatial distance.

At times, influenced by the anti-imperialist politics of the Revolutionary Communist Group, slogans were chanted on the Non-Stop Picket that took this further—‘Brixton, *Belfast*, Soweto—Under attack, we fight back!’ or ‘Brixton, *Belfast*, Soweto—One struggle! One fight!’ Here, the contour lines of oppression and resistance are redrawn to link the struggle against apartheid with not only anti-racist activism in Britain but also the Irish Republican fight against the British occupation of the north of Ireland. For most of the young activists drawn to the Non-Stop Picket, the linking of anti-racist politics in Britain with the struggle against apartheid in South Africa was uncontroversial. It made sense. Drawing Ireland into the mix sometimes caused more discomfort. But these slogans and the counter-topographies they expressed opened a space for political debate and discussion. They were not just declarations of solidarity with distant others, they were discursive tools for reimagining what it meant to be opposed to racism and oppression. They were performative in (re)orientating activists’ solidarity work in new and multiple directions.

Controversies: Competing Visions of Solidarity

In February 1985, City Group was de-recognised as a local branch of the national AAM. In justifying City Group’s expulsion, the AAM’s executive committee circulated a report quoting a letter from the then Chief Representative of the ANC in London, Solly Smith, which stated:

We are aware of the activities of these people and if they are not brought to a stop a lot of damage will be done in the field of solidarity work in this country. (Anti-Apartheid Movement, 1985).

Central to this expulsion were tensions with the ANC leadership in London. From 1983, the ANC (at least in London) became increasingly hostile to City Group, trying to discredit them within the wider AAM. In August 1984, Norma Kitson sent a 12-page letter to Oliver Tambo recording in detail the London ANC leadership’s hostility to City Group and the Kitson family, and offering a political account of these differences. This intervention made little difference. In November 1984, Norma and David Kitson were ‘suspended from the ANC’. David had recently been released from jail in South Africa, where he was the longest-serving white political prisoner, having been part of the leadership of Umkhonto we Siswe, the armed wing of the ANC, after Mandela’s arrest. Although suspended from the ANC, David Kitson had technically never been a member—he was a member of the South African Communist Party (SACP) working alongside ANC cadre (Kitson, 1987).

Despite all the smears spread against them by leading representatives of the London ANC, Norma and David Kitson remained ANC loyalists throughout this period. A letter sent to the Kitsons from Paul Bellis of Deeside Anti-Apartheid Group in December 1986 thanking them for addressing a public meeting in his area neatly summarises their position:

Your speeches made clear to all but those who chose not to hear that, as you have always maintained, you have no political difference with the ANC, and that the rift between you is wholly a by-product of the split within the anti-apartheid movement engendered by the sectarian expulsion of City AA from the AAM.

If David Kitson was an ANC loyalist—a ‘Mandela Man’, as he often described himself—he was also a loyal member of the SACP. He ended up in the leadership of Umkhonto we Siswe precisely because he obeyed party discipline and stayed in South Africa in the early 1960s when many other white communists were leaving for exile. That he did so may have done little to endear him to some of the white exiles who had made comfortable lives for themselves in London during his long imprisonment. Indeed this may, in part, explain some of the troubles that the Kitsons faced in London in the early 1980s. It took the release of Mandela and Sisulu before relationships between the ANC and the Kitsons partially thawed (although they were never fully reconciled).

The ANC in London opposed and actively obstructed the Non-Stop Picket. When City Group decided to launch the Non-Stop Picket of the South African Embassy, and on several occasions subsequently, they sought reconciliation with the London ANC. In March 1986, a month before the start of the Non-Stop Picket, a letter was sent from City Group to the Chief Representative of the ANC in London requesting a meeting ‘to discuss the criticisms you have had of our work over the last few years’. Despite this approach, the ANC continued to undermine attempts to build support for the Non-Stop Picket. ANC members exerted pressure and influence in numerous trade union branches, local anti-apartheid groups and student unions to block support for the Non-Stop Picket.

With the (re)appointment of Mendi Msimang as Chief Representative of the ANC in Britain in the late 1980s, the relationship between the ANC in London and City Group also began to change. The ANC began to acknowledge receipt of the material aid and donations collected by City Group. As the situation changed in South Africa after Mandela’s release and the unbanning of the ANC, the London ANC’s attitude changed further. From early 1991, ANC representatives began once again to speak at rallies organised by the City of London Anti-Apartheid Group and to share platforms at them with representatives of the PAC and the Black Consciousness Movement of Azania (reflecting the new reality of cooperation between these groups within South Africa at the time).

In 1993, the ANC revealed that Solly Smith had confessed in 1990, prior to his death, that he had been a spy for South African Military Intelligence inside the London ANC. It is thought that the ANC were suspicious of his duplicity as early as 1987 when he was replaced as Chief Representative in London (Trewala, 1995). Alongside Smith, Francis Meli, the Chair of the ANC’s Regional Political Committee in London at the time of the Kitsons’ suspension was also revealed as a spy for the apartheid regime. Although they undoubtedly manipulated existing personal and political tensions with the London ANC (and AAM leadership), both men played a key role in sidelining two long-term ANC cadre and the high profile, militant solidarity campaign that they had helped to build in London. Of course, in sticking to their political principles and refusing to back down, the Kitsons and City Group also fanned the flames of this dispute.

Studying the Non-Stop Picket offers valuable insights into the social and political dynamics of long-term urban protest sites. An analysis of the political culture it and the City of London Anti-Apartheid Group fostered offers new ways of interpreting the

practices of transnational solidarity activism, as well as revealing forgotten aspects of the international struggle against apartheid.

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