

# THE STARVATION OF YOUNG BLACK MINDS? A CRITIQUE

by Al Kagan and Corinne Nyquist

## Introduction

In an article in the January 1990 issue of *American Libraries*, Janice Woo describes the recent Wedgworth/Drew report which advocates breaking the international boycott of South Africa. (*The Starvation of Young Black Minds: the Effect of Book Boycotts in South Africa: Report of a Fact-Finding Mission to South Africa, May 18-28, 1989.*) The authors use American First Amendment arguments to support giving publishers carte blanche to sell their materials.

Ms. Woo also notes that guidelines are being developed by the ALA Social Responsibilities Round Table (SRRT) International Human Rights Task Force for "boycott exemption." We wish to set the record straight by explaining the thrust of our guidelines and their relationship to the AAP report.

## Background

In 1970, the Unesco General Conference adopted Resolution 8 regarding apartheid and colonialism. One year later Unesco suspended relations with the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) because of the role of apartheid institutions within that body (relations were later restored). The American Library Association became involved in 1972 when the Council passed a resolution prohibiting ALA relationships with organizations that violate human rights and social justice principles.

In 1978, as a result of further membership pressure, ALA Council endorsed Congressional sanctions against South Africa. Affiliation with the International Federation for Documentation (FID) was suspended due to South African connections in 1980, and ALA divested its South African related investments in 1985.

At the 1985 Chicago IFLA meeting a resolution was passed denying membership to institutions that adhere to the policy of apartheid. In 1986, the ALA Membership and Council passed a firm resolution on the "Abridgement of Human Rights in South Africa." Among its provisions are opposition to the apartheid South African Library Association's participation in IFLA and opposition to the expansion of bibliographic utilities into South Africa. And in 1989, the ALA Executive Board voted to discontinue the Public Library Trusteeship, an investment program for ALA member libraries due to its slow compliance with ALA investment policy towards South Africa.

## Developments in South Africa

After the Sharpeville Massacre and subsequent banning of the liberation movements in 1960-61, the anti-apartheid movement within South Africa and

worldwide called for a complete boycott of South Africa. The United Nation's General Assembly, the Organization of African Unity, and various other international organizations and governments have voted to respect this boycott.

However, in the past few years the movement to create an alternative society and culture has become so powerful within South Africa that the total boycott restrictions became unsuitable. The movement modified its policy to a selective boycott because of the lack of distinction between the new progressive organizations and the apartheid regime. This became quite clear in 1987 when the largest legal (at that time) umbrella organization, the United Democratic Front (UDF), wrote that:

One should seek to make the distinction between isolating the regime and isolating the people of South Africa."

In May of 1989, the African National Congress of South Africa (ANC), the largest and most respected liberation movement, also issued a *Position Paper on the Cultural and Academic Boycott*. This document reinforces the UDF position and calls on the even larger new umbrella organization, the Mass Democratic Movement, to implement this selective boycott policy.

The Movement has won a great victory with the recent legalization of the ANC and UDF (February 1990). Progress is evident with the release of Nelson Mandela and other political prisoners and the partial lifting of the State of Emergency. However apartheid remains in effect, and the struggle is far from over. South Africa has not changed its constitution, rather the Government has been pressured to make concessions. The Movement is now calling for increased sanctions to intensify the drive for freedom and democracy.

## The AAP Report

The Wedgworth/Drew report for the Association of American Publishers is based on discussions with "more than 75 representatives of various organizations and institutions." However, only a few individuals and a partial list of organizations are listed in the report. Some of the organizations listed have a clear interest in breaking the boycott. For example, the two national libraries are government institutions established in the service of apartheid. The three commercial bookstores listed have an obvious economic interest. For other "institutions" listed such as the three black townships, it is crucial to know who was interviewed, the people in the street, or the apartheid township authorities?

The question of the legitimacy of the sample is further compounded by the apparent omission of first-hand interaction with representatives of the South African public schools. It seems that the authors have second-hand knowledge because they write that "We were told that the public schools situation is characterized by substandard instruction, inferior texts where available at all, frequent student strikes to protest school conditions and major distractions resulting from student involvement in the Mass Democratic Movement [MDM] in black communities."

And, furthermore, that students are "routinely and randomly detained and questioned about the MDM for indefinite periods." Did the authors actually talk with some of the students who suffer the consequences of participating in the MDM?

Finally, there is no indication that the authors talked with spokespersons from the large umbrella organizations that constitute the progressive movement such as the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), the United Democratic Front (UDF) or the Mass Democratic Movement itself. There is also no indication that they discussed the boycott with any of the constituent bodies that form these umbrella organizations, such as local unions, church organizations or community groups.

In their conclusions, the authors state that "even those who support the economic sanctions and the general cultural boycott...oppose the boycott on books". Even though it is illegal to publicly endorse the international boycott, almost all recognized polls have shown that the majority of South Africans support isolating the apartheid system even if it might hurt them personally. It is puzzling that the authors picked the above phrase to support their position.

Finally, it is startling that the Wedgeworth/Drew report quotes the African National Congress position paper to promote a laissez-faire approach to the book trade. A recent statement by Tebogo Mafole, Chief Representative at the ANC Observer Mission to the United Nations (see page 29), notes that when Mr. Wedgeworth called at the ANC Mission before his trip to South Africa, he was told that elaborate consultations should be undertaken with the movement at every step. Mr. Mafole reiterated that the ANC did not endorse the trip or the project, and furthermore that the ANC has not been apprised of the project itself.

The international boycott is helping to create the desired effects. The South African economy is hurting, the anti-draft movement is burgeoning, and massive resistance to the system continues unabated. Recent government concessions such as the unbanning of the ANC should be seen in this context. Proposals for establishing a book trade must therefore be addressed to the South African organizations that are in the forefront of the struggle. Our actions can have the most serious consequences.

### Guidelines

When Ms. Woo discussed the *Guidelines for Librarians Interacting with South Africa*, she confused two separate but related issues. The *Guidelines* are for librarians, not publishers. They are an attempt to "balance our methods to promote the free flow of information with work activities that are morally and politically responsible" (point 2.6). The *Guidelines* are in concert with the selective boycott policy adopted by the South African movement. They stress service to the mass democratic movement, aid to the oppressed, and responsible ways to do our professional work. As of this writing the following bodies have adopted the: Social Responsibilities Round Table, Association of College and Research Libraries, Black Caucus of ALA, International Relations Committee, International Relations Round Table.

## INTERVIEW WITH SOUTH AFRICAN LIBRARY USERS

by Joseph Reilly

The system of apartheid in South Africa acts as an agent of disunity in all areas of library activity. The nation's ability to acquire the information that it needs and wants is fragmented in two major ways, as shown by South African scholar Mokobung Nkomo: 1) an inequitable allocation of resources, with the tiny white minority receiving a disproportionately large share and the great majority of the population's Blacks, Coloureds, Asians receiving little or no funds and 2) a censorship system that keeps a broad range of books (materials) out of public reach (see *Interracial Books for Children Bulletin*, v. 16, no.5/6).

Though the apartheid regime has released Nelson Mandela and unbanned the African National Congress, and though some works and some authors are now legally available, the situation described by Nkomo remains the same for the average library patron. What follows are excerpts from a series of interviews conducted during the summer of 1989 with two South Africans about their past experiences in gaining access to materials through libraries and other means and what their expectations are for the library's role in a post-apartheid information order.

Joan is a white South African woman who was exiled in the mid-1980's for her community work done on behalf of the South African Council of Churches. Thabo is a young black South African man from Soweto who, like many other children who survived the Soweto Uprising of June 1976, joined the African National Congress. Because his political work eventually endangered his life, he was forced into exile in Tanzania where the ANC was in the process of developing their prototypical education facility known as the Solomon Mahlangu Freedom College (or SOMAFSCO). After graduating from SOMAFSCO, Thabo began his undergraduate degree in the United States where he is currently residing. These interviews were conducted by Joseph Reilly.

JR: How did you get your hands on works that are banned. My experience with South Africans in the U.S. is that the first thing they do when they arrive is go out and get *The Struggle is My Life* by Nelson Mandela.

JOAN: That was literally the first thing I did when I got to this country. But at home we would get those books from the neighboring states, from people that were travelling. The procedure was that they would mail them in, they didn't actually carry them in when they returned home. We used to have these bizarre expeditions into the neighboring states where we would fill up the motorcar tires, the tubes, with books.

JR: You mean the spare?