In the 1980s international support for anti-apartheid activism in South Africa was growing, and pressure from grass-root organizations around the world led to sanctions against South Africa. An emphasis on nonviolence instead of violence within South Africa made it easier to generate widespread international resistance to Apartheid and isolate the Apartheid regime socially and economically. This case-study by Stephen Zunes is written especially for War Resisters' International, and is no. 2 in a series of articles preparing for the international conference "Globalising Nonviolence" in Germany, July 2006 (http://globalisingnonviolence.org). The global networking described in this article is an early example of the "globalization from below" that is more widespread today and which will be required even more in the future to counter the economic and military "globalization from above". The anti-apartheid struggle should not be copied by contemporary activism against war and injustice, but analyzed as a success story we can learn important lessons from.

Globalising Nonviolence: Nonviolence against Apartheid - a case study of "globalisation from below"
War Resisters' International news, Jan. 1, 2006, by Stephen Zunes

While many Western governments argued that the benevolent influence of Western capital would gradually force an end to South Africa's apartheid system and many on the left argued that liberation would come only through armed revolution, in fact it was largely unarmed resistance by the black majority and its supporters, both within South Africa and abroad.

The resistance of the 1980s was centered on massive noncooperation. As described in an editorial in the Weekly Argus on August 19, 1989,

... the intimidatory powers of the state have waned; the veneration of the law has diminished with the erosion of the rule of law. Inevitably that meek acquiescence of yesteryear has evaporated and SA is now witnessing an open, deliberate and organised campaign of defiance.

Though it is easy to think of apartheid South African society in terms of radical polarization, a model that would tend to support armed struggle as a means of change, the high degree of interdependence - albeit on unfair terms imposed by the ruling white minority - allowed greater latitude for manipulation through nonviolent means than is possible in classically polarized societies. About half of the country's Africans lived in areas allocated to the South Africa's whites, including all the ports, major cities, industry, mines and optimal agricultural land, as do virtually all of the Coloureds and Asians. The white minority existed from day to day with a high level of dependence on the black majority, not just for their high standard of living, but for their very survival. Nonviolent action constituted a more direct challenge to the system of apartheid than did violence.

The black South Africans' overwhelming numerical majority made the use of nonviolent action particularly effective when they started to mobilize in large numbers in the mid-1980s. Nonviolent action, despite its requirements of discipline and bravery in the face of repression, allowed participation by a far greater percentage of the population than would a guerilla army, thus optimizing the blacks' majority.

The shift to a largely nonviolent orientation lured white popular opinion away from those seeking continued white domination. Nonviolent action threw the regime off balance politically. A related factor was that the largely nonviolent struggle of the 1980s made the prospects of living under black majority rule less frightening. Though the prospects of giving up their privileges was not particularly welcomed by most whites, the use of nonviolence by the black majority against their white oppressors was seen as indicative of a tolerant attitude not likely to result in the previously anticipated reprisals upon seizing power. The use of armed struggle as the primary means of resistance, even if white civilian casualties were kept at a minimum, would have led many whites to fear for the worst.

One consequence of the divisions created within the white community was the war resistance, which began in the 1970s by white youth opposing South Africa's occupation of Namibia and invasion of Angola, and later develop into the End Conscription Campaign. It grew dramatically in the mid-1980s when the regular armed

forces moved into the black townships. As many as 1000 new open resisters surfaced in 1989 alone and thousands more evaded the draft in less public ways. Resistance included voluntary exile, going underground, or voluntarily submitting themeselves to arrest and imprisonment for refusal to be drafted into the army. While some were religious pacifists., most resisted on political grounds

Active resistance by previously unsympathetic whites in support of the nonviolent defense of a number of squatter settlements, such as the Crossroads community near Capetown, threatened with destruction by authorities. Such episodes created a climate of divisiveness within the ruling order which was then exploited by the black resistance.

Nonviolent action allowed far greater potential for creating cleavages among the privileged white minority, such as how to respond to the resistance, how long to resist the inevitable changes demanded by the revolutionaries, and at what costs.

The advantages of nonviolence in winning allies went far beyond the potentially enlightened sectors of South Africa's white minority, in that it also extended to the world community. World opinion was of crucial importance. Despite verbal condemnation of its racial policies, the Western industrialized world gave South Africa consistent support over the years in the form of trade, industrial development, technological assistance, infusion of capital, and arms. South Africa would not have become the economic and military power it was without the massive aid it received from the West over forty years of apartheid rule.

Prior to the imposition of sanctions in the mid-1980s, there was over $13 billion worth of annual trade between South Africa and the West, which combined with $30 billion in foreign investment, supplied the country with the vast majority of such basic commodities as transportation equipment, electrical equipment and machinery, nuclear technology, telecommunications facilities and services, computer technology, chemicals and related products, paper and manufactures, and other goods essential to the maintenance of the South African as a modern industrialized state. In addition, the West supported the South African regime through outstanding bank loans and credits totaling $6.5 billion, much of which went to government entities with no restrictions.

When the United Nations Security Council threatened sanctions and other punitive measures against South Africa, the United States, Great Britain, and France, due to their important economic and political interests, cast vetoes. By the mid to late 1980s, however, thanks to massive nonviolent protests in those countries and others by anti-apartheid activists, most industrialized nations imposed sanctions on the apartheid regime by the late 1980s. Labor unions, church groups, students, and leftist organizations made business as usual with the apartheid government impossible. This upsurge in solidarity work came as a result of the largely nonviolent resistance in South African during the 1980s and the repression from the government which resulted. In contrast, had the primary mode of resistance been armed struggle, it is unlikely the same level of sympathy and the resulting mass mobilization been enough to make the sanctions movement so successful.

While the struggle was more protracted, more complex and not as exclusively nonviolent as some similar struggles during this era, it was one of the most significant. It demonstrated that even where so many had given up on nonviolence, key elements of the resistance movement would recognize its power and utilize unarmed resistance in the successful liberation their people.