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How a union's 1984 anti-apartheid strike shaped today's clash between Trump and South Africa

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Consul-General Cyril Ndaba, James Curtis ILWU Local 10, Ambassador Ebrahim Rasool, Clarence Thomas ILWU Local 10, Delores Lemon-Thomas and Chris Silvera IBT at Leo Robinson's ILWU Memorial in 2013. Photo: Malaika H. Kambon

The Trump administration's expulsion of South Africa's ambassador from his post in Washington, D.C., is another outrage.

On March 17, U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio expelled Ebrahim Rasool, South Africa's ambassador to the United States, in extremely undiplomatic language, calling him a "race-baiting politician." In a webinar at the South African Mapungubwe Institute, Ambassador Rasool characterized Trump as pursuing policies that were "a white supremacist response to growing demographic diversity in the United States."

The expulsion was deeply felt in San Francisco, where the predominantly Black members of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union, Local 10, have special bonds with Rasool. That friendship is based on South Africa's recognition of the union's role in fighting apartheid and freeing Nelson Mandela.

Clarence Thomas, a Local 10 retiree and former executive treasurer, said, "I think that Rasool's removal by the Trump administration is a political act that had, in some degree, nothing to do with the ambassador at all. They used recent statements that he made to a think tank on the supremacist character of Trump's MAGA regime as the rationale."

Trump's reasons for breaking relations with South Africa

The expulsion occurred after Trump had already cut off all U.S. aid bound for the country and offered refugee status and a "rapid pathway to citizenship" for white farmers. He cited "unjust racial discrimination" against white Afrikaners, a reaction to a recent Expropriation Act that the South African government passed to address the issue of wealth inequality and eliminate some remnants of apartheid, in which 75% of the country's private land is still owned by the tiny 7% of white Afrikaners. It's a reform law that prioritizes land restitution to empower farm workers and the use of land for the public good.

Trump's DOGE chief, Elon Musk, has accused his former country of discriminating against white farmers in the land ownership laws. Musk, a white supremacist, who waved a Nazi salute at Trump's inauguration, calls the land appropriation act the "genocide of white people in South Africa."

More immediately, Trump's anger was aroused by South Africa's action in taking the Israeli government to the [International Criminal Court](#), specifically with the charge of genocide in Gaza. South Africa has been getting support for this intervention all around the world. The United States government, in support of the Zionist entity,

has made [threats against](#) the personnel of the International Criminal Court, including sanctions.

South Africa's international relations are also at odds with the Trump administration's imperial prerogatives. The country has trade ties with China and is a partner in the Belt and Road Initiative and the BRICS group of nations.

South Africa has also had a long-term friendship with socialist Cuba, a country that Trump, and especially Rubio, with his family's Cuban exile background, are trying to strangle with sanctions.

Ambassador Rasool's special friendship with ILWU Local 10

When Nelson Mandela gave his great speech at the Oakland Coliseum in 1990, he specifically acknowledged ILWU Local 10 for the 1984 action that it had taken in defying Taft-Hartley — defying its contract for 11 days and refusing to unload South African cargo. He placed Local 10 on the front lines of the struggle against apartheid.

In March 2013, there was a memorial for the rank-and-file leader Leo Robinson, one of the earliest organizers of the Anti-apartheid Movement in the U.S. Robinson first introduced a union resolution protesting apartheid to the membership of ILWU in 1976 after witnessing the massacre of Soweto students who were protesting the forced instruction in the Afrikaner language.

South African Consul General Cyril Ndaba and Ambassador Ebrahim Rasool came to Robinson's memorial in 2013 to honor his role in mobilizing workers to resist apartheid. They spoke on behalf of the people of South Africa to express gratitude by saying that without the ILWU under the leadership of Robinson, the end of apartheid may not have come so quickly, and Nelson Mandela would not have been freed as early.

Thomas stressed, “The anti-apartheid campaign was not initiated by the international union president. It was not done by the mayor of San Francisco or the governor of California; it was done by rank-and-filers. It really goes to show the power of the working class. Rasool was at Robinson’s memorial to pay homage and respect not only to ILWU Local 10, but to the entire Bay Area who had become involved in the struggle.

Thomas explained: “There was an eight or nine-year period before the 11-day boycott of the South African ship, the Nedlloyd Kimberley, in 1984, when there was an educational campaign preparing for that historic action. When ships carrying South African cargo arrived, there were discussions with the longshore workers and the dispatchers regarding public demonstrations. The longshore workers who took those jobs knew that they would not receive a whole day’s pay.

“It was during this period when Leo Robinson, Larry Wright, and others organized the Southern African Liberation Support Committee. They would invite members of the African National (ANC) to come to speak at Local 10. They showed videos explaining the horrors of apartheid in South Africa.

“I remember a worker by the name of Delmont Blakeney; he’s passed on. He was a very bright guy, let’s just say he was very street oriented. He said, to Leo Robinson, is this shit really gonna work - not working those ships? He lived to see that it did.”

