

us over reaction to murders

proposals for official recognition of Black unions, Pretoria remains hostile to the black trade union movement. In fact with the increased proliferation of both illegal and legal Black unions on the South African labour market, the government is showing marked signs of nervousness.

The British magazine *The Economist* recently characterized the regime's situation as having "let a genie out of bottle."

In a series of dawn raids union leaders were detained by security police. Dr. Neil Aggett was never released.

Many of the unions are operating in direct breach of government regulations. Some major companies have even recognized unions that refuse to register with the government.

Seemingly of more concern to the government is the fact that many of the activist unions (Black and White) are trying to bring about better living conditions for the general black populace.

What the government seems to fear is that trade union power is being turned into a weapon of black political action.

Its reaction, mainly clandestine, began with the imposition of severe restraints which suggest a program of severe retaliation.

In a series of dawn raids last year at least 306 union leaders were rounded up and detained by security police. A man named Dr. Neil Aggett was one of the people detained. He was never released.

Colleagues of the Doctor actively protested that he was too stable to have committed suicide. They are certain he was killed or subjected to conditions that brought about his death.

Attempt to bury the case

The government has launched an inquest which is expected to be just a formality, recording nothing more than the clinical cause of death. The Aggett case will probably stop at that, as did the cases of forty-three other people known to have died in the hands of security police over the last nineteen years.

Neil Aggett was neither the first nor the last union leader to die behind bars. The list

of jailed trade union leaders is a lengthy one.

According to the 1981 report of Amnesty International, Joseph Mavi, President of the Black Municipal Workers Union was jailed in July 1980 during a strike of the Union's ten thousand black employees.

Bonisile Norushe, an official of the African Food and Canning Workers Union was arrested in June 1980 and detained incommunicado until February when he was required to testify as a state witness in a political trial.

During the many political trials in South Africa last year (many of union leaders), a number of defendants and

witnesses made allegations of having been tortured in prison.

Most of those detained has been held under the infamous *Terrorism Act*, which stipulates that detainees can be held incommunicado and permits security police to withhold all information about those detained.

Aggett was also held under the *Terrorism Act*.

The trade union movement's links to the black struggle became apparent when Aggett died. For the first time at the funeral of a white man the flag of the African



National Congress was unfurled. The congress is dedicated to the overthrow of South African white minority rule. Both the Congress and its members are banned in South Africa.

That this is a premonition of a move towards a Black-White common front against the regime is doubtful given the present atmosphere in South Africa. However, this outright Black defiance of the government in response to Aggett's death may be a sign of other things to come.

Aggett and Biko died in the same place

What happened to Aggett is reminiscent of the fate of Steven Biko, underground leader of the Black Consciousness Movement who posthumously became a rallying point for any black movements throughout African and a world famous symbol as a victim of the murderous regime.

Biko died of severe head injuries coupled with negligence but attorney-general says no breach of the law by police.

In 1977, the security police announced that Steven Biko was dead, a victim of his own hunger strike. International human rights groups protested and several governments brought political pressure to bear on South Africa. Later investigations revealed that Biko had most probably died of severe head injuries coupled with negligence on the part of prison doctors.

According to the South African attorney-general who investigated the case, he could identify no breach of the law on the part of Biko's police interrogators.

While cases such as Biko's suggest a new government policy of violent reprisal towards labour activists in South Africa, the trade union movement continues to move closer toward an alliance with the struggle for Black liberation. An increasingly nervous government, in the meantime, is moving to strangle signs of a growing militancy.

The response from Black South Africans to the deaths of both Biko and Aggett, suggests that of people whose leaders are being murdered.



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