

South African government is nervy

by Albert Nerenberg of the McGill Daily
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Somewhere, in the country of South Africa in a room in a government building, a man's life was lost.

According to the South African security police, on February 4th 1982 the lifeless body of Dr. Neil Aggett was found hanging by the neck from a rope attached to the ceiling of his cell in a government prison. No other information concerning the man's death was made available.

"Suicide," was the verdict announced by the police when the incident was announced the following day.

Suicide or Murder?

The South African security police have been accused several times by both South Africans and international human rights

Death of white political activists in prison is not unheard of.

groups of murdering prisoners, since the country first began its system of detention and interrogation without charge nineteen years ago.

Aggett, a white, had given up his practice as a doctor to become Transvaal secretary for the Canning Workers Union.

His death and the events surrounding it raise questions as to the nature of the government's current political reforms and its stand on Black trade unions. The government's methods of dealing with opposition have come under particularly intense scrutiny.

The death of white political activists in South Africa's prisons is not unheard of, nor is it the type of happening that would cause an uproar, but reaction to Aggett's death was both unprecedented and unexpectedly threatening towards the government and



its security police, supposedly simply hosts to a man's suicide.

Death demonstration

In February, on the day of Aggett's funeral, 70,000 Black labourers in all the major cities of South Africa stopped work for thirty minutes in protest.

Two days later, 2,000 defiant blacks marched through the streets of a wealthy Johannesburg suburb chanting "Aggett is a hero." The mob went on to trample well-kept lawns and tear down president Botha's re-election posters while armed security personnel looked on.

When the administration of Pieter Botha replaced its corruption-tainted rival, Jon Vorster, in 1978, its rhetoric was one of reform. It was faced with both increasing international pressure opposing the government's apartheid system and mounting threats of internal rebellion.

The labour need

The booming South African economy could not cope simultaneously with an uncomfortably high unemployment rate and a serious shortage of skilled labour. The lack of skilled labour was seen as the major barrier to economic expansion.

In the entire country, there were less than 50 blacks who were skilled artisans and a negligible number of blacks with higher technical training.

The government responded by legislating new labour proposals in 1979. They were adopted on the basis of the widely publicized proposals of the regime's Wiehan commission.

As recommended, the new legislation allowed blacks to set up legal trade unions for the first time. However, also according to the new legislation, it was specifically forbidden for black trade unions to engage in political activities or to co-operate with political parties.

Essentially, it seems that the Wiehan commission's recommendations were that some of the racist barriers be removed as political reform, and more probably as an open door to increased productivity.

The trained and cheap Black labour force increased significantly afterwards.

Despite the acceptance of the Wiehan

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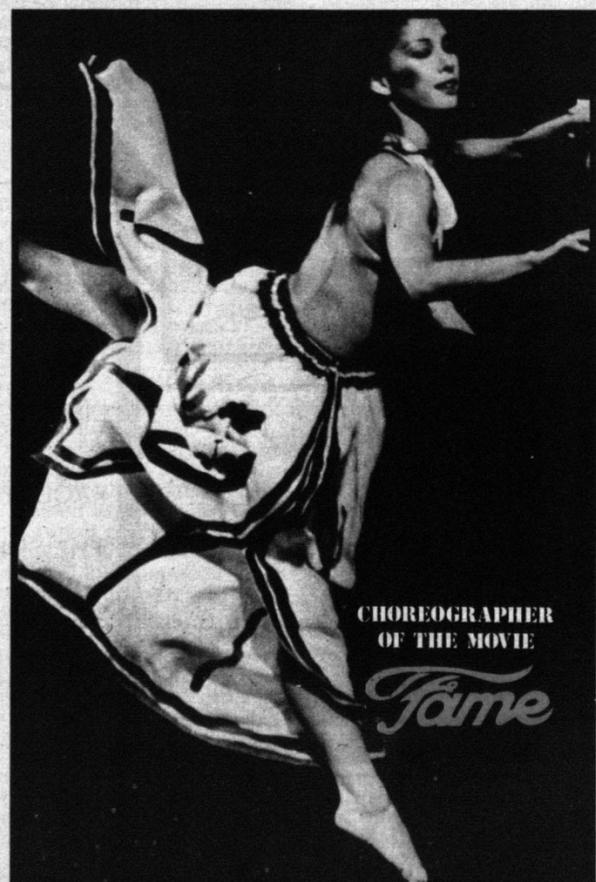
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