

STEPHEN BIKO LEAVES A LEGACY OF ACTIVISM, TEN YEARS LATER

(CUP)

By Carol Guenther

When South African police left anti-apartheid activist Stephen Biko to die after brutally beating him, they thought they had successfully silenced him.

The South African government should have realized that Biko's influence would not die with him. On the tenth anniversary of his death, Biko lives on as a symbol of Black resistance.

"Symbols don't die, they become martyrs. And martyrs live forever," according to P.C. Jones, a Black activist who was arrested along with Biko in August 1977.

Biko was arrested on August 18, 1977 by the South African security forces because his anti-apartheid activism and widespread influence was a serious threat to the apartheid regime. The police beat him severely, causing massive head injuries, chained him to floor of a jeep and transported him 740 miles to a prison hospital. The thirty-one year old activist died of brain damage on September 12.

Biko was a charismatic figure, an intellectual exceptionally able to spur others to action with his vision of a liberated South Africa. He played a large part in the development of Black Consciousness, a movement which stressed Black pride and unity and spurned any involvement with white, liberal anti-apartheid activists.

The senseless killing of one of South Africa's most brilliant and articulate activists left a legacy of bitterness and mistrust among the nation's youth. But the vision he imparted to students

like Gerald Phokobye, the political coordinator of the African and Caribbean Students' Association at the University of Toronto, has had more far-reaching effects. Phokobye is a South African who lived in exile in Botswana for six years before coming to Canada. His political views were greatly influenced by Biko's writings on Black Consciousness.

"Steve was the embodiment of Black Conscious-

ness. He trained us politically. Through his own example and practical work, he taught us to organize, taught us how to talk to people and relate to each other as activists. He also helped us to gain a better understanding of Black Consciousness through his writings," Phokobye said.

Black Consciousness began as a movement in the late 1960s. Many Black university students had become disenchanted with the National Union of South African Students (NUSAS) and in 1968, they broke away to form the South African Students Organization (SASO) with Stephen Biko as its first president.

Biko criticized the white liberals for dominating NUSAS.

"They made all the decisions for us. We needed time to look at our own problems and not leave them to people without experience of the terrible conditions in the black townships or the system of Bantu education (the inferior education system for Blacks)," Biko wrote.

After his third year, Biko was expelled from university for his political activities. That year, he helped to form the Black People's Convention, an umbrella political organization for groups sharing the beliefs of Black Consciousness.

P.C. Jones, Biko's friend and fellow activist, spoke of the influence Biko had on his peers in their struggle against apartheid.

"Biko left with us an idea and a movement which

are inspiring blacks and whites on all university campuses. He came from a generation of Black students who were asking the question, 'What is our calling as Black students and what is our historic role to fulfill?'"

"The answer is that the interests of the Black student are no different from the interests of the community from which he or she comes."

"Today, Biko is a symbol of hope, having been able to show in practical, non-sensational terms, that it is possible to live an independent life outside the intentions of the government," said Jones.

Jones said there was no political movement prior to Black Consciousness that could effectively address the historic division between different segments of the Black community. When the Black Consciousness Movement was banned by the South African government in October 1977, the effect on the Black community was devastating.

"The movement that was most able to lead and unify Blacks was destroyed in one brutal moment. Today we see 99 per cent of conflict contained within Black areas. Violence is inverted violence. Blacks are being killed by other Blacks. This is due to a large extent to cowardly behaviour on the political level by groups like the African National Congress, who do not have the moral depth to denounce what they are seeing," said Jones.

During his lifetime, Biko advocated non-violence in the struggle against apartheid. Today, the Black Consciousness Movement is split on the issue of using violence to effect change. The BCM within South Africa does not advocate violence but Phokobye said the external wing of the BCM advocates the use of revolutionary warfare against the apartheid regime.

Robert Fatton, the author of *Black Consciousness in South Africa*, like many Black Consciousness political theorists, sees violence as inevitable.

"Apartheid, like slavery, cannot be reformed, only abolished," said Fatton.

Biko saw the importance of mental as well as political liberation for Black South Africans.

"From the beginning, the Black Consciousness Movement attempted to instill an ideology of hope brought about by Black unity and the renaissance of the Black mind, from which a new Black culture would spring."

As it developed, the Black Consciousness Movement's ideology became more radical. The emphasis shifted from cultural and psychological concerns to questions of class and economics.

"There is now a focus on racial oppression and class expectations within the Black Consciousness Movement," Gerald Phokobye said.

"Therefore, the black working class is seen as the



leading force for change."

Stephen

Biko has greatly influenced many musicians, writers and artists, in addition to the academics and activists that follow his political example.

Sonia Sanchez, a poet and professor at Temple University in Philadelphia, studies racism in literature and popular culture.

"(Biko) inspires us all to do similar work and have similar visions. He reminds us all not just to be writers, but writers who spread the word about how people should live and walk as upright human beings," Sanchez said.

Norman "Otis" Richmond, President of the Black Association of Toronto, feels that music can have a powerful effect in motivating people to respond to political issues.

"The whole African music experience is a response. African music is such that you have to be part of it. Musicians carry a message, and even if you're just telling people to party and forget their troubles, it's a political position," said Richmond.

Richmond said that Stephen Biko is recognized by musicians all over the world.

"His commitment and courage are inspiring because he could have left South Africa and been very comfortable, but he chose to stay and deal with the situation," said Richmond.

Biko's courage to oppose his white oppressors is evident in his words to the South African police:

"Listen, if you guys want to do this your way, you have to handcuff me and bind my feet together, so that I can't respond. If you allow me to respond, I'm certainly going to respond. And I'm afraid you may have to kill me in the process..."

The police took him quite literally.