



Bantu Steve Biko's Letter to SRC Presidents and Heads of other Organisations

February 1970

Instructions:

(1) Begin by asking students to read the **Introduction** to the Bantu Steve Biko entry on South African History Online (<https://www.sahistory.org.za/people/stephen-bantu-biko>). (2) Then ask students to find and write out the definitions of all the bolded words below. (3) Ask students to read through the letter and answer/discuss the questions alone or as a group.

Dear Sir,

Re: South African Students' Organisation

Allow us at this late stage to introduce the South African Students' Organisation to you. This is a one-year-old organisation which was established at the inaugural conference at the University of the North in July 1969.

This circular is meant to give your organisation a true and first-hand account of the factors that led to the establishment of the organisation. We also intend giving you a clear picture of where we stand today in relation to the other student organisations in the country.

Historical Background

The implementation in 1960 of the Fort Hare Transfer Act of 1959 which brought Fort Hare under direct government control dealt a blow to student contact between that University and the rest of the student population. The dissolution of the SRC¹ at Fort Hare in August that year by the students themselves was a sequel to the **stringent** measures applied at this then only black University to suppress the freedom of the students to meet and discuss with whomsoever they wanted to.

Even more contained were the sister "Universities" that were established that same year i.e. University College of the Western Cape (for Coloureds)

University College of Zululand (for Zulus), University College of the North (for Sothos), University College of Durban (for Indians).

The concept of an independent SRC was never known at these places. The Rector had virtually limitless powers of veto over anything the students decided to do. This power of veto was especially applied to all moves by students to associate with NUSAS. Hence the long period of isolation started.

The establishment of the University Christian Movement in 1967 opened new avenues for contact. UCM had a special appeal to students at the University Colleges. The fact that within a year and a half of its existence the UCM had already a black majority in its sessions is indicative of this. Hence with the continued getting together of students from the University Colleges dialogue began again amongst black students.

One of the most talked-about topics was the position of the black students in the "open" organisations like NUSAS and UCM. Concern was expressed that these were white-dominated and paid very little attention to problems peculiar to the black community. In fact some people began to question the very competence of **pluralistic** groups to examine without bias problems affecting one group especially if the unaffected group is from the oppressor camp. It was felt that a time had come when blacks had to formulate their own thinking,

¹ Student Representative Council, the main university-recognised student organisation at each university.

unpolluted by ideas **emanating** from a group with lots at stake in the status quo.

There was nothing new in this kind of thinking. In bodies like African Students' Association and African Students' Union of South Africa, founded between 1960 and 1961 in the older black campuses, essentially the same underlying thinking was embodied. However these organisations died off for various reasons. The Durban Students' Union also came and went. The problem remained unsolved.

Some people amongst the black communities felt that the best approach would be a black take-over of the "open" student organisations engineered from within. However this idea never got any real support since to start with black students at the University Colleges were not even allowed to participate freely in these organisations.

In the NUSAS Conference of 1967 the blacks were made to stay at a church building somewhere in the Grahamstown location, each day being brought to Conference site by cars etc. On the other hand their white "brothers" were staying in residence around the conference site. This is perhaps the turning point in the history of black support for NUSAS. So appalling were the conditions that it showed the blacks just how valued they were in the organisation.

The 1968 NUSAS Congress was uneventful. The overriding impression was that the blacks were there in name only. The swing to the right in the organisation did not meet with the usual counter from the blacks. It was clear that none of the blacks felt a part of the organisation. Hence the Executive that was elected was all white.

Shortly thereafter, still in July, black students at a UCM conference demanded time to meet alone as a group. Ostensibly they were to discuss what to do in the face of the "72 hour" clause which forbade them to remain in a white area for more than 72 hours at a stretch. However once together they discussed for the first time, formally, the idea of forming a black organisation.

They had to choose between a structured and non-structured alliance and they decided on the former for the sake of continuity. The problem was that none of them were student leaders and therefore they could not take binding decisions.

In December 1968 a conference of SRCs from the black campuses decided overwhelmingly in favour of a black organisation and in July 1969 at the **inaugural** conference of SASO the organisation was formally founded.

It might probably be untrue to give the impression that everything was smooth. However most of the debate arose because of the tendency not to want to do what appears to conform with government policy - i.e. to segregate against another group. To quote from the SASO communique released in July 1969:

- At a time when events are moving so fast in the country, it is not totally advisable to show any form of division amongst student ranks - especially now that students appear to be a power to be reckoned with in this country.
- Any move that tends to divide the student population into separate laagers on the basis of colour is in a way a tacit submission to having been defeated and apparently seems an agreement with apartheid.
- In a racially sensitive country like ours, provision for racially exclusive bodies tends to build up resentment and to widen the gap that exists between the races, and the student community should resist all attempts to fall into this temptation.
- Any formation of a purely non-white body shall be subject to a lot of scrutiny and so the chances of the organisations lasting are very little.

This shows, in a nutshell, just how strong the doubts were amongst some black student leaders. However the argument to go ahead was much stronger. While, as a matter of principle, we would reject separation in a normal society, we have to take cognizance of the fact that ours is far from a normal society. It is difficult not to look at white

society as a group of people bent on perpetuating the status quo. The situation is not made easier by the non-acceptance that black students have met with in all the so called open organisations both religious and **secular**. All suffer from the same fault basically of accepting as a fact that there shall be white leadership and even worse, that they shall occupy themselves **predominantly** with problems affecting white society first.

Another important point was that in the interest of preserving a farcical non-racial front, almost 80% of the black students were regarded as **expendable**. These are the students who for instance were not allowed to participate freely in organisations like NUSAS because they were at government-controlled University Colleges. To quote once more from the SASO communiqué:

In choosing to meet on a limited scale rather than not meeting at all, the non-white students shall be choosing the lesser evil, and striving to offset some of the evils that have accrued from the same evil system that made it impossible for them to meet freely with other students.

Structure

In terms of structure SASO operates like a National Union although she does not claim to be one. The basic type of affiliation is "centre affiliation". The SRCs are the power bases. They affiliate on behalf of their students. Where there is no SRC we accept a majority student body decision as an automatic affiliation by that centre. Individual membership is also catered for.

The governing body of SASO is the General Students' Council which meets once a year. It consists of the delegates from the various centres and branches and also the Executive. This is the official policy-making body of SASO.

The Executive governs in between GSC sessions, working according to mandates given to it by the GSC. The President is the sole interpreter of policy in between sessions.

Policy

SASO has thus far taken policy only on a few topics, these mainly being student organisation, our broad basis of operation etc.

(A) NUSAS

- SASO recognises NUSAS as the true National Union of students in South Africa today. This is based on the paper policy of the organisation. We offer no competition to NUSAS for black membership.

- SASO criticises the **dichotomy** between principle and practice found in the organisation. We reject their basis of integration as being based on standards predominantly set by white society. It is more of what the white man expects the black man to do than the other way round. We feel we do not have to prove ourselves to anybody.

- The fact that they are 27,000 white students and 3,000 black students in the organisation is not complementary to black opinion being fairly listened to.

- The commitment of white students to the principles of the organisation is limited to very few individuals and hence NUSAS' credentials as a sincere and committed aspirant for change are wanting.

(B) ASB

This is the Afrikaanse Studentebond, a culturally inclined organisation operating predominantly at the Afrikaans medium Universities. It lays stress on Calvinism and Afrikanerdom as criteria for membership.

1. We uphold the right of any group to want to perpetuate their culture via this sort of organisation.

2. Where this promotion of a group culture implies cultivation of racist tendencies then the "right" becomes a negative right like the right to kill.

3. We tend to dismiss ASB as an **incorrigible** group with whom no worthwhile contact can be maintained.

(C) UCM

The University Christian Movement is a religious group concerning itself with **ecumenical** topics and modernisation of the **archaic** Christian religious practice. It also concerns itself with a practical application of Christian principles in an immoral society like the South African one.

4. We believe to a great extent that UCM has overcome the problems of adjustment to a two-tier society like ours. However we still feel that the fact that the blacks are in the majority in the organisation has not been sufficiently evidenced in the direction of thought and in the leadership of the organisation.

5. We nevertheless feel that UCM's progress is commendable especially in the direction of provoking meaningful thinking amongst clergymen, and its members.

(D) The Press

SASO rejects the press and believes in having as little to do with it as possible. The press is largely directed at white society or the so-called electorate whose values are laced with racial prejudice against black people.

Equally SASO rejects the black press which up to now has been largely controlled and some of it financed by government institutions. We believe that alongside Radio Bantu, most of the black press is being used as instruments of propaganda to get people to swallow most of the unbalanced and inflated stories about "what the government is doing for the Bantus" or "... for the Indians" or "... for the Coloureds".

Aims

The aims of SASO are concerned primarily with black students and also with contact amongst students in general. Put in a paraphrased form these are:

1. To crystallise the needs and aspirations of the non-white students and the seek to make known their grievances.

2. Where possible to put into effect programmes designed to meet the needs of the non-white students and the act on a collective basis in an effort to solve some of the problems which beset the centres individually.

3. To heighten the degree of contact not only amongst the non-white but also amongst these and the rest of the South African student population to make the non-white student accepted on their own terms as an integral part of the South African community.

4. To establish a solid identity amongst the non-white students and to ensure that these students are always treated with the dignity and respect they deserve.

5. To protect the interest of the member centres and to act as a pressure group in all institutions and organisations for the benefit of the non-white student.

6. To boost up the morale of the non-white student to heighten their own confidence in themselves and to contribute largely to the direction of thought taken by the various institutions on social, political and other current topics.

While these aims might appear to be couched in racialistic language, they are in fact a sign that the black student community has at last lost faith with their white counterparts and is now withdrawing from the open society.

The blacks are tired of standing at the touchlines to witness a game that they should be playing. They want to do things for themselves and all by themselves.

Conclusion

Too much caution has had to be taken at the beginning and the progress has been slow. We have reached a stage now where our existence has become an accomplished fact and our way of seeing things has been adopted by a substantial number on the black campuses.

Our limited dialogue with NUSAS, which has been along lines of constructive criticism, has been interpreted deliberately by some groups, including officials of ASB as a rejection of nonracialism as a political goal. Yet while critics to the right of NUSAS might rejoice, one thing they have to keep in mind is that with all its shortcomings NUSAS is still worth talking to. It is on the other hand, we believe, a painful waste of time to engage in any dialogue with racially-**bigoted** organisations like the ASB. Hence some people at the last SASO conference felt that this organisation "should be left alone to their small world of isolation whose boundaries are the four wheels of an ossewa²".

SASO adopts the principle that blacks should work themselves into a powerful group so as to go forth and stake their rightful claim in the open society rather than to exercise that power in some obscure part of the Kalahari. Hence this belies the belief that our withdrawal is an end in itself.

Steve Biko, **President**

Summary Questions

1. When and where was SASO founded?
2. Why do you think Biko mentions that he intends to give 'a true and first-hand account' of the founding of SASO?
3. Why did some Black students disagree ideologically with the founding of SASO?
4. According to Biko, why was the University Christian Movement so important for the mobilisation of Black students?
5. What are some of the discriminations that Black students experienced in NUSAS and the UCM that laid the foundation for the founding of SASO?
6. What elements of Black Consciousness theory can you see in SASO's policy on NUSAS?
7. Why does Biko say that SASO's recognition of NUSAS as the national students' union is 'based on the paper policy of the organisation' alone?
8. What does Biko mean when he says that withdrawal from the open society by Black students is not an end in itself?

² A wagon.