

Stokely Carmichael dead at 57

## From student rebel to apologist for the African bourgeoisie

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Kwame Ture (Stokely Carmichael), the civil rights activist and student leader who embraced black nationalism and moved to Africa nearly three decades ago, died Sunday at the age of 57 near his home in Conakry, the capital city of Guinea. The cause of death was prostate cancer, first diagnosed in 1996.

In a political sense, Carmichael had been dead for many years. His appeals to black Americans to return to Africa won little response, and the bourgeois nationalist leaders he embraced in west Africa--including Kwame Nkrumah and Ahmed Sekou Toure, whose names he took to express his admiration--left a political legacy of poverty, corruption and inter-tribal warfare.

In the United States Carmichael's meteoric political career coincided with the greatest social movement of the last half-century, the civil rights struggles and ghetto upheavals of the 1960s. Born in Trinidad and Tobago, he came to live in Harlem at the age of 12, in 1952, and by late adolescence had become politically active on the fringes of the labor and socialist movement in New York City.

In 1961, while a freshman at Howard University, he joined the Freedom Riders, students both black and white who rode in integrated groups on buses throughout the South, deliberately challenging segregation and frequently risking arrest and racist violence. Carmichael was arrested repeatedly, in one case serving a 49-day sentence at the notorious Parchman Prison in Mississippi, a facility whose inmates described it as 'worse than slavery.'

The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) became an organizing center for those, particularly youth, who were dissatisfied with the tactics and leadership of the Southern Christian

Leadership Council and Martin Luther King Jr. They sought a more militant and aggressive struggle against racial segregation in the South and against manifestations of racism throughout American society. Carmichael became a SNCC organizer in 1964 and was elected chairman in 1966, succeeding John Lewis.

The new SNCC chairman quickly drew attention with a speech in Greenwood, Mississippi in which he declared his support for the goal of 'black power.' While initially only a vague assertion of racial pride and militant opposition to oppression, this slogan was developed by Carmichael and other black nationalists into a program of thoroughgoing separatism.

Rejecting the struggle for integration to which the bulk of SNCC remained committed, Carmichael left the group in 1967 and established links with the Black Panther Party of Huey P. Newton. But soon afterwards he broke with the Panthers, rejecting their policy of seeking links with white student radical groups such as Students for a Democratic Society.

In a letter to the Black Panther Party he declared, 'The alliances being formed by the party are alliances which I cannot politically agree with because the history of Africans living in the United States has shown that any premature alliance with white radicals has led to complete submission of the blacks by the whites.'

Carmichael's black separatism was so categorical that he rejected any united struggle of blacks and whites against oppression, including unity between poor whites and poor blacks.

In a speech February 17, 1968 at a Black Panther Party rally in Oakland, California, he declared that the exploitation of blacks by other blacks was not as oppressive as the exploitation of blacks by whites,

because all blacks shared the same culture, institutions and values. An excerpt from this speech, broadcast by National Public Radio as part of its obituary notice for Carmichael, contains the following statement, revealing his ignorance, or willful disregard, of the history of struggle by the American working class:

'Poor white people are not fighting for their humanity, they're fighting for more money. There are a lot of poor white people in this country. You ain't seen none of them rebel yet, have you? Why is it that black people are rebelling? Don't think it's because of poor jobs. Don't believe that junk that honky is running down. It's not poor jobs. It's a question of a people fighting for their culture, for their nature, for their humanity.'

Carmichael's views were perhaps the most chemically pure version of black nationalism, but he spoke not just for himself, but rather for an entire social layer of black petty bourgeois. Like most of the representatives of black nationalism, his origins were not in the working class or in the rural South, but in a more privileged layer. He was a West Indian, like Marcus Garvey, whose 'back-to-Africa' program he came to espouse. He grew up in a largely white neighborhood, moved in middle class circles and attended the elite Bronx High School of Science.

Though he called himself a socialist throughout his later life, this was only in the sense that radical bourgeois nationalists throughout Asia, Africa and Latin America use the word. He was as distant from genuine socialism, Marxist internationalism and a working class outlook as could be imagined.

This was demonstrated in his decades in Africa, where the regimes which he had saluted as the vanguard of humanity descended into corruption and squalor. Nkrumah was ousted in a military coup and fled to Guinea. He and Carmichael founded the All African Peoples Revolutionary Party, which retains a small following in the United States. A decade later, Sekou Toure was himself overthrown in Guinea, and Carmichael was briefly arrested, then released.

Today the countries of west Africa are mainly ruled by right-wing military cliques, in some cases installed after armed intervention by the Nigerian military dictatorship. The region has been bled dry by imperialism, and bled doubly by the bourgeois regimes that have ruled on behalf of the former colonial powers since nominal independence came in 1960. For the

great masses of workers and peasants throughout the region, conditions of life are worse than 30 years ago.

Despite his socialist rhetoric, and his trips to Cuba and Vietnam, Carmichael/Ture remained a thoroughly bourgeois figure. His last days featured three visits to his deathbed by the Reverend Jesse Jackson, who was touring west Africa as the envoy of the Clinton administration. He received prominent and respectful obituaries in the American press.

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[4 April 1998]



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