

## WHEN THE BOYCOTT BEGAN TO BITE<sup>1</sup>

*Christabel Gurney describes the origins of the British movement to oppose apartheid, set up exactly forty years ago.*

FORTY YEARS AGO, on June 26th, 1959, a group of South African exiles and their British supporters met in London's Holborn Hall to call for a boycott of fruit, cigarettes and other goods imported from South Africa. The boycott got off to a slow start, but by the following March shopkeepers were being asked to stop selling South African products, the TUC, Labour, Liberal and Communist parties were backing the campaign, and twenty-two local authorities had banned South African fruit from their schools and canteens. On March 9th, 1960, Labour Party leader Hugh Gaitskell went on television to ask viewers not to buy South African goods.

Ever since the victory of the National Party in South Africa's 1948 general election, people across the British political spectrum had watched with alarm the introduction of legislation segregating whites, Africans, Coloureds (people of mixed race) and Indians in South Africa. Trevor Huddleston's elegy for Sophiatown, *Naught for Your Comfort*, sold over 100,000 copies. From 1955 Labour Party conferences passed resolutions questioning South Africa's fitness to be a member of the Commonwealth. In a move which prefigured later campaigns to ban segregated South African teams from world sport, South Wales miners protested at the presence of the all-white South Africans at the 1958 Cardiff Commonwealth Games.

This concern was part of a movement of support for freedom for Britain's own African colonies and of opposition to racial discrimination at home. The Movement for Colonial Freedom (MCF) campaigned for African and Asian independence; Christian Action, headed by John Collins, Canon of St Paul's Cathedral, collected funds for anti-apartheid leaders on trial in South Africa; and the Committee of African Organisations (CAO) gave a platform to exiled politicians from all of Anglophone Africa.

In South Africa the African National Congress joined with the Indian Congress, the Coloured People's Congress and the white Congress of Democrats to fight apartheid with direct action, mass stay-at-homes and passive resistance. But by the end of the 1950s the government had outlawed almost all forms of public political activity and arrested or placed bans on most of the Congress leaders. So Congress turned to boycott. In 1957, the people of Alexandra township walked to work for over three months and forced the local bus company to rescind a penny increase on fares. At its 1958 annual conference the ANC announced: "The

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economic boycott is going to be one of the major political weapons in the country." In the spring of 1959 it announced plans to boycott potatoes grown on farms using forced labour and launched a boycott of goods made by firms which supported the National Party. This was to begin on June 26th, the day marked every year since 1950 as South Africa Freedom Day.

The ANC was well aware of both the potential and the need for support from the outside world. In December 1958, the All-Africa People's Conference, held in Ghana, had called for an international boycott of South African goods. So now the ANC and its allies looked to friends overseas, saying "When our local purchasing power is combined with that of sympathetic organisations overseas we wield a devastating weapon."

But events moved faster than Congress had foreseen. The ANC named March 31st, 1960, as Anti-Pass Day, when it asked its supporters to protest against the pass laws. In an attempt to pre-empt it, the Pan-Africanist Congress which had broken away from the ANC in April 1959, announced that its members would demonstrate on March 21st. There had already been sporadic shootings by police in Natal. With the advantage of hindsight it is difficult to believe that attempts to bring about change through economic and moral pressure alone could have worked in 1959. In South Africa for the time being at least, the boycott tactic had come to the end of its usefulness; the significance of the Congress Movement's call was that it was taken up in Britain and the wider world.

In London a committed group of South African exiles kept in touch with events back home and worked to alert British public opinion to the evils of apartheid. They had already tried to persuade people to boycott South African goods in response to earlier campaigns in South Africa, but with only partial success. But now the ANC sent one of its leaders, Tennyson Makiwane, a former Treason Trialist, overseas to promote the campaign. One of the arguments used then, and later, against the boycott, was that it would hurt the very people - African workers and their families - whom it was supposed to help. Later this argument came to be used by people who were hostile to the boycott; but there were also those, among them many trade unionists, who then genuinely feared that a boycott would drive down African living standards. As an African representing the ANC, Makiwane argued convincingly that black South Africans were suffering already and were willing to pay a further price for their freedom.

Britain provided fertile ground for the campaign. At the end of the 1950s there was a ferment of extra-parliamentary political activity, much of it directed against the nuclear bomb, but also against racism and for self-determination in Britain's African colonies. Africa, especially the Central African Federation where a State of Emergency had been declared in Nyasaland, was high on the political agenda. So when the ANC, in the spring of 1959, asked the Committee of African Organisations (CAO) to organise a boycott, there was a ready-made constituency. CAO, with the support of a group of South African exiles organised in the South

African Freedom Association, responded by organising a 24-hour vigil at South Africa House and the Holborn Hall meeting on June 26th.

By the autumn CAO's Boycott Sub-committee had evolved into an independent Boycott Movement, involving both South African supporters of Congress and Patrick van Rensburg, a prominent member of South Africa's multiracial Liberal Party, together with representatives of British organisations. The Movement decided to organise an intensive month of boycott in March, when South African fruit started arriving in Britain.

At this point, in October 1959, the Labour Party suffered its third successive election defeat. The party was divided over nationalisation and nuclear disarmament, and in an attempt to harness the idealism of many of its activists and potential recruits, it declared 1960 to be "Africa Year." As part of this, it supported the March boycott month. The secretary of its Commonwealth sub-committee, John Hatch, had recently returned from South Africa where he had met members of the Congress movement; the party was probably also influenced by the decision of the South African Liberal Party that the boycott was "a legitimate political weapon." The Labour Party was joined by the TUC, which acted in response to a call from the international trade union confederation, the ICFTU. Of the three organisations which made up the National Council of Labour, only the Co-operative Union refused to back the boycott. However, some of its biggest affiliates, among them the Manchester and Salford, South Suburban and Royal Arsenal Co-op Societies, rejected its advice and took South African products off their shelves. The British Liberal Party also declared its support.

The month of action began with a rally of 8,000 people in Trafalgar Square on February 28th, addressed by Hugh Gaitskell, Liberal MP Jeremy Thorpe, Conservative peer Lord Altrincham, Rita Smythe of the Co-operative Women's Guild, Tennyson Makiwane and Trevor Huddleston. Hugh Gaitskell made clear that the Labour Party's support for the boycott was "a moral gesture," its object was not "to bring South Africa to its knees." The Boycott Movement accepted that the time was not ripe for calling for a government ban. "The boycott is essentially a gesture," it said, "but it is a gesture of the greatest significance." Its aim was to be "a truly national movement, in which the people of this country are free, for once in a while, to forget their domestic political wrangles in order to devote themselves to a great cause."

Nevertheless, Labour Party support was still vital to the campaign. By mid-March the London County Council and local authorities including Liverpool, South Shields, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, the West Riding of Yorkshire and Conservative-controlled Staffordshire were boycotting South African goods. All over the country "broad-based" campaign committees were formed and held poster-parades and public meetings. Theological students marched in Lampeter and in London, the Communist-led Acton and Park Royal Confed declared support for "our native brothers." In West London meetings like one in Portobello Road on

March 12th, were broken up by the ultra-right.

As the month drew to a close, the name Sharpeville flashed across the world. At this small township in the southern Transvaal police had opened fire on PAC demonstrators protesting against the pass laws, killing sixty nine and injuring hundreds more. Within a month the ANC and PAC were banned and hundreds of Congress Movement and Liberal Party activists detained. The Boycott Movement transformed itself into the Anti-Apartheid Movement (AAM), calling for government sanctions against South Africa and for support for all those struggling against apartheid.

As the rest of Africa won its independence, the AAM exposed the "unholy alliance" of South Africa, Rhodesia and Portugal, which refused to give up its colonies of Mozambique, Angola and Guinea-Bissau. After Ian Smith made his illegal declaration of independence in Southern Rhodesia in 1965, the AAM lobbied successive governments to insist that there should be no settlement before majority rule. The AAM campaigned against South Africa's support for Portugal in its African wars and, after Portugal's withdrawal in 1975, to stop South Africa destabilising independent Angola and Mozambique. With the Namibia Support Committee, it worked to end South Africa's illegal occupation of Namibia.

After Sharpeville, the South African government introduced ever more draconian legislation, culminating in the Terrorism Act of 1967. Together with the International Defence and Aid Fund the AAM campaigned for the release of people detained without trial, for decent conditions for convicted prisoners and to save the lives of those, like twenty-year old Solomon Mahlangu, condemned to hang. In 1988 a star-studded line-up played to a packed Wembley Stadium and a quarter of a million people gathered in Hyde Park to demand Nelson Mandela's release.

Above all the AAM called for sanctions and for the total isolation of apartheid South Africa. Mass demonstrations forced the cancellation of the 1970 Springbok cricket tour and sports-mad South Africa was expelled from nearly every international sporting federation. British business was a harder nut to crack. But in the mid-1980s, Barclays Bank and other British companies began to sell their South African subsidiaries and exports to Britain fell as more and more people backed the boycott. For thirty five years, hundreds of thousands of people in Britain joined Anti-Apartheid Movement campaigns, until in April 1994 South Africa held its first one-person, one-vote general election.

Forty years on, the world scene looks very different from how it looked in 1959. Its biggest challenge is the gap in wealth between the countries of the North and South, and the growing differentials within each nation state. In 1959 the Boycott Movement was formed from an initiative of South Africans who were suffering under apartheid, which was taken up by people in Britain. If it holds a lesson, it is that change comes through partnership and that people in the industrialised North

who want to improve living standards in the South should listen to, and work together with, those they are trying to help.