

# THE BUS BOYCOTT

RUTH FIRST

*Editor of "Fighting Talk"*

*Now undergoing Preparatory Examination on a charge of High Treason.*

"THE tiger has fallen," the people cheered. The streets were strangely quiet. First the great lumbering green buses of the largest transport organization for Africans in the country travelled empty along the route; later they were withdrawn altogether.

But for five and six hours every day endless streams of walkers filled the pavements. Over the rise that obscures Alexandra Township from the main road came the eruption of workers in the dawn hours when mists and brazier fires mingle indistinguishably together. End to end the road was filled with shadowy, hurrying figures. Then the forms thinned out as the younger men with the firmest, sprightly step drew away from the older people, the women, the lame.

In the late afternoons and early evenings, the same crowds turned their backs on the city and again took to the roads. Down the hill the footsloggers found it easier (though by the tenth and eleventh weeks of the boycott many shoes were worn to pitiful remnants), the spindly-legged youngsters trotted now and then to keep up, the progress of the weary women was slower still, here a large Monday washing bundle carried on the head, there a paraffin tin, or the baby tied securely to the back.

In the pelting rain, through the suddenly fierce storms of the Johannesburg summer, running the gauntlet of police patrols, the boycotters walked on.

They gave the cities of the boycott a new air. Here was no protest by Africans hidden among the dusty squares of the segregated locations, but an army of protesters, voting with their feet, it has been said, before the eyes of White Johannesburg and the Reef.

The year 1957 will be remembered as the Year of the Great Bus Boycott, and the cry "Azikhwelwa" ("We Shall not Ride) has left its stamp on contemporary events.

"Azikhwelwa" is one of those terse, succinct, "magic" catchwords that epitomizes a whole legion of African demands, a concept of struggle, an entire campaign. There has been, and still is, "Mayibuye" (May Africa Come Back), which dates from the thirties. Twin to "Azikhwelwa" is "Asinamali"

(We Have no Money), said not self-pityingly, but defiantly, the slogan first used widely in the post-war squatters' movement that swept the Reef as a protest against the chronic housing shortage, and which is again on the lips of Africans in the cities.

For months this year the country hummed with these two cries. From the week the bus company, the Public Utility Transport Corporation, jumped its fares twenty-five per cent., like a single shot fired, the people refused to board the buses.

Throughout the long weeks of the boycott, the political initiative in South Africa passed out of the hands of the Government and the Cabinet and into the hands of the African people. Not since the days of the Defiance Campaign had Africans held so strategic a position. Political controversy moved away from the sterile debates in the House of Assembly, where the Flag Bill receded into petty obscurity, and nation-wide attention was focussed on this demonstration by a voteless, voiceless people.

First beginnings of the boycott were in Alexandra Township, nine miles out of Johannesburg on the Pretoria road, where three previous boycotts have been conducted in the last 13 years. Simultaneously, Sophiatown and Western Native Township joined the boycott, and Lady Selborne in Pretoria. Eastwood joined in, and Germiston and Edenvale. Some twelve days later a sympathy boycott was declared in Moroko and Jabavu, and though the fares on these routes were not affected, these townships marched in solidarity to the end. One thousand miles away, in Port Elizabeth, a sympathy boycott was also declared. Soon 60,000 people were walking anything up to 20 miles a day to work and home again.

The cry "Azikhwelwa" and the boycott song banned by the S.A. Broadcasting Corporation rippled along the highways.

For weeks the wires hummed with the latest boycott news. The press was filled with letters expressing the unanswerable case of the boycotters. The boycott not only held the headlines, it pre-occupied Cabinet Ministers, industrialists, municipal councils and political parties. Hundreds of White motorists responded by giving free lifts to the boycotters and in so doing achieved more for race harmony and amity than scores of public meetings and political tracts.

Everywhere it was common cause that the people's refusal to ride the buses was an instantaneous reaction to the fare increases. Everywhere, that is, but in the ranks of the National-

ist Government. The day he returned from a visit to Europe and as he alighted from his 'plane, the Minister of Transport, Mr. B. J. Schoeman, delivered his Government's ultimatum in sharp staccato terms. As yet no investigation had been undertaken, the facts were brushed aside. The Government would not be intimidated, said the Minister. It was not prepared to intervene. Employers should help to end the boycott by refusing to pay workers for any time not worked, and should penalize them for late-coming or reduced productivity due to fatigue. The public ("misguided") should not give lifts to boycotters. "If they want a show-down they will get it. The Government will not give way, no matter whether the boycott lasts a month or six months."

What *are* the facts? It was the Manager of Pretoria's Non-European Affairs Department who stated publicly that most workers could not pay the increased fares. Over two-thirds of the Pretoria boycotters, he said, earned not more than £9 a month. They were unskilled pick-and-shovel workers, and the last wage award affecting them had been made in 1942. The old fares represented £10 a year, or more than one month's wages. The increased fares would raise that to £12 a year.

Except that the figures have altered in the last twelve years to underline the poverty of the African people more starkly, a Government commission appointed at the time of the previous Alexandra Township bus boycott has the definitive say on the ability of the people to pay increased fares.

In 1944, after an exhaustive investigation, the Commission of Inquiry into the operation of bus services for non-Europeans concluded that Africans could not only not afford to pay increased fares, but "it may be said that they cannot afford to pay anything" (for transport). "They certainly cannot afford to pay anything more in any direction, except by reducing still further their hunger diet."

The Commission found that: "the vast bulk of African workers . . . were in 1940 unable . . . to meet even the minimum requirements for subsistence, health and decency. . . . Notwithstanding improvements in minimum wage rates and the introduction of cost of living allowances, since 1940 the gap between family income and the cost of meeting the essential needs of the family has widened considerably, owing to higher prices. . . . Rent, transport and tax make the most rigid and urgent demands on the African worker. They cannot be

escaped. The worker is compelled to live far from his place of work and must pay for his transport. The tax must be paid or he may find himself in gaol. Owing to the compulsion imposed upon Africans by State policy and housing requirements, rent and transport should always be considered together and these together take too high a proportion of the family income . . ." (in 1944 rent and transport averaged 18 and 6 per cent. respectively of family income). The Commission found that the average monthly deficit in family incomes was £3 os. 5d.

Since 1944 the gulf between income and bare subsistence needs has widened. In 1950 the monthly average family deficit was estimated to have risen to £4 17s. 10d., and by 1954 to £7 11s. 5d.

Over the years the real value of wages has decreased, and the immediate shock effect of the boycott was to impress on industrialists and the general public alike the full impact of the below-the-breadline existence of the vast majority of urban Africans. The Africans could clearly not afford to pay the bus fare increases.

PUTCO, the bus company, on its side, made out a good case for its inability to carry on without further subsidy or a fare increase. Formed after the 1944 Alexandra Township boycott, the company was placed under judicial management in 1951 and began to climb out of its financial difficulties and to start paying a six per cent. dividend to its shareholders only when a Government subsidy was granted from 1952 onwards. Year by year the subsidy on fares on sub-economic routes was increased until by 1956 the Government was paying to the tune of £207,475. (The Government fills two of the five directorships of the Company and approves the chairman of the Board.) Despite the subsidy, PUTCO'S 1956 year-end Company Report presses either for a higher subsidy or for Transportation Board permission to increase fares. "The Company's financial position will become acute by January, 1957. . . . Unfortunately a solution is not so simple, because the Company is not only delicately poised financially, but also in its relations with the Bantu world." So it was with some trepidation that the Company applied to the Transportation Board for a fare increase.

Earlier protracted disputes centred in Alexandra Township were still fresh in the Company's mind, and history was to come full circle in 1957.

It was in October, 1939, that the bus companies then operating to Alexandra proposed a rise in the week-day fare from 4d. to 5d. A committee of residents was formed, campaigned for eight months against the fare increase, presented its case to the Road Transportation Board, and negotiated with the bus companies. The Board turned down the bus company application.

In 1943, however, the Board permitted an increase of the fare to 5d. On the first day of the new fare scale a huge procession of 15,000 people walked the nine and a half miles to Johannesburg. The march continued for nine days, and then the bus companies gave in and the fares were once more reduced to 4d.

The Government's Commission into non-European bus services that was appointed in January, 1944, made its findings known in November, concluding that the people could not afford higher fares; but before these findings were made public, the bus owners were putting forward claims for increased fares. The Government promulgated emergency regulations requiring employers to pay any increase in transport fares over and above those existing at September 1st, and the new 5d. fares were then fixed.

The United Party Government proposed that the workers collect these increased fares from their employers, but this was rejected in almost the identical terms in which the people of the township this year rejected the first proposed settlement to the current dispute, namely, that employers pay one shilling a week to their employees as a transport allowance. The people objected that the allowance would not cover casual workers, washerwomen, the unemployed, children. It placed the burden of collecting the extra 2d. a day on the workers; and many felt that employers would discriminate against Alexandra Township residents in favour of those living nearer the city.

At a residents' meeting in November, 1944, to consider the 5d. fares, a police ban on all gatherings of more than twenty persons was read, but by the morning after that meeting, the people had declared their boycott.

The boycott continued for six weeks. The Government rejected a Johannesburg City Council proposal for the subsidizing of the service. An attempt by the Council to buy the buses and run the service to the municipal boundary was turned down by the Road Transportation Board. In the sixth week of the

boycott there was talk of the people of Alexandra staging a stay-away from work protest, but in the seventh week a subsidized coupon scheme was improvised, whereby passengers bought 5d. coupons for 4d. A number of independent bus companies operating on the route were later taken over by the newly formed PUTCO, and the fares then reverted to 4d., with promises that in time they would be lower still. This boycott had been victorious. -

\* \* \* \*

The parallels between the 1944 and the 1956 boycotts are striking. So, too, are the differences.

In both boycotts the central Government had disowned any responsibility for the dispute and stood aloof from any solution. In both the initiative for a settlement had to come not from the obvious official quarters, but from industrialists, enlightened City Councillors, and African and democratic European bodies.

In both cases the boycotts were settled despite the Government, not because of it.

And yet the differences between South Africa's Governments in 1944 and 1956 are still the most telling factors in the total situation. The United Party Government in 1944 was still to some extent sensitive to public opinion, to public pressures. The Government of Mr. Strijdom is intransigent, intractable, unyielding. And nine years under this Government has changed African opinion too. It is not only more united, but also more demanding, more angry, increasingly suspicious because of promises never fulfilled, of undertakings that were never realized. These changes must be borne in mind in an attempt to explain and estimate the course of this year's three-month-long boycott and the thorny path trodden to a settlement.

It is the national policy of segregation, or apartheid, which has led to siting African townships at the outskirts of the cities where land is cheapest and furthest from the White areas. Apartheid and the colour bar in industry decree also that Africans shall do the lowest-paid, unskilled jobs and at rates of pay outstripped many times by White earnings. So heavy transport costs fall on that section of the population least able to bear them. Africans are not only the victims of segregation but they are forced to pay its heavy cost too.

Far from this or any previous Government's recognizing the State's responsibility to provide cheap and heavily subsidized public transport for the poorest groups in the community,

South Africa has turned normal, twentieth century principles of public finance on their heads. "Africans must pay for their own services" is the constantly recurring Nationalist Government theme, and so Africans face a sharp increase in their poll tax, now have to pay an additional levy for the building of schools in their locations, get the lowest school feeding grant for their children, and in many urban areas have just faced a rent increase amounting to 2d. a day.

A number of technical solutions to the boycott were suggested in its early stages and any one of these could have resulted in a settlement.

An increased Government subsidy to PUTCO rather than an increase in fares was an obvious solution, but the Government was adamant that it would not pay out a penny more. Instead, rather than see the boycott end in victory for the boycotters, the Government bore the weekly losses of the Company to stop its compromising or settling.

An increase in the Native Services Levy, through which employers would have subsidized the bus company, was another obvious solution, but again the Government would have nothing of this, and employers who recognized their obligation to help subsidize transport were driven to try to improvise other voluntary and much more clumsy schemes.

At the outset employers were hopeful of an interim transport fund, but the Government would not lend itself to this type of settlement either.

A war measure which requires employers to pay directly to workers who use the buses the difference between original and increased fares could have been revived, but this, said one Johannesburg daily with grim unconscious humour, could not be entertained by the Government for fear it would be accused of "using authoritarian measures!"

On almost every side there was deep concern that a speedy settlement should be reached. Employers, after all the chief beneficiaries of the system of cheap non-European labour, were convinced that Africans could not afford the fare increases and they were the first to try to devise ways whereby they could foot the extra bill. The Johannesburg City Council, which, in the 1944 boycott, had played the major role in launching the coupon system that led to the final settlement, was willing to contribute towards the subsidy. The public was on the side of the boycotters. The boycotters and their committees



repeatedly announced their willingness to negotiate a settlement. After the first few weeks of the boycott PUTCO, had it been a free agent independent of Government pressure, would have returned to the old scale of fares. Only the Government blocked the way to a settlement. It did more than that. It threw the might of the State machinery against the 60,000 walkers in a desperate bid to smash the boycott.

Despite the denials by the Police Commissioner that the police force was being used to crush the boycott, every day brought fresh police acts of intimidation against both boycotters and sympathetic motorists. In a few weeks of mass raids, 14,000 people were arrested on petty offences, most of the raids being conducted on the routes travelled by the boycotters or in the chief boycott areas. Thousands of summonses were issued under the Road Transportation Act. Men were arrested and detained in the cells overnight for crossing roads against the traffic lights. Policemen armed with tape measures and guns measured car seats to ensure that no boycotter sat on less than 15 inches of seat, scrutinized passes and driving licences, and made haphazard arrests.

And as the boycott continued as strong as ever and these bludgeon tactics of the police and the Government failed abysmally, Minister Schoeman prevailed on PUTCO to issue an ultimatum that if the boycott was not ended by the end of February, the buses would be withdrawn and the routes abandoned. And in case any other company had the notion that it could operate at lower costs, the Minister announced a new Bill prohibiting any company from operating on the routes from which PUTCO was withdrawing. It had become a matter of Government prestige that Africans should be compelled to pay the higher fare, even if there could be a lower one.

Why this attitude of the Government on the boycott issue? Sheer perversity, pique and blockheadedness? Another example to add to the already too numerous instances of the callousness and brutality shown to Africans?

There was more to the Government attitude than all this. The Government alarm at the bus boycott sprang from its pathological fear of allowing the African giant to feel—and use—his strength.

Nine years of Nationalist rule have been spent trying to bind the limbs of this giant, to halter and cripple him, to blindfold and muzzle him. The only answer to African demands that



the Nationalists know is the threat, the restriction, the prohibition, the ban, the deportation order, the baton and the bullet. Deputations are turned away; political leaders dubbed agitators; trade unions outlawed. The Government has taken to itself the power to declare martial law (the Public Safety Act); may impose floggings for political offences (the Criminal Laws Amendment Act); may prevent an African seeking redress in the Courts (the Prohibition of Interdicts Act). The strike weapon is illegal, and the avowed intention of the Minister of Labour is to "bleed African unions to death".

The African enjoys no vote, no representation on municipal or local bodies, no genuine method of consultation with any authority. His free movement is harassed at every turn by the pass laws, tightened up every few sessions by a new amending Bill. His right of free assembly is limited by a network of prohibitions in municipal bye-laws and statutes.

The boycott asserted the right of Africans to protest. Despite all the prohibitions and the mountain of laws curbing African political action, Africans in Johannesburg, Pretoria and the Reef had found a method of struggle which could not easily be stamped out by law. It might come to that, but there is not yet a law on the Union statute book imposing penalties on Africans for walking to work and home again by way of protest against a bus company.

The Government denunciation of the boycott as "political" was one of the sticks it hoped to use to beat the boycott, to ruin all chances of settlement, to frighten employers and the Chamber of Commerce and White South Africa as a whole with this spectacle of a menacing black force, using a fare rise merely as a pretext for engaging the Government in political battle to test its strength. For the bus boycott did, undoubtedly, develop into a political campaign. The economic facts, the poverty of a people that reckons its income in pennies, sparked off the boycott, and those who argue the economic basis for this protest could not be on firmer ground. But those who would separate the economic background from the political, who would see the African protesting only against a penny rise in fares, unmoved and unaffected by Minister Schoeman's "break the boycott" threats, by the daily police intimidation, by the pin-pricks, the humiliations and the abject miseries of apartheid, erect distinctions which must be blown over in the first gusts of any African protest or campaign.

The Government, however, had its own reasons for characterizing the boycott a political manoeuvre. It was thus insinuating that the fare increase was merely a pretext for the boycott, whereas a prompt return to the 4d. fare could have been the most obvious disclaimer. The Government branded the boycott leaders trouble-makers and "workless township thugs". But it is a Government deluded by the notion that it is only "agitators" who are dissatisfied, that only "Communists and left-wing extremists" express the demand for political rights of the African people; that only "red termites" organize protest movements.

This is the fantasy world of the Native Affairs Department empire. It is the golden edict of these Native administrators that the Africans are satisfied with their lot and only those who fall under alien and left-wing influences try to revolt against Dr. Verwoerd's paternal authority. Any expression of African aspirations, however mild, is "agitation".

But Africans are no longer bewildered, mute, raw tribal creatures. The boycott showed that the African in the towns is an industrialized, settled, politically aware individual, organized, articulate, purposeful. His organizations are mature and resourceful. His resolve and his courage are not easily broken.

Raw to criticism, enraged by opposition, and, above all, apprehensive of the bitter harvest which they know their treatment of the African people must inevitably reap for them, the Nationalists were forced to recognize in this boycott that apartheid has not succeeded in breaking African opposition and its backbone is stronger than ever.

It needs to be. The negotiated settlement by which bus users would buy 5d. coupons for 4d. and which finally drew the people of Alexandra Township back into the buses is only to last three months. In the absence of a more permanent solution, new struggles clearly loom ahead. There is also the cry from all sides for increases in African wages. The boycott must be seen as a prelude to many related campaigns.

Above all, the bus boycott highlights other lessons for South Africans. It often takes such dramatic episodes to convince complacent White South Africa that Africans feel their denial of rights so keenly. And it showed Africans what they had suspected and now know for certain: that in active campaigning for basic human and economic demands, their unity holds the key to success.