



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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African American passengers boycott segregated buses in Baton Rouge, 1953

June 18,
1953

to: June 25,
1953

Country: United States

Location City/State/Province: *Baton Rouge, Louisiana*

Goals:

For black passengers to be able to sit down in the frequently empty seats reserved for white passengers.

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 048. Protest meetings
- 071. Consumers' boycott
- 179. Alternative social institutions
- 191. Alternative transportation systems

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 011. Records, radio, and television
- 048. Protest meetings
- 071. Consumers' boycott
- 179. Alternative social institutions
- 191. Alternative transportation systems

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 048. Protest meetings
- 071. Consumers' boycott
- 179. Alternative social institutions
- 191. Alternative transportation systems

Methods in 4th segment:

- 048. Protest meetings
- 071. Consumers' boycott
- 179. Alternative social institutions
- 191. Alternative transportation systems

Methods in 5th segment:

- 048. Protest meetings
- 071. Consumers' boycott
- 179. Alternative social institutions

Methods in 6th segment:

- 048. Protest meetings
- 179. Alternative social institutions

Classifications

Classification:

Change

Cluster:

Economic Justice

Human Rights

Group characterization:

- African American bus passengers

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

The United Defense League - held mass meetings to organize the boycott, established a volunteer police force and free alternative transportation system for boycotters.

Reverend Theodore Jefferson Jemison

Partners:

Theodore Jefferson Jemison (African American; reverend)

Raymond Scott (African American; local tailor)

Horatio Thompson (African American; owner of a local gas station)

Dupuy Anderson (African American; volunteer driver)

Willis Reed (African American; volunteer driver)

Almenia Freeman (African American; volunteer driver)

Johnnie A Jones (African American; legal counsel)

External allies:

WLCS radio station – allowed Reverend Jemison and Raymond Scott to announce that a bus boycott was going to happen.

Involvement of social elites:

Not known

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

Groups in 2nd Segment:

- WLCS radio station

Groups in 3rd Segment:

- Volunteer drivers
- bus passengers

Groups in 4th Segment:

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:

Segment Length: *Approximately 1.5 days*

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

Baton Rouge bus companies, Baton Rouge City Council

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

Prior to the actual boycott, almost one hundred bus drivers went on strike in response to the passing of Ordinance 222. There were also others who simply did not obey the ordinance and ordered black passengers not to sit in seats formerly reserved for whites.

Campaigner violence:

None known

Repressive Violence:

There were no known direct acts of violence from the bus company, but local Ku Klux Klan members burnt crosses at Mount Zion Baptist Church and at Reverend Jemison's home.

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

5 points out of 6 points

Survival:

1 point out of 1 points

Growth:

3 points out of 3 points

Notes on outcomes:

Under the leadership of Reverend Jemison and the United Defense League, African American passengers successfully revised the official passenger policy of the Baton Rouge Bus Company. However, the new city ordinances, while granting all of the campaign's demands, did not significantly improve black-white relations in Baton Rouge or put an end to segregation. Only years later would effective change occur with the campaigns of Dr. King and the passing of Civil Rights legislation. There were also some participants who thought the boycott ended prematurely and continued to boycott even after Reverend Jemison called it off.

The strike was able to unite essentially the entire black community in Baton Rouge. Two-thirds of the bus company's

passengers were black and between 90-100% of them participated.

The Jim Crow laws had been in full effect for quite some time before the 1950s era of Baton Rouge, Louisiana. The city, like most cities in the South, had laws regarding racial segregation. A major aspect of the city's laws was the seating policy on the city's buses. Black residents were restricted to sitting in a designated "colored section" located at the back of the bus while the front of the bus was reserved for white passengers. Over two-thirds of the buses' passengers were black and consequently, many blacks stood up on the bus while empty seats were available in front of them. With the outlawing of independently black-owned buses in early 1950, African Americans had no alternative and so they complied with the seating policy.

On February 11, 1953, Reverend Theodore Jefferson Jemison went to the Baton Rouge city council in order to vocalize his grievances regarding the seating policy. This action coincided with an increase in bus fare rates that occurred the month prior. Later, in early March, a group of leaders from the black community effectively petitioned the city council to enact an ordinance that would assuage most of the black community's concerns regarding the city's buses.

This ordinance, which was called Ordinance 222, had the potential to have great ramifications on the city's segregation laws. The ordinance left no seats reserved for white passengers; instead, it called for a first-come-first-served policy. This meant that the seats were available to whoever was there to sit in them, regardless of skin color. There was, however, one condition; blacks were to be seated rear to front, while whites were to be seated front to rear. Once the ordinance went into effect in mid-March, many black passengers began to sit in seats previously available only to white passengers.

Much to the dislike of the black community, white passengers and bus drivers largely ignored the ordinance. For a period of roughly three months, the front seats implicitly remained reserved for white passengers. Bus drivers repeatedly inhibited any black passengers that attempted to sit in the front of the bus. The black community of Baton Rouge erupted in outrage when, in early June, a bus driver harshly mistreated a black woman who tried to sit near the front of the bus. Following that incident, the black community complained to Jesse Webb, the mayor of Baton Rouge, and demanded that he make sure that Ordinance 222 be enforced. The community's demands were met and bus company officials lambasted their drivers to obey the ordinance. Reverend Jemison decided to investigate the ordinance's enforcement by sitting in the front of a bus with a copy of Ordinance 222 in his possession. The driver on that particular bus refused to observe the rules set by the ordinance and instead, drove to the nearest police station. Remarkably, the police officer that responded to the conflict sided in agreement with Reverend Jemison.

On June 15, 1953, over one hundred bus drivers went on strike in response to the small victory for the black community and in protest against Ordinance 222. Four days after the strike, the Attorney General ruled that Ordinance 222 was illegal because it was not in accordance with the state of Louisiana's laws on racial segregation. Refusing to accept defeat, Reverend Jemison and other enraged leaders from the black community formed the United Defense League (UDL) and began discussing plans for a complete boycott of the city's buses. The UDL brought together various church congregations and secular institutions in order to establish a governing body of central leadership and organization.

The following day, on June 19, Reverend Jemison and Raymond Scott, a black tailor, went on WLCS radio and publicly announced their plans for a boycott. Jemison and Scott pleaded with the black community not to ride the buses and assured the community that there would be free transportation for all who participated in the boycott. According to statistics at the time, between ninety and one hundred percent of black residents boycotted the buses. Having heard the announcement on the radio, many African Americans walked to work and then the news quickly spread around town.

As promised, the highly organized "free car lift" system was developed in order to make the boycott and its participants self-sufficient. Individuals volunteered their time and used their own cars to pick up black residents on their way to work. The volunteer cars drove down the exact same bus routes and picked people at the exact same bus stop locations, just as the segregated buses had done. People like Dupuy Anderson, Almenia Freeman, and Willis Reed were eagerly waiting to transport their fellow African Americans to and from work. Volunteer drivers worked shifts that began as early as 5:00 a.m. and shifts that

finished as late as midnight. According to Jemison, there were up to seventy cars being used in the “free car lift” system. The entire operation was free and absent of fares due to potential legal ramifications. Reverend Jemison and the rest of the United Defense League made it imperative to have reliable legal counsel present at all the meetings. Johnnie Jones was one of the more active members of the legal counsel. Jones was present at the boycott-planning meeting and remained involved throughout the boycott.

The financial elements of the campaign were as equally organized and effective as the legal elements. Jemison initiated the flood of donations by donating some of his own money. His congregation had previously given him \$650 and he made the decision to invest the money into the boycotting efforts. Many other church congregations also contributed thousands of dollars to the boycott effort. After every mass meeting, the United Defense League collected large sums of money to fund the boycott. Gasoline, tires, and other essential resources were provided for each and every volunteer driver. Horatio Thompson, an owner of a local gas station, often provided the volunteer drivers with gasoline.

Eventually, the attendance rates at the meetings exceeded any local church’s capacity and so the meetings were moved to the auditorium of a local high school, McKinley High School. At most meetings, there were between 2,500 and 3,000 people in attendance. In order to ensure order, the UDL established an alternative volunteer police force.

The massive loss in passengers cost the Baton Rouge bus companies up to \$1600 per day. The massive losses in revenue forced the leaders of city council and the bus companies to be more flexible in the discussions that had been happening throughout the boycott. Eventually, the council members, bus company officials, and black leaders were able to come up with a compromise. This compromise would later become known as Ordinance 251.

Ordinance 251 stipulated that the first two rows of the buses be reserved for whites and the last two rows be reserved for blacks. All of the remaining seats would be filled on a first-come-first-served basis just as Ordinance 222 had stipulated. On the sixth day of the boycott, the United Defense League’s executive board met to discuss the possibilities of accepting or rejecting the compromise, and after a highly contested debate, they approved the compromise with a 5-3 vote. Later on that day, they opened up the discussion to the rest of the movement’s members at Memorial Stadium. There were reports that over 8,000 people were in attendance at the meeting. Reverend Jemison gauged the amount of support for Ordinance 251 by asking those who supported the compromise to stand and then asking those who were against the compromise to stand. More members stood up in favor of the compromise.

The support for the compromise expressed at Memorial Stadium was not unanimous; a significant number of members wanted to reject the compromise and continue boycotting. During the closing moments of the meeting, there were many who shouted, “Stay! Stay!” or “Walk! Walk!” Having met the original goals of the boycott, Jemison was content with calling off the boycott on June 25, 1953. It was on this day that Jemison announced the conclusion of the “free car lift” system. Shortly after the boycott ended, Dr. Martin Luther King contacted Reverend Jemison to ask for advice regarding initiating a bus boycott and operating an alternative transportation system for its passengers. The end result from that discussion would be the highly successful boycott in Montgomery (see “African Americans boycott buses for integration in Montgomery, Alabama, U.S., 1955-1956”).

Research Notes

Influences:

This campaign influenced the Montgomery bus boycott two years later (see "African Americans boycott buses for integration in Montgomery, Alabama, U.S., 1955-1956")(1).

This campaign was a precursor to the wave of campaigns marked on this site as the U.S. Civil Rights Movement, which began with the Montgomery bus boycott.

Sources:

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Additional Notes:

Although this campaign has been retrospectively criticized for ending prematurely, it accomplished everything it was designed to accomplish.

Name of researcher, and date dd/mm/yyyy:

Julio Alicea, 12/09/2010

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