



# Global Nonviolent Action Database

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## African Americans boycott buses for integration in Montgomery, Alabama, U.S., 1955-1956

- U.S. Civil Rights Movement (1950s-1960s)

1 December

1955

to: 20 December

1956

**Country:** United States

**Location City/State/Province:** *Montgomery, Alabama*

### Goals:

As recounted by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in his memoir, *Stride Towards Freedom*, the boycotters in Montgomery initially refused to ride city buses “until (1) courteous treatment by the bus operators was guaranteed; (2) passengers were seated on a first-come, first-served basis – Negroes seating from the back of the bus toward the front while whites seated from the front toward the back; (3) Negro bus operators were employed on predominantly Negro routes.” During the campaign, the goals shifted to eliminating segregation on city buses altogether.

## Methods

### Methods in 1st segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 013. Deputations
- 020. Prayer and worship
- 037. Singing
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 048. Protest meetings
- 122. Literature and speeches advocating resistance
- 128. Boycott of government-supported institutions
- 141. Civil disobedience of "illegitimate" laws
- 191. Alternative transportation systems

### Methods in 2nd segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 020. Prayer and worship
- 037. Singing

- 048. Protest meetings
- 122. Literature and speeches advocating resistance
- 128. Boycott of government-supported institutions
- 191. Alternative transportation systems

**Methods in 3rd segment:**

- 001. Public speeches
- 020. Prayer and worship
- 037. Singing
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 048. Protest meetings
- 122. Literature and speeches advocating resistance
- 128. Boycott of government-supported institutions
- 191. Alternative transportation systems

**Methods in 4th segment:**

- 001. Public speeches
- 020. Prayer and worship
- 037. Singing
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 048. Protest meetings
- 122. Literature and speeches advocating resistance
- 128. Boycott of government-supported institutions
- 191. Alternative transportation systems

**Methods in 5th segment:**

- 001. Public speeches
- 020. Prayer and worship
- 037. Singing
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 048. Protest meetings
- 122. Literature and speeches advocating resistance
- 128. Boycott of government-supported institutions
- 191. Alternative transportation systems

**Methods in 6th segment:**

- 001. Public speeches
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 020. Prayer and worship
- 037. Singing
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 048. Protest meetings
- 122. Literature and speeches advocating resistance
- 128. Boycott of government-supported institutions
- 191. Alternative transportation systems

**Additional methods (Timing Unknown):**

- 071. Consumers' boycott

## Classifications

### **Classification:**

Change

### **Cluster:**

Democracy

Human Rights

### **Group characterization:**

- African American residents and clergy

## Leaders, partners, allies, elites

### **Leaders:**

Women's Political Council, Jo Ann Robinson, President; Montgomery Improvement Association, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., President; Ralph Abernathy; C. D. Nixon; Rosa Parks; Montgomery NAACP; other African American clergy in Montgomery

### **Partners:**

Bayard Rustin; Glenn Smiley; Clifford and Virginia Durr

### **External allies:**

Fellowship of Reconciliation; In Friendship; War Resisters League; A. Philip Randolph (President of Pullman Car Porters Union); A. J. Muste ("America's Number One Pacifist" according to Time Magazine); James Farmer (director of CORE), Ella Baker (civil rights veteran organizer including with NAACP), Stanley Levison (human rights lawyer)

### **Involvement of social elites:**

The U.S. Supreme Court ruled in favor of integration of the bus system in Montgomery

## Joining/exiting order of social groups

### **Groups in 1st Segment:**

- Clifford and Virginia Durr
- Fellowship of Reconciliation

### **Groups in 2nd Segment:**

- A. J. Muste
- A. Philip Randolph
- Bayard Rustin
- Committee for nonviolent Integration
- Glenn Smiley
- James Farmer
- War Resisters League

### **Groups in 3rd Segment:**

### **Groups in 4th Segment:**

**Groups in 5th Segment:**

**Groups in 6th Segment:**

**Segment Length:** 64 days

## Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

**Opponents:**

City of Montgomery, Alabama, and city bus company

**Nonviolent responses of opponent:**

Not known

**Campaigner violence:**

Not known

**Repressive Violence:**

Violence perpetrated by proponents of the status quo. This included bombing churches and homes of campaign leaders and shooting at integrated buses and African American passengers.

## Success Outcome

**Success in achieving specific demands/goals:**

6 points out of 6 points

**Survival:**

1 point out of 1 points

**Growth:**

3 points out of 3 points

**Notes on outcomes:**

After a thirteen-month struggle, the boycotters succeeded. Following a U.S. Supreme Court decision, passengers on Montgomery's city buses could ride on an integrated basis. The Court upheld that segregation on public buses was unconstitutional.

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The yearlong boycott of Montgomery, Alabama's city buses by between 40,000 and 50,000 African American residents was in the works for years before it began in December 1955. At that time in Montgomery, as well as in many cities across the southern United States, laws required African Americans to sit at the back of buses and yield their seats to white passengers if no other seats were available. Montgomery's Women's Political Council (WPC), founded in 1946, was working to end segregation on city buses well before the start of the boycott. On May 21, 1954, WPC president Jo Ann Robinson wrote in a letter to the Mayor, "there has been talk from twenty-five or more local organizations of planning a city-wide boycott of buses."

In the spring of 1955, Claudette Colvin, 15 years old, was arrested for challenging Montgomery bus segregation. In the fall of that year, police arrested Mary Louise Smith after she refused to yield her seat to a white passenger.

On December 1, 1955, Rosa Parks, a leader in the African American community in Montgomery and in the local chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), refused to give up her seat on a Montgomery bus to a white passenger. Due to her stature in the African American community in Montgomery, Parks' arrest served as the spark for the Montgomery bus boycott.

In response to Parks' arrest, the WPC called for a one-day boycott of Montgomery's city buses for Monday, December 5, 1955. The organization produced and distributed leaflets throughout Montgomery's African American community.

Former local NAACP president, E. D. Nixon, with help from white allies Clifford and Virginia Durr, secured bail for Rosa Parks quickly after her arrest and got her released. Nixon, who was a veteran organizer with the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, then organized a planning meeting for December 2 at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church for clergy and other African American leaders. All present agreed to support and publicize the December 5 boycott. During that weekend, local radio and television stations, as well as newspapers, picked up the story and gave it prominence.

The boycott of Montgomery's City buses began on December 5, 1955. That day, 90 percent of Montgomery's African American community stayed off the public buses. The boycott had only been scheduled as a one-day protest, but that afternoon, African American clergy and community leaders decided at a meeting to extend the boycott. At that meeting, the leaders founded the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA) to assume organizing leadership of the boycott. Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., who had just received his doctorate in systematic theology from Boston University and arrived for his first ministerial position at the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, became the organization's president.

That evening, the MIA held a mass meeting of several thousand African American community members at Holt Street Baptist Church. Attendees voted to continue the boycott.

The MIA tried unsuccessfully to negotiate with city officials and the bus company. Rev. King recounts their position as a refusal of African Americans to ride Montgomery city buses "until (1) courteous treatment by the bus operators was guaranteed; (2) passengers were seated on a first-come, first-served basis – Negroes seating from the back of the bus toward the front while whites seated from the front toward the back; (3) Negro bus operators were employed on predominantly Negro routes."

Initially, Montgomery's eighteen African American owned cab companies transported boycotters for 10¢ a ride, as opposed to the normal 45¢ as a way to support the campaign. Quickly, city officials and police condemned this practice and warned that any taxi driver who did not charge the standard 45¢ a ride would be arrested. In response to this threat, the MIA, assisted by white supporters, organized an intricate carpool system in early 1956 as an alternative means of transportation for the boycotters. Organizers of this carpool system got the idea from T. J. Jemison who was a leader of the 1953 Baton Rouge, LA bus boycott. Approximately 300 cars functioned as part of the carpool system during the Montgomery bus boycott. Organizers of the carpool established "dispatch stations" in African American neighborhoods throughout Montgomery where boycotters could gather in the mornings to be transported to work. Similarly, in the evenings, "pick-up stations" served the same function for the return home.

### **Leaders' houses bombed**

On January 30, 1956, opponents of the Montgomery bus boycott bombed the house of Rev. King; the family escaped injury. A crowd of angry campaign participants gathered outside the house. Although many in the crowd were eager to retaliate violently, Dr. King persuaded them to leave and maintain their nonviolent discipline. He said, "Be calm as I and my family are. We are not hurt and remember that if anything happens to me, there will be others to take my place." On February 1, 1956, E. D. Nixon's house was bombed as well.

In February 1956, Montgomery city officials obtained injunctions against the boycott. During the same period, city officials indicted leaders of the boycott under a 1921 law that prohibited conspiracies that interfered with lawful business. The state of Alabama prosecuted Rev. King under this law, and he was tried and convicted. He was ordered to pay \$500 or face 386 days in jail. The resulting national media coverage of Rev. King's trial and conviction gained support for the Montgomery boycott from across the country.

In February 1956, at the suggestion of the southern author Lillian Smith, the New York-based War Resister's League sent staff member Bayard Rustin to Montgomery to coach Rev. King on strategy and organization for nonviolent direct action. Rustin, an African American, had many years of experience in direct action and helped organize the 1947 Journey of Reconciliation that sought to integrate buses in the Upper South. Rustin profoundly influenced Rev. King and cultivated in the young leader a commitment to nonviolent resistance. Rev. King accepted Rustin's counsel and formed his own interpretations of Gandhian

strategies, melding them with Southern African American Christian values.

Due to Rustin's political past, the War Resisters League determined that it was detrimental for Rustin to remain in Montgomery. The Fellowship of Reconciliation arranged for Rev. Glenn Smiley to replace Rustin as Rev. King's advisor in nonviolence. Smiley would continue Rustin's role as advisor to Rev. King throughout the remainder of the Montgomery bus boycott. Before returning to New York, Rustin moved to Birmingham to establish secret communication lines with Rev. King and the other boycott leaders. Rustin advised Rev. King from Birmingham, and upon his return to New York, organized the Committee for Nonviolent Integration to support the boycott. Rustin also worked with Stanley Levison and Ella Baker to organize In Friendship, raising funds for the boycott.

In the spring of 1956, the local NAACP filed a suit in Federal District Court challenging the constitutionality of bus segregation in Montgomery. The case opened on May 1 and on June 4, in a 2 to 1 decision, the District Court Justices found that Montgomery was violating the constitutional rights of African Americans by operating segregated buses. The city of Montgomery and the state of Alabama immediately announced an appeal to the U.S. Supreme Court, thereby delaying the implementation of the ruling. The boycott continued through the summer.

In September 1956, the Montgomery mayor asked the city legal team to prepare a request for a temporary injunction against the carpool system. The legal team prepared such a request and submitted it to a local court. On the night before the hearing, Monday, November 12, 1956, Rev. King addressed a mass meeting in Montgomery and warned the African American community that the carpool system would likely be enjoined.

### **A complicated victory**

The following day, Tuesday, November 13, 1956, as court proceedings were taking place, news came from Washington that the U.S. Supreme Court had affirmed the Federal Court's decision that segregation on city buses was unconstitutional. New life was breathed into the Montgomery bus boycott, and although the local court granted the injunction against the carpool system, hope ran through the African American community.

The executive committee of the MIA decided to officially end the boycott after the Supreme Court ruling but encouraged all African American residents of Montgomery to stay off the city buses until the Court order was served on city officials. Two simultaneous mass meetings on either side of Montgomery approved this decision on the night of Wednesday, November 14. No one expected that they would have to wait five weeks for the ruling to reach Montgomery.

African Americans in Montgomery remained off city buses through this period, despite the local court's injunction of the carpool system. African American neighborhoods and individual blocks organized "share-a-ride" programs to meet the transportation needs of neighbors during this time. The MIA started to prepare the people for returning to the buses. In mass meetings and flyers the leaders urged people to remain nonviolent and courteous even when facing violent hostility.

On December 20, 1956, the U.S. Supreme Court order declaring bus segregation unconstitutional finally reached Montgomery. Early the next morning, Friday, December 21, 1956, E. D. Nixon, Ralph Abernathy, and Glenn Smiley arrived at Rev. King's home. Media reporters swarmed as the four walked to the nearby bus stop. At 6:00, they boarded the first integrated bus in Montgomery and headed downtown. Glenn Smiley, the white Methodist minister from Texas, took his seat next to Rev. King, making the desegregation clear.

The ensuing days were relatively peaceful as African American and white residents of Montgomery rode the buses together. Some incidents of violence and intimidation towards African Americans were reported in those first days, but the general atmosphere was one of calm.

### **Violence escalates again; bus service cancelled**

Then, in January 1957, the violent attacks intensified. Buses and African American riders were shot at, mostly at night in dark

areas of the city. In response, the bus company cancelled all service after 5 PM, and after more violence, cancelled bus service altogether. Violence continued. African American churches were bombed as well as the home of Ralph Abernathy. A smoldering bomb was found on the porch of King's home. Seven whites were arrested in connection with these bombings but they were never convicted.

African American and white community organizations in Montgomery condemned this violence and it ended soon after the accused white men were tried. Bus service returned to normal schedules throughout the city and ran on an integrated basis.

African American religious leaders from throughout the South gathered in Atlanta in January 1957 to spread the bus integration campaign throughout the South. At that meeting, those leaders formed the Southern Christian Leadership Council and elected Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. as its president.

## Research Notes

### Influences:

The strategies for this campaign were heavily influenced by the Gandhian methods of nonviolent direct action. Further influences came from Bayard Rustin, Glenn Smiley, and from the work of T. J. Jemison, organizer of the 1953 Baton Rouge, LA, bus boycott (see "African American passengers boycott segregated buses in Baton Rouge, 1953")(1).

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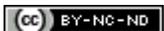
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### Name of researcher, and date dd/mm/yyyy:

Carl E. Sigmond, 29/08/2011

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