South African blacks boycott apartheid in Port Elizabeth, 1985-86

15 July
1985
to: 12 June
1986

Country: South Africa
Location City/State/Province: Port Elizabeth
Location Description: Residents of black townships specifically targeted businesses in Port Elizabeth

Goals:
Initial goals: the integration of public institutions, the removal of troops from black townships, and the end of workplace discrimination.

Goals later demanded/long-term goals: State of emergency to be lifted and political prisoners to be released.

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 037. Singing
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 048. Protest meetings
- 071. Consumers' boycott
- 131. Refusal to accept appointed officials

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 071. Consumers' boycott
- 131. Refusal to accept appointed officials

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 071. Consumers' boycott
- 131. Refusal to accept appointed officials

Methods in 4th segment:

- 131. Refusal to accept appointed officials

Methods in 5th segment:

- 001. Public speeches
• 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
• 037. Singing
• 071. Consumers' boycott
• 131. Refusal to accept appointed officials

Methods in 6th segment:

• 071. Consumers' boycott
• 131. Refusal to accept appointed officials

Notes on Methods:
In May of 1985, several women suggested the idea of boycotting white businesses in Port Elizabeth to PEBCO. The consumer boycott was met with a 100% compliance rate by boycotters, as was observed by those who were sent to monitor the boycott. In November a deal was reached that stated that the boycott would be suspended until March if white businessmen could secure the release of black leaders. This was also helpful in keeping the movement unified because the upcoming Christmas shopping season could have strained the compliance to the boycott. The consumer boycott was renewed on April 1 until June 12, 1986.

Classifications

Classification: Change
Cluster: Economic Justice
Human Rights
National/Ethnic Identity

Group characterization:

• Black South Africans

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:
Mkuseli Jack

Partners:
Port Elizabeth Black Civic Organization (PEBCO), Consumer Boycott Committee, United Democratic Front (UDF)

External allies:
White business owners/white shop-owning families, Janet Cherry

Involvement of social elites:
Bishop Desmond Tutu

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

• Janet Cherry
Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:
P.W. Botha, South African government

Nonviolent responses of opponent:
Not known

Campaigner violence:
Not known

Repressive Violence:
Arrests, ban (house arrest), imprisonment, beatings, use of police dogs.

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:
1 point out of 6 points

Survival:
0.5 points out of 1 point

Growth:
1 point out of 3 points

Notes on outcomes:
The consumer boycott was successful in pressuring white business owners to demand the government for the goals of the boycotters to be met. By March, troops in black townships were withdrawn and black leaders were released, but this particular campaign did not lead to the main goals of desegregation of facilities or workplaces and did not lead to the release of long-term political prisoners.

The South African government waged a violent campaign to shut down the economic boycott and the organizations involved with the boycott. The organizations were driven underground, but they did continue to survive.
owned newspapers and news stations did not report these disturbances.

To launch an effective campaign to cripple the white-owned institutions of Port Elizabeth and undermine the legitimacy of apartheid, several women suggested the idea of a consumer boycott to the Port Elizabeth Black Civic Organization (PEBCO) in May of 1985. Instead of shopping at businesses in Port Elizabeth, black South Africans would be encouraged to shop within the townships. This economic boycott began on July 15, 1985, and was met with a 100% compliance rate as noted by observers who were sent to monitor the outcome of the boycott. Within five days of the boycott, a white Member of Parliament noted that the economic boycott was the most effective weapon used yet. Due to the success of the consumer boycott, the government declared a state of emergency. Through the state of emergency the government imposed curfews, made thousands of arrests, restricted the movement of individuals, and ordered the South African army to occupy townships. The boycotters then responded to the state of emergency with a few more demands: the end of the state of emergency and the release of long-term political prisoners, such as Nelson Mandela.

By September 1985, white business owners became desperate and called upon the government to meet the demands of the black South Africans. In November, the boycott was still hurting the white businesses in Port Elizabeth greatly, and so a deal was reached: the boycott would end until March if the business owners arranged for black leaders to be released. Not only was this decision helpful for the businesses, but it was also helpful for the campaign as well. Christmas shopping season was coming up, which could have strained the South Africans’ commitment to the boycott. By halting the boycott for a few months, it ensured the unity of the people for the next fight.

In 1986, as the deal was approaching its end, the boycotters imposed a deadline of March 31, stating that the boycott would resume if the initial demands were not met. On March 11, the government unexpectedly banned two leaders, one of whom was Mkuseli Jack. However, on March 22, the ban was lifted by the decision of a Supreme Court Justice on the grounds that the government had given insufficient reasons. Mkuseli Jack ripped up the ban papers, and used the celebration as a way to represent the solidarity that the campaign required.

As the demands of the boycotters were not met by March 31, the boycott was renewed on April 1. Mkuseli Jack re-energized the boycott by proclaiming that, "our buying power is going to be the key that is going to decide the future, that is going to decide our destiny in this country." The boycott continued for nine weeks, but on June 12, 1986, another state of emergency was secretly imposed. Security forces searched through the townships, arresting thousands and raiding the offices of black civics, trade unions, the UDF, the South African Council, and churches and also confiscating documents. Botha also spoke out to Parliament claiming that the boycotters and the campaign were aspects of the scheme by the African National Congress and Communist Party to take over the nation by force. Peaceful protestors in front of the Parliament building were arrested. This state of emergency was not the last as it was renewed every year for 3 more years. Repression became the primary instrument utilized by the South African government. Anti-apartheid organizations were driven underground, ending the consumer boycott.

**Research Notes**

**Influences:**

Consumer boycotts in Port Elizabeth led to boycotts in other cities in South Africa. (2)

**Sources:**


Additional Notes:
A Force More Powerful: A Century of Nonviolent Conflict (Documentary) also covers this campaign.

The state of emergency was repeated every year for 3 years.

Name of researcher, and date dd/mm/yyyy:
Yein Pyo, 23/09/2012

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