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# South Africans successfully boycott buses in Johannesburg, 1957

- [\(mainly or initiated by\) people of color](#) [1]
- [included participation by more than one social class](#) [2]

## Timing

7 January

1957

to:

1 April

1957

## Location and Goals

Country:

South Africa

Location City/State/Province:

Johannesburg

Location Description:

South Africans walked from suburbs/townships of Alexandra, Sophiatown, Germiston, Edenvale, and the Western Native Township

[View Location on Map](#)

Goals:

Thwart bus fare increase, demand government to make a study regarding the need for higher wages for Africans.

## Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 037. Singing
- 071. Consumers' boycott
- 126. Boycott of government departments, agencies, and other bodies

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 071. Consumers' boycott
- 126. Boycott of government departments, agencies, and other bodies

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 028. Symbolic sounds
- 071. Consumers' boycott
- 126. Boycott of government departments, agencies, and other bodies

Methods in 4th segment:

- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 071. Consumers' boycott
- 126. Boycott of government departments, agencies, and other bodies

Methods in 5th segment:

- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 071. Consumers' boycott
- 126. Boycott of government departments, agencies, and other bodies

Methods in 6th segment:

- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 071. Consumers' boycott
- 126. Boycott of government departments, agencies, and other bodies

Additional methods (Timing Unknown):

- 065. Stay-at-home

Notes on Methods:

The slogan of the campaign was the phrase: "Azikwelwa," which means "we will not ride." This phrase symbolized the boycotters' commitment to not riding the buses in protest of the fare increase.

It was noted that the boycott started with singing, but that later on the boycotters would make the several mile treks to work wearily. Therefore, singing was put in the 1st segment only, although the singing could have carried on for a few more segments.

The Movement for a Democracy of Content advocated for a stay-at-home and the boycott committee asserted that "when we are too tired, we will stay home and rest." The boycotters as a whole may not have followed this method, and it is not noted whether the calls for stay-at-home were adhered to, but it could have been a method utilized without specific timings.

Segment Length:

2 weeks

## Classifications

Classification:

Defense

Cluster:

Economic Justice

National/Ethnic Identity

Group characterization:

- Black South African bus riders in Johannesburg

## **Leaders, partners, allies, elites**

Leaders:

Dan Mokonyane, Alexandra People's Transport Action Committee (APTAC)

Partners:

The various organizations with representatives on the APTAC: the three factions of the African National Congress (Africanists, Freedom Charterists, the Women's League), the Standholders' Association, the Standholders' and Tenants' Association, the Vigilance Association, the Tenants' Association, and the Movement for a Democracy of Content.

External allies:

White motorists

Involvement of social elites:

Oliver Tambo, Nelson Mandela

## **Joining/exiting order of social groups**

Groups in 1st Segment:

- Boycotters in the following black suburbs of Johannesburg joined the campaign for only a week:  
Atteridgeville/Mooiplaats/New Clare/Germiston/Edinvale
- White motorists
- sympathy boycotters in Moroka and Javabu

Groups in 2nd Segment:

Groups in 3rd Segment:

Groups in 4th Segment:

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:

Additional notes on joining/exiting order:

White motorists joined the boycott by giving rides to the boycotters. However, the police cracked down on and harassed the white motorists, which caused some of them to stop helping the boycotters, but some white motorists continued to give daily lifts for the boycotters.

The South Africans in Atteridgeville, Mooiplaats, New Clare, Germiston, and Edinvale joined the boycott for a week only

Segment Length:

2 weeks

## **Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence**

Opponents:

South African government, Public Utility Transport Corporation (PUTCO)

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

Not known

Campaigner violence:

Not known

Repressive Violence:

Arrests

## 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

Total points:

9 out of 10 points

Notes on outcomes:

The goal of thwarting the raised bus price was successful. The boycott ended with a Bill in Parliament that doubled the levy on employers for subsidization of African transport, which meant that the boycotters could ride the buses at the old fare of 4d. However, the Government did not follow through on the study of the need for higher wages for South Africans.

The boycott and the organization survived overall during the time of the campaign. Even though the police arrested boycotters for crossing streets at wrong times or attempted to stop the white motorists from helping the boycotters, the APTAC and boycotters continued to boycott the buses and were successful in the end.

The campaign grew immensely, especially with the number of participants. During the three months of the campaign a total of 60,000 Africans walked instead of taking the busses, 20,000 of the 60,000 were South Africans living in Moroka and Javabu. These participants joined in the boycott out of sympathy toward the boycotters in Johannesburg even though they themselves had not experienced any bus fare raises. Also, Oliver Tambo and Nelson Mandela sent the boycotters words of encouragement, which allowed the scope of the campaign to expand from being a simple matter of a raise in the bus fare to the greater problem of apartheid and the disparity between white and black South Africans. White motorists also participated in the boycott by being allies for the boycotters as the motorists gave the weary boycotters lifts.

In 1957, the Public Utility Transport Corporation (PUTCO) in South Africa raised the bus fare from 4d to 5d for commuters in Johannesburg. This was equivalent to 2 pennies or 1 shilling (15c) more that the South Africans would need to pay a week.

However, 80 percent of Johannesburg Africans lived under the poverty line, and so the raise was far more than the Africans could afford. The black South Africans in Alexandra grew tired of the behavior and exploitation of the PUTCO and of their own meager wages.

On 7 January, 1957, these Africans in Alexandra launched a bus boycott exclaiming, "Azikhwelwa!" "We shall not ride!" was the rallying cry as they walked the 22 miles from Alexandra to Johannesburg rather than taking the bus.

The Alexandra People's Transport Action Committee (APTAC) formed on 7 January and encouraged organizations in the township to send representatives to join the committee. Many organizations took APTAC

on this invite and sent representatives. These organizations included the African National Congress (which consisted of three factions: Africanists, Freedom Charterists, and the Women's League), the Standholders' Association, the Standholders' and Tenants' Association, the Vigilance Association, the Tenants' Association, and the Movement for a Democracy of Content.

The APTAC facilitated the campaign and by the second day of the boycott the sentiment had spread to Sophiatown, in Johannesburg, and Lady Selbourne, in Pretoria. South Africans in Atteridgeville, Mooiplaats, New Clare, Germiston, and Edinvale joined the boycott as well, but only participated for a week.

During the second week of the boycott, South Africans in Moroka and Javabu began to boycott in sympathy even though the bus fare had not been raised in these townships.

The reaction from the public was generally sympathetic toward the boycotters. White motorists helped the boycotters by providing them with daily "lifts" to destinations.

The police responded to the boycott and the white motorists with harassment. The police stopped cars to search them, demanded licenses, took down names, required "passes" from the riders, and measured the seats of cars to make sure that no boycotter sat on less than 15 inches of the seat.

Toward the boycotters themselves, the police constantly stopped them to check for "passes," arrested them on minor charges, such as crossing an intersection at a red light, and deflated the tires of bicycles or confiscated the valve to make the African workers late to work.

Oliver Tambo, the African National Congress leader, and Nelson Mandela, the ANC deputy leader, sent messages of encouragement to the boycotters. Although the boycott had initially started as a response to the raise in the bus fare, the campaign soon encompassed the issue of apartheid as the political feeling of the need to be liberated and regarded as equals spread.

Although the boycott initially began with singing and loud cries of "Azikhwelwa," the boycotters soon grew weary and continued their boycott silently. The boycotters grew tired from the long travels to and from their destinations, but still held strong to their demands. The result was that the boycott committee asserted that "When we are too tired, we will stay home and rest." The Movement for a Democracy of Content had even called for a stay-at-home since the first week of the boycott. Therefore, the boycott continued despite the exhaustion experienced by the boycotters, who were encouraged to remain at home if they grew too tired.

Employers, industry, and the Chamber of Commerce attempted to negotiate with the boycotters as they realized that their economic interests were being damaged with the bus boycott. Negotiation was futile within the first few months, but finally a compromise was reached on 1 April.

With this compromise the boycotters purchased bus tickets that were stamped as 5d even though the boycotters had only paid 4d. The Africans then took the buses again on the condition that a study was to be made of the need for higher wages and that a permanent solution for the bus fares be implemented by the end of June.

The solution was reached near the very end of June as the government capitulated with the introduction of a Bill in Parliament that doubled the levy on employers for subsidization of African transport. This Bill meant that the boycotters could ride the buses at the old fare of 4d instead of the raised fare.

This solution was met with great celebration, as it was not only an economic victory, but a political one as well. The boycott was an example to the country as it proved two things: that protests against the national government

could be successful and that the black South African boycotters were much more powerful than had been previously perceived.

## Research Notes

Influences:

The bus boycott that started in Alexandra spread to other townships, such as Sophiatown, Germiston, Edenvale, and the Western Native Township. (2)

Veterans of the 1957 bus boycott believe that the success of boycott inspired the Soweto Uprising. (2)

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

Yein Pyo, 30/09/2012

[Back to top](#)

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