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EDITORIAL:

AZIKHWELWA!

"If they want a showdown they will get it. The Government will not give way, no matter whether the boycott lasts a month or six months."

— The Minister of Transport, Mr. Ben Schoeman.
(Rand Daily Mail, 6.2.1957)

THE PUTCO bus company, suddenly and without warning, jumped up its fares by twenty-five per cent. on the Alexandra route at the beginning of 1957. Similar increases were demanded on the Sophiatown-Western Native Township route, on the Pretoria and other services.

Standholders', Congress and other organisations in Alexandra, within a couple of days, called a mass meeting. The people were furious. They took up the cry "Azikhwelwa!" — We shall not board the buses! They have been walking ever since. By the time this article was written (February 11) the average Alexandra worker walking twenty miles a day on a five-day week (but many work six days) had marched over 500 miles: half-way to Cape Town.

The spirit of the Alexandrans was infectious. Soon Sophiatown was walking, and most of Western Native Township. Eastwood and Lady Selborne in Pretoria stopped using PUTCO buses. And Germiston, and Edenvale.

Then, a wonderful thing happened. The tens of thousands of bus users living in the Municipal shanty-towns of Moroka and Jabavu were not affected by fare-increases in their PUTCO buses. But at a great mass

meeting — despite the opposition of the local advisory board under the chairmanship of Dr. Ray Phillips — they decided unanimously to boycott their bus service and to walk seven or eight miles a day to Nancefield station. This was a fine, unselfish gesture: to show their sympathy and support with others who were walking. It showed a social consciousness and public spirit which would be hard to equal anywhere in the world.

Week after week, through the blazing heat and the tempestuous summer rainstorms, the boycotters have kept on walking.

AN ARMY OF HEROES

It is perhaps hard to think of the men and women of Alexandra and the other boycotters as heroes. They do not march forth in lines and columns and battalions. They have no brass bands to keep them cheerfully in step, no uniforms to make a brave show. The endless and motley procession straggles endlessly along Louis Botha Avenue. In the evening, the people are very tired. Many are women, and many are not young any more. They have done a hard day's work, and it will be dark before they reach home.

Weariness and heat and rain and the hard pavements and the bus company are not the only enemies of the bus boycotters. Ever since Minister Ben Schoeman came back from Europe, they have had a bigger enemy to face. He was barely off the plane, he could not have studied the facts, when he announced that the Government "would not be intimidated", and he was going to "break the boycott". From that time the people found that the whole machinery of the State was directed against them.

Peaceful boycott meetings, at Lady Selborne and Moroka, have been dispersed — the former with a murderous ferocity. Daily the walkers on their long march are stopped by the police and nagged for passes and tax receipts and even searched. Minister Schoeman calls on employers to cut their pay if they are late, or sack them if they show signs of fatigue. The many sympathetic motorists who stop by the roadside to pick up those who are "weary and heavy laden" are forced to stop, day after day, give their names and addresses, produce their driver's licences, assure the police that they are not plying for hire. Egged on by Schoeman the Chamber of Commerce, the Chamber of Industry and the Johannesburg City Council join forces in a united front against the boycotters to tell them they have no real grievance, their wages are enough, they are being intimidated by scheming politicians, they should get back on the buses "by next Wednesday."

That was quite a few Wednesdays ago, but the boycotters have continued undeterred. They continue their long, long trek, hardly lifting their eyes to look at the empty green buses with a few PUTCO employees, masquerading as passengers, that occasionally pass up and down the road.

There is something about this quiet, unyielding determination that should compel the admiration and respect of even the most unsympathetic.

There are no pickets to be seen — a fact that makes nonsense of all the Nat.-inspired talk about "intimidation". The people are as one — they have said "Azikhwelwa", and they won't get on those buses till the fares go back to fourpence.

You can't look at this long line of people making their way every morning and evening without being aware of a sense of purpose. Workmen with their jackets over their arms, older men with walking-sticks, pretty young factory girls, women with babies on their backs or big bundles of washing on their heads, thousands of cyclists, often struggling with their firms' heavy delivery-bikes up the killing Orange Grove hill — these are no ordinary people on their way to work. They are true heroes of our times.

TWOPENCE A DAY

For it is more than the twopence a day which has stirred these tens of thousands of people into action. Many could perhaps afford to pay another two pence (though, if you count two or three bus users in the family, an extra £7.10s. a year is no small sum to any non-European family.) But even those who could afford to pay are walking or taking taxis because of their overriding sense of unity and duty towards the great majority who can't afford it.

The indignation of the people at the fare-increases was the last drop that filled their cup of bitterness to overflowing. It was a hateful and unwarranted new imposition — and there was a simple, legal way of hitting back and expressing their protest: not to use the buses.

Yet, behind that protest and implicit in it, perhaps not consciously in the minds of the boycotters but real and vital enough for all that, are all sorts of other protests.

Their protest against the wretched wages paid to Non-European workers in South Africa, the miserable two or three pounds a week that fail to cover the barest needs of life, so that hunger and sickness are their constant companions.

Their protest against the hateful segregation-apartheid system enforced against Non-Europeans not only by the Nationalist but also by their predecessors in the Government for very many years: the system that makes the poorest workers travel furthest to work;

Their protest against unrepresentative government, that denies the non-White person any say in the laws that rule the country, the city and the township, a government that offers no constitutional methods of redress; that bans, banishes and arrests beloved and respected leaders when they dare to voice their people's claims and aspirations.

When Government propagandists repeat that the boycott is "not purely economic", that it has "political motives" and so on, they mean to insinu-

ate that the boycotters are not really worried about the twopence, that they have another sinister motive — to carry out a "test of strength against the Government. Now all that is a lot of drivel. The extra twopence is a desperately important matter to the people, otherwise they wouldn't have walked for one day, never mind six weeks. That is a measure of their poverty: and that is what the Government doesn't want to admit. The twopence is the central issue in this boycott — a statement that could very simply be proved by restoring the fares to the level of December, 1956.

POLITICS AND ECONOMICS

But that the boycott itself is an event of deep political significance is a fact which it is idle and unnecessary to deny. It is no service to South Africa to keep repeating that the bus boycott is "purely economic". As if it had no connection with all the pent-up resentment of the African people at their treatment by the Nationalist Government and its police; at the pass laws and their extension to women; at Bantu Education; at Group Areas and mass removals; at the sort of society that condemns Africans in Africa to only the hardest and worst paid types of employment, forces them to live at distances that mean twenty miles a day travelling to and from work, and expects them to pay the bill.

All that is "politics" — and it is absurd to try to discuss the bus boycott apart from that background as it is to expect the African National Congress, as the leading African organisation, to refrain from participating in this struggle, or pointing out its lessons to the people.

It is because they sense and know these factors that people, not only in Moroka and Jabavu, but as far away as Port Elizabeth, feel called upon to show their sympathy and support in a practical way.

It is a coincidence, but it is no accident, that workers in far-away Barcelona and Madrid, have chosen the same method of a boycott of public transport to demonstrate their protest against low wages and soaring costs of living. Living under a Fascist dictatorship, forbidden the rights of voting for Parliament, forming trade unions, or striking, they have protested in this way, no doubt, because they reasoned that people cannot be punished for not riding in trains and buses for which they have to pay fares.

Of course, they hadn't heard of Mr. Schoeman.

THE MIND OF A RACIALIST

It is not very difficult to follow the train of thought of Mr. Schoeman and his colleagues in the Union Cabinet. He didn't need to know the details of the bus-users' case. He didn't have to study comparative figures of wages and cost-of-living for urban Africans. All he needed to know was that the African people were taking united action in support of a demand — any demand. That was enough for him.

For Mr. Schoeman's "philosophy" is very simple. He made it perfectly clear during the Assembly debate on the Native Labour (Settlement of Disputes) Act, when he was Minister of Labour. Put into plain language, it could be quite fairly stated something like this:

"Africans must not be allowed to gain anything by their own efforts and organisation. Anything like that will be a menace to White supremacy. Their trade unions must be bled to death. Their boycotts must be broken. Any action by Africans, legal or illegal, means a "showdown". 'They ask for higher wages, lower fares? Give them batons and bullets.'"

Once you can see into Schoeman's mind his actions are easy to interpret. A dispute between a bus company and its passengers is seen as a sort of rising, a "showdown", a "trial of strength." The African passengers are seen as "the enemy"; their leaders are "thugs and Communist agitators."

It is precisely this outlook which determines the attitude of the Government to any and every movement towards the advancement of the non-White people. If they boycott the buses they are Communists; if they strike for higher wages they are criminals; if they ask for the vote they commit high treason.

For this psychotic fear and hatred of the people is not confined to Mr. Schoeman. It reflects the official outlook and policy of the Nationalist Party. The Nationalist Government has no respect for the great majority of the people over whom it rules and whose humble and obedient servant, in terms of democratic theory, it is supposed to be. Their minds live in the past. Ignoring the extraordinary industrial and urban development of the sub-continent over the past half-century they imagine themselves as defenders of a voortrekker laër, with the impi's chanting battle-songs outside.

THE 1957 SPIRIT

There can be no return to the past in which these men are living. These are not the tribal warriors of the Nationalist imagination, these men and women who march with such steadfastness and discipline, stoutly resisting every provocation to violence. They are the children of a modern industrial society. They work hard from seventy-thirty till five in factories, and not all Dr. Verwoerd's Bantu schools can close their minds to the lessons of modern life which their work teaches them. Like people in similar conditions the world over they are reaching out irresistibly for those rewards and compensations that alone can make the strain and stress of urban life and labour tolerable: a decent standard of life, leisure and culture, education and opportunities for the rising generation, a say in making the laws and moulding the country's way of life.

Everywhere the old aristocracy and feudal classes resisted these demands — and everywhere they failed. They will fail in South Africa as well. They will fail, and they are failing, because they are out of step with the invariable laws of social development and human progress.

For nine years the Nationalists have done their utmost to stamp out the spirit of the African people. They have tried every known form of repression. They have outlawed movements, newspapers and ideas. They have deported and excommunicated leaders, arrested and imprisoned them. They have launched ever new repressive laws, accompanied by unprecedented police violence. Dawn raids on people's homes, spying on individuals, opening their letters, eavesdropping on their conversations and all the other ugly manifestations of the police state have become commonplaces in South Africa.

At the end of those nine years, at the beginning of 1957, with all the chief alleged "agitators" arrested and facing charges of High Treason in the Johannesburg Drill Hall, the spirit of the people is higher than ever before. It has expressed itself already in the mighty united movement of something like a hundred thousand people behind the slogan "Azikhwelwa!" If the successful conference of factory delegates convened recently in Johannesburg is any indication, the 1957 spirit is about to express itself in a still more formidable movement for a general increase in wages.

WE CAN'T AFFORD IT

This spirit can never be quelled by the big stick methods of the Nationalists. All they can and do accomplish is to make the struggle fiercer and more bitter, and to impose an ever-mounting burden of unnecessary and wasteful expenditure on the country's economy. The bus boycott would surely have been settled quickly but for Schoeman's provocative intervention. PUTCO, losing nearly £20,000 a week, would probably soon have come to terms, with the help of the employers' associations and the City Council, who prior to meeting the Minister were quite favourably disposed. But, as usual, the Government instead of facilitating a settlement was out to sabotage any such thing. In the same way the N.A.D. is always anxious to run to the scene of an industrial dispute in order to prevent any direct negotiation between the employers and the union. In the same way, on the broader scene, the Nationalists will do whatever they can to deter European organisations from participating in the multi-racial discussions proposed by the African Ministers' conference last year and already approved by A.N.C., Liberal and Labour Parties and others.

All this has cost and is costing the country dearly, not only in such imponderables as inter-group tension and ill-will, but also in terms of hard cash — the towering costs of the evergrowing machinery of repression, the man-hours lost through illness, fatigue and undernourishment, the rapidly declining world confidence in the stability and soundness of the Union from an economic point of view.

South Africa cannot afford the Nationalist Government. That is the real message the bus boycotts have for us. The sooner all of us, of all races, understand that vital message the sooner we shall get down to the essential task of planning in mutual consultation and agreement, a new way of life acceptable to all the people. A way of life that will open the door to freedom and prosperity for our country, and enable South Africa to take its rightful place as a respected member of the family of nations.