

A timely article by the banned ex-Secretary of the African National Congress, now on trial for treason.

# **BOYCOTT AS A POLITICAL WEAPON**

By WALTER SISULU

**B**oycott has been used as an effective political weapon in different countries ever since it came into use as a recognised method of struggle against the Irish Land Act of 1880.

There are outstanding examples from all over the world of the effectiveness of boycott in political struggle: the boycott of the Duma in Russia during the struggle against the Czarist regime; the boycott against the British Legislative Council in India by the Indian Congress. And we in this country are in a particularly good position to understand fully how effective the boycott weapon can be, both as an economic and political weapon. It is still one of the few methods of struggle which are not illegal in South Africa today.

Since the end of the last war, we have seen outstanding examples of successful boycotts: the Alexandra bus boycott of 1944; the Western Native Township Tram boycott; the Port Elizabeth bus boycott; the Cape Town bus boycott; the unique Evaton bus boycott which continued for more than a year, and finally brought down the bus owners to their knees. No less remarkable is the bus boycott on the Rand and Pretoria at the time of writing this article. The fact that people can walk for twenty miles a day, week in, week out, in a 100% effective boycott, organised in less than two weeks; and in such diverse areas as Sophiatown, and W.N.T. in less than two days — this is a tribute to the determination of the people in utilising this form of struggle.

Tens of thousands of Africans have participated in these boycotts, and even more compelling is the fact that 20,000 Africans in the Moroka-Jabavu areas have carried on a boycott in sympathy, in support of their brothers who are struggling against higher fares.

In these boycotts our experience is that each time they have raised the political consciousness of the people, brought about a greater solidarity and unity among the masses. In this way they have raised the peoples' organisations to a higher level, demonstrating the correctness of the action.

However, inevitably people with limited democratic rights and few means of expressing their grievances begin to think of boycotts as a means to demand political rights. And it is our main concern in this article to discuss boycott as a political rather than a purely economic weapon.

## WHEN TO BOYCOTT?

There has been controversy over the correctness of the timing of various boycotts against existing institutions and Parliamentary bodies. Such controversies existed in the left movements in Europe, in Germany, Austria, Hungary, and to a lesser extent in England; the issue being whether or not it is correct for members of progressive parties to participate in parliamentary elections and other reactionary institutions. In our own country this controversy has existed for more than ten years. This is a question on which we must have a clear decision. Taking the history of these countries, learning from their experience, we may be able to understand our own problem more easily. For although conditions differ from one country to another, yet the principle is much the same.

During and after the war the national liberatory movement took a greater interest in the boycott weapon; the Unity Movement, the Communist Party of South Africa, and the African National Congress all decided at different times on the boycott of the different political institutions, such as parliament, Advisory Boards and Bungas. Even during this period the issue was a highly controversial one within the organisations concerned. It was during this period that the political consciousness of the people began to emerge, and the militant spirit of the masses was felt. It was also a period of industrial development, of historic strikes and protests of the people; the Squatters movement of 1944-43; the Mine Strike of 1946 in which many Africans were killed. All these things raised the greatest indignation among the people. This was, therefore, correctly regarded as the best time to build the national movements and to force the powers by mass action instead of by petitions or deputations. This also made people naturally regard government institutions with contempt.

It was also argued that people did not distinguish clearly between their own organisations and reactionary bodies; and that there was a need of making people adopt an attitude of contempt to the Advisory Boards and Councils, and to understand their functions and limitations. To work within these bodies and at the same time to condemn them unreservedly would have led to confusion. Therefore the best approach seemed to be an active boycott of such institutions.

There were, however, some who chose the weapon of boycott because it seemed an "easy" course, one which would not expose either the people or their leaders to any hardships. This school of thought is found even today

amongst those who shout the loudest and become more militant when they talk of boycott. They see no other suitable form of struggle save boycott. That explains also why some of those who favour boycott are so strongly opposed to any other form of struggle, under the pretext that the people are not yet trained and ready.

Since the decision of the A.N.C. in 1949, this issue has come up for discussion at almost every conference. There are differences of approach. As far as the Unity Movement is concerned, anyone who participates in any of the elections of various political institutions are collaborators of the government; that whoever so participates, even when fighting for the destruction of such institutions, betrays the struggle. It sounds very militant, of course, to talk about positive boycott, about collaborationists and non-collaborationists. This tendency is confined not only to the non-European Unity Movement, but has penetrated the ranks of the A.N.C.

This surely is being dogmatic. It is a serious political mistake of confusing the tactics with the principle; which means that the decision to boycott is not subject to any changes.

Let us examine the arguments advanced by both sides, those who believe that boycott is the best possible weapon with which to oppose these inferior political institutions, and those who believe that boycott is not necessarily the best or only method.

#### MILITANT OR EXTREME?

From the first point of view, the argument is advanced that these institutions were created to serve the interests of the oppressors and to deceive the oppressed and fool them into believing that they have some political rights. It is argued that the effect of this is to retard the progress of the oppressed people. That to participate, therefore, in these institutions amounts to collaborating with the oppressors, confusing and bluffing the masses; and that the correct thing to do is to have nothing at all to do with these institutions at any time, under any circumstances.

This, indeed, sounds very militant and uncompromising, and it is this approach which raises a tactic into a principle. On the other hand, it is argued that boycotting of these institutions may not necessarily be the best and correct method to fight against their existence. But on the contrary, participation in these institutions may at certain times be the most effective and correct method of exposing them and struggling for more effective representation.

This approach clearly recognises the fact that these institutions exist not because of our wishes, nor are they due to our making; that the people may participate in them for various reasons, and that the correct thing to do is to educate the masses about the purpose of these institutions, thus making them have no confidence in them as such. This approach recognises the fact that the principle is not the boycott of the institutions, but the principle is the rejection of differential political institutions.

## CONDITIONS CHANGE

The failure on the part of many people to realise the seriousness of elevating a tactic of struggle into a fundamental principle could do irreparable harm to the movement. Take, for instance, this decision to boycott taken several years ago. Does it follow that because it was correct then it is correct today? Have conditions not changed at all since the decision was taken? They certainly have. Many forms of struggle which were legal then are illegal today. Organisations and leaders have been banned. Almost all forms of protest have been outlawed. Holding meetings has become almost impossible. Surely the wisdom of leadership lies in knowing what tactics to apply at a given time, dictated to leadership by the prevailing conditions. The correctness of such tactics must be judged from their effect on the movement. The primary thing is that such tactics raise the standards of the organisation higher and higher. Once we differentiate between the principle and the tactic, in other words, in this case to know that the boycott is a tactic and the rejection of reactionary political institutions is the principle, then the fight against such institutions can include participation in them with a view to rendering important the system that gives rise to them.

The A.N.C. resolution for the boycotting of these institutions also made provision for the establishment of the Council of Action, whose function was to decide upon the institution to be boycotted. It was realised that it was not sufficient to say that we boycott these institutions, when people may not be ready for it. There are people even within the A.N.C. who do not realise that boycott is a tactic and only one of the methods to be used for the struggle for national independence and against white domination and discriminatory laws. The fact, some of them argued at the Queenstown National Conference in 1953 that they regarded the decision to boycott not just as a tactic.

They were wrong, and Congress should rediscuss the whole matter now with a view to reviewing the unclear and unsatisfactory 1949 resolution, which no longer reflects a greatly changed situation.