

THE PLACE OF BOYCOTT

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THE discussion conducted in 'Africa South' on the mechanics of social change have assumed that the tactic of boycott will play an important part in the struggle for emancipation in South Africa. Non-Europeans have a long tradition of waging boycott campaigns; and in attempting to discern the course of future political activity, it might prove profitable to investigate this history.

What do we mean by boycott? It is generally defined as a concerted effort to withdraw, and to induce others to withdraw, from political, economic, or social relations with offending groups or individuals. It is a practice that has been resorted to, in one form or another, for many centuries, though the term itself is of comparatively recent origin. Captain Boycott, an Irish landlord agent, had reduced the wages of his tenant farmers and compelled them under protest to complete the harvesting of his crops. On rent day, Boycott sought to evict his tenants, who reacted by calling a mass meeting where Boycott's own employees were persuaded to desert him. In addition, the Irish Nationalists launched a campaign to ostracize Boycott and his family, the action being designated a "boycott" by Father John O'Mailley.

Boycott was often the only means by which the Asian peoples could reply to the assault upon their countries by the Western powers. In 1905 the Chinese launched a boycott of American goods as a protest against the treatment of their countrymen in the United States; and after the Nanking incident in 1929, a similar boycott of British products was organized. The part played by economic boycott in the struggle for Indian freedom is well enough known.

Indeed the first non-Europeans to employ the boycott in South Africa were the Indians. In 1907, the Transvaal Indian community, under the leadership of Gandhi, refused to register under the pass law regulations introduced by General Smuts. Ten years later, the first big African boycott took place, when African mineworkers protesting against rising prices directed their anger against the concession store-keepers with whom they traded. White reaction was to set the pattern for later

movements towards African economic advancement. The *'Natal Mercury'* wrote of "the sinister influence of the Industrial Workers of the World notoriously financed by Germany".

The first major attempt by non-European organizations to launch a political boycott came in 1935, at the time of the disenfranchisement of the Cape Africans, when Africans responded to the Hertzog-Smuts legislative programme by calling a series of conferences that culminated in the summoning of an All African Convention.

This gathering, probably the most representative of non-European leaders yet assembled, rejected the Government's proposals that a Native Representative Council be established as a substitute for the Cape African franchise. On this score the conference was adamant. Yet within a short while an African delegation, many of whom had been the leading spirits in the All African Convention, was surrendering the common roll franchise for the parliamentary seats (three in the House of Assembly and four in the Senate) provided under the Representation of Natives Act, and accepting the advisory Natives' Representative Council. For the next thirteen years the question of boycotting this differential representation was to haunt the non-European political scene since, for a variety of reasons, the African National Congress chose to accept the concessions.

Then, in 1943, the Smuts Government created a Coloured Advisory Council. The Coloured community, led by the Non-European Unity Movement, an offshoot of the All African Convention, successfully boycotted this advisory body, reopening in the process a vituperous debate on the advisability of supporting differential institutions.

The polemics in support of boycotting the "dummy institutions" insisted that the African leaders were playing the "herenvolk's" game. They were deceiving the African people into believing that they were represented in the Councils of State, thereby blunting their potential militancy. The N.E.U.M. demanded the boycott of all inferior institutions in the strategy of total withdrawal. Such a policy, however, was diametrically opposed to that of the African National Congress which was, quite unlike the N.E.U.M., committed to a policy of frontal attack on authority. The parliamentary representatives and the Native Representative Council, it was therefore argued, provided additional platforms for the political activities of Congress. The clear result was that the All African Convention and its

allies, in conformity with their policy of withdrawal, spent most of their energies in denouncing the African National Congress and its supporters.

The political boycott tended, therefore, to peter out in a series of destructive and sterile diatribes. Yet the militant language, if not action, of the Unity Movement was to have some small effect on the A.N.C. The Congress Youth League, influenced by some of the radical conceptions of the Convention, provided an important pressure group within the African National Congress; and as a result of its activities and influence, the Congress adopted its now famous Programme of Action. This set out a series of tactical weapons that might be employed by the A.N.C., including the organization of boycotts, campaigns of civil disobedience, non-co-operation movements, and one-day stoppages of work.

Clearly it was necessary that the Congress put its house in order. Just previous to this it had defined its attitude to the visit of the British royal family. "As a protest", they declared "against the barbarous policy of the Union Government" in denying elementary rights to Africans, and "in view of the fact that these injustices were perpetrated in the name of His Majesty, George VI", the Congress proposed to boycott the activities that surrounded the royal visit. Very little effort was made to organize the boycott, and in the end it was a miserable failure—so much so that the President-General of Congress travelled to Eshowe himself to meet the royal family.

At much the same time, however, the potential of the boycott was being demonstrated by the Natal Indian community. In 1946, the Smuts Government introduced the Asiatic Land Tenure and Indian Representation Act, which set out to deprive Indians of the unrestricted right to own land. In an attempt to sugar the pill, two White "Indian Representatives" were created; but the Indian community rejected both aspects of the legislation, and not one of the thirty thousand persons entitled to register did so.

The best known, and probably the most successful, application of the boycott tactic by the African people can be found in the innumerable bus boycotts, the first of which took place in 1943 when the price of bus fares between Alexandra Township and Johannesburg rose from 4d. to 5d. The poverty-stricken Africans retaliated by walking the nine and a half miles from their homes to the centre of the city where they were employed, and after

ten days the bus companies restored the old fares. In November 1944, the companies again raised the fares, and before a boycott could be organized, the police placed a ban on all gatherings of more than twenty people. Nevertheless the word got round, and for six weeks the people of Alexandra Township refused to use the bus service. Ultimately the companies gave way again, and the fares were restored to 4d.

When, at the beginning of 1957, the fare was raised once more, the people of Alexandra recalled their resounding slogan "Azikhwelwa" (we shall not ride), and were joined by the people of Sophiatown, Western Native Township, and Lady Selborne in Pretoria. A little later Eastwood, Germiston and Edenvale were boycotting their bus services, till finally the commuters of Jabavu and Moroka, whose fares had not risen, came out in a sympathy boycott, together with Africans in Port Elizabeth, a thousand miles away.

The Nationalists hastened to change an economic boycott into a political show of strength. The Minister of Transport, Mr. Ben Schoeman, returning from a visit to Europe, declared, "If they want a show-down they will get it. The Government will not give way, no matter whether the boycott lasts a month or six months." Throwing every weapon of mass intimidation they could muster into their campaign, the Nationalists tried to break the back of the boycott. But in the end the boycotters won, and Parliament voted a subsidy for the bus company.

And it is not only bus boycotts that have been staged. Commercial and industrial firms who chose to victimize strikers found the non-European community boycotting their products.

The Transvaal Chamber of Industries, in a confidential memorandum, referred to a strike of Indian workers in a textile factory during May, 1957. The strikers were *locked out* (a term which is easily interchangeable with boycott) and replaced by African workers at lower rates of pay. The memorandum noted that the company was confronted by a deputation from the A.N.C., the Natal Indian Congress, the Congress of Democrats and the Liberal Party, urging the company to enter into negotiations with the Textile Workers' Union. According to the memorandum, the A.N.C. then wrote to the company and accused it of employing African labour below the normal rates of pay in order to break the strike. "The letter threatened", so the Chamber of Industries claimed, "that unless this practice was immediately ended, a boycott against the firm's products would

be organized.”

The Chamber was obviously perturbed by the “intervention of non-European political organizations in a workers’ strike . . . and more specifically the use of the boycott of products as a weapon to achieve settlement of an industrial dispute.” The Chamber of Industries could see the writing on the wall; it was evident that the non-European population was learning that “its purchasing power can be used as a weapon in its general political struggle.” The Chamber found itself conceding that boycotting was a fairly common weapon used in commercial circles, and that there were also historical precedents where “the boycott has been used in South Africa by Europeans against Europeans, and by Europeans against non-Europeans.” The latter reference was to the vicious boycott of Indian traders led by leading Nationalists, current as recently as July, 1957, when the Nasionale Jeugbond conference “viewed the support given to Indian traders by Afrikaners as a great danger to the Afrikaans people.”

To date the leading exponents of the economic boycott have been the totalitarian clique who bring conformity to Afrikaans political, economic and cultural life. It is an axiom of the sociology of nationalist movements that they are closely associated with, and are in fact channelized by, an entrepreneurial class. And Afrikaaner nationalism is no exception. In 1939, an *Ekonomiese Volkskongres* brought together Nationalist politicians, financiers and ideologists. Politicians like Drs. Verwoerd, Dönges, Van Rhijn and Diederichs were present, while financier M. S. Louw played an important part with I. M. Lombard, reputedly secretary of the *Broederbond*. The Nationalist machine set to work eagerly. Every effort was made, to quote the leading Afrikaner Nationalist financier M. S. Louw, to channelize “Afrikaner savings in Afrikaans financial institutions.” The Afrikaner Nationalist was induced to insure only with Afrikaner insurance companies, to bank only with Afrikaner banks, to build his home through Afrikaner building societies. It was Dr. Diederichs, now Minister of Economic Affairs, who told the *Ekonomiese Volkskongres*: “As regards the relationship between business and sentiment, it has been our standpoint that business could not be based purely on sentiment, but that an Afrikaner business could in no way exist without sentiment.” To this end large sums were set aside for propaganda purposes, the racist Nationalist press put in harness, and the innumerable cultural organizations that lead to the Nationalist machine busily

employed. From the pulpit and the classroom the call went forth to urge Nationalists to buy Afrikaans and not to purchase from firms hostile to "the Afrikaans way of life". If there were still any doubts as to the relationship between Nationalist business concerns and the Nationalist political ideology, a recent pronouncement by M. S. Louw must have dispelled any remaining illusions. "If we (the Nationalists) want a republic", he stated, "we must see that our economy is more independent."

It is clear that the Nationalist political machine and Nationalist capitalism are very closely related. The police state created by the Nationalist Government has left very few legal channels open to the opponents of apartheid, but, for the time being, boycott remains. Because the Nationalists have in the past made no distinction between their economic and political objectives, they are now in a particularly vulnerable position. As the Chamber of Industries noted, "the non-European population is learning that its purchasing power can be used as a weapon in its general political struggle." And this purchasing power is enormous. The 1957 president of the Association of Chambers of Commerce, Mr. W. P. Rousseau, stated that African purchasing power for the year of his term of office was £365,000,000, or a quarter of the total national income.

In the past, whilst Nationalist capital was still in its embryonic stage, it needed only to call upon the "volk" to support its business and financial institutions. This, however, is no longer the case. If these institutions are to progress, they must have a wider appeal and they are now engaged in attempting to capture the non-White market. The macabre irony of the non-European population paying for its own subjection may not have occurred to the Nationalists. It has certainly occurred to the leaders of the Congress movement. Hence their call for a nation-wide economic boycott of business houses that are dominated by leading Nationalists. In the past other pressures have failed to convince the Nationalists of the malignancy of their ways. It is possible that an economic boycott will go a long way to creating the environment in which social change will take place. Michael Harmel has put the point well. "There have been", he notes, "plenty of examples in history where a combination of factors have been compelling enough to make a ruling class give way for urgent and overdue changes, without dragging the people through the agony of civil war." Boycott alone will not achieve this end—but it could very well provide one of the factors.