

BACKGROUND TO A BOYCOTT – EZAKHENI SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 1979

by Peter Brown

The last issue of REALITY commented on the successful boycott of their bus service mounted by the people of Ezakheni. Our readers might like to know a little about the background to it. As far as I can establish the story runs something like this.

Ezakheni, as our editorial explained, consists of a collection of people who have come there from a great many different places in Natal, many of them from "blackspots". Its residents elect a Council to represent them, the present Chairman of which is Mr Elliot Mngadi, previously National Treasurer of the Liberal Party of South Africa, who has been both detained and banned in his time.

It seems that early in July the Council received a letter through the Township Manager, from the Kwa-Zulu Transport Company (a concern owned jointly by the Kwa-Zulu Government and the South African Government's Corporation for Economic Development) saying that they intended increasing the price of season tickets by 70c for a 5-day ticket, 85c for a 6-day ticket and 95c for a 7-day ticket. The Council invited the management of Kwa-Zulu Transport to attend their next meeting to discuss these proposed increases. Five members of the company came. They were told by members of the Council that the people who used their buses could not afford to pay more than they were already paying. Some of them earned only R7,20 a week and they were now to be asked to pay R2,80 on bus fares alone. The Manager of the company said that he regretted that people were paid so little but that his application for an increase in fares, based on the increase in the price of fuel and spares, and a wage increase, had been approved by Pretoria and there was nothing further he could do about it. Mr Mngadi told him that, in that case, they would have to call a public meeting of the people of Ezakheni community to report to them on their discussions with the bus company.

The meeting took place the following Sunday and was attended by about 1,000 people. When Mr Mngadi reported what had happened at the meeting with the bus company management the people at the meeting said "Well, if that is the case, we can't afford these fares, we'll walk!" To which the members of the Council replied "Alright, if you decide to walk, that's good – but don't interfere with the property of the Bus Company in any way or with anyone who does decide to use the buses". The meeting agreed to this but in return asked the Council, during the week which remained before the fares were due to go up, to do two things. They asked them to notify the Kwa-Zulu Government of their intention to boycott the buses, and they asked them to see the District Commandant of Police to ask for protection.

Next morning one of the Councillors phoned Dr Mdlalose, the Kwa-Zulu Minister of the Interior, who said he would bring the matter before his cabinet, and Mr Mngadi went to see the District Commandant to ask for protection for the boycotters. The District Commandant wanted to know what kind of protection the people wanted. He was told that they wanted to be protected from tsotsis who might want to cause trouble by throwing stones etc., and they didn't want the police trying to force people to use the buses. The District Commandant seems to have been shocked to hear that there

were people working in Ladysmith who only earned R7,20 a week and he seems to have promised protection.

Fares were due to go up the following Monday, September 10th. Season tickets for the succeeding week are usually bought on Fridays and Saturdays. True to his word the Commandant had police on duty at the ticket office on those days. There was no trouble, but nobody bought tickets. Some reports said seven people bought tickets, the Ezakheni people didn't see anyone buy any.

On Sunday 9th September the Council called a public meeting in Ezakheni to report on their approaches to the Kwa-Zulu Government and the District Commandant and to give the commuters the opportunity to take a final decision on the boycott. There was no question about what that decision would be. The fact that there had been no buying of season tickets at the new price meant that the boycott was already under way. The meeting decided to walk. The Council urged them not to go to bus-stops, just to walk straight to town and straight back again, so that there would be no large gatherings of people anywhere along the route. They themselves undertook to patrol the bus-stops from the early hours of the morning, and did so.

Next day the police were out in force, patrolling the township and the road to Ladysmith. There was no trouble. In the evening some agitation seems to have been caused in police ranks when a group of school children marched through the townships giving the Black Power salute and singing songs, saying they were going to meet their parents as they walked home. This only happened on the first day and was then stopped at the request of the Council.

Later in the week the Township Manager received a letter from Mr Val Volker, Nationalist MP for the Ladysmith constituency, asking the Ezakheni Council to a meeting in Ladysmith with the Chambers of Commerce and Industry. The Council replied that the trouble was in Ezakheni and not in Ladysmith and that is where the meeting should be held. It was – at the Magistrates Court. To this meeting Mr Volker brought details of wage increases from a number of local industries, either promised or already granted, which either exceeded, or went some way towards covering the fare increases. The white representatives at the meeting obviously felt that this "reasonable" response would lead to the immediate end of the boycott. The Ezakheni Councillors did not. They said they would have to get confirmation of the wage increases from the workers themselves and that they would call a meeting on the following Sunday to discuss the proposals which Mr Volker and the employers had put to them.

At the next Sunday's meeting the estimated attendance was some 6,000 people, a large number of whom had come from other black communities in the Ladysmith area whose fares had been put up by the bus company. Mr Mngadi reported on what the Council had been told at Mr Volker's meeting. Workers agreed that there had been wage increases and they said they were glad about those because they needed them, but they also said that they were not prepared to be used as what they described as a "post-office" just to receive

money to pass on to the bus company. At this meeting for the first time a new issue arose — the loathing of the commuters for the bus-company, which they called "BIC" after its original owners the S.A. Government's Bantu Investment Corporation. The BIC was clearly anathema to every person who had ever used one of its buses. It was regarded as incompetent, indifferent to its customers needs or sensibilities, and wasteful. The demand at the meeting was for it to go and the bus service to be handed over to private competition. The boycott would go on.

The following week Mr Volker called another meeting in Ladysmith to which he invited Dr Adendorff, director of the Corporation for Economic Development (previously the BIC). It was a public meeting. Members of the Ezakheni Council did not attend, having only been informed about it very late — a fact to which they took exception. The two local members of the Kwa-Zulu Legislative Assembly who, up until this point, appear to have shown much less interest in what was happening in their constituency than had Mr Volker, did attend, but failed to consult the Ezakheni Council before doing so. This serious break in communications very nearly led to trouble. The previous Sunday's public meeting at Ezakheni had made it clear that the commuters wanted a new bus service, but the Kwa-Zulu MPs didn't know this. They spoke out strongly at Mr Volker's public meeting against the fare increases and Mr Adendorff eventually agreed that the fares should revert to the old rate, reportedly saying when he made the announcement, "I don't know if what I am doing is legal, but I will do it anyway." An apparent victory had been won but the crucial new point at issue, the black commuters' demand for an end to the "BIC" transport service had not been dealt with. At this stage the Kwa-Zulu MPs seem to have made their first contact with the Ezakheni Council, going to report to them, and no doubt feeling quite pleased with themselves, that the fares had reverted to their pre-boycott level. Their reception was cool. What about the people's feelings about the BIC service they were asked? The Council said that they would call another meeting on the next Sunday where they would discuss the results of Mr Volker's meeting with the commuters.

This meeting was attended by an estimated 10,000 people. The Kwa-Zulu MPs did not attend. Wisely. The mood of the crowd was clearly one of anger at the fact that these men had gone to the Volker meeting without informing themselves of the bus-users' attitude to the bus-company and without combining their demand for a reduction in fares with one for a competitive service. The meeting decided to continue the boycott until something was done about the BIC.

At this stage Mr Volker began saying matters were getting out of hand, the leaders no longer seemed to be able to control the boycott. Mr Mngadi told him that the boycott would be out of control the day the people started damaging the buses. However, heavy pressure was now put on the boycotters. "Pirate" taxis which had been transporting quite a number of people were stopped and impounded, the police attitude became less sympathetic, action was threatened against commuters who were sleeping in Ladysmith "illegally". And finally the Kwa-Zulu Cabinet intervened, asking the Ezakheni Council to come to Ulundi to meet it and sending transport to fetch it. At this meeting the Kwa-Zulu

Chief Minister, Chief Buthelezi asked the Ezakheni Council to persuade the people to call the boycott off while he made representations to Dr Koornhof about their grievances.

The next Sunday another meeting of 10,000 people was held and the Councillors reported on the request from the Chief Minister. Many people in the crowd were for continuing the boycott until the BIC was removed and a competitive system introduced, but it was finally agreed to call the boycott off while negotiations went ahead to achieve this.

This has now been done. A private company is to apply to operate in competition with Kwa-Zulu Transport.

And this is not all the boycott achieved. The fares are back where they were before it started. A Vigilance Committee has been set up for the Ladysmith area on which each black community which supplies workers to Ladysmith will be represented, along with people from employer organisations. More important than anything else, the boycott has shown the power of peaceful, disciplined protest, and how such protest depends as much for its success on the reasonable reaction to it of the authorities as it does on the self-control of the people concerned.

Ezakheni also provided a magnificent example of grass-roots democracy at work. When the fare increases were reported to them by the management of the bus company the Council called a meeting of the residents of the township to tell them about their meeting with the bus company and to hear their views about what should be done about the new fares. From then on they called a meeting every Sunday, for as long as the boycott lasted, to report on what had happened during the previous week and to find out from the people who used the buses what they felt should be the next step taken. The Council provided leadership and advice but it was the people who had elected them whose views were decisive when they were making decisions. And in general those views seem to have been extraordinarily moderate and sensible, especially when one considers the circumstances under which most of the people who now live there have come to be at Ezakheni.

Ezakheni has quite a lot of lessons for those with power in South Africa, black and white.

You don't just suddenly announce to people that you are going to put their bus fares up. You have them represented at the point at which decisions like this are taken so that you know that there are people you propose to charge R2,80 a week to use your buses who only earn R7,20 a week. Perhaps the Vigilance Committee will now do something to remedy this communication situation in Ladysmith. If it doesn't it will simply aggravate the next crisis, because by then it will have been seen by the black people who live around Ladysmith to be ineffective in representing their interests and, if that is what they come to think of it, the extraordinary leadership which this boycott has produced will have been discredited.

The real lesson of Ezakheni, though, for those with power, black or white, is that apartheid is a disaster. It is that, because it makes the white people live in Ladysmith and the black people live in Ezakheni, and decrees that the twain shall never meet to talk to one another, man-to-man, until some grave crisis threatens. Next time, at Ezakheni, the crisis could be out of hand before the talking starts. Unless apartheid goes. □