

IZWI lase TOWNSHIP



Mass meeting in no 3 square Alexandra Workers vote to continue the boycott. Madzunya and others address the masses during the bus boycott of 1957

Azikwelwa!

Bus-boycott of 1957

The Alexandra bus boycott occurred 25 years ago. Every working day for three months the workers of Alexandra Township footed it to Johannesburg and back, a full 18 miles. PUTCO wanted an extra penny on the bus fare: the people would not pay that penny.

The boycott began by spontaneous action of the people on Monday 7th January 1957. The same evening, when workers returned after their first long walk, the Alexandra Peoples' Transport Committee (APTC) was formed to run the boycott. There were representatives from every organised group in the township on this committee.

The prominent groups and members are shown in this chart.

PUTCO FARES UP AGAIN

Who can afford it?

PUTCO fares go up from Monday 26 April. On the route *Alexandra to Noord street*, you will now pay 35c cash fare or R2,00 for a five day weekly.

Transport is essential for workers. Every rise in fares lowers the standard of living. The workers have resisted fare hikes for fifty years.

In this issue IZWI offers an historical account of one such struggle, and a short analysis of present day PUTCO

ANC (Charterist)	Alfred Nzo Thomas Nkobi Caleb Pelo
ANC (Africanist)	Josias Madzunya M. Motsele Mathopa
ANC (Womens' Section)	Florence Mphosho Muriel Sodinda Virginia Mngoma
ANC (National-Minded)	Dan Gumede
Movement for Democracy of Content	Dan Mokonyane Simon Noge Arthur Magerman
Workers League	George Hlongwe
Standholders Assn. Vigilance Assn.	S. Mahlangu J.S. Mathebula

Differences

The different groups had widely different interests. The **Standholders**, being business men, were generally in conflict with the workers and tenants. This was seen clearly at the time of the **Squatters Movement of 1945**. The **ANC** was split between the **Freedom Charter group** and the **Africanists** whose differences on this committee, were many and complex. Despite the range of conflicts and differences the boycott turned out to be a triumph. The reason for this must be analysed.

It is important to note that the boycott began spontaneously. It was launched by the masses themselves, who walked on the first Monday and who walked day after day thereafter. The **APTC** came into existence after the boycott had begun. Thus the boycott was first and foremost a movement of the people, who were determined not to lose a penny more out of their low incomes. It remained to be seen whether the committee would try to make the boycott go the way they wanted, or whether the masses would be able to control the committee. For there is always this problem of leaders and committees trying to take the initiative away from the people, and often then leading them wrongly.

It was decided at one of the first mass meetings held in **Number 3 Square**, that policy decisions would be taken *only* at mass meetings: also that press statements would be made *only* at mass meetings: also that future meetings would be arranged *only* at mass meetings. It was thus impossible for the committee or any part of it to hijack the boycott, and drive it to the wrong destination.

This was a very real problem. Some members of the committee were soon persuaded or frightened into trying to end the boycott and accept defeat. Only because final decisions were reserved for mass meetings was it possible for the people to prevent such a betrayal of their boycott action. Some of the leaders stumbled, but the people were firm and they continued to walk.

Putco's problems

Every month of the boycott cost **PUTCO** about £30 000. On the one hand they claimed that they could not manage with fares as low as 4d, but on the other hand they were losing money much faster from the boycott, and they desperately wanted it to end. Commerce and Industry in **Johannesburg** were also losing. Workers arrived late and tired at their jobs, and

unable to produce properly. So the bosses too wanted the boycott to end. As for the government, it realised that a successful boycott would be a political victory for the workers, so they desired to smash it as soon as possible. In consequence the government used police intimidation, while the **Johannesburg Chamber of Commerce** used persuasion, to get the boycotters to give in. The Minister of Transport promised that the boycott "would be broken, and law and order would be maintained." (Pretoria News 25.1.57) Someone replied at a mass meeting in **Number 3 Square**, "Schoeman says he will break the boycott; but we say that we are going to break the government. . . ." (Quoted in S.A. Digest). This same Digest (a government propaganda organ) tried hard to misrepresent the boycott. "Underground Red workers masterminded the progress of the boycott through all its stages, with the aid of extremist elements in the Bantu population." "It was found that of all the townships where boycott attempts were made, the only really successful ones occurred in uncontrolled townships. . . . It was noticed that the least trouble was experienced in those townships which have recently taken action to deport work less agitators."

Leaders of Azikwelwa

Dan Mokonyane was Publicity Secretary to the boycott Committee, later becoming full Secretary. When the 'sell-out' plan was offered by the **Jhb Chamber of Commerce** to a meeting in **Number 3 Square**, Mokonyane jumped onto the platform, took the offer from **Mahlangu** and set it alight.

Josias Madzunya was regarded by the masses in **Alexandra** as their most trusted leader. He was at this time a leading **ANC** member in **Alexandra**, but he held an 'Africanist' position.



Josias Madzunya



Dan Mokonyane

These articles showed the governments' attitude to **Alexandra**, and their intention to 'deal with' the township as soon as it could get a hold on it. It was not long after these events that **Verwoerd** began to break **Alexandra** by indirect legislative means, transforming it into a controlled labour pool like other locations, hostels, compounds and reserves created by the state.

Stay-away strike

What made business men especially anxious to end the boycott was the possibility that it might turn into a 'stay-at home'. Early on, **Dan Mokonyane** began to urge people to save food 'for a rainy Monday', and **Alfred Nzo** said, "When we are tired we will stay at home and wait for commerce and industry to come and fetch us for work." (R.D.M. 7.3.57) Already the boycott had the effect of a go-slow strike, since workers' efficiency was low because they were tired when they got to work. There is an obvious connection between a transport strike and a stay-away since the workers are not struggling only against high transport fares but generally against low wages. Seeing this clearly, the bosses who depended directly on **Alexandra** workers were becoming desperate.

Sympathy boycotts

The PUTCO fare increase also applied to routes in Pretoria, Sophiatown, and the Western Native Townships. These areas joined the boycott, each having its own Peoples' Transport Action Committee, and there was a co-ordinating group for the Pretoria/Witwatersrand area as a whole.

In addition to these base-line boycotts, the movement began to spread country-wide. There were sympathy boycotts as far afield as East London, Randfontein, Port Elizabeth, Germiston, Moroka-Jabavu and Edenvale. Transport is a nation-wide matter, and all over the country workers experience the same problems. They are forced to live long distances from their work, to travel for long hours, but services are inadequate and uncomfortable and fares are high in relation to wages. The sympathy boycotts reflected a heightened consciousness among black workers everywhere in South Africa, and a sympathy that sprang from their sharing the same grievances regarding transport. The extent of the sympathy boycotts alarmed the state considerably.



The campaign spreads - P.E.

Struggle

The boycott was a struggle over the question Who Should Pay? Should the worker pay an extra penny: should the government increase the subsidy to PUTCO should PUTCO accept lower profits: should employers pay higher levies? That is what such disputes are about. In this case, though attempts were made to weaken the unity of Alexandra boycotters, they showed toughness and resolution, and went on walking. The Johannesburg Chamber of Commerce tried to get the people to accept its strategy, which was to refund passengers



The cops get busy

a penny on every ride. That would mean that at the end of their journey, people would have to queue up again at a kiosk and claim back a penny. A stupid arrangement. Speakers on Number 3 Square insisted that they did not have the extra penny with which to begin their journey; and they refused the deal. The next compromise step was that books of tickets would be sold to passengers at 4d each, but that a special fund would enable PUTCO to get 5d for each ticket sold.

The fund of £25 000 would last for several months, and in that time the Chamber thought that it could persuade employers to pay higher wages, or in some way make the 4d fare permanent.

There was disagreement among the boycott leaders, and among the masses. This scheme was accepted by enough people, however, to mean that the boycott could not be continued. So by the end of March, people again began to use the buses. "The people are riding the buses again - at 4d fare" (The Star 1.4.57) Nevertheless, the Transport Committee continued to hold meetings, every Saturday, in case when the special fund ran out there was an attempt to force a 5d fare on the people.

This they were still determined to resist.

Schoeman defeated

But in fact, in the next few months it was the government who climbed down. On 5th June the Native Services Transport Bill was rushed through parliament, enabling the government to increase the levy paid by employers 'for transportation of their

Native workers.' (RDM 5.6.57) During the debate, a Labour Party Member referred to Ben Schoeman, saying "... this bill is a big come down for him, after the attitude he originally adopted to the bus boycott."

AZIKWELWA WAS WON

The formula for victory by the workers of Alexandra seems to have been: the determination of the people: also, democratic mass decisions taken at public meetings: also, a leadership compelled to keep close to the peoples' wishes: also, on the other side, the necessity felt by Commerce and Industry to get the workers to work every day on time. Without labour, no production. And without production, no wealth!

What is PUTCO

PUTCO is a business company, and its purpose is to make profits. PUTCO does not say this in its publicity. It says that its object is to 'provide transport' for people. It also claims to 'provide employment'. Thus it attempts to give the impression that it generously helps passengers and people who need jobs. But in reality, its purpose is to make profits. And it makes huge profits. "Mr Chaskalson told the Commission that Putco could make a

profit of between R20 million and R25 million in 1 year without the fare hikes" (RDM 26.2.82) Mr Simpson, an accountant commissioned by PUTCO, said that PUTCO's profits had increased from R21 million to R47 million during the past 4 years' (RDM 25.2.82)

Profits

Putco is one of the most profitable companies in S.A. The profits come from the fares paid, and from a subsidy from the government. The subsidy comes from two sources: employers pay a certain amount for each worker, this is called a levy, which is a kind of tax: and the Department of Transport makes money available from its own funds, which come from general state taxes. The Department pays this to PUTCO, to subsidise bus fares and keep them low. The government is willing to pay this subsidy, because it wants workers to get to work each day, relatively cheaply, so wages can be kept low. Employers are able to pay the levy, because they pay workers low wages. It is often therefore said, that the government and employers 'subsidise' workers transport. This is similar to PUTCO saying that they 'provide' transport. The fact remains that workers standard of living is low, and the profits made by capitalists are high. Bus fares are part of this structure that keeps labour cheap and profits high.

COMWASO

In 1979 some community organisations opposed PUTCO's attempt to raise fares. They formed Commuters Watchdog Association (COMWASO) to keep an eye on PUTCO and to look after the interests of passengers. Today there are more than 15 organisations represented on COMWASO, including The Committee of 10, trade union groups, JISWA, civic and housewives groups etc.

CONFLICT

PUTCO wants high fares: passengers want low fares. PUTCO gains if their buses are crowded and fast: passengers prefer buses to be cautious and not crowded. The better the service, the more it costs PUTCO to run and the less profit they make: on the other hand, a better service would give the passenger more value for his money. You can see that the interests of PUTCO and the interest of passengers are opposed. They cannot be the same, because PUTCO is a money-making business. It has to run like that. PUTCO cannot be on the peoples' side. It regards people as a source of income. Money-making concerns operate in terms of accumulation, not in terms of service.

TIMETABLE OF CONFLICT WITH PUTCO. 1982

January 14	PUTCO asks National Transportation Commission (NTC) for permission to increase fares by 35%. NTC permits a rise of 24% on cash fares and 15% on week-fares There are angry reactions from community organisations who say that they were not notified of the hearings.
January 20	COMWASA decides to apply to the Supreme Court to stop PUTCO's action.
February 2	Ms Mulligan, Chairman of United Womens' Organisation, in Ennerdale, makes the application. The Judge overturns the NTC ruling. PUTCO has to apply for a new hearing.
February 24	At the new hearing COMWASA legal representative Arthur Chaskalson shows that PUTCO makes colossal profits, that passengers are very poor and cannot afford high transport costs, and that PUTCO's service is considered bad.
March 18	NTC allows PUTCO to raise its fares

"If there are 36 million passenger/trips per year, an extra cent on every unit would be 36 million extra cents. That adds up to R360 thousand, just by charging one more cent per trip, which no-one will notice!" And in this way the shareholders, directors and managers of the company make their fortunes.
The only defense against this process, is for passengers to make it uncomfortable for PUTCO to ignore their wishes. That is what boycott accomplishes. It costs the company a lot. This is also why angry commuters stone buses that arrive late. But this is not a solution in the long run.
A transport system will benefit the people genuinely only when it is owned by the people and is run in the interests of passengers. It should be a public utility.

The people walk

Although PUTCO is called a Utility Company, in reality it is a state supported monopoly, whose duty is to its shareholders, not to the passengers at all.

The government (through the Department of Transport) subsidises PUTCO to prevent fares being even higher than they are; but there is some doubt whether it wishes to continue supporting a private company in this way. It has appointed a Commission (the Welgemoed Commission) to investigate the whole question of urban bus transport. It might recommend that the government buy out PUTCO and establish a state run utility transport company. Whether or not this would make any significant difference in a bad service, is anybody's guess.

