

The Empangeni Bus Boycott

On 14 January 1985 45,000 commuters from Empangeni's three townships began a boycott of the local bus service to protest against fare increases that were introduced in December 1984. They all live in KwaZulu and most commute to work in Richards Bay. This boycott is one of five that have taken place this year in South Africa. Others occurred in Secunda, Cape Town, Isithebe and, continuing from July 1983, in East London. Once again the boycotts reveal the fundamental contradictions that exist in South Africa's transport policy. Workers are not only forced to travel enormous distances between home and work due to South Africa's unique spatial organisation of production and reproduction. Capitalist transport monopolies and undemocratic, state-controlled transportation boards have absolute power over the quality and cost of transport services which are the umbilical cords between the community and workplace. (1) The Empangeni bus boycott, amongst others, reveals that the logical consequence of this is the politicisation of transport as commuters struggle to increase their control and power over their means of transportation. However, faced with a state, a bus company and reactionary employers who are prepared to use violence to break the boycott, the commuters demands for the democratisation of their bus service have, at this stage, not been realised.

At first the commuters had one drastic demand: the complete removal of the bus company, Empangeni Transport. (2) The severity of this demand which is shared by the East London commuters who have been boycotting their bus service for 18 months now, is a reflection of the bitterness the bus company has generated in the entire community. Although it was groups of workers who decided to organise the boycott during the first two weeks of January, the Commuters Committee (CC) that was

(1) See J J McCarthy and M Swilling, "Transport and political resistance", South African Review Two, Johannesburg, 1984.

(2) Empangeni Transport is a subsidiary of United Transport which also owns: Greyhound (Krugersdorp); Highveld United (Witbank); Rustenburg Bus Service; Vaal Transport Corporation; Western Greyhound (Klerksdorp); and Millard United Transport (Vryheid).

elected on 13 January was made up of the local tribal chiefs, the townships' mayors and councillors, Kwazulu MP's, Prince Gideon Zulu and 2 unionists - Transport and General Workers Union's Ntombela and the President of Metal and Allied Workers Union, Velani. The prominent role played by the chiefs and councillors was due to the fact that they were angry with the bus company for fraudently claiming that they had approved of the fare increases. The two key actors in the whole drama were the chairperson of the OC, Mr Chonco, who is a Kwazulu MP and chief whip of Inkhata, and Velani.

The OC decided that the Department of Transport must be approached and brought into the negotiations from the start. The Minister, Hendrik Schoeman, was informed about the boycott and reasons were given for demanding the removal of Empangeni Transport. The OC appealed to him to intervene in order to find ways of establishing another bus company. In addition, the OC decided to meet the KwaZulu Chamber of Commerce and Chamber of Industries to appeal to them not to dismiss workers who arrived late at work. The OC refused to negotiate directly with Empangeni Transport.

On the 29th and 30th January the OC met the Chambers of Industry and Commerce, 2 representatives from the Department of Transport (H Claasens and W Kempen), and Willie Heine, the National Party MP for Umfolozi. Chris Albertyn, the OC's attorney, submitted the following proposals:

- * that the Minister appoint a Commission of Inquiry to investigate Empangeni Transport;
- * that Empangeni Transport's transport permit be withdrawn;
- * that the Minister instruct the Local Road Transportation Board (LRTB) to issue transport permits to taxis and other bus companies pending the outcome of the investigation;
- * that those people who contravene the Road Transport Act (eg. taxis) not be prosecuted for taking people to work;
- * that Empangeni Transport suspend its services pending the outcome of the investigation;
- * that employers remain tolerant of workers who arrive late at work and continue to provide transport.

The Minister agreed to establish a two-man Committee of Enquiry which met on 11 February in Eskhaweni; one of Empangeni's townships. An angry crowd of 1,300 people turned up to the hearing and insisted that it be held outside and not in the

local magistrate's court - a demand which reflected their desire to control the negotiating process itself.

Prior to this meeting, the OC had decided to move away from the demand that Empangeni Transport be removed. The reason for this change in tactics was because the Chambers of Commerce and Industry and the state officials had indicated that if the OC continued to insist on this demand, the police would be brought in to break the boycott with violence. The OC felt that this would have jeopardised all chances of making even limited gains. This shift was reflected in the proposals that the OC put forward to the Committee of Enquiry:

- 1 that a legally binding agreement be signed between the OC, the Minister of Transport and the LRTB, regulating all facets of passenger transport in the area;
- 2 that there be genuine and full competition in the area;
- 3 that taxis be permitted to transport people to Richards Bay instead of being restricted to the Empangeni townships;
- 4 that Empangeni Transport stop its provocative propaganda campaign designed to break the boycott;
- 5 that the status quo remains until the Committee completes its investigation, ie. the police are not brought in, the boycott continues, and illegal operators are not prosecuted.

The first proposal was accepted by the commuters who were at the meeting, but there were doubts about signing an agreement with the state. However, it was approved at mass meetings in all the townships after people realised that it was a way of transferring some of the LRTB's powers to the commuters.

The second proposal did not stipulate that Empangeni Transport should not be one of the competitors and it was therefore a way of introducing the idea that the demand for its total removal be dropped. It is significant that if this proposal had been accepted it would have benefitted three local black entrepreneurs who wanted to form their own bus companies.

On Thursday 21st the Minister sent a telex that rejected the OC's proposals to the Committee of Enquiry. He stated that the OC had to accept that Empangeni Transport had already made a number of concessions. These included the appointment of a PRO, the amendment of certain routes, an offer to sell some of the company's shares to black businessmen, and the reduction of fares on certain routes. Instead of a legal cont-

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ract, the Minister proposed that a Joint Transport Liaison Committee be established with representatives from the Chambers of Commerce and Industries, the KwaZulu Government, the chiefs and councillors. The sting in the tail was that if the CC did not accept these concessions, the police would be sent in on Monday 25th.

By this stage it looked as if a violent confrontation was inevitable and there was even talk that workers would mount a general stay-away in response. It was in this context that the CC asked the Minister for an urgent meeting. Chonco, Ntombela and Albertyn met the Minister and senior officials on Monday 25th - a meeting that delayed the deployment of the police. The Minister criticised the monopolistic nature of Empangeni Transport and in a major departure from the principles of the Welgemoed Commission, suggested that the solution to all South Africa's transport problems was a free competition approach. He then appointed one of the officials, Mr Nicks, to reopen negotiations with the CC.

Nicks came to Empangeni on Thursday 28th, where he was met, much to his alarm, by 1,000 commuters. The CC's proposals were not substantially different from those given to the *Committee of Enquiry*. The basic principles of free competition, the right of the commuters to have a say in the regulation of transport services, that Empangeni Transport be allowed to be one of the competitors and that black entrepreneurs be given transport permits, remained.

The CC also demanded that the pre-December 1984 fares remain until June 1985 and that from July the bus companies could charge the higher fares that were originally the immediate cause of the boycott. These should last until July 1986 after which fare increases should rise according to 50% of the CPI on condition that the service provided did not deteriorate. Furthermore the CC also demanded that 4 senior Empangeni Transport officials be fired or transferred.

The unknown quantity in the whole question was Buthelezi's attitude because he was overseas at the time. When he returned on 4th February, the South African government immediately tried to elicit his support. However, Buthelezi agreed to remain neutral and gave his support to a negotiated settlement. At this stage, however, it was clear that the Department of

Transport was doing nothing to resolve the conflict. This prompted Heine, the NP MP, to set up a meeting with the Minister of Transport, senior officials, United Transport and, for the first time, the LRTB. This meeting agreed that the following proposals should be forwarded to the CC:

- 1 The Minister will instruct the National Transport Commission (NTC), the central co-ordinating body for all passenger transport, to review the Government's entire transport policy;
- 2 The possibility of establishing a railway system between Empangeni and Richards Bay will be investigated;
- 3 that taxis will be allowed to extend their operations;
- 4 that new applications for bus transportation permits will be considered by the LRTB;
- 5 that as far as Empangeni Transport is concerned:
 - a) it has agreed to lower its fares to the pre-boycott rate until June 1985 (despite the increased petrol price). After this the new higher fare will be charged for 6 months, fares being negotiable again later;
 - b) it failed to address the idea of linking fare increases to the CPI;
 - c) it is not prepared to commit itself to allowing free competition;
 - d) it agrees to remove two senior officials;
 - e) it is prepared to appoint a senior PRO;
 - f) it is prepared to run training courses for its drivers;
 - g) it is prepared to fulfil certain social obligations (which were left unspecified but which later revealed themselves to be a donation to the KwaZulu Drought Relief Fund).

It is clear that the original principles of the CC's demands had not been met. The CC, however, was undecided on whether to accept these conditions because it is obvious that if they did not the police would be called in to break the boycott.

It was in this context that at a meeting on Saturday 16th March between MP Heine, representatives of United Transport and the Commuters Committee reached a full legal agreement on the terms for ending the boycott. The essentials of this extensive agreement were similar to the proposals submitted earlier by Heine to the CC with one major exception. That is, the Commuters Committee agreed to encourage a stop to the

boycott only at the moment competition services were visibly evident in the townships. Empangeni Transport, in other words, was forced to come to terms with both government, smaller transport operators and commuters by conceding to the apparent merits of a greater degree of "free enterprise" in the provision of transport services.

At the time of writing, however, it was beginning to emerge that Empangeni Transport might be dishonouring the agreement, and might attempt to block the operation of competition services in the area. In response, the OC's Chonco has called upon Buthelezi to intervene by going to Minister Schoeman to demand enforcement of the March 16th agreement. Ranged against this, however, are signals of renewed militance against competition amongst South Africa's larger bus transport corporations. The April 5th Financial Mail, for example, quotes PUTCO's GM, Carleo, as complaining of steep declines in profits and attributing this, in turn, to what he calls the "free but not fair enterprise" practised by competitors.

Assessment

The lessons that can be inferred from the Empangeni experience are still not clear as the issue is yet to be finally resolved. OC's attorney, Chris Albertyn, points to the twin advantages of establishing unity amongst commuters and trade unions, and negotiating with the state so as not to invite police intervention and the enforcement of the Road Transportation Act (which currently favours transport monopolies). Trade unionists, however, are ambivalent about the "free enterprise" terms of settlement, even though they acknowledge the advantages of short-term gains to workers in terms of transport costs. It is clear that the state has totally rejected the idea of giving commuters any communal power over their bus service. Rather, it wishes to resolve workers reproductive grievances in general (housing, township services) through the principles of privatisation and the incubation of the interests of an emergent petty bourgeoisie. As the case of bus transportation reveals, however, it is faced with severe contradictions in attempting to realise this objective, not least of which are the often conflicting interests of monopoly capital and the emergent petty bourgeoisie.

It is clear, however, that if the National Transport Commis-

ion does review the state's current transport policy (perhaps under the influence of Minister Schoeman who appears particularly behoven to "free enterprise transport" after a recent visit to the Far East) this will at least represent a recognition of the failure of past transportation practices. As such it will be one gain to come out of all the bitter struggles, suffering and deaths that have marked the history of bus boycotts over the last two years. The question that will need to be addressed by trade unions if, indeed, such a policy review is forthcoming, is how to best represent the interests of workers so as to influence the final outcome.

In many respects, however, the workers transport problem has deep roots: for example in the very exaggerated degree of separation between working and living presumed by Group Areas, Bantustan policy and the new emphasis on "commuterisation", and in the subjection of workers productive and reproductive needs to the laws of profitability. Thus, in the longer term, what the courage and unity of purpose of thousands of working class commuters must be telling us is that a democratic transport service that meets the needs of the people is only possible in the post-apartheid society based on new relations of production and reproduction.

(Jeff McCarthy and Mark Swilling, April 1985)



photo: boycotters find alternative transport