

The Bus Boycott - Johannesburg.

THE EXPLOSIVE PENNY

Seven weeks ago a private bus company called BUTCO increased its fare by a penny each way for buses carrying Africans ~~xxxxxxx~~ from the locations (i.e. segregated areas) to town where they work. The people refused to pay the increase and decided to walk the nine miles to and from the town. An event of such small beginnings has been turned into an issue of national dimensions and makes headline news in the world press. A dispute between a private company and its users has drawn into its vortex Ministers of State, the railway department and the whole might of the police force, armed with batons, pistols and sten - guns.

Every morning, rain or shine, sixty thousand Africans, men and women of all ages, trudge the nine miles to their work. In order to be on time this means getting up in the dark even earlier than they used to. By three o'clock in the morning the little shanty town, mostly of tin and hessian shacks, is astir. Candles are lit. All over the sprawling location their thin light flickers through the patched up windows or openings in the crowded hovels; streaks of smoke pale into the darkness that still envelopes them. The women are hurriedly preparing a bite of food. There is not a minute to waste. One by one the flickering lights go out as each family leaves the house with only women and sick folk; for women too, must go to work to supplement the meagre wages of their men-folk. Shadowy figures emerge and the darkness seems to come alive with hurrying shapes converging into the main highway. They pour out from countless sand tracks, heads lowered against the slanting rain. For on this particular day nature has taken a hand and summer rains can be heavy. No word is spoken; the only sound is the muffled plod, plod of many feet.

In this eerie atmosphere the very sands seem to move as the march to town begins. Something else is earlier than usual. The buses are waiting at the terminus, the police in force standing around at the ready and ostensibly to prevent intimidation and "protect" those Africans who may want to board a bus. Their services are unnecessary. No one boards the buses.

As they shuttle the nine-mile stretch back and forth empty they run the gauntlet of the (marching) crowd, which moves like a human river on both sides of the road. Many are tired, but none avail themselves of the buses. The older women frequently pause on the wayside, sitting on the bundles of the white mistress's washing, which they had balanced on their heads as they walked. There is something strange in this march. There is no order. It is a crowd, a mass of people of all descriptions, the old and the young, the strong and the weak, the healthy, the sickly and the lame ones are all moving in broken,
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irregular file. Some are dressed in decent working-clothes, others in shapeless, colourless garments that were once their masters. But one thing unites them. One and all they are determined not to use the buses. The old bus fare was already a big slice off their meagre earnings; they had to stint themselves and their children of food, of necessary medical attention and other vital needs, in order to find the money for transport. Now this extra twopence a day is the last straw. Literally. They can't pay it. They won't. So they walk. By the time they reach their place of work in the White man's town, they are exhausted. But the day's toil faces them. And at the end of it, they trudge the long way back on foot, arriving as they had set out, in the dark. The little children who they left sleeping in the early hours, many of them waifs of the sandy streets all day, are waiting hungry for food. So the family snatches a few hours sleep before facing the next day's trudge to work.

This wastage of human energy and substance must obviously tell on industry. The industrialists clamoured for a quick settlement of the dispute. Meantime, some sent out their cars to help the people home; others had bicycles. The White public of Johannesburg joined in to assist, preference being given to the old men and women. But this did little to reduce the crowds on the roads.