

1 **Boycott** means to combine with others in refusing to have relations of any kind – social, economic or personal – with someone or another group to punish them or force them into changing their position. It was first used as a strategy by tenant-members of the Irish Land League in the 1880s and its name derived from Captain C. C. Boycott, a landowner, one of the first victims of such a strategy.

## Introductory Exercise

Imagine that your local bus company was refusing to let students use window-seats and that many of the drivers abused students as 'lazy, good-for-nothing layabouts'. Some students were arrested when they tried to oppose the window seat ban. You and your fellow students decide to boycott<sup>1</sup> the company. This bus is the only means of transport for students at your school – there are no alternatives such as trams or trains and few students' parents can drive them to school in family cars.

### Discuss:

- 1 What would the students need to do to make the boycott effective?
- 2 What problems might the school have in organising and enforcing an effective boycott?
- 3 What problems might the boycott cause the students?
- 4 Why might such a boycott be an effective tactic?
- 5 Why might it not be an effective tactic?

## The Montgomery Bus Boycott

On 1 December 1955 Mrs Rosa Parks boarded a Montgomery bus on her way home from work. She paid her fare and moved to the rear, where law and custom required African-Americans to sit. It was full, so she sat in the middle section. She refused to vacate her seat at a later stop when a number of white customers boarded. The driver, seeing a white man still standing, asked Mrs Parks and others to move to the back. She refused, and was arrested for contravening Montgomery's segregation laws.

Rosa Parks, an active member of the NAACP was not the first African-American to protest against such laws nor was she the first to be arrested and jailed. But, with her permission, this was the incident used to challenge the system.

Through the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA)<sup>2</sup>, African-Americans organized what was intended to be a one-day boycott of the bus line by Montgomery's 50,000 African-Americans. Their spokesman, the Rev. Martin Luther King jr., urged the boycotters to be courteous, calm and to avoid confrontation. It was to be a peaceful economic boycott which aimed to get Jim Crow off the bus.

The bus line depended heavily on African-American custom for over seventy-five per cent of its revenue. The line was part of a franchise; if it desegregated the buses in Montgomery, it may have to do so elsewhere. The bus line was supported by Mayor Gayle, Police Commissioner Clyde Sellers, and the city's administration, led by Commissioner Parks.

The MIA organized alternative forms of transport for those who needed to get to work. Many walked, but private cars were also used as taxis. As the boycott continued, tensions heightened. The home of Martin Luther King Jr. was bombed, legal threats were made, but overwhelming support for the boycott remained. African-American ministers used their churches as meeting places, to disseminate information, and asked people to follow these requests:

FIGURE 15

Martin Luther King at a press conference.

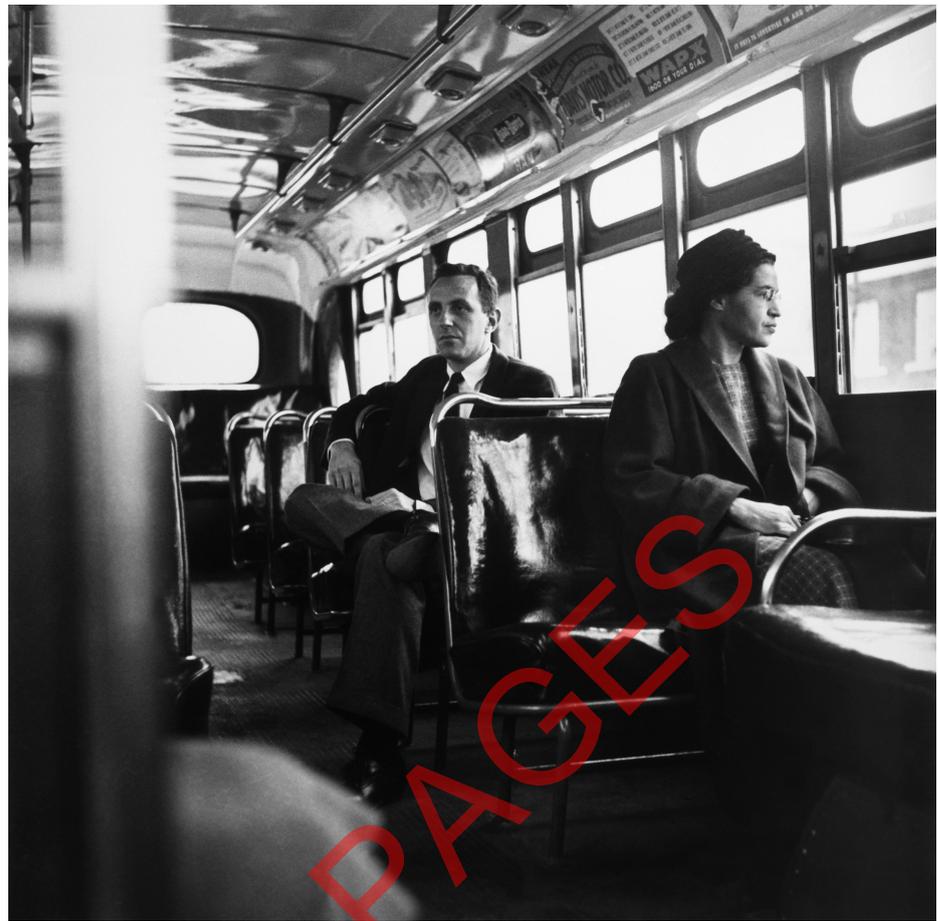
*Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, LC-DIG-ppmsc-01269.*



FIGURE 16

Rosa Parks sits in the front of a bus in Montgomery, Alabama, after the Supreme Court ruled segregation illegal on the city bus system on December 21st, 1956. Parks was arrested on December 1, 1955 for refusing to give up her seat in the front of a bus in Montgomery set off a successful boycott of the city busses. Man sitting behind Parks is Nicholas C. Chriss, a reporter for United Press International out of Atlanta.

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3.1

Don't ride the bus to work, to town, to school, or any place Monday, 5 December, [1955]. Another Negro woman has been arrested and put in jail because she refused to give up her bus seat. Don't ride the buses to work, to town, to school, or anywhere on Monday. If you work, take a cab, or share a ride, or walk. Come to a mass meeting, Monday at 7pm, at the Holt Street Baptist Church for further information.

Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 1988, p. 133.

2 **Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA)** was formed in 1954 to challenge legal segregation on Montgomery's buses.

By the northern spring of 1956 the boycott was receiving national attention. Reporters flocked to Montgomery to report on the progress of the boycott, which demonstrated to African-Americans in Montgomery and elsewhere, that they were indeed capable of sustained collective action.

The following documents will help you to explore the Montgomery bus boycott. Before reading them, locate Montgomery, Alabama, on the map reproduced in the Introductory Exercises earlier in this book.

Martin Luther King perhaps caught the mood of his people when he said in 1956:

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3.2

There comes a time when people get tired of being trampled by oppression. There comes a time when people get tired of being plunged into the abyss of exploitation and nagging injustice. The story of Montgomery is the story of 50,000 such Negroes who are willing to substitute tired feet for tired souls, and walk the streets of Montgomery until the walls of segregation were finally battered by the forces of justice.

Martin Luther King Jr., *Stride Toward Freedom*, New York, Harper & Row, 1958, p. 48.

Martin Luther King also said this about the law:

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**3.3**

Every man has a right and personal responsibility to break, ignore and resist certain local laws – no matter what personal consequences are – in order to abide by the national law.

Lerone Bennett jr., *What Manner of Man*, Chicago, Johnson Pub. Co. 1968, p. 82.

Rosa Parks, a seamstress, had been the volunteer secretary of the local NAACP association. She was quietly spoken, a hard-worker and a regular churchgoer. Some years after the Montgomery bus boycott, she recalled that:

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**3.4**

I had had problems with bus drivers over the years, because I didn't see fit to pay my money into the front and then go around to the back. Sometimes bus drivers wouldn't permit me to get on the bus, and I had been evicted from the bus. But as I say, there had been incidents over the years. One of the things that made this get so much publicity was the fact that the police were called in and I was placed under arrest. See, if I had just been evicted from the bus and he hadn't placed me under arrest or had any other charges brought against me, it probably could have been just another incident.

Howell Raines, *My Soul is Rested*, New York, Penguin Books. 1987, p. 40.

Montgomery boycotters sang this song in 1955:

DOCUMENT  
**3.5**

Ain't gonna ride them buses no more,  
Ain't gonna ride no more.  
Why don't all the white folk know  
That I ain't gonna ride no more

Yancey Martin, who was a college freshman [first-year student] in 1955, recalled a conversation between Martin Luther King and an unnamed seventy-two-year-old black woman who said:

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**3.6**

I'm gonna walk, just as long as everybody else walks. I'm gonna walk till its over ... My feets is tired, but my soul is rested.

Raines, *My Soul is Rested*, p. 61.

### Questions

- 1 From documents 3.1 to 3.5 and figure 17 assess the attitudes of African-Americans in Montgomery towards their protest.
- 2 What strategies did they rely on in their protest?
- 3 Discuss Martin Luther King's attitude to protest. How does it compare with those of your fellow students in your fictitious bus boycott?

The Montgomery City Council took a hard line on this attempt at desegregation. Mayor Gayle, Commissioner Parks and Commissioner Sellers joined a local White Citizens' Council (WCC).<sup>3</sup>

The Administration's reaction to the boycott follows:

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3.7

Commissioner Sellers instructed the Montgomery police force to 'toughen up' on Negroes waiting for rides. Commissioner Parks applauded businessmen who were laying off employees who supported the boycott. Mayor Gayle said in the Montgomery Press. 'It is not that important to whites that the Negroes ride the buses. When and if the Negro people desire to end the boycott, my door is open to them. But until they are ready to end it, there will be no more discussion'.

Branch, *Parting the Waters*, pp. 157-8.



FIGURE 17

Woman carrying crate of turnip greens on her head, walking during bus boycott protesting policy of forcing African-Americans to ride at the back of public buses.

Photo by Don Cravens//Time Life Pictures/Getty Images

FIGURE 18

Another view of Martin Luther King jr.

Flip Schulke.

**Question**

What do the images in the lower left corner represent? Why have they been included?

