

The Montgomery Bus Boycott

On December 1, 1955 in Montgomery, Alabama, Rosa Parks, a black woman, refused to give her bus seat to a white passenger, as required by the city's segregation laws. Although often depicted as a weary older woman too tired to get up and move, Parks was actually a longtime, active member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). A committed civil rights activist, she decided that she was not going to move. She was arrested and jailed for her defiant and courageous act.

The NAACP saw Parks' arrest as an opportunity to challenge segregation laws in a major Southern city. Montgomery's black political and religious leaders came together to support a one-day boycott on December 5 in protest of Parks' arrest.

More than 75 percent of Montgomery's black residents regularly used the bus system. On December 5, 1955, only eight black people rode Montgomery's buses. The success of the one-day boycott had depended on having the support of a large constituency. Indeed, on that day, organizers formed the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA) to lead boycott activities; its founders chose a young minister, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., as its chairman.

The MIA coordinated and helped to sustain what would become a long-term boycott. It demanded the elimination of segregation policy for the city's buses. Until this demand was met, black residents would refuse to ride Montgomery's buses.

Car pools were organized to get black participants to work. Many walked where they needed to go. After a month, Montgomery's businesses were beginning to feel the boycott's effects. Some people who supported segregation retaliated. Black people were arrested for walking on public sidewalks. The homes of Dr. King, E.D. Nixon (the local NAACP president), and Pastor Robert Graetz (a white minister who was a member of the MIA) were bombed in 1956. But King and others continued to build a constituency of people who supported civil rights and used non-violence and civil disobedience to resist violent opposition.

The Montgomery Bus Boycott lasted 382 days. It ended when the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that segregation on the city's buses was unconstitutional and ordered the city to desegregate.

The success of eliminating the bus segregation policy in Montgomery by boycotting depended on building a constituency of people who would not only support the boycott but participate in it. From the planning of the boycott to the Supreme Court ruling, thousands of people took many, many civic actions.

You are going to examine a document from the early days of the boycott to find out more about specific civic actions, especially the civic action of gaining support for your cause to build constituencies.



Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King, 1955.
Wikimedia Commons

For Discussion

1. What was the boycott about? (Describe in terms of policy and civic actions.)
2. Boycotts almost always fail. Why do you think this one was successful?
3. How was the Montgomery's bus segregation issue ultimately resolved?