

BOYCOTT IN SOUTH AFRICA HELPS SHIFT POWER TO THE PEOPLE

SUMMARY

Black South Africans had been living under apartheid since 1948, a legal system that violently oppressed the black population. In 1983, young, black organizers looked for new ways to go on the offensive. A movement of over 600 civic organizations formed, with women's clubs, churches, sports teams, street committees, etc., becoming

centers of resistance. In May 1985, the Port Elizabeth Black Civic Organization brought up the idea of a boycott of white-owned businesses. Some wanted to start right away while others knew success required numbers and it would take time to convince 500,000 black residents to join. Using huge weekly funeral gatherings to rally support, movement leaders launched the boycott in July with 100% participation. The initial demands were to end workplace discrimination, racially integrate public institutions, and remove troops from townships. Later, they added freeing political prisoners to their demands.

The government responded by quickly declaring a state of emergency and sending the army to violently occupy black neighborhoods (townships). There were hundreds of arrests. However, as white business owners lost money, they became reluctant allies, with many lobbying the government to meet the movement's demands. After four months of boycotting, with violence on the rise in townships and many leaders in prison, protesters negotiated a strategic deal: the boycott would be lifted from December to March if business owners arranged for black leaders to be released. Not only would this benefit businesses, it would avoid a potential drop-off in boycott participation over Christmas. Leaders were released and troops withdrawn.

During this time, economic sanctions on South Africa—called for by black South Africans across the country—were gaining momentum in the U.S. and Europe. International governments and corporations, pressed by allies abroad, were withdrawing support of the South African government. In Port Elizabeth, the boycott resumed on April 1st for several months, but with no real progress on demands. As state repression escalated and thousands were arrested, the movement was driven underground. Protesters had not fully achieved their goals, but the boycott spread to other communities and power began to shift into the hands of black South Africans and their social organizations, shattering the legitimacy of the apartheid regime. With the mass participation of people across the country in noncooperation tactics, and with continued economic pressure from overseas, apartheid was finally brought down in the early 1990s.



Posters of the United Democratic Front (UDF) calling for support of the consumer boycotts

Source: <http://mrdavis.yolasite.com>

ISSUE

The brutal system of separation of white and black people in South Africa. Apartheid denied anyone that wasn't white (the vast majority of whom were black) basic rights in education, housing, medical care, public services, etc. This separation and discrimination was absolute and enforced through extreme militarization.

WHO & WHERE

Black residents of Port Elizabeth, South Africa

GOALS

Initial: Open public facilities to all races, take troops out of townships, and end discrimination in the workplace

Later: Lift state of emergency and free political prisoners

STRATEGY

The movement's strategy was to put pressure on the South African government through a mass action tactic (boycott) that was not illegal and compelled white business owners to press the apartheid regime to meet protesters' demands. There was also a broader boycott campaign pressuring international corporations and governments.

PLANNED OR SPONTANEOUS?

The boycott was planned. The idea was raised by a group of women from the Port Elizabeth Black Civic Organization in May of 1985 and organizers spent more than a month rallying support. Funerals for those killed by the regime were a weekly occurrence across South Africa, and were the only gatherings not banned. They were often attended by thousands of people using song and dance to mourn and protest. In Port Elizabeth, organizers used the gatherings to make impassioned speeches appealing to residents to join a boycott and shop only in the townships. Local stores stocked up with supplies for 500,000 residents and the boycott was launched with 100% compliance. As the boycott went on, activists and citizens communicated through a network of committees, filtering responsibility downward to minimize repression toward leaders.



ISSUE FRAMING

The issue was framed in terms of the injustice and brutality of the laws of apartheid, as well as an end to militarization and segregation for black South Africans.

LEADERS, PARTICIPANTS, ALLIES INCLUDING ELITES

Leaders:

- Mkhuseleli Jack, 27-year-old youth leader and organizer of the boycott coordinating committee
- Popo Molefe and other organizers with the United Democratic Front (UDF), an umbrella group for 600 civic organizations
- Organizers with Port Elizabeth Black Civic Organization (PEBCO), an affiliate of UDF, including a group of women members who came up with the idea to boycott
- Organizers from Port Elizabeth Women's Organization (PEWO), like Fikiswa Gaveni, who took leadership roles in monitoring the boycott



Mkhuseleli Jack

Participants:

- 500,000 black boycotters, the heart of the effort
- Some white activists and organizers, like Janet Cherry with UDF

Elite Allies:

- Bishop Desmond Tutu, calling on people to remain nonviolent
- White business owners and the Chamber of Commerce, negotiating with the government (reluctant and desperate allies, pushed to the table by the economic pressure of the boycott)
- At the time of the boycott, corporations like AT&T, IBM, General Electric, Ford, General Motors, and Coke began leading economic sanctions against South Africa's repression (reluctant allies pushed into action by international consumer boycotts)
- International government leaders, speaking out against apartheid and the arrest of leaders

TARGET

Primary: President P.W. Botha and other South African government officials

Secondary: Local white business owners whose pressure could impact South African government officials

OPPONENTS

President P.W. Botha and other South African government officials, military and police forces, and white supremacists in favor of apartheid

TACTICS

- The mass participation boycott was the main tactic. Leaders started and stopped it with strategically timed negotiations, both recognizing the need to work with business owners and to avoid fatigue for black communities.
- Protest rallies: weekly funerals were the only gatherings not banned, so organizers used them throughout the campaign to rally support
- Singing, dancing, and public speeches

- Negotiation
- Parallel institutions to cope with the breakdown in local government tasks, like street cleaning
- Travel abroad to rally support from potential international allies

A member of Parliament called the economic boycott the most effective weapon used-to-date in the anti-apartheid struggle. The boycott was dispersed, with half a million people refusing to shop in white-owned businesses. The nonviolent tactic was chosen deliberately to help build the anti-apartheid movement by enabling everyone to participate and to claim the moral high ground. It was also a conscious act to move the struggle out of the townships and confront the white community that enabled apartheid to survive. The mass participation of 500,000 residents reduced the personal risk. However, individuals were harassed, shot, and arrested, so there was significant risk for any South African activist—especially young black men who were particularly targeted.

RESPONSE BY OPPONENT

- The government called a state of emergency several times, occupying townships with violent military force, curfews, mass arrests, and travel restrictions
- Thousands of people were thrown in jail
- Newspapers were banned
- Protests were broken up with dogs and police/military violence
- One state of emergency was called in secret and police then made surprise raids of trade unions, black civic organizations, churches, etc., confiscating information and making arrests
- Leaders were singled out and arrested, though initially this was difficult as they were dispersed among dozens of civic organizations. Organizer Mkhuseleli Jack was arrested several times and put under house arrest once. (This was overturned by the Supreme Court, giving a burst of momentum to the movement).

MEDIA & MESSAGING

- White media outlets in South Africa did not report any of the repression and events occurring in black townships, helping keep the issues out of the spotlight and awareness of white people.
- The anti-apartheid movement in general and the boycott in particular received significant international media coverage through print, television, radio, books, theater, and music, helping gain international support.
- During the boycott, President of the Chamber of Commerce Tony Gilson spoke with reporters after a meeting with boycott leaders, helping move the business community into negotiations with the government.

In one speech, Mkhuseleli Jack relayed an ongoing message to the crowd: "Our buying power is going to be the key that is going to decide the future, that is going to decide our destiny in this country!"

OUTCOMES

The boycott ended in 1986 under extreme repression and a constant state of emergency. Although the boycott did not directly achieve its stated goals, it helped shift the anti-apartheid movement toward mass noncooperation tactics that put a huge amount of pressure on the

state, moved power into the hands of black civic organizations, and forced the issue of apartheid onto the international stage. With added economic pressure from international allies and extensive media coverage, the anti-apartheid movement was eventually able to bring down the regime. Nonetheless, the history of apartheid still impacts many aspects of South African society and government, and the movement for justice and equality continues.