

Montgomery Bus Boycott | A1 Sample Answer

In what ways did the Montgomery Bus Boycott advance the cause of civil rights. (2007 Section 6 Question 2.)

Montgomery is the capital city of the state of Alabama in the United States. It is found in an area known as the Deep South, which has a large black population and an even larger racial divide. In the fifties, Montgomery had 70,000 white citizens and 50,000 blacks. Jim Crow laws, though unconstitutional, were still widely used and enforced through segregated schools and other public facilities. Blacks mostly held low paid, unskilled jobs. 60% of black women worked as domestic helpers and 50% of men worked as either labourers or domestic helpers. Blacks, on average, earned half the amount of whites. The bus company in Montgomery was no exception to racial discrimination. No blacks were employed as bus drivers and strict segregation was enforced on buses. Many black people reported abuse at the hands of the white drivers. However in 1955 this was about to change.

Buses were segregated so black people had to sit at the back and only whites were able to sit at the front. Black people had to pay for their ticket at the front of the bus but were not allowed enter there. They were forced to enter using the rear door. The last three rows were designated seats for black people but if the seats for white people were full, a black person was obliged to give up their seat for a white person. Rosa Parks was a 42 year old black woman who used the bus frequently in order to get to and from her job as a seamstress. She was a member of the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People and had already been put off a bus in the mid-1940s when she refused to abide the bus rules regarding black people. In December 1955, she took a seat at the rear of the bus. However, when the bus became full, she refused to give her seat to a white man. The driver of the bus promptly called the police and Parks was arrested. She appeared in court four days after the incident and was convicted and fined ten dollars.

Local black leaders decided that enough was enough and it was time to take action. E.D. Nixon, leader of the Montgomery NAACP, and Jo Ann Robinson, leader of the women's political council of Montgomery, decided that something had to be done about this. Nixon approached Parks and asked if he could use her case to fight for desegregation. This was a dangerous request as it would breed animosity within the white community and may have even put Parks' life at risk. However she discussed it with her family and agreed to allow Nixon to do this. The NAACP decided they would use her case in a lawsuit against the state. The

purpose of this was to argue against the constitutionality of these segregation laws. Robinson decided to ask black people to boycott the buses on the following Monday which was the day of Parks' trial. The women's political council of Montgomery issued 35,000 leaflets to spread the word of this boycott. The decision was popular amongst blacks who were also tired of unfair segregation laws and even black ministers in church sermons that Sunday supported it. The boycott that day was more successful than they could have ever hoped with most blacks supporting it despite the inconvenience not being able to use bus services caused.

The organisers however needed to find a leader who would be able to make sure the boycott continued to be successful. Martin Luther King was 26 years old and a clergyman who had arrived in Montgomery the year before. He was originally reluctant to be seen as the head of the boycott but he felt strongly enough about the cause to agree. He was an inspirational leader and was an incredible motivational speaker who was able to get his beliefs and ideal across to the black population with relative ease. He founded the Montgomery Improvement Association which was set up to lead the boycott. King was inspired greatly by the teachings of Ghandi and strived for a peaceful resolution and approach. He adopted a policy of strictly non-violent protesting and it became very popular. This unified his followers and made them determined enough to continue the boycott. This policy of peaceful protesting became the basis for the civil rights movement and peaceful demonstrations were used later in the pushes for voting rights and education desegregation. King also became a prominent figure in the movement due to the boycott and he gained a reputation and power which allowed him to negotiate with the government and even with later presidents with ease. This was extremely important later and came into being because of the boycott.

After the boycott on Monday the fifth was so successful, the MIA decided to continue it indefinitely until the bus company gave into their demands and changed the regulations. They wanted black bus drivers to be employed, all drivers to be courteous to all passengers no matter what their race, and for seats to be filled on a first come first serve basis with no discrimination. Continuing the boycott was risky as it needed widespread support or it would ultimately fail. Blacks would have to walk miles or carpool when able to. When organising the boycott, leaders had to collect a substantial amount of money to buy station wagons for private taxi services. Some of the money came from local black workers where many of them donated 20% of their wages. Other monies came from the NAACP, the United Auto's Workers Union, sympathetic whites and the Montgomery Jewish Community. The leaders set up a transportation committee to organise carpooling which was vital for some blacks to get to their jobs. Other blacks took bicycles or walked. Black churches also had a major role to play in raising funds and managed to raise 30,000 dollars for the carpool.

Many churches also allowed blacks to wait there for cars to pick them up. The boycott provided the NAACP and the MIA with a practice for organising the black community into a joint effort which ended up being a resounding success. It earned the full support of blacks and provided them the means of working together as a community to achieve a common goal which was a vital goal post for the later civil rights movement.

There was a lot of opposition to the boycott however. City authorities threatened to shut down the many taxi companies who were allowing blacks to ride for 10c; this was the same price as a bus ticket. The Ku Klux Klan held marches on the streets of Montgomery in protest and even poured acid on cars used for carpooling. King and many other political leaders involved had their houses bombed and burned. The police also tried to interfere. They stopped cars engaging in carpooling for random searches often to try and find any excuse to demobilise them. They arrested King for doing 30 miles an hour in a 25 an hour zone. In February 1956, 89 blacks, including King, were arrested under an old law that prohibited boycotting. Local insurance agents tried to hinder the boycott by refusing to insure black drivers but they just used Lloyds in London instead. Black churches were bombed and 24 ministers were arrested for helping the boycott. However, white animosity towards the boycott ended up backfiring on them. There was an increase in outside interest in the events in Montgomery both in the north and abroad. Televisions, newspapers and radio publicised the boycott and condemned the whites for how they were reacting to it. Many northern whites were extremely embarrassed and seek to renounce the actions of southern whites. This was important later as King utilised this white hatred to shame both white American liberals and the government into furthering the cause.

While all of this was happening, the NAACP had taken Parks' case to the Supreme Court in Washington. On the 13th of November 1956, the court ruled that the segregation laws on buses were unconstitutional and that they were to cease by December 20th. When the city officials finally gave in and implemented these changes, the MIA called off the boycott. It lasted 381 days and ended on December 21st. To celebrate this, King and other black leaders took seats at the front of the bus. This sparked outrage and backlash with snipers shooting at buses and even more houses and churches being burnt to the ground. However soon the white backlash ceased, spelling victory in Montgomery. This success cemented King's role as a leader of the movement and it also served to give belief to a previously hopeless black population that the racism problem could be saved.

The civil rights movement was largely impacted by the events in Montgomery 1955-1956. It proved that King's method of peaceful protesting was capable of success and most blacks had complete faith in his

teachings. It also provided the victory that many black people required to keep fighting their strife against racism. It created a new generation of southern blacks who wanted to change their situation and were willing to stand up for this change. They knew not only how to achieve their goals but how to deal with the backlash along the way. It provided the vital foundations for the voting protests and many other moves towards gaining other civil liberties. Ultimately, the bus boycott in Montgomery was not just a vital success for the people involved but a stepping stone for the civil rights movement of the 1960s.