

# Montgomery Bus Boycott 1955-56 – Key Events

## Montgomery, Alabama

1. State Capital and one of the most segregated cities in USA (Former “**Confederate**” Capital – Civil War)
2. Black people were regularly prevented from voting and were *not allowed to hold public office*.
3. **63%** of all black women were employed as “**domestic workers**” (servants ‘The Help’!)
4. The average income of a black worker in Montgomery was **half** that of a white worker
5. **Segregation**: Black people had different parks, theatres, restaurants, and school. Justified by the “**Jim Crow**” Laws: “**Separate, but Equal**”. (Plessy v Ferguson - 1896)

## “Jim Crow in Action” – Segregation on the Buses

1. Black citizens were not allowed to sit in the front of the bus, even if there were empty seats
2. The front four rows were exclusively for white passengers
3. If these four rows were full then a black person had to give up their seat to a white person as the white area expanded.
4. If a white person sat beside a black person then the black person had to stand
5. **All** the bus drivers were white. And made Black passengers pay at the front, then get off the bus & re-enter through the rear door
6. Black people who did not obey the law were fined and jailed
7. Many instances of rough and degrading treatment.

## Key Personality - Rosa Parks

1. 43-year old seamstress, **Secretary** of the Montgomery chapter of the NAACP (est 1909)
2. Why Parks? Compare with the 1<sup>st</sup> March case of **Claudette Colvin**. 15-year-old girl, same offence, reportedly pregnant, but unmarried. ‘**Test Case**’?
3. On **1<sup>st</sup> December 1955** Rosa Parks refused to give her seat to a white passenger on a bus
4. The police were called and Parks was arrested
5. The leader of the NAACP in Montgomery, **E.D. (Edgar Daniel) Nixon** paid her bail and they planned to appeal the verdict (up to the Supreme Court if necessary) and organise a boycott of the buses.

## The Bus Boycott

1. **Women’s Political Committee** organised a one-day bus boycott for 5<sup>th</sup> December 1955 – the day that Rosa Parks was due in court
2. Black civic & religious leaders appealed to the black community for calm. Early influence of **Non-Violence**
3. Thousands of leaflets distributed telling people of the bus boycott
4. Religious leaders (including MLK) urged those attending church to join the boycott. Using the power of the Church structures... (later **SCLC**)
5. Black taxi drivers agreed to charge the bus fare (**Economic Solidarity**)
6. Boycott received widespread support from black community
- 7 **Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA)** set up to run the Boycott. Martin Luther King elected leader. First step on the road to national prominence.

## Key Personality - Martin Luther King (MLK)

1. Popular Baptist Minister from Ebenezer, Georgia. Son of a pastor. Newly arrived in Montgomery.
2. Active in NAACP
3. A ‘young’, ‘energetic’ and a ‘brilliant public speaker’ (Powerful Oratory: “I have a dream” D.C. Aug ‘63)
4. King set up a **Transportation Committee** to raise funds to provide alternative transport
5. “**Car Pooling**” established and taxi services coordinated
6. On 8<sup>th</sup> December King met with the Mayor and the owner of the bus company. They told him ‘*Comes the first rainy day and the Negroes will be back on the buses*’
7. It rained the next day and the boycott continued
8. King became well known all over the USA. Iconic Figure.

## Reaction of a Section of the White Community

1. **Psychological Pressure** (disinformation)– Rumours were spread that King was spending money raised to support the boycott
2. False Media Reports – On 22 January 1956 the city authorities announced that the boycott was over. King told people to ignore the false reports
3. **Police Harassment** – Police arrested car pool drivers for giving lifts. Black people waiting for lifts were arrested for ‘loitering’
4. ‘To the fullest extent of the law’ – (legally) raised min taxi fares.
5. Feb 56, **89 black leaders arrested** - old law against boycotts
6. The **Ku Klux Klan** roamed the streets attacking black people, wrecking cars and bombing churches.
7. Political Influence of the White Citizen’s Council – Est. in 1954 after Brown ‘vs’ Board case. Opposed all desegregation.
8. 13<sup>th</sup> Nov & 28<sup>th</sup> Dec ‘56. White **violence** against boycotters

## Results of the Bus Boycott

1. The Bus Boycott lasted **381 days**.
2. Personal & economic consequence: Black people endured hardship getting to work, city services and private businesses lost millions of dollars
3. The Supreme Court ruled that segregation on buses was unconstitutional - “**Equal Protection Clause**” of the 14<sup>th</sup> AMD of the U.S. Constitution.
4. Ku Klux Klan continued to used violence
5. Many whites were appalled at the violence
6. After **Browder v Gayle** judgement and US Supreme Court decision not to overturn the ruling, MLK called the boycott to an end on 20<sup>th</sup> Dec, 1956.
7. Boycott ended segregation on buses but many black people continued to sit at the back of the bus out of habit. Change came slowly...

## Importance/Significance of Bus Boycott

- Remarkable, Remembered, Resonant, Resulting in Change, Revealing
1. First organised mass movement of black people in post-war US
  2. Ended segregation on buses in Alabama, suitable template for others
  3. Proved that **Direct Action** & “Non-violence” (**Ghandi & Bayard Rustin**) could work on a large scale. But required **discipline** from participants
  4. Inspired hope for change in black communities, particularly those who had lost faith in justice system.
  5. Focussed attention of nation on civil rights. **Federal Action**, not just local action needed. ‘**Sit-ins**’, ‘**Freedom Rides**’, ‘**Marches**’
  6. MLK gets national platform to promote civil rights – spearhead of a broader mvt, influential with **LBJ Civil and Voting Rights Acts**. (64 & 65)
  7. Instilled a new sense of pride in the black community in USA
  8. Inspired other minority groups to struggle for equality (Native Americans (Alcatraz Occupation), Mexican-Americans **Chicano Movement**, AKA “**El Movimiento**”, “**Black Power**”