

Busfare Rises Hit Workers

On December the 22nd, busfares increased substantially. Many workers travel long distances on the buses and these increases have been like stealing from their wages. For the same service, workers must now pay more because the owners of the busses, City Tramways, want to extract even more profit from these people that use the buses. Last year, Tollgate Holdings which owns City Tramways, increased its profits by no less than 1/3, to R5½ million!

Were they satisfied? No! They say they have greater costs. They point to the increased wages achieved by the Busdrivers. They try to split the unity of workers by blaming the Busdrivers for asking for wage increases made necessary by rising prices. Why were they not prepared to pay for these out of their profits?

Now busfares are controlled by the Road Transportation Board which is appointed by the Government. They are supposed to consider the needs of the bus users as well as City Tramways. But when they came to decide what increases to give, they simply gave City Tramways all the increases they asked for! Whose side are they really on? Workers can not pay these new busfares from their present wages. Only with increased wages will they manage to pay for the increases.

East London Workers Boycott Buses

Since December 2nd, all buses in East London have been boycotted by workers. It is reported that the boycott is total. Workers will not know much about this boycott because the newspapers have been very careful not to give it much publicity. This is why "Abasebenzi" brings you this survey of the boycott.

Fares in East London were raised on December 1st by between 7,1% and 33%. This meant that many workers had to pay 40 cents extra per week, while others had to pay 20 cents extra per week. (Remember that wages are lower in East London than in other cities).

On the day that fares were increased, the bus company only sold 20% of its usual weekly tickets. Meanwhile, rumours of a boycott were rife in the township of Mdantsane.

On the first day of the boycott, there were outbreaks of violence in Mdantsane bus terminal. Stones were thrown by youths and one bus was hijacked and driven off into the bushes. Police used teargas to disperse the crowds and broke up groups of workers with sticks and batons. One boy was shot by a policeman, and a bullet was later removed from his leg.

Many people were arrested for allegedly damaging police vehicles. One of these people arrested, later died in jail. The cause of death had not yet been determined. An unconfirmed report states that another of the men arrested is in a serious condition in a hospital.

On the second day, the boycott spread to Duncan Village. Bosses were now trying to get their workers to work by subsidising their wages, but not all wages were increased to meet the increased fares.

On the third day, police clamped down on trucks, private taxis and cars that were taking workers to work. Instead of using the buses, workers were taking the train. The railways put on a few special trains. But the special buses hired by bosses to bring their workers to the factories were also boycotted. Bosses said they saw intimidation behind this refusal to take the free buses.

In the midst of the boycott, the bus company said that they would not decrease the fares. The new fares had been approved by the Road Transportation Board. The bus company admitted that they were suffering substantial daily losses on the empty buses. But the company has not yet put any men off.

Mr Sebe's Role

New information is coming out about the events leading to the boycott. Meanwhile the Coloured Management Committee in East London has had meetings with the bus company. They were told that after the bus drivers went on strike on July 31st, Mr Sebe of the Ciskei Government intervened on behalf of the bus drivers. A bargain was struck whereby the busdrivers would be given increases, while the company would apply for higher bus fares.

So far so good. The company raised the wages of its 600 workers from R27,00 to R33,24. This increase will cost the company R392.152,00 every year.

To meet these increased wages, the company applied to the Road Transportation Board for an increased bus fare, and to the Government for an increase in the subsidy on bus fares. If this subsidy had been granted, the burden on the workers would have been much less.

But although the Ciskei Government was informed of the application for higher fares, it made no objection. And it is understood that Mr Sebe refused to support the appeal for a higher subsidy and the appeal failed. Thus the full burden of the fare increase fell on the workers.

It is apparent that the increase in fares, and thus the boycott, arose out of the bargain that Mr Sebe struck with the bus company.

Meanwhile, the Ciskei Government has refused to intervene in the boycott. It has refused to attend a meeting of all parties concerned organised by an East London City Councillor, which has been cancelled for this reason. Mr Sebe has also refused to react to the accusation that it was his intervention during the bus drivers' strike that led to the increase in fares for the workers.

Liaison Committee Shows its Colours

Earlier, the chairman of the bus drivers' liaison committee, Mr Jonas, attacked the boycott. He said political pressure, not economics, were behind the boycott. He called on Mr Sebe to bring an end to "this senseless boycott".

"After striking for higher wages (in July) most of which were granted by the company, drivers and other employees of the company will be forced out of work and have no wage at all."

But there has been no intimidation during the boycott - and that's official. The police station commander at Mdantsane has told newspapers that there is no intimidation, but police are on watch to protect passengers who want to use the buses.

So far, it seems, the workers aren't interested in the buses, police protection or not!

Ciskei to Buy up Bus Company

Mr Sebe has cleverly decided to buy up the Border Passenger Co. at exactly the right time. Since the company is losing money because of the boycott, it is worth less and thus Mr Sebe's Government will be able to buy it cheaply.

It is understood that the Xhosa Development Corporation is assisting in talks between Mr Sebe and the bus company. The Ciskei Government has apparently offered R5 million for the company, but the company wants R9 million.

So, while the boycott continues, Mr Sebe is buying up the bus company. But since an idle company is not worth having, he has appealed to workers to use the buses again.

"I appealed to my people to support the existing service for an interim period while we are making the necessary arrangements for taking over." Mr Sebe has promised to reduce fares to the old level - but he has not said how long it will be before the fares are raised again.

Workers Reject Sebe's Call

But Mr Sebe's appeal met with rebuff from those he calls "his people". At a mass meeting in Mdantsane, 7 out of 8 sections rejected Mr Sebe's appeal to go back to the buses, and voted to continue the boycott.

This was despite the pleas of Township Councillors, who urged the workers to heed Mr Sebe's pleas to return to the buses. Only one section was prepared to give up the boycott at this stage.

But the sections did call for a mass meeting between workers, the Sebe Government, the Border Passenger Transport Co. and the Mdantsane Council to air their grievances with the bus service.

At the same time, Mr Sebe has confirmed reports that he supported the increase in fares. He says, "I warned the bus company. I spent 3 hours with them and I told them we were not against the implementation of the rise but the manner in which it was carried out - and that the people would not accept this."

Mr Sebe was right - the people did not accept the increases. But he is wrong if he thinks it was the "manner in which it was carried out" - no, the workers have shown they are against the increases themselves!

What the Boycott Means for the Workers

And so the boycott continues. At the time of writing (9-1-75) the workers were still keeping up their total boycott of buses in East London. The country has not seen such a boycott since the Alexandria bus boycott in the 1950's. Not since then have the workers been so united in their action.

What are the conclusions to be drawn by workers in other parts of the country? The workers of East London must be congratulated on their unity. They have shown what unity means. It is true that their unity has not yet spread right into the factories - the workers of East London have still not started organizing factory committees. But no doubt that will come in time.

Nevertheless, their action shows how important unity is when the workers want to make a demand. It also shows how careful preparation among the workers is necessary for long beforehand, so that the workers know what to do when they are called. This means constant meetings, constant planning! You can be sure that the workers of East London did not just suddenly start the boycott without thinking! No, much discussion and planning went on before the boycott so that the workers were ready. Here is the most important lesson of the great East London boycott - before you make demands: plan, educate, discuss!

Stop Press:

The latest news from East London is that the boycott has resulted in a victory for the workers. "As from January 9th, 1975, the bus-service will return to normal and passengers will pay... those fares which applied before the increase." The victory of the workers is to be saluted by fellow-workers throughout the country.

EDITORIAL

What are workers to make of the confusion that surrounds the boycott in East London ? With statements flying left, right and centre, we have heard from all the parties - except the boycotters! What is the workers' attitude towards the boycott ?

The first thing to be made clear is that the fare increases result from the wage increases that the bus drivers got after their successful strike in July and August. And who is to begrudge the drivers these increases ? They went on strike for reasonable wages, and all workers will support them in struggling for what is their due.

But clearly it is not the bus company that is paying for the increased wages, but the workers of East London, in the form of higher fares!

The bus drivers are entitled to ask the workers of East London to pay bus fares to cover their wages. But the bus company increased the fares in order to keep its profits high!

In other words, the company should pay for higher wages out of its profits - the East London workers should not have to pay for these wages out of their own small wages!

And that is why the boycott is so important. The workers are, in effect, telling their bosses and the Government that they all want increased wages to cover the new fares. If one group of workers gets better wages, this must not be done at the expense of other workers. What has happened is that the workers of East London have joined the busdrivers in a general campaign for higher wages.

The second general point is that the leader of the bus drivers is displaying a very selfish attitude. It is perhaps significant that he is chairman of a liaison committee - the kind of committee that is very easy for the boss to control. This man has attacked the boycott because it threatens the jobs of the busdrivers. He fears they will be put out of work if the boycott continues. But does he not realize that it was the wage increases won by the busdrivers that caused the fares to go up - and thus caused the boycott ? Instead of asking the workers of Mdantsane to pay for his higher wage, he should support the workers in the boycott, and do what he can to help them get higher wages to cover the new fares.

We can only hope that the busdrivers do not share the selfish attitude of the chairman of the liaison committee.

The third lesson is that the township councillors do not enjoy the confidence of the workers. This is shown by the rejection of their pleas to end the boycott. Workers in East London have indicated that they will trust only their own leaders - and it will not be too soon if workers in other cities follow their example.

The fourth lesson is that the workers' struggle is more important than any tribal differences! Radebe and Fingo in Mdantsane have forgotten their differences and come together as one "tribe" - or tribe of workers!

And the final lesson ; a lesson for all workers - is that united action by workers from every different kind of job is called for. The stage is passing when workers in one factory can struggle alone for higher wages - because those increases may well raise the cost-of-living of other workers (as in the case of the bus fares).

Workers should not be discouraged from demands for higher wages on the grounds that it will hurt other workers - but they must be discouraged from making demands without consulting other workers and enlisting their support.

The call to workers is this - no more isolated demands! Instead, workers from every factory must join in making a single demand of all the bosses. In that way, the bosses are made to pay for increased wages, not the other workers.

Wages and Profits

Whenever the workers demand an increase in their wages, managements' first answer is that if wages are increased, their costs will be increased and so prices will have to be raised - in other words they tell their workers that an increase will not improve their living standards because they - the workers - will have to pay a higher price for the goods that they buy.

The worker earns wages which are paid to them by management, management earns profits which they get from selling the goods produced in their factories - if management pays his worker a wage of R1,00 and if he sells the good produced for R5,00, he has made a profit of R4,00. He now says that if he pays his worker R1,50 he will have to sell the good for R5,50 so that he still makes R4,00 profit - but it is not possible for him to raise wages without increasing the price, even if his profits are slightly smaller.

Almost every day workers find they have to pay more for the goods they need. Only a few days ago bus fares went up, shortly after the rise in rail fares. And as if this was not enough, bread has gone up from 13c to 16c.

So on the one hand, the workers are finding they can buy less with their money - and on the other hand, when workers ask for higher wages, the boss tells them that they cannot get them because of inflation.

Why does this inflation come about ?

Workers in many parts of the country have won better wages by organising themselves and the bosses have raised many wages to prevent unrest from disturbing the factories. The bosses' costs have risen in other ways too - many of the goods he uses are now more expensive.

If the boss finds his costs (like wages) going up, he will be earning a smaller profit (profit is what the boss keeps when he has paid wages and other costs). The boss will therefore attempt to keep his profit high by increasing his prices.

To put it more simply, the workers may be given a higher wage. This will reduce the boss's profit, so the prices will be increased. But it is the workers who have to pay his higher price! Thus, even with their higher wage, they are no better off than before.

In attempting to keep his profits high, the boss will make the workers in general pay for the wage increases of his own workers.

This only serves to show that inflation is used by bosses to keep profits high - and to ensure that workers can buy no more for their wages than before!

If the workers are to achieve a higher standard of living, they will have to ensure that higher wages come out of profits, not out of the workers' wages.

Note for Cape Town's Workers

Bus fares in Cape Town have just gone up to cover the increased wages for bus drivers. The busdrivers recently had a ban on overtime to force the bus company to raise their wages.

Thus the events of East London are repeating themselves in Cape Town! But it is sad to see that the committee that says it is representing the bus-passengers has done nothing more than "appeal" for the fares to come down again. The Border Passenger Transport Co. is owned by the same people who own the buses in Cape Town and Port Elizabeth. Both these cities have experienced overtime ban and increased fares.

SOURCES: The World, Daily Dispatch, Rand Daily Mail.

More About Committees

Workers must elect factory committees to represent them. These committees are for the workers, not for the employers. They must report back to the workers every month - and the workers must make sure that the committee obeys their instructions.

The liaison committee is the employer's committee that the employers have foisted on the workers in many factories. The chairman and half the members are appointed by the employer. The other half only, are elected by the workers. This committee is registered with the Department of Labour. Workers are strongly advised not to agree to the liaison committee because it cannot speak with the voice of the workers - it is only half a voice!

The works committee is also registered with the Department of Labour, but the workers elect all the members of this committee. The boss cannot interfere in the elections of this committee. The employer cannot prevent the workers from electing a works committee - unless a liaison committee has already been formed. Workers have a free choice between liaison committees and works committees - this is laid down by Act of Parliament.

Workers are advised to elect factory committees, and register them with the Department of Labour as works committees. In this way, your factory committee will get recognition.

If you have problems with all this information, or have more questions to ask, or need help in forming a factory committee, write to "Abasebenzi", 317 Turban Road, Korsten.

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