

Boycott is not an inflexible principle

OUR STRUGGLE NEEDS MANY TACTICS

by NELSON MANDELA

Political organisations in this country have frequently employed the boycott weapon in their struggle against racial discrimination and oppression. In December, 1947, the African National Congress decided to boycott all elections under the Natives Representatives Act of 1936 as well as all elections to the United Transkeian Territories General Council generally referred to as the Bunga; to the advisory boards and all other discriminatory statutory institutions specially set up for Africans. A year earlier the South African Indian Congress had decided to boycott and had launched a resistance campaign against the Asiatic Land Tenure and Indian Representation Act which, inter alia, made special provision for the representation in parliament of Indians in the Provinces of Natal and the Transvaal and for the representation in the Provincial Council of Natal of Indians in that Province. During Easter last year the South African Coloured People's Organisation considered its attitude on the question of the election of four Europeans to represent the Coloured people in Parliament and decided to boycott these elections as well as the election of twenty-seven Coloured persons to the Union Council of Coloured Affairs. In December of the same year SACPO reversed this decision and decided to participate in the Parliamentary elections.

Apart from such boycotts of unrepresentative institutions, boycotts of a different kind have often been called by various organisations on matters directly affecting the people. For example in 1949 the Western Areas Tram Fares Committee successfully boycotted the increased fares on the Johannesburg—Western Areas tram route. Similarly last year, and by means of the boycott weapon, the Alexandra People's Transport Committee achieved a brilliant victory when it rebuffed and defeated the decision of the Public Utility Transport Corporation, backed by the Government, to increase fares along the Johannesburg—Alexandra bus route. The Federation of South African Nurses and Midwives is presently campaigning for the boycott of all discriminatory provisions of the Nursing Amendment Act passed last year. By and large, the boycott is recognised and accepted by the people as an effective and powerful weapon of political struggle.

Perhaps it is precisely because of its effectiveness and the wide extent to which various organisations employ it in their struggles to win their demands that some people regard the boycott as a matter of principle which must be invariably applied at all times and in all circumstances

irrespective of the prevailing objective conditions. This is a serious mistake for the boycott is in no way a matter of principle but a tactical weapon whose application should, like all other political weapons of struggle, be related to the concrete conditions prevailing at the given time.

For example, the boycott by the Indian community of the representation machinery contained in the Asiatic Land Tenure and Indian Representation Act of 1946 was correct at the time not because the boycott is correct on principle but because the Indian people correctly gauged the objective situation. Firstly, the political concessions made in the Act were intended to bribe the Indian people to accept the land provisions of this Act which deprived Indians of their land rights — a bribe which even the Indian reactionaries were not prepared to accept. Secondly, a remarkable degree of unity and solidarity had been achieved by the Indian people in their struggle against the Act. The conservative Kajee-Pather bloc worked in collaboration with the progressive and militant Dadoo-Naicker wing of the S.A.I.C. and no less than thirty five thousand members had been recruited into the S.A.I.C. before the commencement of the campaign. Under these conditions the boycott proved correct and not a single Indian person registered as a voter in terms of the Act.

Similarly, the 1947 boycott resolutions of the A.N.C. was correct in spite of the fact that no effective country-wide campaign was carried out to implement this resolution. It will be recalled that at that time in an endeavour to destroy the people's political organisations and to divert them from these organisations, the United Party Government was fostering the illusion that the powers of the natives Representation Council, the Bunga, the Advisory Boards and similar institutions would be increased to such an extent that the African people would have an effective voice in the government of the country. The agitation that followed the adoption of the boycott resolution by the A.N.C., inadequate as it was, helped to damage the influence of these sham institutions and to discredit those who supported them. In certain areas these institutions were completely destroyed and they have now no impact whatsoever on the outlook of people. To put the matter crisply, the 1947 resolution completely frustrated the scheme of the United Party Government to confuse the people and to destroy their political organisations.

In some cases therefore, it might be correct to boycott and in others it might be unwise and dangerous. Still in other cases another weapon of political struggle might be preferred. A demonstration, a protest march, a strike or civil disobedience might be resorted to, all depending on the actual conditions at the given time.

In the opinion of some people participation in the system of separate racial representation in any shape or form, and irrespective of the reasons advanced for doing so, is impermissible on principle and harmful in practice. According to them such participation can only serve to confuse the people and to foster the illusion that they can win their demands through a parliamentary form of struggle. In their view the people have now become so politically conscious and developed that they cannot accept any form of representation which in any way fetters their progress. They maintain that people are demanding direct representation in Parliament, in the provincial and city councils and that nothing short of this will satisfy them. They say that leaders who talk of the practical advantages to be gained by participation in separate racial representation

do not have the true interests of the people at heart. Finally they argue that the so called representatives have themselves expressed the view that they have achieved nothing in Parliament. Over and above, the argument goes, the suggestion that anything could be achieved by electing such representatives to Parliament is made ridiculous by their paucity in Parliament. This view has been expressed more specifically in regard to the question of the boycott of the forthcoming Coloured Parliamentary seats.

The basic error in this argument lies in the fact that it regards the boycott not as a tactical weapon to be employed if and when objective conditions permit but as an inflexible principle which must under no circumstances be varied. Having committed this initial mistake people who advocate this point of view are invariably compelled to interpret every effort to relate the boycott to specific conditions as impermissible deviations on questions of principle. In point of fact total and uncompromising opposition to racial discrimination in all its ramifications and refusal to co-operate with the Government in the implementation of its reactionary policies are matters of principle in regard to which there can be no compromise. In its struggle for the attainment of its demands the liberation movement avails itself of various political weapons one of which might (but not necessarily) be the boycott. It is, therefore, a serious error to regard the boycott as a weapon that must be employed at all times and in all conditions. Secondly they fail to draw the vital distinction between participation in such elections by people who accept racial discrimination and who wish to co-operate with the Government in the oppression and exploitation of their own people on the one hand and participation in such elections not because of any desire to co-operate with the Government but in order to exploit them in the interest of the liberatory struggle on the other hand. The former is the course generally followed by collaborators and Government stooges and has for many years been consistently condemned and rejected by the liberation movement. The latter course, provided objective conditions permit, serves to strengthen the peoples struggle against the reactionary policies of the Government.

The December decision of SACPO in favour of participation in the forthcoming parliamentary elections is correct for various reasons. The principal and most urgent task facing the Congress movement today is the defeat of the Nationalist Government and its replacement by a less reactionary one. Any step or decision which helps the movement to attain this task is politically correct. The election of four additional members of Parliament, provided that they agree with the general aims of the movement and provided that they are anti-Nationalist, would contribute towards the defeat of the present Government. In advocating this course it is not in any way being suggested that the salvation of the oppressed people of this country depends on the Parliamentary struggle, nor is it being suggested that a United Party regime would bring about any radical changes in the political set-up in this country. It is accepted and recognised that the people of South Africa will win their freedom as a result of the amount of pressure they will put up against the reactionary policies of the Government. Under a United Party Government it will still be necessary to wage a full-scale war on racial discrimination. But the defeat of the Nationalists would at least lighten the heavy burden of harsh and restrictive legislation that is borne by the people at the present moment. There would be a breathing space during which the movement might recuperate and prepare for fresh assaults against the oppressive policies of the Government.

SACPO's struggle and influence amongst the Coloured people has grown tremendously but it is not without opposition and there are still large numbers of Coloured people who are outside its fold. In order to succeed a boycott resolution requires a greater degree of unity and solidarity than has been so far achieved amongst the Coloured people. Prior to the December resolution certain Coloured organisations had indicated their willingness to participate in these elections. Under such conditions to boycott the elections might result in hostile and undesirable elements being returned to Parliament.

In several conferences of the A.N.C., both national and provincial, the view has been expressed that the 1947 resolution requires to be reviewed in the light of the new conditions created as a result of the serious and dangerous attacks launched by the Nationalists on the liberation movement. The political situation has radically changed since. The political organisations of the people are functioning under conditions of semi-illegality. Legal authorities are refusing to permit meetings within their areas and it is becoming increasingly difficult to hold conferences. Some of the most experienced and active members have been deported from their homes, others have been confined to certain areas whilst many have been compelled to resign from their organisations. Institutions such as the advisory boards are regarded as too advanced and dangerous by the present Government and are being replaced by tribal institutions in terms of the Bantu Authorities Act. Platforms for the dissemination of propaganda are gradually disappearing. Having regard to the principal task of ousting the Nationalist Government it becomes necessary for the Congress to review its attitude towards the special provision for the representation of Africans set out in the 1936 Act. The Parliamentary forum must be exploited to put forth the case for a democratic and progressive South Africa. Let the democratic movement have a voice both outside and within Parliament. Through the advisory boards and, if the right type of candidates are found, through Parliament we can reach the masses of the people and rally them behind us.

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