

Contents

- 123 PLANNING FOR ZAMBIAN INTEGRATION: Sikota Wina
- 126 VIEWS OF YOUTH:
1. THE YOUTH OF AFRICA WILL CHOOSE: Shakespeare Makoni
 2. BRIDGING SOUTH AFRICA'S YOUTH GAP: David le Roux
- 130 THE TRANSKEI'S ANSWER I: L. Jipula
- 132 NIGERIA: THE ECONOMICS OF SOCIO-POLITICAL BANKRUPTCY I: R. H. Green
- 135 DIVINITY. A RADIO PLAY PART I: Obi B. Egbuna
- 137 RHODESIA'S OPPRESSIVE ALLIANCE: Colin Cleat
- 140 COLOURED SON — 4: Johan de Lange
- 142 KENYA: GROWTH AND THE GOOD RELATIONSHIP: Belle Harris
- 122 Leader; 138 Cartoon; 141 Review by Martin Jarrett-Kerr

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Reassessing the boycott

THE TIME HAS COME to question the advisability of continued advocacy of the boycott as an all-purpose weapon of opposition to the South African regime. Since the boycott movement was started six years ago in London by Mr. Patrick van Rensburg, it has achieved a number of significant successes, notably on the pledge by playwrights and some artists not to allow their works to be shown in South Africa, in the exclusion of South Africa from the Olympic Games, and on the subject of an arms embargo by some of the leading Western States. But it has also failed, in many other fields. The attendance of 30,000 people at Lords to watch the South African cricket team in its first test match against England, and this after an all-out boycott campaign, is a recent example. A more telling, and distressing one is to be found in the 1965 South African trade figures, which were released last month. These show that, in the first half of the year, trade with America, Europe (including the Communist bloc) and even African countries increased — despite sporadic restrictions and statements advocating them by more than a hundred countries. In Britain, the home of the most persistent and dedicated advocates of the consumer boycott, the lack of success is palpable. Not only has it produced almost no impact on the vast majority of retail outlets, but it has even been met with a divided and largely unhelpful response from such sympathetic bodies as the Co-operative movement.

By some mischance, what was originally designed as a tactic has been elevated to the level of a principle. As a result, boycott-promoters have done frequent harm to the cause they have been seeking to advance: both by distracting would-be activists against apartheid from concentrating on a more effective means of opposition, and by bringing about frustration among those who see the boycott foundering and failing in so many ways.

WE DO NOT MEAN to suggest that boycott should be abandoned entirely as a technique of opposition; but it should be recognised as a technique and no more. It should be used selectively and where it can work best. Where it is unlikely to be effective it should be abandoned. Support for this view is found in the views of Mr. Nelson Mandela.* Writing about a different type of boycott (that of the segregated electoral machinery for non-whites in South Africa, before 1960), he said:

"Perhaps it is precisely because of its effectiveness and the wide extent to which various organisations employ it in their struggle to win their demands that some people regard the boycott as a matter of principle which must be applied invariably at all times and in all circumstances irrespective of the prevailing conditions. This is a serious mistake, for the boycott is in no way a matter of principle but a tactic weapon whose application should, like all other political weapons of the struggle, be related to the concrete conditions prevailing at the given time. . . . In some cases, therefore, it might be correct to boycott, and in others it might be unwise and dangerous."

At very least, a serious attempt should be made to reassess the way in which the boycott is being used, and to restrict its application to those fields in which it can be made to work most efficiently for the cause of ending white domination. If this involves the abandonment of some aspects of the boycott campaign, it should not be shirked. More people, more energy and more resources can be devoted to those campaigns which are likely to succeed, as well as to other techniques of opposition.

* *No Easy Walk to Freedom* by Nelson Mandela, Edited by Ruth First (Heinemann Educational Books, London, 1965. 21s.)