

Montgomery Bus Boycott

Event

December 5, 1955 to December 20, 1956

By: Stanford University | The Martin Luther King Jr. Research and Education Initiative

Sparked by the arrest of Rosa **Parks** on 1 December 1955, the Montgomery bus boycott was a 13-month mass protest that ended with the U.S. Supreme Court ruling that segregation on public buses is unconstitutional. The **Montgomery Improvement Association** (MIA) coordinated the boycott, and its president, Martin Luther King, Jr., became a prominent civil rights leader as international attention focused on Montgomery. The bus boycott demonstrated the potential for nonviolent mass protest to successfully challenge racial segregation and served as an example for other southern campaigns that followed. In ***Stride Toward Freedom***, King's 1958 memoir of the boycott, he declared the real meaning of the Montgomery bus boycott to be the power of a growing self-respect to animate the struggle for civil rights.

The roots of the bus boycott began years before the arrest of Rosa Parks. The **Women's Political Council** (WPC), a group of black professionals founded in 1946, had already turned their attention to Jim Crow practices on the Montgomery city buses. In a meeting with Mayor W. A. Gayle in March 1954, the council's members outlined the changes they sought for Montgomery's bus system: no one standing over empty seats; a decree that black individuals not be made to pay at the front of the bus and enter from the rear; and a policy that would require buses to stop at every corner in black residential areas, as they did in white communities. When the meeting failed to produce any meaningful change, WPC president Jo Ann **Robinson** reiterated the council's requests in a 21 May letter to Mayor Gayle, telling him, "There has been talk from twenty-five or more local organizations of planning a city-wide boycott of buses" ("A Letter from the Women's Political Council").

A year after the WPC's meeting with Mayor Gayle, a 15-year-old named Claudette Colvin was arrested for challenging segregation on a Montgomery bus. Seven months later, 18-year-old Mary Louise Smith was arrested for refusing to yield her seat to a white passenger. Neither arrest, however, mobilized Montgomery's black community like that of Rosa Parks later that year.

King recalled in his memoir that "Mrs. Parks was ideal for the role assigned to her by history," and because "her character was impeccable and her dedication deep-rooted" she was "one of the most respected people in the Negro community" (King, 44). Robinson and the WPC responded to Parks' arrest by calling for a one-day protest of the city's buses on 5 December 1955. Robinson prepared a series of leaflets at Alabama State College and organized groups to distribute them throughout the black community. Meanwhile, after securing bail for Parks with Clifford and Virginia **Durr**, E. D. **Nixon**, past leader of the Montgomery chapter of the **National Association for the Advancement of Colored People** (NAACP), began to call local black leaders, including Ralph **Abernathy** and King, to organize a planning meeting. On 2 December, black ministers and leaders met at **Dexter Avenue Baptist Church** and agreed to publicize the 5 December boycott. The planned protest received unexpected publicity in the weekend newspapers and in radio and television reports.

On 5 December, 90 percent of Montgomery's black citizens stayed off the buses. That afternoon, the city's ministers and leaders met to discuss the possibility of extending the boycott into a long-term campaign. During this meeting the MIA was formed, and King was elected president. Parks recalled: "The advantage of having Dr. King as president was that he was so new to Montgomery and to civil rights work that he hadn't been there long enough to make any strong friends or enemies" (Parks, 136).

That evening, at a mass meeting at **Holt Street Baptist Church**, the MIA voted to continue the boycott. King spoke to several thousand people at the meeting: "I want it to be known that we're going to work with grim

and bold determination to gain justice on the buses in this city. And we are not wrong.... If we are wrong, the Supreme Court of this nation is wrong. If we are wrong, the Constitution of the United States is wrong. If we are wrong, God Almighty is wrong” (*Papers 3:73*). After unsuccessful talks with city commissioners and bus company officials, on 8 December the MIA issued a formal list of demands: courteous treatment by bus operators; first-come, first-served seating for all, with blacks seating from the rear and whites from the front; and black bus operators on predominately black routes.

The demands were not met, and Montgomery’s black residents stayed off the buses through 1956, despite efforts by city officials and white citizens to defeat the boycott. After the city began to penalize black taxi drivers for aiding the boycotters, the MIA organized a carpool. Following the advice of T. J. **Jemison**, who had organized a carpool during a 1953 bus boycott in Baton Rouge, the MIA developed an intricate carpool system of about 300 cars. Robert **Hughes** and others from the Alabama Council for Human Relations organized meetings between the MIA and city officials, but no agreements were reached.

In early 1956, the homes of King and E. D. Nixon were bombed. King was able to calm the crowd that gathered at his home by declaring: “Be calm as I and my family are. We are not hurt and remember that if anything happens to me, there will be others to take my place” (*Papers 3:115*). City officials obtained injunctions against the boycott in February 1956, and indicted over 80 boycott leaders under a 1921 law prohibiting conspiracies that interfered with lawful business. King was tried and convicted on the charge and ordered to pay \$500 or serve 386 days in jail in the case *State of Alabama v. M. L. King, Jr.* Despite this resistance, the boycott continued.

Although most of the publicity about the protest was centered on the actions of black ministers, women played crucial roles in the success of the boycott. Women such as Robinson, Johnnie **Carr**, and Irene **West** sustained the MIA committees and volunteer networks. Mary

Fair Burks of the WPC also attributed the success of the boycott to “the nameless cooks and maids who walked endless miles for a year to bring about the breach in the walls of segregation” (Burks, “Trailblazers,” 82). In his memoir, King quotes an elderly woman who proclaimed that she had joined the boycott not for her own benefit but for the good of her children and grandchildren (King, 78).

National coverage of the boycott and King’s trial resulted in support from people outside Montgomery. In early 1956 veteran pacifists Bayard **Rustin** and Glenn E. **Smiley** visited Montgomery and offered King advice on the application of Gandhian techniques and **nonviolence** to American race relations. Rustin, Ella **Baker**, and Stanley **Levison** founded **In Friendship** to raise funds in the North for southern civil rights efforts, including the bus boycott. King absorbed ideas from these proponents of nonviolent direct action and crafted his own syntheses of Gandhian principles of nonviolence. He said: “Christ showed us the way, and Gandhi in India showed it could work” (Rowland, “2,500 Here Hail”). Other followers of Gandhian ideas such as Richard **Gregg**, William Stuart **Nelson**, and Homer **Jack** wrote the MIA offering support.

On 5 June 1956, the federal district court ruled in **Browder v. Gayle** that bus segregation was unconstitutional, and in November 1956 the U.S. Supreme Court affirmed *Browder v. Gayle* and struck down laws requiring segregated seating on public buses. The court’s decision came the same day that King and the MIA were in circuit court challenging an injunction against the MIA carpools. Resolved not to end the boycott until the order to desegregate the buses actually arrived in Montgomery, the MIA operated without the carpool system for a month. The Supreme Court upheld the lower court’s ruling, and on 20 December 1956 King called for the end of the boycott; the community agreed. The next morning, he boarded an integrated bus with Ralph Abernathy, E. D. Nixon, and Glenn Smiley. King said of the bus boycott: “We came to see that, in the long run, it is more honorable to walk in dignity than ride in humiliation. So ... we decided to substitute tired feet for tired souls, and walk the streets of

Montgomery” (*Papers 3:486*). King’s role in the bus boycott garnered international attention, and the MIA’s tactics of combining mass nonviolent protest with Christian ethics became the model for challenging segregation in the South.

Footnotes

Joe Azbell, “Blast Rocks Residence of Bus Boycott Leader,” 31 January 1956, in *Papers 3:114–115*.

Baker to King, 24 February 1956, in *Papers 3:139*.

Burks, “Trailblazers: Women in the Montgomery Bus Boycott,” in *Women in the Civil Rights Movement*, ed. Crawford et al., 1990.

“Don’t Ride the Bus,” 2 December 1955, in *Papers 3:67*.

U. J. Fields, Minutes of Montgomery Improvement Association Founding Meeting, 5 December 1955, in *Papers 3:68–70*.

Gregg to King, 2 April 1956, in *Papers 3:211–212*.

Indictment, *State of Alabama v. M. L. King, Jr., et al.*, 21 February 1956, in *Papers 3:132–133*.

Introduction, in *Papers 3:3–7; 17–21; 29*.

Jack to King, 16 March 1956, in *Papers 3:178–179*.

Judgment and Sentence of the Court, *State of Alabama v. M. L. King, Jr.*, 22 March 1956, in *Papers 3:197*.

King, Statement on Ending the Bus Boycott, 20 December 1956, in *Papers 3:485–487*.

King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, 1958.

King, Testimony in *State of Alabama v. M. L. King, Jr.*, 22 March 1956, in *Papers 3:183–196*.

King to the National City Lines, Inc., 8 December 1955, in *Papers 3:80–81*.

“A Letter from the Women’s Political Council to the Mayor of Montgomery, Alabama,” in *Eyes on the Prize*, ed. Carson et al., 1991.

MIA Mass Meeting at Holt Street Baptist Church, 5 December 1955, in *Papers 3:71–79*.

Nelson to King, 21 March 1956, in *Papers 3:182–183*.

Parks and Haskins, *Rosa Parks*, 1992.

Robinson, *Montgomery Bus Boycott*, 1987.

Stanley Rowland, Jr., “2,500 Here Hail Boycott Leader,” *New York Times*, 26 March 1956.

Rustin to King, 23 December 1956, in *Papers 3:491–494*.