

# LESSON 8: CIVIL RIGHTS

## Student Handout 6: Outcomes Montgomery Bus Crisis, 1955–1956

### GOALS

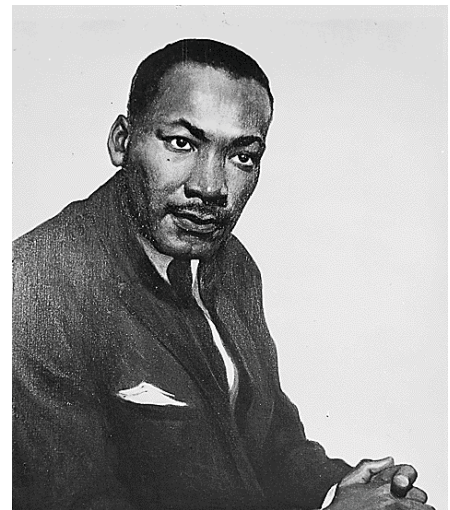
Black leaders began the boycott with the goal of making the segregated seating system fairer. They wanted a solution similar to the one reached in Louisiana: blacks would sit on buses from the back to the front, while whites sat from the front to the back. There would be no reserved seating area, and blacks would not be forced to give up their seats. However, white leaders resisted even this moderate change. As the boycott gained strength and it became clear that the decline in ridership was hurting the bus system, black leaders changed their goal. They now wanted to end segregation on buses altogether.

### STRATEGIES

The black community focused its efforts on the boycott of the Montgomery bus company. Because blacks made up 75% of the city's bus riders, a boycott would almost certainly have a major impact. Black leaders believed that the bus company couldn't withstand such a huge drop in ridership and would eventually have to change the system.

The leaders of the boycott had to overcome numerous obstacles. First, they needed to spread the word about the boycott in order to ensure that a large number of blacks would participate. Activists accomplished this task by printing 40,000 handbills and distributing them around Montgomery.

The activists quickly realized that they needed better organization. They formed the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA) in order to coordinate the boycott. However, Montgomery's blacks were a large and diverse group with many different income and education levels, and the MIA alone couldn't effectively reach the entire African American community. The one thing almost all Montgomery's blacks did have in common was affiliation with one of the community's black churches. Thus, church leaders such as Martin Luther King took leadership roles in the boycott. King was an inspirational preacher who successfully urged blacks to endure the many months of the boycott. His charismatic leadership helped spread the civil rights effort beyond Montgomery, and he eventually became a national leader of the civil rights movement. The civil rights movement retained



Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

many reminders of its church roots as it spread across the country: supporters sang spiritual anthems to provide inspiration and a sense of unity, and many of the most famous speeches in favor of civil rights used religious imagery.

The boycott's organizers also had to overcome the fact that blacks depended on income from work to support their families, and in many cases the bus system provided the only source of transportation to those jobs. Few people had enough money saved to hold out if the boycott lasted for months, and many risked their jobs if they missed too many days of work. Segregationists made it difficult for boycotters to arrange alternate transportation. The police threatened to arrest any taxi driver who charged less than the standard 45-cent fare, which made taxis too expensive for many workers. Some blacks organized carpools to get to work. Some whites who sympathized with the boycott also aided in the carpool effort. Although about 150 car owners volunteered initially, at least 20,000 rides were needed per day for blacks who couldn't walk, which meant that each carpool driver would have to give 130 rides per day. Eventually, the MIA raised enough money to buy more than a dozen large station wagons, which reduced some of the burden.

White segregationists waged a media war against the organizers, creating further challenges. Newspapers printed personal attacks on King, charging that he was an outsider who had never ridden a bus in Montgomery. However, blacks trusted King and didn't believe the articles. Segregationists met with black ministers who were not part of the MIA, and made an agreement with them to end the boycott. Newspapers printed the agreement to fool blacks into thinking that the boycott had ended. Though some fell for the ruse, MIA leaders managed to spread the word about the false agreement, and the boycott continued.

Violence also posed a problem. The MIA leaders became targets of white violence, but they knew that it was important for the black community not to retaliate. Rioting or attacks against whites would have turned moderate members of the white community against the boycott. The MIA prevented blacks from getting violent by repeatedly reinforcing the idea of the boycott as a civil, peaceful action. The boycotters won the sympathy of many people both in Montgomery and nationwide. Many applauded the black community's commitment and determination to create change through nonviolent, legal means; they also deplored the violent tactics used by some white segregationists.

## OUTCOMES

The Montgomery bus boycott succeeded in desegregating the buses. As such, it represented a milestone in the civil rights movement and encouraged other communities to push for desegregation and equal rights, both on buses and in other areas of society. Rosa Parks became a hero to many people in the civil rights movement and to others who supported equal rights for all people. She became a role model for African Americans, for women, and for people in general. Martin Luther King went on to become the nation's most prominent civil rights leader, and has remained an inspirational figure even after his tragic assassination in 1968. The Montgomery bus boycott showed that direct, nonviolent action could successfully effect change.