

Handout 1: Choosing an Incident to Rally the People and the Media

An incident that gets the attention of the media and moves people to action is crucial to the success of any movement. As organizers were considering a boycott against the bus company in Montgomery, Alabama, they considered two incidents to use as catalysts. Listen as the stories of these incidents are read, and then consider which one you would have chosen and why.

Claudette Colvin

On March 2, 1955, 15-year-old Claudette Colvin refused to give up her seat to a white passenger. Here in her court testimony she describes what happened:

[The bus driver] asked us to get up. [A middle-aged, pregnant, African-American woman, Mrs. Hamilton, was also still seated.] So, he directly asked me to get up first. So, I told him I was not going to get up. He said, "If you're not going to get up I will get a policeman." So, he went somewhere and got a policeman. He [the policeman] said, "Why are you not going to get up?" He said, "It's against the law here." So I told him that I didn't know that it was a law that a colored person had to get up and give a white person a seat when there were not any more vacant seats and colored people were standing up. I said I was just as good as any white person and I wasn't going to get up. So he got off. And then two more policemen came in. He [one] said, "Who is it?" and was very angry about it. He said, "That is not new, I had trouble out of that thing before." So he said, "Aren't you going to get up? He didn't say anything to Mrs. Hamilton then. He just said it to me. He said, "Aren't you going to get up?" I said, "No." He saw Mrs. Hamilton but he was afraid to ask her to get up. He said, "If any of you are not gentleman enough to give a lady a seat you should be put in jail yourself." So Mr. Harris, he got up and gave her a seat, and immediately got off of the bus. He said, "You can have that seat, I am getting off." And so she took his seat. So he [the police officer] asked me if I was not going to get up. I said, "No sir." I was crying then. I was very hurt because I didn't know that white people could act like that and I was crying. And he said, "I will have to take you off." So I didn't move. I didn't move at all. I just acted like a big baby. So he kicked me and one [policeman] got on one side of me and one [another policeman] got the other arm and they just drug me out. And I was so very pitiful. It really hurt me to see that I have to give a person a seat, when all those colored people were standing and there were not any more vacant seats. I have never seen nothing like that. Well, they take me down, they put me in a car and one of the motorcycle men, he says, "I am sorry to have to take you down like this." So they put handcuffs on me through the window.

As she explained in an interview in *The Guardian* (December 16, 2000), "I was really afraid, because you just didn't know what white people might do at that time." In August that year, 14-year-old Emmett Till had said, "Bye, baby" to a woman at a store in Mississippi, and was fished out of the Tallahatchie River a few days later, dead, with a bullet in his skull, his eye gouged out, and one side of his forehead crushed. "I didn't know if they were crazy, if they were going to take me to a Klan meeting. I started protecting my crotch. I was afraid they might rape me."

They took her to City Hall, where she was charged with misconduct, resisting arrest, and violating the city segregation laws. The full enormity of what she had done was only just beginning to dawn on her. "I went bipolar. I knew what was happening, but I just kept trying to shut it out."

She concentrated her mind on things she had been learning at school. “I recited Edgar Allan Poe, Annabel Lee, the characters in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, the Lord’s Prayer, and the Twenty-third Psalm.” Anything to detach herself from the horror of reality.

At the trial, Colvin pleaded innocent but was found guilty and released on indefinite probation in her parents’ care. “She had remained calm all during the days of her waiting period and during the trial,” wrote Jo Ann Robinson, “but when she was found guilty, her agonized sobs penetrated the atmosphere of the courthouse.”

Claudette Colvin was a “student, quiet, well-mannered, neat, clean, intelligent, pretty, and deeply religious,” noted Robinson. She had dark black skin and lived in King Hill, a very poor part of Montgomery. She had been deeply troubled by the arrest of a teenage classmate who was accused of raping a white woman and executed four years later. She was pregnant, and she would not reveal who the father was.

Rosa Parks

The following is a description by 43-year-old Rosa Parks of her arrest on December 5, 1955:

Having to take a certain section [on a bus] because of your race was humiliating, but having to stand up because a particular driver wanted to keep a white person from having to stand was, to my mind, most inhumane.

More than seventy-five, between eighty-five and I think ninety, percent of the patronage of the buses were black people, because more white people could own and drive their own cars than blacks.

I happened to be the secretary of the Montgomery branch of the NAACP as well as the NAACP Youth Council adviser. Many cases did come to my attention that nothing came out of ’cause the person that was abused would be too intimidated to sign an affidavit, or to make a statement. Over the years, I had had my own problems with the bus drivers. In fact, some did tell me not to ride their buses if I felt that I was too important to go to the back door to get on. One had evicted me from the bus in 1943, which did not cause anything more than just a passing glance.

On December 1, 1955, I had finished my day’s work as a tailor’s assistant in the Montgomery Fair department store and I was on my way home. There was one vacant seat on the Cleveland Avenue bus, which I took, alongside a man and two women across the aisle. There were still a few vacant seats in the white section in the front, of course. We went to the next stop without being disturbed. On the third, the front seats were occupied and this one man, a white man, was standing. The driver asked us to stand up and let him have those seats, and when none of us moved at his first words, he said, “You all make it light on yourselves and let me have those seats.” And the man who was sitting next to the window stood up, and I made room for him to pass by me. The two women across the aisle stood up and moved out.

When the driver saw me still sitting, he asked if I was going to stand up and I said, “No, I am not.”

And he said, “Well, if you don’t stand up, I am going to call the police and have you arrested.”

I said, “You may do that.”

He did get off the bus, and I stayed where I was. Two policemen came on the bus. One of the policemen asked me if the bus driver had asked me to stand, and I said, "Yes."

He said, "Why didn't you stand up?"

And I asked him, "Why do you push us around?"

He said, "I do not know, but the law is the law and you're under arrest."

Handout 2: You Are in the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA)

Background

In 1955, three African-American women, Claudette Colvin, Mary Louise Smith, and Rosa Parks, of Montgomery, Alabama, refused to submit to local Jim Crow laws, which required that African Americans give up seats on local buses for white patrons. They were each arrested. These individual acts of heroism inspired greater resistance to Montgomery's segregated public accommodations. E. D. Nixon, president of the local railroad union, Brotherhood of Sleeping-Car Porters; Clifford Durr, a white lawyer; and Jo Ann Robinson, president of the Women's Political Council (WPC), began to organize to protest against the unfair arrests.

On December 1, 1955, Rosa Park's refusal to vacate her seat was the catalyst for boycotting the buses. E. D. Nixon and Jo Ann Robinson organized the first boycott of the buses. The three demands of the Montgomery Bus Boycott were as follows:

- 1 adoption of a first-come, first-served segregation basis;
- 2 courteous treatment of blacks by drivers, as well as discipline of drivers who were not courteous; and
- 3 making jobs as bus drivers available to black people.

As a result of the early boycott, activists established the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA). The MIA consisted of eight percent of the local black population.

Assignment

You are in the MIA. You are an organizer who feels segregation in the United States is wrong, but you are scared. As you see it, participation in a boycott could cause you to lose your job and possibly even subject you to physical violence.

The task of organizing a boycott is immense. In the upcoming weeks you and your fellow MIA members must handle organizational responsibilities such as selecting a spokesperson for the organization, dealing with the day-to-day tasks of creating an organization, finding alternative modes of transportation, and confronting people in Montgomery who are hostile to you and your cause. In addition to your organizational duties, you must motivate individuals through songs and speeches for the long struggle ahead.

While the immediate demands of the MIA include mandating different seating arrangements on the bus, greater courtesy by bus drivers, and the hiring of black drivers, your overall goal is to change how African Americans are treated in our country.

Directions: Please answer the following questions.

1. Write in your own words what you think your job as an MIA organizer is.
2. If there were a boycott of public transportation today, how would it change your life?
3. What arrangements would you and your family and friends need to make to get to school or to work?
4. Who or what group or individual could provide the leadership for such a boycott?

5. How would you respond to people who challenged the boycott? What if they used violence as a tactic to discourage you from continuing?

Handout 3: MIA Committees

Select the committee you would like to participate in.

Transportation

Negotiation

Media

Mass Meetings

Education

Once you have chosen your committee, select individuals for the following roles:

Spokesperson: will speak for the committee

Question Asker: will be the person designated to ask the teacher questions, as needed

Decision Maker: will select a protocol for decision-making

Secretary: will take notes for the group to submit to the teacher each day

Handout 4: Problem-Solving Worksheet

Directions: As your group discusses your respective challenge(s), everyone in the group must fill out this sheet.

Our Problem

Write the challenge(s) listed on your sheet:

[Designer: Insert WOLs]

List Four Ways to Solve the Challenge(s):

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

Handout 5: Boycott Challenges

Transportation Committee Challenge

In the early stages of the boycott, African-American taxicab drivers provide an emergency 10-cent cab fare for boycotters. This practice is ruled illegal by the police commissioner, so MIA organizers must develop a new method to transport all boycott participants. It is not illegal for individual passengers to make contributions to the MIA; however, the MIA can subsidize a carpool. But the carpool system has run into major driver shortages, and some of the drivers have stolen money from the MIA for gasoline and tires. And now the police have ruled that it is illegal for more than two people to ride in a car. What can the MIA do to facilitate transportation arrangements?

Negotiation Committee Challenge

The initial goals of the boycott were for the bus company to adopt a first-come, first-served segregation basis; mandate drivers' courtesy to blacks and discipline violators of this rule; and make jobs as bus drivers available to blacks.

In the early rounds of negotiations, the bus company and the city government made concessions to the MIA. They promised that the bus company would treat the riders with more respect, but the white negotiators would not change the practice of preferential seating for whites nor would they agree to hire African-American bus drivers. What should the negotiators do in order to convince the white bus owners and city government officials to change these discriminatory policies?

Media Committee Challenges

1. One of the most important parts of an economic boycott is dealing with the media. Decide how the MIA should generate excitement and a greater understanding of the reasons for the boycott.
2. The boycott was initially led by local activists such as Jo Ann Robinson and E. D. Nixon. A 26-year-old minister named Martin Luther King Jr. has emerged as a very talented spokesperson for the boycott. But many people feel that he is too young, does not have a lot of experience, and has not lived in Montgomery very long. What should be his media role?
3. How will you share information with the boycotters? Remember, the mass media is not likely to print public service announcements for you. In addition, this is all happening long before people have computers in their homes, let alone e-mail.

Mass Meetings Committee Challenge

In these days (without the existence of e-mail), there needs to be a way to communicate with people about the progress of the boycott, present decisions that need to be made, and provide updates on strategy. It has been decided to hold mass meetings, some during the day and others in the evening in order to accommodate everyone's schedule. The only locations large enough and willing to open their doors to the African-American public are the churches. (This is just one more example of the multiple roles black churches have played for many years, when other "public" institutions refused to open their doors to African Americans.) The mass meetings are an important part of the overall organizing, providing participants with direction and purpose.

Initially, people were drawn to the meetings because of the excitement about the boycott—there was a sense of power in taking a stand. However, the constant harassment (participants were often faced with threats of violence by those who opposed the civil rights movement) and the daily logistical struggles are wearing people down. Many individuals complain that though they love the speeches in the mass meetings, they need more variety. To sustain the momentum, what can you, the organizers, do to make the meetings more spirited and uplifting?

Education Committee Challenge

Recently, the houses of some of the bus boycott leaders were bombed. Many of the individuals walking to work face harassment from their employers. There is always the threat of action by the local Ku Klux Klan. Many members of the Montgomery community are upset at the violence and they want to retaliate. However, the foundation of the movement is nonviolence. Your job is to convince the MIA members that the best way to respond is with nonviolence. Determine how you will make your case about the power of nonviolence, as it's described in the quotes below:

“Nonviolence is fighting back, but you're fighting back with other weapons.”—
Bernard Lafayette

“I supposed that human beings looking at it would say arms are the most dangerous thing that a dictator needs to fear, but in fact, no. It is when people decide that they want to be free. Once they have made up their minds to that, nothing will stop them.”—Desmond Tutu

Handout 6: Evaluation

Part A. Rustin to King: Memo on the Montgomery Bus Boycott, December 23, 1956 (*Daybreak of Freedom: The Montgomery Bus Boycott*)

Directions: Read the memo below by Bayard Rustin about the success of the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Then list on a separate sheet of paper at least six of the reasons that he gives to explain why it worked. Based on your experience with and analysis of the boycott, place a check next to the two reasons that you think are most important, and/or add another reason of your own.

Montgomery possessed three features that are not found in other movements or efforts:

1. It was organized; used existing institutions as foundations so that all social strata of the community were involved. It thus has the strength of unity, which the school integration efforts have lacked, thereby leaving the fight to heroic but isolated individuals. Montgomery could plan tactics, seek advice and support, develop financial resources and encompass a whole community in a crusade dominating all other issues. The reason there were those who did not want to give up the boycott is due in part to the consciousness that this welding of a comprehensive, unified group has a quality not to be lost. The fellowship, the ideals, the joy of sacrifice for others and other varied features of the movement have given people something to belong to which had the inspiring power of the Minute Men, the Sons of Liberty, and other organized forms which were products of an earlier American era of fundamental change.
2. The actions of the people won the respect of their enemy. The achievement of unity, the intelligence of planning, the creation of a competent complex system of transportation, the high level of moral and ethical motivation, all combined to give the closed mind of the white southerner an airing that it has never had. It is not only the Negroes' self-respect which has won—but the respect of white people, who though they retain a basic prejudice, have lost something in the course of this year that begins their long struggle to genuine understanding. In short, Montgomery has contributed to the mental health and growth of the white man's mind, and thus to the entire nation.
3. Montgomery was unique in that it relied upon the active participation of people who had a daily task of action and dedication. The movement did not rely exclusively on a handful of leaders to carry through such fundamental change.

Part B: Self-evaluation of your participation in the bus boycott simulation

Directions: Answer the following questions.

1. How did your committee come to a decision regarding the challenge you faced? (For example, did you have any disagreements? If so, how did you resolve them?)
2. Do you think that the bus boycott was an effective way to create social change? Why or why not?
3. Who are some of the people and what are some of the activities that you were not aware of before?

4. How would you describe the role Martin Luther King Jr. played in the implementation and success of the boycott?
5. What were some of the difficult decisions that organizers had to make to ensure the success of the boycott?
6. What tactics or strategies impressed you the most?
7. Why do you think that Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King are portrayed as single-handedly bringing about the desegregation of buses?
8. List other historic or current events in which we learn only about the “heroes,” and not about the many “ordinary” people who made history happen. What is the impact of this “heroes version of history” on our country today?