

Teacher's Background: South African Boycotts

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On June 26th, 1959, a group of South African exiles and their British supporters met in London's Holborn Hall to call for a boycott of fruit, cigarettes and other goods imported from South Africa. The boycott got off to a slow start, but by the following March shopkeepers were being asked to stop selling South African products, the TUC, Labour, Liberal and Communist parties were backing the campaign, and twenty-two local authorities had banned South African fruit from their schools and canteens. On March 9th, 1960, Labour Party leader Hugh Gaitskell went on television to ask viewers not to buy South African goods.

In South Africa the African National Congress (ANC) joined with the Indian Congress, the Coloured People's Congress and the white Congress of Democrats to fight apartheid with direct action, mass stay-at-homes and passive resistance...

So now the ANC and its allies looked to friends overseas, saying, "When our local purchasing power is combined with that of sympathetic organisations overseas we wield a devastating weapon."

... the ANC sent one of its leaders, Tennyson Makiwane, overseas to promote the campaign. One of the arguments used then, and later, against the boycott, was that it would hurt the very people (African workers and their families) whom it was supposed to help. ...As an African representing the ANC, Makiwane argued convincingly that black South Africans were suffering already and were willing to pay a further price for their freedom. Britain provided fertile ground for the campaign...

The [Boycott] Movement decided to organise an intensive month of boycott in March, when South African fruit started arriving in Britain. ...The month of action began with a rally of 8,000 people in Trafalgar Square on February 28th... By mid-March the London County Council and local authorities including Liverpool, South Shields, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, the West Riding of Yorkshire and Conservative-controlled Staffordshire were boycotting South African goods. All over the country "broad-based" campaign committees were formed and held poster-parades and public meetings...

The Boycott Movement transformed itself into the Anti-Apartheid Movement (AAM), calling for government sanctions against South Africa and for support for all those struggling against apartheid.



... In 1988 a star-studded line-up played to a packed Wembley Stadium and a quarter of a million people gathered in Hyde Park to demand Nelson Mandela's release.

...Mass demonstrations forced the cancellation of the 1970 Springbok cricket tour and sports-mad South Africa was expelled from nearly every international sporting federation. British business was a harder nut to crack. But in the mid-1980s, Barclays Bank and other British companies began to sell their South African subsidiaries and exports to Britain fell as more and more people backed the boycott. For thirty-five years, hundreds of thousands of people in Britain joined Anti-Apartheid Movement campaigns, until in April 1994 South Africa held its first one-person, one-vote general election.

... In 1959 the Boycott Movement was formed from an initiative of South Africans who were suffering under apartheid, which was taken up by people in Britain. If it holds a lesson, it is that change comes through partnership and that people in the industrialised North who want to improve living standards in the South should listen to, and work together with, those they are trying to help.