

The article in the May, 1957 issue of the "Fighting Talk" by L. Bernstein, has provoked discussion amongst those who led the Bus Boycott and ~~nessi~~ necessitates comment on and reply to some of the statements made by the author. From the outset, it must be made clear that Bernstein is either grossly misinformed about the events, or has deliberately distorted the facts, in an endeavour to justify the jumbled actions of the "ANC's "central leadership".

Throughout his article, it is evident that Bernstein is the spokesman of this "central leadership". Through his ignorance he commits serious mistakes, which go so far as to effect internal ANC administration.

Bernstein makes repeated reference to the "boycott leaders", without distinguishing between those who stood for the temporary £25,000 settlement, and those who cried out for the continuation of the boycott. The Witwatersrand and Pretoria Co-ordinating Transport Council, which is submitting this article, and the Alexandra Peoples' Transport Action Council officially accepted the temporary settlement. Those who opposed the settlement are not in the ranks of the people's movement - the Congress Movement - but hold perverted political outlooks and have never stood by what is correct. But Bernstein, in his ignorance, lumps together Congress and non-Congress Boycott leaders.

He goes on to allege that in some areas it was argued that the settlement should be rejected until the demand for the minimum wage of £1 a day had been realised and that some of the leaders, although well meant, thought that the boycott against PUTCO could bring "the national body of employers to its knees." What utter inaccuracy!! Those leaders who were for a settlement saw in it a chance to organise for a substantial increase in wages. Those against the settlement felt that its acceptance would ruin all chances of a permanent solution. And, NONE, thought that this boycott could ever mean the change of SA's social system.

INNER ANC QUESTIONS.

Bernstein is not satisfied with this confusion. He goes on to discuss matters that affect the ANC internally, and, in a very strong worded comment, endeavours to justify the untimely intervention of "the central leadership of the ANC", with its leaflet drafting and resultant unprincipled closure of the boycott. These latter errors were brought about by the most confused and confounded haphazard efforts of individuals belonging to the "national leadership of the ANC," who had till then kept completely outside the practical activities of the Boycott Committees and of the ANC branches concerned. Bernstein's "central leadership" had not participated in the branch work of organising the boycott, had not helped in sustaining the boycott during 10 long weeks, had not discussed the boycott with branch members, or at executive meetings, - ~~let~~ alone with the Co-ordinating Council, - and had not given comradely advice during the long weeks of the struggle. The role of the "central leadership of the ANC" was to give dictatorial "directives" and to consort with individuals who were as out of touch with activities as they were.

The manner of the intervention of the "central leadership" was politically incorrect and harmful - a subjectively bureaucratic behaviour - the direct result of which was the ragged, disorderly manner in which the boycott ended.

Bernstein, in a further attempt to justify this untimely, unprincipled and bureaucratic intervention, writes; "No serious organisation can ever be bound, by the formality of a united front Committee's existence, to sit idly by and watch that committee fritter away the substance of people's victory, and fail to give leadership when leadership is needed."

While in the abstract, the statement is true, Bernstein's attempt to justify such actions as the "ANC central leadership" took, leads to the suspicion that one cannot have a principled alliance with Bernstein and his friends, because they will throw their allies aside without cause or discussion, destroying the alliance at penstroke. Moreover, the leaflet drafters and interveners whom he so staunchly defends, took action right outside the alliance, ignoring even Congressites within the alliance, thereby doing great damage to the ANC in the areas concerned. The Bernsteinian concept of an alliance is confused!! An internal issue of the alliance, of which Bernstein was clearly unaware, was that the local ANC leadership had for some time pointed out the weaknesses of the alliance and demanded that the alliance be put on specific and principled terms. To this the "Bernsteinians" retorted "Unite, unite, everywhere" - apparently with all comers and on any basis.

It is clear that Bernstein discusses internal and domestic irregularities of the ANC, when, in addition to his being grossly misinformed, he is least competent to do so, let alone to justify irresponsible interventions which find birth in bureaucracy and maladministration. Admittedly, he was before his banning, a member of the ANC's sister organisation and should therefore hold the same political views as ANC members, but, the difficulties of the ANC are least comprehensible to people in his position and any amount of unravelling these knotty difficulties is bound to be abortive and confused. This matter involves the autonomy of the Congress movement as a whole and our attitude is by no means "racialistic". It is a fact that only members of the ANC are capable of fully understanding internal problems specific to the ANC - and, ^{only} the leaflet drafters and interveners are in a position to explain the reasons for their actions.

That Bernstein has publicly revealed this issue, giving a complete distortion of the facts, is regrettable. The responsibility of this Council is to the people, and not to the "central leadership" of the ANC. The Congressites would have preferred going about settling this bureaucratic maladministration as an internal ANC matter, but have now no alternative but to correct the distorted justification given by Bernstein.

INTERVENTION - POLITICALLY INCORRECT.

In justifying the untimely intervention of the "ANC's "central leadership" in the bus boycott - for it must ~~at~~ be justified at all costs - Bernstein (perhaps through ignorance) fabricates the most complicated situation, creating the impression that matters were getting out of hand, and that "leadership was needed".

Bernstein's "central leadership" of the ANC had no contact with the people, ~~neither~~ with the boycott leaders. He terms it "central leadership" because he dares not use the name of any ANC organ, for the intervention was the plot of individuals and opportunists, representing none but themselves!

This "central leadership" issued leaflets and gave dictatorial directives in the most bureaucratic fashion and, unfortunately, these leaflets had no bearing on the situation as the boycotters and their leaders saw it. Moreover, the leaflet spoke the same language as that spoken by the anti-boycott reactionary elements throughout the boycott, and tended to associate the people's organisation with the perverts who were working for the unconditional break-down of the boycott. These leaflets confused the situation and placed the local ANC branches in a desperate predicament, the only alternative to which would have been to discredit the leaflets and their drafters. Nevertheless this was not done.

Bernstein also alleges that the 13th week of the boycott was a "time when it was impossible to go forward any longer without a pause to regain lost breath or recover balance; a time when one step back is an essential condition for taking two steps forward", and by this hopes to justify the manner in which his "central leadership" intervened. The argument is not concerned with the degree of fatigue or hypothetical developments but with the fact that the manner of the intervention was politically wrong, was opportunistic, individualistic, dictatorial and bureaucratic, dependent on an unfounded fear based on gross misinformation coupled with dangerous adventurism.

The worst crime in this intervention was that its individualism excluded any discussion or consultation with the local ANC leadership who had contact with the people and belonged to the organisation in whose name the intervention was conducted. The excuse that the ANC would have been failing in its duty if it had not intervened so unscrupulously demonstrates an insulting and belittling attitude towards the local ANC leaders and the boycott leaders; an attitude typical of all bureaucrats and found wherever democracy is absent. If the ANC needed to take an independent line, as it always should, then the local ANC branches were the organs through which such action should have been taken after thorough and democratic discussion with the membership.

The effect of the intervention in the areas has been dangerous and is precisely not in the interests of the people. It has armed the reactionaries with slogans against the people's organisations; it has branded the ANC a scab organisation; it has given new life to the old allegation that ANC members receive "instructions from Hillbrow"; it has exposed the organisational weaknesses of the ANC to the enemies of the people.

When questioned by the people, the activists in the branches, the backbone in the organisation, could not explain the actions of the "central leadership". They knew nothing about these actions!!

THE QUESTION OF "VICTORY".

The Bernsteinian concept of a "victory" is confused. It is completely divorced from the hard realities of the boycott and is argued from an entirely incorrect premise and perspective. Bernstein quite rightly says that to argue that the boycotters are not victorious when they pay the pre-boycott fares, is unrealistic. This was the contention of the Council when it accepted the £25,000 temporary settlement offered by the Chamber of Commerce of Johannesburg. But he goes further and, in smug rhetoric, ridicules the boycotters' demands that the guarantees they wanted should be realised together with the temporary settlement. He states that, "the debate can well be left to garrulous old men in wheel-chairs, for whom verbal ~~exer~~ exercise is all-important and the hard realities of life of no consequence." What utter unreality!!! Bernstein's ignorance compels him to discredit the boycotters' demands, and he goes on to say that "over and above all, there is the battle to win substantial all-round increases in wages for every worker and a minimum wage of £1 per day,..." Bernstein seems unaware that the boycotters recognised a final settlement only in a "substantial increase in wages", and that they had requested the Chamber of Commerce to undertake to support them in the struggle for an all-round increase in wages. Can Bernstein tell us what his "central leadership" is doing to ensure a "victory" in the £1 a day campaign. He might find himself having to justify their actions in an article again.

Despite the fact that the guarantees were excluded, this Council never denounced the settlement, nor urged the boycotters to continue walking.

Bernstein sees "a victory" because "the employers as a class have been forced to give back to the African workers some part of the profits they obtain from their labour." Yet later in the article, Bernstein rebukes the boycott leaders for "imagining that a boycott could bring not just PUTCO but the whole national body of employers to its knees." Such is Talmudic contradiction!

In his idea of "a victory" Bernstein conveniently 'forgets' that the struggle is still waging in Pretoria, where our gallant comrades have to bear the brunt of the attack without our support. This is a great Bernsteinian "victory"!!

Bernstein writes; "That the acceptance of the settlement was disorderly and ragged - first Alexandra, later Moroka, and with Pretoria left outside the area of the settlement - is the result not of the ANC intervention, but of the fatal divisions amongst the boycott leaders themselves,....". But he does not specify what divisions existed amongst the boycott leaders. He conveniently forgets to mention that the condition for accepting the settlement as far as the boycott leaders were concerned, was that Pretoria be placed within the province of the settlement. Bernsteinian justification also ~~ad-~~ omits that the intervention cut off the negotiations for the inclusion of Pretoria, and when the boycott was off in Johannesburg, it was no longer possible to include Pretoria. Further, Bernstein sees the reason for the ragged and disorderly acceptance in the divisions amongst the boycott leaders. This is untrue. The facts of the matter are that the interveners confused the people in Alexandra into going back to the buses unconditionally and this in a disordered way. The areas around Moroka, which were out on a sympathy boycott, tried to hold out until Pretoria was covered. The intervention in Alexandra disorganised these areas and they were forced to retreat.

No explanation is given for the ~~omni~~ omission of the boycotters in Pretoria from the settlement. He does not mention also that the interveners, his "central leadership" has since been trying to force down the throats of the people of Pretoria a part of ~~this~~ great "Bernsteinian plan for victory" - the acceptance of a cut in their route.

The Boycott Leaders' attitude should not be interpreted as meaning that they see the settlement as good-for-nothing and wasted effort. They are not seasonal politicians who see an end and a victory in a bus boycott. The boycott is regarded by this Council as a specific issue that must be linked with the general - the struggle of the people for Freedom and Liberation. The real "victory" will be seen when we have settled permanently the question of bus fares, and the very roots of such problems. The official attitude of the Co-ordinating Council is that the settlement was a compromise, honourable in all respects. The compromise was indeed a gain, an advance. But we must be careful not to become swollen-headed and conceited with our importance. We must not forget our perspective. We should use our gain and advances to encourage the people, but we should not allow every advance won by hard struggle from the enemy to become an occasion for the relaxation of our work because we have won a "victory".

COLLECTIVE ATTITUDE.

In concluding the article, Bernstein speaks of lessons to be learnt from struggles of this nature. Indeed, "such lessons serve to illuminate the path that lies ahead". But these should be lessons learnt by all.

Bernstein and those he attempts to justify, should realise that his article would never have been written if individualism, bureaucracy and dictatorship had not influenced the course of events.

While the guidance of the more experienced leaders is essential, it should always be remembered that they lack the quality of prime importance - contact and influence with the people in the different localities. Their experience and political advancement can only be of value to the people, if exercised through the local, less experienced and less advanced leaders, who are in touch with the leaders masses and are thus, influential.

The value of consultation and discussion is immeasurable, and the outcome thereof is always nearest the correct decision on any issue. The principle of Collective Leadership should be practised, not only on paper, but in our daily practical activities for the advancement of the people's cause.

In concluding our reply to Bernstein's article, there are a few observations to be made.

Bernstein's article has made public internal and domestic irregularities of the ANC, and has thereby caused considerable damage. The Co-ordinating Council feels compelled to answer and to rectify the misinformation disseminated to the public. Bernstein, whose information depends on sixth hand reports, which are obviously grossly distorted by the time they reach him, is not a member of the ANC, although he was a member of the ANC's sister organisation. Thus, his understanding of the internal problems of the ANC is very remote. He is therefore least competent to riddle out and to justify the actions of persons who have still to explain to members of their own organisations, at an appropriate time and place, their irresponsible actions. The issue involves the autonomy of the Congress Movement, and our view is by no means "racialistic". To revert to the question of consultation; such articles as Bernstein's should be discussed in the proper circles before publication. Or, even better, they should be called for from the people directly participating in the campaign, and not from writers dependent on second - and sixth-hand - reports. Then, such a confusing and distorted article will not appear again.

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