What the Bristol Bus Boycott of 1963 did for us

The Bristol Bus Boycott drew attention to racial discrimination in Britain and influenced the passing of the Race Relations Act 1965, which made “racial discrimination in public places” unlawful, and subsequently the Race Relations Act 1968, which extended protection from race discrimination to employment and housing.

Background

In the early 1960s, Bristol had an estimated 3,000 residents of West Indian heritage, some of who had remained in Britain after serving in the British military during World War II and some of who had immigrated to Britain more recently. They endured discrimination in housing and employment, and some encountered violence from Teddy boy gangs of white British youths. This community set up their own churches and associations, including the West Indian Association, which began to act as a representative body.

One of their foremost grievances was the colour bar operated by the Bristol Omnibus Company, which was owned by the British government and operated through the Transport Holding Company.

Although there was a reported labour shortage on the buses, black prospective employees were refused work on bus crews, although they were employed in lower paid positions in workshops and canteens.
The colour bar was blamed by company management on the Transport and General Workers’ Union (TGWU), which represented bus workers. Despite denials that a colour bar existed, TGWU members expressed concern that a new competitive source of labour could reduce their earnings. Pay was low, and workers relied on overtime to get a good wage.

**Boycott**

Unhappy with the efforts of the West Indian Association to agitate for removal of the colour bar, four young West Indian men, Roy Hackett, Owen Henry, Audley Evans and Prince Brown, formed an action group called the West Indian Development Council. The Council took the following steps: -

1. They appointed an articulate spokesperson, Paul Stephenson, whose father was from West Africa;

2. They set up a test case to prove the colour bar existed. They did this by arranging an interview with the bus company for a black job applicant called Guy Bailey. When the bus company discovered Bailey was West Indian, the interview was cancelled;

3. Inspired by the refusal of Rosa Parks to give up her seat on a bus in Alabama and the ensuing Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955, they organised a bus boycott in Bristol;

4. They challenged the TGWU to consider what they were doing to counteract racism in their ranks.

**Support**

Students from Bristol University held a protest march to the bus station and the local HQ of the TGWU.

Local MP Tony Benn contacted then Labour Opposition leader Harold Wilson, who spoke out against the colour bar at an Anti-Apartheid Movement rally in London.

At a May Day rally, local Trades Council members publicly criticised the TGWU.
The dispute led to what has been described as one of the largest mailbags that the Bristol Evening Post had ever received, with contributors writing in support of both sides of the issue.

Resolution

Following many months of negotiation between the city Labour establishment and the TGWU, 500 bus workers agreed at a meeting to end the colour bar. On 28 August 1963 it was announced that there would be no more discrimination in employing bus crews. It was on the same day that Martin Luther King made his famous “I Have a Dream” speech. On 17 September, Raghbir Singh, a Sikh, became Bristol's first non-white bus conductor. A few days later, two Jamaican and two Pakistani men joined him.