

THE BRISTOL BUS BOYCOTT 1963

The experience of visible minority workers in the UK

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.

Evening Post Wednesday 1st May 1963

BEWILDERED JAMAICAN FEELS DOWNHEARTED
I thought there was no colour bar, says Guy

by MALCOLM SMITH

The man at the centre of the bus boycott storm, 19 year old Guy Bailey, told me today: "I feel really downhearted. I never believed there was a colour-bar."

The 19-year-old Jamaican, who has been in Bristol since he came to the country a year ago, was given time off from work in a local factory to tell me his story.

His employer called him a "poker" and he was well liked, but begged: "Do not mention our firm. We have nothing to do with it."

Asked if there was any political significance in the issue — Communism or other political association — Guy replied: "None at all."

UNION MAN

"At home the Labour Party are strong and I support them of the party. I am a member of my union—but I can't remember her name. My card's in my pocket."

Did Guy know there was a bar in the employment of coloured people? "I never believed there was a colour bar—especially they employ coloured bus crews in Birmingham and London, and I thought they would here."

MOTOR ENGINEER

"In Jamaica I worked for two months in motor engineering and it's the job I want to do here. For that reason I am studying. The English are much better than we are. I thought I was a member of the union."

And the appeal of the conductor's job?

"Well, my aunt used to be on the buses in Jamaica. I liked the job of being out with passengers. I like the spirit of bus conducting."

Asked if he believed that there had been a deliberate move by the West Indian Development Council in Bristol to precipitate this situation, Guy went on:

"It was just a case of me meeting Mr Stephenson at night school, and because I did not want to lose any time at this work, I was agreed that he should fix the interview for me."

"I am very depressed at the result. It is a great surprise. I am the only black working here who is friendly with everyone and everyone is friendly with me."

"What I am really glad about is that the Christians of this country are with us. And I say congratulations to the students who are supporting us with a march."

How does Guy spend his week?

MONDAY—He attends the Docklands Club.

TUESDAY—Education, evening.

WEDNESDAY—Education, evening. Guy attended the Docklands Club.

THURSDAY—Education, evening. Guy attended the Docklands Club.

FRIDAY—Education, evening. Guy attended the Docklands Club.

SATURDAY—Education, evening. Guy attended the Docklands Club.

SUNDAY—Education, evening. Guy attended the Docklands Club.

LONDON JOBS?

Guy said his interview with the bus company was for last Wednesday. On the day the welfare officer had been sent to see where he should attend. The welfare officer said the company he was a West Indian, and the bus company said the welfare officer was a black man.

"I handled in my mother's car. I drove it, and I took it to my job this Friday. I don't know what I am doing to do next. I may get a job on the buses in London, but I want to keep on my roots here. I really like Bristol. I would hate to have to leave."

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.

Evening Post Thursday 17th September 1963



Raghbir Singh setting out from Old Market, Bristol, last night.

The first coloured conductor thinks it's so nice

By George Halladay

Bristol's first coloured bus conductor is Raghbir Singh from the Punjab. He was on the No. 8 between Kingswood and Southmead last night.

His verdict on the job:

"Very nice."

"The passengers are so nice, the bus crews are so nice. Everyone is so helpful," he said.

The colour-bar on Bristol buses, which caused a storm four months ago, ended last month after talks between the bus company and the local branch of the Transport and General Workers' Union.

When he read the announcement, he applied for a job.

Last week he passed out of the company's training school with flying colours.

Ex-fitter

Mr. Singh came to this country from India four years ago. His last job was a fitter in an engine works in Staple Hill.

He lives with his wife and three children, aged 14, 11 and 9, in a flat in the city.

"Since I started my new job, everybody has been most co-operative," said 27-year-old Mr. Singh.

Last night, he was wearing a blue turban. "If I wear a brown suit I wear a brown turban," he said.

Pleased

Mr. Arthur Caswell, regional trade union secretary of the TGWU, said last night, "He, as a union, are very pleased that Mr. Singh has passed his conductor's test."

"He is a very capable fellow."

Last week the subject came from Mr. Singh's driver, 27-year-old Mr. Harry Wilson of Woodchester, Kingswood.

"He's all right, mate," said Bruce. "I'm not sure, but I'm sure they can be black, blue or yellow."