

“To the Montgomery Public”

25 December 1955
Montgomery, Ala.

This half-page paid advertisement, signed by “The Negro Ministers of Montgomery and Their Congregations,” appeared in the Sunday Advertiser and Alabama Journal. All of the ministers, with the exception of Joseph C. Parker, Sr., were members of the MIA executive board. After detailing eight areas of complaint, including the history of unsuccessful efforts at redress, they explain that the bus protest “is the culmination of a series of unpleasant incidents over a period of years. It is an upsurging of a ground swell which has been going on for a long time. Our cup of tolerance has run over.”

We, the Negro citizens of Montgomery, feel that the public has a right to know our complaints and grievances which have resulted in the protest against the Montgomery City Lines and our refusal to ride city busses. We, therefore, set forth here some of the many bitter experiences of our people, who have, at various times, been pushed around, embarrassed, threatened, intimidated and abused in a manner that has caused the meekest to rise in resentment:

COMPLAINTS:

1. Courtesy:

The use of abusive language, name calling and threats have been the common practices among many of the bus operators. We are ordered to move from seats to standing space under the threat of arrest, or other serious consequences. No regard for sex or age is considered in exercising this authority by the bus operator.

25 Dec
1955

2. Seating:

The bus operators have not been fair in this respect. Negroes, old, young, men and women, mothers with babes in their arms, sick, afflicted, pregnant women, must relinquish their seats, even to school children, if the bus is crowded. On lines serving predominantly Negro sections, the ten front seats must remain vacant, even though no white passenger boards the bus. At all times the Negro is asked to give up his seat, though there is not standing room in the back. One white person, desiring a seat, will cause nine Negroes to relinquish their seats for the accommodation of this one person.

3. Arrests:

Numerous arrests have been made even though the person arrested is observing the policy as given us. This year the following persons have been arrested and convicted, although they were seated according to the policy given us by the bus company. They are Claudette Colvin, Alberta "Coote" Smith, and Mrs. Rosa Parks. Among others arrested at other times are Mrs. Viola White, Miss Mary Wingfield, two children from New Jersey, and a Mr. Brooks, who was killed by the policeman.¹

4. Two Fares:

Many house-servants are required to pay an additional fare if the bus is late getting to town, causing them to miss a bus going to Cloverdale or other distant points. Some of these have complained that on returning from work similar incidents have occurred necessitating the payment of double fares.

5. Making Change:

We understand that correct change should be given the operator, but there are times that such is not possible. Several bus operators have refused to make change for passengers and threatened to put them off for not having the exact amount. On one occasion a fellow-passenger paid the fare of one such passenger to prevent her from being put off.

6. Passing Up Passengers:

In many instances the bus operators have passed up passengers standing at the stop to board the bus. They have also collected fares at the front door and, after commanding Negro passengers to enter from the back door, they have driven off, leaving them standing.

7. Physical Torture:

One Negro mother, with two small children in her arm, put them on the front seat while she opened her purse for her fare. The driver ordered her to take the

1. Claudette Colvin, a fifteen-year-old high school student, was arrested on 2 March 1955 and charged with violation of city and state segregation laws, disorderly conduct, and assault. Alberta Smith may refer to Mary Louise Smith, who was arrested on 21 October 1955 and, like Colvin, was later a plaintiff in *Aurelia S. Browder v. William A. Gayle*. Viola White had been arrested in the 1940s for refusing to give up her seat when asked by the bus driver, whom she fought with after he assaulted her. According to Jo Ann Robinson's memoir, Mary Wingfield and two children from New Jersey were also arrested for sitting in the front section reserved for whites (see Robinson, *The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Women Who Started It*, pp. 20–22). Hilliard Brooks was killed by Montgomery police on 12 August 1950 after an argument with a bus driver over the ten-cent fare. His widow, Estella Brooks, testified for the defense during King's trial in March 1956 (Transcript, *State of Alabama v. M. L. King, Jr.*, 22 March 1956).

children from the seat, and without giving her the chance to place the children elsewhere, lunged the vehicle forward, causing the small children to be thrown into the aisle of the bus.

25 Dec
1955

8. Acknowledgement:

Not all operators are guilty of these accusations. There are some who are most cordial and tolerant. They will go to the extent of their authority to see that justice and fair play prevail. To those we are grateful and sympathetic.

9. Adjudication:

Every effort has been used to get the bus company to remove the causes of these complaints. Time and time again complaints have been registered with the bus company, the City Commission and the manager of the bus company. Committees of both sexes have been conferred but to no avail. Protests have been filed with the mayor, but no improvement has been made.

In March we held a conference with the Manager of the Montgomery City Lines and made a very modest request: (1) that the bus company attorney meet with our attorneys and give an interpretation to laws regulating passengers and (2) that the policy of the bus on seating be published so that all bus riders would be well-informed on the policy of the bus. To this date this has not been done.

The manager read to us the city code and informed us that this is in the hands of every bus driver. At this meeting, the arresting officers of the Claudette Colvin case were there along with the Police Commissioner. The bus operator, who caused the arrest of Claudette Colvin, was requested to be present. But did not come.

A committee met with the Mayor and Associate Commissioner when the bus company requested a raise in fare. No protest was made against the raise, but only against seating and courteous treatment of passengers. Nothing came of this and Negroes were treated worse after the increase in bus fare than before.

The Great Decision:

The bus protest is not merely in protest of the arrest of Mrs. Rosa Parks, but is the culmination of a series of unpleasant incidents over a period of years. It is an upsurging of a ground swell which has been going on for a long time. Our cup of tolerance has run over. Thousands of our people, who have had unhappy experiences, prefer to walk rather than endure more. No better evidence can be given that the fact that a large percent of the Negro bus riders are now walking or getting a ride whenever and wherever they can.

Our Proposal:

The duly elected representatives of the people have the approval of the bus riders to present three proposals:

1. That assurance of more courtesy be extended the bus-riders. That the bus operators refrain from name calling, abusive language and threats.

2. That the seating of passengers will be on a "First-come, First-Served" basis. This means that the Negro passengers will begin seating from the rear of the bus toward the front and white passengers from the front toward the rear, until all seats are taken. Once seated, no passenger will be compelled to relinquish his seat to a member of another race when there is no available seat. When seats become vacant in the rear Negro passengers will voluntarily move to these vacant seats and by the same token white passengers will move to vacant seats in the front of the bus. This will eliminate the problem of passengers being compelled to

25 Dec
1955

stand when there are unoccupied seats. At no time, on the basis of this proposal, will both races occupy the same seat. We are convinced by the opinions of competent legal authorities that this proposal does not necessitate a change in the city, or state laws. This proposal is not new in Alabama, for it has worked for a number of years in Mobile and many other Southern cities.

3. That Negro bus drivers be employed on the bus lines serving predominately Negro areas. This is a fair request and we believe that men of good will, will readily accept it and admit that it is fair.

Nature of Movement:

1. Non violence—

At no time have the participants of this movement advocated or anticipated violence. We stand willing and ready to report and give any assistance in exposing persons who resort to violence. This is a movement of passive resistance, depending on moral and spiritual forces. We, the oppressed, have no hate in our hearts for the oppressors, but we are, nevertheless, determined to resist until the cause of justice triumphs.

2. Coercion—

There has not been any coercion on the part of any leader to force any one to stay off the busses. The rising tide of resentment has come to fruition. This resentment has resulted in a vast majority of the people staying off the busses willingly and voluntarily.

3. Arbitration—

We are willing to arbitrate. We feel that this can be done with men and women of good will. However, we find it rather difficult to arbitrate in good faith with those whose public pronouncements are anti-Negro and whose only desire seems to be that of maintaining the status quo. We call upon men of good-will, who will be willing to treat this issue in the spirit of Him whose birth we celebrate at this season, to meet with us. We stand for Christian teachings and the concepts of democracy for which men and women of all races have fought and died.

**THE NEGRO MINISTERS
of Montgomery and Their Congregations**

**THE METHODIST MINISTERIAL ALLIANCE,
The Rev. J. W. Hayes, President²**

**THE BAPTIST MINISTERS' CONFERENCE
The Rev. H. H. Hubbard, President³
The Rev. R. D. Abernathy, Secretary**

2. Joshua William Hayes (1905–1969), a native of Lowndes County, Alabama, earned his B.A. (1944) from Livingstone College. The presiding elder of the West Montgomery District of the AME Zion Church from 1954 to 1958, Hayes chaired the MIA's membership committee and served on its transportation and programs committees. He was also indicted for his role in the bus boycott. After leaving Montgomery he pastored Trinity AME Zion Church in Birmingham and participated in that city's 1963 civil rights campaign.

3. Hillman H. Hubbard (ca. 1892–1967), pastor of Bethel Baptist Church, served as an MIA negotiator and a member of the committees for relief, programming, and establishing a bank and savings association. He was among the indicted boycott leaders.

THE INTER-DENOMINATIONAL MINISTERIAL ALLIANCE

The Rev. L. Roy Bennett, President

The Rev. J. C. Parker, Secretary⁴

27 Dec

1955

THE MONTGOMERY IMPROVEMENT ASSOCIATION

Dr. M. L. King, Jr., President

The Rev. U. J. Fields, Secretary

PD. *Montgomery Advertiser–Alabama Journal*, 25 December 1955.

4. Joseph C. Parker, Sr. (1920–1987), was pastor of Hall Street Baptist Church from 1953 to 1957.