Many West Indian people settled in England during the 1960’s due to looser immigration restrictions and offers of jobs from British-based companies that had gone out to the Caribbean for workers to do the jobs that were not being done by people in Britain. In Southwest England West Indians easily found menial jobs in Bristol, but found themselves shut out of higher positions. It was hardly a secret that the Bristol Omnibus Company constantly turned away black and Asian applicants for drivers and conductors, but neither management nor the union, the Transport and General Worker’s Union, seemed interested in dealing with the “colour bar”.

In the late 1950’s, the newly formed West Indian Association had been looking into the issue of job discrimination. By 1962, after little progress in overturning the colour bar, four young Jamaican men named Henry Owens, Roy Hackett, Audley Evans, and Prince Brown broke away from the West Indian Association and formed the West Indian Development Council. The council appointed Paul Stephenson, a college educated youth worker who had recently moved to Bristol, as spokesperson.

In 1963 Stephenson used one of his students, Guy Bailey, as a test case to see if the bus crew ban existed. As expected, the Bristol Omnibus Company canceled Bailey’s job interview for bus conductor after realizing that Bailey was black.

Inspired by the Montgomery Alabama Bus Boycott, Stephenson decided to begin a bus boycott as well. On 29 April 1963 the West Indian Development Council held a news conference announcing the beginning of the boycott.

The next day, nearly all 7000 West Indian residents of Bristol refused to ride buses.

Taking cues from the civil rights movement in America, Stephenson tried reaching the greater West Indian community through the church; however, he had trouble gaining support since most West Indian clergy preferred staying of political issues. Still, the campaign grew without the church’s cooperation, with Bristol University students and sympathetic white Bristol residents joining in marches the following week.

When the local newspaper, the Bristol Evening Post, began reporting the campaign, the Bristol Omnibus Company general manager, Ian Patey, stated that the colour bar only existed for economic reasons, and that the bar came about after a 1955 union ballot in favor of it. Patey made racist comments about the boycott that stirred parts of the community that were originally neutral in action.

The Transport and General Worker’s Union responded by stating that enforcing the bar was the bus company’s decision only.

Stephenson and the Council’s aggressive approach soon caused a backlash. The regional secretary of the Transport and General Worker’s Union, Ron Nethercott, formed an alliance with Bill Smith of the West Indian Association to negotiate the colour bar. Smith’s gradual and non-confrontational approach made him the preferred negotiator compared to Stephenson.

Newspapers began criticizing the West Indian Development Council for dramatizing the situation, and support of the campaign divided into those for Smith and those for Stephenson.

Soon the boycott caught the attention of Sir Learie Constantine, a famous former cricket player and current High Commissioner of Trinidad and Tobago. It was his approval of Stephenson that kept the West Indian Development Council from being isolated from the campaign.

Sir Learie Constantine met with the Bristol Lord Mayor Leonard Stevenson and decided that it would be more effective to get the Transport Holdings Company, the company the Bristol Omnibus Company reported to, to overturn the bar. After a series of letters and editorials, official negotiations between the Transport Holdings Company and the Bristol Omnibus Company began in London on 8 May 1963.

The nature of the talks were kept private, but the bus boycott continued for the months the talks lasted and letters to the editor regarding the boycott filled local newspapers all summer. On 28 August 1963, after four months of the bus boycott, the talks ended with an agreement to overturn the colour bar.

On 16 September 1963, a Sikh named Raghbir Singh became the first non-white conductor in Bristol. Gradually, more black and Asian people were hired as bus drivers and train conductors. Exposing this case of public discrimination contributed to the Race Relations Act of 1965, which banned discrimination of public areas and housing.

**Research Notes Influences:**

Montgomery Alabama Bus Boycott

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