

# ‘A RACE STRUGGLE, A CLASS STRUGGLE, A WOMEN’S STRUGGLE ALL AT ONCE’: ORGANIZING ON THE BUSES OF L.A.

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In Los Angeles today, the Labor/Community Strategy Center is carrying out a difficult Left experiment in the age of the omnipresent Right. The center is an explicitly anti-racist, anti-corporate, and anti-imperialist think-tank focusing on ‘theory-driven practice’—the generation of mass campaigns of the working class and oppressed nationalities, in particular the black and Latino workers and communities. These campaigns are historically relevant on their own terms, but also have real relevance to any transition to an uncharted socialist future. Despite Clinton/Blair-style refinements on neoliberalism, imperialism’s infliction of massive human suffering and its moral and ethical deterioration has never been more apparent; there is an enormous opening for an anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist Left, as there is now no viable progressive liberalism or social democracy even trying to co-opt radical Left ideology and organizing.

The work of the Strategy Center is reflected in several interrelated organizational forms: a staff that initiates mass campaigns and establishes the political policies and priorities of the organization; a National School for Strategic Organizing that recruits and trains ideologically-oriented college and working-class activists who often rapidly become front-line leaders of the mass campaigns (i.e., the development of cadres along the lines theorized in Lenin’s *What is to be Done*, and emulated in every successful U.S. Left organization from the CPUSA to SNCC to SDS to the Black Panthers); AhoraNow, a bilingual political magazine, that focuses on raising practice to the level of theory and has generated a target audience of 1,000 key organizers, activists, and intellectuals—

with a growing international readership. At center stage is the Bus Riders Union/Sindicato de Pasejeros (BRU): a multi-racial mass organization of the transit dependent, the front-line mass campaign that extends the political influence of the center, tests its anti-imperialist theories, and generates a militant struggle to improve the public transportation system and the lives of 400,000 overwhelmingly minority, female, and low-income members of the urban working class.

The BRU, formed in 1993, is known for its yellow T-shirted, militant, multi-racial band of on-the-bus organizers, taking over the bus and contesting public space, as they organize bus drivers and bus riders in a moving site of struggle—exemplified by its ‘No Somos Sardinias/No Seat No Fare’ campaign in which tens of thousands of bus riders refused to pay their fare as a protest against bus overcrowding. The union’s explicitly ideological approach to organizing, reflected in its slogans on posters, leaflets, and T-shirts throughout the city—‘Fight Transit Racism’, ‘Stop the Corporatization of Government’, ‘Mass Transportation is a Human Right’—explicitly challenges the accommodation to neoliberal globalization of many former socialists and communists who are now pro-corporate labor union officials, community organizers, and powerful Democratic Party liberal operatives.

Organizing the bus riders has involved recognizing the strategic centrality of public services for the urban working class. For most of the twentieth century, communists, social democrats and even Keynesian liberals, have all argued that the market system and the trade union struggle cannot provide a living wage. In a capitalist system, the working class needs both a wage from the employer and a supplemental wage, a ‘social wage’ from the state in the form of publicly funded medical care, transportation, housing, education, culture, and recreation. The present mantra of privatization works for the upper classes who can purchase on the market any services they desire, but for the low-wage working class low-cost, efficient public transportation is an urgent need. Moreover, for transit dependent workers in sprawling areas like Los Angeles, Atlanta, and Chicago public transportation takes a very significant part of their day. While suburban auto commuters complain about gridlock, they can turn on the air conditioning and CD-player, contact clients on their cell phone, and suffer in style. For the working class, with increasingly dispersed employment and education centers, the one- and two-hour commutes each way on filthy, overcrowded buses, the long waits, the missed transfers, the constant fear of being fired for being late for work, the intrusion into any leisure time generates a rage that can be directed at a clear enemy—the powerful Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) with a U.S.\$ 3 billion a year budget that if captured and redirected towards a first-class bus system, could dramatically improve life for the working class.

ORIGINS: THE VAN NUYS LABOR/COMMUNITY  
COALITION

The Strategy Center was initiated in 1989, but its formative experience was the UAW Campaign to Keep GM Van Nuys Open, launched in 1982 to challenge General Motor's efforts to shut down L.A.'s last remaining heavy industrial plant with a workforce of more than 5,000. (I was the primary organizer of that campaign, situated as an assembly line worker in United Auto Workers Local 645, one of the most militant, progressive, and powerful locals in the U.S. labor movement at the time.) The campaign built a powerful in-plant movement led by Latino, black, white, and women workers, in strong alliance with L.A.'s large black and Latino communities. For a decade, from 1982 to 1992, that movement forced General Motors, the largest transnational industrial corporation in the world, to keep the plant open. The campaign achieved significant visibility and national impact through its unexpected tenacity in the age of Reagan and UAW concessions, as well as its ties to the New Directions Movement (a vibrant national insurgency to change the UAW at the time), the constructive, essential role of communist organizers in the plant (including me) and the determined efforts we made to document the struggle for a wider audience.

In the realm of Left politics the campaign broke new ground. It challenged management's rights theories by arguing that workers and communities, in particular black and Latino communities, had countervailing and special rights to restrict capital flight. It went beyond 'colour blind' approaches to working-class unity by highlighting the special rights of black and Latino workers to jobs. This was done in a way that went beyond contractual arguments. It asserted the obligations to the black working class created by centuries of slavery and segregation; it located the just demands of Chicano workers in terms of California's common colonial past with Mexico; and it drew attention to GM Van Nuys as the last provider of heavy industrial jobs for black and Latino workers. The campaign also argued for the special rights of women workers, who had just fought their way into heavy industrial jobs after decades of exclusion, and who had to fight for federal laws and programmes just to be able to be exploited on the shop floor.

The movement to challenge GM's 'management rights' provision in the collective bargaining contract and to boycott the cars of the very company for whom we worked put our local union on a direct collision course with the international leadership of the UAW. They defended GM's contractual right to close the plant, urged the workers instead to elect Democrats and oppose Japanese imports, and attacked the local for its 'self-destructive militancy' at a time when, according to the international union bureaucracy, the workers' obligation was to help the company regain greater profitability and competitiveness internationally. Against this explicitly pro-imperialist stance, the campaign gave explicit content to 'independent Left politics' through its main confrontational tactic, a pre-emptive boycott of GM products in the Los

Angeles new car market, and its insurgent form of organization, the Labor/Community Coalition, an independent forum explicitly designed to link the union local with powerful community forces in order to challenge the collusion and repression of GM and the UAW.

The long-term strategic significance of the campaign lay in how it addressed the complexities of working-class social formation in terms of class, race and gender. It was rooted in an analysis of the specific and controversial disposition of forces in an anti-racist anti-imperialist united front—the strategic alliance of the multi-national working class with the oppressed nationality workers in the U.S. The analysis evolved from specific events in the campaign. At the first major strategy meeting in late 1982, attended by more than 250 active GM Van Nuys workers and community allies, we broke into small groups in which each worker was asked to make an inventory of their own organizational, neighbourhood, racial, and other affiliations. Several women talked about being graduates of shelters for battered women, and issues of male alcoholism and battery, and the life and death face of women's liberation were brought into the open. Out of these discussions the first Women's Committee was organized in the local and contacts were made with the Coalition of Labor Union Women and other women's groups. The Mexicano workers talked about their problems as immigrants, and formed a vibrant Spanish language organizing committee—reaching out to Chicano students, immigrants' rights groups, and to the predominantly Latino Catholic Archdiocese. Many black workers focused on their ties to the Baptist and First African Methodist Episcopal churches. We learned that some workers (including several laid-off auto workers from other plants already closed) were black pastors running very small 'storefront' churches, while holding full-time working-class jobs.

The campaign helped clarify both the racialized nature of class and the class structure of racially oppressed groups. There is a tendency among some Leftists, even while acknowledging some racial and ethnic contradictions, to discuss the working class as fundamentally unified; by implication, this means accepting the dominant white identity of the U.S. working class. There is also a tendency to collapse oppressed nationalities—very complex multi-class formations—into uniformly classless black or Latino or other 'communities'. In reality, it is impossible to build an effective united front without giving great attention to the racial contradictions and white racism inside the working class, and the class contradictions within oppressed nationalities. In the Van Nuys campaign, the multi-national working class was 50% Latino (about one-third of whom were immigrants), 15% black, and 15% female. It was understanding the multiple and dynamic identities of the workers, and in particular taking up the demands of the black and Latino workers, that allowed us to energize the local working class as an actor. Explicitly addressing difference and contradiction were essential for unity of action. Similarly, while the support of Latino and black college students and clergy was pivotal, it was the black and Latino GM workers—who were parishioners in the churches, and whose kids went to the community colleges

and state universities—who had both the strategic positioning in the factory and the moral authority in the community to push the clergy and the elected local officials into the united front against GM. In the Van Nuys Labor/Community Coalition, it was the oppressed nationality workers who were the main force inside labor, and also the main force inside the black and Latino communities. That pivotal and dual role has continued in the work of the Bus Riders Union.

By 1987, as the union local and the Labor/Community Coalition increased its pressure on GM (having already forced GM to issue a five-year stay of execution from its original intention to close the plant in 1982), the UAW counterattacked. It imposed a ‘team concept’ of labor management co-operation on the local union, suppressed any UAW militants who refused to co-operate, colluded in the firing of Pete Beltran and Mike Velasquez, the president and vice president of the local who had led the movement against the ‘team concept’, and ushered in a Right-wing pro-company faction. This faction, armed with thugs and the threat of more firings of militant workers, openly repudiated the campaign, embraced the attack on the Japanese, and physically prevented the Left from using the union hall.

Under these conditions, we formed the Strategy Center, with the following objectives: (1) Continuing the Van Nuys campaign: the center became the new home for the Labor/Community Coalition and the ‘union hall in exile’ for militant UAW workers trying to recapture the local. (2) Recruiting and training a new group of organizers to initiate community based campaigns. (3) Focusing on ‘environmental justice’ campaigns in which the most impacted low-income minority communities, suffocating with industrial and auto toxins, would challenge large-scale industrial polluters and state regulatory agencies in big-picture, test-case campaigns. (4) Functioning as a strategic think-tank for organizers and activists, situated in local labor unions and oppressed nationality communities, who were trying to create an independent base, separate from and in contradiction to the trade union bureaucracy and Democratic Party.

#### CONTEXT: THE POLITICAL FACE OF LOS ANGELES

The initiation of the Strategy Center took place none too soon. By 1991 the Left wing of the local was completely crushed and by 1992 the plant was closed, with no organized resistance. With fitting irony, in 1994 the UAW West Coast Region was closed altogether, for lack of membership. So much for the benefits of labor/management co-operation. The consequences of such a strategy were increasingly visible, moreover, throughout the megacity of Los Angeles. In a development mirrored in every advanced capitalist country, and many Third World countries as well, where many former revolutionaries have become the most militant apologists for the imperialist world order, virtually all the leading figures in what used to be called the ‘progressive’ and Left trade union and minority movements are now firmly entrenched in the corporate orbit. Our initial tactic of the GM boycott in Los Angeles county, and the

subsequent work on regional air quality and mass transportation issues, demanded a greater understanding of the political economy of Los Angeles.

Los Angeles is a major ruling-class city in the U.S.—a ‘world city’ of media, manufacturing, banking and ruling-class politics, with national and international impact. The growing importance of L.A.’s international position has taken place over a few short decades, coinciding with the historic election of Tom Bradley, a liberal black former policeman, as mayor in 1973. Bradley’s election involved the construction of a powerful liberal black/Jewish alliance and the defeat of the old reactionary white regime that had shaped L.A. since its inception. Bradley’s initial focus on anti-racism and curtailing police brutality moved rapidly into a corporate makeover, which rationalized the local state as a more sophisticated instrument of downtown development. Some have called this the Manhattanization of L.A.: it involved co-opting the AFL-CIO (through contracts for building trades construction unions) and the black bourgeoisie (through the transformation of black churches into ‘community development corporations’).

Bradley was elected mayor for four terms—he was the FDR of Los Angeles, the true corporate liberal. During his reign, it was the black and Latino working class who suffered the most. The downtown high-rise office developers destroyed the black janitorial unions, subcontracting to non-union, low-wage employers. Los Angeles became the new center of U.S. garment manufacture as sweatshop owners realized that the city had all the advantages of a Third World labor market and a First World consumer market for high-end goods. Bradley upheld the mobility of capital by refusing to challenge the many industrial plant closings of the time (including giving GM a green light to close both of its L.A. plants). More than 35,000 high-paying industrial jobs were eliminated, the recently-created well-paid working class of colour was decimated, while the labor bureaucracy, Democratic Party and black bourgeoisie stood mute, content with their piece of the action.

Fittingly, the last year of Bradley’s last term was punctuated by an anti-racist rebellion. His efforts to curtail the paramilitary LAPD had failed: the videotaped beating of Rodney King, and the subsequent Simi Valley jury’s defiant acquittal of the police, vividly highlighted the structural role of police repression and white suburban support in the continued subjugation of blacks. The acceleration of urban poverty, low-wage industry, and changing urban demographics sparked the first large-scale black/Latino street action, expanding the racial composition and geographic area of any previous urban revolt. In 1993, the venture capitalist, Richard Riordan, rode the white backlash against the ‘riot’ and the Latino backlash against Bradley’s chauvinist exclusion of them into a mayoral victory. Riordan pledging to hire 2,000 more cops and to ‘run the city like a business.’

From Bradley to Riordan the government of L.A. has come to play a far more central role in corporate development, moving massive amounts of federal, state, and local funds into massive construction projects with guaran-

teed profits and cost overruns that benefit a complex alliance of corporate forces. In the early years of the Bradley administration the city purchased 2,000 new buses to modernize and expand the fleet—to deliver low-wage labor to the increasingly dispersed L.A. capitalists and in anticipation of the 1984 Olympics (the crowning jewel of Bradley's efforts to display L.A. as a world city). In 1980 and 1984 L.A. voters passed two half cent sales taxes—with bus riders having been promised a reduced 50 cent bus fare and a network of fast, clean buses. But this was linked to a new MTA plan for a vast array of subway and light rail lines. This plan was driven by corporate development objectives—rail construction as a publicly funded boondoggle for contractors and monuments to developers, real estate speculators, politicians, and their contributors. It was clear from the outset that there was no way they could afford to construct an even minimally viable mass transit plan if rail construction was prioritized over expanding the bus system. L.A. county, with 4,000 square miles, does not have the density for rail; only bus can compete with the auto. Moreover, rail construction costs are prohibitive—\$350 million per mile for subways, \$150 million a mile for light rail, whereas the cost of a first-class bus system that could serve 500,000 daily riders would be less than three miles of subway construction. As the MTA rail lines came in at 350% above cost, and attracted less than 50% of their projected ridership, the subsidy for each suburban passenger (mostly white) rose to as much as \$5 to \$10 a ride—for only 6% of all mass transit riders. It was the city's 500,000 bus riders, mostly black and Latino (94% of all mass transit riders) who paid the bill. By the early 1990s, despite a 15% increase in population, the MTA bus system had deteriorated. A once brand new 3,000 bus fleet was down to 2,000 dilapidated ones, as old buses were not replaced and ridership declined by 20%.

The BRU's challenge to what it called 'transit racism' has led it to a frontal challenge to the fiscal priorities of the local capitalist state, posing the central political question: which class should government subsidize? The BRU demanded 'Billions for Buses', a carefully-developed programme for replacing 2,000 dilapidated diesel buses with 2,000 new clean-fuel (compressed natural gas) buses, expanding the bus fleet by an additional 500 buses to reduce overcrowding and another 500 buses for new service to medical, employment, and educational centers. This would require hiring more than 2,000 bus drivers and an additional 750 mechanics and maintenance people. This plan would get the working class to work, attract many auto drivers as well, but would offer no kickbacks, no monuments, and no sacrifices to the gods of corporate urbanism.

In 1992, when we initiated the 'Billions for Buses' mass transportation campaign, we understood we would have to challenge virtually every organized force in the city. No 'anti-corporate united front' was possible at the time; we had first to initiate an anti-corporate center of gravity. But we were also aware that the BRU's efforts at anti-racist organizing were taking place in a context of heightened racism and xenophobia. Throughout the 1990s, California, the alleged cutting edge political laboratory for U.S. politics, has seen right-wing,

pro-corporate reactionaries, armed with sophisticated Republican electoral tactics, engage in bi-annual rites of racial political sadism in which substantial majorities of white working class and middle class voters are organized into referenda crusades to strip every last civil right and civil liberty from minority communities. For more than a decade they have spent millions to place on the ballot repressive measures with demagogic slogans: 'The Taxpayers Revolt' to reduce property taxes and reduce funding for public (that is, black and Latino) education; 'Three Strikes and You're Out' to legalize putting minority youth in prison for the rest of their lives; 'Save our State' which would deny medical benefits and education to undocumented immigrants; and even the notorious 'Civil Rights Initiative' to eliminate affirmative action for university admissions and government contracts. As each initiative passes, it whets the public's appetite for more racism and reaction—sentencing youth as adults, banning gay marriage. In this context, the Strategy Center has tried to use mass campaigns such as the Bus Riders Union to construct an 'anti-racist united front' focusing on the urgent needs and legitimate demands of the working class of colour. The fight against national oppression and racism is the central 'class' question in a structurally racist society.

The BRU's work has focused heavily on the class nature of national oppression—talking about 'class-based racism' and 'race-based poverty'. We have highlighted the many overtly material manifestations of discrimination and racism—the substandard services and the discriminatory use of public funds in order to subsidize white suburban commuters. We have also elaborated the ideological reflection of racism, which is also a material force: the massive overcrowding, sometimes more than 40 people standing, bodies pushed together, with every seat taken on a 43-seat bus; the bus drivers' often contemptuous screaming at bus riders to 'get back', as if they have any place to go; the despair of watching bus after bus pass you by as if your time and your life are worth nothing; the constant fear of being late for work, with the assumption you are lazy or unreliable, when in fact you must get up an extra hour early for work or school to compensate for the many times buses break down or pass you by; the two-hour bus rides from South Central and East L.A. by domestic workers to clean white wealthy people's homes; and the sexually threatening pushing, grabbing and touching that many male passengers inflict on women to add insult to injury on the overcrowded buses. Humiliation, degradation, devaluation—the bus system reflects and replicates racist policies. The 'No Somos Sardinas' campaign struck a chord—'we are not sardines, goddamn it.' As BRU leader Norma Henry angrily told the MTA board, 'If the bus system was carrying 400,000 white males, no matter how rich or how poor, there is no way you would tolerate those disgusting conditions.' For the working class of colour this is a race struggle, a class struggle, and a women's struggle all at once, but the struggle against national oppression for working-class black and Latino bus riders clearly is what used to be called the 'primary contradiction': placed at the center of the strategy it has the potential to unlock and unleash all the other struggles.

### ORGANIZING BUS RIDERS: THE CLASS STRUGGLE IN MOTION

The buses are an exciting arena of organizing for the Left—a site of social and structural formation of the multi-lingual, multi-cultural urban proletariat. The generalized concept of ‘people of colour’ stands in for a new working class whose complex character challenges even the best organizers. Like the factory, the bus system forces together working-class people of different nationalities, races, ethnicities, genders, and strata, who share a common proximity and oppression. Over time, and through the organizing work of the BRU, many bus riders are coming to understand their own experience in more systemic terms, seeing the MTA as a mechanism of the capitalist state, exploiting their time and money to subsidize the wealthy and the corporate class. The bus creates the structural possibility of breaking through the parochialism and ethnic balkanization of the neighbourhoods. If you live in East L.A. (Chicano) but have a job on the West Side the bus rides take you through Pico Union (Central American) Koreatown, Crenshaw (black) and Fairfax (white, Jewish, elderly) before you get to work. The bus is what we call a factory on wheels, carrying the Korean restaurant worker, the Thai woman garment worker, the Latino hotel worker, the black department store worker, the black and Latino domestic workers, high school kids with their boom boxes, the black and Latino parolees—and the cruellest new growth industry of all, black and Latino security guards, minimum wage workers asked to risk their lives and at times take the lives of others to protect private and corporate property. Like the former heavy industry factory, the bus system creates one of the multi-racial contexts in which an appeal to a common destiny and a common enemy can be made—the objective conditions into which the organizers attempt to inject the subjective factor—strategy, tactics, agitation and propaganda.

Bus riders are a powerful numerical force in the city. L.A. has 400,000 daily bus riders taking 1.3 million daily trips. Several major urban bus lines, the Wilshire, Pico, Vermont Western, and Third St. lines, carry more than 20,000 riders a day each, more than any heavy or light rail line, and the MTA has 77 high density bus lines. This is a mass constituency that if organized could represent an important power bloc in the politics of a megacity. At present, the BRU reaches as many as 50,000 bus riders each month—through flyers, on-the-bus discussions, agitations and theatre presentations, BRU members talking to other riders on the way to work, massive media campaigns and high visibility feature stories, television shows, and films about our work.

Moreover, Bus riders have many organizational affiliations. This is important to solving the complex questions of how to win our demands. Given the powerful coalition of forces that benefit from the rail juggernaut—construction companies, building trades unions, elected officials of every persuasion and nationality, how can we build a countervailing force to pressure the federal courts and the MTA board to prioritize the bus system? As the BRU recruits

members on the bus, we learn that, like the Van Nuys workers, they have multiple organizational affiliations with the Hotel and Restaurant Union, the clothing and textile workers' union UNITE, Justice for Janitors, Los Angeles City College, NAACP, churches, disability rights groups. Even trade unions who have strongly disagreed with our politics are careful as to how they handle us, because many of their own members are also members of the BRU. As Ricardo Zelada, a Salvadorian immigrant with long ties to the Left agitated, 'I wear two hats for two unions—UNITE, for my workplace, and the Sindicato de Pasejeros for my civil rights and my transportation.' This tactic of organizing the industrial and service working class through a city-wide struggle over public services allows us to re-enter the trade union movement through a new form of working-class union.

In 1993, when BRU organizers began their work, the only material expression of a unified or even nascent class or race struggle was in their brain cells. The bus riders and the bus drivers began with only one thing in common—they were pissed off at each other, alone in their experience and consciousness, thinking and speaking in different languages, with no sense of a common destination or destiny. This is the multi-racial working class doing its own spontaneous thing. The first steps involve commandeering the space—sending organizers on to the bus, militantly engaging the passengers, distributing leaflets, making loud speeches when many bus riders were yelling and screaming anyway. The aggressiveness of the BRU organizers is legendary. They often include young recruits from our National School for Strategic Organizing along with our most developed members. But how to shape the bus into an effective arena for organizing? To begin with, the BRU focuses heavily on the written word; agitational flyers that are very hard to write, because the story is so complex—the history of transit racism, the complex corporate and political forces, the specificities of our legal case, and the endless series of parliamentary manoeuvres at the monthly MTA board meetings that require a level of specificity and at times technicality that would drive away all but the most committed. Still, we target 'the opinion leaders of the oppressed', those who are attracted to, even fascinated by, our protracted, and highly conceptual approach to long-term political struggle. Then we learn to refine our agitation, speaking at times to the whole bus, then settling in for one on one conversations, most leading nowhere, but again, looking for the attentive eyes, the open and inquiring minds.

Equal attention needs to be paid to the language of organizing. All of our leaflets are in Spanish and English, most of our organizers, Latino, black, Asian, and white are bilingual English/Spanish, and every team is always bilingual. We have had one Korean organizer, Carol Song, and when she was with us the involvement of Korean people on the bus was radically expanded. Our inability to find an effective replacement has been a major setback. The strong presence of black organizers—Kikanza Ramsey and Sean McDougall, who speak fluent Spanish—is as educative for the blacks on the bus as the Latinos, seeing a model

of blacks who are aggressively challenging the reactionary anti-Latino sentiment prevalent among members of the black political establishment. The multi-racial, multi-lingual team of organizers is often as compelling as the demands for more buses and better mass transit—people want buses, but they want to join a movement as well. The unapologetically Left, internationalist, expansive anti-racist politics of the BRU helps recruit and retain new members.

The bus really comes alive when organizers challenge people to act and do so in a way that unleashes class, race, and gender dynamics. In the summer of 1997 the Bus Riders Union organized a ‘No Seat No Fare’ campaign, asking bus riders to refuse to pay their fare to protest the MTA’s refusal to reduce overcrowding to agreed-upon levels and to demand that the MTA purchase 500 additional buses. Out of the 400,000 daily bus riders, we estimate the BRU/Sindicato has about 3,000 dues-paying members and 30,000 self-identified members—so when we go on the buses we often begin with at least one or two out of 60 to 80 passengers who know who we are and who see themselves as supporters or members.

We began the campaign with a commissioned poster from well-known guerrilla artist Robbie Conal, a full colour can of sardines with the slogans, ‘No Somos Sardinias, We Won’t Stand for It.’ Several thousand posters were plastered on bus shelters throughout the city and got a great reception. We spent the entire summer doing mass leafleting on the buses, carrying out militant actions such as stopping dilapidated buses at their stops, putting yellow homicide tape around the buses, labelling them ‘dead on arrival’. This expanded street presence led to many confrontations with the LAPD including several arrests for ‘defacing property’ and resisting arrest. Several BRU members were roughed up by the police.

This is not to say the bus riders are, as a group, very militant—certainly not spontaneously. Many are very poor, with no history of political struggle and, at first, worried that not paying their fare would be like stealing or cheating. Over time, we educated many bus riders that this was not individual free-loading, but instead, group resistance, a politically symbolic act of defiance to signal the media, the courts, and the MTA that the bus riders were angry as hell, and clearly identified with the BRU. While even at its height the campaign was very much driven by the initiative of the BRU staff and active members, more than 30,000 passengers participated in the ‘No Seat No Fare’ campaign. This mass militancy was reinforced by very sympathetic press coverage, and a federal court decision, several months later, ordering the MTA to purchase 350 additional buses and to hire as many drivers as necessary—estimated at more than 700—to operate them.

From the inception of our organizing work, we gave high priority to trying to enlist and organize the support of the bus drivers. We theorized that the drivers and riders had a common material and class interest. Overcrowded buses were terrible for the riders, but what driver wanted to be faced with the daily war games between him or herself and a busload of angry passengers?

Moreover, the BRU's demands to reduce overcrowding and develop service to new areas would require as many as 1,000 additional buses, creating as many as 2,000 new jobs. But building working-class unity between the more privileged and the more super-exploited sectors of the working class is far more difficult than logical argument of common interests. The drivers, significantly black and Latino, with as many as 20% of them female, are represented by the United Transportation Union (UTU), a conservative AFL-CIO craft union. The drivers work alone, and often do not experience the passengers as fellow workers but rather see them as the main 'problem' in their working conditions. While many drivers are courteous and even solicitous of the passengers, many treat the largely Latino and Asian immigrants with contempt. Conversely, many bus riders see the drivers as 'the MTA' and when we talk about 'transit racism' many angry riders say, 'the main problem is the arrogant drivers who pass me by, yell at us to step back like we are cattle, and won't learn my language to give me instructions.'

The work with the drivers has included efforts to help them build a rank-and-file caucus. This got off to a good start but collapsed under pressure from the UTU leadership. We have continued our daily conversations with the drivers, and we put out open letters to the drivers about a common programme at least every six months. On every bus, one BRU organizer talks to the driver while the others talk to the passengers. We have also made many overtures to the UTU leadership, and have met with them on several occasions, but they have never expended any of their limited influence on behalf of bus riders or even a better bus system. The UTU has made significant concessions to the MTA on issues of subcontracting, privatization, and a two-tiered wage system. Several MTA drivers have told us that the union leadership is threatened by the BRU because our militant stance against privatization exposes their own deals with the MTA. Many drivers say 'the BRU even fights harder for our jobs than our own union.'

This patient work was tested during the 'No Seat No Fare' campaign when most drivers offered at least passive support—adhering to a narrow contractualism by simply 'quoting the fare' and refusing to call MTA police. A significant minority of drivers went further, chanting into their microphones 'Support the BRU' and putting their hands over the fare box, informing passengers, 'No Asiento, No Pago'. Given the growing privatization and police control of public space, making it increasingly difficult for Left organizers to even reach mass constituencies, the driver/rider alliance, no matter how tenuous, has been a critical breakthrough in our work—not the least of which is allowing us the physical space in which to do it.

Through six years of organizing we have recruited and retained a core of several hundred active members. The BRU holds regularly scheduled monthly membership meetings that average 75 to 100 participants, elects an executive board/planning committee that meets weekly to set all major policies and objectives of the organization, creates multiple structures for membership participation

and leadership such as the Action Committee and the newly formed Teatro whose members write political skits and perform them at bus stops and on the buses. Again, all of this work is carried out and performed in Spanish and English, facilitated by professional translators and the use of headsets.

### ACHIEVEMENTS AND DILEMMAS

The Strategy Center, in the absence of a Left political party or other national organization, has created an organized center of resistance and large-scale campaigns to challenge the powerful L.A. and U.S. ruling class. Using racial oppression as a fulcrum, we are slowly unlocking the complex dynamics of class, race, gender, disability, age, and using the most oppressed sectors of society to impact the politics of a megacity of nine million people. From that base, we are reaching out to make new alliances with activists and social movements in other major urban centers—Atlanta, New York, San Francisco/Oakland, Toronto, and Johannesburg.

In 1994, the center initiated an aggressive civil rights law-suit Labor/Community Strategy Center and Bus Riders Union vs. Los Angeles Metropolitan Transportation Authority, charging the MTA with establishing a racially discriminatory separate and unequal mass transit system in violation of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 14th amendment to the U.S. Constitution. The suit resulted in a precedent-setting ten-year Consent Decree, whose provisions included: the reinstatement of the unlimited use bus/rail pass and its guaranteed existence for ten years; the creation of a low-fare affordable transit system, with a \$42 monthly bus pass and a first-ever \$11 weekly bus pass; the first national standard to restrict overcrowding—an enforceable limit of no more than 15 people standing on a 43-seat bus by 1998 and no more than 8 people standing by 2002; a ‘New Service’ bus plan to combat transportation segregation in which the MTA and the Bus Riders Union will jointly develop an integrated county-wide transit plan to new centers of education, medical services, and jobs; and the establishment of the Bus Riders Union as ‘class representative’, i.e., as the official representative of 400,000 bus riders. And after three further years of organizing since that victory, the BRU has pushed the MTA to order more than 1,200 new Compressed Natural Gas clean-fuel buses, at a cost of more than \$400 million, to phase out more than 1,200 diesel buses, and to agree to the complete conversion of the fleet to clean fuel buses by 2003, as well as hiring more than 1,000 new bus drivers and an additional 500 mechanics and maintenance workers.

In the realm of sustained mass organizing and struggle, the BRU is by far the most vital organization in the city. Since the ‘No Seat No Fare’ campaign the BRU has initiated an every-Thursdays fare strike—*Juerga de Jueves*—to create low-level but constant pressure on the MTA. The BRU sends grassroots lobbyists to Sacramento and Washington D.C. to challenge MTA’s budget allocations. It has invented on-the-bus masked heroine *Superpasajera*, and initiated the on-the-bus theatre group that carries out counterhegemonic ‘actos’ in transit. In a

recent campaign, confronting the Latino political elite that is attempting to push through a new billion-dollar rail line in direct violation of the Consent Decree with funds that are urgently needed for bus service, the Sindicato has organized high school students, built large-scale puppets caricaturing the powerful elected officials, and taken the campaign deep into the housing projects and low-income communities that will suffer the consequences. In all of this work the BRU continues to reinvent its tactics and sustain impressive media coverage—with major features on National Public Radio, ABC World News Tonight, *Christian Science Monitor*, *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and the influential minority media, *La Opinion*, *Korean Times*, *Rafu Shimpo*, *Watts Times*. A recently released feature documentary film, *Bus Riders Union* by academy-award cinematographer Haskell Wexler, hopes to bring the movement and its message to ‘a theatre near you’. The BRU is organizing a national tour with the film, having already had major events in New York, Atlanta, and Boston, a 600-person film showing at the L.A. Director’s Guild, and now scheduled showings in Vancouver, Toronto, and Johannesburg.

Despite these achievements, the future challenges to the movement are more difficult than ever. The MTA has launched a major legal counter-attack, appealing the court orders requiring it to expand its bus fleet by 350 buses. While the BRU has been able to force the MTA to replace its existing dilapidated fleet of 2,000 buses, we cannot exert enough political or legal muscle to force them to expand the fleet, which is the biggest ticket item, and would require the suspension of every other rail project. After the federal district courts ordered the MTA to purchase the first 350 of those additional buses, the MTA counterattacked by challenging the entire legal basis of the Consent Decree. The Ninth Federal Circuit Court will hear a wide-ranging MTA appeal based on ‘states’ rights’ theories that the federal courts do not have the authority to compel a state agency, even one that voluntarily entered into a contract with the BRU, to reallocate funds based on racial equality. At a time when the scope and enforceability of civil rights laws are being abrogated by the Supreme Court, the Labor/Community Strategy Center case becomes even more historically significant. If a government agency can enter into a legally binding Consent Decree with a grassroots organization, in this case the Strategy Center and BRU, and then go back to the federal courts to have it abrogated, then there is virtually no legal tactic in the realm of challenging racial discrimination that has the slightest chance of bringing any tangible relief.

There are times when the political landscape looks bleak and foreboding. The Strategy Center and Bus Riders Union try to carry out a dual strategy—trying to ‘unite all who can be united’ to create the broadest possible united front, even on a tactical level, such as all those who would benefit from a first-class bus system regardless of political philosophy and larger objectives, as well as carrying out ‘independence and initiative in the united front’ to make sure an independent Left voice can try to shape the larger debate. But often, after months and years of organizing, the united front still seems very narrow. Most

of the organized forces in the city are so tied to either the rail juggernaut itself or the main political forces who are driving it that there is very little possibility of winning over powerful tactical allies. The establishment is playing winner take all, and punishing those who would break with them on even one issue.

In that context, the reforms won by the BRU, however impressive, need to be seen in terms of whatever significance it will have on the future form and content of working class organization. The challenge for all Leftists at this point in history is figure out how to construct independent institutions (Left organizations, trade union caucuses, black, Latino, Asian, women's organizations, that are independent of the Democratic party, the trade union bureaucracy, the civil rights establishment) and to theorize and attempt to carry out an independent working-class programme that rejects imperialism, racism, and xenophobia. The Los Angeles Strategy Center's assessment of current conditions leads it to conclude that the best form for such struggles is the creation of similar Left centers for organizing and the initiation of city- and county-wide campaigns that challenge corporate policies and the capitalist state. It used to be felt that building Left caucuses in the trade unions and moving from that base into a city-wide and national Left politics was the best allocation of resources and the most productive trajectory. But the debate about where to situate the Left is far less important now than the political goals that define our work, for the situation of one's forces, one's cadre, if such an organization even exists, is a question of tactics, whereas programme, reflected in demands, is the most concrete reflection of one's strategy and ultimate aims.

After almost 20 years of work in Los Angeles, from the demands of the GM workers to the environmental demands of low-income residents in the Strategy Center's Watchdog Project to the present work of the Bus Riders Union, the challenge of constructing and maintaining an anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist consciousness in the minds of leaders of the working class has been at the heart of how we have defined the challenge of the socialist project. With all its many limitations, and its own dilemmas in going beyond 'bus consciousness' (which is an analogy to trade union consciousness), the BRU has exhibited a surprising resiliency and an evolving world view that is taking the discussions of the struggle against national oppression and neoliberal state policies in Los Angeles into larger national and international arenas—the Democratic National Convention and the militant protests against the World Trade Organization, the World Bank and International Monetary Fund. The effort of L.A.'s bus riders to become the drivers of their own history is a work in progress. Like Haskell Wexler's film about the Bus Riders Union, there is no ending to this story, just a finite time when the narrative has to be arbitrarily 'freeze framed' while the movement and the debate continues.