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An Environmental Justice Strategy for Urban Transportation in Atlanta: Lessons and Observations from Los Angeles

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Overview

Atlanta and Los Angeles are two world cities, with old elites challenged by an increasingly cosmopolitan, transnational, and dynamic population. Any significant movement for sustainable communities, for environmental justice, for a first-class, regional transportation system that prioritizes the transit dependent will of necessity involve the mobilization of those excluded and marginalized from politics-as-usual, and will require a challenge to the pro-corporate consensus. As many have observed, the Bus Riders Union's *Fight Transit Racism/Billions for Buses* campaign has not just shaken up the Los Angeles Metropolitan Transportation Agency (MTA), it has been a major intervention in the politics of the region. A similar challenge will be required in Atlanta, where the seemingly "reasonable" demand for "equity" will involve a mass movement of funds from the highway and rail lobbies to the bus system, from suburban commuters, corporate developers, and rail contractors to the urban working class of color. And such a transformation will not happen, cannot happen, until a mass movement of the transit dependent is built from the bottom up.

In both cities, the urban poor, the working class, and the lowest income communities of color are given shoddy mass transit service and denied equal access to federal and state transportation funds that advantage suburban commuters and auto owners. In both cities, the "choice rider"—who already has a

car—is privileged, whereas the "transit dependent"—the urban working class, the elderly, the high school students, the disabled—are discriminated against. They suffer the experience of dilapidated buses, long-waits, longer rides, poor connections, service cuts, overcrowding, and daily exposure to some of the worst tail-pipe toxins. Theirs is a transit experience characterized by class bias, racial discrimination, women's oppression, and lethal air.

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In 1993, the Labor/Community Strategy Center (LCSC) in Los Angeles founded the Bus Riders Union (BRU)—now the largest multi-racial grassroots transportation group in the U.S., with more than 3,000 members representing 400,000 daily bus riders. The BRU’s 8 years of organizing, significant policy and legal victories, and analytical and theoretical expertise, can be used as a resource for the urgent work of mass transit reconstruction in Atlanta. Based on the BRU work, four visits by LCSC and BRU staff to Atlanta, a visit to the Strategy Center by Atlanta activists from Clark Atlanta Environmental Justice Resource Center and the Metropolitan Atlanta Transportation Equity Coalition (MATEC), this paper will emphasize the following remedies:

- Reduced fares and an emphasis on affordable transit to increase transit use among the transit dependent and substantially increase mass transit ridership
- A clean fuel, bus-centered mass transit system
- Dramatic reductions in highway funding and use
- Enforceable standards for bus and rail overcrowding
- A coordinated plan to create new bus service to hospitals, job and educational centers including freeway-based bus service
- A stop to racial segregation: opposing projects such as the proposed Macon/Atlanta commuter rail; forcing outlying counties to integrate their service with Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority (MARTA)
- Extending existing MARTA rail lines through express bus lines
 - * A moratorium on future rail construction until the entire bus infrastructure is constructed
- Reducing sprawl and air pollution by forcing suburban commuters into integrated public transportation and eventually relocating into urban centers
- Democratizing the political process by creating new participatory structures with institutional power and prioritized funding for the regional transit needs of inner city communities of color

This paper will go into significant detail to show the structural similarities of Los Angeles and Atlanta and the directly relevant applications of the Los Angeles Bus Riders Union experience to the Atlanta movement.

I. Objectives: A New Civil Rights Movement

Any strategy is ultimately reflected in *Programmatic Demands*—to answer the fundamental question the establishment asks of all social movements, “What is it that you people want?” Moreover, any strategy must include *Tactics*—the forms of organization and the methods of organizing necessary to win those demands. But we begin this discussion with *Objectives*—the broader goals that motivate a social movement and that frame its demands and tactics.

1) **Putting the urban working class of color at the center of all social policy**

In too many conferences of urban planners and environmentalists, hypothetical and sometimes meritorious proposals are advanced by the white, well-intentioned middle class. But they often are way off in their actual proposals for the “urban” core, and often, fortunately for all of us, they are powerless. It is impossible to discuss “urbanism” without acknowledging that “city” and “urban” are code for “working class people of color.” It should not be a strategic revelation that *the needs and the leadership capacity of the urban working class of color must play a central role in developing sustainable communities*—reflected in a reduction in suburban sprawl, ecological and environmental public health, anti-racist public policy, and a focus on the transportation needs of society’s most oppressed and exploited. For the Strategy Center, the needs of the working class and communities of color are both an end in themselves and an essential building block of any effective organizing plan.

The *transit dependent* are defined as those who depend on public transportation for their mobility and personal viability because of low-income (the inability to afford the purchase or maintenance of a car or cars for one’s family), age (either too young or old to drive), or disability. It is the low-wage workers, often majority women, people of color, the elderly, the high school students, and the disabled who often constitute the majority of urban residents and *who must be at the center of any viable transit strategy*.

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This strategic decision is in direct contrast to the elitist and failed strategy that argues that, from an air quality and environmental perspective, it is the “*choice rider*” who must be prioritized, that is, the more affluent classes who have as many autos as they need and can choose to use public transit or not. This argument begins with a reasonable assumption—that if we want to systematically reduce air pollution we must get people out of their cars. But then it makes an elitist and spurious leap of logic—that public transportation policy must privilege the privileged, those who have cars, and those who have the most cars. The way this argument typically unfolds is that, while of course it is regrettable that a black domestic worker waits at a MARTA rail stop for 30 minutes for a connecting bus to arrive, she in fact is not polluting the air while she is “idling” and thus should not be prioritized. Instead, proponents argue that if we can get the suburban “choice rider” out of his or her car, we will achieve quantifiable air pollution reductions. This logic has supported moving the lion’s share of public transit dollars to first class commuter rail systems with extra seats for laptop computers, free shuttle buses or subway connections, and of course frequent service, all deemed necessary—even at astounding subsidies per passenger—to get the spoiled suburbanites out of their cars.

Using the lessons from Los Angeles, this strategy paper will go into significant detail about the fallacy of the “choice rider” argument and why the prioritization of the “transit dependent” must be the centerpiece of a viable regional plan.

Public transportation must serve the needs of those who need it the most, not those who need it the least—the “option of the poor” must be prioritized.

In Atlanta and Los Angeles, and every major urban area in the U.S., there is a low-wage workforce that is at the center of the region’s political economy—the domestic, department store, convenience store, electronic assembly, garment, hotel, and restaurant workers, security guards, and street vendors. These workers often have children, generally rent apartments rather than own homes, use public transportation, and have *family* incomes from \$15,000 to \$20,000 a year. Taking children to childcare or school, going to work, looking for better

jobs, taking courses at community colleges, and trying to have modest forms of recreation and enjoyment depends upon the viability of public transportation. In Los Angeles, there are approximately 400,000 daily bus riders taking 1.2 million trips a day, with approximately 60,000 daily rail riders taking 180,000 trips a day.¹ Most of the transit riders are transit dependent, and their grievances create the potential basis of a powerful

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movement for a first-class public transportation system. Moreover, many of the transit dependent do have cars. But they have perhaps one car for an entire family, and that car is usually an older gas guzzler that is responsible for a disproportionate amount of tailpipe emissions. Thus, besides the ethical and strategic arguments, *even in terms of immediate tailpipe reductions, it is the urban poor who must be further encouraged to ride public transit.*

In conclusion, there is no doubt that any movement of the urban low-wage and higher-wage working class must reach out to the more privileged classes, and eventually to the “choice rider” who presently uses her or his car. But you can’t begin a movement with “choice riders”, because the freeway system *does* work as a transportation system, it offers flexibility and door-to-door service and no waiting time—until of course you hit traffic congestion that takes up more and more of the entire day. You have to begin with those who use public transit and who depend upon it. They are the ones who are most motivated, who will fight for better service, who will be more interested in clean fuels and public health—because their lives depend upon it. The work of the Bus Riders Union in Los Angeles has shown that the core of the movement must be the urban poor, overwhelmingly people of color, and from there, move

BRU Program Drives L.A. Mayoral Transit Debate

In 1993 the Bus Riders Union developed the first demands of the Billions for Buses and Fight Transit Racism campaign. MTA board members and L.A.'s top elected officials respond with nearly universal dismissal: "They're utopianists," "they don't understand the complexities of mass transit policy," "rail is L.A.'s future—the BRU is obsessed with buses!"

A lot can happen in eight years. In 2001 the terms of the debate on mass transit policy in the L.A. mayoral contest has been largely determined by the BRU.

1993 The BRU calls for:

- 50¢ fare and \$20 unlimited bus pass
- 500 clean fuel buses to replace old diesel buses
- 500 expansion buses to reduce overcrowding and for New Service Plan
- Moratorium on all rail projects

2001 Official positions taken by LA mayoral candidates:

Calif. Assembly Speaker Antonio Villaraigosa:

- 50¢ fare and \$20 bus pass over five years
- Stop the MTA appeal of the Consent Decree (CD) before the 9th Circuit Court of Appeals
- Buy the court-ordered 350 expansion buses
- Buy 500 additional expansion buses [which meet the New Service buses required by the CD]

U.S. Congressperson Xavier Becerra:

- Stop the MTA appeal of the Consent Decree
- Buy the court-ordered 350 expansion buses
- Moratorium on rail projects until CD is funded

LA City Attorney James Hahn:

- Stop the MTA appeal of the Consent Decree
- Buy the court-ordered 350 expansion buses

out to a multi-racial, multi-class constituency. Moreover, any efforts to squander public funds for additional rail projects to cater to the "choice rider" will be in direct contradiction to the needs of current bus/subway riders who are at the heart of the system and need new express bus and shuttle bus connectors now.

2) A new civil rights movement: Placing the fight for the transit dependent in the context of an anti-racist, civil rights strategy

In every major urban center, there is a growing overlap between the fight against poverty and the fight against racism and racial discrimination. In Los Angeles, and even in Atlanta, these fights intersect at what we call "class-based racism," where white supremacy and racial segregation are still the most overt aspects. The Strategy Center's *Fight Transit Racism* campaign has provided a sharp cutting edge to an overall campaign for environmental justice, sustainable economic development, and regional mobility. A look at the present forms of institutional racism will help us understand why an antiracist perspective must drive the demands of the campaign.

The location of the vast majority of the black and Latino community in the lowest wage work

As with Los Angeles, the class nature of Atlanta in general and the black community in particular has changed dramatically in the past four decades. There is a far larger black professional class and middle class, as well as a major entry of black people into the business and governmental elites. Led by Tom Bradley in Los Angeles and Andrew Young in Atlanta, a small but significant black elite has become part of the actual ruling class of the city and the country.

But that improvement or "integration" of a stratum of blacks and Latinos into elite positions does not change the fundamentally white nature of the society or its ruling elites. Moreover, it does not change one of the most economically and socially egregious forms of racism—the locking of a majority of black, Latino, and other oppressed nationality people into the lowest forms of economic exploitation—where they comprise the overwhelming majority of low-

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wage workers, the unemployed, and those dependent on social services.

During the height of the civil rights movement, the “militants” offered a radical and structural critique of the system that blamed the institutional organization of society for why black people were forced onto welfare and into low-wage labor—and demanded compensatory affirmative action programs. Today, there has been a massive ideological backlash, in which a “blame-the-victim” worldview (with significant support among the black elites) has undermined the legitimacy of some of the structural claims of the urban poor of color.

The first building block of an anti-racist critique begins with a class analysis of racial discrimination. While not all the rich are white and not all the poor are black and Latino, in fact it goes far beyond “disproportionality” to understand that in urban centers, the vast majority of the low-wage working class is people of color and the vast majority of the black and Latino communities are working class. In Los Angeles, “transit dependent” is synonymous with blacks, Latinos, Asians, and low-income whites, though the overwhelming majority of the “transit dependent” are black and Latino. *The deterioration of urban public transportation is racially coded and must be addressed with an explicitly anti-racist perspective.*

Racism is reflected in the degrading nature of how government addresses the transportation needs of communities of color and the low-wage working class

The Strategy Center has been raising the slogan and the concept that “mass transportation is a human right.” This is an effort to create a revolution of rising expectations among immigrants, women, communities of color, and low-income bus riders to challenge the degraded way they are treated.

Long waits. If the low-wage working class has to commute one to two hours to work, it reflects a lack of respect for their time and for their lives. For women, waiting at a bus stop or walking long distances in the evening is frightening and vulnerable. Every bus and train connection must be no longer than 8 minutes during the day and evening and no longer than 15 minutes at any other time, including the middle of the night.

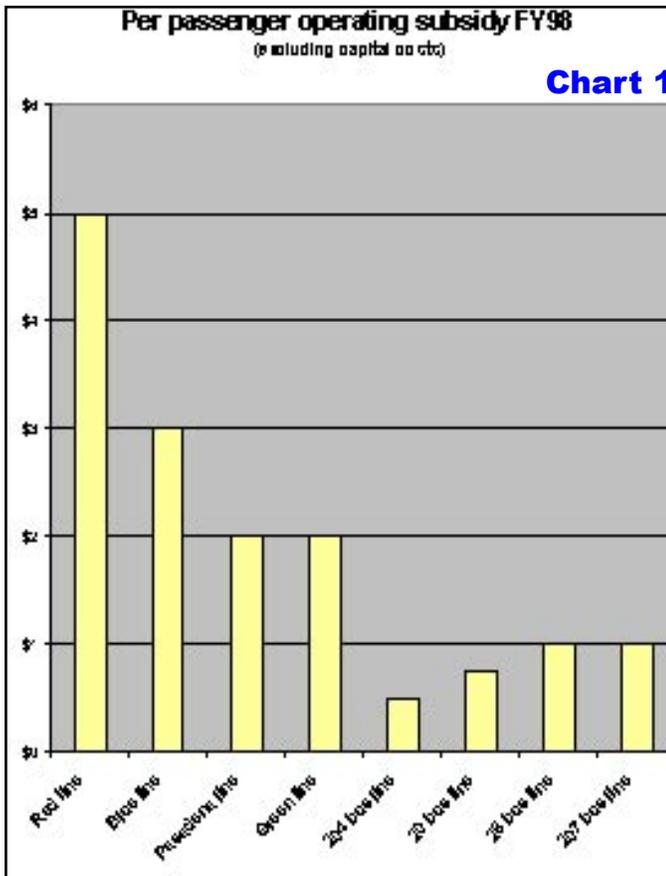
Overcrowding. Many working people spend all day on their feet and look forward to a ride home where they can get a seat. In Los Angeles, many buses have 43 people sitting (the maximum) and from 15 to as many as 40 people standing! This is exhausting and demeaning, leaving the low-wage, majority female, working class of color feeling discriminated against, devalued, and depressed.

Racial segregation. In Los Angeles, after the urban rebellion of 1965 in Watts (35 years ago!), the McCone Commission was brought in to investigate the underlying causes of the unrest. It identified many forms of racial discrimination and segregation, including

“The MARTA is central to the development of ‘separate but equal’ suburban bus systems in which white, suburban communities are permitted to have their own separate and segregated systems that link to MARTA one-way and fail to provide the same benefits to minorities in MARTA’s service district as those provided to the residents of the suburban bus systems.”

Title VI Challenge to MARTA by MATEC

the transportation system. It observed that for black people in Watts, it was virtually impossible for them to effectively move out of their communities, as public transportation routes kept them trapped in a tiny circle of economic and social isolation. In Los Angeles today, the multi-racial nature of the city is more accepted, even formerly lily white enclaves such as the San Fernando Valley have now had to accept, if grudgingly, the growing Latino and black populations. Still, the public transportation segregation remains, so that even when, for example, West Side wealthy people want low-wage black and Latina domestic workers to come to their homes, the bus commute from South L.A. is one to one-and-a-half hours each way.



Disproportionate subsidies based on race

Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act states, “No person in the United States shall on the grounds of race, color, or national origin, be excluded from participation in, or denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance.”

In Los Angeles, a material reflection of institutional racism is the profound differences in public subsidies provided to suburban and urban modes of transportation. Suburban train riders using Metrolink rail are subsidized at \$21 a ride. The Blue, Green and Red rail lines have per ride subsidies from \$2 to \$5 (excluding capital costs, which, if factored in, would raise the subsidies into the tens of dollars per ride). On the other hand, urban bus riders are subsidized between 33 cents and \$1 per ride. [see chart 1] This difference is reflected in the brand new trains with profoundly expensive construction costs, whose ridership is a higher percentage white, versus the older, massively overcrowded bus system whose ridership is overwhelmingly people of color. The struggle to create an equality of subsidy will be a major component of better mass transit and racial equality.

But for many residents of Koreatown, Pico Union, East Los Angeles, and South Central the new job markets in the San Fernando and San Gabriel Valleys, in Santa Monica to the West, or Orange County to the South, are not even accessible by public transportation. Moreover, as more and more employers are putting on “swing” and “graveyard” shifts, it is all the more difficult for residents of communities of color, including those forced onto “workfare,” to take those jobs—in that bus/train service is infrequent or often non-existent after 11 or 12 at night.

In Atlanta, the white suburban racist segregation patterns are more pronounced, and more intentional. The Title VI Challenge to MARTA by MATEC makes this clear. “The MARTA is central to the development of ‘separate but equal’ suburban bus systems in which white, suburban communities are permitted to have their own separate and segregated systems that link to MARTA one-way and fail to provide the same benefits to minorities in MARTA’s service district as those provided to the residents of the suburban bus systems.”²²

In both cities institutional transit racism is often reflected in decisions to raise bus and rail fares which profoundly impact low-income people of color. Furthermore, these fare increase that are often used to further subsidize rail construction projects that disproportionately advantage riderships that are predominantly or disproportionately white.

For example, “MARTA made the decision to raise its fares and thereby disparately impacted African Americans who make up 75% of its ridership, while committing \$464 million in construction costs and \$4 million a year in operating costs to two new train stations on the North line which will benefit predominantly white suburban communities.”²³ This was similar to Los Angeles where, in 1994, the MTA attempted to raise the one-way bus fare from \$1.10 to \$1.35 and eliminate the \$42 monthly bus/rail pass while at the same time they voted to invest \$59 million in bus-eligible funds to initiate the Pasadena Blue Line for a significantly white and suburban rail ridership.

These manifestations of transit racism are part of a broader system of class discrimination and

class privilege which undermines any truly viable and integrated regional transportation system. The systematic attacks on the urban poor of color, and in Atlanta, the black poor of color in particular, are not only the major source of social conflict in urban centers, *but also the site with greatest potential to improve urban quality of life for all residents.* For, if addressed, a whole series of other interrelated problems can also be taken on, such as the growing crises in the environment, housing, low-wage employment, urban sprawl, public health, and public education, among others.

The main force

Who will drive a multi-ethnic, multi-racial, multi-class movement and coalition for environmentally sound and truly multi-modal and integrated regional transportation in Atlanta, Los Angeles, and other urban centers? It must be the most transit dependent—those who use public transit the most, those who have no choice but to use public transportation or walk or use their wheelchairs, those who cannot afford a car, those who take the longest rides, those whose entire mobility and a great part of their quality of life is determined by public transportation—who must lead a broad coalition, beginning with their most immediate ridership needs but over time, evolving into a strategic planning approach to the entire urban system.

3) A new public health movement: the environmental justice fight against auto-based air pollution

The Strategy Center and Bus Riders Union have come to the broad issue of ecological and environmental justice from the perspective of world public health. Having organized on this issue for more than a decade now, with particular focus on low-income communities of color, we have concluded that the greatest interest in the environment, and the greatest passion to learn the health impacts of industrial and transportation policy is situated among those who are most impacted by air contaminants.

Through our own independent and extensive studies, and the help of outside environmental science advisors, we are convinced that the emissions from the

8 million cars in Los Angeles and nearly 2.5 million cars on the road in Atlanta are truly lethal—thus the title of our pathbreaking book, *L.A.'s Lethal Air*. We are also particularly concerned about the *cumulative effect* of auto-based emissions from “mobile sources” and industrial “stationary sources” on young people in particular who are subject to a lifetime of exposure and whose small bodies are more vulnerable to the high doses of air toxins.⁴ Moreover, the area that the public understands least about is the *synergistic effects* of industrial and auto emission chemicals in the air that, in combination, have an even worse impact than the mere sum of the individual properties of each toxin.

We have carried out extensive public education, especially among the most active BRU members, about the four major air pollutants that are generated by the internal combustion engine—public education that unfortunately, some of the more established environmental organizations have chosen not to emphasize.

Ozone: Created in the atmosphere when oxides of nitrogen combine with reactive organic gases in the presence of sunlight. These reactive organic gases are primarily generated by auto emissions, but industrial emissions as well. Once in the lungs, ozone generates a free radical, an oxygen atom, that irritates lung tissue—causing or exacerbating asthma, emphysema, respiratory disease and, over time, reduced lung capacity. Animal studies also indicate that ozone either causes or exacerbates cancers.

Carbon Monoxide: Everyone knows carbon monoxide as a colorless, odorless gas that comes out of the tailpipes of cars which, by blocking the delivery of oxygen to the blood, can kill you. But carbon monoxide in smaller doses causes dizziness, impairs central nervous system functioning, deprives the heart muscles of oxygen—leading to heart attacks, and is also a reproductive toxin.

Nitrogen Oxides: Toxic gases that give smog its yellow brown coloring. They are produced as a result of burning fuel under high temperatures or pressure, from stationary sources, such as auto refineries and chemical plants, and mobile sources, mainly motor vehicles. Nitrogen oxide decreases lung function and can reduce resistance to infection, influenza, pneumonia, and other illnesses. Once in the atmosphere, it reacts

to form ozone and particulate matter. It has also been shown, in animal studies, to increase the metastasis of pre-existing cancers, and accelerate the growth of cancer colonies in the lungs.

Particulate Matter (PM₁₀): Consists of solid and liquid particulate less than ten microns in diameter that are suspended in the air and invisible to the eye. Nitrates, sulfates and dust particles are major components of particulate matter and are created by fuel combustion, oil refineries, power plants, wear on break linings, and dust from paved roads—in short, all of the many components of the auto/oil/highway lobby.

You have to begin to build a mass transit movement with those who use mass transit, those who depend upon it. They are the ones who are most motivated, who will fight for better service, who will be more interested in clean fuels and public health—because their lives depend upon it.

Some of these tiny particles are themselves highly carcinogenic. Other particles, which derive from incomplete combustion from vehicles and industrial sources, are not in themselves toxic, but as they circulate in the air, certain poisons, such as polynuclear aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs) dioxins and furans, adhere to them. The particles facilitate the entry of the chemicals into the body where they are deposited or lodged in lung tissue—causing or facilitating the development of cancer.

Air Toxins: The public health debate about auto emissions in particular has been at a level that ranges between stupor and stupidity. Even the view of smog as annoying rather than lethal has been hard to combat—especially among white and middle class people who are not as subjected to the most toxic impacts, because they can afford to live and work safer distances from the major concentrations of industry

and freeways. For example, the National Centers for Disease Control have observed that childhood asthma and *fatalities* from childhood asthma have been on the rise. Yet most of the children who die from asthma are low-income and often children of color—often caught in a vice between industrial and auto emissions. Thus, the so-called “criteria pollutants” covered by the Clean Air Act are not classified as air toxins, but in fact, based on research documented in *L.A.’s Lethal Air*, they should be.⁵

Moreover, there are many other explicitly toxic chemicals that are directly produced by the internal combustion engine—such as benzene. Benzene has been proven to cause leukemia, a cancer of the blood in humans. Repeated low levels of exposure to benzene cause reduced red or white blood cell counts (aplastic anemia) while a sudden exposure to high levels can depress the central nervous system causing staggering, vomiting, sleeplessness and shallow, rapid pulse. Benzene, which is derived from crude oil, making up 1 to 2% of gasoline, also contributes to the formation of smog. More than 90% of the benzene in the air results from the use of gasoline in motor vehicles.

There are many other harmful and even lethal chemicals that are direct or indirect products of the auto/oil/rubber tire/highway industry. The dilemma of course is what we are going to do about it.

Public health and mass transportation—expanding mass transit first, then moving to take on the auto and highway industries

Any serious movement that prioritizes public health over corporate profit, especially with regard to air pollution and air toxics, must of necessity draw some very radical political and policy conclusions. As Barry Commoner, the noted environmental scientist, observed, the only effective way to radically reduce airborne toxins is to ban them before they are produced. With regard to the internal combustion engine and the auto industry, it would be best if there were the most radical restrictions on auto emissions per vehicle, combined with the most radical restrictions on auto use. The problem is *that there can be no effective social movement, no effective mass movement to radically reduce fossil fuel and automobile use until there is a*

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developed public transportation system. The power of the auto/highway lobby is legendary, but the problem goes deeper because the working class itself is hooked on the auto for both transportation and cultural reasons. The cultural attachment can be challenged if there is a public transportation system that can really meet people's transit needs as rapidly as the car.

We would like to believe it is just the white, middle class, suburban commuter who has a love affair with her or his car, but the cultural power of the auto penetrates all classes of society. The car culture has won the hearts and minds of many low-income people, including many blacks and Latinos. Given the centuries of housing segregation and discrimination, buying a new or fancy used car has been one of the few attainable symbols of status and upward mobility in communities of color.

Moreover, even if organizers can challenge the cultural power of the auto obsession, it is also difficult to challenge the corporate counter-attack against public health science. In the debate about air toxins, corporate "scientists" have become masters of the art of obfuscation and even outright lying. Most criteria pollutants and air toxins take years or even decades of exposure to generate cancers and other diseases. That is agreed upon. But that is all the more reason to restrict their production in the present. Anyone really trying to organize on this subject has found that, for example, standing in front of government regulatory agencies such as the Air Quality Management District of Southern California (AQMD), the impacted communities prefer to talk in humanist and common sense public health language—"your chemicals are killing me," "my daughter cannot breathe from the asthma," or "if you know a chemical is carcinogenic, why do you produce it in the first place?"

By contrast, the offending industries come back with a battery of scientists and lawyers arguing that in fact there is *multi-causality* meaning that "we don't know why your kid has cancer or leukemia, it could be from our chemical plant, it could be from another oil refinery, it could be from other known carcinogens in the water or air." Then they move to debates about actual *exposure levels*, that is, "We acknowledge that our company emitted known carcinogens into the air, or our entire fleet of autos emitted known pollutants and chemicals, but how

do we know that your daughter was directly exposed to our auto emissions?" Then they move to issues of *dosage*—reflected in parts per million and even cancers per million! They may acknowledge that studies indicate that benzene, for example, is known to cause leukemia, but then they argue that the actual emissions of benzene from their car or cars is not sufficient to cause leukemia (similar to the arguments by cigarette companies claiming their products are not addictive or deadly).

By the time low-income, or any income, Latino, black, Asian, and white families have spent a day at the EPA or AQMD, or comparable agencies in Georgia there is a sense of exhaustion and futility. It is as if *they* were on trial, with the burden of proof on them as the system asserts that known toxic pollutants and known carcinogens are innocent until proven guilty. Over time, however, we have found that public health education is a powerful organizing tool, and that low-income residents come to enjoy the science, enjoy challenging corporate science, and learn that while of course a social movement must be rooted in passion and direct experience, a little anatomy, physiology, toxicology, and epidemiology goes along way to strengthen a social movement. The victory of the Bus Riders Union in forcing the MTA to keep it clean fuel standard and forcing the MTA to drop any plans to purchase diesel buse—reported later in this discussion—is a positive example of grassroots science defeating corporate science in the arena of public policy and public debate.

4) Building a strong black/Latino alliance: Bilingualism and outreach to the Latino community

In Los Angeles, while we are working on a multi-racial model that impacts all Angelenos, we see the black/Latino alliance as the central component to our work, an alliance that in no way excludes other people of color, or whites, but whose success is the key to the full gamut of multi-racial work. In light of this, we are convinced that in Atlanta, where the black community and the civil rights movement has provided leadership to the entire society and people of all races seeking social justice, early attention to the small but long-term significant Latino immigrant population is, in our view, a key component to a successful regional campaign.

Demographics

The growing Latino immigrant population in the U.S. is a major phenomenon, growing by geometric proportions. The *New York Times* just reported that the Latino population in the United States increased from 22.4 million in 1990 to 34.7 million in the 2000 Census—a gain of 60% in just one decade!⁶

Los Angeles

In Los Angeles, when Tom Bradley was first elected mayor in 1970, this was the beginning of the end for the overtly racist, white majority rule in L.A. that reached its peak with the cowboy culture of Mayor Sam Yorty. When Bradley entered office, L.A. county was 72% white, 11% black, 15% Latino and 3% Asian/Pacific Islander. When the Strategy Center began its work in 1989, the county was already majority people of color, with the white population at 41%, the black population at 11%, the Latino population at 36%, and the Asian/Pacific Islander population at 9%.

After the 2000 census, L.A. Latinos have replaced whites as the largest single ethnic/national group, with whites the single largest group in decline. L.A. county is now officially 44% Latino, 31% white, 10% black, and 15% Asian/Pacific Islander, while we believe that an accurate accounting would put the Latino proportion at 50%.

Atlanta

While Atlanta is politically and demographically a black majority city, the rapidly expanding Latino immigrant population needs to be given serious and respectful attention. The *New York Times* observed,

While Hispanics are still concentrated in the Southwest, California, Florida, and New York, new immigrants from Mexico and Central America have moved to states like North Carolina, Georgia, and Iowa, where the Hispanic population was almost non-existent a decade ago. Hispanics have become a mainstay in many low-paying labor intensive industries. In Atlanta and Memphis, they dominate the construction and landscaping trades. (emphasis added)⁷

The U.S. Census bureau said metro Atlanta's Latino population increased 103% from 1990-1998, from about 62,500 to approximately 132,500. However, Georgia State University demographers⁸ and Angel Torres of the Clark Atlanta Environmental Justice Resource Center⁹ dispute those figures as reflecting systematic undercounting, and estimate that 325,000 Latinos live in the Metro area. If the larger number is correct, (and the present U.S. Census data has partially shown such a rapid rise in Latino population because of past undercounting) then already, in the Atlanta metro population of 3.3 million, the Latino population is about 10%! While most Latinos presently live in Gwinnett county—outside of the two-county MARTA service area (Fulton and DeKalb)—any regional transit plan will require the recruitment and involvement of the growing immigrant and Latino population.

The tactics of building a multi-racial movement that reaches out to Latinos

The Strategy Center and Bus Riders Union have spent almost a decade involving Latinos in all aspects of leadership in the organization. Obviously in a city that was annexed from Mexico by the U.S. and is now 44% Latino, this work assumes enormous strategic importance. The Strategy Center and Bus Riders Union have many complex observations about organizing among Latinos relevant to our work with Clark Atlanta University, MATEC, and other groups in Atlanta, but a few elementary observations here can help focus future conversations:

An Environmental Justice Strategy

- Latinos come to the U.S. as immigrants, often undocumented. The defense of immigrant rights, and the free passage of all immigrants, is central to any humane and progressive politics on public transportation, as with any other issue.
 - The system's efforts to portray the growing Latino population in every major city and the country as a threat to other ethnic groups, such as the *New York Times* headline, "Census Figures Show Hispanics Pulling Even with Blacks," work to generate black/Latino competition and conflict. Efforts by political elites, unfortunately including conservative political elites in the black and Latino communities, to pit Latinos against blacks will lead to the worst form of racial conflict and prevent any effective multi-racial movement for social advancement of either group, let alone the society as a whole. While there is no automatic black/Latino alliance, it is urgently needed in every major city.
 - The best leaders in the black community are very pro-Latino, and the best leaders in the Latino community are very pro-black (and pro-Asian as well.) In the work of the Bus Riders Union, for example, Barbara Lott-Holland, a black woman, and Cirilo Juarez, a gay Latino man, are co-chairs of the BRU general membership meeting. Black BRU leaders Kikanza Ramsey and Sean McDougal, shown in the film *Bus Riders Union*, speak Spanish and organize bilingually on the buses not only reaches out to Latinos, but shocks Latinos and blacks alike in a positive way, working against stereotypes. Virtually all the multi-racial staff at the Strategy Center, including the white organizers, are either fluent or conversational in Spanish. There is no staff member at the Center who can not take a phone message in Spanish and make sure that a more effective bilingual staff person or member will return *la llamada lo mas pronto posible*.
 - The recent complaint put forward to the Department of Transportation by Clark Atlanta and MATEC begins to outline challenges on Title VI violations that include a failure by MARTA to provide all notices and meetings in both Spanish and English. This is a very good tactical intervention. Equality of languages and full language rights are essential components of any effective movement and it shows the Latino community that The Civil Rights Act and Title VI is not just for black people.
 - It should be obvious that all publications should be in Spanish and English. At the BRU, our general membership meetings involve simultaneous translation using UN style translation headsets. We still have a long way to go for full equality of languages, but we have been able to retain dozens of monolingual Spanish speaking members for years, many of whom are key leaders of the organization.
 - Since Latinos and other immigrants are often situated in the most low-wage jobs, *the overwhelming majority of new Latino immigrants are transit dependent*. When Eric Mann and Barbara Lott-Holland rode the Buford Highway bus round trip from the MARTA subway (about 45 minutes each way) they had many talks with Latino monolingual Spanish speaking passengers. Many of them worked at the restaurants along the highway as what they called *corteros*, kitchen workers chopping vegetables and cooking. When we asked them how long they had been in the country many workers said, "Two months" or "Less than a year." The point is that this immigration is growing and the ability to reach out and welcome new immigrants offers some exciting possibilities.
- In conclusion, the black community in the U.S. has a long history of struggle and leadership in progressive causes. Many of the most progressive whites, Asians, Latinos/Chicanos and women of all races in the U.S. trace their formative consciousness to the work of the black-led civil rights movement. Today, such as in the fight over voting rights in Florida, it was still black civil rights leaders who played a crucial role in fighting for the voting rights of blacks, Haitians, Latinos, Jews, and the elderly. Similarly, the new Latino immigrants often come to the U.S. with a long history of social justice struggle within their own countries and with experiences in and observations about social movements. It would be a grave misassessment to assume that the growing Latino immigrant population does not care about issues such as public health, air quality, transit mobility and minority rights, nor should we assume a narrow self-interested focus on their part. In the work of the Strategy Center and Bus Riders Union we have begun to build an important breakthrough in black/Latino dynamics, and from that base, reached out to those who we call "anti-racist whites" and people of all races. We hope that our experience can help the encouraging beginnings in Atlanta in this arena.

II. Demand Development: A Program for a First- Class, Clean Fuel, Mass Transportation System

1) A clean fuel, bus-centered mass transportation system

The Atlanta project, in order to serve all the objectives of the campaign, must focus on a bus-centered system. The debate in Atlanta about “bus versus rail” is not merely a local question—it is becoming the centerpiece of a national debate about the most cost-effective, efficient, and socially equitable way to use limited public transportation funds to construct a truly democratic and viable mass transit system. The Labor/Community Strategy Center did not begin our work with such an emphasis on clean fuel buses and, in most instances, an opposition to new rail construction. Yet after 8 years of direct practice and study of transit policy we are convinced that in virtually every urban center in the U.S. bus is the way to go—and rail is a transportation disaster for the vast majority. It is our view that while there must be a multi-modal system in every city, especially when rail has already been built, *future rail projects in virtually all instances must be stopped or at least subordinated to massive expansion of the bus system.*

The central premises of the argument are outlined here:

* All effective public transportation systems, in order to compete with the convenience of the auto, must provide its same flexibility with virtually door-to-door service. Thus, any system must begin with community jitneys and shuttles and local bus service close to people’s homes. Any major bus or rail stop, in order to be effective, must be within 4 to 5 blocks of a residential area.

* Rapid and frequent service. Waits and transfers of 8 minutes or less during peak period and no more than 15 minutes at any period of the day or night.

* Significant limited stop and express service with carefully planned north/south and east/west connections and transfers. The quantity of service is critical and, of necessity, there must be sufficient operating funds.

* Bus/rail interfaces must be prioritized. In Atlanta, many late night MARTA trains leave passengers in the streets waiting for bus service, some of which has already been terminated for the night. In Los Angeles, the MTA often cancels bus service next to rail lines in order to artificially inflate rail ridership, forcing riders to take a bus, get on a train, and then get back on a bus instead of having rapid bus transfers and less interrupted routes.

* The Development of Rapid Bus. In Los Angeles, the MTA has initiated, with pressure from the BRU, a “Rapid Bus” program that places new low-floor CNG buses on major surface streets—such as Wilshire Boulevard and Ventura Boulevard, with far greater distances between stops, in this case 1 to 1 ¼ miles between stops—the same distance as the average rail stop. This has dramatically reduced travel times—in some instances by 20% or more—and is an excellent breakthrough—showing that there is nothing inherently slow about bus service. Moreover, the new bus routes will have “signal synchronization” so that traffic lights can be electrically timed based on a signal sent by an oncoming bus to allow rapid passage.

2) A Moratorium on Rail Projects until the bus system is given priority and brought into full capacity

In discussions with some activists from Atlanta, the focus on “racial equity” has been limited to opposing the north/south (suburbs to the airport) predominantly white passenger rail lines in favor of the east/west rail extensions which are understood to be of greater benefit to the black communities. But we worry that this emphasis on “equality” of rail projects will not generate equality in transportation mobility for communities of color, let alone the urgently needed *expansion* of service.

Rail is far too expensive at this point in history.

Rail construction costs are prohibitive—up to \$200 million a mile for above ground “light rail,” and \$350 million a mile for subway construction. In a few selected instances, certain subway and light rail projects can be justified in high density urban centers where there is sufficient ridership density to warrant it. In Los Angeles, virtually none of the rail lines can justify their prohibitive construction costs, whereas in Atlanta, the most justifiable subway lines have already been built. In fact, for any future planned rail line there is almost always a far less expensive bus alternative that can generate far more ridership, convenience and comparable commute speed for far fewer dollars.

LA's top 6 bus lines carry more daily riders than all LA's rail lines combined—for 70 times less money!

Changing suburban and urban residential and commercial configurations are better served by high speed express buses rather than rail.

Transportation planner Ryan Snyder calls rail “a bus that can’t turn.”¹⁰ In the early 1990s, for example, the MTA built the \$1 billion Green Line above ground light rail, running east/west in the Southern area of Los Angeles county from Hawthorne to El Segundo, to serve the booming aerospace industry. But by the time it was completed in 1995, the aerospace bust had reduced the workforce in the area by 50%, and MTA officials defensively explained, “How were we to know the bottom would fall out of the defense industry?” The answer is obvious. In these days of tremendous capital mobility, economic volatility, and demographic flux, any fixed rail project can become obsolete before it is even constructed. Furthermore, what the MTA did not disclose was that originally it had proposed to build an express bus way for 25% of the cost—a more appropriate transit technology. As modern population centers emerge or disappear, bus routes can be rapidly changed accordingly. Unfortunately, the busway plan was killed by the far more powerful rail lobby.

Rail costs crowd out alternative modes of transportation.

Manhattan island’s subway system, completed by 1907, is idealized. Indeed, given the uniquely narrow and densely populated geography of the island, rail works very well. The majority of riders can get off at most north south stops and walk the remainder of their route east or west to their destination. In sprawling, decentralized, and multi-centered urban areas such as Atlanta and Los Angeles, (or even, given the costs, in Manhattan today) the Manhattan model is not possible. Including the need for diagonal routes as well, viable urban/suburban transportation must involve a complex and coordinated grid of service—jitneys, local service, limited stop service, express stop service, and freeway service—all of which would be expensive, but in all, far less expensive than even a few rail lines. Let us give a few very concrete cost/benefit statistics from Los Angeles.

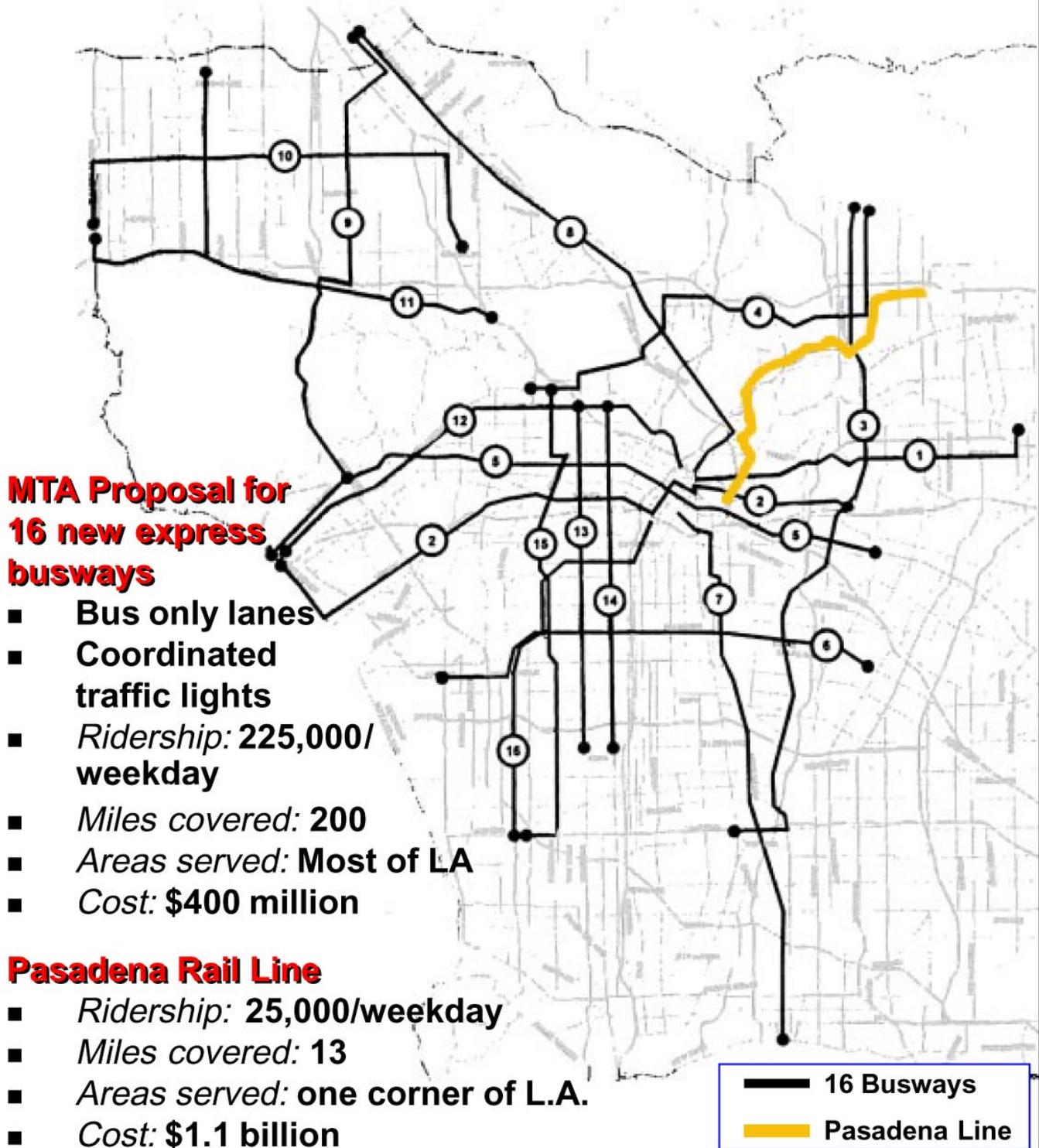
Los Angeles has built three new rail lines—the Red, Green and Blue lines. The Green and Blue each cost approximately \$1 billion in construction costs,¹¹ while the Red subway line cost upwards of \$5 billion.¹² Combined daily boardings for all rail in 2000 averaged 180,000.¹³ By contrast, the top six MTA bus lines carry more than 30,000 daily boardings *each* and 220,000 combined! Capital costs for each of these bus lines was between \$10 and \$20 million dollars, or a total of \$90 million vs. a total capital expenditure of \$7 billion for these rail lines. 70 times more money was spent on rail to carry fewer daily riders! [see chart 2]

The lesson is lost on rail boosters. For example, despite sustained opposition by the Bus Riders Union, the Pasadena extension of the Blue Rail Line went into construction in 2000 and by the time it is completed in 2004 it will cost an estimated \$1 billion in capital costs and achieve only 30,000 daily boardings¹⁴ (even this number is on the high side and assumes the MTA will cancel parallel bus routes to artificially boost the rail ridership as it did with its other rail projects). [see chart 3]

If the MTA purchased 500 brand new compressed natural gas *expansion* buses, (the number that we estimate is needed to meet the most fundamental system-wide improvements) the capital cost as a one-time expense would be \$170 million, and the operating cost (estimated at \$17 million a year for each 100 buses) would be \$85 million per year.

Chart 3

Pasadena Rail or 16 Express Busways for less than half the cost?



Thus, LA's massive bus overcrowding and need for new express bus routes could be solved by a first class bus expansion plan for \$170 million in capital and \$850 million in operating costs for an entire decade, for a total of slightly more than \$1 billion. In other words, \$1 billion reduces overcrowding and expands service for 400,000 existing bus riders in the entire county for an entire decade, not to mention it would attract tens of thousands of new bus riders. Instead, the Pasadena Blue Line extension will use \$1 billion to carry 30,000 or fewer daily boardings (less than 10,000 actual bus riders—many of whom will be forced onto the rail line as the MTA cancels adjoining bus service to artificially boost rail ridership). Furthermore, operating costs for the Pasadena extension will add up to hundreds of millions of dollars over a decade.

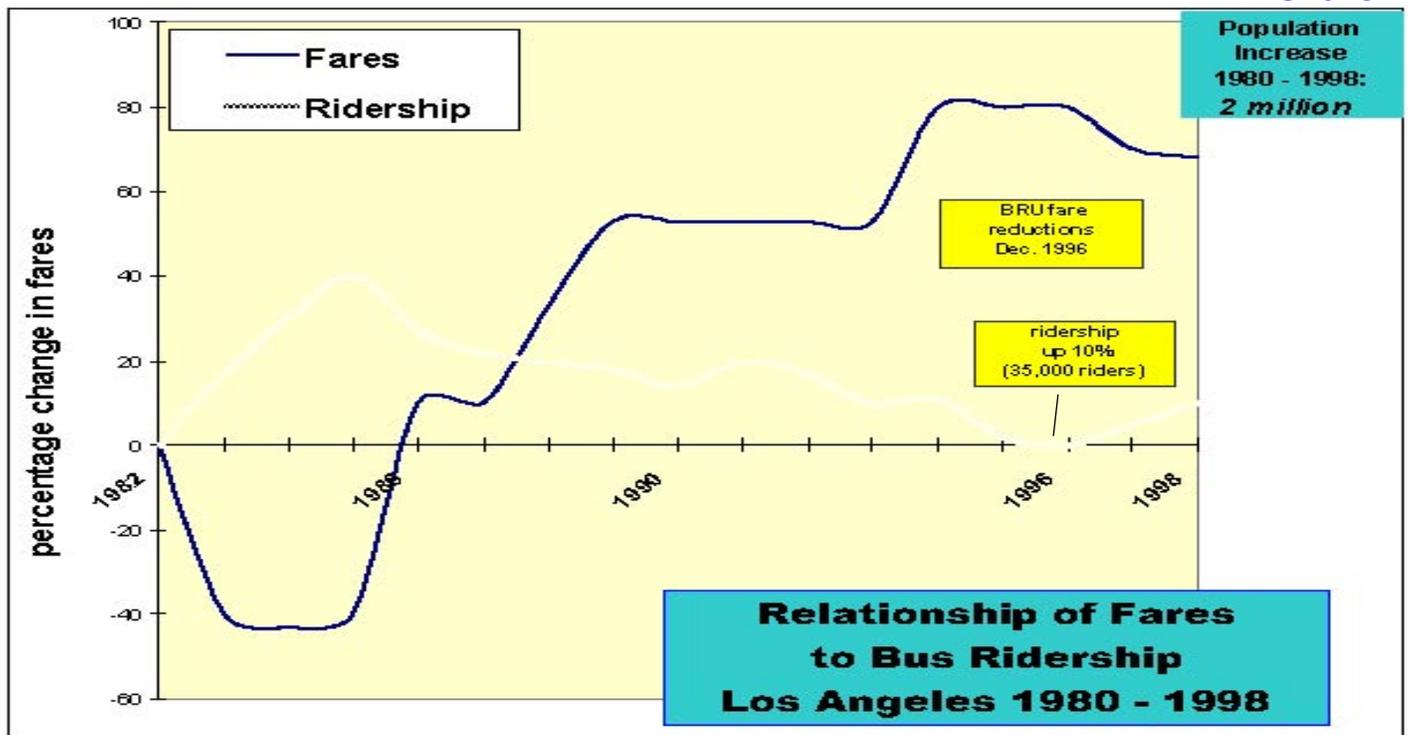
3) Driving Highway Funds to Public Transportation

We are aware that there are enormous amounts of highway transit dollars inappropriately taken away from public transportation, and many of these highway dollars are in essence subsidies for the auto industry.

But the reason we in Los Angeles have not focused our work on that pot of money is because, in fact, the MTA is already funded at a level appropriate to build a first-class bus system. Plus it has a guaranteed revenue stream because of two ½ cent sales tax measures passed by the L.A. voters. These propositions, A and C, generate more than \$800 million a year in revenues.

Many white rail advocates, most of whom have no sympathy for or involvement with the 8 year struggle of the Bus Riders Union, continue to lobby and argue for rail even after the evidence is in that rail lines generate far fewer riders for far more dollars. Even in the face of a federal consent decree, they argue, "Why go after the rail dollars when there are so many highway dollars?" It should be obvious that in the broader scheme of things, social movements *should* go after not just highway dollars, but 90% or more of the Pentagon budget as well. But in reality most agencies such as the MTA do not have extensive highway funds. A separate state agency, CALTRANS, controls those funds, whereas the bus/rail fight takes place inside one agency—the MTA—where it has been the rail system's raiding of bus funds that has created the line in the sand for BRU organizing.

Chart 4



An Environmental Justice Strategy

The long-run target is the auto system and highway funds. But if rail boondoggles continue to kill the chance for expanded bus mass transit in the short term, *there is no chance of ever going after highway funds.*

The main points of our argument are outlined here:

1) Freeways and the auto create a massive public health crisis, sprawl, and chronic underfunding of public mass transit.

2) Freeways and the auto have become so irreplaceable that there is no way of cutting down on sprawl, generating urban densification, and reducing auto use without first building a world class mass transit system.

3) While of course most cities already have a “multi-modal” system of trains and buses, the *future* of mass transit is a rapid network of local jitneys, express buses on surface streets, long distance rapid buses, and freeway bus service, all using clean fuel buses. These technologies are much more flexible than rail and far cheaper because they use the existing

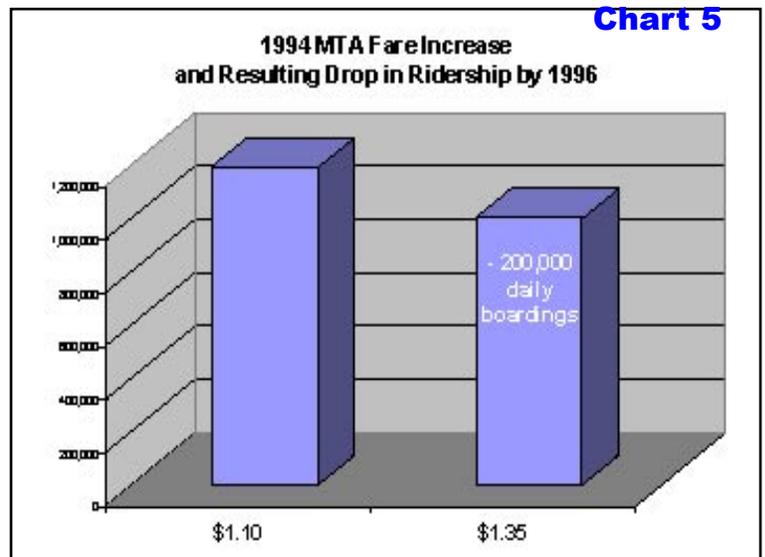
“If rail boondoggles continue to kill the chance for expanded bus mass transit in the short term, there is no chance of ever going after highway funds.”

“concrete track system”—roads and highways—but do so much more efficiently than autos (see below). Obviously existing rail lines will be integrated into the entire transit system with rapid transfers to and from buses.

4) Expanded bus routes and service combined with reduced fares can generate dramatically increased mass transit use and the beginning of the reduction in auto use and improvements in air quality and public health. These achievements can also be implemented in far fewer years than building rail lines.

5) The prioritization of lanes for buses, more than any “road taxes,” will in fact discourage auto use

Chart 5



and encourage bus/train use in that public transportation must be lower cost and similar in flexibility and commute speed (and eventually faster than auto as gridlock worsens) in order to compete with the auto.

6) Efforts to restrict the auto can take place through challenging highway funds and moving them to public transit agencies, but also through prioritizing public transit use and punishing auto use (including ruling certain areas of the city out of bounds for any auto traffic) so that over time public transit can effectively compete with, and yes, crowd out, the auto.

7) Public health campaigns of the transit dependent against the auto and to challenge the cultural and political power of the auto, can best be initiated if there is a true public transit alternative. This is why we have first targeted rail boondoggles that are killing any chance of building a true public transit alternative, though we are clear that the ultimate public health and transit equity struggles must fight the auto system.

Increased public transit demand—expanding low-cost, efficient public transportation initially to inconvenience and later to restrict auto use

The public health benefits of reducing auto use and the fight for the rights of the transit dependent require, for the first time, that government must advantage bus mass transit—increasingly at the expense of the auto system. For example:

- Freeway bus service with bus-designated lanes and major secondary roads with prioritized bus lanes. One lane on a freeway can carry a maximum of about 2,000 auto passengers per hour (at that point every additional auto lowers the average speed and the per hour number drops quickly). A car pool lane can double the maximum. However, there are real-world examples in Ottawa, Canada and Curitiba, Brazil where bus-only lanes carry 20,000 people per hour!, with a theoretical lane maximum well above that.¹⁵ In other words, we can take one of the four or five lanes on a typical L.A. freeway, turn it into a bus-only lane used by a stream of sleek clean-fuel buses, and *that lane alone can carry twice as many passengers as all the other auto lanes combined!* Rather than the bleak zero-sum picture that auto proponents paint of bus-only lanes making roads even more congested, bus-only lanes can dramatically increase the maximum per hour passenger limits that many freeways have already begun to reach during most daylight hours. A similar principal works for large surface streets where lanes can be used to either give priority or exclusivity to buses. A fully developed and coordinated system of freeway and secondary express bus-lanes could potentially carry millions of new riders who would leave their autos at home to join the transit dependent. [See accompanying document Bus Riders Union New Service Plan, Final Submission, for

One bus-only freeway lane can carry twice as many passengers per hour as all the other auto lanes combined!

a lengthy discussion of and proposal for expanding express bus service to major secondary roads and eventually all 500+ miles of L.A. freeways.]

- Public Subsidies for Low fares. The long-term fight against the single-passenger auto system starts with the premise that all modes of transit must and do receive public subsidies—the auto system above all. The fight is not over whether the buses or auto should be subsidized, but how to substantially divert auto/highway subsidies into mass transit subsidies for lower fares and bus system expansion.

Transit demand among low-income people is very elastic. In other words, relatively small reductions in bus fares lead to relatively large expansions of bus ridership. For example, since the Consent Decree won a 15% reduction in the price of the monthly bus pass to \$42 and creation of the \$11 weekly bus pass in L.A., bus ridership has expanded more than 10% in less than three years. [see charts 4 & 5] That translates to more than 100,000 additional bus trips made each day. But more important than the substantial monetary victory for low-income bus riders is the political and ideological victory that sets the precedent that fares can be lowered and that public monies must subsidize lower fares.

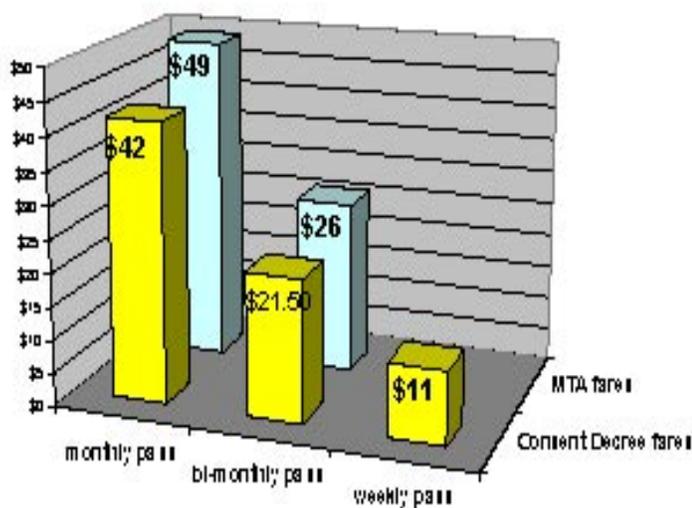
Other important areas where government can prioritize bus-centered mass transit are

- Expanded new service routes with rapid transfers (more on this below), and
- All night or very late night service, with rapid headways (times between buses arriving).

Class biased proposals to restrict auto use that need to be rejected

There are some environmentalists who are deeply concerned, correctly, about the dangerous impacts of auto based emissions, but are also aware that at present there is no national mandate to regulate the auto companies. As a result they propose economic measures to deter auto use—such as highway tolls during rush hour or efforts to prevent free employee parking. In fact, these proposals will not reduce auto use, but instead will put a further burden on low-income workers who are simultaneously the most transit dependent but also auto dependent. For example, if a worker making \$8 an hour needs to get to work on time in Los Angeles he or she can save 1/2 hour or more each way to work (an hour or more a day) by taking a car, given the poor connections in L.A. public transportation. Many low-income workers have one gas guzzling car in the family, and cobble together a transit plan by a combination of bus/rail passes and the single, often uninsured car (when it is not in the shop). Any efforts to “tax” auto riders will in fact simply mean taxing the poor. Workers will *not* reduce auto use. If they have a car they will use it, and pay any toll or tax. They will not be forced into the unreliable public transportation system, because the financial penalty of unreliable mass transit in both L.A. and Atlanta is far greater than any proposed

Chart 6
BRU Bus Pass Victories
Dec. 1996



auto-use fees—the penalty is losing one’s job. For example, during the one month bus strike in Los Angeles, in which 5,000 bus drivers were forced out on strike by the MTA’s aggressive demands for a \$23 million take-away package, many stranded bus riders spent \$10 to \$40 a day getting back and forth to work in taxis for jobs that only paid \$40 - \$75 a day—because the alternative was losing their job. Similarly, when Mexico City, literally choking in smog, tried to restrict auto use by mandating that each licensed car could only be driven four days a week, the wealthy simply bought more cars.

The focus on “driver taxes” will only perpetuate the image of the environmental movement as white, privileged, and class biased. Right now, corporate polluters threaten workers by telling them that environmental regulations will hurt industry and cause lay-offs. In Los Angeles, some of the most reactionary pieces of legislation attacking the power of environmental agencies such as the South Coast Air Quality Management District have been carried by black and Latino elected officials, receiving large contributions from the Western States Petroleum Association. These bought-and-sold Democrats whose actions will contribute to the illnesses and deaths of low-income minority children justify their treachery by demagogically arguing, “Black and Latino communities need jobs. We don’t have the luxury like the middle class whites to focus on the environment, eating is an environmental

...e too!” When in turn, white environmentalists talk about taking away labor union’s negotiated free parking at county facilities, or developing a road tax during the rush hour, they are hostile to the interests of low-income working people.

Most low-income working people have a great deal of difficulty affording their cars—the gas and repairs are staggering. They would love to get out of their cars and use a first-class transit system, especially if the service was excellent and the fares are low. Moving funds from the highway lobby to public transportation—great! Moving funds from boondoggle rail projects to a transit system that comes every 8 minutes—great! Using public funds to subsidize monthly bus passes to \$20 a month—great! Running swing shift and graveyard bus and train service at frequent intervals, especially in areas of late night employment—great! If those measures were taken, the transit dependent would voluntarily increase mass transit use, and would see the environmental movement as their friend and ally—not their class biased adversary.

4) “Fifty Cent Fare, \$20 Passes, Mass Transportation Belongs to the Masses”

In 1993, the Los Angeles MTA tried to get rid of the \$42 monthly pass—claiming “budget shortfalls” which are in reality funds earmarked for rail projects that raid the bus system. Through a complicated process, the federal courts mandated that the MTA maintain the monthly bus pass, but allowed the MTA to raise it to \$60. Then through negotiations with the BRU it was reduced to \$49 and two years later the BRU Consent Decree won a further reduction to \$42. It was shocking for L.A. bus riders to see their monthly bus pass almost eliminated, and then over a period of years, see the price actually drop 15%. Reducing bus fares is a critical demand in Atlanta.

Also, the BRU was able to win a \$21 biweekly pass and an \$11 weekly pass, allowing low-income bus riders to purchase mass transit at an affordable level—since many working class people cannot accumulate \$42 on the first of the month when so many other bills are due. [see chart 6]

The idea of free or low-fare transportation.

The Bus Riders Union has been focusing on expanded service more than lower fares, but has also been adamant that the MTA cannot raise its fare—even \$1 a month. Under the Consent Decree, the MTA was legally allowed to raise the monthly bus pass in 1999, three years after the signing of the Consent Decree, but has not been able to do so because the BRU has built such a strong movement to protect the \$42 monthly pass. Now we are moving in a serious way to get the mayoral candidates to pledge to lower the monthly pass—some are discussing a \$20 a month bus pass and a 50 cent one way fare. This breakthrough in the mayor’s race achieves two objectives:

1. It makes it virtually impossible for the MTA to *raise* fares. Too often, groups bargain with the devil as to “how much” to raise fares. In our case by demanding that the MTA lower its fares it makes it even more difficult for MTA board members to propose a fare increase.

2. It directly confronts the alternate uses of public subsidies and our strategy of prioritizing the needs of the urban poor. For example, in Seattle we are told that there is some free bus transportation in the urban center—to attract commuters to the downtown business district. In Los Angeles the MTA offers free transfers onto the bus system to suburban Metrolink commuters who are coming into the city, even though the train ride is already subsidized by more than \$23 a ride.¹⁶ In Los Angeles there are many downtown restaurants that have a free shuttle to the theater district—Mark Taper Forum, Ahmanson Theater, Music Center—so that the affluent can drive to the restaurant, get valet parking, eat a pricey meal, get free shuttle service back and forth to the theater, and then drive home. The point is that in fact there are many subsidies for the wealthy, but the idea of very low fares or free bus service for the urban working class is dismissed as utopian.

In fact, every municipal operator can decide its own policy on what is called “fare box recovery.” In Los Angeles, the MTA argues the amount must be 35%. This is why, given the massive overcrowding, that the \$1.35 fare and the \$42 pass only requires a 33 cent to \$1 per ride subsidy.

Similarly in Atlanta, MARTA could make a decision that it wants to expand bus/train ridership by lowering fares dramatically and asking local, state, and

federal agencies to pick up the tab. This of course will require an organizing plan and a long-term strategy, but it can be won.

Even with the relatively modest \$42 a month bus pass in Los Angeles (as opposed to the new \$52.50 Atlanta bus pass), if a family has 2 adults (\$84 a month) and 3 public school students at \$32 each for a monthly pass, the total transportation cost is \$180 a month or 30 hours of wages from one of the adults (averaging \$6 an hour after taxes). Affordable public transportation is all the more important in that it is one of the quickest and cheapest ways to boost mass transit ridership and therefore must be a centerpiece of any strategy to reduce sprawl and increase densification of the urban core.

5) Enforceable standards for bus and rail overcrowding

The Bus Riders Union has literally stumbled into an understanding of how to document and enforce overcrowding standards. Ironically, this may become the centerpiece of our programmatic contribution to urban transportation planning. Throughout the Consent Decree negotiations with the MTA, the BRU focused on a concrete number of buses to replace an aging fleet, to reduce overcrowding, and to expand service to new jobs, hospitals, and educational centers. But the MTA board refused to negotiate a firm number of buses, because obviously signing a Consent Decree with a legal commitment to purchase 500 replacement buses and 500 expansion buses would have made it clear to the board that they would have to stop all rail projects—a decision they were unwilling to make. Instead, the MTA offered us a proposal to lower overcrowding on the buses to specified “load factor” ceilings—that is, to guarantee that by December 1997 no more than 15 people would be standing on average (during any 20-minute peak period—a 1.35 load factor or 135% of capacity). By July 2000, no more than 11 people would be standing on average (1.25 load factor or 125% of capacity) and by July 2002 the number would fall to 8 (1.20 load factor or 120% of capacity).

On some level this seems arcane and academic, but for our members, the issue of overcrowding on the buses was a heartfelt one—and they damn well know the difference between 43 people sitting and 43 people

Join the BRU Help Fight Overcrowding

Over the next months you'll see BRU members in yellow T-shirts counting rush-hour overcrowding. The numbers will be extremely important in forcing the MTA to buy hundreds of new buses to reduce overcrowding. But the MTA is doing everything it can to avoid buying new buses. We need your help to improve your bus system!

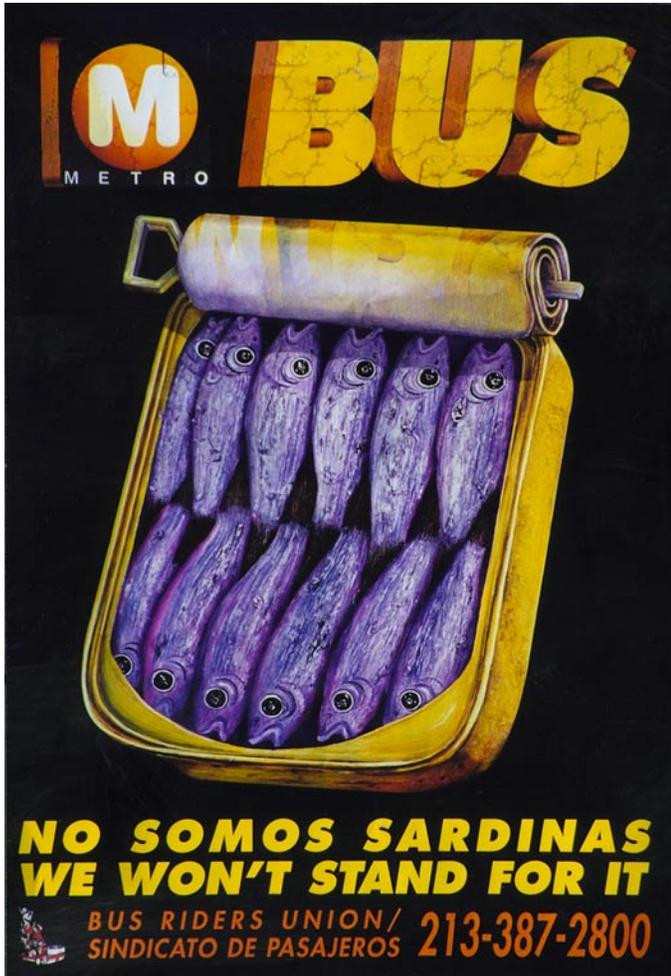


Yes! I want to be a member of the Bus Riders Union. Enclosed are my membership dues of \$_____. (\$10 - \$50 year)
Payment arrangements can be made. No one refused for inability to pay. Please print clearly.

Name _____ Address _____

Telephone (_____) _____ Mail to: Bus Riders Union 3780 Wilshire Blvd. L.A., CA 90010

(213) 387-2800



standing (actual conditions on many MTA buses) and 43 people sitting and 8 standing. In the first instance you'll never get a seat (and often get passed up by the full bus), in the second you'll have a seat in a few minutes.

In the case of Los Angeles, the decision by the Bus Riders Union to agree to the "load factor" ceilings instead of a concrete number of buses was a calculated gamble—we knew we could not get the MTA to agree to a specific number of buses, and yet, assured by the mediator that the standard would be measured fairly and accurately, we felt that by December 31, 1997 the MTA would, in fact, have to buy far more buses than it was anticipating. One reason for this was that the MTA had never really worried about its counting of overcrowding. Before the Consent Decree the MTA had a standard of no more than 1.45 on each bus—43 people sitting and approximately 21 people standing. But in fact that standard was never enforced. The MTA was so busy building rail lines that it didn't really care how many people were standing. The only clear bus policy was that it would never use funds to replace its aging fleet (replacement buses) nor increase the total size of its fleet (expansion buses.) On the other hand, our own members told us that they thought the actual load factor on most MTA buses was well over 1.5 and they told us that the MTA, if really monitored by the courts, would have to buy far more buses than it was anticipating.

Weighing our concern that taking the MTA to court, even in front of a fair judge who did believe in the 14th amendment to the Constitution, would be very time consuming, and would definitely lead to a lengthy series of appeals, we decided to sign the Consent Decree with the MTA.

Then we had a dilemma. How did you popularize a "load factor ceiling" to bus riders, and to a broader public? Also, how did we monitor the MTA's own counting, given that our own members understood the MTA would have a profound incentive to undercount and cheat us out of buses.

Lessons from the BRU campaign: The fight against bus overcrowding in Atlanta and other U.S. cities

First, you have to have a movement, and that involves organizing on the buses. In the BRU, for example, we only developed our understanding of the profound nature of overcrowding and how it was understood as



An Environmental Justice Strategy

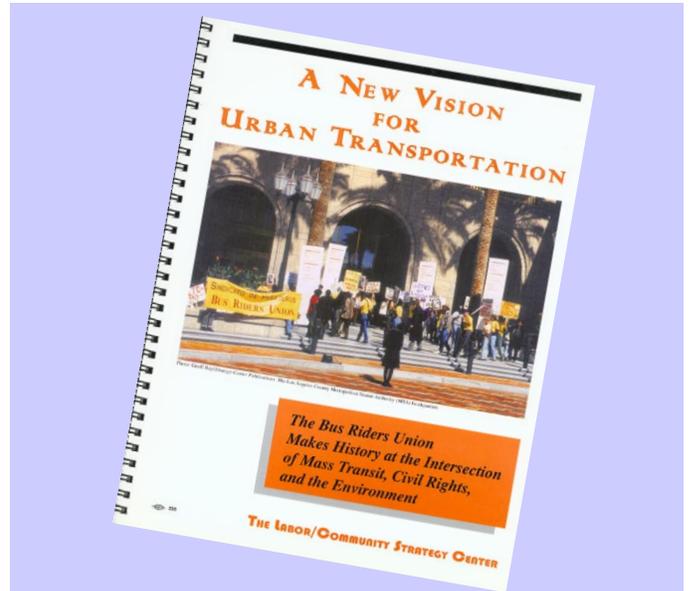
such a heartfelt abuse of racism, by direct contact with thousands of bus riders.

Second, you have to train organizers. Once the MTA signed the Consent Decree, the BRU put at least 5 full-time staff on the buses, and designed informative leaflets in English and Spanish to explain to the bus riders the December 31, 1997 load factor deadline and get them counting overcrowding. [see chart 7] But this also involved a more complex explanation, because the MTA and BRU Consent Decree specified that the MTA could not go over the 1.35 load factor on average for any 20 minute period on any line. That meant, for example, that it was “legally” permissible for one bus to have 20 people standing and another bus to have 10 people standing, because they average 15. That made it difficult to explain to people that their experience was true, but was only part of the whole—that is, one overcrowded bus on a line did not force the MTA to buy more buses—it took a complete count of every bus on every overcrowded line to establish the pattern.

Third, you have to train first-class technical staff. In Los Angeles, the MTA had a paid staff of “point checkers,” people who stood at a fixed point, in this case a bus stop in the heart of the busiest part of the line, and counted those seated and those standing on each bus as it stopped. These people were dedicated and honest and were willing to train BRU members to use the same procedures to count overcrowding. Fortunately for us, Ted Robertson, one of our organizers, agreed to head up the overcrowding point check group, and the BRU trained low-income bus riders and college students to be point checkers—to make our own assessment of the problem and to generate our own data to submit to the courts. To our surprise, the federal courts accepted the BRU point check data as equal to that of the MTA. The excellent technical analysis of the BRU members has given them both legal standing and a great sense of political self-worth.

Fourth, the BRU has established the first legally mandated standard for overcrowding in the country and turned it into a very popular organizing issue. How overcrowded are the trains and buses in Atlanta? Does anyone care? How can groups like MATEC organize on that issue and make it popular?

In New York, for example, the idea of subways jammed full of people wall to wall at rush hour is



A New Vision of Urban Transportation:

The Bus Riders Union's Mass Transit for the Masses Campaign
by Eric Mann

The Strategy Center and its Bus Riders Union are fighting for the future of mass transit in the most auto-dependent, air-polluted city in the U.S. based on a Four Pillars strategy: 1) Ridership needs, 2) Air quality, public health, and energy efficiency; 3) Job development and economic conversion; 4) Community revitalization. **New Vision** also analyzes the “The Labor/Community Strategy Center v. the Metropolitan Transportation Authority,” a civil rights suit trying to dismantle a racist, separate but unequal transit system in L.A.

The document's argument is outlined in the chapter titles:

1. The Role of the Oppressed as Policy Makers
2. How the Los Angeles MTA Ran Public Transportation Into the Ground: The Corporatization of Government and the Destruction of L.A.'s Transportation System
3. Racial Discrimination at the Core of Urban Policy: L.A.'s Separate and Unequal Mass Transportation System
4. The Billions for Buses Plan: For Once, Mass Transportation for the Masses
5. Strategy and Tactics in the Struggle for Public Transportation

commonplace. But in reality, for many suburban commuters making the short ride from Penn Station to Wall St., for example, the overcrowding is bearable because many of the subway rides are 5 to 10 minutes. By contrast, for students living in the South Bronx looking for work or education in downtown Manhattan, or the many people working in Manhattan who cannot afford to live there, and must commute to Brooklyn, Bronx, or Queens, and then take connecting buses, the subway/bus ride can be 45 minutes or more each way.

In Los Angeles, many of the commutes on the bus are from 45 minutes to 1½ hours. Thus, the issue of an overcrowding standard is a very hot one. How long do people ride in Atlanta? When Barbara Lott-Holland and Eric Mann spoke with riders on the Buford Highway bus, many said that their daily commute was as long as one hour or more each way. Obviously, the development of a rapid bus network is a critical component of the problem, but so is providing enough service to guarantee that after a brief time, every passenger can get a seat. We think the organizers in Atlanta should pay great attention to the issue of overcrowding and develop their own tactical plan for fighting it—including asking MARTA to develop an enforceable standard.

Fifth, the BRU carried out a “No Seat, No Fare” Campaign. In 1998, after the MTA was found in violation of the Consent Decree’s overcrowding standard, but still refused to buy the buses, the BRU initiated a “No Seat, No Fare” “No Asiento, No Pago” campaign. This caught the public’s attention because the entire concept that you would only pay a bus fare if you had a seat was unheard of before we popularized it—and yet it resonated with people. “Don’t Pay for Racism” and “We Won’t Stand for It” also attracted a lot of support. We commissioned Robbie Conal, a highly respected “guerrilla artist,” who designed a beautiful full color poster, built around an image of a can of sardines, with the slogan, “No Somos Sardinas.” Five thousand posters mysteriously appeared on bus stops, the sides of office buildings, and billboards throughout the city. It was truly a revolution of rising expectations—lower bus fares, weekly bus passes, and now the idea that you would get a seat or not pay. More than 30,000 bus riders refused to pay their fare at the height of the campaign and it helped to pressure the federal courts to rule in our favor. The public support

for civil disobedience was surprisingly strong and the MTA drivers, after a period of initial hesitation or even opposition, came to strongly support the campaign.

The film *Bus Riders Union* lays out in living color a wide variety of tactics. Obviously the organizers in Atlanta will have to make their own tactical adjustments. But the core of our work—training organizers and putting them on the buses and trains, recruiting rank and file leadership from the transit riders themselves—is irreplaceable. It works and is the only way to build a real movement. The Bus Riders Union goes beyond being an “advocacy group,” that is, a group of activists who speak “on behalf” of the transit dependent. The BRU has built a multi-racial, multilingual movement *of* the transit dependent.

6) CNG Sí—Diesel No!: The transit dependent lead the fight for clean-fuels

On May 26, 2000, the Bus Riders Union won an amazing victory, one of truly significant proportions and impact—forcing the Los Angeles MTA to purchase 370 clean fuel Compressed Natural Gas (CNG) buses, at a cost of \$118 million. Right up to the eleventh hour, the MTA board had been poised to purchase 370 DIESEL buses that would have been a public health disaster for the city and a significant setback for our movement.¹⁷

To put this victory in a national context, 370 buses is almost half of the entire bus fleet of Atlanta. And it is another major step towards one of our key policy objectives—retiring all diesel buses and replacing them with clean fuel CNG, and later hydrogen fuel cell, electric, and other even cleaner fuel technologies. [see chart 8]

Winning the Battle of Ideas

The Bus Riders Union went into the battle with three main ideas.

First, this was a life and death battle. Diesel is a known carcinogen and a virulent one, it also causes asthma and other respiratory diseases. We convinced public school teachers, high school kids, and community groups that the MTA board was threatening to kill them. We broke through the too-often sterile discourse of mainstream environmentalism—this was environmentalism with your life on the line.

An Environmental Justice Strategy

Second, the BRU, the acknowledged leader of the transit dependent in the region, refused to accept *any* diesel buses. We did not entertain the Sophie's choice offered by some MTA board members "The Bus Riders Union has always complained there are not enough buses, well now they could get more buses if we purchase the cheaper clean diesel buses." We refused to choose between mobility and public health. "Diesel is death on wheels." "No killer buses." "Zero tolerance for carcinogens." We wore face masks, gas masks, we shocked the MTA with the vociferousness of our membership on this issue.

Third, the battle was put in the context of "stop environmental racism." Professor Laura Pulido of the USC Department of Geography, and a long-time member of the Strategy Center, chastised the board for exposing the most vulnerable communities, the most vulnerable children, to spatially concentrated

toxins from mobile and stationary sources—the toxic interplay of emissions from factories, freeways, and diesel buses. The Strategy Center does not throw terms like environmental racism around lightly. We document its causes, its motivations, and its impacts. The National Centers for Disease Control have long warned that asthma deaths among children are significantly on the rise, and figures indicate that black and Latino children are 300% or more likely than white children to die of asthma.¹⁸

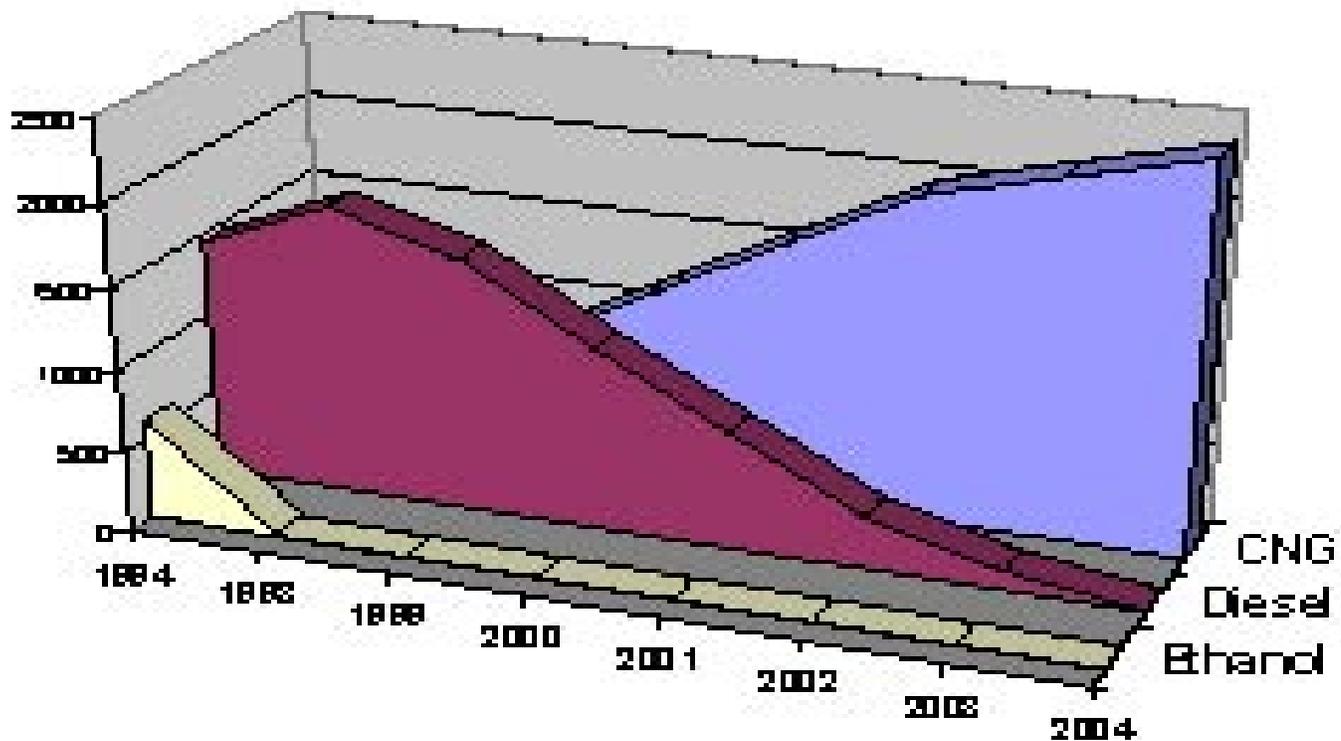
Working Effectively With Other Environmental Groups

The Bus Riders Union reached out to Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) and Coalition for Clean Air. We held a very successful press conference the day before the MTA board meeting, that led to the *Los Angeles Times* article the day of the vote, "Activists Threaten to Sue MTA Over Diesel Bus Plan."¹⁹

BRU Clean Fuel Victory:

Chart 8

If the BRU can ensure full implementation of the Oct. 1998 victory of 800 Additional CNG buses, MTA diesel buses will be phased out by 2004



Eric Mann of the Strategy Center had drafted a memo to NRDC the week before, proposing that the Strategy Center and BRU sue the MTA over violations of the civil rights Consent Decree, the 14th amendment and the 1964 Civil Rights Act, the Clean Air Act, and the California Environmental Quality Act. Both Joel Reynolds and Gail Ruderman Feuer of NRDC were very interested in representing the LCSC and BRU, and attorneys for the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund also were very interested in pursuing such a case if the MTA board voted to buy diesel buses. At the press conference the BRU and NRDC made it clear to the press that such a lawsuit was very probable, and we meant it. We feel that also played a role in the MTA board vote the following day. As Don Knabe, a conservative MTA board member observed, referring to the many legal victories the BRU has already won, “Let’s be honest. Our track record in the courts isn’t very good.”

7) Challenging transit segregation: The BRU initiates a plan for new bus routes

During the mediation process established by the Consent Decree, the BRU initially focused on expanding the bus system to reduce overcrowding. For the purchase of both replacement and expansion buses for existing bus routes. But in a critical meeting with the mediator, Donald Bliss, BRU leader Della Bonner began focusing on an equally egregious abuse—the virtual absence of MTA service to many critical areas of the city, especially in low-income communities of color.

For example, she explained that there was no bus service to Disneyland from South Central and Watts where she lived. Even though Disneyland was Southeast of Watts she and her family had to go North into the downtown business district and then take a bus that would backtrack south. She also told a heart rending story of how her son had been diagnosed with leukemia and was hospitalized, and yet the bus service to the county hospital left the passengers to walk two blocks and then climb a high hill that was exhausting.

As a result of her testimony, the mediator got the MTA to agree to a pilot project of 50 *expansion* buses, that could be organized into new routes developed through

cooperation between the MTA and BRU. After two years, this pilot project would be expanded to a countywide plan for new service to hospitals, educational centers, and employment centers.

Again, the BRU went on the offensive.

First, putting organizers on the bus. Again we began by asking members where they wanted to go, and where the buses didn’t go.

Second, working in constructive engagement with the MTA. In our work with MTA staff we found many decent people who wanted to dramatically expand bus service and had excellent ideas about how to do it, but were suppressed within the agency because the MTA only wanted to expand rail projects and did not want any proposals to expand the bus system. They actually had studies of excellent bus routes that had strong ridership projections, some of which were implemented in the pilot project.

Third, grassroots technical expertise. Just as Ted Robertson had known nothing about “load factor computations” before he got the assignment, Kikanza Ramsey had no background as a “transit planner.” But she had a nimble mind, a clear set of politics, and a problem solvers attitude. Working with mass transit consultants Ryan Snyder and Tom Rubin and BRU members Woodrow Coleman and Norma Henry, Kikanza headed up a one year study of the bus system and developed an extensive plan for a comprehensive expansion of the bus system in Los Angeles [*included with this strategy paper*]. The 70 page five-year plan, which is available from the Strategy Center, is a model of extensive regional planning from the bottom up—skills that can be learned by MATEC members working in close connection to the transit dependent. Moreover, after the BRU and the MTA sent competing plans for a ruling to the Special Master Donald Bliss, the Special Master put forth a preliminary ruling that indicated that while the BRU plan was perhaps more expansive than the Consent Decree required, the MTA plan was far too minimal, and in essence he suggested that the BRU plan be the basis for negotiation.²⁰

We think that people in Atlanta have a great opportunity to work with professional transportation planners but while evolving their own expertise so that grassroots low-income people of color can be directly involved in the planning process.

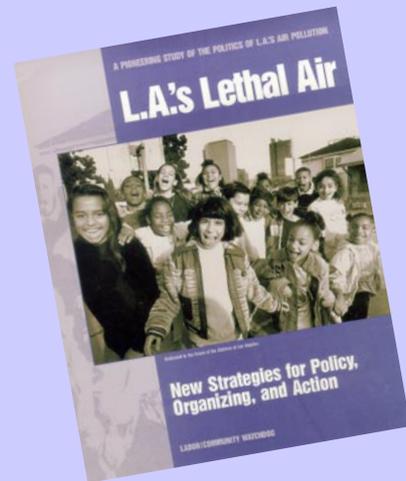
8) **Fighting racial segregation in Atlanta: Oppose the proposed Macon/Atlanta commuter rail; force outlying counties to integrate their service with MARTA**

None of the Bus Riders Union demands have generated more controversy than “A complete moratorium on rail projects until all bus projects are completed.” The system is always good about telling people that “hard choices must be made” when they cut off welfare benefits or when they cut urgent social service programs. But when it comes to rail projects, even after having signed a Consent Decree in which it pledged to make bus “the priority,” the MTA still argues “we can have it all.” Of course “we can have it all” is code for “we will build these damn rail projects and if there is anything else left over we will expand the bus system.” By contrast “a moratorium on rail projects” is an explicit statement whose implications are quite clear: “We will expand the bus system, hire the drivers, build the Compressed Natural Gas filling stations, reduce the overcrowding to no more than 8 people on a bus, expand service to hospitals, schools, community colleges, employment centers, and guarantee the operating funds to maintain them, and *then and only then*, if there is anything left over we can reconsider building these ridiculous boondoggle rail projects.” Thus, stopping projects and forcing the re-allocation of funds is the hardest work for any social movement, because the projects are often backed by powerful political forces, whereas the expansion of service for the urban working class and urban communities of color often have no powerful, corporate, or even Democratic party advocates—thus the critical nature of urban social movements.

We do not have tactical advice on how to stop a Macon/Atlanta light rail project or how to force outlying counties to integrate with the MARTA system, but based on the Los Angeles experience here are a few ideas.

Macon/Atlanta

All social movements begin with a radical critique that the public can clearly understand. It does not have to agree with it—you have no idea how many



L.A.'s Lethal Air/El Aire Mortal de LA

New Strategies for Policy, Organizing, and Action

by *Eric Mann*

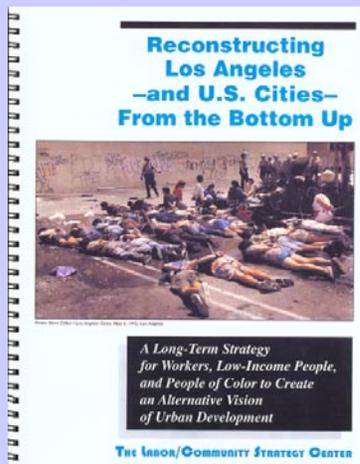
with the *Labor/Community Watchdog Organizing Committee*

“*L.A.’s Lethal Air* is a breath of fresh air; it translates cold environmental statistics into a story about people. The chapter on *Class, Race, and Gender: The Unspoken Categories of Public Health* is a major breakthrough in environmental analysis. *L.A.’s Lethal Air*, makes a unique, well-documented contribution to the environmental movement by placing responsibility for the devastating public health impacts of air pollution clearly at the feet of corporate America—and generating positive grassroots proposals for industrial and transportation policy.”

Barry Commoner, *Nation Magazine*

L.A.’s Lethal Air is used as a text in college courses at more than 20 universities including U.C.L.A., Harvard, Columbia, York University, as well as by activists from Greenpeace, the Canadian Auto Workers, and the Southwest Organizing Project.

El Aire Mortal de Los Angeles, Spanish Language Edition, perfect for bilingual education classes, and environmentalists in Spanish speaking communities and nations.



Reconstructing Los Angeles—and U.S. Cities—From the Bottom Up

by Eric Mann

with Cynthia Hamilton, Anthony Thigpenn, Dean Toji, Laura Pulido, Geoff Ray, Robin Cannon, Lian Hurst Mann

“*Reconstructing L.A. from the Bottom Up*, calls for massive public investment and social welfare spending, direct income transfers to the poor, mass transportation, a moratorium on police funding, sustainable, environmentally sound development and a challenge to corporate perogatives and power—as a way of rebuilding the country from the bottom up.”

Henry Weinstein, *Los Angeles Times*

Reconstructing offers alternatives to the disaster of market-based urban policy.

- * government as a unionized, high wage employer
- * a “jobs or income now” campaign to challenge structural unemployment of capitalism
- * government responsibility for income maintenance, housing, and health care
- * an environmentally-driven model of sustainable development
- * an explicit rejection of the racialization and criminalization of poverty
- * support for union organizing rights including a ban on permanent replacement workers
- * opposition to the use of the INS to attack immigrant workers

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people have asked us, “Why do you always have to talk so much about racism?”—but they do have to be directly confronted with the ideas.

Macon/Atlanta is a disgusting proposition for several reasons. First, as we understand it, Macon, Georgia is a racist suburban community that has been underspending on its own bus system, and in fact is practicing the same level of racial segregation that Los Angeles was implementing in 1984-1993, that is, expanding commuter rail while allowing urban transportation to disintegrate. It should be obvious that this is a major Title VI violation, in that government is literally establishing a separate and unequal transportation system rewarding affluent and more white commuters and disadvantaging the urban working class in Macon.

Second, the idea of light rail connecting urban centers at a cost of \$200 million a mile in construction is obscene. Even if there were a legitimate need for rapid transit between the two hubs, a series of express buses with designated highway lanes would simultaneously provide rapid service while saving funds for urgently needed urban transportation.

Third, in terms of fighting sprawl, the struggle for densification of urban cores must prioritize inner-urban travel. It is just not true that travel within Atlanta is so easy. If the goal is to encourage people to move closer to urban hubs, to reduce auto use, and to increase the use of public transportation, then those who live in the urban core must be prioritized.

The segregation of the outlying counties is covered in the Title VI complaint ²¹ submitted by MATEC in greater detail

The transportation segregation of the counties outside Fulton and Dekalb and the efforts by predominantly white suburban counties to disassociate from MARTA is a major issue. In essence the white suburbanites want to “enter” downtown Atlanta because it is a major business hub, but they do not want to allow low-income blacks to travel on public transit to reach suburban jobs, and eventually perhaps purchase apartments in predominantly white suburbs. Again, in terms of sprawl, it makes sense that people should live near their work. For those black people who work in

Atlanta they should simultaneously have the right to work in any county of their choice, and also live in predominantly black areas if they so choose—that is, we have been told by many black residents of Atlanta that they have little desire to live in any outlying counties out of fear for their physical and psychological safety. Still, they should have the right to seek work and live anywhere they want.

For example, in Los Angeles, the San Fernando Valley was long known as a white flight reactionary suburb, part of Los Angeles County, and much of it part of the City of Los Angeles, but always an alien in our midst. The “Valley” led the fight against school integration and the bussing of school children. But in the past 15 years the growing industrial base in the Valley has led to the migration of a substantial Latino and black population, and now towns like Arleta, Van Nuys, Pacoima and San Fernando have large “minority” populations and have elected Latinos to the state legislature.

It is not inconsistent to demand that the outlying white counties pay taxes and fees to MARTA for an integrated transit system, and that MARTA become the hub of a regional transit system. The demand for equal access between the white suburbs and black Atlanta and an integrated public transportation system is essential. The Title VI complaint already drafted creates a solid foundation for such a political and legal campaign.

Extending existing MARTA rail lines into express bus lines that prevent rail construction boondoggles

The joke in Atlanta is that the two new recently constructed north stations—North Springs and Sandy Springs—are so close to each other that you can see one from the other—a major investment of funds for no legitimate transportation objective. Again, the idea of building north/south suburbs-to-the-airport rail lines is a massive waste of money. In Los Angeles, the MTA, under strong pressure from the Bus Riders Union, has initiated a Rapid Bus program that operates on surface streets with traffic signal priority technology and has stops about 1 to 1 1/4 miles apart—the same distance as rail stops. This program has been very successful and has cut down

travel time by as much as 50%. When the Blue Line rail project was first proposed from downtown Long Beach to downtown Los Angeles, Alan Pegg, the head of the L.A. Rapid Transit District, (RTD), the MTA’s predecessor, testified that for a fraction of the funds he could develop a complex grid of buses—express buses, freeway buses and local jitneys—to supplement the existing bus system to create a state of the art bus way from Long Beach to downtown L.A. that would carry the same number of projected Blue Line passengers and as fast.²²

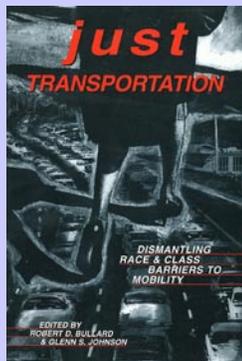
Similarly, we urge activists in Atlanta to consider developing specific transit plans to extend each existing railway by express buses, so that the north/south and east/west grids can be accelerated. But again, picture greater Metropolitan Atlanta as a massive area of 1800 square miles (the 20-county orbit defined by the U.S. Census Bureau)—with a north/south axis of 65 miles and an east/west of 110 miles (including Cherokee, Forsyth and Coweta counties).²³ What of all the people who do not live on an east/west rail corridor, or who live blocks or even miles from a railway station? What of all the infinite number of diagonal trips to parts of the city and counties not served by rail stops? The two answers are “car” or “bus” and for reasons outlined above, we want to get people out of their cars and into public transportation.

By contrast, rail projects actually generate more auto use for two interrelated reasons.

1) First, they eat up funds for buses that are the only viable centerpiece of an urban mass transit system.

2) They encourage suburban commuters to “park and ride” and encourage low-income working class people sick of the rail/bus system to buy a car.

There is no question that the Bus Riders Union did not begin our work with such a clear analysis of urban transportation as much as with a civil rights/environmental justice /public health perspective. But as we began to study, of necessity, urban and transportation policy, we found that the vast majority of both progressive and libertarian transportation experts opposed rail construction as inherently unsound in increasingly dispersed urban/suburban megacities in which there is not sufficient density to justify massive rail spending and



Just Transportation: Dismantling Race & Class Barriers to Mobility

edited by Robert D. Bullard & Glenn Johnson

For millions of urban North Americans, transportation barriers create profound obstacles to job opportunities and quality of life. Moreover, such barriers work systematically against the poor and people of color, constituting a hidden form of institutionalized racism.

From Harlem to Los Angeles and cities in-between, *JUST TRANSPORTATION* reveals the distribution of transportation benefits to the wealthy and educated to be disproportionately high compared to people of color and those at the lower end of the socioeconomic spectrum. Essays by a wide range of environmental and transportation activists, lawyers, and scholars trace the historical roots of transportation struggles in U.S. civil rights history.

Includes chapters *Just Transportation*, by Robert Bullard and Glenn Johnson, *Confronting Transit Racism in Los Angeles*, by Eric Mann, and *Race and the Politics of Transportation in Atlanta*, by Sidney Davis.

Robert D. Bullard is Professor of Sociology & Director of the Environmental Justice Resource Center at Clark Atlanta University. His most recent books include *Dumping in Dixie: Race, Class and Environmental Quality* (Westview, 1994), & *Unequal Protection: Environmental Justice & Communities of Color* (Sierra Club Books, 1994).

Glenn S. Johnson is an Assistant Professor of Sociology and Research Associate in the Environmental Justice Resource Center at Clark Atlanta University.

208 pages. References. Bibliography.
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in which consistently changing transportation patterns require the most flexible transit technologies to rapidly change transportation routes. It is flexible buses, not “fixed” rail that must be the centerpiece of a regional transportation hub.

9) Urban planning from the bottom up: New participatory structures for inner city communities of color

When the Bus Riders Union was initiated in 1993, the entire class of bus riders were despised, marginalized, and oppressed by the Los Angeles MTA. There was no organized voice for the 400,000 daily bus riders. For the MTA their monthly meetings involved squabbles among board members about which contractor and which political ally would get a contract, and the “audience” was composed of competing groups of suits demanding cost overruns, fawning and fighting for favor. The BRU began by regularly attending each monthly meeting and testifying on behalf of bus riders—about conditions on the bus, about lateness and overcrowding, about conflicts between riders and drivers, about the fare structure—all to the deaf ears of a contemptuous and haughty MTA board.

The idea of a union for bus riders, however, attracted the attention and captured the imagination of the bus riders themselves. “Imagine having our own organization to represent us, why didn’t I think of that?” Over time the BRU with its yellow t-shirts, its growing if still small membership, and its monthly persistence, became a recognized force in the politics of the city. We made presentations to unions, churches, and community groups, reaching out to the elderly, the disabled, and every Latino, black, Asian, women’s and low-income organization we could find.

In 1994 when we approached NAACP-LDF for legal representation, the Strategy Center and Bus Riders Union were recognized as grassroots organizations representing the entire class of bus riders—and were subsequently legally established as both named plaintiffs and class representatives in the class action lawsuit against the MTA.

Through the negotiations with the MTA, after we won the temporary restraining order in 1994²⁴, the BRU was able to win a major component of the Consent Decree, the creation of the Joint Working Group (JWG) in which four members of the BRU and four high ranking MTA staff meet regularly to negotiate the provisions of the Consent Decree.²⁵ Out of the work of the JWG has come all of the main presentations to the federal courts on behalf of the bus riders, and it has given great moral authority to the BRU to be able to report to our weekly Planning Committee and monthly general membership meetings on the progress of our work.

Atlanta organizers need to discuss and debate appropriate forms of organization to directly involve the transit dependent in building a new movement

In the earliest stages of most work—including that of the BRU—groups begin by functioning as “advocacy groups,” in other words, groups that speak for, rather than involving, those directly impacted by transit racism, transit segregation, and the entire mass transit system. The future success of this work, however, will hinge on building an actual movement of MARTA subway and bus riders.

This direct involvement and leadership of transit riders is particularly important if groups in Atlanta want to have more than nominal participation in any Title VI lawsuits. This is particularly important in the arena of demand development and legal settlements. Every time the BRU went into negotiations with the MTA they asked us, “Why do you think you know what ‘our’ bus riders think?” But over years they no longer asked us that question. In fact, former MTA CEO Joe Drew told Eric Mann, “I have to give you people credit, the bus riders look to you, not to the MTA, to represent them. We’ve lost the confidence of our own riders.”

But this is particularly important in negotiations with MARTA, GRTA, DOT, and FTA, and later in any legal challenges. How will organizers in Atlanta know what to demand? If compromises and trade-offs are required, who will have the legitimacy to speak for the transit riders? And if the work extends into an actual Title VI court case, any class action settlement reached between advocacy groups in Atlanta and MARTA or GRTA or DOT must be subjected to a “fairness hearing”

NATIONAL SCHOOL for STRATEGIC ORGANIZING

The National School for Strategic Organizing is a project of the Labor/Community Strategy Center, a multiracial, anticorporate think tank/act tank, based in Los Angeles. The School is rooted in the Strategy Center’s long-term organizing campaigns that demand comprehensive, structural, and increasingly international solutions to the problems of urban poverty, racism, environmental degradation, and the escalating attacks on workers, women, people of color, and immigrants.

The Strategy Center’s emphasis is on theory-driven practice. We train “long distance runners” who will commit years and hopefully a lifetime to highly professional and effective organizing work. All organizers-in-training are assigned to at least one of center’s ongoing grassroots organizing campaigns.

Organizers with prior experience in multiracial contexts are strongly encouraged to apply. The National School accepts classes of up to 10 students. During the six-month program, organizers-in-training receive monthly stipends. Out-of-town trainees receive housing in the neighborhood of the Strategy Center’s mid-Wilshire office, located at the crossroads of many working class communities of color—Pico Union, Koreatown, Hollywood, and South Central.

For further information on applications, deadlines, and all aspects of the school please contact Eric Mann.

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in which the attorneys and the organizational plaintiffs can be challenged as to whether any settlement really represents the interests of the class. At that point, we hope there is a transit riders union in place with a mass membership and regular general meetings so that the legal work is the extension of a widely recognized social movement, not a substitute for it.

Conclusion

In this work we have focused on the lessons from the work in Los Angeles with obvious reference to the work in Atlanta. Representatives of the Strategy Center and Bus Riders Union, Eric Mann, Norma Henry, Barbara Lott-Holland, and Kikanza Ramsey have made four different visits to Atlanta, and we have benefited from a visit to Los Angeles by a delegation of community leaders and activists from Atlanta. We have focused our study and this report on broad strategic elements of social policy—after years of study and conversations with civil rights, community, labor union, and environmental justice scholars and activists in Atlanta. We realize that people in Atlanta must ultimately make their own decisions to guide their own work. Still, the work in Los Angeles has achieved significant scope and impact over more than 8 years, and we have tried to be as clear and direct about the lessons from L.A., that, after considerable study of the Atlanta situation, we do believe are directly applicable to the work in Atlanta.

In reality, we are all part of the same society, we live in two megacities, and the ruling class and corporate leaders of Los Angeles and Atlanta do not really believe their situations are very different—they compete for power and influence but learn from each other to advance their careers and profit-driven objectives. We hope our friends in Atlanta see the work of the Bus Riders Union as a great opportunity—a solid base of social practice, rooted in low-income communities of color, that has won enormous victories and can help inspire and influence struggles throughout the U.S.

Candidates Hahn and Becerra: “MTA, Drop the Appeal and Buy 350 Buses”



City Attorney James Hahn “The MTA needs to drop the appeal in the Ninth Circuit right now. We have to stop spending out transit dollars to fight the people who are using our system and immediately purchase 350 new clean natural gas buses and expand our routes. As Mayor, I’ll make sure that at least one of the appointees I appoint to the MTA Board be someone that uses the bus everyday.”



Congressman Xavier Becerra “I want to thank the Bus Riders Union not just for today, but for all the years of struggle in trying to impress upon the MTA what its responsibilities are. The MTA agreed to a consent decree. It’s time to implement that consent decree on time and on budget. And you have to put the buses on the road, before you start talking about any other programs.”



Mari Aguirre “Many Latinos believe that the 1964 Civil Rights Act was only for African Americans. That’s not true. The Consent Decree is based on the Civil Rights Act and we can use it to stop the overcrowding and 3rd class bus system that hurts not only Latinos but all people of color.”



Eric Mann “During Black History Month we saw moving films about the Montgomery bus boycott. But let’s understand that we had to bring the very Civil Rights Act that was envisioned against the states of Mississippi and Alabama against the Los Angeles MTA. That’s why we won in federal court and that’s why the MTA signed the Consent Decree with us.”



Kikanza Ramsey “It’s a breath of fresh air to see two mayoral candidates do the right thing and stand behind civil rights, call for the removal of the appeal to the Ninth Circuit, buy the 350 buses for expansion.”

All-day strategy meeting to build the BRU’s *Fight Transit Racism & Environmental Justice* Campaigns

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FRIDAY, MAY 26, 2000

In Reversal, MTA Votes to Buy Clean Fuel Buses

TRANSIT—Facing overwhelming public opposition, board rejects staff recommendation to purchase 370 diesel vehicles.

By: JEFFREY L. RABIN
TIMES STAFF WRITER

Confronted with an unyielding wall of public and official disapproval, the Metropolitan Transportation Authority's directors executed an abrupt U-turn on Thursday and voted unanimously to purchase 370 new natural gas-powered buses rather than diesel vehicles.

After hearing impassioned pleas from bus riders and environmentalists, school teachers and students, air quality officials and Los Angeles residents suffering from asthma and bronchitis, the MTA board rejected the recommendation of the agency's staff and voted to remain the nation's leader in the operation of clean-fuel transit buses.

"This is not the time for us to go back on that commitment," said county Supervisor Yvonne Brathwaite Burke, chairwoman of the MTA. "We would have been the laughingstock of people throughout the nation if we made this quick decision to try to avoid rules that are being considered both by [the Environmental Protection Agency] on a national level" and locally by the South Coast Air Quality Management District.

When the three-hour-long discussion began, no one could predict with

certainty the ultimate outcome. It was not until hours later, when Los Angeles Mayor Richard Riordan announced that he would come down on the side of compressed natural gas buses, that the verdict was sealed.

The mayor had been a driving force in getting the MTA to consider buying diesel buses. But after he aired his concerns, all of the pro-diesel votes on the board quickly fell into line.

The board's 10-0 vote to buy more natural gas-powered buses was greeted by loud applause from members of the Bus Riders Union unaccustomed to winning fights before the transit board.

Outside the MTA's headquarters, Eric Mann, leader of the bus riders group, publicly thanked Burke and Riordan and expressed relief that the agency had made what he felt was the right decision without being ordered to do so by a court.

Mann called the vote to buy more natural gas buses "the great reversal." But he said it also represented a major breakthrough. "We convinced the public this was a life and death issue." He said his group assembled a coalition "where civil rights meets the environment and meets mass transit."

The speakers—many of whom said they ride the bus regularly—expressed concern that they would be most at risk from diesel soot, which the state has determined can cause cancer.

Judy Brady, an elementary school teacher from Brentwood, read letters from her first-grade students calling

on Riordan to vote for cleaner natural gas buses.

Laura Pulido, an associate professor of geography at USC, told the directors she would be shocked if they voted to buy diesel buses. She said such a move, which would intensify pollution in central Los Angeles, would be a "classic case of how racism works."

From Bus Riders Union members wearing their trademark yellow T-shirts and new masks adorned with a skull and crossbones to representatives of the AQMD and environmental groups in business suits, the speakers against diesel kept coming to the podium.

S. David Freeman, general manager of the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power, took dead aim at arguments advanced by Arco that diesel buses using low-sulfur fuel and equipped with particulate traps similar to catalytic converters on cars can be made as clean as natural gas buses. "There is no such thing as clean diesel," Freeman said. "Diesel is inherently dirty."

He told the MTA board that "you dare not depart" from a policy to buy cleaner buses in a region that has long had the worst air quality in the nation. Freeman suggested the MTA consider electric buses as an alternative.

After the decision was made, Conner estimated that with the award of a \$115.4-million contract to buy the new buses, 86% of the MTA's active fleet of more than 2,240 vehicles will be running on compressed natural gas within three years.

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Report from the Labor/Community Strategy Center

This strategy report was written for the Clark-Atlanta Environmental Justice Resource Center (EJRC), the Metropolitan Atlanta Transportation Equity Coalition (MATEC), and the Turner Foundation.

The report is based on hundreds of hours of research and conversations with activist scholars and organizers in Atlanta. Much of the research was conducted during four visits to Atlanta by Bus Riders Union (BRU) members, including Eric Mann, Kikanza Ramsey, Barbara Lott-Holland, and Norma Henry. Further insights were gathered during a site visit by MATEC and EJRC leaders to Los Angeles hosted by the BRU.

The following individuals helped conceptualize, research, and write this report:

Eric Mann, director of the Labor/Community Strategy Center and member of the Bus Riders Union Planning Committee. Primary author of *L.A.'s Lethal Air: New Strategies for Environmental Organizing*, and *A New Vision For Urban Transportation: The Bus Riders Union Makes History at the Intersection of Mass Transit, Civil Rights, and the Environment*. He has been a civil rights, anti-Vietnam war, labor, and environmental organizer for 35 years with the Congress of Racial Equality, the Students for a Democratic Society, and the United Auto Workers, including eight years on auto assembly lines and as the lead organizer of the labor/community campaign to Keep General Motors Van Nuys Open that stopped GM from closing the auto plant for ten years.

Kikanza Ramsey, a co-founder of the Bus Riders Union in 1993 and a lead organizer of the BRU for seven years. She is the primary author of *The Bus Riders Union New Service Plan*, the 70-page mass transit policy document submitted to federal court as required by the BRU Consent Decree. The document outlines a five year, \$1.2 billion bus-centered mass transit plan for Los Angeles that expands express bus service to major secondary roads and eventually all 500+ miles of L.A. freeways.

Barbara-Lott Holland, co-chair of the Bus Riders Union Planning Committee which oversees development and implementation of the BRU *Billions for Buses and Fight Transit Racism* campaign. Life-long L.A. bus rider, she travelled to Atlanta to learn first-hand about the similarities and differences between the mass transit systems and grassroots struggles for transit equity and environmental justice in the two cities. She was the primary host for the Atlanta delegation that visited Los Angeles in 2000.

Geoff Ray, coordinator of the Strategy Center Publications department and editor and graphic designer of this report. After getting an MA from the Public Policy School of the University of Michigan he joined the Strategy Center in 1992 where he has helped to build Strategy Center Publications, a center for books, films, and articles that focus on multi-issue social and environmental justice grassroots organizing.

Copies of this report are available for \$10 plus shipping from Strategy Center Publications

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