

# LA Bus Riders' Union Rolls Over Transit Racism

By Geoff Ray

In 1992 Bus Riders' Union (BRU) organizers, organizers-in-training, and members rode thousands of buses for thousands of hours and began to build what has become a dues-paying membership of 2,500 persons and a very active leadership core of 200 riders. Many members have been active for five or more years. Another 40,000 people who ride the buses support our work, and many of them have participated in BRU fare strikes and other actions.

The Riders' Union was organized by the Labor/Community Strategy Center, which was founded in 1989 with the mission to help rebuild vibrant, democratic working-class movements that directly challenge corporate power and corporate-dominated government agencies. While our work focuses on and is led by working-class communities of color—those most hurt by corporate and corporate-state policies—we encourage participation by people of all classes and races.

Since our founding, the BRU has literally saved public transportation in Los Angeles. In 1996, the Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA) bus fleet was less than 2,100 buses, almost all diesel. More than half of the buses were totally dilapidated, many with more than 500,000 miles and ages of 14 to 20 years. Many did not run at all and those that did run, broke down. As a result, people were chronically late to work, school, and medical services. Through the BRU's legal advocacy and grassroots organizing, the MTA agreed to dramatic improvements in the bus system, generating hundreds of millions of dollars in bus improvements for low-income transit dependent riders. These victories have included:

- Reducing the monthly bus pass—which the MTA had tried to eliminate—to \$42 a month (from \$49), and creating the first \$11 weekly bus pass. Consequently, bus pass use has increased and low-income riders save tens of millions of dollars each year. Lower-cost transit has led to significant increases in transit use since 1996.

- Replacing 2,100 dilapidated diesel buses with Compressed Natural Gas buses.
- Expanding the bus fleet by more than 300, from 2,100 buses to more than 2,400 buses.
- Generating the first Rapid Bus lines that dramatically reduce transit times on major surface streets.

## Origin of Victories

In 1994, the MTA, in a fit of class arrogance, launched a billion-dollar rail line to affluent Pasadena and simultaneously declared they were in a budget crisis. Solution? Eliminate the monthly unlimited-use bus pass and raise fares. The BRU and Strategy Center, with the help of Korean Immigrant Workers Advocates and the Southern Christian Leadership Council, convinced the NAACP Legal Defense Fund to file a class action lawsuit against the MTA. We strongly felt that the actions of the MTA violated the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which requires any public agency receiving federal money to spend all of its money in a racially equitable manner.

In our first major victory, Federal Judge Terry Hatter issued a Temporary Restraining Order against the MTA within days of the filing, stopping the cancellation of the bus pass. We used the legal victory to galvanize thousands of bus riders out of the disillusionment and sense of defeat that so many working-class people of color understandably feel after three decades of unrelenting right-wing and racist backlashes. Hundreds of riders a month became members.

Careful not to let the legal tactic dictate our grass-

roots organizing and mass tactics, the BRU launched a series of marches, rallies, and local speaking tours to progressive organizations of all kinds. We organized actions at MTA board meetings, press conferences, mass-leafletting, letter-writing campaigns, and media strategies. The objective was to raise the visibility of our demands.

We began to dramatically change the dominant terms of the debate, opening up the region of ten million people to concepts of transit racism. We argued that civil rights and the environment come together powerfully in mass transit struggles and that working class transit needs should drive overall transit policy in Los Angeles. Through ongoing education we conveyed the central premise that, rail transit destroys mass transit because it is inherently too expensive for sprawling L.A.

It was very difficult to get the corporate media to cover us at first. But a combination of growing membership, creative and militant mass actions, and legal victories turned the BRU into one of the most media-covered forces in the region.

In October 1996, fearful of being found guilty of transit racism in federal court, the MTA settled with us. They agreed to a landmark ten-year civil rights consent decree potentially worth billions of dollars for the bus system. Substantial fare reductions were an immediate victory. But before the ink was even dry, the \$3 billion-a-year agency hired a team of corporate lawyers who have worked full-time for three years to deny, delay, and destroy the consent decree. In March 1999, we won a court ruling for 532 new buses and 1,500 new union jobs for drivers and mechanics—a ruling that Judge Hatter upheld comparing the MTA to segregationists.

Our long-term objective is to use these victories to help rebuild a national and international movement led by the working-class, communities of color, and women, whose enemy is the corporate system that, by definition, prioritizes profit maximization, deregulation, exploitation, and repression over civil rights, environmental justice, and human need.

Large rail construction companies, land developers, and politicians from both big business political parties who wanted to be big money brokers built a separate and unequal mass transit system in Los

Angeles. On the one hand, they constructed the most expensive rail project in the world—a tiny number of miles that cost over \$12 billion and carries only eight percent of L.A.'s mass transit riders. Mass transit carries about three percent of the daily trips of L.A.'s ten million residents.

On the other hand, the bus system was raided for rail and left to deteriorate to such a degree that it became the most overcrowded, unreliable, and oldest bus fleet of any major U.S. city. Ridership had dropped 40 percent since 1984. It should be no surprise to learn that bus riders make up 92 percent of mass transit users. L.A. transit riders are 85 percent people of color, 60 percent women, and almost 100 percent working class—65 percent have family incomes under \$15,000.

Those \$12 billion dollars squandered on rail could have revolutionized L.A.'s mass transit system to build a world class clean-fuel express bus system that not only served the needs of the existing 500,000 bus riders, but also could serve three or four million auto commuters and thereby dramatically clean up L.A.'s lethal air.

These same corporate forces and politicians helped undermine the Air Quality Management District (AQMD), the public agency in charge of cleaning up L.A.'s lethal air.

A critical related lesson, reflected throughout our organizing practice of the last dozen years, is that an organization that takes on corporate domination must remain resolutely independent of the Democratic Party and national labor bureaucracies—both profoundly controlled by corporate money and power. On particular issues or campaigns we may work closely with elected officials and labor unions, especially the more left and militant ones. But more often than not, multiracial Democratic politicians and labor bureaucrats have worked closely with white Republican politicians and corporate lobbyists to raid billions from bus riders and give virtual free reign to industrial polluters in L.A.

The lesson we draw is that only a systemic analysis can account for these patterns of behavior, and only a long-term movement strategy to change the corporate-dominated world system will bring about lasting economic, social, and environmental justice for all. ■

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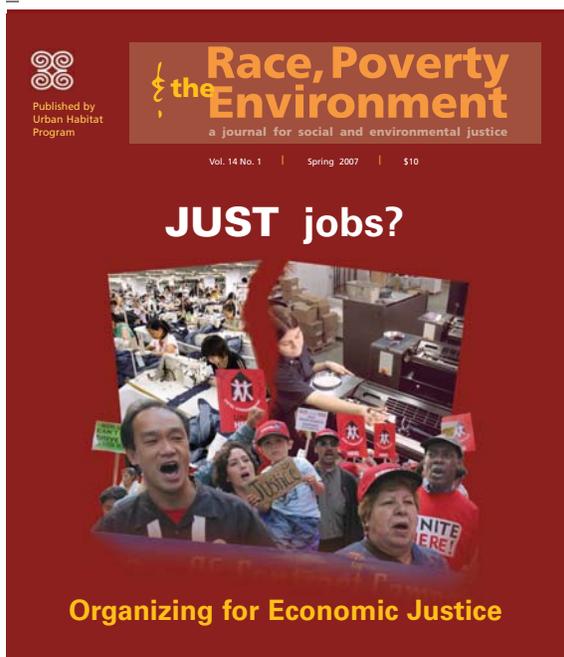
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