



The Fight for the Soul of Los Angeles

by Eric Mann

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In Los Angeles this November 6, on the same ballot as the presidential election, is a racist, gentrifying, sales tax initiated by the Los Angeles MTA and the Move LA Coalition— Measure J. This ½ cent sales tax is an extension of an already-existing sales tax thirty more years into the future. Defeating Mitt Romney and electing Barack Obama is the central anti-racist fight. Defeating Proposition J at the polls will be another high visibility, high stakes civil rights battle with great historical significance. We need you to learn the story, learn the facts, and take action.

The story of how the Los Angeles Metropolitan Transportation Authority has attacked the bus system and 500,000 bus riders since 1990 and how the Bus Riders Union has fought them tooth and nail and more often than not won many of the battles, is the stuff of legend, articles, and films. I urge you to read my recent Yes! Magazine article that gives some background to today's struggle (Fare Play: Transit Rights Are Civil Rights for L.A.'s Bus Riders) and check out Haskell Wexler's feature length documentary, Bus Riders Union (available on DVD from the Labor/Community Strategy Center, 213-387-2800, kelly@thestrategycenter.org).

The fight to Defeat Measure J is part of the larger battle for the soul of L.A.—and the same fight is going on in cities around the country. On one side is a rail-centered, gentrifying plan supported by real-estate developers, Chambers of Commerce, the owners of local hotels and restaurants and Move LA, an alliance of business, construction unions, and even some environmental groups. The dominating business interests are advocating a city where the urban working class is under constant police attack

for interfering with law, order, and profit. This rail centered plan will leave the city a hollow shell as rail projects languish in construction for decades, working people are displaced, and carbon-spewing cars dominate the roads.

On the other side is a bus-centered, environmental justice, sustainable urban plan that offers green jobs and draws support from working people of color. This vision includes a fight against the mass incarceration of Black and Brown communities, full defense of immigrant rights, and a more sustainable city in which poor people of color are at the center of the urban plan.

The No on J Campaign begins with the support of the Bus Riders Union, Los Angeles Community Action Network, East Los Angeles Community Corporation, Union de Vecinos, and the list will be growing rapidly. (To join the No on Measure J Campaign please contact Barbara Lott-Holland (barbara@busridersunion.org) and Sunyoung Yang (sun@busridersunion.org).

The Fight to Defeat Measure J will be one of the continued themes of my blog until Election Day. To begin with, let me give you 3 reasons to Vote No on J.

Prop J is racist.

The MTA has declared war on 500,000 bus riders, who are 55% Latino, 20% Black and 8% Asian/Pacific Islander, 60% women, and 50% with family incomes under \$14,000 a year. These are real people, 500,000 one person at a time. The MTA has raised

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the monthly bus pass from \$52 to \$75 and cut 1 million hours of bus service at a time when they got 1.4 billion in new money. Prop J will give them more money for rail and they will still cut bus service and raise fares? Why? Ask Mayor Villaraigosa with 4 votes on the MTA board, Zev Yaroslavsky, Gloria Molina—why this level of racial and class cruelty in the midst of corporate affluence?

Prop J is a disaster for our health and for the planet.

Measure J will accelerate and expand Metro's freeway construction bonanza, including two notorious plans to expand and extend the I-710 freeway. That's a surefire way to encourage auto use and contribute to even higher rates of cancer, asthma, and other respiratory illnesses caused by LA's polluted air. Twenty years and more than 10 billion dollars later, rail has not brought droves of people out of their cars and onto transit as it promised. In fact, every MTA rail line has fallen short of its already low ridership projections and as the MTA keeps cutting bus service overall ridership is going down. With global warming now advancing at a breakneck speed, LA cannot afford to enlarge its oversized carbon footprint with more freeways or waste its time on false solutions that leave bus riders stranded.

So why would the MTA do this and why would MoveLA organizers, making a deal with the highway lobby, argue that Measure J is good for the environment? My view is that they want rail construction projects and all the rest is simply ideological make-it-up-as-you-go-along. The cruel reality of global warming is that nature does not give a damn about human illusions and unscientific self-justification.

Prop J is anti-labor.

For 20 years, hotel workers, restaurant workers, janitors, security guards, home care workers, day laborers have asked, implored the MTA—"don't raise our fares, don't cut our service, don't cut night shift service." At a fare increase hearing 1500 working people showed up to ask the MTA to not raise the fare from \$42 to \$52, as one woman asked, holding her child, "Do you want me to take the shirt off his back or the food out of his mouth." The MTA went ahead and raised the fares. The MTA argues that Prop J is a "jobs" package but it is an anti-environmental, racist jobs program that benefits construction companies, and yes, construction unions, but attacks the working class as a whole and especially the low-wage, often undocumented, Black, Latino, and immigrant working class.

So what is going on?

The Prop J campaign is run by Democratic Party elected officials, the LA mayor, big business, the gentrifying class, and is supported by some labor unions and some

environmental groups—while most working class community groups of color and environmental justice groups oppose it.

This is the tragedy of pro-corporate politics dominating the urban plan. Once upon a time the mayor ran for election calling for a 3,000 bus fleet (it's presently 2500). He has since become a big subway advocate and often, a supporter of fare increases and service cuts. The County Federation of Labor is dominated by the building trades unions and for reasons they will have to explain, have thrown service workers, hotel workers, the unemployed, high school students, and immigrants under the train. Some environmental groups, in my opinion, are not taking the threat of global warming and children's health seriously and are not following the inexorable logic of science to its indisputable conclusion—that rail is an ecological disaster.

There is an alternative: A zero emissions bus-centered auto-free city is our only hope. In a few years we could double the bus fleet to 5000 zero-emission buses, build bus rapid transit corridors, create freeway express buses, and move to low fare and then free public transportation and attract hundreds of thousands of new riders. It would stimulate the economy and create thousands of permanent unionized green jobs for drivers, mechanics, and maintenance workers and would get working people to work, medical centers, and education centers in far less time. It can be done!

We all have to answer the question, "Which side are you on?" We are tired of watching the MTA make an alliance between rail construction companies and the highway industry, and against the bus riders who are 80% of their passengers. They started the war and we have no choice but to fight back and fight to win.

So here is how you can get on the bus and fight with us.

1. Please get this article out on Facebook, Twitter, your own and organizational email lists.
2. Get your church, union, community group to endorse the No on J Campaign Keep in touch and let us know how you're contributing to the fight. Call the BRU at 213-387-2800.
3. Contribute funds to the campaign, put up signs on your or neighbors lawns, go organizing on the bus with us, attend rallies, come up with other great ideas we have not thought of? Please contact Barbara Lott-Holland (barbara@busridersunion.org) and Sunyoung Yang (sun@busridersunion.org) and they will hook you up to a great campaign.

We can't wait to hear from you.

Eric Mann is a veteran of the Congress of Racial Equality, Students for a Democratic Society, and the United Auto Workers. He is author of *Playbook for Progressives: 16 Qualities of the Successful Organizer*. He is a host of **Voices from the Frontlines** on KPFC Pacifica, Los Angeles, 90.7 FM, Tuesdays at 4-5 PM PST, and streaming live on the web at www.kpfc.org. Follow him on Twitter / Facebook.