

A NEW VISION FOR URBAN TRANSPORTATION



Photo: Geoff Ray/Strategy Center Publications. The Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA) headquarters

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*The Bus Riders Union
Makes History at the Intersection
of Mass Transit, Civil Rights,
and the Environment*

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**A NEW VISION
FOR
URBAN TRANSPORTATION**

*The Bus Riders Union Makes History
at the Intersection of Mass Transit,
Civil Rights, and the Environment*

Written by Eric Mann
with the Planning Committee of the Bus Riders Union

Strategy Center *Publications*
Los Angeles, 1996

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A New Vision for Urban Transportation was written by Eric Mann, as part of a collective process of writing and organizing that involved dozens of people at its core. The work began with a Transportation Policy Group in which Lian Hurst Mann, Carlos Porras, Lisa Durán, Lisa Hoyos, Dean Toji, Robin Cannon, and Charlotte Bullock shaped its early direction. Ryan Snyder, a transportation policy analyst, was hired by the Strategy Center to expand our expertise and has continued to work with us for the past five years.

The work evolved into the formation of the Bus Riders Union, led full-time by four gifted organizers: Chris Mathis, a founder of the Strategy Center and a brilliant policy initiator, Kikanza Ramsey, who has emerged from a gifted intern to a front-line organizer, Martín Hernández, who moves from East L.A. to Sacramento with increasing authority, and Rita Burgos, who is the coordinator of our National School for Environmental and Civil Rights Organizers. Our organizers-in-training, who are far more than interns and provide a maturity and ballast to the work that is becoming essential, must also be acknowledged: Dave McClure, Lorena Barillas, Liz Moore, Liz Goss, Carol Song, Victor Viesca, Kirti Baranwal, Ted Robertson, and Sara Zimmerman have been the key to the BRU's membership growth from 200 to 1,100 in less than two years. Tom Rubin, former Chief Financial Officer of the Los Angeles Rapid District, has served as the "people's financial officer" for the Bus Riders Union in our growing challenges to the MTA's budget deceptions.

The Planning Committee of the Bus Riders Union—Ricardo Zelada, Della Bonner, Rosalio Mendiola, Norma Henry, Woodrow Coleman, Rudy Pisani, and Scott Miller—along with active members John Whitebrook, Nancy Lawrence, Philip Ajofoyinbo, Maria Guardado, Noemi Zelada, and dozens of others provide an essential grassroots leadership body that allows the BRU to truly represent the class of 350,000 bus riders. Active members of the Strategy Center, Bianca Kovar, Carl Gunther, and Kate Kinkade have been critical supporters of BRU organizing, while Georgia Hayashi and Ted Hays, who have been with the Center for five years, provide a rock solid administrative core to the work.

Geoff Ray and Lian Hurst Mann began our publications and communications department in 1992 and put in a week of all-nighters to turn out *Reconstructing Los Angeles from the Bottom Up* to make our deadline on the first anniversary of the 1992 L.A. urban rebellion. Along with the gifted Stephen Gutwillig, they are now creating an organizational structure that can allow new publications such as *A New Vision for Urban Transportation* to see the light of day. Alex Caputo-Pearl, who began with us as an organizer-in-training in Wilmington, worked on this paper for weeks as the primary editor—combining organizational skill, a fine theoretical understanding, and a project manager's overview to bring the project in on deadline.

We are very appreciative of the work of Connie Rice, Bill Lann Lee, and Robert Garcia of the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund for their impressive and dedicated work as legal counsel in our class action civil rights lawsuit, *Labor/Community Strategy Center, et al. v. Los Angeles Metropolitan Transportation Authority*.

The five years of our mass transportation organizing would not be possible, certainly at the scale we have been able to carry it out, without the strong financial support of several key foundations who have made substantial and long term commitments to our work. We are particularly appreciative of the support of Ed Skloot and Hooper Brooks at the Surdna Foundation, Patricia Bauman at the Bauman Family Foundation, Larry Kressley and Dana Alston of Public Welfare Foundation, Steve Viederman at the Jessie Smith Noyes Foundation, Marjory Fine and Jane McAlevey at the Veatch Foundation, Rob McKay at the McKay Foundation, Nelson Holl and the Board of the California Consumer Protection Foundation, Charles Halpern and Dick Mark at the Nathan Cummings Foundation, Nick Bollman at the James Irvine Foundation, Anne Hess who has supported our work from its inception, Victor Wallis and Hoby Spalding at the Wellspring Fund, Ingrid Washinawatok and Gary Schwartz at the Fund of the Four Directions, Diane Ives and John Hunting at the Beldon Fund, Peter Bahouth at the Turner Foundation, Chester Hartman at the Poverty and Race Research Action Council, Bill and John Moyers at the Florence and John Schumann Foundation, Deborah Tuck at the Ruth Mott Fund, and Diane Feeney and Christina Roessler at the French American Charitable Trust. We thank them for their belief in our work and their support or at least tolerance of our unapologetic tendency to rock the boat of injustice.

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I. Making History: The Role of the Oppressed as Policy Makers

On September 1, 1994, the doors of the federal court building were almost knocked off their hinges. A jubilant crew of Latinos, African Americans, Asians, and whites came running out jumping up and down, screaming and yelling, even shrieking, hugging each other in a rare victory celebration that seemed eerily out of time and place. Even more shocking was the army of photographers, radio reporters, and TV cameras from at least 10 local stations, waiting with the fickle embrace saved only for “winners.” In English, Spanish, and Korean the urban rebels had to learn almost from scratch how to assume the mature posture of victors without giggling or pinching themselves in public.

Constance Rice of the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, attorney for the plaintiffs, told the press on the courthouse steps,

Today, federal judge Terry Hatter issued a temporary restraining order, blocking the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) from raising the bus fare from \$1.10 to \$1.35, and also blocked them from eliminating the unlimited use monthly bus pass. The plaintiffs—the Labor/Community Strategy Center, the Bus Riders Union (BRU), the Korean Immigrant Workers Advocates, and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference—argued that the alleged ‘fiscal crisis’ at the MTA is being handled in a racially discriminatory manner in violation of Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The judge ruled that the MTA’s fiscal problems of their own making cannot be solved on the backs of the city’s 500,000 poor and overwhelmingly minority bus riders.

Eric Mann, the director of the Strategy Center and a member of the Center’s Bus Riders Union, gave a more global spin to the issue and the multi-racial grassroots organizing that was driving it:

This case is not just about reducing bus fares or improving bus service. At stake here is the concept that in the richest nation in the world, transportation is a human right. Government cannot provide, and then withhold, transportation to determine who can look for a job or get to a job or visit a sick mother or take her kids to childcare or the park based on the ability to pay. This class action suit challenges the corporatization of government—the reactionary notion that public life should be privatized and that the city should be run ‘like a business.’ It is an effort to revitalize the civil rights movement when it is under attack and to show that a half million low-income bus riders, 81 percent of whom are Latino, African American, Asian/Pacific Islander, and Native American, and 60 percent of whom have family incomes under \$15,000, can play a role in making history.

That night, the Bus Riders Union had the first of its many fifteen minutes (or in this case fifteen seconds) of fame on the evening news. On the English, Spanish, and Korean language stations, Maria Guardado, Ricardo Zelada, Rita Burgos, Chris Mathis, and Eric Mann from the Bus Riders Union, and dozens of bus riders on the street were interviewed about the “great and unexpected victory for bus riders.” As could be expected, many of the media angles reduced the Bus Riders Union into a human interest story with no politics. Some reporters tried to reduce a social movement to a legal tactic, the temporary restraining order, and reduce a multiracial insurgency with a new vision of urban life to “plaintiffs.”

Still, reporters were shocked at the answers they received when they asked “What is it that you people want?” Instead of the perhaps expected, “We want the MTA to keep the bus fare at \$1.10 and not appeal the judge’s reinstatement of the monthly bus pass,” they were given the series of interrelated demands that comprise the Billions for Buses campaign.

“We want a 50 cent bus fare with a free transfer.”

“We want a \$20 unlimited use monthly bus pass.”

“We want 2,000 new compressed natural gas or other clean fuel buses, until electric and hydro-

gen fuel cell buses are available—and we want them built in L.A. in low-income communities.”

“We want an end to privatization and a stop to the busting of the bus drivers and mechanics unions.”

“We want an end to all rail construction that is stealing funds from the bus system.”

“We want an elected MTA board, not the appointed one we have.”

“We want an end to transit racism.”

One reporter incredulously said, “You don’t sound like a protest group. You sound like you want to *run* the MTA.” “You got *that* right,” a BRU member responded.

The BRU story: An organizing model made to be exported to other U.S. cities

The next morning, the *Times* announced that the Metropolitan Transportation Authority, claiming fiscal shortfalls which arose under a Republican mayor and governor committed to running government “like a business,” was stymied in its attempts to raise the daily bus fare from \$1.10 to \$1.35 (plus a 25 cent transfer) and eliminate altogether the \$42 a month unlimited bus pass. The increase in bus fare would leave low-wage, overwhelmingly Latino, African American, Asian/Pacific Islander, and Native American workers, barely able to afford to get to work, with no funds left for recreation or emergencies. The additional transportation costs of up to \$50 a month would cause families with incomes of \$15,000 a year to pay as much as \$1,000 a year per person on “public” transportation. Liberal Democrats had issued half-hearted protests against the fare hikes and about the new “fiscal and political realities,” while limiting their debate to the degree of fare increases and service cuts that were necessary.

The Strategy Center and Bus Riders Union charged the MTA with setting up a separate and unequal mass transportation system that systematically discriminated against low-income people of color, and saw their class action suit, *Labor/Community Strategy Center and Bus Riders Union v. the MTA* as the *Brown v. Board of Education* for transportation. The quote from the plaintiffs that the *Times* picked up was just the one

we had hoped for, “Eric Mann, director of the Strategy Center, said ‘This case argues that transportation is a human right.’”

Less than a year later, the morning edition of the *Times* announced that the Metropolitan Transportation Authority, claiming fiscal shortfalls which arose under a conservative Republican mayor and governor committed to running government “like a business,” would eliminate the free transit pass for students—generating, for the first time, the specter that low-income children could not even get to school. Liberal Democrats issued half-hearted outcries about the new “fiscal and political realities” while simply negotiating the extent of the cuts, community groups called the decision racist and class-biased as the new costs per family might be as high as \$1,000 a year—denying poor students the chance to attend better schools further away from their homes and reinforcing racial and class segregation. Again, a combination of grassroots organizing and civil rights legal action was planned in response.

In the first news story the date is September 1994, the *Times* is the *Los Angeles Times*, the Republican governor is California’s Pete Wilson, the newly elected Republican mayor is Los Angeles’ Richard Riordan, and the MTA is the Los Angeles Metropolitan Transportation Authority. In the second story the date is August 1995, the *Times* is the *New York Times*, the Republican governor is New York’s George Pataki, the newly elected Republican mayor is New York City’s Rudy Giuliani, and the MTA is the New York Metropolitan Transit Authority.

In Birmingham, Alabama, Washington D.C., and virtually every major urban center in the U.S. the pattern is the same: business-oriented governments are dramatically cutting public services at the same time as they are using valuable public assets, including tax revenues, to bolster private sector profit-driven companies that claim to believe in a free enterprise system but, in fact, are truly addicted to government subsidies. Meanwhile the urban poor—increasingly Latino, African American, Asian/Pacific Islander, Native American, and female—are too often disorganized and demoralized, as each welfare, health care, and transportation service cut makes the mythical “family” of family values increasingly non-viable, while governmental policies turn to criminalizing those it has assaulted and then abandoned.

The fight for a first-class mass transportation system, and the way in which the Strategy Center and Bus Riders Union are theorizing and organizing that fight offer not just an encouraging story, but a theoretical and strategic model that challenges much of the existing organizing on transportation and urban issues in the U.S. It is the effort to put forth an analysis and an organizing model, rooted in a breakthrough social movement and class-action civil rights case, that can generate an urgently needed debate about an alternative vision for mass transportation and urban policy in the age of the bipartisan free market disaster that is destroying U.S. cities.

In September 1994, James E. Moore, an associate professor of urban and regional planning at USC, observed in a *Los Angeles Times* op-ed article,

U.S. District Judge Terry Hatter's decision to respond to the Labor/Community Strategy Center by freezing the Metropolitan Transportation Authorities' bus fare increase does more than focus public attention on one of Southern California's wealthiest, most influential bureaucracies . . . The rules of the transit game will never be the same. From a public policy point of view, Hatter's restraining order creates new incentives for public agencies to remain accountable for the quality of their decisions. It is a new experience for the MTA.

Unlike most career-driven "experts" Moore has consistently and publicly validated the role of the Bus Riders Union in shaping public policy in mass transportation, pointing out that "The university research community has been blowing its little ivory whistle over such outcomes for 30 years, with no substantive effect." While it is true that the Bus Riders Union has radically altered the terrain of transportation policy, that is not to say that the organization has yet been able to reverse the MTA's racially-discriminatory squandering of public funds. On the contrary, the MTA is still moving forward with a rail system that has developed into a boondoggle transportation construction project benefiting only a coterie of construction firms, developers, architects, designers, and a pathetic retinue of petty subcontractors. But the

discussions and heated arguments about bus versus rail, both in the public arena and in the courts, have finally been able to shape the debate. At the core of the debate is the question, "What is the objective of government transportation policy—to serve the needs of the transit dependent, or to serve the needs of the 'choice rider' and the needs of the transportation contract dependent?"

A further elaboration of the programmatic demands of the Bus Riders Union's Billions for Buses campaign will shape the later discussion on the history of L.A.'s racially discriminatory and bankrupt transportation policy, the politics of urban transportation, and some strategies for changing the balance of power. It is from a demand-driven discussion of public policy that the underlying issues can best be understood.

II. How the Los Angeles MTA Ran Public Transportation into the Ground: The Corporatization of Government and the Destruction of L.A.'s Transportation System

On the surface, no one in Los Angeles is *for* transit racism or *against* dramatic improvements in the bus system. In fact, because of the Strategy Center and Bus Riders Union's five years of organizing to "shift the terms of the debate," we have now reached the next level in the struggle—from marginalization to attempts at co-optation, as virtually every public official in Los Angeles praises the work of the Bus Riders Union, and agrees that (of course while we go a bit too far) our demands for a massive improvement in the bus system are fair, even reasonable. During this dual process of praising and co-opting, the multibillion dollar rail projects are moving full speed ahead and the bus system continues its spiral downward into shambles.

The debate gets much sharper over our charges, in the public arena and in the courts, that the MTA is operating a racially discriminatory, separate and unequal public transportation system that violates the civil rights of 500,000 monthly bus riders, 81 percent of whom are Latino, African American, Asian Pacific Islander, and Native American. To fully understand the intersection of racism and the transportation system, we must analyze the region demographically and, then, in terms of its transportation infrastructure.

Today, Los Angeles County is a multiracial political jurisdiction of nine million residents, of whom 3.4 million are white, 3.1 million are Latino, 1.1 million are African American, and 1.1 million are Asian/Pacific Islander, according to 1990 census data. Tremendous poverty in the region is disproportionately borne by people of color. For example, there are 500,000 workers in Los Angeles County who work an entire year for less than \$10,000, of whom more than 75 percent

are Latino, African American, and Asian American. In South Central Los Angeles, unemployment levels among African Americans between the ages of 18 and 35 are more than 55 percent.

Geographically, the region is laid out not simply as an inner-city area surrounded by large, sprawling white suburbs. Rather, there is (1) an inner-city core, with large African American, Latino, and Asian populations covering the communities of South Los Angeles, Pico Union, East Los Angeles, Koreatown, the Southeast Corridor of Vernon, Commerce, and Downey, and (2) a very significant and increasing number of communities of color and low-income communities in the spatially-dispersed areas of Pacoima/San Fernando, Hollywood, the San Gabriel Valley, the Harbor communities of Wilmington, Harbor City, and San Pedro, and Orange County.

Across this region, one of the primary ways in which racial and class segregation is enforced is through the dismal quality of the bus system and the corresponding lack of mobility for many poor people and people of color. On public transportation, how does one go from Boyle Heights in East Los Angeles to Sylmar in the San Fernando Valley, from Watts to East Los Angeles, from Koreatown to Torrance, or from the Crenshaw district to Orange County to look for work or to keep a job? At present, the answer is that one cannot make these trips on public transportation. Mike Davis, author of *City of Quartz*, has commented that the objective impact of the terrible quality of bus service from predominantly African American and Latino areas to parks and recreation areas is to prevent youth of color from getting out of the barrios and ghettos. This, of course, perpetuates the old segregation plans on which the city was originally developed, and must be rejected.

In Los Angeles, racial discrimination is reflected in the bus versus rail debate. Transit racism of this sort may take other forms in other cities, but is essentially the same regardless of the particular modes of transportation in which class-based racism resides. In Los Angeles, it can be broken down clearly and simply:

A Graphic Comparison of the Bus and Rail Systems

	Bus System	Rail System
1. Daily ridership	350,000	26,000
2. Racial composition	81 percent people of color/ 19 percent white	50 percent people of color/ 50 percent white
3. Core rider economic status	“profoundly poor”	middle class
4. Load factors	most overcrowded in U.S.	running half empty
5. Dependability	late/often passes you by	on time
6. Quality	dirty to filthy	clean and new
7. Age of capital	oldest bus fleet in U.S.	new and modern
8. Amenities	none, seat is optional	computer racks/four seats for every three passengers
9. Subsidy per passenger	\$.33 to \$1.17	\$5 to \$25
10. Security subsidy per passenger	\$.03	\$1.17
11. Riders fare as percent of cost of service (or “fare box recovery ratio”)	30-35 percent	7-9 percent
12. Fare Increases	170 percent over 10 years	23 percent over 5 years
13. Percent of MTA discretionary funds for total ridership	30 percent for 94 percent of riders	70 percent for 6 percent of riders

This chart shows the material basis of what a racially discriminatory, separate and unequal, two-tier mass transportation system looks like, and the actual lived experience for bus riders is even worse than the stark numbers can convey. It reflects the dominant patterns of modern urban life: the use of public funds by increasingly reactionary corporate elites to plunder public services while claiming budget shortfalls and penalizing an increasingly powerless and growing population of low-income people of color, women, and immigrants. Even by middle-class standards this particular story in Los Angeles gets worse, because there are virtually no middle-class passengers who are even willing to benefit from the MTA’s class-biased largesse. They still prefer to drive their cars and leave the ghost trains running half empty. But no mind, since the purpose of the rail system was never to carry passengers anyway. The MTA just continues to build until the money runs out. Thus, stopping the rail construction “in its tracks” is essential to finding money to repair, let alone uplift, the bus system.

Fighting racial discrimination and stopping funding for L.A.’s rail system: Understanding the history

Modern mythology on transportation in Los Angeles begins and ends with the infamous conspiracy of General Motors and Standard Oil to destroy the now fabled “red car” in favor of first the bus and then the auto/oil highway lobby. In fact, the main conspiracy in terms of public transportation is far more profound. By 1929, several trends had made auto the unchallenged king in the city: land use patterns, spatial development of the city, and a philosophy behind mass transit based on profit strategies for the real estate industry rather than on notions of serving the public. Rail transportation, which was controlled by the private hands of real estate moguls since the late 19th century, had been used primarily as an accommodation to new home buyers, as part of the real estate package—house, land, and private transportation to the downtown business district by rail. Between 1919 and 1929, however, auto registra-

tion in L.A. County ballooned from 141,000 to 770,000, a 550 percent increase. Thus, in the late 1920's, when the automobile began to dominate and private rail transportation was no longer needed as an amenity for suburban home owners to purchase land and homes, the developers got out of the transportation business. Before long, the land use patterns and auto-dominated culture were solidified and mass transit had to get out of the way. Moreover, the downtown was created to accommodate cars. In 1933, more than twice as many vehicles were in downtown Los Angeles than any other city in the U.S. As Jane Wilson writes in her article in *Buzz* magazine, "The comment 'you can't get there from here' had begun to define the situation of an Angeleno without an automobile" in the 1920's!

The concept of "privatization" used today, while helpful, is better understood as part of the larger pattern of the "corporatization of government." That is, large corporations first prevented government from running public transportation when real estate profits demanded it, then "sold it" at a profit back to government when it became unprofitable to run it themselves and, since then, have returned to demand that government sell back to them contracts for rail cars and buses, construction, and now, even entire mini-bus lines. The movement back and forth between the "public sector" and the "private sector" masks the fact that the corporate class owns and operates each—and the transactions involved are therefore only tactical.

Thus, with the domination of the automobile, Los Angeles County's transit system became "two-tiered" in that it was divided between cars (private transportation) and buses (public transportation). While most Angelenos of all races drove cars, the public transportation system—run for many years by the Southern California Rapid Transit District (RTD)—was understood to be the avenue of last resort for the urban poor, the elderly, the disabled, and students. Thus, as L.A.'s urban poor became increasingly Latino, African-American, and Asian Pacific Islander, so did the composition of the majority of bus ridership.

Even *within* the bus system, however, racial discrimination was reflected in policy. For many years bus lines to predominantly white suburbs had better service, more direct express routes, newer buses, far less overcrowding, and a far higher subsidy per passenger than the central city

bus system. This system was justified using an argument based primarily on the importance of the "choice rider." According to this line of argument—bolstered by the class-biased and racially-discriminatory support of many transportation planners and mainstream environmentalists—the main purpose of public transportation is to reduce congestion and auto emissions. Thus, it would be precisely the suburban car rider who would be targeted to ride public transportation. According to this argument, the choice rider who lives in the suburbs and prefers to drive his/her car must be attracted by better and more convenient service. On the other hand, according to the theory, services do not need to be attractive to gain the ridership of the transit dependent since, by definition, they have no choice. For many years, then, the fight of L.A.'s low-income minority communities for equal protection of the law and equal access to public services took place *within* the Rapid Transit District, the bus system that would later become part of the MTA.

The formation of the MTA and the rail raid on the bus system

In 1976, the California State legislature established the Los Angeles County Transportation Commission (LACTC), to provide a more comprehensive overview of transportation in the region. Under this re-organization, the RTD would focus on bus service while the LACTC would focus on new plans for light and heavy rail construction in a region that, until this time, had none. From the inception of the LACTC, rail and bus were not treated as equal priorities in the county. Though rail did not yet exist, it was established as the favored mode of transit. Moreover, since the LACTC was given ultimate financial control over the RTD, the discriminatory policies that took the form of a rail versus bus debate were institutionalized from the beginning.

But even with LACTC's dominance, it was impossible to begin massive rail construction without new funding. Thus, in 1980, the Bradley Administration, downtown business developers, and rail construction firms formed a coalition that gained the support of many bus riders and the transit dependent in leading Los Angeles County voters to approve Proposition A—a 1/2 cent sales

tax to be used to improve bus service and begin rail construction in the county. As with all sales tax measures, it promised far more than it could possibly deliver. In fact, it promised a wide variety of constituencies mutually contradictory and competing outcomes. The Proposition was written in a way to appeal significantly to bus riders, promising a reduction in the bus fare to 50 cents from the existing 85 cents. It promised those who wanted rail in their districts an ambitious grid of rail lines that would function alongside an expanded network of bus lines. It promised cities a portion of the funds to be essentially kicked back to them, with a 25 percent "local return" on each dollar, to be used for "transportation uses" broadly defined. In short, the public was promised, for a 1/2 cent sales tax plus state and federal funding, a dramatic improvement in bus service, an expansion of new rail projects, local transportation improvements, and a reduction in air pollution and congestion.

Proposition A resulted in \$340 million per year (now, closer to \$380 to \$400 million per year) in new transit funds for the LACTC, which helped to generate a temporary and visible boost to the bus system. As promised, for the first three years after its passage, twenty percent of Proposition A revenue went towards subsidizing a reduction in the bus fare from 85 to 50 cents. This decreased fare generated, to the surprise of some, dramatically *increased* bus ridership, reinforcing our understanding that in a region of very low-income people the relationship between fare structure and overall bus ridership is highly elastic. Annual bus ridership rose from 354 million unlinked one-way trips per year in 1982, just before the reduced fare was implemented, to a peak of 497 million in 1985, a 41 percent increase. The fare change was accompanied by bus purchases for the 1984 Olympics. Even with additional buses, the demand for service was so great because of the fare reduction that passengers would regularly stand in the aisles, for lack of a seat, on many major lines. In fact, as many as 32 people (on buses of seating capacity 43) would be standing in the aisles during peak service on the major lines.

In 1986, the funds that had been dedicated to bus fare subsidies were shifted to rail construction, as was mandated by Proposition A. Additional *discretionary funds*, which were abundantly available, were never sought to maintain the 50 cent

fare. Instead, the bus fare was pushed to 85 cents again. In fact, the fare was not even reduced when another half-cent sales tax for transportation (Proposition C) was approved by the voters in 1990. The majority of this revenue, too, would go towards rail construction, because the transportation agencies had made their decision several years before, in 1986, to move full force into rail, virtually abandoning the bus system.

Thus, when the MTA was formed in 1992, through state legislation, the pattern of discrimination against bus riders was already firmly in place. The only change that came with the formation of the new agency was that the fight for bus riders' rights would have to take place in a different arena. The MTA, the result of the merger of the RTD and LACTC, would be a new and imposing mega-institution with which to fight.

Disregarding the warnings of the "experts" on rail

Among transportation "experts"—academics, planners, RTD and, later, MTA staff—there was virtually unanimous opinion that costly rail projects served no legitimate transportation objectives in a region with such low population density and multiple centers of employment, business, residence, and recreation. Their warnings against rail investment went unheeded. Professor Marty Wachs at the UCLA Graduate School of Architecture and Urban Planning, and Ryan Snyder, a well-respected transportation planner who studied with Wachs, were among the early unequivocal opponents of rail for Los Angeles. In a recent paper, "Rail Transit's Role in the Future of Los Angeles," Snyder outlines some of the fundamental flaws in a rail-centered plan. First, L.A. does not have nearly the population density of cities like Tokyo, New York, or London, all of which have rail systems that, with the complementary work of buses, can serve the needs of the transit dependent. Second, in a city designed for the automobile, L.A. must be home to "final destination" public transportation to serve people's needs. It is only through the flexibility of the bus system that something close to "final destination" transportation can be provided in Los Angeles. To the point of flexibility, Snyder argues, "A train, on a fixed route, is simply a bus that can't turn." Third, the

rail system is literally stealing funds from the bus system, with phenomenally high costs per ride and very few riders. These arguments alone should have been enough to stop rail construction, if ridership needs had been at the center of L.A.'s rail planning process. But as we will see, the bus riders—as a large group of low-income, overwhelmingly Latino, African American, Asian, Native American and significantly female transit-dependent people—were not only at the bottom of the list of the transportation system's priorities. In fact, they became its victims.

The Long Beach Blue Line: L.A.'s first rail project illustrates the moral and financial bankruptcy of the rail "experiment"

The Blue Line was the first leg of the rail system, connecting L.A.'s central business district with Long Beach, a quasi-suburban port city about 20 miles south of downtown. According to Tom Rubin, who at the time was the Chief Financial Officer of the RTD,

The emphasis for building the Blue Line was to build a rail line, somewhere in the county, as fast as possible to justify to the voters the sales tax that they had approved. The Blue Line was chosen because there was an existing rail right of way that could be obtained relatively quickly. However, many of the stations don't really serve anything—there are not any commercial, government, or residential clusters nearby. In other words, once you get on the Blue Line at one end or the other, you aren't going to be getting off to go to some destination in the middle, other than your home, which you will need to transfer to another mode to reach.

Still, since Proposition A did allow 35 percent of its funds to be used for rail projects, certainly it was reasonable to build at least one rail line and to learn from the experience. However, after just the experience of building and operating the Long Beach Blue Line, the MTA's allegedly most successful rail project, the debate should have been over. All remaining funds should have gone towards building a first-class bus system through-

out L.A. County. Let's examine the Blue Line closely in light of this perspective.

The Blue Line balance sheet: A prototypical indictment of L.A.'s rail plan

A) Underbidding and cost overruns: Not a cut, but a hemorrhage

The Blue Line was first proposed at a cost of \$200 million. By the time the environmental impact report was completed, the estimates had reached as high as \$400 million. By the time construction began, board members were being told that additional costs might raise the cost to \$600 million. By the time the first passenger finally got on board in July 1990 the actual cost of the project was \$877 million. An MTA official explained the type of process that had occurred in the construction of the Blue Line: "The key to getting a rail line built is to come in with a low bid and then just keep coming back with change orders. It's the old Robert Moses trick, just begin construction and then tell people 'We will look like fools if we stop.'"

B) Rejecting far less expensive, higher quality bus-centered proposals

The "Long Beach-Los Angeles Rail Transit Project, Draft Environmental Report" of May 1984 reported that, in choosing to proceed with the Blue Line, the LACTC had rejected a "bus alternative" that called for the addition of thirty-three conventional 40-foot buses or twenty-four articulated 60-foot buses. Apparently, the LACTC held the bus plan in high regard, reporting that "the major population effect [of the bus plan] would be to improve service and accessibility in the corridor." Yet, rail construction was initiated.

The Blue Line's projected capital cost of \$407 million was over 65 times the \$6 million projected capital cost of the bus alternative. The *actual* capital cost of the Blue Line, \$877 million, was 146 times the \$6 million projected capital cost of the bus alternative. Even the Blue Line's projected annual operating cost of \$13 million was over 6 times the \$2 million projected operating cost of the bus plan.

C) Stealing ridership from the bus system, and dismantling bus service adjacent to its path

The Long Beach Blue Line is the only rail line in the county that has population density levels that could possibly justify its existence. However, it has achieved these ridership numbers partially by shutting down bus lines that had existed in its stead previously, thereby forcing riders onto the train. Given that more than two-thirds of all Blue Line passengers must take buses either to or from the Blue Line stations when they use the train, this process of dismantling the area bus system has had negative consequences for many riders. It is in this way that the Blue Line competes with bus service, rather than supplementing or expanding it.

The figures and information above are not cited to argue that the Long Beach Blue Line should never have been built. As stated above, the rail money from Proposition A was properly used, in this case, to experiment with rail construction. However, the astounding comparative figures *are* cited to show unequivocally that the transportation authorities should have prevented cost overruns, written a tight contract for the construction of the rail line, and once finished with the Long Beach Blue Line, should have stopped rail construction in Los Angeles.

The diversion of bus funds to rail: How cost overruns drove racial segregation and the destruction of the bus system

The MTA is a \$3 billion agency that receives its funds from complex and multifaceted sources that include:

- Propositions A and C 1/2 cent sales taxes, coming to almost \$800 million in 1996. City of Los Angeles local return funds for Red Line construction (\$54.3 million); that is, cities can essentially “kick back” local return funds to the MTA for rail projects in their districts; these same funds could be used for bus projects.
- Other local revenues (including bond/cash note receipts), which have come to \$92.7 million.
- Federal Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA) Section 3 capital, \$350.5 million, used primarily for rail capital.

- Federal ISTEA Section 9 capital, \$203 million, used primarily for bus capital.
- Federal ISTEA Section 9 operating, \$28.2 million, utilized for bus operations.
- Federal ISTEA Surface Transportation Program/Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality Program (STP/CMAQ), \$98.6 million, utilized for road construction and Green Line rail operations.
- California State Transportation Development Act, \$275.2 million, utilized primarily for bus operations and the local share of bus capital grants.
- Proposition 108/116 state rail bond proceeds, \$64 million, for rail construction.
- Other State of California funds, \$90.9 million.
- Bus and rail fare revenues, \$213 million.

The complex nature of its funding sources has allowed the MTA to use a great many sleight-of-hand maneuvers to put together funding for rail projects, while simultaneously reducing the bus system. Attaining the funds for virtually any start-up cost or cost overrun on a rail line involves manipulation of funds from the bus system, since every possible source of rail funding has been used up including the option of issuing bonds for future rail expenditures.

Marvin Holen, who served as president of the RTD and, later, as an alternate board member at the MTA, confessed that he could never track the MTA’s funding because the staff was always able to keep moving funds more quickly than he could pursue them. In 1994, when the MTA declared a “budget shortfall” and began deliberations to increase bus fares to pay for it, Holen became exasperated and initiated a public interrogation of MTA chief Franklin White at the MTA monthly board meeting.

When we use the word ‘shortfall,’ Mr. White, I think it’s a very slippery word. I can design a scenario in which the operating shortfall is \$440 million this year, or no shortfall this year, or a surplus this year. It is a matter of policy established by the MTA board of directors as to the application of resources to any particular area in the jurisdiction and activities of the agency. I must say that others have described to me, and I must say there is an

echo of truth in it, that using such phrases as a '\$126 million shortfall' is simply a propaganda slogan. I guess my quarrel is this: 'Don't come in and tell me I have to cut a bus line that carries 170,000 to 180,000 people because there is no other choice.' Frank, there is another choice, there are 101 other choices in terms of the allocation of resources in control of this agency with respect to providing monies to support the bus system.

Holen's observation that the MTA could, given the same financial data, show a shortfall, no shortfall, or even a surplus leads exactly to the foundation of why the Bus Riders Union is attempting to impose a strict measure of fiscal accountability on the agency.

As rail projects eat away at the MTA budget, bus funds are confiscated to pay for runaway trains

Undaunted by the failure of the Blue Line experiment, the MTA moved forward with other highly-expensive rail projects. From 1982 until 1996, the MTA has constructed less than half of its planned rail system, and by any objective analysis, it is not a "system" at all, simply a series of arbitrarily linked individual rail projects. The rail lines include:

A) The Long Beach Blue Line, completed in 1990

B) A multi-county suburban Metrolink system with trains leaving downtown.

Los Angeles' Union Station for the Eastbound Riverside line and the Northeast Santa Clarita Line. The subsidy per passenger on Metrolink is as much as \$25. These trains are pure gifts to suburban riders who wish to use them, with beautiful rail cars planned at only 75 percent of capacity at rush hour. In practice, they rarely ever reach 75 percent capacity. The expensive return trips, from the suburbs back to downtown Los Angeles during rush hour, are running virtually empty. Immediately following the 1994 Northridge earthquake, when the freeways were temporarily shut down, ridership on the Metrolink trains from Santa Clarita reached record levels at 20,000 passengers

per day, or a twenty-fold increase over normal ridership. But, literally, the day the freeways reopened the Santa Clarita Metrolink went back to half empty, serving less than 1,000 riders per day. Even with fares as high as \$6 for a thirty to thirty-five mile ride, the amenities and incredibly low ridership of the Metrolink lead to a \$25 subsidy for a \$6 fare. The ridership of the Metrolink is more than 60 percent white, and the median income is over \$60,000.

C) The Red Line subway, at present, running only five miles from Union Station to the corner of Wilshire and Western Boulevards.

This corner is the site of the Strategy Center offices, so we hope to "draw a line in the sand" and end Red Line construction at our door. The Line was originally intended to go from Union Station down the Wilshire Corridor, linking key elements of civic pride such as MacArthur Park, the L.A. County Museums, and the Hollywood Bowl. Thus, the Red Line, as architectural critic Lian Hurst Mann observed, "could have been built to prove that Los Angeles, positioning itself as a world-class city, has a subway, but more as an architectural project than a transportation one. It would make sense if it were paid for by the Chamber of Commerce, not the MTA, since it functions as a representation of the city's business and cultural elite, and serves no serious mass transportation objective."

D) The Green Line, the fabled "train to nowhere" that runs east and west from Norwalk to El Segundo, ending a few miles away from the L.A. International airport.

The Green Line connects with the Blue Line and was built to take aerospace workers from their homes in suburban Norwalk to the center of the aerospace industry in El Segundo. During the construction of the line, however, the number of aerospace jobs in the area began to decline dramatically. MTA board member James Cragin, one of the political beneficiaries of the line apologetically explained, "It wasn't our fault that the bottom fell out of the aerospace industry. How would we know that ridership would be so low?" Thus, the Green Line illustrates exactly the folly of fixed rail. An \$800 million fixed rail line, that was originally designed to be an express busway at less than 25 percent of the same cost, now cannot be

changed (as a flexible bus route could be) even though its ridership is pathetically low and will continue to be that way. Even the original plan to build the Green Line all the way to the airport was stopped by the airport shuttle bus industry in a last-ditch attempt to protect shuttle services' profits. As one regular rider of the Green Line explained, "The whole thing is a joke. It goes nowhere. Even the train drivers are ashamed to tell people they work there, because the whole project is a laughingstock. I happen to live on the route, but all that money could have been used to fix up the bus system."

In his paper, "Rail Transit's Role in the Future of Los Angeles: Rail as a Bus That Can't Turn," transit analyst Ryan Snyder has observed that,

When Proposition A was passed in 1980, voters were promised that 35 percent of the half-cent sales tax would be sufficient to build and operate 11 rail lines in Los Angeles County. Today, the rail network consumes:

- all of the dedicated portion of Proposition A
- large portions of local Proposition A revenues (that could be allocated for bus service)
- large portions of dedicated and discretionary Proposition C revenue
- Propositions 108 and 116 revenues (1990 state rail bond revenues)
- federal rail capital funds
- federal ISTEA money

After spending this much money, the MTA can only show the first portion of the Blue Line, the Green Line, and the first segment of the Red Line. In order to build even this much the MTA has had to cut bus service by 20 percent and to raise fares. The only possible line that the MTA could start now is the Pasadena Blue Line, but not without further robbing the bus system. The rail network is about as complete as it is going to get for at least several decades.

In 1990, the LACTC went back to the voters and was able to win approval of Proposition C, another 1/2 cent sales tax, with the ambiguous goals of increasing mobility, reducing congestion, and improving air quality. Obviously they could not tell the voters the truth that "We have already squandered and mortgaged the last sales tax revenues, and the rail system is barely starting and is already in shambles. Please give us some more money to feed our habit."

The destruction of the bus system

From 1985 to the present, a period during which the rail juggernaut has been moving full speed ahead, the destruction of the bus system has assumed alarming proportions. There have been many components to this process of destruction.

A) Bus fare increases

While having money to burn when it came to investing in rail, the MTA decided that it was "subsidizing" the bus passengers too much, and thus, began a series of fare increases. In 1986, the bus fare was raised back to 85 cents, after three years at 50 cents. In 1989, the agency raised the bus fare to \$1.10, and in 1995 pushed it to \$1.35.

B) Service cuts

In fiscal year 1988, bus service covered 93 million vehicle miles. By 1993, that figure had fallen to 81.8 million and, by 1995, to 78 million. These service cuts are reflected in fewer buses on the road and the reduction of buses on each route. These conditions create situations of overcrowding and dreadfully long intervals, or headways, between buses.

C) Reduction and deterioration of the bus fleet

In 1984, the MTA operated 3,000 buses in its fleet. Today, the bus fleet has shrunk to 2,000. Moreover, many of those buses are dilapidated and are often off the road for repairs. The MTA retains its buses up to the maximum limits of 12 years and 500,000 miles, and many of the vehicles are finally sold for junk for \$2,000. Mechanics have told us that the MTA claims it has 1,750 out of the 2,000 buses on the road every day, but in fact, many of those simply leave the station and turn around—

that is, they perform a “false start” to cover up the continued deterioration of the fleet and the service.

D) Deterioration of service for the transit dependent

There is massive overcrowding on the buses. By the MTA’s own standards, it now considers acceptable a load factor of 1.45 at peak on its most heavily-used lines. The discussion of “load ratios” is straightforward. It measures the number of passengers who are standing at peak periods of use. For example, if every passenger on a 43 seat bus (the main configuration for MTA and most urban buses) had a seat, then the load ratio would be 1.0—1 person, 1 seat. If the load ratio is 1.1 (or 110 percent of capacity) that means that during the peak rush hour, there is a maximum of 4.3 (10 percent of 43) people standing at any given time. If the load ratio goes up to 1.2 that means 8.6 people on average are standing, 1.3 means 12.9 people are standing, and 1.4 means that 17.2 people at peak are standing. The current load factors accepted by the MTA are brutal and must be challenged.

E) Violation of the rights of the disabled, especially those using wheelchairs

The process of stopping the bus for a person with a wheelchair, dropping the wheelchair lift, and allowing the person to board is both a requirement of any humane bus system and, in theory, should be legally required by the Americans with Disability Act. At the moment, overcrowding, lack of training for drivers, disrespect for the disabled, and pressure from management on drivers to meet unrealistic time demands are all contributing to the literal leaving behind of the disabled.

F) The dishonesty and unpredictability of the MTA’s scheduling process

The MTA produces schedules for the public that do not at all reflect reality. Many workers and students have told us that, because of the unpredictability of the bus service, they have to leave for work or school as early as two hours before their day is supposed to begin, because one day the trip may take 45 minutes, the next day 1 hour and a half.

G) Agonizing waits for transfers

Virtually every major trip in Los Angeles involves a north/south, east/west transfer. Waiting on the corner for the transfer after having waited for as long as a half hour for the first bus makes the bus system a complete disaster.

H) Reduced bus ridership

As should be expected, with increased fares, decreased service, massive overcrowding, and greater security problems for passengers with long waits at bus stops, bus ridership has plummeted more than 20 percent below 1985 levels.

I) Infrequent evening and weekend service

To the degree that the business establishment cares at all about the bus system, it is around the issue of how to get an increasingly low-wage workforce to work on time. Thus, in the eyes of the establishment, evening and weekend service is not as essential to maintain as peak service during the week. We have seen the results of this policy choice. Philip Ajofoyinbo, an African American member of the Bus Riders Union who is blind, has testified that he was once dropped off at a bus stop in the evening by friends, waited and waited for the bus, only to find later that the MTA had changed the schedule and discontinued night-time service. He was forced to sleep on the street until the bus came the next morning.

A janitor with Local 399 of the Service Employees International Union has testified that when she gets off from work at 1 AM, in the abandoned downtown business district, she often has to wait as long as an hour for the bus, and then has to decide whether to wait another 45 minutes for the transfer bus, or to walk home 12 blocks through the dangerous neighborhood in which she lives.

The highway lobby becomes the beneficiary of the MTA’s destruction of the bus system

Los Angeles does not have the population density for a train system. The entire region was designed as a decentralized sprawl, and future growth projections indicate further unpredictable and dispersed industrial, commercial, and residential growth. Since Los Angeles was, thus, constructed as an auto-dominated city, it is only a first-class bus system with three or four times the present fleet of 2,000 buses that can

even have the chance to compete with the auto, and the auto/oil/rubber/highway conglomerate as viable transportation. Thus, the MTA's presiding over the destruction of the bus system is not just an attack on buses. It is destroying the viability of public transportation in the region altogether, thereby allowing the auto to reign supreme.

Snyder illustrates the historical domination of the auto:

Suburban sprawl has also been fueled by the development of the freeway system, which began with the construction of the Pasadena freeway in 1939, and gathered considerable momentum during the late 1950s and into the 1960s after President Eisenhower passed legislation to develop the interstate highway system. This system was originally conceived as a network of highways to serve the military's interstate transport needs, but became the primary mode for regional travel around the Los Angeles Basin. This made suburban sprawl into progressively more distant neighborhoods possible as more people moved to Los Angeles after World War II.

The current emphasis in transportation planning is schizophrenic. Public agencies such as Caltrans and city Departments of Transportation are typically dominated by traffic engineers who attempt to solve traffic problems by accommodating more cars through widening freeways, streets and intersections. More recently, various computerized techniques are being experimented with in order to facilitate the flow of automobile traffic. Examples are ATSAC, the Automated Traffic Surveillance and Control System that the Los Angeles Department of Transportation has placed at many intersections; and Smart Corridor, a traffic diversion system that Caltrans is experimenting with along the Santa Monica Freeway. These 'smart' systems make more efficient use of our transportation infrastructure, but also make automobiles faster and more convenient to use.

The destruction of the bus system, then, will have long-term impacts on the region, unless addressed now. In order to fully analyze strategies to revitalize and expand the bus system in Los Angeles, we must first attempt to comprehensively understand the root causes of our separate and unequal transportation system.

III. Racial Discrimination at the Core of Urban Policy: L.A.'s Separate and Unequal Mass Transportation System

What could possibly motivate a public transportation agency to destroy the public transportation system and the lives of a half million people who use it? What level of contempt for 94 percent of its passengers, whom the MTA patronizingly claims are its "customers," could warrant the unbearable conditions of people waiting on corners in droves for hours, for nothing more than a standing room only ride to a \$5 per hour job? At the level of economics, the most important characteristic of bus riders of all races is their poverty, or "profound poverty" as the MTA callously observes. The concept of a low-income working class suffering discrimination is critical for understanding MTA policy. But it is the *racial* composition and categorization of these low-income bus riders that explains the cruel and unusual punishment that our system has historically meted out for them. In this historical context, the call to "Fight Transit Racism" is the key to mobilizing a broad social movement for a first class public transportation system in Los Angeles.

In the 8 years of the Strategy Center's organizing (and 7 preceding years of its predecessor, The Labor/Community Coalition), the fight against racism has been a central struggle in every campaign, every book, every speech, and every leaflet. We see racism, against people of color in the U.S. and throughout the world, as deeply embedded in this nation's history and culture.

- In the Campaign to Keep General Motors Van Nuys Open, we challenged GM's closing of the last auto plant in Los Angeles. The workforce was 50 percent Latino, 15 percent African American, and 15 percent female. Was it a workers' rights issue, a "fight against plant closings" issue, or a democratic control of capital issue? Of course the threat to close the plant and the ensuing struggle involve all of these issues, but it was the framing of the fight around the *racism* of GM's plant closing that gave a profound edge to the overall class struggle. Framing it, correctly, as an issue of racial discrimination

helped to mobilize essential support from the city's African American and Latino communities, thus keeping the plant open for 10 years against GM's will.

- Later, the Center worked in the Los Angeles harbor area, organizing communities to confront the toxic emissions assault of oil refineries. Our critique of corporate production decision-making and the lack of protection for the public health was driven by an understanding that the vast majority of children and adults exposed to Texaco's lethal doses of air toxins were Latino immigrants.

- The Center also engaged in a fight against the federal "Weed and Seed Program." This federal program violated the civil rights and liberties of low-income communities. We understood that the target areas under the program, in which federal law would supersede state law, were almost exclusively the city's African American and Latino communities.

- In our fight against the onerous Proposition 187, we understood well that the ballot initiative was both anti-immigrant *and* anti-Mexican. After all, how many white Americans are upset about a surfeit of undocumented Canadians in the country?

The Strategy Center's anti-racist fights have been very specific in terms of issues and in terms of regions. However, neither the specific arena of the struggle nor the fact that some white people may also suffer greatly from a racist policy or action precludes the centrality of the fight against racism. Rather, in a racist society, the effort of some activists to subordinate the fight against racism to the "specifics of the issue" is strategic suicide, when it is people of color who both bear the greatest brunt of oppressive policies and must be motivated to play the greatest leadership role in the struggle against them. With this analytical and strategic background, the form that transit racism takes can now be better understood.

Because we are in the midst of a class action civil rights lawsuit, Bus Riders Union strategy teams have spent the past two years sharpening the legal proofs of a racial discrimination that we have charged politically for the past five years. First, most racial discrimination cases involve a comparison between two "classes" of people—since the proofs of the 14th Amendment's equal protection clause must show an inequality between two groups of people, in which it can be shown that the

plaintiff class suffers inferior and unequal treatment because of its racial character. This is also the proof required under Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. To be clear, even if there was no rail system, the unacceptable conditions of Los Angeles' public transportation riders could be compared to the highway riders who also receive federal funds in substantial amount, and who also benefit far more than bus riders. In our case, however, we focus on the discrepancies between bus and rail, because it is within the MTA's \$3 billion a year budget that the discrimination against the bus riders can best be proven; and it is within the arena of bus/rail allocations that funds are specifically earmarked for public transportation and are available, if the courts or a social movement can constrain rail spending, to be transferred to the bus system.

Describing and comparing the classes

A) Daily ridership

Every day 350,000 passengers use the MTA bus system, taking 1.3 million daily rides, while 26,000 passengers use the MTA's rail system, taking only 96,000 daily rides. The bus riders are 81 percent Latino, African American, Asian/Pacific Islander, and Native American, and the rail riders are about 50 percent white. But, on the most overcrowded inner-city buses the passengers are virtually 100 percent people of color, and on the most luxurious trains the passengers are almost 70 percent white. It is the apartheid-like nature of this transit system that is unusually disturbing, in which a small and declining white minority benefits so greatly from racist government policy, while an enormous and growing group of people of color suffer such abuse and discrimination.

B) Racial composition: Bus vs. rail

In cases such as *Brown v. Board of Education*, where a literal Jim Crow system was being challenged, it was hard for all but hard-core racists to justify such gross forms of racial segregation. However, in Los Angeles today, while the impacts of racism are just as pronounced, the form it takes is somewhat different, especially after some of the victories of the civil rights movement.

For example, the Metrolink is the most "white" line, with a white ridership as high as 70 percent, serving some of the last overwhelmingly white suburbs in the region. But the entire demographic form of Los Angeles is now shaped by people of color, and there are virtually no majority white areas that can be reached without going through areas dominated by people of color. Moreover, the Bradley administration and the powerful African American and Latino voting coalitions in Los Angeles have made a substantial improvement in the conditions of a rather large strata of middle class people of color, whose activities have included breaking into areas of previously lily-white suburban housing. It is based on the above facts that the MTA argues in court that it cannot be practicing racial discrimination because many of the train lines carry more than 50 percent minority ridership, and "travel through" districts with an even higher percentage of people of color.

However, these explanations fail to take into account that L.A. County is now 60 percent Latino, African American, Asian, and Native American and only 40 percent white. So, another way of understanding the bus/rail racial numbers is that on some of the most suburban trains, white people are represented by almost twice their percentage in the county. On the trains going through overwhelmingly minority communities, the white percentage is still almost the same as their population in the county. By contrast, on the buses, white ridership is only 19 percent (compared to their 40 percent of the county total), while black ridership is 22 percent (compared to their 11 percent of the county total), and Latino ridership is 47 percent (compared to 34 percent in the county). Moreover, the figure of 81 percent people of color on the bus system hides the fact that on the inner-city buses such as the Vermont 204 line—the most overcrowded bus line in the U.S. carrying 20,000 riders a day with a load factor of over 1.45—the passengers are almost entirely people of color.

These stark statistics indicate that the trains are far more heavily white and the buses are far more heavily comprised of people of color, creating a strong racial character to each mode of transportation. These numbers say a lot, but sentiments sometimes give the story an added texture: the MTA itself has had a long-standing inside joke

(until we publicized it) calling its bus system, “a third class bus system for Third World People.”

C) Economic status of ridership: Bus versus rail

Too often in the popular discourse there is a false theoretical separation, in which “working class” is used to refer to white workers while “racial” and “ethnic” is used to refer to African American, Latino, and Asian communities, presented as totally undifferentiated in terms of their own class structure. But, it is as a discrete group that low-income people of color, the primary constituents that make up the class of bus riders, have been the victims of a number of brutal economic forces.

First, the higher-paid unionized jobs that African Americans and Latinos fought their way into during the 1960s are for the most part gone—casualties as the U.S. made its brutal transition back to a low-wage nation and job exporter. The lower-wage working class jobs that have stayed in the U.S., with minimal job security, are filled by women and, increasingly, immigrants of color. Because of the disappearance of the unionized, high-wage jobs, “cyclical unemployment” has been replaced by *structural* unemployment, particularly in the black community. There is now a justified reluctance among many black men, in particular, to accept jobs that are clearly exploitative and of extremely low wage rates. Also, there is clear prejudice among employers against African Americans because of their history of militant and principled leadership in social justice movements.

Second, the former role of the social welfare state to buttress low-wage workers from the worst ravages of a market economy is now under frontal attack from President Clinton and the Democrats, who agree that low-income women and men of color must be forcibly weaned from a “culture of dependence.” The massive resources of government are now more than ever turned to support large corporations in the world market and to pacify a voracious and racist white middle-class electorate, who simultaneously rail against “welfare” while supplementing their income through government-financed homeowners tax credits, FEMA earthquake relief payments, tax write-offs for home “business” expenses, and suburban rail systems with lap top computer terminals and childcare centers. As a result, the

low-wage working class must desperately struggle to beg, borrow, or steal enough funds to buy food, housing, clothing, education, transportation, and medical care in the market.

Third, the briefly fashionable view held during the 1960’s that society had some obligation to provide decent-paying jobs or adequate income for all its members has been replaced by the ideology of “an end to welfare as we know it” and the racialization, feminization, and criminalization of poverty. Laws such as “Three strikes and you’re out” and the re-legalization of the death penalty in many states are clearly aimed at incarcerating and killing African American and Latino youth, who are also overwhelmingly poor and working class.

Thus, it is the African American, Latino, and Asian poor people who cannot afford existing MTA fares. It is the explosive relationship of *identity* between an increasingly minority (and female) low-wage workforce and an increasingly stratified U.S. class structure that goes to the heart of our civil rights challenge.

How racism and class privilege translate into the transportation realm

A) Overcrowding

On a recent investigative trip on the Metrolink commuter rail to Santa Clarita during rush hour, Chris Mathis, Della Bonner and Eric Mann had a chilling experience—where the race and class privilege of the riders defied even our most imaginative stereotypes. These are truly the “choice riders” the MTA is trying to cultivate, and they acted out the part. Their time on the Metrolink was characterized by the very social nature of the ride, their knowledge of one another’s names, and their “regulars” camaraderie reminiscent of the bar stool patrons at “Cheers.” This social atmosphere included showing each other pictures of their summer homes and, to our amazement (at the coincidence, not the content), one rider boasted that he had just “hustled the MTA into a \$10 million contract to study ways to subcontract and privatize bus systems.” For them, the train was a traveling living room, if not a bar car. We walked through three of the cars, including the glamorous upper deck, and observed a load factor during peak rush hour of about .6 to .7, that is, for every 10

seats only six to seven people were occupying them. People had room for their briefcases, their legs, their packages, and yes, their picture books of their summer homes.

Even more astounding, the next train back to Los Angeles returned virtually empty. Two black youths from Compton were on the train, having just returned from Magic Mountain, an amusement park in Valencia. Several MTA personnel were taking their last ride back before leaving work and, except for the few of us, the train was running on empty. Thus, with the return trip factored in, the overall load factor for the round trip was about .4.

The next day we rode the Line 60 bus from downtown Los Angeles into the Alameda corridor, a center of low-wage, overwhelmingly Latino employment. There we rode a bus that was entirely Latino, African American, and Asian, with an average of 15 people standing in the aisles on their way to work, and as many as 27 standees at the peak of the peak. This was as clear an illustration as we had seen of the idea that the MTA buses are designed to treat the low-wage workers of Los Angeles as cattle, to be transported as cheaply as possible.

B) Dependability

Professionals in Los Angeles have one of the great luxuries of all workers, the ability to show up late and offer a casual off-hand excuse: "Traffic you know," or "I had trouble getting out the door today." These are the usual platitudes of privilege. For low-wage workers, on the other hand, most of whom live and die by the time card, more than 50 percent of terminations are because of tardiness. Bus Riders Union member Norma Henry observed, "I get up so early to make sure I am at work on time. Why should I have to give an hour of my time each day to the MTA to make sure I am not late? When I try to explain that the bus was late I realize I am losing my credibility, even with myself." Ric Romero, an employee at Quiznos deli and a member of the Bus Riders Union, repeats the same lament: "I have to open up the place each day and if I'm late I'm in big trouble. How is it possible that one day I show up on the corner in Hollywood and I'm here in 45 minutes, and the next day, exact same corner, exact same time, it's an hour and half? What is wrong with these people?"

Our Metrolink experience to Santa Clarita included becoming familiar with the Santa Clarita

municipal bus service. When we arrived at Santa Clarita, there were three buses waiting for us, almost like chauffeured limousines waiting for their masters to get off the train. The idea that the poor people of color wait for the buses, but the buses wait for the suburban, white commuter in Santa Clarita is a little much to take.

C) Subsidy per passenger

One of the most egregious forms of racial discrimination within L.A.'s transit system is that of subsidy per passenger. In essence, the MTA is not subsidizing the bus rider, but rather the bus riders are actually subsidizing the MTA, which then subsidizes rail contractors and suburban commuters at outrageous levels. The question of subsidy goes to the heart of this debate, for it concerns nothing less than the way that society distributes collectively-produced wealth back to individuals, classes, and races. The question of subsidy also involves the ideological mechanisms that are used to justify how our government helps the rich get richer and poor get poorer.

To begin with, the subsidy per passenger is essentially the cost of the service divided by the number of people who use it. In a racially equitable society, each MTA passenger would pay the same sales tax, pay the same fare, and receive the same quality and quantity of service regardless of the mode of transportation they use. The two extreme examples of subsidy in Los Angeles illustrate well how the MTA practices transit racism. We will compare the most overcrowded (and heavily used) bus line in the United States, the Vermont Line 204, and the Metrolink commuter train to Santa Clarita.

The Metrolink passenger receives a total subsidy of \$21.02 per ride, while the Vermont line passenger receives a subsidy of 33 cents. Within that, the capital cost of the Metrolink is \$17.19 and the operating subsidy is \$3.83, whereas the 33 cent subsidy for the Vermont Line riders is too minuscule to even divide into components.

Every day in Los Angeles the Vermont line carries more than 20,000 people on a north/south route from South L.A. into North Hollywood. Its passengers are more than 95 percent people of color, packed into the bus so tightly that the driver keeps yelling, "Step back, step back," and in every language imaginable they are telling her, "Step back where, out the back window?" The MTA

pays virtually nothing for the route because there are so many riders on each bus, many of these riders paid \$1.35 per ride plus a 25 cent transfer, and each bus is averaging 8 years in age and 350,000 miles in usage, its capital costs long since having been covered. Moreover, each person on that bus is paying a 1 cent sales tax per dollar to the MTA. Most of them have no idea they are doing so. These 20,000 riders on just one bus line are more than double the passengers on the entire Green Line rail system that cost \$800 million to build and that the MTA was able to build partially because it makes money on the bus system. This is the picture of what a racist subsidy system looks like, ending mass transportation as we know it.

IV. The Billions for Buses Plan: For Once, Mass Transportation for the Masses

Los Angeles could have a first-class public mass transit system, serving low-income people, well-paid working people and even the upper middle class, if they are willing, that is, to mingle with "the masses." It could serve Latinos, African Americans, Asian/Pacific Islanders, Native Americans and whites, women and men, inner city and suburbs, students, the elderly, and the disabled. In theory, this first class mass transit system could dramatically reduce auto use, and reduce noxious and lethal emissions from autos, thereby improving the public health. It could bring low-income workers to their jobs, help out-of-work workers look for jobs before President Clinton's "five year and starve" rule takes effect, serve night-shift janitors and day-shift professionals. By dramatically reducing auto use, it could generate more pedestrian centers, bringing the races together through a transportation system that is more social and far more rich culturally than the private automobile. By dramatically reducing fares, increasing service, and giving high-speed buses the right-of-way, it could increase daily mass transit use—some estimate doubling the present level of bus riders from 350,000 to 700,000 per day over a decade of consistent improvement.

A first-class bus system that comes on-time and with such regularity that you don't need to call the MTA for a schedule would allow the elderly to break out of their home-prison of fear and loneliness, allow disabled residents in wheelchairs rapid and courteous service, permit high school students from the inner city to travel to good schools around the county in a reasonable amount of time, and allow working men and women to take their children to childcare, visit their sick relatives, and take the entire family to a park or beach without a care or a car.

In theory this new vision of urban transportation could cure as many ills as penicillin, jogging, and a low-fat, high-fiber diet combined—providing green jobs to produce electric buses in

job-starved areas, creating new bus shelters and bus depots in blighted communities, and allowing an exhausted working class to consider going to parks, museums, and free concerts miles away. Moreover, with an immediate moratorium on rail funding and either a movement or a court-imposed policy for massive funding of the bus system, the following key demands of the Billions for Buses plan would make this vision come to life.

1) A low fare public transportation system: A fifty cent bus fare and \$20 unlimited use monthly bus pass

When we propose this idea to MTA officials they try to look at us as if they are taking us seriously, but their smirks are hard to ignore. "You are talking about fifty million dollars, perhaps 100 million dollars to reduce the fare box recovery that much," they argue, and in fact they are right. For the MTA to spend funds on dramatically reducing its entire fare structure might cost as much as \$100 million a year. But, this figure is still substantially less than the \$150 million in cost overruns and change orders that the MTA approved, over and above already contracted rail expenses, for fiscal year 1996 alone.

Moreover, because the MTA has worked out a sweetheart deal with the municipal bus operators with whom it subcontracts—essentially allowing them to give a higher subsidy to their suburban and wealthier passengers than the MTA gives to the passengers of the majority "minority" lines throughout the city—many of the utopian fare structures that the Bus Riders Union is demanding already exist! For example, Santa Clarita transit, covering an enormous outlying region of suburban Los Angeles, offers Metrolink passengers, who already receive a \$21 rail subsidy per ride, and all the other residents of the area the following fare structure:

- One way cash fare: 75 cents
- Transfer: free
- Monthly bus pass \$20

Funny how the idea of a low-fare bus system for the urban poor generates incredulous responses from MTA officials while they are already providing or facilitating such benefits for wealthy

suburbanites who need no subsidy, but live the subsidized life.

MTA policymakers try to resist any efforts to *reduce* bus fares, acting as if there is some law of fare physics, “What goes up can never come down.” We respond as follows. “First, in 1982 you reduced the bus fare from 85 cents to 50 cents. It has been done before and it can be done again. Second, the wages of the lowest quartile of the Los Angeles and national working class have declined significantly over the past 5 years. For them the cost of living has increased dramatically, but not their wages, so why can’t we reduce the cost of their ride? Third, you have used teaser fares on the Red Line of 25 cents, free transfers to MTA buses for Red Line and other rail users, three day ‘free’ fares, and a very low flat fare for the Blue Line, all to attract customers and artificially boost ridership numbers to justify massive investments. Why not a significantly lower bus fare, not for the purposes of justifying investments, but to create a viable public transportation system? Fourth, the money in your coffers came from the taxpayers and passengers and should be allocated in a way that serves the majority of them.”

When Martín Hernández, an organizer for the Bus Riders Union, asked one of the bus passengers what she thought about a \$20 bus pass and 50 cent bus fare, she replied, “Well, that’s what I can afford, so I think that’s fair.” That sentiment has been repeated to us by the more than 1,100 dues-paying members of the Bus Riders Union. The Bus Riders Union’s idea that *bus prices should be based on what the transit dependent can afford* is certainly a radical idea in our present market-based political climate and system. It is for precisely this reason that the BRU focuses its energies on organizing the bus riders themselves, not those who benefit from their exploitation.

In examining the predicament of the transit dependent in Los Angeles, let’s focus on income levels. Sixty percent of the MTA bus riders have *family* incomes of less than \$15,000. For a family of five, with one spouse working full-time, another part-time or “off the books” at home, and three children taking the bus to public school, the *family* payments to the MTA are as follows:

- 2 adult bus passes at \$49—\$98 per month
- 3 student bus passes at \$25—\$75 per month

Unbelievably, the transportation costs for that family are \$173 a month or \$2,076 a year—almost 15 percent of their gross income. Thus, a \$20 monthly bus pass for each adult, and a \$10 monthly bus pass for each student would reduce the monthly cost per family from \$173 a month to \$70 a month. This still comes to \$840 a year, but constitutes a much more reasonable 5 percent of their total gross family income.

The role of the low-price \$20 bus pass, of course, is to “preempt” the higher-priced 50 cent bus fare. At 50 cents a ride, with a free transfer, the average 100 trips per month for the transit dependent would cost \$50 without a monthly pass. So, if the bus pass is such a good deal, saving daily riders a significant amount of money, why don’t all poor people or all “smart shoppers” buy a bus pass? The answer is that the poor are always penalized for being poor. Accumulating \$49 a month (the present MTA bus pass) assumes two things about the bus rider. First, the rider must have \$49 in one installment in the last few days of the month in order to buy the next month’s pass. Second, the rider must attain a level of personal “organization” and functionality to allow a trip, often by bus, to buy the pass. Many low-income people have neither of these luxuries. To begin with, if you are a minimum wage worker making \$5 an hour, and you are “lucky” enough to get a full 160 hours a month work, your monthly take home is about \$700. After purchasing food, clothing, and just a few minor luxuries, and with the rent due on the first of the month, to have \$49 out of your last week’s take home pay of \$175 at the same time that the rent is due is a minor miracle.

Moreover, if you don’t have time to go to buy the pass, and just take the bus back and forth to work for three days before you have time to buy one, you have already spent \$3.20 a day or \$9.60. This cost, added to that of the bus pass, now raises your monthly transportation to \$58.60. Thus, the BRU’s demand for a \$20 monthly bus pass is very “realistic” based on the needs and actual income of the vast majority of the MTA’s riders. The availability of a low-price pass and a policy of paying for the pass in installments, if necessary, will allow far more daily riders to purchase one, thereby increasing bus ridership as well.

In attempting to rebut our charges that the Los Angeles MTA has violated the Equal Protection clause of the 14th Amendment and is denying low-income people of color viable public transportation, the MTA argued in papers to the federal judge:

Plaintiffs papers filed with this Court read as though there is a federal right to free or subsidized public transportation. In fact, there is no constitutional or other federal right to subsidized monthly passes or \$1.10 cash fares. If there were, New York's transit fare structure could not survive because it does not provide for monthly passes or discount tokens. And if there were a right to a deeply discounted monthly pass, Chicago's \$72 monthly passes may well be illegal.

Leaving aside the obvious organizing and legal possibilities for other challenges to transit racism in Chicago, New York, and other cities implied by the MTA's excellent suggestions for action, the dominant ideology put forth in these comments is that transportation fares may be unfair and even deny people mobility, but they are not illegal. It is the work of the Bus Riders Union to publicize the demand that affordable, efficient mass transportation is a human right. This demand alone is turning the transportation debate on its head, for once advocating that the needs of the riders must take precedence.

2) Creating a viable bus system: Doubling the MTA's bus fleet in 8 years through the purchase of 250 new buses a year, plus an additional 500 replacement buses over the next 3 years—for a total of 2,500 new buses

Los Angeles is one of the largest and most spatially spread-out urban centers in the United States. A bus system is the only type of mass transportation mode that is flexible enough to serve such an area. Our objectives in massively expanding the bus fleet are multiple.

A) Expansion of the bus fleet would reduce overcrowding.

The Bus Riders Union is proposing that of the 2,500 new buses that the MTA must purchase, at least 750 of them must be used to reduce maximum load levels during peak hours to a load ratio of 1.1. This policy would, again, put forth a radical concept—that in return for a bus fare, most bus riders should be able to sit down either immediately or within a stop or two. The MTA bus system is the most overcrowded in the United States, with an "acceptable" load standard of 1.45 at peak. This means that, during the six peak hours of service, the average number of standees on the buses is approximately 20 people. This level of overcrowding is brutally unacceptable.

By contrast, the MTA has planned its most expensive suburban rail line, the Metrolink, with a load factor of .75, which means that for every four seats it is only planning 3 riders *at peak*, allowing one free seat in case someone wants to put her computer down. The 1.1 load factor is very reasonable and assumes that a Latina, African American, Asian, or white low-income bus rider should be allowed at least the same rights as a suburban commuters' lap top computer. Moreover, until the MTA institutes such a policy, bus riders should not be required to pay for standing up. Working with transportation planners and many of the MTA's ridership statistics that document overcrowding levels, we estimate it will take at least 750 new buses to decrease overcrowding to a 1.1 maximum peak load ratio—given decreased fares, increased service, and therefore, increased transit demand.

B) Expansion of the bus fleet would dramatically increase bus ridership by at least 25 percent in three years, with the goal of doubling ridership over 10 years.

Through spending the vast majority of its discretionary funds on the rail system, allowing service to deteriorate, raising its fares, and allowing many of its buses to become unrepairable, the MTA has presided over the single most devastating dismantling of a public transportation system in recent U.S. history. This dismantling process has resulted in a decline in ridership despite the fact that the need for services has increased. This duality is reflected in the fact that, though the need for transit services has increased as the population of Los Angeles County has grown by 774,000

between 1985 and 1995, ridership has decreased by over 134 million in the same period.

The connection between the size of the fleet and ridership levels is compelling. The decline in ridership began in 1985, after a three-year period in which ridership had expanded by 41 percent. This expansion was due to both the reduced fare that was in effect from 1982 to 1985 *and* the fact that the bus system had the capacity (albeit with difficulty, sometimes at 180 percent capacity at rush hour) to handle increasing numbers of riders because the fleet was relatively large, reaching a height of 3,000 vehicles in 1984. In parallel terms, the trend towards declining ridership beginning in 1985 was due, in part, to the increase in fares *and* the fact that the MTA had declining vehicle capacity for riders because the agency spent no money to purchase new buses from 1986 onward. Even the replacement buses were purchased far behind schedule.

In response to the downward trends in ridership, the Bus Riders Union has done its own research, thanks to the work of transportation planner Ryan Snyder, former RTD chief financial officer Tom Rubin, and Chris Mathis and Eric Mann's many discussions with MTA transit planners who are sympathetic to the need for more bus purchases. These planners refer to and we celebrate the "cascading effect"—that is, the more buses the MTA buys the less overcrowding there is, and the more consumer demand will be generated, producing another trend towards overcrowding and the subsequent need to buy even more buses to again reduce load factors. In other words, the combination of lower load factors, improvements in existing service, and lower fares will create a demand for new service. The Bus Riders Union conservatively estimates a 10 percent increase in ridership from a fare reduction, significant service improvements and aggressive pass marketing after the first year. We also estimate a 25 percent increase in ridership based on sustained improvements after three years in which overcrowding levels are maintained at 1.1; and up to a 50 percent increase in ridership over 5 years under our plan. The MTA does not dispute these estimates. In fact, Alan Pegg, the former head of RTD, put forth views that support the BRU's analysis, arguing that there is such pent up demand for bus service that *any* reduction in fares or increases in the total number of buses would generate many

more customers for the MTA. Thus, we uphold the radical argument that one purpose of a public transportation agency is to encourage, rather than discourage, the public to use public transportation.

C) Expansion of the bus fleet would provide high-quality bus service on "off peak" hours, for in Los Angeles "rush hour" is virtually all day.

In L.A., with people having so many different work, school, and family-driven schedules, many of the most overcrowded lines show very little distinction between "peak" and "off peak"—especially because the MTA runs most bus lines at overcapacity. The expansion of the late-night, mid-afternoon, and weekend bus service will require more bus purchases, since those are some of the areas in which bus cuts have been made.

D) Expansion of the bus fleet would create viable north/south, east/west transfers for the hundreds of thousands of daily riders who take at least two buses to their destination.

At present, the wait for buses at key transfer points is intolerable. Resolution of this problem will also involve dramatic expansion of the fleet. Most bus riders are traveling north/south and east/west with *at least* one connection in a county of 4,000 square miles. If headways are reduced on the main north/south arteries, but people still have to wait 20 more minutes for the east/west connection, the system doesn't work. It is precisely expansion of service on all major arteries that will allow a viable transfer system to work.

E) Expansion of the bus fleet would provide long-distance, low-fare limited stop and express service—allowing inner-city residents true mobility in the county.

Los Angeles' economy, job market, and public resources—parks, beaches, museums, universities, hospitals—are *regional* in nature. The economy is made up of a moving, shifting, decentralized group of small business centers, many of which have at their foundation low-wage industries.

Because of the county's spatial and economic framework, transportation in the Los Angeles region needs to be flexible and must cross municipal boundaries and even county lines. We, thus, take issue with the MTA's efforts to reduce our discussion to an "inner city" focus, rather than

addressing an overall regional transportation plan that recognizes that "minority" and poor populations live virtually everywhere and must have access to all parts of the Los Angeles region to meet basic needs.

To deal with the problem of first class public transportation provision over an enormous geographic area, the Bus Riders Union has been advocating new freeway express service for buses. Currently in Los Angeles County, there are approximately 55 bus lines operating express service on freeways. However, several problems exist with this system: (1) It is primarily oriented between suburban locations and downtown Los Angeles. Only 8 percent of the county's jobs are there. People need to be able to get to other important work centers such as the LAX area, Pasadena/Glendale/Burbank, Westwood/Century City, Mid-Wilshire, Van Nuys and Warner Center to name some of the most important ones; (2) The service is primarily oriented one-way, again to downtown Los Angeles. People need service which goes *out* from transit-dependent neighborhoods to other areas as well; (3) Some of the service operates only during peak commute hours. To be dependable and to serve people who need to travel outside peak periods for work, medical purposes, etc., it must run throughout the day, well into the evening, and on weekends; (4) Some of the lines take long, circuitous routes on surface streets before entering the freeway.

In short, we must implement a county-wide bus improvement plan that includes a significant expansion of MTA long-distance service to areas in which MTA service is non-existent or non-viable. Our proposed system would expand to serve important centers outside downtown Los Angeles, operate bi-directionally, have shorter headways, operate all day long and on weekends, and would emanate and terminate in more locations along the freeways. Some transit experts have estimated an ideal express system such as the one described above would require over 1,000 additional buses. We accept the more basic plan of 500-600 buses, however, with a focus on the needs of the transit-dependent.

F) Expansion of the bus fleet would include the modernization of the existing fleet through a process of replacing old buses with new.

In discussions with the MTA, the agency has acknowledged that many of its buses are over their 12 year projected use, are "down" for repair much of the year, and are being kept on the road only because the MTA does not want to spend funds to replace them. Bus drivers tell us a far more harrowing stories: "The bus fleet is in shambles," and "My bus is falling apart at the seams." Existing bus improvement plans attempt to avoid replacing old buses in the existing fleet let alone expanding it. We demand that, of the 2,000 buses in the current fleet, a minimum of 300 new replacement buses be purchased immediately, and 500 by the end of three years.

G) Expansion of the bus fleet would occur in combination with a process of making buses safer and more accessible to all riders.

A doubling of security expenditures, directed especially to late-night hour security on buses and at bus stops, as well as strict rules of conduct for MTA police to protect passenger civil rights and civil liberties will make the buses safer places. These security measures would be accompanied by an immediate inventory of all needs for disabled passengers, including the blind, such as the usage of wheelchair ramps and the training and education of drivers to fully comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act.

Moreover, the key to increased bus security is more buses, not more police. Reducing the overcrowding on the buses and the long waits on dangerous street corners is far more cost effective than padding the MTA police force—a maneuver Mayor Riordan is trying to accomplish to solve a campaign promise to hire 1,000 new police. In addition, a pilot project should be initiated for neighborhood escort services to hire youth to escort people to their homes or to help elderly or disabled passengers on the buses.

3) Alternative fuels and environmentally-advanced buses: Using the public sector to subsidize, through purchase, truly advanced low and zero-emission fuels

The Strategy Center has been the strongest proponent of clean fuel buses in the city, and was instrumental in both expanding the compressed natural gas component of the MTA bus fleet, and in defeating efforts to reinstitute diesel, or its latest incarnation, “clean diesel,” as the vehicle of choice for the MTA. At each stage, the Strategy Center has worked with clean fuels and environmental scientists, to advocate the latest in advanced clean fuel technology.

Nonetheless, we have to be careful about advocating for new technologies before they are fully viable, especially in terms of long-term costly purchases. For example, in the past few years, under pressure from environmental regulations, the MTA has purchased approximately 330 ethanol and methanol vehicles, which have turned out to have myriad mechanical problems. Many of these vehicles are not even on the road. We have presently been supporting the use of compressed natural gas (CNG) vehicles, only to find that a few weeks ago a major explosion on one of the CNG buses forced the MTA to temporarily pull 120 of the 150 vehicles out of operation.

These events with alternative buses have been set-backs, but they have not had an impact on the philosophy behind the environmental component to our work. We support the use of public funds, as environmental scientist Barry Commoner has advocated, to purchase advanced and experimental vehicles from manufacturers who need markets to fund their work. While we oppose the directing of any governmental research and development funds to strictly profit-driven manufacturers, we support the use of contract *purchases* to buy limited numbers of hydrogen fuel cell and electric battery buses—to jump start a series of environmentally driven pilot projects.

For example, there is a manufacturer, Speciality Vehicles, in the city of Downey of the southeast industrial corridor of Los Angeles, making electric battery buses. Speciality has a contract with the Chattanooga, Tennessee municipal bus

system to provide them with vehicles, knowing that one of Chattanooga transit’s objectives is to eventually manufacture the buses in their own city. The MTA has so far refused to buy even one battery-driven bus from Speciality, a technology with many problems of recharging so far, but still, one that could be used on heavily traveled straight line shots such as the Vermont Line. The Billions for Buses plan involves using MTA funds to purchase small numbers of both electric, and when available, hydrogen fuel cell buses in pilot projects to test their mechanical viability and dependability, and to consistently increase their numbers if positive results are forthcoming.

4) Community economic conversion and development

In movement terms, “economic conversion” is usually restricted to the peace movement’s important efforts to demand that the federal government dramatically restrict the military/industrial complex and invest in socially useful production. “Community economic development” is a notion that, too often, has been shaped by corporate and political elites trying to tie community groups to the corporate agenda. Corporations use this practice with the goal of precluding militant and more structural demands on the system—encouraging Latino, African American, Asian, and poor white working class community activists to adopt an entrepreneurial strategy. This usually results in the co-optation of community leadership under the mantra of “empowerment,” the diversion of community energy and focus, and actual *reductions* in community wealth and political power. (For a detailed analysis of the corporatization of community movements and a methodology to develop an alternate model of community economic development, see the Strategy Center’s report, *Reconstructing Los Angeles—and U.S. Cities—from the Bottom Up*.)

At its best, however, community economic development could contain a radical notion—that the fights over society’s economic resources, and over the choices made by federal, state, regional, and municipal governments and agencies reflect a critical arena for the struggle for economic justice. This struggle contextualizes the fight between rich and poor, between the use and abuse of public

funds, and between a military appropriation of the budget and a focus on human services. These political choices, until new terms can be constructed and agreed upon, can reside within the categories called economic conversion and community economic development, and will be given meaning and content in the analysis that follows.

The Los Angeles region contains too much military production, not enough civilian, environmentally-sound production, a very low-wage labor base, an anti-union labor climate, and massive levels of unemployment in areas such as South Central Los Angeles. In addition to transforming the mobility of low-income people, the use of public funds to construct a first-class mass transit system has great potential to address the employment, community development, and industrial production problems described above.

A) The demand that the federal courts mandate massive shifts in funds towards the bus system and away from rail, and essentially place the MTA in trusteeship, is a form of economic conversion within the MTA, supporting the Billions for Buses plan of the Bus Riders Union.

This sharpens the class content of "economic conversion" to demand that government funds directly serve the transportation needs of low-income people and communities of color.

B) Key elements of economic development should be the protection, support, and creation of unionized, high-wage jobs, all of which require that the MTA have an anti-privatization policy that protects and creates public sector jobs.

The results of transit privatization are clear—"efficiency" is simply a code for private profit and the public expense. To begin with, service for riders can deteriorate drastically under privatization. In Fairfax County, Virginia, Miami, and New Orleans, public transportation authorities broke contracts due to irresponsible and unsafe service-provision and contract management performed by the private contractors.

Moreover, pro- and anti-privatization forces agree that the major element of cost-saving for private transit contractors is the reduction of wages and benefits. Transportation planner Alan Black writes that "Bus drivers for the Kansas City Area Transportation Authority, who have a union,

received a top scale of \$13.07 per hour in 1990. In nearby Johnson County, Kansas, where a private firm supplied the service and there was no union, the maximum wage was \$7.00 per hour. A Florida union official stated that private firms 'can hire people easily for half the price that they pay our people.'" Black also refers to a 1986 study that showed that the compensation level for unionized bus drivers at private firms was 21 percent less than that for public agency bus drivers and that compensation for non-unionized bus drivers at private companies was 45 percent lower than that for drivers at public systems.

The debate surrounding transit privatization is particularly pertinent to Los Angeles because there is a clear ideological trend at the MTA towards increased contracting out of bus lines and operations. The Bus Riders Union opposes any plans for privatization and contracting out based on the direct correlation between privatization and the busting of unions and the depression of wages. The ideological trend towards privatization has manifested itself in two ways recently in Los Angeles:

(1) There is the constant threat that more MTA bus lines will be contracted out to private companies such as Foothill Transit, which already runs more than 20 bus lines that were formerly run directly by the MTA. William Forsythe, President of Forsythe and Associates, Inc., which manages Foothill's administrative operations, and Foothill Transit's major contractor, Laidlaw, are consistent players in MTA politics, pushing for further contracting out of services. In 1993 and 1994, they contributed well over \$10,000 to different members of the MTA Board. Mayor Riordan received at least \$2,500 in contributions from them. Not surprisingly, during the 1994 MTA transit strike, Mayor Riordan played a major role in a settlement that forced the union to accept the contracting out of 13 more bus lines—most of which went to Foothill.

Currently, whereas the unionized bus drivers of the MTA earn an average hourly wage of \$18.45, Foothill Transit's contractors pay their drivers \$11 per hour. The myth of the "happy privatized worker" was exploded when the MTA bus drivers went on strike for the radical demand of company-paid medical benefits and a raise, only to be forced back to work broken and defeated

when the company threatened to replace them with permanent strike breakers.

(2) One of the chief executives of the MTA recently lauded the "London model" of transit provision as one that should be emulated by the MTA. It appeared that he was attracted to the model because the London transportation agency runs relatively few bus lines itself, but instead, simply takes public money and dispenses it to private contractors. London's system was gradually contracted out under a scheme similar to that of cities in the United States. Between 1985 and 1993 around 5 percent of the total network has been newly contracted out each year. By 1995, just under 50 percent of London's bus miles were secured through contracting out. Cost savings under contracting out in London are estimated to be at 14 percent, while hourly wage reductions among transit workers during the same period are estimated to be at 16 percent. Thus, again, the great majority of savings under that plan of privatization came directly from labor. The Bus Riders Union must be vigilant in its opposition to privatization as the MTA talks about emulating the gradual plan of contracting out that comes from London.

It is clear that privatization is brutal public policy. If government officials want to force down the wages of bus drivers, janitors, and secretaries while allowing 344 percent cost overruns for rail contractors they should just say so, and stop putting forth humble offerings to the gods of "efficiency." It was precisely in the public sector that the major employment gains of the civil rights movement were won. The BRU understands that these gains must be protected and expanded. The Bus Riders Union will not fight to improve bus service at the cost of allowing the MTA to lay-off or reduce the wages of decently paid, unionized, minority and female workers.

C) The MTA should use its contracting power to create a bus production system in South Los Angeles, with manufacturers of electric/ hydrogen fuel cell buses at its core.

Many bus manufacturers can operate with annual orders of 200 buses, and employ approximately 200 to 300 production workers accompanied by additional clerical and support staff. These manufacturers could supplement their

sales to the Los Angeles MTA with sales to other areas around the country, generating more jobs in Los Angeles. MTA contracts for CNG, electric, or other low or zero emission buses, should be given to employers who will hire from high unemployment areas. The workforce within this bus production system should be unionized and well-paid.

D) Military funds should be diverted to non-polluting mass transit.

The Pentagon budget should be targeted for billions of dollars in new public funds for both peace/civilian and environmentally-constructive jobs. Movements such as that of the Bus Riders Union should not limit their federal search for funds to the Department of Transportation and ISTEA, but should also demand a dramatic seizure of funds from the Pentagon budget for bus and other urban transportation operating and capital costs.

E) Federal officials must create oversight mechanisms to stop politicians from using ISTEA's flexible federal funding options as vote-seeking tools for the construction of rail projects, and, instead, allow funds for the direct purchase of vehicles, road improvements to handle bus service, and bus operating funds for the long-term.

F) The MTA should work with local merchants, neighborhood groups, and area planning groups to develop local bus routes that more explicitly carry the urban poor to areas that have high concentrations of available jobs, that link commercial/retail areas with consumers, and that link community residents to services and goods that they need.

G) The MTA should initiate and pay for a community bus depot construction program.

These community depots would be built by local, unionized, well-paid workers and would be supplemented by a series of better-constructed bus shelters that have shade, designs, water fountains, and bus schedules, replacing our current bus stops that are a metal pole with a bus route sign on it (unless they are the "deluxe" model that boasts a plastic awning). The goal would be to use bus depots as community institutions—highly visible like those designed by the Project for Public

Space. These bus depots could become the hub of local community development projects, with community designers generating newsstands, small stores, pedestrian malls, and high-security lighting and escort services as a way of revitalizing communities. Rather than speculative developers buying up property in anticipation of a rail station that may never have many passengers, the bus depot project could attract undercapitalized businesses, giving preference to women and minority designers, architects, and artists to design, along with community input, capital projects of a more modest but still substantial level—e.g. about \$1 million in land acquisition, \$1 million in construction costs per depot.

H) All jobs bid by MTA contracts guaranteed no lower than \$8 an hour, with non-interference in union activities and affirmative action hiring built into the contract structure.

5) Political democracy and grass-roots policy making

The MTA has proven that, as an agency, it is not capable of making decisions that are to the benefit of its ridership or to the region as a whole. It has proven that it will disregard “community input” language in federal legislation such as ISTEA by reducing it to one-minute angry shouts during “public comment” at MTA meetings, followed by back room deals with members of the political and business elite. The Bus Riders Union proposes the following reforms.

A) Each transit passenger, regardless of mode, should receive the same subsidy within a 10 percent margin. Just as the state law requires that each student in the public schools receive the same “subsidy” from taxpayers’ money to prevent some public schools from becoming, in essence, private schools with public funds, similarly the MTA should strictly enforce a passenger equality funding plan.

B) All MTA board members should be elected in districts of no more than 500,000 people, leading to an elected 18 member board in a county of 9 million. Districts should be drawn to guarantee substantial representation of all ethnic and racial groups.

C) All MTA meetings should be held on week-day evenings or Saturdays to allow truly mass participation.

D) All MTA members should be required to attend all public hearings on budget items and should be banned from eating, caucusing, using portable phones, or leaving their seat vacant for hours.

E) All MTA members should be prohibited from receiving campaign contributions from any contractors who seek funds from the agency.

F) The MTA should be prohibited from using the MTA police to threaten, intimidate, hit, or beat protesting bus riders and other critics of the agency. Unarmed security should be used to deal with extreme cases of disruptive behavior by unarmed protesters. Public and collective expressions of anger and protest must be protected and legitimized. The MTA cannot both attack the public with its policies and then restrict the rights of those who suffer as a result.

G) All agendas and public documents should be translated into Spanish and other languages as requested. Translation should be provided at all meetings for Spanish, Korean, and other languages as needed. The time limits for speech, such as a 3-minute rule, should be applied to the spoken word of the person, not the translation time.

H) All MTA members should be required to ride public transit to all MTA board meetings, and at least one day per week as well. Without proof of such usage they should be removed from the board for cause.

I) Any organized group that can run a slate of candidates that receives at least 20 percent of the vote in three board districts or more should receive an at-large seat, unless they succeed in electing at least one board member through a majority.

This comprehensive program has been in the process of development for more than five years, and will take many years if not decades to achieve. It provides a comprehensive, policy-driven direction to a social movement of low-income people. It explains why the BRU is being called “The MTA in exile.”

V. The Labor/Community Strategy Center's and Bus Riders Union's Role in the L.A. Transit Fight: Strategy and Tactics in the Struggle for Public Transportation

The Labor/Community Strategy Center was founded in 1989, and initiated its Transportation Policy Group in 1991. The entry into transportation policy and organizing provided a new component to the strategy that guides all of our work—the building of multiracial movements of low-income people, predominantly people of color and women, to challenge profit-driven policies of transnational corporations that are in direct conflict with the needs of working people. Every major campaign that we have waged—fighting for dramatic reductions in the toxic emissions of L.A.'s oil refineries; demanding that the South Coast Air Quality Management District enforce environmental law and protect public health; defeating a federal “anti-crime” program, Weed and Seed, that criminalized communities of color; advocating the rights of immigrants and opposing California's Proposition 187; and demanding a first-class mass transportation system in Los Angeles—has combined key components of the struggle for environmental justice and the protection of the civil rights and liberties of low-income people of color.

Our initiation of the Campaign for Mass Transportation and Environmental Justice, as we first conceptualized it, began with a commitment to a dramatic expansion of bus service and a dramatic reduction in fossil fuel-based auto use. We understood that the core of any campaign would involve directly organizing low-income people, but as in any project, the first step is to consult broadly, to listen, and to learn.

We sought out the advice of two members of the Rapid Transit District (RTD) whom we knew, Marvin Holen and Antonio Villaraigosa. We listened for hours as they laid out the contours of

the transit crisis in Los Angeles. Both of them repeated similar themes:

- (1) The bus system is the workhorse of public transportation in Los Angeles, but it is underfunded, overcrowded, and rapidly deteriorating;
- (2) The LACTC is spending the vast majority of discretionary money on the rail system, rather than buses, and there is no organized constituency powerful enough to stop it;
- (3) The RTD, and the bus system it is trying to serve, is the stepchild of the transit system, receiving only the scanty resources left over from LACTC projects.

Villaraigosa explained that he had publicly protested that the average security subsidy on the Blue Line was \$1.17 per passenger while on the buses it was only 3 cents. He used this as a symbol of the “double standard” in mass transportation. While neither Villaraigosa nor Holen used specific phrases such as “separate and unequal” or “in violation of the 1964 Civil Rights Act,” they made clear that they saw LACTC policies as class- and race-biased, further impoverishing the lives of the urban poor.

Within a few months, the Strategy Center's nascent Transportation Policy Group, a small caucus of organizers and activists beginning to develop a tactical plan, became embroiled in a major fight over transportation priorities. In the fall of 1992, the RTD was experiencing a budget shortfall of \$59 million. The threat of higher bus fares and cuts in bus service loomed as possible “solutions” to the shortfall. RTD staff pointed out that bus fares already constituted about 35 percent of the total cost of bus operations, which was a very high “fare box recovery ratio” and much higher than that of rail. Based partially on these ratios, RTD staff argued to the LACTC that they had made their operations as efficient as possible in attempting to cover the shortfall, and requested that the LACTC allocate \$59 million from Proposition C discretionary funds (county transportation funds) to cover it.

The Strategy Center was brought into the fight by RTD board members and staff who were happy to find some new allies, especially those who could combine policy advocacy and grassroots organizing in the interests of bus service. The first leaflet that we produced about the RTD shortfall advanced the crucial ideas of racial discrimination

and a two-tier transportation system. We argued that the LACTC was creating an artificial shortfall at the RTD by spending so much money on rail that it left the bus agency holding the bag.

To confront this issue with the LACTC, the Center organized a delegation that included Robin Cannon and Charlotte Bullock from Concerned Citizens of South Central Los Angeles, representatives of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and transportation planner Ryan Snyder. The delegation met with LACTC's chief administrative officer (CAO), Neil Peterson, who was a powerful public figure with control over a major budget. Peterson was engaging, and due to his perception of his strength and our weakness, disconcertingly honest. He boasted to us that LACTC could create a shortfall or a surplus, depending on his desires. He said, "When I want to spend money I call it 'discretionary' and when I don't, I call it 'dedicated to other purposes.'"

Through our intervention and organization of one of the first "pro-bus" coalitions in the city, the vast majority of the RTD's budget shortfall was restored without fare increases or service cuts. But, as is often the case, the LACTC was able to turn even this minor tactical victory for bus riders to its long-range strategic advantage. Rather than taking funds from possible rail projects to cover the shortfall, the agency allocated money to present bus operations from funds that were to be devoted to *future bus purchases*. So, even though the bus crisis was temporarily averted, the structure of L.A.'s transit policy became clear—virtually all discretionary funds would be used for rail and the bus system would face shortfall after shortfall in which the only policy "solution" would be to cut services or raise fares.

Thus, we relearned from our first skirmish in the transit wars a central theoretical premise for why structural, radical, and societal change is necessary. For even when grassroots groups are able to change policy outcomes and have reason to believe they have won a "victory," those who control the larger structures of economic and political power and the system itself are usually able to reintegrate the reform into their overall strategy of domination. Thus, it is necessary for insurgent groups to devise and execute a coherent counterstrategy, in which each small reform, or at times even each tactical setback, serves their own long-term strategy—in the case of the Strategy

Center, to increase the power of autonomous social movements of the urban poor, and to weaken transnational market-based ideology, policy and power.

Partially as a result of what we learned during this struggle for RTD funding, we now understand that the RTD played a very important but poorly-understood role in the struggle for transportation equity in Los Angeles. Throughout the decline of bus service and ridership that characterized the late 1980's and early 1990's, the existence of the RTD provided an organized constituency that could fight for equity, or at least *less* discrimination, in regional transportation policy. Of course, since the rail-oriented LACTC controlled the transportation purse strings the RTD staff was forced to regularly implore the LACTC board to fund the bus system. Because the RTD staff had virtually no power, they resorted to explicit, even polemical, exchanges with the LACTC board. Alan Pegg, at the time the CAO of the RTD, delivered a stinging criticism of the "rail at any cost" policy and a poignant appeal on behalf of the county's bus riders.

There is a huge unmet demand for basic transit services in Los Angeles. Many of these needs can be met very simply and easily by adding service to the many heavily-utilized bus lines that we now operate. Policy board members may wish to contrast this strategy for expansion of transit against the heavily capital-intensive and high operating cost guideway modes of transit, which generally have subsidies per passenger of thirty, fifty, or one hundred times more than do expansions of bus lines.

If the objective is to improve the quality of transit service in Los Angeles County, there are two options. One is to promote the expensive fixed guideway alternative (rail lines). This will wind up providing extremely expensive service to a very small number of passengers (even at the end of the Commission's proposed 30-year plan, well under 20 percent of all transit trips will be on rail modes).

Another alternative is to spend a small amount of additional money on each existing bus passenger. If all we did was to

reduce overcrowding we will have accomplished a great improvement in quality by allowing more of our riders to find a place to sit during their daily travels. But we can do much more and at very little expense in providing more frequent, more reliable service, cleaner buses, better security, more off-peak, evening, and weekend service, and other improvements. And if we can accomplish this increase in service quality, not only will we be giving our existing passengers the type of service that they deserve, we will also attract many new riders to bus lines.

In 1992, shortly after the struggle over the RTD shortfall, the California State legislature passed AB 152, establishing the MTA. Partially as a result of the continued conflict between the two transit agencies, the bill proposed their merger into a new mega-agency. There were two points of view as to whether the creation of the MTA would reduce or exacerbate the inequities of the two-tiered racially-discriminatory transit policies. One argued that while minority communities had small transportation budgets during the time of the RTD, at least the existence of the agency guaranteed the communities some control over it. Those advocating this point of view claimed that the formation of the MTA would accelerate the shifting of bus funds to rail projects because transportation policy would be under one institutional framework. Thus, discriminatory impacts against bus riders would be increased.

The other point of view argued that the creation of the MTA could possibly reduce discriminatory impacts, because the political struggle for transportation equity would occur within one agency, and each annual budget fight might be an opportunity to expand bus funding and restrict rail funding.

This debate ended shortly after the MTA was formed and its transportation policies and political strategies became abundantly clear. Within a year, virtually all the major RTD players were "phased out" of the MTA, and virtually every key position went to an unapologetic rail advocate. Thus, a powerful bureaucracy concerned only with rail was formed, and the few allies that we had on the MTA staff who were holdovers from the former RTD were soon silenced or outright dismissed.

During this process, the MTA was conducting a national search for a chief administrative officer. Neil Peterson had assumed, long before, that he would be chosen; but he was fired even before the MTA was officially formed, a victim of his hubris and miscalculations of his own strength. Charges of personal misconduct were used against Peterson by his former allies on the LACTC board in an effort to cover up the major policy scandals in which they were all complicit.

The MTA ended up hiring Franklin White, formerly the Commissioner of the New York State Department of Transportation, as the agency's CAO. Early in his tenure, the Strategy Center, Concerned Citizens, and SCLC held an exploratory meeting with White, urging him to protect and expand the bus system. We asked him straightforwardly if he would propose a brief moratorium on rail spending, which would open the possibility of expanding bus service even under the conditions of imminent deficit. White explained to us several problems that he had inherited. First, the Peterson Administration had created a "Thirty Year Plan" which advocated an increase in both rail and bus spending, but which was based on a massive overstatement of revenues and understatement of costs. White said, "I am afraid I have inherited a budget crisis and I just got here." Second, there was no way he, as a new CAO, could challenge the board in an effort to stop rail lines. "That is your job," he told us, and he was right.

At the MTA monthly board meeting in July 1993, we attempted to introduce a motion from the floor in which we urged the MTA to: (1) Allocate \$1 billion per year, in addition to the fare box revenue, to the bus system; (2) Impose a moratorium on rail projects "except for the ones that MTA is legally obligated to pay for in Fiscal Year 1992-1993"; (3) Make a comprehensive assessment of the financial resources required to renew old and create new infrastructure support for the bus system.

Legally, grassroots groups cannot introduce motions. They must be introduced by a board member and then seconded. But from an early stage, we began to function as "the MTA in Exile." In this capacity, we taught other community activists to introduce their own motions, hoping that board members would either pick the motions up or modify them, rather than simply complain at the microphone. But this time, as with most of our

motions before the MTA, our call for “fiscal constraint” and funding for buses was met with bored, if polite, silence.

Partially because of the Strategy Center’s intervention, however, White later put forth a proposal to minimally expand bus service on 25 of the most overcrowded lines. But he did not agree to a moratorium on rail construction to find ways to pay for small increases in bus service, let alone the major changes we were advocating. White told the *L.A. Times*,

There is genuine concern about opening glossy new rail lines while the condition of the inner city bus rider continues to deteriorate. This board is determined to not let bus conditions deteriorate as a consequence of the rail construction effort and they are showing it very clearly.

The Strategy Center agreed with White’s sentiments about buses, but not the overall political content of his actions, given the context of the bus versus rail debate. The *Times* reported, “Eric Mann, director of the Strategy Center, criticized the MTA plan as tokenistic and dangerous. ‘In return for giving us 40 buses, a tiny expansion of a depleted bus fleet, they want us to sign off on all rail construction—which of course we won’t.’”

Understanding the nature of the opposition: The powerful coalitions in support of rail projects

When we first became involved in the transit wars, we assumed that our work to build a new organized constituency would help coalesce and energize many labor, senior, environmental, and community groups. We assumed that this new coalition would apply pressure to a new MTA board that would have at least some sympathy for our objectives. Even if the board were not willing to stop all rail projects (which at the time we were not advocating), we imagined that at least it would decrease the pace of rail construction and planning, and substantially increase funding for the bus system. It did not take us long to understand that the terrain was far more treacherous than we imagined. Powerful and entrenched forces were lined up behind a “rail at any cost” strategy,

whereas the forces in support of the bus system were both weak and disorganized.

Rail projects can buy a lot of friends when the tab includes \$800 million to \$1 billion in construction costs per rail line, additional hundreds of millions of dollars to purchase rail cars, and hundreds of millions more for operating costs. Corporate elites, corporate-oriented elected officials, and a legion of self-interested beneficiaries do not just make up a powerful adversary. They constitute an army of occupation at the MTA, with a complex list of players.

A) The rail construction industry

Rail contractors Tutor/Saliba, Parsons/Brinckerhoff, and Parsons/Dillingham have made a killing in the rail construction business. The *Los Angeles Times* reported that Tutor/Saliba had been able to successfully bill the MTA with cost overruns of 344 percent due to the firm’s strategy of giving campaign contributions to virtually every elected official on the MTA. This elaborate web of construction contracts and campaign contributions creates the ties that bind.

B) The real estate developers

One of the values of fixed rail for real estate developers is, literally, that it is fixed. Once the location of projected rail lines is determined, a real estate developer who has advance notice of a future rail stop can make plans for commercial property which has, at least in theory, a guaranteed market at the end of the line.

C) The MTA elected officials

The Metropolitan Transportation Authority is a \$3 billion per year political plum for its board of officials, all of whom are essentially appointed to their positions as a result of winning election to other offices. The Mayor of Los Angeles sits on the MTA board and appoints 3 other members, thus allowing him to control four votes. Each of the five Los Angeles County Supervisors has a seat on the board by virtue of having been elected to what is already the most powerful (in terms of funds disbursed—\$15 billion per year) body in the region. Other representatives are smaller city mayors elected by Leagues of Cities throughout the county. They are elected based on promises to bring rail projects to the “constituencies” they represent, namely the elected officials who elected

them. MTA board member Zev Yaroslavsky agreed with the assessment of elected officials' behavior on the board: "People inside and outside the agency consider the MTA's tax-funded coffers as their own candy jars."

D) Latino and African American elected officials—fighting for equal opportunity of greed and malfeasance

Both the Strategy Center's analysis of the 1992 L.A. urban rebellion and its aftermath, *Reconstructing Los Angeles from the Bottom Up*, and Eric Mann's two-part series on the rebellion in the *Nation* magazine described the Bradley Administration's rainbow coalition of the elite, formed to the great detriment of the vast majority of low-income Angelenos of all races. At its core, Bradley's coalition supported the interests of transnational corporations, with the primary beneficiaries being Westside white businesspeople, black business elites, and white and up-and-coming black politicians. Latinos were largely excluded at all levels. The multiracial coalition came about due to the fact that radical mass movements were virtually eliminated in the 1970's, creating a political vacuum in the politics of communities of color. Thus, the dominant political lines in minority communities emphasized the "we want our share" agendas set by elected middle and upper-middle class elites, with the encouragement of the Bradley Administration. Certainly, in terms of democratic rights, this is fair. After all, why should whites get all of the rail contracts, kickbacks, and cost overruns?

Still, it is tragic that the main race-conscious debate at the MTA has not been about better bus service for a largely minority ridership. Rather, it has focused on the disposition of rail contracts and lines into Latino and African American communities versus into the predominantly-white San Fernando Valley. Thus, the East Side connection of the Red Line is identified as a "Latino line," the Pasadena/San Gabriel Valley extension of the Blue Line as another "Latino line" supported by MTA board member Richard Alatorre, and the never-to-be-built Crenshaw Red Line extension is the pipedream that the black upper-middle class has been chasing for more than a decade, through the work of everyone from Congressman Julian Dixon to Supervisor Yvonne Braithwaite Burke. Unfortunately, the African American and Latino elected

officials' pursuit of rail for the upper-middle class has had devastating consequences for the vast majority of transit dependent African Americans and Latinos in Los Angeles.

E) Construction labor unions

Bus lines require no construction and offer no construction contracts. The agency just buys the bus, hires the driver, decides which fuel to use, establishes a scheduling division, and begins picking up passengers. Rail, by contrast, involves digging tunnels, breaking up streets, establishing elaborate support structures, even fixing adjacent buildings that are damaged by the construction. For two to five years these construction projects provide very high-paid work for construction workers. When they are finished, the construction workers move on to the next project regardless of whether or not anyone rides the completed rail lines.

The labor unions that are in the rail construction business are major lobbying forces in support of rail projects, which is much more than can be said of unions representing the drivers, mechanics, and maintenance workers of buses. Buses provide well-paying, unionized jobs for all of these workers, yet the unions have remained virtually silent on the Bus Riders Union's issues of expanding the fleet, ridership, and number of jobs associated with buses in Los Angeles. Much of this silence appears to be due to the unions' fear of privatization, and their desire to remain largely non-confrontational when it comes to the relationship with the MTA.

F) Contractors, subcontractors, designers, and planners, including minority and women architects

When the Bus Riders Union first began to get involved in the public processes of the MTA, we were impressed by the sight of hundreds of well-dressed people with briefcases attending each meeting. We assumed, at first, that they were concerned middle-class transit advocates or even bus or train riders. We soon learned that they were a small army of contractors, lobbyists, designers, planners, and architects all there to advocate on behalf of one rail contract or another. Tragically, many of them were women and people of color—professionals, trying to advance their careers either as "minority advocates" for powerful firms or as subcontractors on big money rail projects. This group, in particular, was made increasingly un-

comfortable by our charges of racial discrimination against the agency and our demand to stop all rail construction. Many of the contract applicants were people we knew, some even socially. They would privately encourage us, but publicly testify on their own behalf. We confronted several minority and female architects and designers about their willingness to profit from the planned Pasadena Blue Line, which was to be built with “stolen racist money” taken from the 350,000 overwhelmingly minority and female bus riders. They answered, “We know, and we feel guilty. We don’t really care if they ever build the thing, but we just want a contract to design it.”

Thus, in 1993, we began to better understand the extent of the transit problem as we analyzed the powerful multi-faceted coalition that was tied lock, stock, and barrel to the rail coffers. We saw that it would take a powerful new mass membership organization driving a new transportation coalition, which would require years in the making, to even have a chance in confronting the dominant politics of our age as reflected at the MTA. As we began to envision a movement that did not yet exist, the MTA continued to move full speed ahead.

The Pasadena line goes forward and the bus fares go up: The confrontation between bus and rail escalates

In June 1993, we were approached by several MTA staff members concerned about what would occur as the MTA board prepared to vote on its 1993-1994 budget in July. The MTA, despite the warning that they were running out of funds for rail construction and had taken virtually everything they could from the bus system, was planning to go ahead with a new rail line, the Pasadena Blue Line. The agency planned to build it with one of the last remaining pots of Proposition C discretionary funds, money that was urgently needed for bus purchases.

After two months of non-stop organizing, we brought more than 75 people to testify at the MTA’s budget meeting in August 1993, demanding that the agency hold off the vote for the Pasadena Line until they could find funds to build it

that did not raid bus funds. Instead, the MTA approved a \$3.7 billion budget, allocating \$97 million in new funds for a Pasadena Blue Line rail extension that was still on the drawing board. Following the stereotypical pattern of allocating money for the “first leg” of rail projects, this rail line was a future \$871 million construction project with no plan as to how to complete or even extend the project in the following years. Moreover, after originally allocating only \$40 million to the project from rail funds that it did not have, the MTA agreed to a motion for an additional \$57 million for the project after the staff was instructed by Mayor Richard Riordan to “find the additional money.”

Alternate board member Antonio Villaraigosa passionately implored the board not to spend one of the last sources of discretionary funds needed for the bus system on the proposed Pasadena rail project. He was overridden by the entire board including the member for whom he was an alternate, Gloria Molina.

As the *Los Angeles Business Journal* reported on August 30, 1993,

Representatives from the Labor/ Community Strategy Center issued a demand that the MTA spend \$1.5 billion per year for five years on the buses, with a moratorium on rail contract awards until long-range funding is locked in for the bus system.

MTA politics have been reduced to a race against time by several board members to get rail lines in their districts before the money runs out,” said Lisa Hoyos of the Strategy Center. The demand was endorsed by several speakers including a variety of politicians. “Clearly, buses are the stepchild in L.A. County,” said Congressman Xavier Becerra (D. Los Angeles). The MTA did not even discuss the Center’s demand.

Even worse, in December 1993, the MTA tried to fix its fiscal crisis by going back to the state legislature to expand its bonding capacity against future sales tax revenues—bonding they would never propose for bus projects. Assemblyman Richard Katz, who had brought the MTA into existence through state law, moved to expose that maneuver. As the *Los Angeles Times* reported,

The Metropolitan Transportation Authority was pressured last week to fix up its bus fleet... Richard Katz, chairman of the Assembly Transportation Committee said he opposes legislation to "raise the cap on the MTA's bond-issuing capacity to build more rail lines."

Katz called MTA Chief Executive Franklin White to task for pursuing legislation to increase the MTA's bonding capacity when the bonds would have to be paid back using sales tax revenue that could be better spent focusing on the deteriorating inner-city bus system... Franklin White admitted that "there was no money available to transfer from rail construction to bus operations, saying that all flexible funds were "spoken for with political commitments."

Katz challenged that premise, saying that the MTA clearly was continuing to commit money to rail projects at the expense of the ailing bus fleet... "People in the inner city are not getting the service that they need."

The public hearing process: An outpouring of public outrage about proposed fare increases, but no match for the organized rail forces

Virtually as soon as the MTA board had voted \$97 million to start the Pasadena Blue Line, rumors started circulating that the MTA was facing a budget "shortfall" and that "fare restructuring" would have to be a component of finding new revenues. By January 1994 the MTA had announced it was considering a series of fare increases and service cuts, but in its infinitely democratic manner, wanted "public input" into whether the public wanted fare increases, service cuts, or both.

On Saturday April 23, 1994, the MTA held a public hearing on its proposals for the buses as mandated by federal law. Pressure organized by the Strategy Center forced the MTA to hold the hearing on a Saturday at 10am, instead of its usual scheduled meeting on the last Wednesday of the month at 1pm, a time which effectively excludes

most bus riders. What followed was an unprecedented outpouring of anger and fear from more than 800 people, a standing room only crowd including organizations representing many constituencies upon whom the proposed fare increases and service cuts would inflict irreparable harm. The vast majority of people testified that bus fares were already too high and bus service was already deplorable.

- Elderly groups testified that, because the MTA buses are so slow in coming, and connections and transfers are so difficult, they cannot travel on the buses at night and feel imprisoned in their homes.
- Low-income workers explained that the existing bus schedules are so unreliable that they have to leave for work hours before they have to report, for fear of being late and losing their jobs.
- Low-income workers testified, in Spanish and English, that for people like themselves who made \$10,000 to \$15,000, even the \$42 monthly bus pass was a lot of money and that any increases in the bus pass (let alone its elimination) would cause significant hardship.
- Several blind bus riders talked about the difficulties and dangers of standing on street corners waiting for buses for almost an hour and urged the MTA to *increase* bus service.
- Many night-shifts workers, such as janitors and service workers, talked about waiting for an hour for a bus, and having to travel as much as 2 hours by bus to locations outside the inner city looking for better-paying work.
- Families talked about the expense of buying bus passes for two children (students), and two adults on one income of less than \$15,000.

Many of the MTA board members did not attend the hearing, or attended for only an hour or two. They talked to each other during most of the testimony. When many of the 800 people asked the MTA board members to respond to their concerns, they were told that since it was a "public hearing" the board was there to listen, not to respond.

On that day, the Strategy Center emerged as the clear leader of the coalition to stop the fare increases, but our organizing work faced multiple dilemmas. First, we did not have a single advocate on the MTA board. Without even one true ally, we

were testifying into the air, and everyone in the room knew it. Second, the coalition of groups that attended were both weak in their own membership and in their staying power for a long-term fight. Third, despite handing out thousands of leaflets, we could not get the angry group of individuals to agree on a strategy or even a tactic. Frankly, the vast majority of people begged more than argued, and instead of demanding a moratorium on rail or a fare *reduction*, just kept repeating, "Please don't raise our fares, please don't cut our service." Hundreds of the participants signed up with the Strategy Center to get more information, but as with all organizing efforts of this type at this point in history, 350 names generated 10 to 12 new and dependable contacts.

The assault of the MTA and the mass potential of the public hearing process made two key points clear to us: (1) There was a need to build a mass movement of bus riders; and (2) The MTA meetings could not continue to be the main arena of organizing or membership development. The activists who had initiated the Transportation Policy Group and the first new members we had recruited at the public hearing renamed themselves the Bus Riders Union. They began to develop a plan to warn the bus riders of the forthcoming fare increases and service cuts—by organizing directly on the buses.

July 1994: The MTA willfully and with full knowledge causes irreparable harm to minority bus riders

After the April public hearings, we had no doubt that the MTA would push ahead full steam with the fare increases. The only "debate" on the board was how much suffering to inflict. The first full-scale mobilization of the new Bus Riders Union generated 100 people to testify at the July 14 MTA board meeting in protest of the proposed fare hikes. While there had been 800 people at the public hearing in April, we found that by July many bus riders had been stonewalled enough by the MTA to stay away from board meetings—and this time the MTA resisted strongly a Saturday vote. Moreover, they pulled off a shameful maneuver. Instead of voting on their entire budget, in which \$32 million in fare increases and service cuts would be examined in the context of a \$3

billion budget and compared to any increases in rail service, they demanded that the bus fare increase be voted on at a separate meeting held only for that purpose. BRU members testified eloquently, but to no avail. The board voted to:

- Raise the bus fare from \$1.10 to \$1.35—a 23 percent increase.
- Eliminate the \$42 per month working people's pass altogether.
- Reduce bus service on several bus lines.
- The MTA argued that these fare increases and service cuts would save the agency \$32 million per year out of a total budget of \$2.9 billion.

Los Angeles Times reporter Bill Boyarsky, who attended the meeting, wrote a scathing critique of the MTA board.

The Metropolitan Transportation Authority board's conduct while pushing through a fare increase at a meeting Wednesday was so outrageous that it's hard to single out its most offensive act....The MTA board was rude to those testifying against the fare increase. Members and aides walked around the rostrum, chatting as if it were a cocktail party....I've seen such inattention at other legislative meetings, but never to this degree. One speaker made a futile attempt to attract the attention of the board members. Pointing to some of the protesters, she said, "This is their first experience at a public meeting. Is this the way you want to treat them?" She was ignored.

One legal-minded MTA critic told me he was particularly irked by the way the board ignored the Brown Act, which requires government agencies to conduct their business openly. No copies of the final fare increase proposal, devised by Los Angeles County Supervisor Gloria Molina, were made available to the audience, a step required by the Brown Act...Finally, there was the board's refusal to grant opponents of the increase another 10 minutes to speak...

The MTA's actions hurt the poor in ways that have long-term effects. You

could see this at Wednesday's hearing. Some of the speakers said they used adult student passes to attend night school to learn English, and the increase would make the trip to class more expensive. "We want to have a better life," one of them said. "We want to speak with the teachers and help [our children] with their homework."

The following week, on Wednesday, July 20, the MTA held another board meeting to approve its \$2.9 million 1994-1995 budget that included an expenditure of \$123 million for the Pasadena Blue Line rail system. The \$123 million expenditure was virtually identical to the MTA's professed \$126 million operating deficit.

Besides the expenditure of \$62 million directly for the Pasadena line, the MTA diverted to the project:

- \$32.8 million from reserves created from high occupancy vehicle (HOV) projects expected to be completed under budget (these were anticipated reserves on projects not yet initiated!)
- \$18 million from a fund used for message signs, sensors, and other traffic operations
- \$10 million in capital and operating funds

BRU members went to the microphone and yelled from the audience, angrily protesting the MTA's unethical and illegal use of discretionary funds to start the Pasadena Line, only a week after voting to punish bus riders for a claimed budget shortfall that seemed to have disappeared overnight. We were forcibly thrown out of the meeting by MTA police at the urging of the chair, the liberal supervisor Ed Edelman. People were pushed through doors and had their arms twisted by the police while the alleged progressives on the board either mumbled veiled concerns or looked the other way. The MTA board then voted to approve the entire budget, including the Pasadena Blue Line expenditures. As the *L.A. Times* reported, CAO Franklin White publicly warned the board,

This organization is broke and has been broke for the last three years. This is not a cash management issue. If money from the HOV fund is taken, from where will it be replaced? Last year should have taught

us that we have to get back to a sensible policy, which is don't spend money we don't have.

White's statements did not stop the policy, but commenced his own downfall with the MTA board.

The Bus Riders Union takes the MTA to court

In August 1994, out of resourcefulness and desperation, the Bus Riders Union planning committee wrote a proposal for a temporary restraining order to stop the MTA bus fare increases and the elimination of the monthly bus pass. The legal grounds were that the increases caused "irreparable harm" to the class of low-income, minority bus riders. We argued that the MTA's policies were racist and violated the 14th Amendment to the Constitution and the 1964 Civil Rights Act.

We faxed the proposal to the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund (LDF). After days of moot court debates to test the strength of our case, LDF attorneys agreed to represent us, and we agreed to play the role of "lead plaintiffs" in what became the *Labor/Community Strategy Center, et al. v. the Los Angeles Metropolitan Transportation Authority*.

On September 1, the day the fare increases and the elimination of the bus pass were about to go into effect, we entered federal court for a hearing. After listening to arguments for both parties, federal judge Terry Hatter issued a temporary restraining order, stopping the MTA from increasing the bus fares. The city was stunned. For six months the bus fares were held at \$1.10 and the bus pass at \$42, while for the first time a few thoughtful bus riders each week began to ask, "How do I join that Bus Riders Union?"

Later, the Strategy Center and the MTA reached a pre-trial compromise in order to avoid constant appeals by the MTA to the 9th circuit court and to hold a fare structure in place for the year before the trial began. The MTA agreed to keep the unlimited use monthly pass until the trial at an increased price of \$49, and raised the bus fare to \$1.35. This would be one of many less-than-ideal choices we were forced to make in our new role as plaintiffs. It is a role in which social

movements, especially new and relatively weak ones, have to accommodate and compromise with forces far more powerful than themselves while still trying to come out with policies that benefit the class.

The lawsuit as one component of a three-part long-term strategy

In the more than two years since the temporary restraining order was won, the Strategy Center and the Bus Riders Union have learned a lot about the possibilities and the limits of the law. We have developed a three-part strategy to push for a radical transformation of L.A.'s urban transportation system.

A) A legal strategy to win limited reforms in the MTA's policies

As this report is written, the Strategy Center is involved in efforts, strongly encouraged by the courts, to mediate a settlement to our class action civil rights case, which if resolved successfully, would preclude a trial. Whether through mediation or trial, we understand that our long-term program cannot be won through the courts. At best, what a legal "victory" can mean is *some* restrictions on the MTA's rail spending, *some* relief from onerous fares, *some* improvement in the total number of buses and the level of overcrowding, and *some* reductions in the gross inequities between rail and bus subsidies per passengers.

We must take into consideration that if the court first finds the MTA guilty of racial discrimination and, then, the remedy phase of the trial yields significant relief for bus riders, the MTA may very well appeal the decision, leading to years of litigation before any benefits are won for the class. In his book, *On the Limits of the Law: the Ironic Legacy of Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act*, Stephen Halpern documents the painful experience of black parents and school children who thought that the legal victory in *Brown v. Board of Education* would generate rapid school desegregation only to find that, ten years later, 99 percent of all black children in the South were still confined to segregated schools. We have learned many hard lessons already from the endless delays and postponements of the trial. The MTA, once the restraining order was "settled," has gone full

steam ahead with rail expenditures over our increasingly militant objections. We have re-learned what we often teach—that no court can protect a social movement from the responsibility of being in charge of its own destiny. Nonetheless, we are optimistic that some significant, if restricted, incremental gains may come out of the legal tactic. We have already gained a great deal of help from the restraining order, through the maintenance of a bus pass that would have been eliminated altogether without the court's intervention, and in the realm of organizing, we have used both the publicity and legitimacy that the case has given the organization and our objectives to build an even stronger movement on the buses and in the communities.

B) Creating a long-term, permanent coalition for mass transportation, focused at the intersection of civil rights and environmental justice

The Strategy Center and Bus Riders Union understand that the struggle against the MTA is, fortunately, first and foremost a social movement with a long-term plan, and only secondarily a legal challenge. Whether or not the courts find the MTA guilty of violating Title VI of the Civil Rights Act, the racism and class bias of MTA policy is clear to the half million monthly bus riders. For October 5, 1996, the Strategy Center has organized a major march and rally in support of the BRU Billions for Buses plan. The active organizational participants in that rally include co-plaintiffs in our lawsuit Southern Christian Leadership Conference and Korean Immigrant Workers Advocates as well as Justice for Janitors SEIU Local 399, St. Brigid's Catholic Church, the UCLA Environmental Coalition, Hotel and Restaurant Employees Union Local 11, On Campus Teachers Organization, Californians for Justice, Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador, SAGE/UAW Graduate Students Union, Coalition Against Police Abuse, L.A. Coalition in Support of the Gang Truce, and more. This march, estimated to be at least 1,000 people for a full day of activity, will be the largest multiracial action for transportation justice in the city's history. The turnout will be far smaller than the mass movements of the 1960s, and those that will be necessary to ultimately change MTA policy. But, it will represent a major expansion of our organizational strength since the public hearings only two years ago.

C) Continuing to build the Bus Riders Union as a long-term, membership-based organization to lead the permanent coalition

Long-term, and self-revitalizing grassroots organization is the driving force of history in any progressive strategy. If organizations disintegrate due to internal contradictions, external repression, or co-optation, progressive policies can be reversed—as the civil rights and labor movements have learned. Therefore, each time the Strategy Center intervenes on the level of policy, we evaluate our actions from the perspective of *consciousness, leadership, and organization*. Obviously, we fight, and quite effectively, for concrete improvements in peoples' lives and dramatic shifts in public and corporate policy. But for us, the balance sheet must also address the questions, "Were we able to shift the public debate and create space for an antiracist, pro-immigrant, democratic challenge to transnational corporate power and values?" "How many new leaders—especially among low-income people, people of color, and women—did we recruit and train?" "Did we create or strengthen democratic, multiracial organizational structures in which the people most impacted by policy played a significant role in shaping the campaign's strategy and tactics, and participated in the deliberations over hard choices and options along the way?"

One of the most important pieces of building consciousness and capacity to lead is the BRU's commitment to multi-lingualism. At present, all meetings are conducted in English and Spanish and all flyers and public education materials are printed in both languages. A substantial portion of the general membership are monolingual Spanish-speaking bus riders whose ability to participate and lead this struggle is considered a non-negotiable part of the organization's culture. In the last year, the Bus Riders Union expanded organizing work among Asian/Pacific Islanders, including monolingual Korean speakers—an effort that may itself eventually require a permanent commitment to trilingualism.

The Bus Riders Union began with a handful of members and a few key organizers, and has now grown to a dues-paying membership of 1,100. The BRU is run by an elected planning committee of 12 people: seven representatives of the general membership and five staff people. It is a multiracial group that meets weekly to plan membership

meetings, address issues of BRU policy, and to brainstorm long-term tactics.

Current planning committee members include:

- **Della Bonner**, a resident of Watts working as a paralegal.
- **Woodrow Coleman**, a senior and a long-time activist in the black community.
- **Norma Henry**, a legal secretary and aspiring filmmaker.
- **Rosalio Mendiola**, an immigrant from Mexico who works in a hotel restaurant.
- **Scott Miller**, a Ph.D. candidate who works as a part-time office worker.
- **Rudy Pisani**, a retired meat cutter who emigrated from Algeria in the early 50's.
- **Ricardo Zelada**, an immigrant from El Salvador, a garment worker, and a long-time human rights activist.
- **Chris Mathis**, Strategy Center lead organizer, an African American who worked in auto plants for 10 years and led the Center's environmental justice organizing in the Harbor Area.
- **Kikanza Ramsey**, BRU organizer specializing in youth involvement, fluent in Spanish, working on new links between African American and Latino cultures.
- **Martín Hernandez**, BRU organizer and legislative analyst, long-time Chicano activist, actor, theater critic.
- **Rita Burgos**, BRU organizer, coordinator of the Strategy Center's School for Environmental and Civil Rights Organizing, focusing on outreach to Asian/Pacific Islander communities and women's organizations.
- **Eric Mann**, director of the Strategy Center, civil rights, anti-war, labor, and environmental organizer with 30 years experience.

Currently, in addition to attending to the details of the legal strategy, long-term Bus Riders Union tactics under consideration at the level of the planning committee include:

1) Continuing the “Make History/Fight Transit Racism” public art project

In the past year, the Bus Riders Union has taken art into the streets and onto the bus stops. Full-color posters in Spanish and English invoke Rosa Parks’ bus organizing work against racial segregation and make parallels between the work of the BRU and that of the Mexican bus drivers of the autonomous labor union SUTAU-100 who have been in a long-term struggle against privatization of transit in Mexico City. These posters are visibly displayed in stores and bus shelters throughout Los Angeles. The BRU has also created a portable “People’s Bus Shelter,” encouraged by the insurgent public art theories of Lian Hurst Mann of the Strategy Center’s communications staff. This bus shelter is taken to bus stops as a representation of the decorative, solid, and inspiring shelters that the MTA should be providing for its riders—as well as a representation of resistance, in which the people provide their own “shelter” from which they organize.

2) A continued demand for an elected MTA board

Plans are being constructed to run BRU members for these positions if we are able to win this important reform.

3) Grassroots pressure campaigns in the districts of MTA board members

Flyers are being drafted that include pictures of highly-visible MTA board members next to maps of their districts that show where the most overcrowded bus lines are—in an effort to get bus riders to see the connection between their miserable conditions and the MTA board members who are responsible for them.

4) Consideration of efforts to cut off federal funding to the MTA and to oppose re-authorization of the federal Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA)

If federal lawmakers do not amend the act to demand and enforce protections for inner-city transit riders, the Act must be opposed. Federal funding has done virtually nothing for the bus riders, and keeps the rail system on life support. A national lobbying campaign to cut all federal funding for the MTA, like the “disinvestment from

South Africa” campaign, may be necessary to stop transit apartheid in Los Angeles and other cities.

5) Direct action campaigns on the buses themselves

There is growing sentiment for a “No seat, No fare” campaign in which people will refuse to pay to ride the bus if they can’t find a seat. Our long term plan is to turn the buses into democratic town halls and theaters of contestation, in which bus riders creatively use tactics to achieve their objectives and to make their protests more effective than at the monthly charade of the MTA board meeting.

6) Building the general membership

Each month, the BRU holds general membership meetings of 50 to 75 people, with anywhere from 3 to 10 new members who attend. Though there is certainly turnover from meeting to meeting, it is remarkable how many people stay for an entire four-hour, *bilingual* meeting and come back in the following months. There is a core group of more than 100 very active members of the BRU that understands that grassroots-driven policy involves serious conversations about conditions on the bus, racial dynamics among bus riders, load factors, the legal case, reports from the MTA board meetings, plans for organizing more members, media strategies, and the direct experiences of the bus riders themselves.

These dependable, hard working, witty and observant members who speak to each other in many languages and through many cultural prisms are the prize of the organizing work. It is they who drive the organization toward gaining even more members, more victories, and greater exposure *over the long-term*.

In the five years since the Strategy Center has been organizing in the arena of public transportation, Mayor Tom Bradley has retired and Richard Riordan is already running for re-election for his second term. MTA chief Neil Peterson was fired and replaced by Franklin White, who was also fired a few years later and replaced by Joseph Drew. We begin to develop the moral authority of the long distance runners, as our adversaries begin to understand that we are in this struggle for the long-term, and we are able to win some small victories sometimes by simply wearing down the opposition with our persistence.

If we win in court, any settlement will still involve a decade of policing and expanding our

demands, as the court continues to hold legal jurisdiction over the specific commitments which the MTA may be willing to make. If we are not successful in court, we will continue the fight with the MTA in spite of the limits of the law. In either case, we are training our members that it will take at least a decade to build a first-class mass transportation system from the bottom up—and endless decades after that to protect it.

As the Strategy Center and Bus Riders Union have successfully evolved from an embryonic to a substantial force in the region, we are now confronting a new arena of the struggle—a transitional stage characterized by attempts at co-optation and tokenism by the MTA board and staff and city and state elected officials—which too many groups confuse with real social change. We are not impressed that public officials come out “in general” for a first class bus system, or answer our telephone calls promptly, or propose more breakfasts and lunches than one’s diet could possibly accommodate, or manage to include a token amendment to every proposal that negates our strategy under the guise of being influenced by it. We are using this transitional stage, which offers the advantage of far greater access to and “dialogue” with top MTA staff and key elected officials, as a means of applying more direct organizing pressure and a sharpening of our programmatic demands.

Too many transportation advocacy groups are overwhelmingly white, tepidly environmental, and think that the main problems in society are congestion management and suburban sprawl. But when your organization is led by people such as Della Bonner, Rosalio Mendiola, Ricardo and Noemi Zelada, Norma Henry, Woodrow Coleman, Rudy Pisani, and Scott Miller, the new intellectuals of the urban oppressed, mass transportation for the masses takes on a passion and urgency. The work of the Strategy Center and Bus Riders Union offers a new agenda, a new vision for sustainable, livable cities, in which for once, people of color, low-income people, the elderly, the students, and the disabled demand that the needs of the vast majority of the public must set the priorities for public policy.



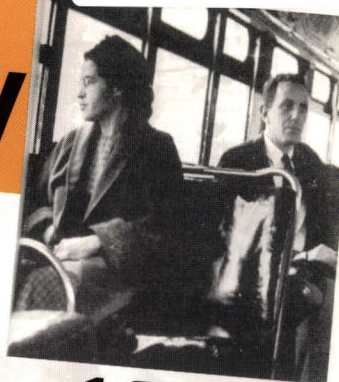
Eric Mann

is director of the Labor/Community Strategy Center in Los Angeles. He has been a civil rights, anti-Vietnam war, labor, and environmental organizer for 30 years, working with the Congress of Racial Equality, Students for a Democratic Society, and the United Auto Workers, including eight years on auto assembly lines. His books include *Comrade George: An Investigation into the Life, Political Thought, and Assassination of George Jackson* (Harper and Row, 1972) and *Taking On General Motors: Labor Insurgency in a UAW Local* (UCLA Institute of Industrial Relations, 1989). His latest book, *Mass Transportation for the Masses: the Bus Riders Union Models a New Theory of Urban Insurgency in the Age of Transnational Capitalism*, will be published by Verso Press in 1997.



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Strategy Center Publications