

An Environmental Justice Strategy for Urban Transportation

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Across the United States, federal and state transportation funds favor suburban commuters and auto owners at the cost of the urban poor, the working class, the lowest income communities of color, the elderly, high school students, and the disabled. People dependent on public transit for their transportation needs suffer dilapidated buses, long waits, longer rides, poor connections, service cuts, overcrowding, and daily exposure to some of the worst tail-pipe toxins.

The movement for first-class, regional transportation systems that give priority to the transit-dependent requires the mobilization of those excluded and marginalized from politics-as-usual, and will challenge the pro-corporate consensus. Equity demands a mass movement of funds from the highway and rail interests to bus systems, from suburban commuters, corporate developers, and rail contractors to the urban working class of color. Such a transformation will not happen—cannot happen—until a mass movement of the transit-dependent is built from the bottom up.

A Transit Strategy for the Transit-Dependent

In 1993, the Labor/Community Strategy Center (LCSC) in Los Angeles founded the Bus Riders Union (BRU)—now the largest multi-racial grassroots transportation group in the U.S.—with more than 3,000 members representing the roughly 400,000 daily bus riders. The BRU's 12 years of organizing, significant policy and legal victories, and analytical and theoretical expertise can be used as a resource for the urgent work of mass transit reconstruction in U.S. urban communities.

The needs and the leadership capacity of the urban working class of color must play a central role in developing sustainable communities. We must aim to: reduce suburban sprawl; promote ecological and environmental public health; create non-racist public policy; and focus on the transportation needs of society's most oppressed and exploited. The needs of

the working class and communities of color are both an end in themselves and an essential building block of any effective organizing plan.

The transit-dependent are defined as those who depend on public transportation for their mobility and personal viability because of income (unable to afford the purchase or maintenance of a car), age (too young or too old to drive), or disability. It is the low-wage workers, the people of color, the elderly, the high school students, and the disabled who must be at the center of any viable transit strategy.

The deterioration of urban public transportation is racially coded and must be addressed with an explicitly anti-racist perspective. In every major urban area in the United States, the low-wage workforce is at the center of the region's political economy—the domestic, department store, convenience store, electronic assembly, garment, hotel, and restaurant workers, the security guards, and the street vendors. These workers often have children, rent apartments rather than own homes, use public transportation, and have family incomes of \$15,000 to \$20,000 a year. Everything they do—transporting children to and from schools and childcare facilities; going to work; looking for work; attending community colleges; even enjoying modest forms of recreation—depends upon a viable public transportation system.

Public Health vs. Culture of the Automobile

Any serious movement that prioritizes public health over corporate profit, especially with regard to

toxins and air pollution, must draw some very radical political and policy conclusions. As Barry Commoner, the noted environmental scientist, observed, the only effective way to radically reduce airborne toxins is to ban them before they are produced.

With regard to the internal combustion engine and the auto industry, it would be best if there were the most stringent restrictions on auto emissions, combined with some radical restrictions on auto use. The problem is that there can be no effective mass movement to drastically reduce fossil fuel and automobile usage until there is a well-developed public transportation system. This brings us up against the legendary automobile/highway lobby, and something else: the deeply ingrained culture of the automobile, which cuts across every social and economic class in this society, not just the white, middle-class suburbanites.

Unfortunately, the car culture has won the hearts and minds of many low-income people, including Blacks and Latinos. Given the centuries of housing segregation and discrimination, it is not surprising that a fancy car has become one of the few attainable symbols of status and upward mobility in communities of color. This cultural attachment can only be challenged if the public transportation system can at least meet the people's transit needs as efficiently as the car.

Public Health vs. Corporate Science

If organizers are indeed successful in using public health arguments to challenge the cultural obsession with the automobile, we will still be faced with overcoming the corporate counter-attack on public health science. In the debate about air toxins, corporate 'scientists' have shown themselves to be masters of the art of obfuscation and sometimes, outright lying.

It is generally agreed that most criteria pollutants and air toxins take years, or even decades, to generate cancers and other diseases. But that is all the more reason to restrict their production in the present. However, organizers from impacted communities have found that approaching government regulatory agencies, such as the Air Quality Management District of Southern California (AQMD), and talking to them in common-sense public health terms—"your chemicals are killing me," or "my daughter

cannot breathe from the asthma," or "if you know a chemical is carcinogenic, why do you produce it in the first place?"—gets them nowhere.

The offending industries characteristically respond with a battery of scientists and lawyers arguing for multi-causality, meaning that the cancer or leukemia could have been caused by the chemical plant in question, or an oil refinery down the road, or any of the many known carcinogens in our air and water. They may have debates about actual exposure levels ("We acknowledge emitting known carcinogens into the air but we cannot be sure that your daughter was directly exposed to those emissions") and dosage levels—reflected in parts per million and even cancers per million! They may acknowledge the link between benzene and leukemia, but will deny that the benzene emissions from their cars is sufficient to cause leukemia, just as cigarette companies argued that their products are neither addictive nor deadly. To spend a day dealing with the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) or the AQMD, or any other similar agency, is to feel a sense of futility and exhaustion. It is as if the people are on trial and have to carry the burden of proof even as the system asserts that known polluters and carcinogens are innocent until proven guilty.

Over the years, however, we have found that public health education is a powerful organizing tool. Low-income residents come to enjoy the science as much as anyone else, and they enjoy challenging corporate science. They understand that a social movement, while rooted in passion and direct experience, can be greatly strengthened by a little knowledge of anatomy, physiology, toxicology, and epidemiology. The victory of the Bus Riders Union in forcing the MTA to abide by its clean-fuel standards and drop its plans to purchase diesel buses is a positive example of grassroots science defeating corporate science in the arena of public policy and public debate.

Transportation Justice Demands

A comprehensive list of demands for a renewed transportation justice movement will be long, but following the successful Future of Transportation organizing conference in Los Angeles this year, we currently

see the following as central to any serious movement.

Low-priced public transportation—24/7

A common complaint across the country is that urban and rural bus systems are coming undone at the seams but the government continues to fund the insatiable highway lobby (80% of all federal funds) and boondoggle rail projects. At \$200 million per mile for 'light rail' and \$350 million per mile for subways—in construction costs alone—these projects generate constant budget deficits. This in turn leads to massive fare increases and service cuts in urban and rural bus systems all over the United States and Canada, forcing low-income people to fall back on unreliable, gas-guzzling, often uninsured cars. What is needed instead is aptly expressed by the chant: "We need a 50-cent fare/and \$20 passes/mass transportation/belongs to the masses."

A clean fuel, bus-centered mass transit system

As a model, the Los Angeles Bus Riders Union plan proposes the deployment of 600 buses and 50 community jitneys, covering hundreds of miles and hundreds of thousands of riders, for a \$1.5 billion price tag, which includes capital and operating costs. This plan is in sharp contrast to the typical 'light rail', which covers six to eight miles and serves no more than 15,000 riders for the same price. The efforts of the rail lobbyists to characterize the Riders Union and other civil rights groups as "narrow and protest-based" (read Black, Latino, Asian, female, and low-income, as opposed to the white, suburban, privileged, car-riding constituencies who supposedly embody the "broader" view) can easily be repudiated. Plus, a growing number of transit planners are coming around to accepting the idea that replacing automobiles on the existing highways and surface streets with a clean fuel, bus-centered, rapid transit system, is the way to go.



Paying attention to dirty-at-source clean fuels

As Clayton Thomas-Muller from the Indigenous Environmental Network has pointed out, many clean fuels, such as compressed natural gas and hydrogen, are very dirty at the source. There are growing violations of Indigenous peoples' sovereignty and impacts on public health from coal mining, oil exploration,

the extraction of natural gas, and other 'dirty-at-source' energy schemes. We need less energy altogether and a focus on truly renewable energy sources.

We need to place public health and the survival of Third World nations at the center of our U.S. environmental organizing work. The U.S., with just six percent of the world's population, consumes and abuses 25 percent of the world's resources. We need a radical restriction of this toxic lifestyle, beginning with a major challenge to the auto industry. As nations around the world face devastating extreme weather events, we have to take this message to the Black, Latino, Asian/Pacific Islander, and Indigenous communities, as well as the white middle-class and working-class communities: the future of the planet is at stake.

Mass Transit: The Heart of the New Revolution

Transportation is a great multifaceted issue around which to build a movement, because it touches so many aspects of people's lives. Transportation affects public health, access to jobs, childcare, housing, medical care, education, and more. It is inextricably tied to the history of the civil rights movement now and in the past. Now it has taken on a life and death urgency because of the public health crisis and global warming brought on by the automobile. Public transportation can be a great unifier—bringing together people of all races and classes who seek a saner, healthier world in which wars for oil and energy are exposed and opposed. ■