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# Free Transit and Beyond

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Epochal crises allow us to see clearly the irrationalities of capitalism, notably its systematic inability to develop to the fullest human capacities and provide the basis for sustainable and respectful relationships to the rest of nature. The current world economic crisis has thrown to the dustbin of history the aspirations and capacities of millions of human beings – those laid off, driven off the land or relegated to permanent precariousness. At the same time, the crisis has intensified the exploitation of those still connected to gainful employment and driven up, at least temporarily, the ecologically destructive extraction of 'resources,' particularly in the global South and the peripheral areas of the global North.

The contradictory character of imperial capitalism can also be seen by focusing on mobility and transportation. The aggressively neoliberal and authoritarian responses ruling classes have pursued to respond to the crisis have reinforced the degree to which many are confined, in a contradictory way to a combination of forced mobility and immobility. Globally, layoffs, land grabs, agricultural restructuring, and mining exploration have pushed more people onto a path of forced migration to other cities, regions and countries. In turn, grinding poverty and ever-more punitive migration policies in the global North drastically limit the capacity of many to move to places where the grass appears to be greener.

During all of this, global transportation systems continue to be restructured to maximize the capacity of goods, resources and the 'winners' of global capitalism to move around the world behind the securitized perimeters of airports, pipelines and shipping ports.

## Gentrified Central City Areas and Gated Communities

This interplay of mobility and enforced (im-)mobility is also at play in the major urban regions today. Most blatantly in cities of North America, Britain, South Africa, India, China and Brazil, the upward redistribution machine that is imperial capitalism has meant that elites and upper segments of the middle classes increasingly live in protected financial districts, gentrified central city areas, office parks and gated communities. They are connected to each other by means of transportation that allow them to bypass the 'squalor' of shantytowns or segregated districts: highway overpasses, regional commuter trains and rapid inter-city links.

In turn, the working-class and insecure elements of the middle class are divided. Those who are forced to work longer hours or depend on several jobs have to spend more and more time commuting. Those permanently excluded from employment, subject to systemic discrimination or too poorly paid to afford accessible housing, child care or transit find themselves relegated to life in segregated neighbourhoods. What some take for granted (the capacity to move about freely and based on choice) is an unaffordable luxury for those who are forced to commute against their will or those who cannot reach the places they need to survive.

In this light, campaigns for free public transit (such as the one undertaken by the Greater Toronto Workers' Assembly) are promising. In the short term, making transit free would provide relief to some commuters even as it would improve the mobility of all those who are least mobile or most transit-dependent now: the young and the old, women, people with disabilities, people of colour and the most precarious fractions of the working-class. Even if implemented gradually (beginning with children, students, the elderly, low-income and unemployed workers; or during off-peak hours and weekends), free transit would also lead to an increase in public transit use among existing and some new users, thus making transportation patterns more favourable to public transit. Finally, free transit arguments bolster the public sector. They are difficult to reconcile with neoliberal policies: free transit is less attractive for public-private partnerships (P3s) and cannot be properly implemented by decimating the public sector or further commodifying public services.

In principle, free transit advocacy can also be an element in a broader vision to reorganize urban life and restructure the social order along red (working class-based, working toward socialism) and green (environmental) lines. This requires working through a host of open questions that go far beyond lowering the cost of fares. These include:

- How can a free and expanded transit system be financed?
- Can free transit be part and parcel of a green jobs strategy against austerity?
- Is free transit a potential weapon against global climate injustice?

- How can transit workers and transit users become allies to push for free transit?
- What additional measures might be necessary for free transit to have a deep and lasting impact on our car-dominated transportation system?
- How do we think of free transit not simply as a more effective, just and sustainable form of mobility, but an element in a way of life where mobility is not imposed but subject to democratic decision-making?
- Can we expand public transit without promoting real estate speculation or making transit-connected neighbourhoods off limits to many?
- And finally, can we organize free transit networks as generous public spaces that do not exclude and discriminate on the basis of race, class, gender or sexuality?

Before we get to these issues, a few more observations about transportation in its broader context are necessary.

## Starting Points

*Transportation is never just about transportation*

Historically, transportation has always been much more than a technology of moving goods and people from point A to point B. In the modern world, it has been central in the development of imperial capitalism and the transformation of social relations. The sail ships of the 17th and 18th century, the steamships of the 19th century and the cargo planes and container ships in the late 20th century were essential means of 'shrinking the globe' to minimize the circulation time of capital while entrenching a deeply unequal and racialized international division of labour. The slave ships, the railways and the car represented key points of experimenting with new labour processes and energy sources while providing the strategic sectors in the first three industrial revolutions. Today, production and circulation are based on existing transportation technologies that are intensified and selectively globalized. Auto-centred transportation has been transformed into "hyperautomobility" (Martin) in the global North while taking off in select parts of the global South. As the case of computerized container shipping indicates, transportation technologies have also been integrated with electronic means of communication.

Mass transportation has also been central to the process through which the world has become urbanized over the last two centuries. It has helped build networks between cities and hinterlands while shaping



spatial relations in metropolitan areas. In the 19th century, the rise of the modern metropolis was unthinkable without the global network of steam ships and railways that sustained the transfer of surplus under imperialism. Equally important was mass transportation (streetcars and suburban trains, then subways). Mass transit made it possible for social relations to be stretched between work and residence, facilitating (not causing) the segregation of social groups along lines of race and class, and sustaining the sexual division of labour. In the 20th century, car transportation allowed planners to treat cities as machines of consumption, production and circulation to sustain post-war capitalism. It laid the foundation for the suburbanization of urban life in Euro-America while building the basis for urban sprawl, which we now recognize as a crucial element of global climate injustice – the imperial aspect of planetary ecological degradation.

Restructuring transportation is thus never just a matter of adjusting the technologies of transportation. Up to a point, this is now widely acknowledged by most progressive urban planners and politicians. Advocates of "smart growth," "new urbanism," "new regionalism" or "transit-centred development," many of whom sit on city councils, populate planning offices or write on urban affairs in cities like Toronto, recognize that to promote more effective and ecologically sustainable forms of transportation requires linking public transit to a form of city building that promotes higher population densities and a greater 'mix' of urban activities (jobs, apartments, public spaces).

But mass transportation is intimately tied not only to the physical form of cities, towns and suburbs. It is profoundly shaped by the deeper social structures of imperial capitalism. Making transit free and transforming it in the process is impossible without transforming the social relations amongst humans and with nature that are embedded in transportation as we know it.

*How 'public' is public transit?*

In our age of privatization, it is easy to forget that public transit was built on the ruins of private transportation networks. Between the late 19th and the middle of the 20th century, it became clear that "the market" was incapable of organizing effective forms of mass transportation. As a result, transportation was organized publicly: private rail, subway and trolley lines were taken over and transformed into transit agencies and railway corporations. Labour and popular movements often played an important role in this process, as was the case in Toronto where the labour

council began advocating for a municipal streetcar system decades before the TTC was created in 1921. However, in the capitalist world, this sectoral socialization of transportation did not lead to a wider decommodification of land and labour. Public transit did not always serve primarily public purposes.

Public transit was an important part in the construction of the 'red' [in this case, Social Democratic] cities of the inter- and postwar period – Vienna, Frankfurt, Zurich, Amsterdam, Rotterdam, Stockholm – where public land ownership, public services and social housing were pillars of early modernist planning. In contrast to the early Soviet experiments, these efforts did not of course challenge private property per se and the world of exploitation in the workplace. Indeed, in capitalist contexts, public transportation has typically represented a collective infrastructure to sustain expanded and primary accumulation. Most egregiously in the colonies – and white settler colonies like Canada – public transit companies and railway corporations helped dispossess indigenous peoples, plunder 'resources,' further real-estate speculation and promote boosterist urban development. One reason for the eventual creation of the TTC (in 1921) was that private streetcar companies were unwilling to expand their routes sufficiently to support private real estate development.

Since the middle of 20th century, public transit in the advanced capitalist world was increasingly relegated to secondary status. Despite big comparative differences between, say, New York City and Houston, or Naples and Vienna, nowhere did public transportation manage to stem the tide of mass 'automobilization' and cargo trucking from the 1920s (in the U.S.) to the 1960s (Western Europe). Indeed, it was not uncommon for Socialist and Communist parties to support car-led development as a 'working-class proposition.'

Since the oil crisis of the 1970s, only some resurgent transit initiatives were designed to counter automobility. Long-range suburban commuter transit, which is typically supported by business-centred growth coalitions, often facilitate automobilized sprawl. Similarly, the European case shows that high-speed train systems (now typically semi-privatized initiatives) can come at the expense of the density of inter-regional rail transportation.

Demanding free transit can represent a refreshing argument against the reprivatization of transit – and the profoundly unfree character of our car- and road-dominated society. But given that various forms of public transit have functioned in less-than-public and progressive ways, arguing for free transit today is also insufficient. Free transit advocates are thus forced to think not only about how to pay for existing transportation routes but also about what kind of transportation system we want. While public transit is always preferable to privatized transportation (car-led or otherwise), only some forms of public transit are amenable to red-green – socialist, sustainable, internationalist – ways of reorganizing urban life and the social order.

## Dilemmas

> "The automobile is the paradoxical example of a luxury object that has been devalued by its own spread. But this practical devaluation has not yet been followed by an ideological devaluation. The myth of the pleasure and benefit of the car persists, though if mass transportation were widespread, its superiority would be striking." (André Gorz, 70)

*Shifting to Transit*

Free transit will likely lead to an increase in transit ridership among existing and some new users. This increase will not be enough to bring about a radical shift away from cars toward transit, however. For such a shift, two initial steps are necessary: a) expanding transit capacities and b) actively restricting automobile transportation. Increasing transit ridership will require increasing transit service on existing systems. And for free transit to have a wider effect, it will require an expansion and intensification of transit where most people cannot currently switch to transit (most newer suburbs and pockets in postwar suburbs) and where commuting flows escape existing transit routes (between suburbs and exurbs).

In addition, research has demonstrated that transit expansion does not suffice to seriously shrink hyperautomobility in 'advanced' capitalism. Next to some steps discussed further below, measures to restrict car traffic will be necessary. Among these: phasing out car-related subsidies; severely restricting parking; stopping greenfield road expansion; giving transit, cyclists and pedestrians systematic priorities on existing roads; make planning approvals for all development contingent upon transit access; and levy employer taxes for transit use.

A red-green approach will have to be careful to propose restrictions on car traffic without imposing

regressive taxation, adding to gentrification pressures or penalizing all those car-dependent working-class fractions for whom switching to alternate modes of transportation is not an immediate option today.

*Financing Free Transit*

Financing free transit will be difficult within existing budget envelopes. In the here and now, free transit will increase public expenditures to substitute ridership revenues with tax subsidies and increase system capacities to accommodate new ridership. In the Toronto region, where local transit is still mostly financed by municipalities, years after the Mike Harris government downloaded it onto them, this will be difficult to accomplish with existing city budgets only. In the case of the TTC, which relies approximately 70 per cent on fares to cover its operating expenditures, free transit would cost many hundreds of millions of dollars a year. The demand for free transit thus would have to be linked to a restructuring of transportation and public finance. This could include a combination of new revenue sources (gas taxes, carbon taxes, tolls, congestion taxes, luxury taxes), a significant reduction in car-related expenditures by transportation departments, and reorientation of federal and provincial transportation policies.

To finance free and expanded transit will require a challenge to the many ways in which the state represents a multi-pronged subsidy machine for privatized transportation and land development. The car and road-centred bias of the state apparatus is linked to a range of social interests rooted in the construction, development, finance, media and car industries. Financing free transit will thus have to shift the costs of transportation onto those private interests, as well as car drivers.

In Canada and Ontario, where the state apparatus' deep hostility to public transit has been reinforced with cutbacks and downloading at federal and provincial levels, arguments for such a shift can be developed, however. First, the overall budgetary cost of transit budget expansion can be measured against the typically much higher cost of underwriting car-dominated transportation (road and infrastructure budgets and tax policies which subsidize them). Second, from a macro-economic and social efficiency point of view, public transportation is far less expensive than the existing privatized system. In this way, financing free and expanded transit represents a fiscal *benefit* rather than a cost. On average, this is also true for households. For most, switching to transit, if available,



would provide a big relief from the burden of car-related expenditures.

*Global Climate Justice*

Public mass transportation produces five to 10 per cent of the greenhouse gases emitted by automobile transportation. The latter is responsible for about a quarter of global carbon emissions. In addition, public transit consumes a fraction of the land used by individualized car transportation (roads and parking space consume a third or more of the land in North American urban regions). Not even counting other negative effects of automobilization (congestion, pollution, accidents, road kill, cancer, asthma, obesity, and so on), shifting to transit will markedly reduce the social costs of economic and urban development. It would also make a substantial contribution toward global climate justice.

The complex of forces sustaining car-led metropolitan expansion (from the oil industry to real-estate development) represents a primary driving force of global climate injustice (or what some have called ecological imperialism: the way in which imperial divisions of labour distribute the cost of environmental degradation unequally). This is particularly the case for European, Japanese, and, above all, North American cities, which are the most environmentally destructive on the planet and which have played a disproportionate role narrowing the options open to people in the global South. Of course, restructuring the transportation system is not a substitute for a social and political challenge to empire. However, once combined with transit expansion and reduced mobility needs, free transit could help lay the socio-ecological foundation necessary to restructure the global division of labour.

*Green Jobs and Ecological-Economic Reconstruction*

The current global slump represents an opportunity to propose a strategy of ecological and economic reconstruction, to borrow a term from the 1986 programme of the then left-wing German Greens. Transit is an ideal component of such a strategy. The investment in transit necessary to shift to a free transit system constitutes a major opportunity to promote socially and ecologically effective development (instead of bailing out banks, socializing private debt and instituting austerity regimes).[1] Indeed, transit investment could reconstruct the public sector as the strategic linchpin linking the development of urban infrastructure to the creation of green jobs and an industrial strategy centred on retrofitting ailing manu-

facturing plants and developing compact, non-profit housing on land assembled by governments, land trusts or cooperatives.

Of course, such a strategy has to confront the power bloc which has historically sustained the current model of privatized and automobilized growth: developers, banks, the construction industry, auto companies, the media, municipal and provincial transportation departments, among others. This is no small challenge, particularly in urban regions like Toronto, where industrial retrofitting to build trams, buses and trains face the still considerable weight of the car industry. Ruling-class voices for a more 'rational' regional transit system, who have had to face the historic transit weakness of the Canadian state as well, now see transit as a way to expand the role of the private sector in transportation. In contrast, a left green economic development strategy centred on labour, communities and the public sector can build on the arguments made often by workers and environmentalists fighting against plant closures (including those promoted in the early 1990s by Toronto's own Green Work Alliance). It can also build on proposals, recently made again in the United States, to redesign mass-produced suburbs along public and communal lines to save these ecologically destructive, socially isolating and debt-ridden districts from foreclosure and bankruptcy.

*Scale*

In the 20th century, the transit systems that declined least due to automobilization were those that managed to retain strong links between local, regional and national scales of public transportation and rail-based shipping. In turn, mass rail transit is weakest where national rail systems were destroyed and where metropolitan transit systems pit long-range commuter railways against local transit (most egregiously in North America). The narrow debate between streetcar/LRT and subway proponents in Toronto is a good example of how transit advocates have been forced to engage in 'either/or' arguments because of the state's systematic transit hostility. In this context, free transit advocates best argue for a virtuous cycle between neighbourhood and commuter transit that strengthens transit at all scales.

Today, multi-polar urban regions feature inter-suburban and intra-suburban commuting flows that are difficult to capture with existing transit systems. Also, long-range regional transportation (the GO Transit system, for example) typically does not reduce short-distance car trips. Sometimes, it actually underwrites automobilized sprawl and undercuts transit densities where they now exist. In this context, reintegrating the remnants of Canada's national system – the railway corridors – into a fine-grained web of local and regional transit is crucial to strengthen local and regional transit. Equally important to seriously reduce short-distance car trips are links between commuter transit and local pedestrian and cycling infrastructure. Using an approach which provides for different levels of scale and different modes of transportation, transit justice can be conceived also in geographical terms. U.S. American advocates of 'regional equity,' for example, insist that investment in regional transit do not crowd out transit improvements for existing transit users in central cities and older suburbs. These arguments are highly pertinent in Toronto, where the province and regional transit agency Metrolinx are pushing to absorb the only integrated transit system in the region – that of the Toronto Transit Commission – into their plans for transit in the sprawling Toronto region.

*Mobility and Time*

Free transit strategies may negotiate between two possibly contradictory goals: (1) replacing existing car-led effects of forced immobility (which make it difficult or impossible for people to go where they want or need to) with a public and just alternative form of mass transportation; and (2) transforming how we understand mobility today. The first goal tries to supplant or complement existing private systems without necessarily questioning the goal of transportation borrowed from the modern capitalist city: to maximize the capacity to move people to meet the imperatives of production and reproduction.

The second argument follows red-green logics. It sees transit as an element in a form of urban life that minimizes the need for mobility and maximizes people's capacities to live, work and make political decisions with or without travel. In a vision for a post-capitalist world, a combination of the first goal – 'the right to mobility' – with the second – the 'right to stay put' – may converge in a 'right to choose democratically among different mobilities.'

Such a combination of perspectives may be needed to counter the current realities of forced immobility. To realize this goal will require not only a capacity to plan the spatial relationship between employment, community and residential space, making it possible for workers and inhabitants to get where

they need or want to go without spending hours to get there. It will also require a transformation of time and a reorganization of daily working schedules.

Today, the daily grind leaves less and less breathing room not only because of the time spent on the road or in transit; daily routines are also driven by the twin tyrannies of capitalist work-time and patriarchal social reproduction (where women often have to juggle household tasks and a number of precarious jobs). Today, some work longer and longer hours (either at the job or at home) while others are structurally underemployed. In this situation, ending both forced immobility and forced mobility requires a reduction and redistribution of working time, a reorganization of the gender division of labour, and a simultaneous reduction of precarious working arrangements based on unwanted part-time, contract and temporary work. In this way, free transit and freely chosen transit mobility can be part of a vision for "slow city" that is based on much less stressful working lives and shorter but well-remunerated and fairly distributed working hours.

*Compact City Building*

'Transit-oriented development' (TOD) has become the new mantra promoted by planners and urban progressives. The notion rightly insists that a shift toward more ecologically sustainable transportation needs to go hand in hand with residential intensification and the promotion of walkable, street-oriented, mixed-use built environments. To foster transit against sprawl thus means reorienting city building to produce the transit densities necessary for mass transit. In this model, 'intensification' and 'development' appear socially neutral. In effect, however, they are often code words for urban design approaches driven by privatized real-estate development. In Toronto, the North American 'capital' of residential high-rise development, 'intensification' typically means 'condo tower' (or 'stacked dollar bills,' as we could also call them).

Privatized intensification creates a contradiction: dependent on increasing land rents, intensification threatens less profitable land uses – lower-rent apartments, cheap shops, functional industrial spaces – with the likelihood of displacement or redevelopment. By pushing working-class jobs and residences to the outer suburbs or beyond, it thus recreates the very centrifugal pressures that keep transit-hostile sprawl alive. At the same time, the 'intensification-as-condo' development model is structurally unable to link



working-class residents to their jobs in order to reduce commuting. In contrast, a socialist approach to building compact, land-saving and energy-efficient urban environments needs to return to a founding assumption that was common even among reformist planners a century ago: public land ownership and social housing are essential to develop forms of regional planning that can create compact urban forms without centrifugal side effects. Free transit can thus lead to arguments for the socialization of land and a new era of social housing.

*The Public Sector and Democratic Administration*

Insofar as it proposes to decommodify transportation, free transit is necessarily an argument in defense of the public sector: the private sector is unlikely to be interested in bidding for 'free-transit partnerships.' In the short term, however, transit companies (and, in some case also transit unions) are likely to see free transit as a threat to the financial basis of their operations (or livelihoods). Indeed, such organizational resistance may be read by some as another example of the rigidity of public sector bureaucracies, an argument that continues to be exploited with great effect to support marketization, privatization and public-private partnerships. Politically, it will thus be essential to build alliances between organized transit users, progressive transit advocates and transit workers.

As experiences in Toronto, Los Angeles and New York City have shown, building such alliances is as politically difficult as it is in other cases where public services and jobs are threatened. Still, it is easy to see how public transit workers could be among the

prime beneficiaries of free transit. The transit expansion required by an effective free system would boost the number and prestige of transit workers. Eliminating the fare would free transit worker from the stressful task of policing fare collection while eliminating another source of tension between workers and riders: the resentment of having to pay ever higher fares for stagnating service. In fact, establishing a community of interest could prefigure arguments for a new, more genuinely public form of public sector, one that is co-determined by workers and the users of public services, not state managers and the ruling class. Free transit advocacy can link up to arguments for a new, democratized state.

*Public Space*

Formally, public transit networks are among the most important public spaces in our privately dominated cities. However, socially segmented and regulated transit use has meant that public transit has always been less-than-public in practice. Indeed, public transit has become even less public over the last generation, and not only because of cutbacks and rising fares, as in Toronto. Across Euro-America, new segments of mass transit – long-range commuter networks, rapid airport links, high-speed trains – have been developed to cater to the 'winners' of the new capitalism. Well-known examples include the new Los Angeles subway and the even newer Delhi Metro Rail, both of which serve to link growing bubbles of middle- and upper-class residential and employment zones. Frequently, these new transit initiatives have been developed through public-private partnerships and come at the expense of the less profitable components of public transportation (local buses, crowded suburban trains used by toilers, inter-regional trains).

Also, in order to serve the professional middle class, cities have 'cleaned up' existing transit systems. They have pushed away panhandlers, informal street vendors, and unemployed youth with heavy security, 'bum-proof' equipment, surveillance cameras, automated ticket machines and driver-less trains. Sometimes justified by racist media campaigns about urban crime, these initiatives have contributed heavily to the securitization of public space. In the Toronto area, the VIVA buses in York Region, a P3 on the most profitable routes in the York Region Transit system, were promoted as shinier, more secure and comfortable alternative to the 'shabbier' buses that run on the secondary routes and retain the YRT label. In this case, rampant class bias against transit provided the subtext for a (slightly different) form of transit! Arguments for



free transit are a refreshing counterpoint to sanitized transit. Free transit promises genuine public space – accessible, intense, and sometimes messy. Whenever one runs into impromptu banter among riders and drivers on a bus or a subway, one can see glimpses of such genuine public space.

*Desegregation*

Like urban planning generally, transportation has often been a "technique of separation" (Guy Debord). This is most systematically true for car transportation – but not only. The role of public transportation in facilitating social segregation is one reason why public transit has been unevenly public in everyday use. Global transit history is full of examples: suburban trains serving class and race-segregated residential suburbs, trolleys and trains bypassing neighbourhoods of workers and people of colour, or railtracks being used to separate social groups from each other. Today transit policing can make transit inhospitable for youth of colour and the homeless while threatening to turn transit workers into the long arm of the punitive state.

Yet, public transit has also brought people together en route, in train stations and at bus stops. In various parts of the world, transit served as an unintended communication network for organizing drives, protests and uprisings. Remember, for example, the crucial role Rosa Parks or the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters played in the history of North American anti-racist and civil rights movements.

Today, some continue to see transit as a tool for desegregation: opening up elite, White residential ghettos ('inclusionary zoning') or making distant employment zones accessible to transit-dependent workers in segregated neighbourhoods ('reverse commuting' is practiced in a marginal way on the TTC routes that reach into York region). Laudable in principle, desegregation-by-transit can also have a negative side, however. In Paris, new transit links to underserved suburbs often help plans to demolish, redesign or gentrify racialized housing estates, which have long served as bases of rebellion, solidarity and anti-racist organizing. In Toronto, the now partly resurrected Transit City initiative may improve transit access in the most segregated – and racially demonized – parts of the inner suburbs. However, it may also serve to bring 'intensification' – potentially gentrifying development – to the arterial roads upon which it will be built. While a 'natural' way of reducing the segregating role of transit, free transit will be

free in name only if it is used to forcibly desegregate stigmatized neighbourhoods through gentrification.

*Living Differently: Transit and Urban Life*

Transit-based urban futures without forced mobility requires more than shifting the political economy of transportation. To win out against the real, if contradictory pleasures of our car culture, transit has to offer an exciting way of experiencing urban life. The beast so central to capitalism as we know it, "homo automotivis" (Mugyenyi and Engler), will only die out with a renewed transit culture: being together with others in anonymity and encountering fellow inhabitants not simply through kinship and self-selected sub-cultures but through the unexpected encounters of urban living. Fostering such an exuberant – curious, open, and generous – public culture of being "in solitude without isolation" (Augé) will require that many of us relearn the capacity to live outside privatized, atomized and sanitized environments. This is not impossible.

A recent survey by the Pembina Institute reveals that most GTA residents would happily trade their cars and bungalows for walking, transit and denser living arrangements if they could afford it. After decades of worsening congestion and 'world-class' commuting delays, Torontonians seem to have become more intolerant of car-led sprawl and more receptive to more open and public forms of urban life. This makes it possible to think of a transit culture beyond the central city spaces where transit is already a fact of life for the majority of inhabitants. If not from personal experience, we know promising elements of living in large cities from movies, literature, and music: the syncopated rhythms of street life and mass transit, the promise of independence from domestic life, the excitement of bustling crowds, the bouts of unexpected camaraderie among strangers.

## Free Transit in Toronto: The Right to the City?

How does a free transit campaign 'fit' into Toronto politics?

In the late 1960s, French Marxist Henri Lefebvre coined the term 'right to the city.' He did so to rethink revolutionary theory in explicitly urban terms. For him, contours of the 'right to the city' could be seen in the Paris Commune of 1871 and the May events in 1968. The 'right to the city' is thus much more than a mere legal right to particular public



services (housing, recreation...) or specific physical spaces (downtown...). The term captures how revolutionary demands to the social surplus as a whole are expressed by a multiplicity of movements which transform urban life by challenging boundaries of segregation and converging in their respective mobilization (mass protests, strikes, barricades...).

In Toronto, a whiff of the right to the city could be smelled during the Days of Action in October 1996. Then, a political transit strike against the Harris government connected a variety of strike actions and helped shut down the central city for a day. A sectoral transit campaign is a more modest and focused undertaking. But if understood in its wider implications, a demand for free transit can anticipate various elements of the 'right to the city': a demand to the surplus produced by society (which is necessary to reorganize public finance and economic development), a new form of city building (based on use-values and democracy, not profit and private property), and genuinely public spaces (that can bring together instead of segregating people of colour and segmenting the working-class).

In today's Toronto, a free transit campaign can be contrasted to the two dominant positions on transit, both of which are opposites of the right to the city. The first one of these is – Mayor Rob Ford's – keeps to a long tradition of car boosters which only accept transit if it does not interfere with road traffic. His attempt to depict street-car users and cyclists as obstacles for car drivers is a typical right-wing populist attempt to build a reactionary social base. This position has the advantage of capitalizing on the anti-transit bias of the Canadian state and the marginal status transit plays in the everyday life of many Torontonians, particularly suburban and exurban residents. The second perspective sees 'transit-centred' development as a way to rationalize and 'green' capitalist Toronto; it is championed by progressivist and centrist politicians, some planners and transportation specialists, urban professionals and gentrifiers, disillusioned suburban drivers, the Toronto Board of Trade and select fractions of development capital.

Both positions emerge from the inevitable contradictions of automobilization: congestion, pollution, forced mobility, spiralling commuting times, ecologically wasteful, land-devouring and debt-ridden infrastructure. Neither of the two camps can address the sources of these contradictions, however. The former is too blinkered to realize that the best way to choke 'free' car traffic is the car itself. The second sees

the merits of transit to accelerate the circulation of goods and people. As a result, some disagreement over transportation priorities has emerged within ruling circles in Toronto and Ontario. However, this pro-transit position does not challenge car society. It accepts the deeper conditions that reproduce auto-dependency in the region: land-rent driven and private property-oriented urban development and a hollowed out public sector which depends on such development to raise property taxes. Indeed, through Metrolinx, this position now using regional transit as a Trojan horse to absorb the TTC and privatize what is left of the state's public transit planning capacity. Like the radical pro-car position, it is silent on the social relations of domination and exploitation that are woven into existing transportation practices.

Arguments for free transit may lead to a third, red-green, eco-socialist perspective on transportation. Right now, the argument for free transit naturally complements the efforts of other transit and transportation activists (including pedestrian and cycling advocates) who see the links between the social and ecological benefits of public transit and understand that privatized transportation (auto-based or otherwise) cannot deliver these benefits.[2] Within existing transit-advocacy and transit union circles, the call for free transit may yet help stop an emerging consensus among neoliberals and transit progressives in Toronto for public-private partnerships.

## Short-Term Initiatives and Long-Term Perspectives

The advantage of a free transit campaign lies in its initial simplicity and concreteness. It may also open up perspectives for a different kind of city, one that harbours the possibility of a life beyond imperial capitalism. The links between a free transit campaign and the ‘right to the city’ lie here, in the connection between short-term and long-term strategies for social and ecological transformation. Short-term initiatives and long-term perspectives may be bridged, for example, by ecosocialist desires to counter the social and ecological ravages of capitalism with struggles for a “new civilization” (Löwy): modes of life governed by genuine democracy, global solidarity, generous conviviality, environmental responsibility, and deep egalitarianism along lines of class, race and gender.

To develop a longer-term vision will require working through dilemmas and open questions with activists and organizers, workers, riders and inhabitants. For a red-green perspective on transit to be part



of a broader dynamic for the right to the city, it cannot be fleshed out in the abstract. It has to be the result of an open-ended process of dialogue and movement building.

For this purpose, we will be able to learn a great deal from others elsewhere. Among these are not only the cities and regions that are usually mentioned by those arguing for comprehensive transit reform strategies: the Curitibas, Amsterdams, Bogotàs and Stockholms of the world. It is equally important to learn from the contradictory experiences with integrated urban and economic planning in the defunct or dying state-socialist world (from East Berlin to Havana) and gather the most important lessons from informal transit practices (cycling, rickshaws) across the global South, which can supplement free transit initiatives with a minimum of infrastructure. And most importantly, it will be essential to learn from radical transit movements the world over, from transit strikers in Mumbai to bus rider unionists in Los Angeles.

• Stefan Kipfer teaches at the Faculty of Environmental Studies, York University. He thanks members of the GTWA transit committee as well as Karen Wirsig, Thorben Wieditz, Parastou Saberi, Kanishka Goonewardena, and Ian MacDonald for critique and insight. For some of the sources utlizied in this article see: www.socialistproject.ca/bullet/738.php

## Endnotes

1. Recently, the new Socialist government in France has decided to proceed with a 20-30 billion Euro project to build a 200 km-long ring-shaped subway with 75 stations around central Paris. Seen by some as a Keynesian supplement to austerity, the project is designed to promote the competitiveness of Paris’ suburban export clusters, facilitate private real estate development, and support ongoing efforts to deconstruct and redevelop housing estates. However, it would not be inconceivable to reorient the project into a socio-ecological direction: intensifying transit between working-class suburbs, link transit to non-profit housing on public land, and retrofit the Paris-region car plants which are awaiting shutdowns.

2. Recent examples include: Scarborough Transit Action, Rexdale Youth TTC Challenge, TTC Riders, Sistering's Fair Fare Coalition, Clean Train Coalition, and DAMN 2025.

# Free Transit and Movement Building

Rebecca Schein

The demonstrations surrounding the G20 summit in Toronto unfolded more or less as scripted. The state spent obscene amounts of public money to install security cameras in Toronto's streets, build an enormous fence, and augment the capacities of the local, provincial, and national police forces, both logistically and legally. Demonstrators marched peacefully along a designated route through deserted downtown streets. A few people broke windows and set fire to abandoned police cars. Police made full use of their brand new riot gear and special legal powers. Steve Paiken of TVO was shocked, shocked, to see police aggression directed at journalists and, as he put it, "middle class people" peacefully assembling. A thousand arrests. Denunciations of police lawlessness and brutality. Calls for a public inquiry. Denunciations of vandalism. Calls for solidarity. And of course, the perennial lament that the voices and messages of labour and civil society were lost in the clamor.

To say the events were scripted is not to say that the violence and rights violations were not serious, or that people's anger, shock, and frustration are not real, righteous, and deeply felt. The problem with this script is that our side loses. We get bogged down in the postmortem, denouncing each other, and then denouncing the denouncers. We pour scarce resources of time and money into mobilizing for legal defense: we are literally put on the defensive. We react with renewed outrage to the predictable "over-reaction" of the state and continue to mourn the movements we should be working to build.

The aftermath of the G20 summit will be an important test for a newly formed activist organization called the Greater Toronto Workers' Assembly. Formally convened in January 2010, the Assembly is comprised of individual members from a diverse array of unions, leftist political groups, and grassroots community organizations [see list of members' organizational affiliations]. The Assembly's organizational culture is still very much a work in progress, and it has not yet proven its capacity to sustain over the long haul the diligent, principled non-sectarianism that it has begun to cultivate over the past year. But coming out of the G20 summit, the analysis and political ambitions that have driven the Assembly's formation seem all the more urgent and necessary.



## Changing the Script

The impetus behind the Assembly, as I see it, is the idea that "changing the script" will require a new form of organization, one deliberately geared to gain traction against the contours of contemporary capitalism. At a time when unions have largely stopped acting like organs of a labour movement, and when workers increasingly identify their own fate with the fate of capital (and not without reason, given the financialization of many pensions), we need an organization capable of confronting the specific ways in which neoliberalism divides, demobilizes, and demoralizes its potential opponents. Since joining the Workers' Assembly, I have often been asked about the use of the word "worker" in the organization's name. My answer has been that the work of the Assembly is to rebuild the meaning of "working class." That meaning will not be realized by fiat, and no organizational vision statement, however comprehensive or inclusive, will generate the cultural meanings that give shape and power to political identities. To rebuild the meaning and political potency of working-class identities, we need an organization that will foster sustained relationships and sustained political dialogue – not as a precursor to movement-building, but as an intrinsic feature of the movement itself.

In the weeks since the G20 summit, I have had many conversations debating the need for various organizations to weigh in on the question of property destruction, "diversity of tactics," and the meaning of solidarity in the face of state repression. Although I was dismayed that broken windows played their part in the G20 drama, it was hard for me to feel that a movement had been discredited, or that the messages of "legitimate protestors" had been undermined. In the absence of a movement with clear ambitions, an ostensibly tactical debate quickly becomes unmoored from strategy and devolves into a discussion of principles – principles of non-violence, solidarity, opposition to police violence, etc. As long as we are neither harnessed by the practicalities of building a mass movement nor oriented toward a vision we really believe we can win, these debates are unlikely to generate productive disagreement and dialogue on the broader left.

## Free and Accessible Public Transit Campaign

The Greater Toronto Workers' Assembly, however, has embarked on a project that has real potential to develop into the kind of movement in which impassioned debates over tactics will be inspiring and energizing, rather than defeatist and moralizing. At its

general meeting in April, 2010, the Assembly voted to dedicate significant energy to a campaign for free, fully accessible public transit in the city of Toronto. Many of our members have been inspired by recent efforts to elaborate the "right to the city" as a rubric organizing demands for public services and city infrastructure (Harvey, 2008; World Charter on the Right to the City, 2004). In Toronto, recent fare-hikes, strikes, provincial funding cuts, cancelled or delayed construction projects, insufficient service, piecemeal and inadequate accessibility infrastructure, and public relations debacles have made our transit system the target of considerable public anger, much of which has been channeled into generalized anti-union resentment and calls for privatization. The Assembly began to see a role for itself here – not only to respond to rhetoric pitting transit riders and transit workers against each other, but to popularize an analysis of public goods and an argument for democratic control over city resources.

Mass transit is an essential pillar of Toronto's public infrastructure, yet its transit system is among the least "public" public systems in the world. Estimated at between 70 and 80 per cent, Toronto's "fare-box recovery ratio" – the percentage of the system's operating budget paid for by individual riders at the fare-box – is among the highest in North America and more than doubles that of some other large cities around the world (Toronto Environmental Alliance, 2009; Toronto Board of Trade, 2010). Many other transit systems in comparable cities "recoup" less than half of their operating budgets from fares, relying more heavily on subsidies from multiple levels of government. According to the Toronto Board of Trade (2010), "essentially no North American or European transit systems operate in [the] manner [of Toronto]" with respect to transit funding.

Riders rarely think about rising "fare-box recovery ratios," but few have failed to notice that fares have increased from $1.10 in 1991 to $3.00 in 2010 – the last fare-hike in January 2010 arriving in the context of high unemployment and rising demand for emergency food and shelter services in the city. The fare-box recovery ratio represents a rough quantification of the efficiency with which neoliberal governments have divested from the public sphere and downloaded costs to the most vulnerable individuals. The failure to invest seriously in mass transit in recent decades has meant, moreover, that many Toronto residents outside the downtown core pay high fares for service that is inconvenient and inefficient. While the operating subsidies that support other transit systems reflect an understanding of mass transit as a public good, yielding benefits to entire communities and ecosystems, Toronto's system increasingly treats transit as a commodity, consumed and paid for by individual riders. The funding structure of Toronto's transit system is effectively a form of regressive taxation: although all of Toronto's residents benefit from transit infrastructure – including the car-owners who never ride a bus – our "public" system is funded disproportionately out of the pockets of the low- and middle-income people who rely on mass transportation in their daily lives.



## Anti-Capitalist Politics

The demand for free and accessible public transit has the potential not only to develop into a broad-based movement, but also to drive the development of the new kind of organization that the Assembly aspires to become. The Assembly is committed to its call for the outright abolition of transit fares, not merely a fare-freeze or fare-reduction. What is exciting to me about the free transit campaign is that the expression of a radical anti-capitalist principle – the outright de-commodification of public goods and services – actually serves in this instance to invite rather than foreclose genuine political dialogue about values, tactics, and strategies. While still in its early stages, the free transit campaign is already pushing us to elaborate both analytical and strategic links between commodification, environmental justice, the limits and capacities of public sector unions, and the interlocking forms of exclusion faced by people marginalized by poverty, racism, immigration status, or disability. Free transit could represent a site of convergence between many distinct activist circles in the city and foster greater integration and collaboration between environmental advocacy, anti-poverty work, and diverse human rights organizations. If the free transit campaign does succeed in bringing diverse and distinct activist cultures into conversation with each other, it will force the Assembly to grapple with strategic questions about its relationship to less radical organizations in the city. Given the marginalization and isolation that have long plagued leftist groups in Toronto and elsewhere, this should be a welcome challenge, particularly if the Assembly hopes to become an effective left pole in a broad alliance.

Among the strengths of the free transit campaign is the concreteness of vision. Within the left, efforts to elaborate a broad anti-capitalist vision too often run aground at the level of abstractions, generalities, and platitudes. Most Toronto residents would draw a blank if asked to "imagine a world without

capitalism," but what Torontonian who has ever waited for a bus can't begin to imagine an alternate future for the city, built on the backbone of a fully public mass transit system? The invitation to imagine free transit is an invitation for transit riders to imagine themselves not simply as consumers of a commodity, but as members of a public entitled to participate in conversations about the kind of city they want to live in. Without devolving into abstract and alienating debates over the meaning of, say, socialism, the call for free transit invokes the things we value: vibrant neighbourhoods; clean air and water; participatory politics; equitable distribution of resources; public space where we are free to speak, gather, play, create, and organize. Even the most skeptical response to the idea of free transit – "how will you fund it?" – is the opening of a productive conversation about taxation and control over public resources. The call for free transit can effectively open a space for an unscripted political dialogue about the meaning of fair taxation, public goods, collective priorities, and public accountability for resource allocation.

But perhaps more fundamentally, the free transit campaign is a rare example of a political project on the left that is not reactive, defensive, nostalgic, or alarmist, but hopeful, proactive, and forward-looking. "Crisis talk" is pervasive in much of contemporary culture, but in left circles, it has become difficult to imagine a mode of organizing that is not oriented around predicting or responding to punctuated calamities of various kinds – whether a financial meltdown, an un/natural disaster, the latest wave of layoffs and service cuts, or the systematic violation of basic civil liberties on a weekend in downtown Toronto. In the case of free transit, however, we are free to move ahead with the campaign on our own timeline, to seek out and develop the kinds of relationships and democratic spaces that are necessary to sustain grassroots movements over the long term. For the Assembly, this will mean having the space and time to realistically assess its own capacities and to organically develop its own strategies and priorities.



The Assembly does not have modest ambitions: it hopes to nurture a broad-based anti-capitalist movement and to vitalize a new working-class politics (Rosenfeld and Fanelli, 2010; Dealy, 2010). Its members are, I think, tired of listening to militant rhetoric unanchored to any genuine hope of winning. The push for an excellent, fully public and accessible transit system is a radical demand with immense popular appeal, an ambitious, long-range goal for which clear, achievable interim political victories are possible along the way. Free transit is not a crazy idea. Arguments in favour of free transit have surfaced sporadically in Toronto over the years, whether in an editorial by CAW economist Jim Stanford in The Globe and Mail or in a CBC interview with Deborah Cowen, a professor of geography at the University of Toronto (Stanford, 2005; Cowen, 2010). Some cities already have free transit systems, and many have partially free systems – in the downtown core, during holiday seasons or off-peak hours, or on "spare the air" days when smog levels are high. But in Toronto there has not yet been an initiative focused on building a broad-based movement dedicated to the eventual abolition of transit fares in the name of social, economic, and environmental justice.

## Baby Steps

Without abandoning or compromising its radicalism, the Assembly can push for concrete steps in the direction of de-commodified transit and build productive relationships with individuals and organizations who do not necessarily identify themselves as anti-capitalist. It will be in the process of pushing for interim reforms along the way to a de-commodified transit system that the Assembly will most need to articulate its political principles and its analysis of the spatialization of race and class in Toronto. Free transit in the downtown core may, for instance, be good for Toronto's tourism industry, but will it benefit the immigrant and working-class communities in transit-poor areas of the inner suburbs, who spend proportionately more of their income to access poorer quality services than those available downtown? Proposals to pay for free transit through suburban road tolls will similarly hit hardest those working-class communities whose neighbourhoods are so underserved by transit that they have no choice but to drive into the city for work. The process of developing interim priorities will not, in other words, postpone the challenge of articulating and popularizing a class-based and anti-racist argument for public infrastructure. Instead, the Assembly will be forced to pursue its most radical aspirations by cultivating a sustained dialogue about the interim

remedies and strategies that will both address real needs in our communities and help build a broad-based movement over the long term.

It will be through this process of dialogue, I hope, that a new articulation of a politicized working-class identity might emerge. Our earliest discussions of the free transit campaign are already pushing us to think about the social complexities that will need to be navigated if we are to build an effective free transit movement. Success will depend on our capacity to carve out and sustain a space for dialogue and negotiation among transit workers and riders, within unions, and across neighbourhoods and communities that have been unevenly affected by fare hikes and inadequate services. Questions of tactics and strategy cannot be divorced from the process of identifying, developing, and strengthening the complex connections between the people who need and use public goods and services and the workers who provide them. We will need to recognize the different ways in which our various constituencies are powerful and vulnerable and learn how to defend and protect each other. The free transit campaign lends itself to the kind of intensely local organizing through which honest dialogue, trust, and long-term relationships can be developed and nurtured – within and across neighbourhoods and among transit riders and workers. And of course, without these things, the campaign will go nowhere.

Among the strengths of the free transit campaign is its potential to foreground and develop an analysis of our collective stake in the protection of public goods. It is not difficult to talk about public goods in the context of mass transportation infrastructure. The shared benefits of public transportation are difficult to deny, particularly in a city as large and as sprawling as Toronto. Even setting aside the obvious ecological imperatives that should be driving public investment in greener infrastructure, there are powerful economic reasons to support a massive re-investment in Ontario's transportation sector. A serious effort to expand the reach and accessibility of the public transit system would serve not only to ease the burden of Toronto's most vulnerable residents and reduce the economic and health costs associated with air pollution and traffic congestion: such an investment could re-direct the wasted skills and resources embodied in Ontario's laid-off auto-workers and silent auto-plants, which could be converted to the production of high efficiency mass transit vehicles. As Sam Gindin and Leo Panitch (2010) argued recently in the Toronto Star, public borrowing to finance such investments represents not a wasteful burden on future generations,



but a commitment to securing them a future. The real squandering of our collective resources lies not in public borrowing or in benefits packages for public employees, but in our failure to direct existing skills, knowledge, and material capacities into a coherent strategy for building sustainable communities.

The idea of a free transit movement immediately foregrounds a number of thorny strategic questions for the left in Toronto: how to build trust, dialogue, and support for a free transit movement within the transit union; how to address and re-focus the widespread anger, mistrust, and resentment directed at the public sector in the current climate; how to sustain and advance anti-capitalist principles while building productive relationships within broader progressive milieux. Navigating these questions will be challenging, and the Assembly is still a long way from a coherent and systematic approach to answering them. But the fact that these questions surface so quickly and urgently is a positive sign of the ambition and seriousness with which the Assembly is approaching the organization of a free transit movement. The free transit campaign will push the Assembly to develop further its internal organizational and decision-making capacities, but it will also demand an outward-looking, inclusive process, in which the Assembly's role is to open space for debate, dialogue, and collective strategizing.

In fact, the transit system itself can provide the venue for us to stage public discussions about our collective resources and to share alternative visions for our city: the transit system is a readymade classroom, theatre, and art gallery, attended every day by people who could come to recognize their stake in the de-commodification of public goods of many kinds. My hope is that Toronto's buses, streetcars, and subway platforms could be places for experimentation, places to develop the new tactics, organizing skills, and relationships that might permit us to really depart from the prevailing script.

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# What Emergency?
## An Assessment of Toronto's 2008 Transit Strike

Ian MacDonald

Last weekend's two-day transit strike in Toronto raises anew and in starker terms two issues of longstanding concern to the labour movement in this city and throughout the province. First, the unprecedented rapidity with which the city sought back-to-work legislation, and the similarly expeditious and unanimous passage of this legislation by all parties of the provincial legislature, represents a monolithic rejection by governing elites of transit workers' right to strike. Second, and equally worrisome, the strike has revealed the inadequacy of organized labour's political capacities in a city where vicious anti-union sentiment lies just beneath a superficially civil discourse, and the municipal privatization agenda remains essentially unchecked.

### Three Strikes

On March 12th, Amalgamated Transit Union Local 113 members voted overwhelmingly to reject the TTC's (Toronto Transit Commission) final offer: a contract which proposed a sub-par wage settlement, rejected union demands for improved benefits, and opened a second tier for new hires. The union executive spent the following month in negotiations with a strong mandate to walk out if the 2005 contract expired on April 1st without a new agreement. A tentative contract was reached by the bargaining committee on Sunday, April 20th, narrowly averting a Monday strike. Local president Bob Kinnear presented this as a 'no-concessions' contract and recommended ratification without, however, having secured the full support of the committee.

Wage gains in the new contract were in line with other union settlements: operators were given full pay when off work due to workplace-related injuries, other benefits were topped up and skilled trades received wage premiums. Management withdrew its two-tier demand. But some of the language was sufficiently unclear on contracting-out and seniority to raise concerns among maintenance workers and operators in the transportation division. This lack of clarity was highlighted by bargaining committee members, based in the maintenance division, who are hostile to Kinnear's leadership and campaigned against ratification. The tentative contract was put to the membership on Friday, April 25th, and voted down by a significant majority. It was solidly rejected by maintenance workers and by approximately half of transportation division members, who voted both out of solidarity with maintenance and out of their own concerns relating to seniority. The executive was subsequently notified that a strike would shortly commence, and Kinnear moved quickly to lead the walkout with the support of his board.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, transit workers have succeeded, almost alone, in blocking employer attempts at dividing their union and lowering wage costs through the introduction of part-time positions and contracting-out of services. They have done so through strike action, the credible threat of walkouts during negotiations, and work-to-rule campaigns. When they have struck over job security issues, they have been condemned by management and the press for being 'paranoid' and 'irrational'. Similarly, the TTC promised during last weekend's strike that it had no intention of contracting-out maintenance services and that no employees would lose their jobs. But transit workers know well that any concession, no matter how ambiguously worded or 'exceptional' in nature, will be seized upon by management as a precedent for further concessions in subsequent negotiations, leading to the weakening of union power over time. In any event, you can't take a promise to arbitration, and transit workers have no reason, given recent experience, to place their faith either in management's promises or judges' rulings.

This most recent strike is the third walkout under Kinnear's presidency. In 2004, 700 maintenance workers downed tools for a day and half at the TTC's Hillcrest Yards over a work rule issue. Instead of negotiating with the union over what amounted to a minor matter – the closing of one of the yard's pedestrian access gates – management sought and received a cease-and-desist order from the Ontario Labour Relations Board (OLRB). In 2006, custodial workers set up a picket when management moved a number of their positions to the night shift. Again, instead of negotiating the issue as it had promised to do, the TTC shut the system down, secured an immediate back-to-work order from the labour board, and then sought $3 million in damages from the union. Management and the Commission defend the alacrity with which they seek state sanction in mid-contract disputes as necessary to demonstrate to the workforce 'who is in charge,' since Kinnear appears either unable or unwilling to discipline his own members (as stated to the

author in interviews with Scott Blackey, Director of Human Resources, TTC; Adam Giambrone, Chair of the TTC; and Joe Mihevc, TTC Commissioner – the last two being New Democratic Party – NDP elected councilors for Toronto).

The April 25th walkout was a legal strike whereas the previous work stoppages were 'illegal.' But the employer's immediate recourse to back-to-work legislation in the third strike effectively dissolves the difference. It is clear from the record of the past four years that neither the city nor the province will tolerate the collective withdrawal of transit workers' labour. Now all strikes are de facto illegal.

The 'no' vote and subsequent walkout last weekend are expressions of militancy from a powerful sector of Toronto's labour movement. In echoing the rejection of a tentative contract by ATU-affiliated GO workers late last year, it points to the use transit workers are making of their economic leverage. As mass transit becomes ever more important in organizing the commute in the metropolitan region, and therefore also of organizing urban form and development across the GTA, the labour that transit workers perform has become more valuable. The irony is that instead of becoming more highly valued as a result, transit workers face ever greater discipline. To be a productive worker in neoliberal Toronto, it seems, is not a piece of luck but a misfortune.

### Questions for Howard Hampton

> "If these workers are so bloody essential, why don't you pay the best possible wages?" Ontario NDP leader Stephen Lewis speaking in the provincial legislature before voting against back-to-work legislation ending a 23 day transit strike in 1974 (*Hansard*, August 31, 1974).

The city requested back-to-work legislation within hours of the strike. The provincial government convened an emergency session for that purpose within a day and a half. In fact, the legislation had already been drafted the previous week, when the parties were still negotiating. The Legislature opened at 1:30 Sunday afternoon and by 2:00 pm the bill had passed three readings.

ATU members were forced back to work before their strike began to have its real economic impact, which is to shut-down the weekday commute. The ability to disrupt the commute is what gives transit workers the leverage to bargain a better contract. The weekend strike made traveling in the city, including some work trips, more difficult – not impossible, or dangerous. The increase in traffic was hardly noticeable, no shipments were delayed on that account, and no workplaces were closed. And yet the strike was treated as if it were a major urban crisis. When the Eves government ordered sanitation workers back to work in 2002 with the support of both Howard Hampton and Dalton McGuinty, the government at least went through the motions of arguing that the strike posed a significant threat to public safety. What is so dangerous about a transit strike that 8,900 workers had to be stripped of their rights to strike and freedom of association before they could properly exercise them?

In presenting the bill, Labour Minister Brad Duguid spoke of the TTC as the "backbone, the lifeblood" of Toronto, itself the "engine of the economy of both Ontario and Canada" (*Hansard*, April 27, 2008). The increased traffic caused by a strike would not only inconvenience drivers, it "will also translate into higher pollution levels, with the related health effects and impact on our environment." Bob Runciman, leader of the opposition Tories, noted that, before the strike, he "wasn't aware of how significant it [the TTC] was in terms of environmental impact" (*Hansard*, April 27, 2008). McGuinty and Tory MP Peter Shurman spoke of the effect of the strike on workers and the most vulnerable residents of the city. Every speaker expressed their faith in collective bargaining.

You don't have to be the leader of a workers' party to point to the contradictions and hypocrisy expressed that day in the Legislature. Dalton McGuinty used the occasion of debating back-to-work legislation in 2002 to blame Tory governments for the deterioration of public services in the city and for poisoning bargaining relationships with unions. But in

2008, Hampton said nothing along these lines, even though the McGuinty government has done very little since coming to power to restore provincial services and municipal funding, and McGuinty himself undermined the transit negotiations with his public musings about essential work legislation.

Why does it take a strike for the government and official opposition to recognize the importance of mass transit to the provincial economy, the lives of working people, and the environment? If mass transit plays such a significant role in reducing pollution, why hasn't the Liberal government restored operating subsidies to what they were before the Tory cuts? And if mass transit is an essential condition of the competitiveness of the Toronto regional economy, why is the level of government subsidy on a per-ride basis 2 times higher in New York City and 5 times higher in Chicago – our supposed urban competitors – than it is in Toronto? The TTC is the worst-funded public transit system in North America. Police, emergency medical and firefighting services are deemed essential because they are necessary to the preservation of public safety. And because they are considered essential, they are provided free of charge to the recipient. If mass transit is an essential service, why should riders pay three quarters of the operating costs at the point of delivery through ever-increasing fares?

From the perspective of the state, the emergency resides in the economic disruption that a transit strike causes in a city like Toronto. The point of a strike, of course, is to cause economic disruption. If the state is going to ban strikes which cause economic disruption – rather than appealing to the higher standard of a threat to public safety – where will it draw the line?

In speaking to the back-to-work legislation, Howard Hampton made his reservation known on language in the preamble which suggested that the TTC is an essential service. This was a dodge, not a defence. The city of Toronto already has 'essential' transit workers – on the cheap. Runciman spoke truthfully when he noted that the consent of all parties to the emergency Sunday session proved that transit workers' right to strike was "illusory" (*Hansard*, April 27, 2008). In joining with the other parties to legislate ATU members back to work, the Ontario NDP believed that it was making an electoral calculation (one could say the same of the NDP-linked Mayor David Miller and many of the NDP city councilors). But in so doing the NDP has made itself indistinguishable from the governing Liberals on a matter of vital importance to the labour movement. Trade unionists are working in a province where the government can strip us of our right to strike without any parliamentary expression of dissent from a labour-backed party. That is our emergency.



### A Left Strategy for Transit

There are two voices in the city which speak for a transit system based on the principles of distributional justice, democracy, and equal access: the riding public and the workers who move them. The failure of the union to give adequate notice when they launched their strike late on a Friday night was a tactical error. The strike has made a united worker/rider defence of public transit more important – but for the lack of notice, more difficult – than before. If this seems an unlikely prospect at the present time, we can nevertheless begin to think about how to build such a campaign.

The union should raise the banner of a free fare. High fares are a workplace issue. The fact that fares are rising faster than inflation, in the context of declining family incomes and no significant improvement in service, creates conflict between riders and front line workers. The resulting stress on operators takes a heavy toll on their health: TTC workers have the highest occupational rate of post-traumatic stress disorder in the province – four times higher than police officers. While a free fare cannot be made a contract issue, the union could declare 'pay-what-you-can' days. A free fare would have a significant redistributive effect while reducing the city's greenhouse gas emissions. Other North American cities have set a precedent in this area. The provincial Liberal Party and the NDP at both the provincial and city levels have done little to advance an alternate transit policy.

The union should develop a capacity, in common with rider and neighbourhood associations, of intervening in TTC service design and expansion plans, with a preference towards improving service in the poorly served inner-suburban areas of the city. Neoliberal governments make money available for capital spending, but not for operating expenses. The union should be a voice for improving the system where it will make the most difference in improving people's access to the city as a whole, rather than directed towards the endless process of making downtown Toronto a more competitive location for capital.

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# Toronto's $8.4-Billion Light Rapid Transit Sell Out

Brenda Thompson

It seemed all our transit woes in Toronto were finally behind us. Mayor Rob Ford's cancellation of Transit City had galvanized the mushy middle. In February, Toronto Council ignored his call for subways to vote in favour of four Light Rapid Transit lines (LRTs). At long last, the residents of Malvern and Jane and Finch in Toronto's northern suburbs were going to get some much needed public transit. In retrospect this was only the lull before the storm. No one suspected that it signified the end of locally controlled, maintained and operated public transit. Two months later, the Ontario provincial government made the announcement that Metrolinx, a provincial arms-length agency meant to coordinate regional planning, was taking over for the Toronto Transit Commission (TTC) Expansion Department. Construction of $8.4-billion worth of LRTs was being pushed back to 2014. They needed the extra time to pursue Alternate Funding Procurement (AFP) otherwise known as a public-private partnership (P3).

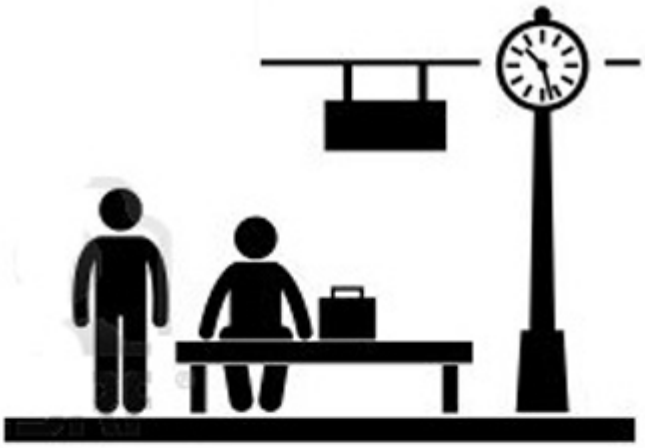
The TTC Expansion Department had already begun to oversee work on one of the Eglinton Crosstown LRT in 2011. However, a municipal transit authority with 50 years experience was going to be replaced by the province's regional transit agency and a yet to be determined, multinational consortium. Metrolinx added the formality of a “positive value for money assessment” as if to claim an objective analysis would be carried out to compare private and public procurement. But in reality, the die had been cast. TTC staff was forced to clear out of their Eglinton office in July and Metrolinx staff moved in. Toronto's new transit was going to be delivered through a crown agency with no experience in large transit infrastructure projects and no protocol for public consultation.

Set up to replace the Greater Toronto Transportation Authority by the Dalton McGuinty government in 2006, Metrolinx had already earned a reputation for being secretive. With a board of directors stacked with bankers, real estate company executives, a hotelier and various other business types, they were accustomed to closed door meetings, and relegating the public to a scripted agenda with no opportunity to depute. Another crown agency, Infrastructure Ontario, would be responsible for the ‘value for money assessment.’ They continue to use this skewed cost estimate despite an obvious bias toward privatization. The public cannot even verify the accuracy of their numbers. The P3s corporate confidentiality always trumps citizen's right to know.



### Privatization Trumps Public Transit Debate

Now that Metrolinx was conducting negotiations with the province of Ontario, City Councillors would need to sign a Master Agreement to hand over control of city right of ways, property and scope design (number of stations, length of transit line etc.). This would have been the only opportunity for the public to weigh in on privatization. But the fact that they were going to have to foot the bill didn't matter.



Council members, anxious to secure the funding for LRTs, refused to facilitate any kind of real and meaningful consultation with constituents. Nor would they discuss the findings of the American Public Transit Association report commissioned by TTC staff. The report concluded that such a huge ($8.4-billion) project would create less competition, not more and could result in "loss of public control."

In September, Metrolinx let the other shoe drop. Operation of new LRTs would also be privatized. Although they later agreed to return responsibility to the TTC, this back room deal, brokered by the centre-left Councillor Joe Mihevc, was just a temporary fix. In ten years Metrolinx could negotiate a new contract with the private sector. There wasn't much in it for TTC workers either. Most of the good jobs are in the maintenance of public transit, not in operations.

But as far as pro-LRT members of Council and their media allies were concerned, privatization was no longer the issue. Besides, the Province had threatened to withdraw funding if they didn't go along with AFP. Even the Public Transit Coalition, an organization set up expressly to warn voters about the pitfalls of privatization during the 2010 municipal election was strangely quiescent. On November 1st, Council voted 31 to 10 in favour of the Master Agreement. According to TTC Commission Chair Karen Stintz, attempts to defer approval or ensure veto power over scope design, were met with similar threats to renege on funding, from Minister of Transportation, Bob Chiarelli. Provincial bullying had worked like a charm.

With Council more than willing to play the victim, given their timidity and lack of direction since the Ford election, it's not hard to see how the public interest got lost in all the political arm twisting. But Toronto is not some small town in the middle of nowhere. Toronto is two and a half million people who generate billions of dollars in revenue for the Province. How do our municipal representatives justify their willingness to roll over and play dead? Especially when dealing with a leaderless, scandal ridden, minority provincial government. They obviously felt no obligation to defend the TTC's jurisdiction over one of the largest public transit systems in North America.

### Increased Costs with P3s

We could have another provincial election in the spring. If we end up with a Conservative or NDP government at Queen's Park, what guarantee do we have that this agreement will survive? Many of us are old enough to remember when Mike Harris filled in the hole for the Eglinton subway in 1995. Tim Hudak is threatening to divert the money toward subways. If he wins, Mayor Rob Ford may still get his wish. Either way, there has to be a huge public outcry or trade agreements like NAFTA and the soon to be ratified Canada Europe Trade Agreement (CETA) will ensure P3s with foreign consortia continue to funnel profits out of our local communities and into offshore tax havens. Recent research on P3s in Ontario, conducted by Matti Siemiatycki and Naeem Farooqi of the Geography and Planning Department at the University of Toronto, conclude they cost 16 per cent more than regular government infrastructure projects.

The Canada Line in Vancouver is touted as a shining example of privately designed, built, financed, maintained and operated mass transit. However, closer examination reveals rising costs of almost $500-million. There are fewer station stops than originally planned and the public is on the hook for any shortfall ($21-million) in ridership targets. The Federation of Canadian Municipalities is against P3s. They want increased, long-term funding to be independent of privatization.

Ridership on the TTC is increasing each year with a projected 528 million in 2013. This trend continues despite the fact that transit users bear the financial burden of provincial underfunding through fare hikes and service cuts. Soon they will be forced to subsidize the private sector's bottom line as well.

Where do we find people in Toronto with the courage to make similar demands on higher levels of government? It will certainly not be from among members of Toronto City Council. The concocted spectre of "no LRTs without P3s" was good enough for them to abandon their responsibility for local control and public accountability.

But this will just put more pressure on the people living in Malvern and Jane and Finch – neighbourhoods where good working-class jobs are scarce and poverty levels keep rising. Privatization of our public transit system will only exacerbate the hardship and inequality that has already taken up residence in Toronto's outer areas.

• Brenda Thompson is a public transit activist living in Toronto.

# Privatization and Public Transit in Toronto:
## The 2012 Provincial Auditor's Report on Metrolinx

Brenda Thompson

Metrolinx, a Government of Ontario agency, has a mandate to "co-ordinate and integrate all modes of transportation in the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area" (GTHA). Its blueprint for regional transportation expansion, *The Big Move*, was released in 2008. Initially, all debt to support transit projects in this plan was to be arranged through the Ontario Financing Authority using public procurement. However, by 2011 its investment strategy reflected changes to the Ontario Infrastructure and Lands Corporation Act that required projects over $50-million to be considered for Alternate Funding Procurement.

In traditional public procurement, money is borrowed directly from the government at low interest rates. The appropriate government agency has responsibility for design, operation and maintenance while either undertaking the construction itself (of which there are many advantages which neoliberalism has shunted) or contracting out construction to a builder. But in the new Alternate Funding Procurement (AFP) model, a private consortium obtains financing from a private bank in order to design, build and possibly maintain and operate government infrastructure. AFP is essentially another term for public-private partnership (or P3).

Justifying the new model was the claim that P3s would bring projects to completion "on time and on budget" while providing "value for money" (VfM). All government agencies overseeing large infrastructure projects are now required to go through Infrastructure Ontario's value-for-money assessment, supposedly objectively comparing traditional government procurement with a public-private partnership before deciding on the delivery model.

### Biased Process

But this process is far from objective. Infrastructure Ontario (IO) was set up expressly to promote P3s. IO's standard practice is to hire "an external advisory firm with relevant experience" to prepare the analysis. That means the private sector is evaluating whether to proceed through government or the private sector – bias is unavoidable. In value-for-money assessments of Metrolinx rail projects, a completed GO Transit project would be a logical public procurement choice for comparison. However, as described below, this practice is not always followed, leading to another potential bias favouring privatization.

Because of the higher interest costs of borrowing privately and the expectation of a 10–15 per cent profit, P3s inevitably end up costing more than government projects. Therefore, ways are found for P3s to appear to have better value.

One way is through risk assessment and transfer. When using public procurement the province is liable for all risk. But with a P3, risk is shared between the province and the private consortium, driving down the estimated cost to the public of a P3. In many cases, Infrastructure Ontario hires an outside consulting firm to develop the "risk matrix" for the project. This allows further manipulation of the results. If the risk estimate is inflated, the supposed saving by transferring the risk to private hands is equally inflated. Numerous studies have documented the economic fallacies of this process, and the assault on the most basic principle of democracy of accountable expenditures. For example, John Loxley, in his study for CUPE *Asking the Right Questions: A Guide for Municipalities Considering P3s* (June 2012, p. 18), commented:

> "For Ontario, the assessments show, very clearly, that risk transfer alone supposedly gives P3s value for money over conventional procurement. The Credit Valley Hospital is said to deliver VfM [Value for Money] of $26-million, based on risk transfer valued at $39.7-million. Durham Regional Court House shows VfM of $49-million, while risk transfer is said to be $132-million. The Ministry of Government Services Data Centre shows VfM of $64-million and risk transfer of $150-million. How risk transfer could possibly amount to so much for such pedestrian buildings as a court house (39.5 per cent of final P3 cost) and a data centre (42.6 per cent of final P3 cost) is not explained – the public is simply expected to believe it."

Similarly, Stuart Murray, in his report for the CCPA B.C. Office, *Value for Money? Cautionary Lessons about P3s from British Columbia* (June 2006, p. 1), noted that:

> "The normal deliberations that go into making sound decisions about infrastructure projects

are being influenced by 'Value For Money' assessments ... that have limited use. These reports are so subjective, so susceptible to manipulation by vested interests, so complicated, and so consistently withheld from appropriate public scrutiny that they must be done by the Auditor General's office to be of any legitimate use."

### The Ontario Provincial Auditor General Annual Report 2012

Ontario's Auditor General, Jim McCarter, is responsible for auditing the accounts of government agencies like Infrastructure Ontario and Metrolinx. Only the Auditor General's office has access to fiscal data contained in the value-for-money assessments, consortia bids and change orders for P3s. A shield of corporate confidentiality prevents the public from accessing this information.

Under the existing protocol, the Auditor General's recommendations are never released until after the decision to use a P3 has been made and the project is under way. This leaves the public powerless to intervene or have meaningful input in the decision. The Auditor General's 2012 *Annual Report* does provide, however, valuable information on two P3s currently managed by Metrolinx – information that favours public procurement and more public input over transit expansion in Toronto. Two examples are the Pearson/Union Station air-rail link and the Presto fare card. They provide additional support to the conclusions reached by Loxley and Murray, and a warning to the direction that the new public transit being built is heading in.

### The "Spur" Line for the Pearson-Union Air-Rail Link P3

This $128.6-million contract was awarded to a private consortium: AirLINX Transit Partners (Aecon Construction and Materials Ltd. and Dufferin Construction Company).

The initial cost estimates for the P3 model were $22-million higher than traditional government financing and procurement. The value-for-money analysis to justify private capital estimated risk for the P3 delivery to be $42-million less (with the typical fudge around risk transfer from the public to the private sector). However the higher estimate of risk for traditional delivery was not based on any completed GO Transit projects. Neither did it take into account any additional P3 costs due to changes that might be necessary during construction. A conflict of interest was also noted, as Metrolinx allowed the consulting firm that produced the P3 risk allocation matrix to bid and obtain the contract for providing engineering and technical advice on the project.

In other words, like so many P3 privatization measures, the justification rests on dubious assessments of risk, ignored assessments of public sector financing and building options, economic nonsense about government financing limits and often retro-active open-ended government guarantees of cost over-runs.

### The Presto Fare System P3

The inroads to privatization and commercialization of the public transit are not just evident in the building of new transit lines. They are also found in the way the Ontario Liberal government has been maneuvering some of its other public transit support. The Presto Fare System, for example, is intended to facilitate travel by public transit anywhere within the GTHA using a reloadable plastic card for payment. In 2006, the Ontario Government awarded a ten year, $250-million contract to a U.S. consulting firm, Accenture, to design, build, operate and maintain the fare system. The process of public consultation and coordination between government agencies appeared dubious at best in the interest of privatization.

Astonishingly, when the Ontario Ministry of Transportation signed the contract, the Toronto Transit Commission (TTC) – which has 80 per cent of transit ridership within the GTHA – had not yet agreed to use the Presto system. Concern with Presto's lack of accessibility and convenience for low-income and university students, high repair costs and a lack of back-end support for reporting transaction mistakes remained unresolved. As leverage to encourage acceptance, the Ministry suggested that the transfer of the gas tax revenue to the TTC would be contingent on it agreeing to use Presto.

Provincial guidelines stipulate that the TTC's share of the gas tax transfer is for operations and capital expenditures.[1] According to Peter Notaro of the City of Toronto Manager's Office for 2011-12, the amount was $162.2-million. Since 2009, approximately $91.6-million has been allocated to service, leaving transit riders on the hook for 70 per cent of the TTC's $1.5-billion annual operating budget. With 24 per cent coming from municipal revenue and taxes, the gas tax transfer constituted a provincial contribution of

just 6 per cent of the TTC's operating budget. The province was thus threatening to withdraw its negligible subsidy to the largest transit authority in Canada, the least subsidized of any comparable jurisdiction in North America.

In 2011, the TTC negotiated a tentative agreement with another company for an open-source fare system. According to former TTC Chair Adam Giambrone, this was much more cost effective. Unlike Presto, it used existing banking technology rather than paying for the development of proprietary – and monopolistic – technology. The supplier was willing to pay the initial costs as long as it got a percentage of fare revenues. It would also make the fare collection system compatible with the existing Presto base system. But at this point the province upped the ante, threatening to withdraw not only gas-tax funding but money to pay for new streetcars and the Eglinton Crosstown LRT if the TTC didn't adopt Presto.

So the TTC agreed to relinquish autonomy over its fare system, and recently elected mayor Rob Ford signed onto Presto. In exchange, construction of the Sheppard LRT, which had begun in December of 2009 and that Ford opposed, would stop. Provincial money would be redirected toward putting the Eglinton LRT underground (Ford's expensive pet project that planners had concluded was unnecessary for large section of either an LRT or subway line) while the mayor sought private investors to extend the Sheppard Avenue subway. Transit City in its original form was dead, killed by Ford with provincial acquiescence.

Metrolinx paid a premium for what could be considered the unnecessary proprietary development of Presto. And, according to the Provincial Auditor, rather than modifying the original Presto system to meet the needs of Ottawa and Toronto, as permitted in the contract, the Ministry of Transportation decided to pay for a new system, Presto Next Generation (PNG). Like so much of the McGuinty Liberal government's decision-making around P3s, transparency of the process took a backseat to the deal itself.

The Provincial Auditor estimated that the total capital expenditure for Presto and PrestoNG could be as high as $700-million, while the operating cost would be $253-million a year. Of 22 measures tracking its performance in the contract, Accenture failed to meet nearly a third. As of March 31, 2012, only 18 per cent of transit users in the GTHA used Presto. After the massive expenditures to support a private venture, public transit in the Toronto region, including the



TTC, has one of the most inept electronic payment systems of any major transit system in the world. As the 2012 A*nnual Report* of the Auditor General concluded, the "Presto base and PNG combined would turn out to be one of the more expensive fare-card systems in the world" (p. 22).

## The Four New LRTs and the Downtown Relief Line

The Auditor General's *Report* is suggestive of the many problems that may beset Toronto's $8.4-billion LRT expansion projects and the projected $6.2-billion Downtown Relief Line. Metrolinx is at the helm, and it is one of the central agencies that the Liberal government has wielded its patronage and by which it coordinates its networks with the Toronto capitalist classes. More flawed value-for-money analyses favouring the private sector are likely, as well as the typical back-room deals and manipulative threats to remove funding if the City tries to act too independently from the province. Unnecessary cost overruns (fully absorbed by the public sector), with no guarantee that deadlines will be met, can also be expected. Finally, the in-house, local expertise that has supported TTC expansion for the last fifty years will be replaced by private engineering and design consultants leaving us ill equipped to choose anything but privatization in future. The urban planning disaster that has become public transit development in Toronto can be expected to continue. There is nothing that Metrolinx has ever done that makes a case otherwise.

Privatization is rooted in a neoliberal ideology that seeks to target public service workers and municipalities with austerity measures while reducing corporate taxes, bailing out banks and granting lucrative public infrastructure contracts to foreign multinationals. Once the ink has dried, international trade rules have the potential to restrict communities from acting in their own best interest. Steven Shrybman, in a report for CUPE, P*ublic-Private Partnerships: Assessing the Risks Associated with International Investment and Services Treaties* (2002), concluded that,

> "Agreements such as NAFTA, GATS and CETA could mean that once a local government tried to terminate the P3 contract it could be considered expropriation, launching an investor-state claim through international law. Local governments would no longer be able to insist on local procurement. Environmental and health regulations could be subject to trade challenges and foreign investor claims."

To make up for the extra P3 costs that the TTC has accepted, there will be pressure to outsource more good TTC jobs and impose fare increases on those who can least afford to pay. Other municipalities take for granted the right to their own transit policies, with senior level government financial support and public coordination. But unless there is a loud public outcry, the slow and steady evisceration of the local public transit system in Canada's biggest city will continue – until, faced with a pile of bones, Metrolinx is 'compelled' to move in and take over TTC operations as well.

*The Big Move* is more than a regional transportation plan. In taking over LRT expansion and the Downtown Relief Line from the TTC, Metrolinx has not only restricted public scrutiny but eliminated a local level of governance and oversight that is still somewhat responsive to Toronto residents. Public consultation for *The Big Move* is ongoing until June 2013. Armed with the additional evidence contained in the Auditor General's report, public transit activists must broaden the conversation about transit to include not only how we fund public transit but also how to ensure that it is delivered locally and publicly, and that the needs of the most vulnerable transit users come first.

• Brenda Thompson is a public transit activist living in Toronto.

**Endnote**: 1. Previous provincial funding is summarized in the TTC's 2010 Annual Report (p. 22) as follows: "Between 1971 and 1980, the City and the Province of Ontario (the 'Province') covered the Commission's operating shortfalls on a shared basis. From 1981 until 1993, a more formalized 'Users' Fare Share' formula was used, with the Commission establishing its fares each year to cover 68% of total estimated operating expenses (as defined for provincial subsidy purposes). The City provided an operating subsidy equal to the remaining expenses. The City in turn obtained a subsidy from the Province equal to 16% of eligible expenses, plus additional subsidies for certain specified costs. Between 1994 and 1997, modified 'flat-line' subsidies were provided by the City and the Province. However, between January 1, 1998 and December 31, 2003, the Province did not provide operating subsidies for public transit. Subsequent to 2003, the City allocated to the Commission's budget an amount of provincial subsidy from the gas tax (see note 13(b)). In 2010, the amount allocated was $91.6-million (2009 – $91.6 million). Currently, the total City operating subsidy amount is established as part of the City's annual budget process."



# Fare Increases to Pay for New Transit in Toronto:

## Punishing those who can least afford to pay

Brenda Thompson

Metrolinx, the Greater Toronto Area's regional transit authority, has released a short list of revenue tools that they will consider using to help pay for new public transit in the Greater Toronto Hamilton Area. Projects like the Eglinton, Scarborough, Sheppard and Finch light rapid transit lines (LRTs) will need $2-billion a year from sources other than existing government revenue. Options that made it to their short list were: development charges, employee payroll tax, gas tax, high occupancy toll lanes, highway tolls, land value capture, parking space levy, property tax, sales tax, transit fare increase and vehicle kilometres travelled.

It is almost unbelievable that transit fare increases are still an option. Paying more for transit at the fare box actually discourages transit use by punishing those who can least afford to pay and it doesn't even generate very much revenue ($45-million). Employee payroll taxes target working-class people through regressive taxation, and property taxes are also highly regressive.

With Toronto second only to Calgary in income inequality, it is crucial that public transit be affordable and accessible to transit users and low income residents across the city. Congestion, smog, stress, long commute times, increased respiratory illness and fare increases, are the result of decades of underinvestment and downloading by provincial and federal governments. They must play a much bigger role in funding existing public transit operations. We need more frequent service and more connectivity between neighbourhoods now. Even with new Light Rail Transit (LRTs), it will still take four transfers to go from Morningside to the Beaches along Kingston Road, and that's not convenient enough to get people out of their cars.

### National Transit Strategy?

Canada is the only G8 country without a National Transit Strategy. There is no federal money specifically for urban transit. In 2007, when the province first announced plans to expand transit

infrastructure, they expected the federal government would contribute $6.3-billion toward the $18-billion price tag. To date, they have only received $300-million. The recent 2013 federal budget reveals a stubborn refusal to address the urgent need for public transit in Canada's cities. With a cut of $1-billion to federal transfers that could go toward public transit for 2014-15, the Harper government has failed to make public transit a priority.

From the early 1980s the TTC has had to cover at least 68 per cent of the operating costs through fares (the highest fare box ratio in North America) while the provincial subsidy has steadily dropped from around 16 per cent down to a mere 6 per cent in gas tax funding.

Too often TTC Commissioners choose to raise fares to meet the funding shortfall left by downloading. Perhaps they find it easier than holding the provincial, federal or even their own municipal government, accountable. Last year, $22-million was generated from overcrowding due to service cuts, as part of a larger right-wing assault on a host of city services and municipal worker wages and benefits. This money could have been used to avoid another five cent fare increase in 2013. Instead it was funnelled back into City coffers. The majority on City Council fail to recognize the importance of adequately funding this “essential service.” With ridership increasing every year, we should be expanding. Instead we abandon the “Ridership Growth Strategy” and punish transit users with fare increases and service cuts, ignoring the fact that many can no longer afford to use the TTC.

If more service and lower fares in Toronto's outer areas are needed now, what will happen when new LRTs are up and running? How will the TTC meet this new demand unless higher levels of government provide a stable, adequate subsidy? If the province agreed to properly fund operations, they could use a gas tax, highway tolls, high occupancy toll lanes or a parking space levy to encourage residents to leave the car at home and switch to public transit. This revenue could then be used to offset subsidy costs.

Should we be surprised that corporate and personal income tax on the wealthy, did not make it onto Metrolinx's short list? Not if this is a government that thinks lowering corporate taxes while 255,000 manufacturing jobs disappear in Ontario is a good idea. Since 2004, the rate has gone from 14 per cent down to 10 per cent. Originally intended to facilitate economic investment, it has had little effect. Instead



Canadian corporations have accumulated almost $600-billion which they refuse to put toward anything but bigger bonuses for their CEOs.

According to Joseph Stiglitz, Nobel Prize-winning former chief economist of the World Bank, a three per cent tax increase on higher income Canadians would generate $2-billion whereas the same tax increase on incomes under $30,000 would only generate $154-million. With such a high return, why do we avoid taxing the wealthy and corporations? Does it make sense for them not to have to make a contribution when they will reap most of the benefits from higher productivity that new transit service will bring?

Even a sales tax in combination with fare

reductions, free transit for seniors, social assistance recipients, the unemployed or during extreme weather alerts, would significantly increase public revenue ($1.6B) without reducing accessibility.

### Transportation for the Community

It is also apparent that many of the revenue tools necessary to pay for major new capital investments involved in *The Big Move*, are similar to those needed to pay for the maintenance, operation and improvement of the public transit system in the city of Toronto. Any plan to expand the system regionally, must take into account the needs of the TTC and the people that rely on it. The vast sums needed to pay for all of this must come from sources which rely on progressive forms of taxation, higher levels of government – as mobility and urban infrastructure are key elements of social justice and public health – as well as instruments which reduce the use of private vehicles and fossil fuels.

So far, the discussion about public transit expansion and how to pay for it, has been dominated by business concerns around traffic congestion, commuting times and lost productivity, with little regard for basic issues of mobility. The purposes of public transit go beyond getting to and from jobs (themselves structured around the needs of private capital). Transit provides for the needs of everyday living, shopping, social interaction and the way our communities look. If it is to replace the use of private cars as much as possible, we must also consider the needs of everyday transit riders or those disqualified from accessing transit, due to low income or mobility issues. If we truly care about the future of Toronto, they should be our main concern. We don't charge user fees for public health care, schools, libraries and highways so let's stop punishing people who improve our air quality by choosing to take the bus. Let's make sure chronic underfunding from higher levels of government and rising inequality are addressed, before we turn to the fare box, or punishing workers earning low wages.

• Brenda Thompson is a public transit activist living in Toronto.



# Background on Revenue Tools for Public Transit Expansion in the GTA

Brenda Thompson

This position paper is a response to roundtable discussions conducted by Metrolinx on revenue tools for the twenty two new public transit projects contained in *The Big Move* as well as the similarly focussed City of Toronto Feeling Congested public consultation meetings.

The implementation of all twenty two projects in The Big Move will cost $34-billion. The Province has already dedicated $16-billion toward several of these projects including four new LRTs, the Pearson/Union Air Rail Link and the Presto fare card system. The remaining $18-billion, must come from other sources of revenue. At The Big Move Roundtable Conversation held in Toronto on February 9th, 2013, we were told we would need to raise $2-billion a year to cover this amount.

Before considering additional revenue tools, it is important to reflect on the political, socio-economic, and environmental conditions affecting public transit use in Toronto.

### Toronto's Inequality Crisis

*Where Women Count: The Women's Equality Report Card Project - 2010*

Data collected from a series of public workshops, conducted by Toronto Women's City Alliance showed the TTC was crucial for many women and women with children, but high fares often meant choosing not to use transit. Although the majority of transit users in Toronto are women (65 per cent) those travelling with children or with mobility issues do not find it accessible.

*The Three Cities Report - 2010*

Research by University of Toronto professors J. David Hulchanski, *The Three Cities within Toronto Income Polarization Among Toronto's Neighbourhoods, 1970 – 2005* and Deborah Cowen, *Toronto's Inner Suburbs Investing in Social Infrastructure in Scarborough* provide an overview of the stark new reality of suburbs in Toronto. No longer a haven for

the middle class, residents of neighbourhoods like Kingston/Galloway (over 50 per cent of immigrant and visible minorities) have seen their income decrease by more than 40 per cent below the average income of $40,704, while residents close to the city centre (82 per cent white) have seen their incomes rise more than 40 per cent above the average income. Both studies conclude that unless there is an increase in social and physical infrastructure investment 60 per cent of Torontonians will be living in poverty and the middle class will have virtually disappeared by the year 2025.

This alarming trend is corroborated by a recent info-graphic on provincial inequality produced by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives. Their chart shows Toronto is second only to Calgary in income inequality.

Furthermore, a new study by McMaster University and United Way Toronto, *It's more than Poverty: Employment Precarity and Household Well-being*, suggest more than half of Toronto area workers have fallen into "precarious employment." These are part-time, contract, temporary jobs with no benefits. Although this trend is harder on those working at minimum wage jobs it is not restricted to low wage workers. Middle income workers are also dealing with precarious employment. Along with economic hardship, the global economy has brought more stress, doubt and anxiety about the future. Workers are finding it more and more difficult to plan for a family and retirement knowing they could suddenly and unexpectedly lose their jobs.

## Twenty Five Years of Downloading from Higher Levels of Government

*Public Transit Underfunding*

Congestion, smog, stress, long commute times, increased respiratory illness, would not be with us today without decades of underinvestment and downloading by provincial and federal governments. This chronic funding shortfall must first be addressed in order to rectify the low priority public transit has received in the past.

*Federal Underfunding*

In June of 2007, a plan to build new transit infrastructure in the GTA was first announced under Move Ontario 2020 and the federal government was expected to contribute a minimum of 35 per cent ($6.3B) toward the $18-billion price tag. So far, Metrolinx has only received $300-million in federal



funding for *The Big Move*. Despite the growing need for more public transit in Canada's cities a dedicated source of revenue was still missing from the 2013 federal budget. What's worse, even with indexing the gas tax fund for inflation, the net result of other reductions to infrastructure transfers, is a $1-billion funding cut for 2014-15. Canada is the only G8 country without a National Transit Strategy. The twenty two projects in The Big Move must have adequate, continuous federal funding.

*Insufficient Federal Equalization Payments to Ontario*

With thirty nine per cent of the population, Ontario was once the economic powerhouse of Canada. However global restructuring, the high dollar, Dutch disease etc. has shed 255,000 manufacturing jobs over the past decade leaving us ill equipped to contribute to 'have not' provinces through federal equalization payments. An article in the *Toronto Star* by Mowat Centre for Policy Innovation director, Matthew Mendelsohn: Ontario staggers under burden of fiscal federalism, makes reference to the Drummond Report. Although the report looked at ways to cut spending, it also revealed Ontario has less money to spend per capita because of a $12.3-billion shortfall in federal transfers.

While new premier, Kathleen Wynne announces, "the cupboard is bare," we hear very little about Ontario being required to contribute the same amount to federal coffers despite being one of the provinces hardest hit by the recession. Mendelsohn concludes that if Canadians were aware that federal spending and transfers continue to take money out of Ontario, they would be offended. He's right. For many years Ontario gave to 'have not' provinces. Federal equalization payments must address the hollowing out of Ontario's manufacturing sector and public transit expansion is a good place to start.

*Provincial Underfunding of TTC Operations*

The TTC struggled to maintain and expand service when the 50 per cent of subsidy for public transit was removed in the mid-1990s. Aside from a few provincial contributions ranging from $100-million to $238-million from 2007 to 2009, nothing has changed. TTC fares now comprise the highest operation "subsidy" (70 per cent) of any transit system in North America. The only regular contribution that can be put toward operations is $162-million in provincial gas tax funding which when divided between new transit infrastructure and operations,

amounts to $91.6-million – a mere 6 per cent of the TTC's $1.5-billion annual operating budget. The province should return to subsidizing 50 per cent of TTC operations, as it did in the past.

Delivery of new transit infrastructure will automatically result in a demand for increased service and operations. If a 50 per cent subsidy were already in place, innovative, less costly measures could address traffic congestion immediately. Electrification of existing rail lines, dedicated bus lanes and continuous bus routes (destinations along Kingston Road can require up to four transfers) should be considered before tunnelling.

*TTC Fare Increases and Service Cuts*

Faced with a perpetual operating budget shortfall, City Council has responded with a "let the users pay" approach to the TTC. Last year, the TTC generated a $22-million surplus due to overcrowding from service cuts. This money could have been used to avoid another five cent fare increase in 2013. Instead it was funnelled back into City coffers. The majority on City Council fail to recognize the importance of adequately funding this "essential service." With ridership increasing every year, we should be expanding service. Instead we abandon the "Ridership Growth Strategy" and punish transit users with fare increases, ignoring the fact that many can no longer afford to use the TTC.

## Criteria for New Revenue Tools

Additional revenue tools must not add to the financial burden and stress of Torontonians bearing the brunt of government cutbacks, precarious employment, unemployment and lack of affordable housing. Each fare increase has the potential to disqualify a growing number of people in Toronto from using public transit altogether. Unless we make a concerted effort to re-orient municipal, provincial and federal funding to ensure accessibility for the most vulnerable members of our communities, we fail to bring about the kind of prosperity and well being we envision with The Big Move. They should also encourage public transit use, reduce pollution from cars, while generating sufficient revenue without duplicating existing municipal revenue tools.

*Existing Revenue Sources*

The City of Toronto currently uses property taxes, land transfer tax, land value capture and have



considered using vehicle registration tax to generate revenue for capital projects. Since municipalities have limited options for generating revenue, Metrolinx should co-ordinate with the City to ensure that they do not duplicate any of these tools.

*Proposed Revenue Sources to Expand Public Transit*

Fare increases, transit fare restructuring, a utility levy and employee payroll taxes would do more to exacerbate the economic hardship that already exists in the outer areas of the GTA and for half of Toronto residents engaged in precarious employment, while the amount of revenue generated would be relatively small ($50 to $260-million). Therefore we do not recommend adopting these revenue tools. However, a regional sales tax in combination with fare reductions, free transit for seniors, social assistance recipients, the unemployed and during extreme weather alerts, would significantly increase public revenue, while addressing inequality.

*Progressive Revenue Sources Not Considered*

Personal Income Tax: consideration should be given to taxing incomes over $250,000. According to Joseph Stiglitz Nobel Prize-winning former chief economist of the World Bank, a three per cent tax increase on higher income Canadians would generate $2-billion whereas the same tax increase on incomes under $30,000 would only generate $154-million.

Federal Equalization Payments: there is a $12.3-billion shortfall in federal transfer payments to Ontario. Some of this money could be directed toward public transit.

Corporate Taxes: underfunding of public transit has been permitted while corporations have seen their taxes drop provincially and federally. Since 2004,

the corporate tax rate in Ontario has gone from 14 per cent down to 10 per cent. Originally intended as an incentive for economic investment, it has had little effect. To the chagrin of Bank of Canada governor, Mark Carney, Canadian corporations have accumulated almost $600-billion which they refuse to put toward anything but bigger bonuses for their CEOs.

Metrolinx should make corporate taxes as a priority revenue tool since corporations will directly benefit from the increased productivity of shorter commute times and profitability from Ontario's preferred infrastructure delivery model of alternate funding procurement (AFP) or public-private-partnerships (P3s). This does not constitute and endorsement of P3s however.

According to T*he Big Move Conversation Kit*, a proposed 0.05% corporate tax increase would generate $210-million/year. However if it were increased another 2.5 per cent it could generate as much as $1.26-billion/year. This 2.5 per cent increase would still be 1% less than the 2004 corporate tax rate. Adequate, dedicated corporate taxes are strongly recommended. On their own, they generate nearly $2-billion/year and do not exacerbate inequality.

*Transport Shifting Sources*

The carbon emission tax, highway tolls, vehicle kilometres travelled charge, parking space levy reduce pollution and congestion while encouraging people to use public transit. They should be given consideration based solely on this outcome. Before proceeding with these tools however, existing public transit service must be able to meet new demand. Increased service, new bus routes and continuous service along arterial roads (destinations along Kingston Road require up to four different buses) must be provided along with these incentives to leave the car at home.

## $34-Billion Investment Must Address Inequality

According to the *2012 Ontario Auditor General's Report*, the Presto Next Generation fare card requires all users to have a bank account with which to load a $10 minimum, or pay a $6 initial charge. Tickets for the Airport Rail Link could range from $20 to $30. Metrolinx and the City of Toronto must ensure that new and existing public transit infrastructure is accessible. Presto card users can apply for a fifteen per cent federal tax credit but must take transit for thirty one consecutive days to qualify. Instead transit should be free for seniors and the disabled, transit authorities should provide a low income pass and free transit on smog alert/extreme cold days.

*Good Job Creation*

Infrastructure expansion brings job creation and the opportunity to provide a real alternative to economic recession and inequality. Metrolinx estimates that, The Big Move will generate 430,000 new jobs and $21-billion in employment income or as much as 800,000 to 900,000 jobs and $110 to $130-billion. To create prosperity that is equitable however, these jobs must be local, fair wage, full time, permanent jobs with benefits and they must be directed toward immigrant and visible minorities in Toronto's outer neighbourhoods.

However, the decision to go with AFP (Alternate Funding Procurement), could significantly reduce the number of good jobs that will be created. The TTC will only be allowed to operate four new LRTs under a ten year contract. Maintenance jobs will be controlled by the private sector although there may be some apprenticeships for youth through a Community Benefits Agreement. Had the TTC Expansion Department been allowed to oversee these projects as originally planned, all construction, operation and maintenance jobs would have been unionized or at the very least subject to the City's fair wage policy. The province has no such requirement and once the contract is awarded to the private partner, providing good jobs is even less likely. Thus calling into question, who really benefits from this $34-billion investment?

> "Often, when the private sector claims to be more efficient than the public sector, this really means cutting labour costs by laying off workers, using non-unionized instead of unionized labour, cutting wages, pensions and other benefits, or reducing hours or conditions of work. This is particularly common in service delivery P3s, where the private partner is handed a budget or part of a budget to deliver services previously delivered by the public sector in return for a share in any savings it can generate."— Asking the Right Questions: A Guide for Municipalities Considering P3s, John Loxley, Canadian Union of Public Employees, June 2012, page 24.

## Metrolinx Needs More Democracy

*Real And Meaningful Public Consultation*

In exploring a vision of transportation for the next 25 years, there must be democratic checks and balances to ensure real and meaningful public consultation is conducted at crucial decision making points prior to the selection of revenue tools. For example there was no public input over the decision to eliminate fifty years of in house TTC Expansion Department expertise, or unionized maintenance jobs. There were no public meetings about the signing of the Master Agreement with the City to build four new LRTs, the decision to use Alternate Funding Procurement (AFP) or the decision to hire non-unionized workers for a portion of construction of the Eglinton Crosstown LRT.

It is imperative the public interest be protected when considering public versus public-private-partnerships delivery models. For instance, unnecessary cost overruns and delays with the Presto fare card (Presto initial cost $250-million – final cost up to $700-million) might have been avoided if the Provincial Auditor General had been allowed to review all value-for-money-assessments and contractual agreements beforehand. Since corporate confidentiality prevents public scrutiny, any future decisions to go with AFP for new transit infrastructure projects, should first be subject to a review by the Provincial Auditor General's office.

*Local Autonomy*

In the past, the Province has threatened to withdraw funding if local municipal officials try to retain autonomy over construction of new public transit infrastructure in Toronto. However, in replacing the TTC Expansion Department for delivery of four new LRTs, we risk losing fifty years of valuable, in house expertise. Metrolinx must not ignore this valuable, local, public source of technical experience. Metrolinx must take steps to ensure we do not become overly reliant on the private sector to the point where we are no longer able to choose anything but public-private-partnerships. The Ministry of Transportation and Metrolinx must take a more open and co-operative approach with municipalities. No more threats to remove funding. No more back room deals.

• Brenda Thompson is a public transit activist living in Toronto.



# Drivers and Riders Unite!

## Fare hikes, layoffs, and service cuts decimate public transit

Linda Averill

In 2008, when gas prices spiked, so did transit ridership, reaching 10.7 billion trips in the United States. Hard times make this service even more essential to millions of people. So the U.S. government is expanding public transportation, right? Wrong. Across the U.S., 80 per cent of transit agencies are cutting service, hiking fares, or both. Moreover, cuts are hitting hardest the people with the least access to other ways of getting around.

New York City's transit system, the largest in the country, transports half the local populace every day. Faced with a $400-million shortfall, officials are raising fares, eliminating two subway routes and 34 bus lines, and cutting night-owl service, a lifeline to swing-shift workers. Students are losing free fares.

In Atlanta, where half of transit users don't own a car, authorities are cutting service 30 per cent. The same is true in Milwaukee, where 70 per cent of entry-level jobs are at least one hour away by bus from inner-city residents who need those jobs the most.

In San Francisco, senior, youth, and disabled passes are jumping from $5 to $20 per month. “It's unfair,” says Terri Thorpe of fare hikes in Southern California. “They are going to stick it to the little blue-collar worker who can't afford a car.” But opposition to transit cuts is growing. In several cities, angry residents have packed public hearings; bus rider unions are escalating activity; transit worker unions are organizing protests.

### Sticking it to the Poor

Before the economy crashed, transit was already under-funded. But now, with state revenues plunging more than at any time since the Great Depression, matters are going from bad to catastrophic. Most big transit agencies are swimming in red ink. A screwy federal funding formula is one big problem. For every transportation tax dollar, only 18 cents goes to transit. The other 82 cents goes to roads. On top of this, rules dictate that agencies can use only 10 per cent of federal funding for operations – running the actual system. The other 90 per cent must go to capital

expenses – construction of light rail lines, equipment purchases, etc. Who gains from this? Private for-profit companies that get the lucrative government contracts.

Another problem is regressive tax structures. Logically, big business should pay to fund a service that is so essential to the conduct of commerce. Transit gets labour to work, and frees up roads for freight. But instead of being sufficiently taxed, corporate America is getting a cheap ride. For example, many transit agencies generate extra money through "public-private partnerships," where service is designed around the needs of a specific private company or wealthy community.

Simultaneously, service is deteriorating for people who rely on transit most – people of colour, seniors, youth, people with disabilities, the unemployed and working poor. And thanks to a heavy reliance on regressive sales taxes to fund transit, those at the bottom of the economic ladder are paying more, while getting less.

On top of service cuts, agencies are saving money by cutting the pay and jobs of their ethnically diverse, highly unionized workforces. San Francisco officials want wage cuts. In New York, management plans to lay off 1,700 workers. Similar scenarios are unfolding across the USA.

### Profits vs. People

So, if peaking ridership shows that people need public transit, why is government starving it? Because, like quality education, it doesn't generate profits. Indeed, a good transit system actually threatens the profits of GM, Shell, and other corporate heavyweights by offering an alternative to the single-occupancy vehicle.

Lip service to the "green economy" gets votes for politicians. But the deepening crisis of transit funding shows where their real allegiance rests – squarely with big business. There's no point in looking for change from either Democrats or Republicans. Look for it where it has come from historically: a working class that is in motion, organizing for change.

### Mobility is a Human Right

And public transit unions are stepping into leadership of the fight. Recently, in New York, Washington, D.C., and other cities, the Amalgamated Transit Union, Transportation Workers Union, and United Transportation Union rallied to demand more funds for operations. These unions are also starting to ally with riders.

Los Angeles provided a model in 2000, when the Bus Riders Union representing mostly low-paid Latino service workers defended predominantly Black and Latino drivers striking over pay and conditions. By the strike's end, drivers were protesting fare hikes – a big issue for their riders.

This alliance broke the pattern of some transit workers viewing poor riders as "freeloading," and some riders blaming "high-paid" transit workers for fare hikes. These attitudes buy into the reactionary mindset that public services should pay for themselves, and let politicians off the hook. Public transit will never pay for itself at the farebox. And why should it? Transit is a public good and environmental necessity that frees up land and resources. This is how taxes should be used.

Transit unions have an historic opportunity to unite with riders and fight for transit as a human right that should be available and accessible to all. For many people it is a service as essential to life as shelter. Yet as long as profits dictate priorities, it is in constant jeopardy. Fortunately, activism to save public transit is alive, and union muscle could give it legs.

In Portland, a riders' union is publicizing good alternatives to transit cuts. They include: thin the ranks of top-heavy management; redirect tax dollars from wars and bank bailouts to transit; tax the rich.

In Atlanta, protesters used creative tactics to oppose transit cuts, marking vehicles on reduced routes with large red X's. Imagine campaigns like these connecting with the fight to save public education and other basic services! The U.S. can afford free quality transit for all. Winning it will require building a movement that leaves no passenger behind.

• Linda Averill is a union bus driver in Seattle, Washington. This article first appeared on the Freedom Socialist Party website.

# A “Fair” Protest in New York City?

Natalia Tylim

If you ride the New York City subway system, then you've become accustomed to reading the signs in stations across the city that let riders know about service changes. Most often, there are delays, or you find that you must take a different line to get to where you need to go. On the morning of March 28, though, many subway riders found a very different message: “FREE ENTRY. No Fares Collected.” This was part of an action carried out by activists calling themselves the “Rank and File Initiative.” The press release about the action announced:

> “This morning before rush hour, teams of activists, many from Occupy Wall Street, in conjunction with rank-and-file workers from the Transport Workers Union Local 100 and the Amalgamated Transit Union, opened up more than 20 stations across the city for free entry...
>
> “Teams have chained open service gates and taped up turnstiles in a coordinated response to escalating service cuts, fare hikes, racist policing, assaults on transit workers' working conditions and livelihoods – and the profiteering of the super-rich by way of a system they've rigged in their favor.”

The decades of slashed Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA) funding have created an inverted flow of money. Instead of being a city-funded service, the transit system has become what Rank and File Initiative aptly calls “an ATM for the super rich.” In the face of budget cuts, the MTA has had to sell massive bond issues to Wall Street in order to cover costs. This means that the system is required to divert funds from transit services toward paying back the billionaire bondholders. And this is all happening in a context where the Transport Workers Union (TWU), arguably the most powerful workforce in the city, has been working without a contract since January.

### How To Organize?

So there is no shortage of reasons to be frustrated, mad and disgusted with the bosses and city government that control funding for the MTA, and that are raising costs, cutting services, harassing young people of color and putting a boot on the TWU's neck. But the free subway action, as exciting as it felt to see the turnstiles open that day, is tied to a whole range of questions about how our movement can best organize in a partnership with labour.

While thousands of New Yorkers rode the subway for free that morning and saw the condemnation of Wall Street on posters, some station agents are facing threats of discipline, including home visits by the New York Police Department (NYPD) and the FBI because they theoretically violated work rules by not stopping the action. Organizing solidarity is urgently needed to respond to any disciplinary actions that may be taken against these workers. Because of these repercussions, the relationship between Occupy and rank-and-file workers in TWU Local 100 has been placed on a more tenuous footing.

TWU has supported Occupy from the beginning, unanimously voting to become the first union to endorse the movement last September. When Zuccotti Park was being evicted, Local 100 refused to drive buses to aid the NYPD in arresting protesters. This support aided the Occupy movement enormously, and it's important to move forward on a basis of mutual respect and collaboration. Local 100 President John Samuelson announced that union members have no intention of distancing themselves from Occupy over this action, but went on to say: “They could've taken more precautions to make sure [subway station agents] weren't put in harm's way.”

The TWU is capable of powerful, citywide action. In 2005, when the union went on strike for two-and-a-half days in December, everything ground to a halt. But because of the Taylor Law, which makes it is illegal for public-sector workers in the city to strike, the union remains in a tough spot, after it was hit with a multimillion-dollar fine and had dues check-off taken away for several years. This has resulted in disorganization and demoralization among members still trying to sort through what happened in 2005. It will take discussion among members and organizing at the rank-and-file level for the union to regain its fighting confidence – and that's a process that can be aided by outside support from Occupy and other sources.

But when it comes to the struggle against the MTA, it's still those who work in the stations, on the trains and on the buses who are in the best position to organize the fight for a fair contract and all the issues that are tied up with it.

The decades of attacks on unions, paired with the recent experience of the 2005 strike, mean that workers aren't in a strong position right now. But to draw the conclusion that this means small bands of activists must substitute themselves for the self-activity of transit workers is a mistake.

This fare strike was a step away from the type of solidarity that activists in Occupy should aim to build – because it put the most vulnerable workers in a position to be targets for backlash, with consequences that the links between the union and the Occupy movement could potentially be weakened.

### Lessons Learned?

Either this was a mistake that can be learned from when planning future actions, or it is part of the perspective of some activists that in order for direct actions to be successful, someone has to be arrested or disciplined. The danger of not understanding the problem with this attitude is that when direct actions backfire against our allies, it alienates people, instead of drawing them into a stronger bond of solidarity.

The yardstick for the success of an action can't just be the disruptive effects against the 1 per cent, but how it increases the political and self-organizational capacity of the working-class. Sometimes, the action of a small group of people can achieve that, and sometimes it can't.

This doesn't apply only to the activists in Occupy Wall Street, but to the union members involved as well. It is possible that individual members or leaders of Local 100 were part of planning and carrying out the fare protest, but this doesn't change the problematic nature of the collateral damage our side is facing. Union members and Occupy Wall Street activists – all organizers, really – need to think critically about our tactics if our movements are to grow in size and in militancy.

There are other actions we could organize to take on the MTA while building public support for the struggle of TWU workers. Offering free rides to travelers by swiping people in with unlimited cards is one idea. Having speak-outs and engaging in civil disobedience in major train stations is another, with more potential for spreading the word to people who may sympathize with the struggle. There are no shortage of directions we can go.

But a conscious approach that thinks critically about potential repercussions, whether actions



strengthens workers' ability to fight back, and how they lay the ground for more protest in the future must be a key element. We cannot organize based on what the most militant-sounding tactic is. We need an approach that recognizes the power of transit workers and sees the key role that Occupy can have in opening up space in New York City for more actions.

The fact that the TWU isn't waging a big fight right now doesn't mean that it never will. A key aspect of solidarity is recognizing the inherent power that the movement's different allies have, even if it is currently dormant – and organizing protests and actions that can help it come to the surface and develop. The TWU can shut the city down. Its ability to gain the support and confidence to do so can be aided by the Occupy movement. And vice versa – the Occupy movement can only be strengthened by the support of TWU. These mutual relationships aren't automatic, but must be built.

### May Day 2012 - reOccupy?

The next big opportunity to do so in a concrete way is May Day, which is International Workers' Day. There are a number of actions planned for May 1, including a mass solidarity demonstration under the slogan: “Legalize, unionize, organize to fight the 1 per cent.”

May Day can be an important step forward in solidifying relationships among Occupy activists and labour activists. But, frankly, it could also be a step backward if small groups take this as a call to substitute themselves for the self-organization of workers in workplaces across the city, as ended up happening with the MTA action. This could widen, not close, the distance between the Occupy movement and the labour movement – as well as a broader audience, too.

The experience of the fare strike action should guide our approach to organizing for a stronger movement that strives for a militant approach, but one that is driven by the goals of fighting the 1 per cent in every workplace and every community. Shutting the city down – not just in word, but also in deed – will require the active participation of the TWU and other workers across the city. These connections are critical to make and will determine the future of the Occupy movement.

• Natalia Tylim is a reporter for *Socialist Worker* where this article first appeared. Amy Muldoon contributed to this article.

# Bus Stewards Win More Routes Through Alliance with Riders

Nick Bedell

New York City transit workers ran a winning campaign when we turned to community organizing in our fight against cuts in service. The cuts to bus service were severe: 38 routes eliminated and 76 with shorter routes or shorter hours. Transport Workers Union (TWU) Local 100 fought the Metropolitan Transportation Authority every step of the way, protesting at board meetings and in front of the director's house. And we managed to get our laid-off workers back over the course of a year.

But the local officers, headed by President John Samuelsen, had run on a promise to form coalitions with the riding public. We knew that to restore lost service, we'd have to involve the communities hit by the cuts. When we did, we discovered an untapped resource of connections our stewards had – outside the workplace.

## Targeting One Bus Line

We decided to tackle the cuts in one community and zeroed in on a single bus line: the B61 in Brooklyn. This line serves a racially and economically diverse community: from hipsters in railroad apartments to the working poor in housing projects, from working families in small rentals to the 1 per cent in million-dollar homes. This meant a diverse coalition would be possible.

And the line's failures had already been chronicled by a progressive city councilman and the transit advocate community. Riders were experiencing long waits, bunched-up buses, and severe overcrowding. The B61 was an ideal target.

We kicked off our effort with a month of education and outreach. Union staffers and officers from the local's Brooklyn bus division visited four depots to talk with stewards. Most of their conversations focused on how the cuts had affected working conditions, how hostile the passengers were, how likely the rate of assaults on bus operators would grow, and how much interest members had in building common cause with the public.



We identified activists. At the same time, we were meeting with politicians to explain the issues and set up our opening salvo.

## Organizing On Wheels

Our first meeting drew 15 bus stewards, who developed an organizing plan to win back service on the B61 and restore a lost line, the B77. Our message emerged from that meeting, too. The MTA had said it would ease overcrowding by adding one more bus during rush hours, so we ran with the phrase “One Bus Is Not Enough” and made that a centerpiece of the campaign.

We sent teams of two, in TWU Local 100 t-shirts, to visit bus stops along the route, leafleting riders and asking them to sign a petition for restoration of service. We told the public that just one more bus was a slap in the face.

One member of the team would address the riders, while the other would loop around and talk to the operator, encouraging them to keep working safely in the difficult conditions. A crowded bus with passengers “lips to windows” is harder to operate.

We talked about coming into each stop fully, kneeling the bus at every stop, and making sure operators prioritized their and the passengers’ safety over keeping to a schedule.

The B61 had already attracted media attention as the topic of Councilman Brad Lander's report “Next Bus Please,” which chronicled the line's failure to meet community needs. The report gave concrete recommendations for how to improve the line, and stewards used these ideas to generate conversations with riders and operators alike.

## Talking to Tenants

While the bus stop activity was in motion, one of the most active stewards began organizing in the housing projects of Red Hook, where his aunt was president of the tenants association. He initiated the campaign's next step: a community meeting to get folks directly impacted by the service into a room together with politicians, union members, and community leaders.

Building on his ties in Red Hook – the community hardest hit by the B61 cuts – stewards and members of the tenants association door-knocked the

projects and put up flyers and posters all over the community. We also asked for support from the Red Hook Initiative, a local youth group, and the Red Hook Civic Association, both of which turned out their members for the community meeting.

Internally we reached out to all TWU members who lived in communities served by the B61, whether or not they operated a bus.

The meeting filled the gym, and TWU officers facilitated a lively discussion of the MTA's failure to serve their community. Alongside Councilman Lander were other state and city leaders who came out to support the call for more service.

### Showing Off Our Unity

The next week we convened a press conference, where over 100 people filled a Red Hook street in front of a public school, and TWU, alongside riders and politicians, demanded more service. We deliberately shifted the conversation away from defending what we had to saying what we wanted.

Next we were planning a big rally in front of the MTA, and had promised a free ride to the first 50 Red Hook residents who took the B61 to the site – but alas, management stole our thunder. The MTA freed up some money and restored much of the lost service. A second bus was rerouted to pick up folks in Red Hook and additional runs were added to the B61.

It was a huge victory. So, rather than rallying, we celebrated.

We have since replicated the campaign out of other depots, although New York bus service is still far from what it needs to be. We have to keep organizing community members if we want to keep winning.

But one thing we learned, when we took the time to know each other, was that our stewards bring far more to the table than knowledge of their jobs. When we started looking for the community connections that would form the building blocks of the campaign, what we needed was already in the room.

• Nick Bedell is education director for TWU Local 100. This article first published on the *Labor Notes* website.



# No Fare is Fair

## A Roundtable with Members of the GTWA Transit Committee

Ali Mustafa

*Since the The Greater Toronto Workers' Assembly's (GTWA) inception in early 2010, mass public transit has emerged as one of the organization's key political battlegrounds. In this in-depth roundtable discussion, members of the GTWA's transit committee Jordy Cummings, Lisa Leinveer, Leo Panitch, Kamilla Pietrzyk, and Herman Rosenfeld explore both the opportunities and obstacles facing the campaign Towards a Free and Accessible TTC.*

**Ali Mustafa (AM): Towards a Free and Accessible TTC became the first major campaign adopted by the GTWA. Why is mass public transit a key priority to the work and overall vision of the GTWA?**

**Herman Rosenfeld:** Actually, it took about two assemblies before we endorsed this campaign. We took some time to evaluate different possible campaigns and, after that, we decided to choose transit as a priority. All working people – all people, really – should have the right to mobility and shouldn't have to pay for it like any commodity. It should also be accessible to all people and not doled out according to how much money you have, which part of the city you happen to live in, or whether or not you are living with a disability. If we want to politicize people by putting forward a vision of a different kind of society, free and accessible transit has to be a part of that strategy.

The campaign also poses a vision of public transit that is 'non-commodified' – that is, not something that is bought or sold in the marketplace but exists as a service and public good that is not owned or managed by private business interests seeking to make a profit. A similar vision motivated people to create public Medicare in Canada. In mobilizing people and doing education around the need to make public transit a right that is accessible and fare-free, this campaign forces us to address current attitudes about taxes, public-sector spending, and austerity by not only understanding them but challenging the legitimacy of the neoliberal ideas behind them.

**Jordy Cummings:** The GTWA is a new kind of political organization, in recognition of the limitations

of the past. One of the ways we can open up space for an anti-capitalist vision that is shared by diverse elements of the Left is to start with something deceptively simple like free and accessible transit, and from there you begin to get an entire vision of a de-commodified social order. It's not just a 'single issue' campaign; it's a campaign that fundamentally challenges capitalist social relations from a working class, transit-using standpoint.

But what about those who live in the outlying regions of Toronto who are either forced to buy private automobiles or take ninety minutes or more to get to work because of the poorly planned transit routes? Most people in Toronto use transit every day to go to work and come home, so fighting for free and accessible transit is a fundamental issue to address a broader anti-capitalist vision overall.

**Kamilla Pietrzyk:** This campaign also arose in part from the energies around the Right to the City campaign and the recognition that organizing around the issue of transit can have great popular appeal right now because so many residents of Toronto are upset about the recent fare-hikes. While transit systems in other large metropolitan areas get large government subsidies to cover their costs, Toronto's transit system relies on user fees for approximately 70 per cent of its operating budget, causing fares to rise to $3.00 in 2010. As a result, there has been a lot of dissatisfaction regarding the state of transit in the city. We believe that by building an effective campaign around free and accessible transit, we can direct that anger and frustration around fare-hikes to include an analysis of public goods, public accountability, the failures of the market system, and the right to democratic participation in the shaping of our city. A free transit campaign has the potential to be a popular movement because it has clear and tangible links to the daily experiences of many people, especially those with low income.

**AM: What type of groundwork has been done to date by the GTWA transit committee to help build the campaign across the city – including any education, outreach, and public events – and what has been the general response to these efforts thus far?**

**Kamilla Pietrzyk:** So far we have organized a number of large public events and held a series of smaller flyering actions at major TTC stations. The larger events include a public forum on Free and Accessible TTC in July 2010, which involved a number of speakers from transit-related groups and initiatives. We also held a street party in Christie Pits Park in October



2010, which was the official launch of the campaign and featured speakers, musical performances, food, and general festivities. Both of these events were successful in stimulating further debate around transit issues in Toronto and mobilizing new support for the campaign. Our more mundane organizing has focused on engaging with people at TTC stations, giving out pamphlets and talking to them about transit in Toronto. The response from the public has been very supportive. The vast majority think that free and accessible transit is a tremendous idea; their only reservation tends to be around the question of how to fund it. But even on this point, many of them become sympathetic once they find out that for the $1-billion wasted on security during the G20 summit in Toronto last summer, we could have enjoyed free transit for a full year.

We intend to continue our public outreach work through ongoing flyering efforts. We have also been inspired by the popularity of the Bad Hotel Youtube video, where a group of activists infiltrated Westin St. Francis hotel in San Francisco and performed an adaptation of Lady Gaga's song Bad Romance in support of the workers' struggle to secure a fair contract. We recently developed a set of Guerrilla theatre scripts to be performed in conjunction with the GTWA's cultural committee on streetcars, buses, and subways.

**AM: Are you linked in any way yet with other groups in the city also campaigning around the issue of mass public transit (fare-free seeking or not) in order to build a 'broad-based movement' on this front?**

**Herman Rosenfeld:** We have organized joint events with DAMN 2025, a group working for full accessibility of public transit and people living with disabilities; and Sistering, who have been agitating for lower fares. Surprisingly, there aren't all that many movements dealing with fare issues.

**AM: What do you have to say to those who argue that free and accessible mass transit is a wonderful idea in principle but in reality too unrealistic or impractical, especially during a major period of recession?**

**Jordy Cummings:** That's not an easy question to answer, but we do need to take free and accessible transit as a first principle. On a concrete level, given the amount of money the state (let alone private markets) spend on jails, the G20 Summit security budget, and military armaments, there is certainly

enough money available for free and accessible transit to become a reality. But there is also immense pressure for austerity in the other direction.

As a union activist, I learned that you need to demand more than you think you're going to get, so fighting austerity by merely demanding that the status quo is maintained isn't going to cut it. 'Be realistic, demand the impossible,' as the saying goes.

**Lisa Leinveer:** I would agree with Jordy, and add that for many people with disabilities and their allies, both fare accessibility and physical accessibility of public transit is a first principle. A physically accessible transit system is not an extravagant accommodation. Not having an accessible transit system is a form of social segregation. For many people in Toronto, transit is the only option to get from one place to another across the city, and yet close to 30 per cent of TTC bus routes, 50 per cent of subway stations, and 100 per cent of streetcars are totally physically inaccessible. Transit is a public good; it should be accessible to all the people of a city.

**Herman Rosenfeld:** For the powers that run this city and country – and the business community in general – this will never be practical or desirable, recession or not. But it does challenge many basic assumptions of living under neoliberalism: there isn't enough money to go around and pay for transit as a social service; the current recession requires austerity, rather than expanding public services; taxes are already too high, so we have to shrink the size of government, and so on. These notions need to be challenged as part of a political and ideological assault on the 'common sense' of this era of capitalism. Fighting for free and accessible transit forces us to do so.

In another way, we also need to fight for shorter-term reforms that can give us confidence for ultimately demanding more expansive goals. We can call for cuts to current fares, dramatic increases in the levels of service, and democratic control over the larger planning processes – this would allow us to hone in on specific ways of increasing services for particular communities and build a base for a larger campaign. Of course, even raising these rather short-term demands also requires us to respond to the same set of concerns that people raise about the longer-term ones.

**Leo Panitch:** Everything from schools to libraries to healthcare to water services is paid for by tax revenue. Roads don't have user fees – why should public transit? We can pay for free transit through a fair tax system. The amount of taxes that riders would have to pay for fare-free transit would be much lower than the amount that they spend each year on the cost of commuting. Even those who drive cars are prepared to pay taxes for less traffic – and there is no better way to do this than by expanded and free public transit. Harper's government is spending money on building new prisons and buying the military new fighter planes for $35-billion for no useful purpose. All sorts of tax breaks are given to the oil and gas industry as it threatens our environment. Is this how we want our taxes spent? We need to make our tax dollars benefit the common good and make our governments provide fare-free transit!

**AM: Since former Premier of Ontario Mike Harris saw all provincial and federal subsidies to the TTC cut in 1996, the TTC's financial viability has been entirely dependent on municipal funding and user fees (the latter comprising 70 per cent of the revenue base). Assuming increased property taxes alone cannot make up the shortfall, how exactly do you envision the project for free TTC service being funded?**

**Herman Rosenfeld:** Harris didn't cut federal subsidies – that was the result of the abandonment of city life by the Liberal and Conservative governments of Chretien, Martin and Harper. Public transit should be funded by a combination of municipal taxes, federal and provincial funding, and contributions through driver tolls. Property taxes are unfair and limited. Cities like Toronto need new sources of taxation, such as a city income tax. The rates for federal and provincial income taxes can be made fair by lowering them on the bottom-end and increasing them for large, wealthy corporations, as well as those that receive huge bonuses in the financial sector.

Most importantly, the needs of people in cities must become a priority of state financing – this is a question of priorities between giving subsidies to private capital in the hope that wealthy investors will be bribed into creating low-paying jobs, or using the resources created by working people to serve our collective needs and, in the process, creating high-paying, secure, and environmentally friendly employment.

Capital costs (building new lines and infrastructure) can be financed through bond issues, which is another way for describing borrowing on international bond markets. The possibilities of doing this are dependent on the belief that we can pay those bonds

back over time through revenues derived by tax dollars, and the new economic activity that a massive new transit system would create.

**Leo Panitch:** The transportation sector that is so central to Ontario's whole economy is in crisis. This crisis is obvious from auto industry shutdowns and layoffs and the notorious traffic congestion on our roads. We need to change the old car plants so people get jobs producing the mass transit vehicles needed for a free and accessible public transit system. Just as the original subways, and the street cars and buses too, were funded by issuing Ontario bonds, so can this be done today. The very low interest rates make it less costly to do this than ever before, while the new jobs provided will expand the tax base. Far from placing a burden on future generations, this would guarantee them a future. And we also need to be able to rely on our banks to direct funds to shifting the whole transportation sector toward public transit. The money we put in our banking system should be used to meet our society's real needs.

It's time for a wider vision for our city. Free public transit will help create the healthier, cleaner and better integrated neighbourhoods we all want. And rather than pitting public transit workers against riders, it will help create a public transit community committed to excellent service and accessibility for all. We all want more and better public transit, less road traffic, fewer accidents, cleaner air and greater mobility.

**AM: Your campaign material sites several cities across North America currently operating under zero user-fees, including Commerce, California; Chapel Hill, North Carolina; and Coral Gables, Florida. But since all of these cities are significantly smaller in size than Toronto, is it possible that Toronto is simply too large for this kind of project to be feasible?**



**Herman Rosenfeld:** I think this reflects the political difficulties of getting this kind of project on the public agenda in big cities, rather than any technical or other obstacles. Cities are the center of neoliberal economies, particularly with the dominance of finance and private-sector development in major urban centres. This kind of campaign challenges the nature of how those places are organized and structured, which is why they seem so difficult to move on. Smaller centres that are geared around colleges or tourism don't present the same challenges.

**Lisa Leinveer:** We can also learn much about how accessible transit can be done by looking to examples of other transit systems in the world. Many newer transit systems are far more accessible. A study of different transit technologies globally yields many innovative approaches to transit that prioritize physical access and green technology; among these are Curitiba's high-speed accessible bus system, and variations on the Light Rail Transit (LRT) system that was proposed in Toronto and has been implemented in many cities around the world. Although no system is perfect, the successes and limitations of various systems can guide our fight to make transit free and accessible here in Toronto. When overall access is not made a fundamental priority, it is a reflection of the deeply ableist and elitist priorities of the government.

**AM: The Bus Riders Union (BRU) in Los Angeles is perhaps the most successful example in North America of a working class movement built around the issue of mass public transit, yet even they have avoided calling for fare-free transit. Why is the GTWA transit committee seeking free TTC service, and not merely a cheaper or more affordable option?**

**Jordy Cummings:** We have discussed incremental demands within the spirit of 'Free and Accessible Transit.' One slogan recently proposed has been 'Cut Fares, Not Services.' Speaking for myself, I'd again drive home the point that demanding lower fares won't get lower fares. Saying 'No Fare is Fair' is more likely to create an impetus for lower fares.

**Herman Rosenfeld:** There is nothing wrong in raising or fighting for lower fares and greater levels of service and accessibility than we have today – that is different than giving up on the fundamental goals of this campaign. The BRU is based on building an organizational power-base among bus riders in order to increase the accessibility and availability of bus service in Los Angeles. In other ways, its goals are similar to ours:

allowing working people to access public transit; protecting the environment; and acting to organize workers in communities as a way to build a movement against the logic of private market accumulation.

**AM: Why is 'accessibility' in particular a key demand of the campaign, and what do you see as some of the glaring failures currently characterizing TTC service in this regard?**

**Kamilla Pietrzyk:** If we are serious about improving transit accessibility, then saving Transit City is not enough. We need to demand better, safer, more accessible transit. We also need a commitment to improving and expanding existing transit infrastructure, so that people from communities outside the downtown core like Markham, Scarborough, or North York can enjoy adequate transit services. Huge portions of the city are virtually inaccessible because there are no accessible transit routes nearby. We want all of our transit vehicles and stations fully accessible.

**Lisa Leinveer:** As I stated earlier, far too many of the bus routes and subway stations are totally physically inaccessible. Repair of any subway stations that actually are accessible has been underprioritized. Many elevators and escalators in subway stations have been out of service for months. For example, the elevator at the Yonge/Bloor station was out of service for nine months before it was finally back in operation on December 16, 2010. As a result, many people could not transfer between the North-South line and the East-West line during this time. These kinds of service delays mean that people who need elevators and escalators cannot use those stations for extended periods of time, further blocking them from accessing some areas of the city. These repairs need to be prioritized, and more stations need to be made accessible in the first place.

Wheel-Trans, the unreliable 'alternative' to the TTC, is a segregated and discriminatory system that requires painful and humiliating tests for eligibility. If a person does qualify, they have to plan trips 24-hours in advance, and if they need to call instead of using the Internet, they may spend up to an hour on the phone waiting to get through because there are not enough workers on the line. There is much more demand than supply of Wheel-Trans buses, which means that if a person requests a ride at 2pm, they might be offered one at 4pm, or they might simply be declined. There are many other unfair rules that govern the lives of Wheel-Trans users.



A Wheel-Trans ride might arrive 20 minutes early, or 45 minutes late – without penalty. At the same time, if a rider is not ready within 5 minutes, the driver will leave and they will have missed their ride. If a rider happens to miss a ride four times in a month, they are cut off of Wheel-Trans access for two weeks. People often face discrimination and abuse from drivers working under terrible labour conditions. We also demand improved training and working conditions of Wheel-Trans drivers. We are not calling for the end of Wheel-Trans, since for many people it's the only way that they access public transit at this point. Rather, we are calling for the whole transit system to be made physically accessible, including all stations, bus routes, and streetcars.

Fare access is also a disability issue. Poverty in general is a disability issue, since poverty and disability are critically linked in the context of capitalist societies like Canada. Transit costs $3 per ride and $6 for a round-trip – if you have attendant care, that goes up to $12 for a round-trip! This is compounded by a political and economic system that keeps many people with disabilities in poverty. We demand free transit for TTC users and their attendants.

**AM: Rob Ford, the recently elected Mayor of Toronto, campaigned on an open platform to annul *Transit City*, and by all appearances seems keen to fulfill his promise. Where does your campaign stand in relation to *Transit City*, and do you think it is possible to in any way reconcile the two initiatives?**

**Herman Rosenfeld:** *Transit City* is in reality a series of light rail lines that seeks to include inner suburban neighbourhoods in the larger transit grid; it's the result of a series of compromises that represent the strengths and weaknesses of the [former Mayor David] Miller era (and previous city and provincial administrations). We tend not to defend all of *Transit City* but parts of it. As a result, we are not part of the movement that argues that the be-all and end-all of transit policy is the defense of *Transit City*.

For us, the key is open, democratic planning; a rejection of neoliberal austerity; and opposition to the anti-public transit policy of Ford. We need to consult with people in the affected areas to see what they want and need and try and articulate that message around the concerns of those currently working to defend Transit City.

**Lisa Leinveer:** To that I would add that although it's commendable that the LRT system proposed would be

accessible, this should not sway us from our critiques of *Transit City* overall, nor from our goals of changing the infrastructure of existing lines to make them physically accessible.

**AM: What is your envisioned relation to the TTC and TTC workers?**

**Jordy Cummings:** Like other public services, the relationship would not change. There is some fear among TTC workers that free transit would mean less jobs, but there's no reason that those taking tickets or working within finance and other departments cannot be redeployed in a variety of ways to make transit a more affordable and accessible experience.

Recently, Mayor Ford and the 'liberal' provincial government recently attempted to make TTC an essential service – this is a slap in the face to TTC workers. While the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) cannot publicly back our campaign, TTC workers I've encountered have been remarkably receptive to the idea, as have other public and private sector trade unionists.

**Lisa Leinveer:** Being in solidarity with TTC workers, we believe that systemic change should include the improvement of working conditions for TTC and Wheel-Trans workers. We oppose framing these debates in narrow terms – for example, saying that it's the fault of the drivers that Wheel-Trans is unreliable. Part of making transit in Toronto less ableist, and therefore more accessible, is the prioritization of anti-ableist training and better working conditions for all TTC staff.

**AM: Finally, people will need to begin to believe that fare-free transit is possible before it can happen. What do you currently see as the key obstacle to the campaign becoming something that is seen as attainable in the public consciousness?**

**Jordy Cummings:** The majority of people in Toronto in principle would back the idea of free transit. I think the obstacle is how we're socialized under capitalism to see things (public and private goods) as commodities, and the entire set of social relations that accompanies this way of thinking. For example, it seems normal for us to pay for some services, yet not for an appointment with our doctor or taking out a library book. What is the difference?

**Leo Panitch:** Nothing unites the people of the Greater Toronto Area as much as mass public transit, whether it is the TTC or GO Transit. We take it for granted since we use it every day and spend a good portion of our hard-earned money on unfair fares. Why then, is our supposedly 'public' transit system among the least public in the world? Our fares pay a large part of transit costs. Since 1991, fares have increased from $1.10 to $3.00 in 2010. And fares will likely continue to increase $0.25 each year. Why should we stand for this? Transit systems in other cities get more government funding to cover their costs. Other cities in the world put money into mass transit because people demand that the comfort, safety and cost of their commute is part of the common good. We Canadians are proud that we have a Medicare system that means we don't have to pay for each time we go to the doctor or a hospital. We don't have to pay a fee for water each time we turn on the tap or flush the toilet. We know that a public education system means our children don't have to pay to go to school. We got these things because people came together and demanded them and won them from governments. A fare-free and accessible TTC is possible, if we demand it.

• Jordy Cummings is a PhD candidate in Political Science at York University, and active with CUPE Local 3903. Lisa Leinveer is an activist working with DAMN2025 in Toronto. Leo Panitch is Canada Research Chair in Comparative Political Economy at York University. Kamilla Pietrzyk is an activist and PhD student currently living in Toronto. Herman Rosenfeld is a former national representative in the education department of the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) and now teaches Labour Studies at McMaster University. They are all active in the Greater Toronto Workers' Assembly (GTWA) transit committee.

• Ali Mustafa is a freelance journalist, writer, and media activist. He resides in Toronto. His writing can be found at FromBeyondTheMargins.blogspot.com

# Free and Accessible Transit Now:
## Toward a Red-Green Vision for Toronto

Free and Accessible Transit Campaign,
Greater Toronto Workers Assembly

Transit is a critical issue for people in Toronto, as in all major urban areas. More is at stake than reducing traffic congestion and gridlock. Transit and general mobility are intimately related to larger issues in capitalist society: how goods and services are produced and delivered; the location of and nature of jobs; where and how we live and travel; issues of class, inequality and oppression related to race, age, gender, and sexuality; climate justice; and the very shape and nature of our democratic institutions.

The GTWA *Free Transit* initiative opens the door to a broader transformation of urban life and the current social system. Our 'Red-Green' vision is socialist, based on the working-class, environmentally just, internationalist, and transformative.

### Promises and Challenges of *Free Transit*

Our *Free Transit* model makes public transit a right of all people, which would dramatically increase its use. While serving the vast majority of Torontonians and strengthening the public sector's role in meeting their needs, it would also address the special mobility requirements of the least mobile and most public transit-dependent: people with disabilities, people working in precarious jobs and/or living in poverty, plus the more elderly and younger members of our community.

Demanding *Free Transit* poses key questions:

- How can F*ree Transit* help transform our car-dominated transit system?
- How would it be financed?
- How would it challenge government austerity and fight for good green jobs?
- How much would *Free Transit* support global climate justice?
- How can transit users and transit workers together push for *Free Transit*?
- Could F*ree Transit* networks be generous public spaces that express the full diver sity of our city without discrimination?

### Mobility and Time in the City

Mobility is more than the ability of people to travel where they want or need to. People who have to take transit to precarious jobs, juggle two or more jobs, and/or balance household and work tasks (usually women), have different transit needs than the wealthy. For many people, reduced need to travel could be as important as the right to move around the city.

Addressing this means planning and reordering the location of work, home, and recreation. It means changing the structure of work, including fighting against precarious work, and involves reorganizing gendered patterns of living and working. In other words, mobility should become a social choice that qualitatively improves workers' everyday lives while reducing environmental degradation.

### Building a Compact City

"Transit-oriented development" is taken to mean combatting sprawl by intensifying residential development, along with providing walkable, street-oriented, mixed-use built environments. This can produce the population densities that make mass public transit feasible.

As neutral or positive as this seems, it has problems. Intensification in Toronto is mostly in the form of private real estate development, usually of high-rise condominiums. This leads to increasing land costs that threaten low-rent apartments, cheaper shops and industrial spaces. All these displace working-class people to the suburbs, reinforcing sprawl.

Our approach calls for compact, land-saving and energy-efficient building. This would require public land ownership and social housing that is collectively or co-operatively owned and managed.

### Public Space in the City

Even publicly owned transit networks can be socially divided and less than public in practice. New lines sometimes cater to privileged elites (such as the diesel train link from Union Station to the airport), are built and maintained via "public-private partnerships" (Toronto's new LRT network), or bypass areas where

working-class people live, especially people of colour or on social assistance.

Transit must not reinforce current patterns of segregated living. It must also fully accommodate people with disabilities and special needs. In sum, *Free Transit* should provide a fully public space, where people have the right to engage with one another and feel comfortable doing so, in the spirit of the world's most congenial public spaces.

### The Scale of our City

*Free Transit* – and complementary industrial strategies – would require greater integration of neighbourhood and commuter transit, and of those with national rail networks. This would strengthen transit at all levels. Current commuting flows (such as GO Transit) are out of joint with urban travel; they actually encourage individual, short-term car trips and undercut necessary city densities.

We need to integrate what remains of Canada's passenger rail grid, inter- and intra-regional and local transit networks, and co-ordinate them with improved cycling and walking infrastructure. All this needs to be extended to and integrated with inner and outer suburbs. Current forms of regional integration are business-dominated, undemocratic and underfunded. Ontario's Metrolinx agency in particular is invested in privatizing public transit in the GTA.

### Addressing Twin Crises: Environment and the Economy

*Free Transit* would necessitate shifting away from private transport, which creates 25% of global carbon emissions. That shift would make a major contribution to reducing our greenhouse gas pollution, which in turn would have benefits around the world. Public mass transit produces 5–10% of the greenhouse gas levels of autos, and consumes much less land than does car dependency.

The current economic crisis, although seen by business and governments as helpful for imposing unpopular austerity, provides an opportunity for ecological and economic reconstruction. A Red-Green economic development strategy, with mass public transit as a key component, can build on workers' and environmentalists' fights against plant closures, such as Toronto's Green Work Alliance in the 1990s, the Greater London (England) Council experiments in the 1980s, and new proposals in the United States.



The investment necessary for *Free Transit* is a major opportunity to promote social and ecological development. The public sector could become a strategic lynchpin for developing urban infrastructure, in the process creating green jobs and implementing an industrial strategy centred on retrofitting ailing manufacturing plants, generating new forms of sustainable energy, building non-profit housing on government-assembled land, land trusts or co-operatives, and providing new forms of public service.

### Changing Our Use of Cars

Toronto needs to radically decrease the dependence on private vehicles that has been structured into our living and working lives since the mid-20th century. On its own, *Free Transit* would not end car dependence. Doing that would require not only dramatic increases in transit capacities, but also measures to transform the way we use cars today.

Such changes will need to be carefully thought through, and will have to include recognizing that people cannot easily cease depending on cars and preclude penalizing working-class people for whom switching modes of transportation is not an immediate option.

Solutions will include intensifying and expanding transit in currently transit-poor areas of the city and in newer suburbs, at the same time making development contingent on transit access. Limits on the times and places of car usage and parking in the city will be needed, while priority is given on many routes to pedestrians, cyclists and transit.

### Public Ownership and Democratic Planning

*Free Transit* can only happen if transit is fully public in ownership and operation – it is not compatible with private-sector logic. But public-

sector bureaucracies and even unionized workers may think this demand threatens the financial viability of public transit. Achieving it will require a strong alliance among public transit workers and their unions, transit users and all supporters of robust and expanded public transit. The goal is not to make public managers more powerful, but to democratize planning and administration by empowering transit workers and users.

*Free Transit* is in the medium- and long-term interest of transit workers. It would end fare-policing, a major source of tensions between transit workers and users; lead to increased transit employment; and raise transit workers' importance and prestige in users' lives.

Democratic planning must be introduced, from local neighbourhoods through to high-level co-ordination and planning. Regional and inter-regional transit needs can also be articulated from below, by creating regional democratic planning bodies that are mandated to improve transit – not to take resources from transit-dependent but underserved areas (such as inner suburbs) or transit-dense areas (such as downtown).

### Paying for *Free Transit*

Current budgetary practice makes it difficult to pay for F*ree Transit*. In Toronto, massive public funding would be needed to replace the current 70% of operating costs paid by fares and to build new transit capacity. The Ontario government would have to reverse its Harris-era downloading of operating support to municipalities with limited taxing ability.

Both Ontario and federal governments need to provide the funding that is recognized around the world as essential for any successful transit system, free or not. Even free public transit can be cheaper than the costs of building road and other infrastructure for cars. Ending state subsidies (such as building highways at public expense) to privatized transport and land development would, of course, challenge vested interests such as construction, development, finance, media and auto-related industries.

Increasing federal and provincial funding of mass public transit with stable and generous formulas, while ending the hidden subsidies to these vested interests, would make it possible to fund free transit without increasing municipal taxes. This would not preclude a new tax structure to support the transformation of our city, such as new taxes on gas, carbon and parking, and certain tolls, congestion fees and luxury taxes.



Of course, as part of a progressive taxation system, we should all be prepared to be taxed for a basic public service like free transit, recognizing that this will leave us far better off than having to pay the increasingly regressive and unsustainable fares we now do. Even occasional transit users – motorists and cyclists for instance – can view their role in such a system of taxation as ultimately beneficial, as funding a more usable and sustainable public transportation network is essential to creating a sustainable and livable city for us all.

### How to Get There

The Free and Accessible Transit Campaign proposes the following steps toward *Free Transit*:

- Freeze all fares, and embark on a plan to gradually reduce them.
- Prioritize eliminating fares for seniors, people on social assistance and the unem ployed. Start with lowering fares, and eliminate them during non-peak hours.
- Suspend fare collection during extreme weather alerts (cold and hot).
- Maintain full public ownership of all transit services, stock and maintenance. No private contracts (such as P3s) that distort the goals of public transit!
- Create neighbourhood-based, short-distance public transit to link people lacking access to the main urban network.
- Replace Metrolinx with a democratic planning body.

In Toronto, the movement to defend and expand public mass transit includes the Fair Fare Coalition, Scarborough Transit Action, Public Transit Coalition, Clean Train Coalition, and TTCRiders. Along with the city's working-class movement and climate justice advocates, the Free and Accessible Transit Campaign can create a sorely needed critical pole of reference for Toronto and Canadian politics – and achieve Free Transit.

## Further Resources

A number of transit discussions have been recorded and are available at socialistproject.ca/leftstreamed

Left Streamed 63
**Free and Accessible TTC!** - Discussion about free and accessible transit in Toronto organized by the Greater Toronto Workers' Assembly. Recorded July 16, 2010 in Toronto.

Left Streamed 70
**No Fare IS Fair** - Start of the campaign to win free and accessible transit for the GTA. A project of the Greater Toronto Workers' Assembly. Recorded October 2, 2010 at Christie Pits, Toronto.

Left Streamed 107
**Cars and Capitalism on the Road to Economic, Social and Ecological Decay** - with co-authors Bianca Mugyenyi and Yves Engler. Opening remarks by Jordy Cummings and Rick Salutin. Recorded 12 May 2011 in Toronto.

Left Streamed 131
**Transit Forum 2012** - Which Way Forward for the Transit Movement in Toronto? Recorded 3 March 2012 in Toronto.

Left Streamed 159
**Beyond Toronto's Transit Crisis** - How can our campaign contribute to Toronto's transit movement and help transform the city? How could our demand for free and accessible public transit promote environmental justice and sustainability, housing, jobs and social equality? How can we move forward the GTWA Free and Accessible Transit Campaign? Recorded 20 January 2013 in Toronto.

## Socialist Interventions Pamphlet Series

This pamphlet series is meant to encourage principled debate amongst the left and the working class to advance a viable socialist movement in Canada. Democratic debate is encouraged within and beyond the Socialist Project.

1. Sam Gindin (2004) *The Auto Industry: Concretizing Working Class Solidarity: Internationalism Beyond Slogans*

2. Leo Panitch (2005) *Whose Violence? Imperial State Security and the Global Justice Movement*

3. Carlos Torres, et al. (2005) *The Unexpected Revolution: The Venezuelan People Confront Neoliberalism*

4. Hugh Armstrong, et al. (2005) *Whose Health Care? Challenging the Corporate Struggle to Rule Our System*

5. Labour Committee (2007) *The Crisis in Manufacturing Jobs*

6. Richard Roman and Edur Velasco Arregui (2008) *The Oaxaca Commune: The Other Indigenous Rebellion in Mexico*

7. Labour Committee - Socialist Project (2008) *Labour Movement Platform.*

*8.* Michael A. Lebowitz (2009) *The Path to Human Development: Capitalism or Socialism?*

*9.* Socialist Project (2009) *Financial Meltdown: Canada, the Economic Crisis and Political Struggle.*

10. Marta Harnecker (2010) *Ideas for the Struggle.*

11. Angela Joya, et al. (2011) *The Arab Revolts Against Neoliberalism.*

12. Socialist Project (2013) *Free Transit*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