

Case Studies and Solutions

T Riders' Union: A Tale of Two Campaigns in Boston

By Penn Loh

At the end of 2000, transit riders in Boston had launched the T Riders' Union (TRU) and were celebrating their first victory—free system-wide bus transfers. Three years later, community advocates walked away from a three-year initiative to reform the Boston Metropolitan Transportation Organization (MPO), with little to show for their effort. These two campaigns have taught Alternatives for Community & Environment (ACE) and our community partners a lot about the opportunities and pitfalls in transit justice organizing and advocacy.

Launch of T Riders' Union

Our story began with community concerns about asthma and air quality. In 1997, through ACE's youth program, students at three schools targeted dirty diesel buses and trucks as an environmental injustice linked to the high rates of asthma in the community. Seventy-five youth marched in an Anti-Idling Day and handed out "tickets" to educate drivers about the state law limiting idling of engines. That same day, these youth joined with six other community and environmental groups to launch the Clean Buses for Boston coalition.

Over the next two years, Clean Buses tried to draw the Massachusetts Bay Transit Authority (MBTA) into negotiations to change over its fleet of 1,000 diesel buses to cleaner alternatives. Eventually, we organized a series of forums, where more than 300 residents and riders testified about their concerns with MBTA service. Through this outreach, we realized that we had tapped into an issue much broader than just diesel exhaust. Riders cared about the health impacts, but they were just as concerned about the late and overcrowded buses, lack of bus shelters, and overall disrespect by the MBTA for their communities. Diesel was just one of the many transit inequities experienced daily by riders.

Inspired by efforts like the Bus Riders' Union in Los Angeles and the Straphangers Campaign in New York City, Clean Buses then hatched a plan for launching our own T Riders' Union. We realized that

winning clean buses or improvements in any of the other service problems would require significant shifts in state resources, and that there was no group building the power of riders themselves. The testimonials from our community forums became TRU's five-point platform for transit justice, including respect and equity, accountability, first class service, clean air and better health, and accessibility and comfort.

Transit Racism and Disinvestment

By 2000, Clean Buses and other grassroots transit advocates came together to fight the first system-wide fare increase in a decade. Not only was this the perfect opportunity to launch TRU, but it also forced us to define the overall problem as one of transit racism and disinvestment. About 32 percent of the 1.2 million daily MBTA riders are bus riders. The MBTA also runs subways serving 56 percent of its ridership and commuter rail serving 12 percent. The region's low-income communities and communities of color are served primarily by buses. Not only were some of these neighborhoods like Roxbury and Chinatown torn apart by highway construction, but over the decades some of the trolley lines that once served these communities were shut down and replaced by buses. These buses are often late and overcrowded and get stuck in Boston's notorious traffic. Buses packed with predominantly low-income riders of color are almost 20 percent more crowded than the commuter rail trains, serving wealthier

suburbs. In 2000, there were only 300 bus shelters for more than 9,000 stops, forcing riders to wait in rain, snow, or shine.

At the root of the problem is that transportation decision-making overwhelmingly favors the automobile. The Central Artery Project is the most costly public works project in the country with a price tag of over \$14 billion. (See article on the Big Dig and Bechtel, page 27.) It is no surprise then that Massachusetts has spent three times as much of its federal funding for transportation on highways as transit. Of the resources dedicated to transit, the MBTA has invested four times as much in commuter rail as on buses between 1995 and 2000.

“Higher Fares are No Fair” Campaign

When the MBTA announced a proposal to raise fares in May 2000, we launched the “Higher Fares are No Fair” campaign as TRU’s first act. We demanded that there be no fare increase until service was improved and inequities addressed. Through the summer, the campaign mobilized hundreds of people to testify at public hearings. We submitted a joint letter signed by more than 40 groups representing more than 90,000 residents, and a petition signed by more than 1,500 riders opposing the fare increase. Despite the massive opposition, the MBTA Board of Directors still voted to raise fares in August.

In response, TRU organized a fare protest on September 18, the day that higher fares went into effect. More than 20 community leaders boarded buses from Roxbury to downtown and refused to pay the fare increase. We went directly to the State House and demanded and got a meeting with the Governor. After several weeks of negotiations, the MBTA agreed



to a new policy of free bus transfers and reduced-cost weekly subway-bus combination passes as a way to lessen the burden of the fare increase on lower-income riders. This campaign made the front page of the major city newspapers and was widely reported on regional television and radio. Our message about the existing inequities in the transit system resonated over the airwaves to educate decision makers and the broader public.

Reforming the Metropolitan Transportation Organization: 2000-2003

The birth of TRU and its first campaign victory spurred community leaders and advocates to tackle the deeper root causes of the systemic injustices. After TRU was launched, the Clean Buses Coalition and other transit justice groups formed On the Move: the Greater Boston Transportation Justice Coalition. We developed a five-point agenda for transportation



justice and livable communities. Our first target was the Boston Metropolitan Transportation Organization which controlled the allocation of federal funds for transportation projects. Given the success of the first fare increase campaign, coupled with some federal pressure to incorporate environmental justice into transportation planning, we were able to open up a seat at the MPO table. We focused our efforts on the MPO's long-term Regional Transportation Plan and the workings of the MPO itself.

For three years, members of On the Move participated in the tangled process. Our goals were to get our set of transit projects included and prioritized in the long-range plan, to democratize the MPO itself, and to wrestle power away from the state transportation agencies. We joined the Environmental Justice Committee formed by the MPO. We developed joint positions and submitted comments on two rounds of the MPO's long-range plan. We tried to force reforms in the MPO when it underwent federal recertification. All told, we committed hundreds of hours collectively at meetings, reviewing documents, and drafting comments. With the exception of the MPO's inclusion of a project to add 100 clean buses to relieve overcrowding in the system in 2001 and incremental reforms in the MPO's process, there were few positive outcomes. By the end of 2003, we decided that there was not much more progress we could make from within the MPO arena, and we walked out of the MPO's Environmental Justice Committee.

Lessons Learned

Both of these experiences offer a number of lessons on why and how we were or were not successful. Below is the advice that we would give to others organizing for transit justice in low-income communities of color, and that we are trying to follow ourselves.

- focus on the real sources of power (like the governor), not just the formal structures (like the mpo).

One strength of the fare campaign was that the decision-maker was clear and simple to communicate. It was the Governor and his appointees to the MBTA Board of Directors. Thus, taking our campaign demands straight to the Governor, coupled with other grassroots and media pressure, we were able to win a substantial victory.

In contrast, the MPO, at least on the surface, was a more complicated and convoluted entity. Most people have never heard of the MPO. In the end, we figured out that the Boston MPO was also a puppet of the Governor, controlled largely by the state transportation agencies. It really did not make any decisions on its own. What ended up in the MPO's plans and prioritized for funding from year to year was still controlled by the Governor. As it turned out, the MPO process was largely a way to divert community energy away from the real sources of power.

- prioritize grassroots base-building and leadership development to shake up the power structure before you get to the decision-making table.

Our largest source of power in the fare increase campaign was not our expertise in fare policy and transit funding (though we had some), but the number of people and groups at the grassroots. The Governor feared being publicly branded as uncaring of low-income communities of color. All it took was front-page media coverage and direct action to force him to meet with us. Afterwards, it took just one phone call from him to MBTA, forcing them to open negotiations with us.

The MPO campaign did not contribute to grassroots base-building. In fact, it felt like it drew our attention away from organizing. The work was conducted almost exclusively by staff advocates and organizers, those who had the time and energy to navigate the institutional complexities. Though we had access to the decision-making table because of previous organizing efforts, we were not able to tilt that table in our favor, nor even to be more level, once we got there.

- pursue policy advocacy on a foundation of solid base-building.

Oftentimes, we get caught up in believing that if only we put all our effort into grassroots organizing or policy advocacy, we would be able to win more. We found that you need organizing in order to set up advocacy opportunities on more favorable terms. But the lure of access to the decision-making table is so great at times that we end up spending all of our time in advocacy rather than continually growing the base and developing new leadership. In the fare

increase campaign, the grassroots base wedged open negotiations that were then taken on by a combination of staff advocates, organizers, and rider leaders. In the MPO, we were invited into its own process, set up on its terms and not ours.

- frame issues in terms understood by your constituency.

To maintain the winds that float the sails of grassroots organizing, you need to frame the issues in terms that are understood by your own constituency. In the Higher Fares are No Fair campaign, we brought to light the frustrations that hundreds of thousands of riders felt every day: why should they pay more if they are already dissatisfied with service? In the MPO campaign, public messaging was challenging, given the complex institutional structure and the fact that the decisions made by the MPO were not immediate and direct.

In transit justice issues, the core messages that always have some play include service (Is my bus late or overcrowded?), price (How much are fares?), and expansion (Will a new train run down my street?).

- Make them play your game, on your turf, for as long as you can.

The lasting lesson for us is that we need to continue to build on our strength, which is our people power. We will never have the money or resources of our opponents. But if we have the grassroots base, then policy advocacy, media strategies, and coalition building can be used to complement the people power. If we frame issues in terms that will energize and resonate with our own communities, then we have the opportunity to wage campaigns that force decision makers to play our game, on our turf. ■

Penn Loh is the executive director of Alternatives for Community and Environment.

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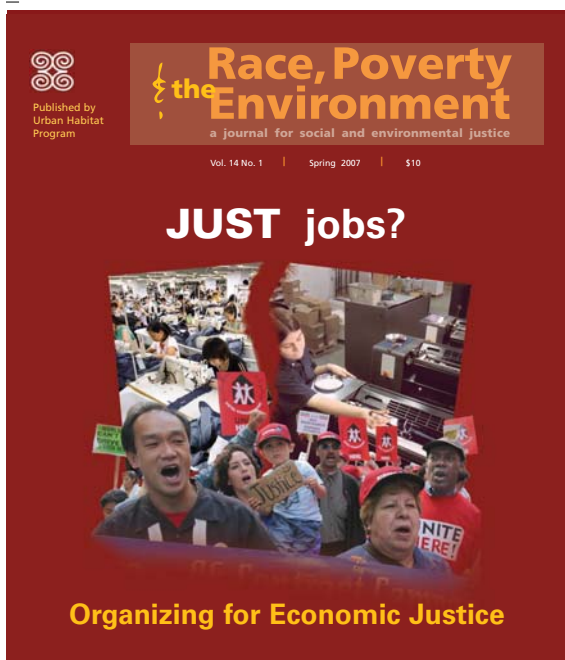
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