

# Organizing on the “Factory on Wheels”

## The Bus Riders’ Union and Anti-Racist Feminism for the 21st Century

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*Cet article rapporte un incident entre le syndicat des chauffeurs d'autobus de Vancouver (BRU) qui ont envahi la voie publique pour en faire un site de syndicalisme social et de féminisme anti-raciste. J'ai discuté avec le BRU démontrant la centralité des luttes qui agitent le capitalisme mondial et le testament de la renaissance de la pensée politique et d'action autour des présences dans une ville. En arguant que la stratégie de communication du BRU concernant le transport en commun se doit de donner un espace vital à l'organisation féministe, j'ai relevé deux aspects de leur travail: les politiques de la visibilité et l'élaboration des pratiques contestataires qui abolissent ce qui distingue une citadine activiste et un chauffeur d'autobus.*

Vancouver's Bus Riders' Union (BRU) is a strongly women-led activist group transforming the city's public transit into a site of social unionism and anti-racist feminism. Public transit is typically seen to be space of mundane urban travel, but the rise of the BRU renders the bus as a hotly contested means of transportation used by Vancouver's most precarious workers. The BRU's on-the bus organizing experience shows that Vancouver's transit dependent bus riders, both numerous and diverse, are comprised of low-wage workers, the unemployed, students, refugees, children, seniors, immi-

grants and people with disabilities. Women and a disproportionate number are Aboriginal people and people of colour make up the bulk of the city's transit dependent (BRU). The BRU situates urban mobility as a political struggle against colonial capitalism's narratives of gendered subjectivity, where public and mobile subjects are characterized as male, while private and immobile life are portrayed as female. It seeks to overturn such narratives by mobilizing transit users through calls for “the right to get around” and through campaigns such as “End the Curfew” (that aims to reverse cuts to transit night service). The BRU's constituency and organizing style suggests a concrete project for the assertion of new claims organized around a justice politics of everyday free mobility in the neoliberal city. Here, the historical spaces of social organizing, such as the trade union or the neighbourhood association, are being radically transformed by privatization and de-regulation. In this context, the initiation of a union of bus riders is both surprisingly innovative and long overdue.

The idea of a new kind of social unionism, built on the self-organization of bus riders, emerged out of Los Angeles in the early 1990s as a project of the Labour/Community Strategy Centre. Rooted in Los Angeles's fierce labour struggles that

peaked in the Reagan-inspired de-regulation boom of the 1980s, two key factors drove the Centre towards non-conventional spaces of organizing. First, its radical critique of U.S capitalism, including the official labour movement; second, its understanding of the changing political landscape occurring both globally and locally under neoliberal restructuring. Recognizing and politicizing Los Angeles as a site of intense labour mobility, where women from the Global South provide a lion's share of the city's competitive edge, the L. A. BRU's analysis of the production of capitalist social relations rendered the bus system and its users into a 400,000-strong “factory on wheels,”<sup>1</sup> a crucial site for justice organizing (Mann).

In the aftermath of the 1992 Los Angeles Revolt (Ramsay), the BRU set out to work with various social justice movements in the city, including the movement to defeat California's racist Proposition 187 and the Justice for Janitors campaign. This affinity with other grassroots movements became the basis of the BRU's new social unionism. Working from the view that “the geography of work and travel reflects the spatiality of patriarchy, structural racism, and the division of labour” (Burgos and Pulido 80), the BRU confronted Los Angeles's transportation authority and its active role in

urban segregation. Their “No Seat, No Fare!” campaign, documented in Haskel Wexler’s 1999 film *The Bus Riders Union*, articulated specifically feminist demands of the public transport constituency—street lighting at bus stops, unarmed escorts, an end to overcrowding, accessible child care—combining transitional demands with legal tactics and radical grassroots organizing.

Vancouver’s own BRU emerged in the summer of 2001. A screening of Wexler’s *Bus Rider’s Union* brought Los Angeles BRU organizers to Vancouver to meet with local activists. The film made visible a face of the city that is generally kept hidden from its spectacular representation. It clearly articulated anti-racist feminist agitation around mobility and visibility in the U.S.’s most globalized city. For bus dependent Vancouver activists, the film provoked a sense of belonging to an extraordinary social constituency, at once connected to place but not necessarily to conventional spaces of social movement such as the factory or the nation-state. Like Los Angeles, Vancouver is also a multi-lingual, cosmopolitan, and heavily car-oriented city, where the vast majority of public transport users are low-income, racialized women. Los Angeles BRU organizers and Vancouver community activists discussed strategies for dealing with public transit authorities in a political culture where bus riders are not considered political subjects but recipients of a service. These representations and interactions suggested the Vancouver bus could be a site for the elaboration of new social relations and radical imaginations, pointing towards the building of what Paulo Virno calls a “non-state public sphere” (42).

In this paper, I approach the BRU’s conception and practice of social unionism as an animating force in feminist activism and in expanding the traditional trade unionist conception of labour—which has historically focused on production and the wage—to include the

central place of social reproduction. This approach sheds politicized light on a hallmark feature of our current experience of global neoliberal restructuring: the continuous expansion of the working day. Hence, one of the BRU’s significant contributions to feminist social justice organizing in the neoliberal era is in its challenge to the extension of unpaid work time that many wom-

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en, especially women dependent on public transportation, experience in the neoliberal city.

The BRU’s organizing practice draws on grassroots movements that meet at the historical nexus of working class politics, internationalism and feminism. Their style invokes the grassroots labour movement’s history of radical shop floor organizing and community-based social unionism in combination with autonomous Marxist feminist critiques of capitalist work and the invisibility of women in working-class history and politics. An especially important influence has been the organizing and theoretical contribution of movements explicitly oriented towards internationalism and social reproduction, such as the international Wages for Housework campaign and its activists and theoreticians, such as Selma James (Efting). That movement’s groundbreaking

work around the central role of social reproduction in the production of capitalism is very relevant to the contemporary experience of transit dependent women.

### **Anti-Racist Feminist Social Unionism**

The BRU’s organizing approach uniquely combines traditions of shop floor and community organizing. It draws together those traditions in new ways that respond to and try to make sense of the radical transformations in urban space throughout the last couple of decades of neoliberal transformation. In particular, it brings into focus the changing compositions of urban politics born out of mass migrations and the new claims that have emerged out of these processes. The right to mobility, the right to public space, and the right to the city are contested within an analysis of neoliberalism, civil rights, and an emergent social movement tradition based in the struggles around social service cuts, privatization, strike breaking, anti-union legislation, and growing urban economic polarization. The BRU signals the challenges of organizing for justice across mobile and dispersed constituents who don’t necessarily share many fixed common spaces such as neighbourhoods or factories. As Los Angeles BRU organizer, Martin Hernandez, explains: “Since de-industrialization, buses are among the last public spaces where blue-collar people of all races still mingle.” (qtd. in Davis 272). The BRU’s feminist challenge to the mainstream labour pact with Fordism and its fleeting promises of a family wage, itself increasingly under attack over the last two decades of neoliberalism, is to organize on the bus as a space of reproductive labour.

The group’s cultural politics injects a vital energy into the North American conception of union organizing. In calling itself a union, the Vancouver BRU draws on the best of

the labour movement's traditions of agitation while avoiding mainstream labour's verticalism and privileging of "productive," waged labour. The BRU's ability to draw on the city's grassroots multiculturalism, and the anti-racism at the core of its organizing, draws us closer to this radical tradition, and meanwhile subverting the traditional union movement's historic white male industrial image and its fraught relationship with national capitalism. As the factory system and industrial work metamorphoses dramatically under neoliberalism, public space may be shrinking but the bus is an expanding space (Dutton and Mann). The "factory on wheels" is a specifically neoliberal urban form. It is a mirror of the modern industrial factory that emerged out of the enclosure movement, whereby expropriated mobile workers are forced together in capitalist social relations. Indeed, much of the BRU's organizing efforts challenge the complicated cultural politics of race, class, and gender on the bus.

The BRU's politics of communication are significant to recognizing multiple struggles within the city. The precariousness of public transit-dependent service workers, shift workers, students, single mothers, and the elderly is the basis of their dialogical organizing model. This political strategy aims to harness, not contain, the diversity of the public transit constituency as a source of powerful accumulated knowledge, thereby departing from conventional claims of political representation. The BRU is not claiming to represent bus riders but to open up a space for the articulation of democratic desires for mobility, justice and equality.

This aperture is enacted through tactics such as street actions, demonstrations, and traffic blocking theatrics and, through what the BRU calls "direct-contact organizing." Talking to riders and drivers and engaging in multi-lingual pamphleteering on the bus, the BRU fuses industrial union organizing

tactics reminiscent of the Wobblies<sup>2</sup> with those of grassroots urban movements of the last four decades. This dialogical feminist organizing practice extends to the BRU's radical investigation strategy called "Testimonial Research," whereby organizers conduct interviews so that bus riders can narrate their own experience and analysis of the transit system. This method makes con-

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crete a radical planning movement in which the users of public services are recognized as constituent actors.

Out of this dialogical, feminist research approach emerged the BRU's slogan/demand for "the right to get around," which seeks to occupy the spaces of enclosure and overturn neoliberal command. Also elaborated through this process, Vancouver's BRU has tabled four "transitional demands." These demands articulate concrete struggles relevant to women's lives through an analysis of capitalist relations of reproduction as well as production. They consist of: the defence and expansion of public services, an end to transit racism, a policy framework that privileges environmental sustainability and public health and that puts women at the centre of transit planning (Roberts). As a critique of top-down planning and a way of drawing links between

the ongoing privatization of public services and declining social rights, these demands implicitly ask: How does public transit impact the lives of women who must travel long and complicated routes to ferry children, buy food, attend to aging relatives as well as get to and from paid work? Importantly, the demands suggest a shedding of the reform/revolution binary by working through the concrete experience and life desires of riders. These objectives are imagined and articulated through a combination of "direct contact organizing," political street theatre and demonstrations, interventions at the Transit Authority's meetings, organizing bus riders to participate in these meetings, and direct actions designed both to publicize an alternate vision of public transit as a common good and to economically impact the transit authority through the withdrawal of fare payments.

#### **Visibility and Encounter: The Fare Strike**

The Vancouver BRU's first Fare Strike was launched on January 14, 2005 following Translink's (i.e., B.C.'s Transit Authority) New Year's resolution to raise transit fares for the third time in five years. Transit fares have increased by 40 per cent over this period. The fare strike tactic sets in motion a mass refusal in order to make visible the economic power of transit users as the makers of the public transit system. According to the BRU, over 5,000 passengers boarded the bus while refusing to pay the fare, demonstrating and therefore politicizing the presence of public transit users and collectively demanding a restoration of pre-hike fares. The strike aimed to win a concrete goal connected to larger aims of social transformation. This process challenges the logic of the reform or revolution debate by turning struggle into an argument about public services as a commons run by the people that use it. It is a strategy first and foremost about

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moving people into collective action, about encouraging bus riders to see themselves as social actors that can take part in transforming the world immediately around them—in this case to make a fair and equitable public transport system and to resist the fare increase as symptomatic of the upward transfer of wealth that is a structural feature of neoliberalism. In the fare strike model, social subjects can participate in a mass action through not paying the fare—an act of refusal that affirms political agency.

Nine months later, in the lead up to the 2005 municipal elections, the BRU launched a second fare strike. To experiment with form and to build momentum through a concentrated period of on-the-bus organizing, media presence, and ongoing community dialogue, the strike took place over five days in November. From early morning rush hour until past the evening crush, organizers boarded the buses and leafleted at major nexus bus stops. The strike concentrated on those inner-city routes that move the largest concentration of transit-

dependent riders, those who have experienced the greatest burden from lagging services and increased costs. The strategy was to target Translink at the fare box to leverage restitution of the 2004 transit fare, a demand based on the expressed desire of riders.

The move towards this civil disobedience strategy was a response to the limitations of the electoral system as evidenced by the inaccessibility of local government politicians and the refusal of TransLink to negotiate. After the BRU's effort to push open top-down spaces of political representation—postcard campaigns, testimonials at TransLink meetings—failed to stop the increase, organizers determined that civil disobedience in the form of the fare refusal strike was necessary to create the space of dialogue about public transit as a justice issue. Hence, the fare strike acted as both a critique of electoral politics and a way to make public transport an election issue. It was, the organizers explained, a way of moving people into action, and an opportunity to educate people on the bus to see

transit as a serious political issue.

The contact on the bus was used as a medium for linking the struggles of transit-dependent people to broader systemic critiques of capitalism. It was specifically oriented toward the development of a community-level dialogue on neoliberalism, internationalism, and public space. BRU organizers framed the fare increase as a service cut because, according to their research, the increased cost of travelling was directly pushing people off the bus. The Vancouver organizers pointed to the powerful role of the transit industry lobby in determining public infrastructure policies and resource allocation. They explained the webs of corporate and political interest—dredged through investigative research—between the car dealers, gas industry, and private transit developers to the ruling provincial government.

### **Activism, Research, and the Oppositional Constituent**

The fare strike of 2005 was my first experience with on-the-bus organizing. At the crowded and tumultu-

ous intersection of Main Street and Terminal Avenue, I joined several BRU activists for the last shift of the strike. The area, an industrial scale transport hub with a constant flow of car traffic, is also the main nexus for a number of long inner city bus routes. It is an especially bleak area of the city, especially as bus after bus rolls by filled to capacity, routinely leaving passengers behind. The bus we board is predictably over-crowded. The organizer designated to be the liaison with drivers boarded first to explain the strike and express the BRU's solidarity with the bus drivers' own struggles to halt the trend towards privatization, address the system's terrible overcrowding and their general demands for better working conditions. On this dark and rainy winter afternoon on a relentlessly crowded route, the bus driver was in a foul mood. But after an outburst of angry frustration, he permitted the four of us to board provided we "didn't harass any passengers."

As the bus inched into rush hour traffic towards the bursting bus stops ahead, the BRU liaison sparked a dialogue with the driver about the difference between political organizing and harassment. As passengers streamed onto the bus, the organizer held her hand over the fare box and informed them that we were on a fare strike. Passengers responded with a mix of bewilderment, delight, and occasional apprehension, particularly after the bus driver began screaming that we could not do this. The organizer discussed the politics of the strike with both the oncoming passengers and the driver. Another organizer addressed the bus as a whole, charging that "the transit authority is a racist, sexist, and inept institution run by people who never have to take the bus and who are responsible for deteriorating air quality and increased hardship for bus riders." The rest of us distributed leaflets about the fare strike in Punjabi, Spanish, Chinese, and English, and discussed the state of public transit

with the passengers.

People on the bus were intrigued, not the least because of the infuriated bus driver and this curious group of women wearing bright orange shirts respectfully testing what is often a fraught relationship between uniformed driver and passenger. At one point, the driver protested loudly at an organizer's charge that the transit system is a racist institution, evidenced, she continued, in the routine cutting of services, such as the Night Owl bus, and in the relentless fare hikes, both of which disproportionately impact riders of colour concentrated in low-wage shift work. Other riders immediately surged into the debate. "Yes it is!" a grocery-laden woman passenger yelled back, "it is racist, sexist, anti-working people, anti-student and young people, they just do what they want!" At this point an elderly man—who moments before had been complaining about the strike action holding up passengers who "have dinner waiting at home"—joined in proclaiming "and anti-senior citizen!" This moment suggests how suddenly the bus-riding subject became visible in a whole new way, asserting a political presence that came from the riders themselves. At this point something shifted on the bus, filling it with effervescent discussion. The bus had turned into a moving debate. The driver finally ejected us several stops later, but passengers clapped and cheered in support as we flew off the bus to be met by a representative of the Transit Authority.

Throughout that strike I saw many instances where the politically marginalized urban subject became active oppositional constituent. Visible on the faces of many riders as they entered the bus was the pleasure in collective defiance of a system whose routine and invisible humiliations are rarely recognized. The collective solidarity of refusal also provided a break in the mundane frustrations of commuting on a beleaguered public transportation system. More

than in many other spaces of public organizing, it was on that bus that I experienced a collapse between political activist and urban subject. Indeed, the whole basis of the BRU's organizing is rooted in its identification as part of the transit dependent public. This is, of course, integral to their strength and credibility as a movement and what distinguishes social unionism from the hierarchal logic of representational politics that separate leadership and subjects on the one hand and the "organized" and the "unorganised" on the other. This is the logic of the factory as a separate inside to the outside of elsewhere, whereas the BRU operates on the logic of the city as a constituent everywhere.

Hence the struggles around public transit represented in transnational movements like the BRU point to some ways in which we can re-assess the long-held strategy of the General Strike and look at it in terms of generalizing the strike in the neoliberal factory without walls or wages. This tactical shift suggests a perception of a more general shift towards the sphere of social reproduction, of the service economy and the migrant workforce that is often characterized by the generality of its ties rather than the specificity of work sites. It suggests a collapsing of the distinction between activist and social actor. As in other spaces of mobility and public life, it renders the bus a space of immediate transformational politics. The BRU's Fare Strike tactic is suggestive of the significance of feminist politics in mobility struggles in ways that collapse the distinctions between productive and reproductive labour and between activist and subject, distinctions that in many respects propelled theoretical and tactical developments of social movements throughout the twentieth century.

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istance to the new enclosures and she is presently writing her dissertation on the politics of fear and mobility in urban fortress North America.

<sup>1</sup>Coined by Strategy Centre co-founder, Eric Mann, the term “factory on wheels” is meant to signal an overlooked continuity between the industrial factory as a historic site of organized resistance to capitalism and the city bus where an increasingly diverse and dispersed working-class population encounters one another in a similar kind of social and organizational proximity that suggests radical possibilities for social justice organizing, only this time in the often overlooked and unlikely figure of the lumbering urban bus.

<sup>2</sup>The Wobblies, the shorthand name for the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) was an internationalist autonomous labour movement born amidst North America’s profound labour upheavals at the turn of the twentieth century. The IWW pioneered a radical labour movement dedicating to organizing the unorganized across industrial sectors, national, racialized, and gendered divides. The Wobblies were especially groundbreaking in their organizational approach that was uniquely horizontal and democratic and their communicational style which emphasized street theatrics to communicate across linguistic barriers.

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## FARIDEH DE BOSSET

### a tilt

i. You judge my words  
like the Carthage God, Baal.  
Harsh and unforgiving.  
You fear the fertile womb,  
the new moon,  
the first spring storm.  
You fear the fresh breath  
erasing the old.

ii. It was only a thorn  
embedded  
in the flesh of a finger,  
confident  
in its lodgment, nesting.  
But the flesh raged  
against the uninvited guest  
protesting and defending  
its boundaries.  
A fight that only blood  
could wash clean.

iii. And the tree sheltered  
the crow.  
Now the darkness belonged  
to both.  
They had to share it,  
they had no choice.  
And somehow they found  
a common joy  
in waiting  
for the sun rise.

iv. The dizzying swing  
of the rocking chair  
was comforting.  
The tilt was menacing enough  
to be a reminder of the  
bitterness  
of loss  
yet of the sweetness  
of not falling.

v. They met in a washroom  
at the intermission  
of “Oh happy days”,  
almost shivering  
in their shriveled old skin,  
sad and struck by the play,  
two strangers sharing  
an experience  
and talking of their lives  
spent shoveling paper and  
laundry,  
keeping busy  
of pleasing the world  
with little delight,  
sustained by a faint hope.  
And here they were at the end  
of a road and its detritus  
seeing their lives played  
on the stage.  
And they went back for  
the second act.

*Farideh de Bosset is a poet who sees the storm in each soul and the seed of beauty in each cell and wants to share it with the world. <poet@debosset.ca> <www.Farideh de Bosset.ca>*