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Back in April the MTA Board, which runs Muni (the bus and streetcar system in San Francisco) voted to increase the transit fare from $1.25 to $1.50, to cut service on many bus lines, and to lay off about 200 drivers. This Thursday, Sept 1, is when the fare hike is supposed to go into effect. This is the second fare hike in two years. Since 2003 the fare has gone up 50 percent.

Initially there were two groups that started doing organizing against the fare hikes, layoffs, and service cuts. The Coalition for Transit Justice was initiated by organizers who work for some housing nonprofits, such as the Tenderloin Housing Clinic, and they were able to get the endorsement of about 35 community groups in S.F. to oppose the fare hikes & service cuts.

The second group that started up back in April was Muni Social Strike. This was initiated by Anarchist Action and the Bay Area Anarchist Council. Their aim was to develop a worker/rider alliance to carry off a "social strike" — that is, a strike where the transit workers continue to run the buses and streetcars but riders ride for free.

For several months the Coalition got people out to protest at city hall hearings and to lobby the Board of Supervisors to block the fare hike, layoffs and service cuts. (S.F. is a merged county and city so the Board of Supes is the city council.) For example, Families in SROs — a group of Asian women and Latinas who live with their children in residence hotels — did a mass lobby of the supervisors.

These lobbying efforts did gain some concessions. MTA management backed off on its proposals to charge for transfers and for a hike in the monthly pass. But in the end, the "progressive majority" on the Board of Supes split, with the Supes approving the fare hike, service cuts and layoffs by an 8 to 3 vote in July. At that point, the Coalition pretty much gave up the fight. They weren't prepared to actively go beyond the reformist approach they had used, tho some of the people in the Coalition did get the Green Party to endorse the fare strike.

Meanwhile, Muni Social Strike had started out doing intensive outreach to the drivers for the first couple months, through June. They hooked up with a dissident group in the union, called the Drivers Action Committee. Here I should mention that the bus drivers union in S.F. (TWU Local 250A) is the largest group of unionized African-American workers in the city, and there are also a large number of Latino and Chinese drivers. In other words, mostly workers of color. The Drivers Action Committee succeeded in getting a union meeting to endorse a mass non-compliance by the drivers with signups for new schedules — to try to block the service cuts. However, two African-American members in the Drivers Action Committee were brought up on charges by the union leadership and suspended from the union for pushing for a wildcat job action. This has pretty much squelched involvement of the dissident drivers' group in working with the rider groups. Nonetheless, there is a widespread sympathy among the drivers for the proposed fare strike.

Until about two weeks ago there were two groups working on organizing for the fare strike — Muni Social Strike and Muni Fare

Strike. There are two groups due to political and personal differences. Nonetheless, in the last week or so before the strike the two groups have been much more closely cooperating and coordinating the organizing.

Also, in the last couple weeks support for the fare strike has begun to spread, with active involvement now of the immigrant workers from the Day Laborers program, and another ad hoc group we just found out about. The day laborers have been doing all-day tabling and outreach on Mission Street and other areas where there are large numbers of Spanish-speaking immigrants.

Altogether I would estimate that there are at present about 50 people actively doing organizing for the fare strike. Outreach has included regular teams leafletting at major bus stops, teams putting up posters and leaflets, and extensive use of stickers in English, Spanish and Chinese on bus shelters throughout the city. We also printed up simulated Muni bus transfers but with the demands of the fare strike on them. These have proved quite popular. People like this because it gives them something they can show to the drivers when they get on the bus.

Today the fare strike groups held a press conference and speakout at the BART plaza at 24th & Mission (basically the heart of the Latino community in S.F.). The bus routes that run along Mission Street are the busiest in S.F., and one of the busiest local surface bus operations in the U.S. There were speakers from St. Peters Housing Committee, Mujeres Unidas, POWER, Gray Panthers, day laborers, and disability activists.

Speakers talked about how these fare hikes & service cuts were part of the war on the poor, will make S.F. ever more expensive to live in, will adversely affect low-wage workers, people of color, immigrants, young people and seniors the most.

Of course, the proof of the pudding will be on Thursday. We won't know til then just how widespread will be participation in this rider strike.

My own view on this whole project since the beginning is that this should have been used as an opportunity to develop a mass organization of Muni riders, controlled by its members, to be an ongoing force even after the strike and as a way to give ordinary people a sense of participating in something they control. I consider this to be a syndicalist approach to this struggle.

Most of the anarchists in Muni Social Strike rejected this idea when I first broached it back in April, tho there are a few people who agree with me on this. As of right now, however, people's energies are focused on the practical work of getting the fare strike off the ground, and are not yet ready for a discussion about what the long-term strategy is.