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In the days leading up to September 1st, more than 50 people were actively organizing for the fare strike, with new groups endorsing the effort in the last week. More than 20,000 leaflets had been distributed and 10,000 stickers were attached to bus shelters and poles throughout the city — in Spanish and Chinese as well as English.

Muni — San Francisco's city-owned bus and streetcar network — raised its adult cash fare to $1.50 as of September 1st. This is the second hike in two years, representing an increase of 50 percent since 2003. Although organized pressure from community groups forced Muni management to back down on a proposal to raise the monthly pass, many low-income people have a hard time getting together the cash to buy the monthly pass. The weekly pass was a more financially accessible discount option for them. Muni never adequately advertised the weekly pass and has now raised it from $12 to $15.

Muni is also proposing to slash service on many lines, starting September 24th. Layoff notices were issued earlier in the year to 150 drivers. Muni management is eliminating 83 of

these jobs through early retirement. This means a loss of good-paying unionized jobs. For the rest of the job cuts, they're firing all of the part-timers. The fare strike has three demands: No fare hike, no service cuts, no layoffs.

Muni's bus network is very intensively used. In a typical year there are an average of 270 public transit rides for every resident in San Francisco — the same level of transit-dependency as New York City. But in San Francisco three-fourths of the rides are on the electric and diesel buses that ply the city's streets. There are already standing loads on many lines at various times throughout the day. Loss of drivers will lead to overcrowding, with people standing in stairwells and drivers passing people up at stops. People will be late for work. Low-income people often work at jobs where they are not given much slack about when they can arrive. Fare strike advocates say that these cuts in service and hikes in the fare are an attack on the poor, a regressive tax on those least able to pay. More crowding and more rider complaints will also add to the stress of the driver's job.

On the morning of September 1st, the fare strike groups concentrated most of their people at about eight major nodes in the Muni bus network, with banners, strike placards, bullhorns and leaflets. About half of these nodes were on the Mission-Van Ness corridor. Two of these sites were 16th and Mission and 24th and Mission in the Mission District's "main street" retail center — the heart of San Francisco's Latino community. With over 85,000 rides on a typical weekday, Mission-Van Ness is one of the world's busiest bus operations. During the last two weeks of organizing, the day laborers had gotten involved in the fare strike campaign and had taken over the tabling and leafleting on Mission Street and other areas in the city with large numbers of Spanish-speaking immigrants. Support for the fare strike was particularly strong in the Mission District.

Muni targeted the Mission District for a heavy show of force on September 1st. When I got to 16th and Mission at 8AM, there

were about 20 cops, virtually the entire Muni fare inspector force, and a squad of Muni "security assistants" — temporarily employed young people, mainly African-American, outfitted in bright green vests. Paunchy middle-aged Muni bosses had gotten out of their offices and were overseeing the operation. Gerardo, one of the day laborers, told me he had coaxed several crowds of passengers to get on buses for free before the cops arrived.

In recent years Muni has had a practice and policy of permitting pass and transfer holders to enter the buses through the rear doors. However, in the last couple days before the fare strike, Muni applied stickers with a large red "Stop" sign to the back doors, with instructions to use the front door. This will have the effect of slowing down bus service. The main job of the security assistants was to herd passengers away from the rear doors. This led to an incident at 16th and Mission where a female security assistant illegally grabbed a man by his pants as he was entering through the rear door, leading to a physical altercation.

Fare strike advocates distributed about 8,000 leaflets with the demands of the fare strike but in the shape and graphic style of a Muni bus transfer, and reproduced on the same flimsy newsprint. These transfer-shaped leaflets were very popular with riders. They felt more comfortable with something they could flash to the drivers.

The police claim this is illegal counterfeiting but fare strike advocates claim it is merely a leaflet, and therefore constitutionally protected free speech. At 24th and Mission, Moe, a lawyer with the fare strike team, smiled at the cops and challenged them to issue him a citation for passing out the transfer-shaped leaflets. Moe wants to take this to court. Faced with a lawyer, the police backed down. Eventually a Muni fare inspector wrote Moe a citation.

Deploying heavy security where fare strike groups were visibly concentrated was intended to intimidate both drivers and

riders from participating in the fare strike. Meanwhile, small teams of fare strike activists were surfing the bus lines in various neighborhoods. They'd get off at a busy stop and then lead by example, bringing on groups of people to ride for free with them. Their hope is that people will get comfortable with the idea and then do it on their own.

The corporate media parroted the Muni management party line in downplaying the fare strike. The S.F. Chronicle claimed they did a "random check" on a number of lines and found "only a handful" of fare strike participants. On a transit system that handles over 700,000 rides every weekday, a handful in a small sample translates into a significant number of people. The Corporate Free Ride With nearly 50 million square feet of office space compacted into San Francisco's city center, the structure and employment pattern of San Francisco is very downtown-centered. In the early '70s, when the BART regional metro was being built, San Francisco changed its downtown zoning to discourage parking. Allowing scarce downtown space for lower-value parking structures would take away space from highly profitable office and retail uses. The vast capital value of downtown as a corporate headquarters and financial center and major retail center depends heavily on Muni — to deposit shoppers at downtown stores and carry the thousands of employees to their jobs. About two-thirds of the people who reach downtown on a given weekday arrive by public transit. But downtown building owners and corporations pay nothing special for this service which is essential to their profit making. Corporations are externalization machines — they systematically work to shift their costs onto others. In this case, they work to shift the cost of the public transit service onto the riders and the government.

In 1994 a broad-based coalition of community groups, working with liberal Supervisor Sue Bierman, shook up this status quo when they got Proposition O on the ballot. Prop O would

as the signup for the reduced-service schedules has apparently gone off without disruption.

Attitudes of drivers during the fare strike varied. Some drivers were playing by the Muni management game plan, refusing to move the bus if people didn't pay. But this was a minority. As some Muni drivers told us, the union contract only requires the drivers to tell people what the fare is. In one incident, when an activist announced he was on fare strike, the driver said "The fare is $1.50. You know the rules." She then stared straight ahead, smiling as he moved into the bus without paying. In another incident, when a group of people got on the bus with money in their hands, ready to pay, the driver told them "Why pay? Today is the fare strike."

The fare strike requires intensive work by dozens of activists. It's not clear how long they can keep this up. Muni management is hoping to ride out the storm. What about the longer run? If the consciousness-raising and momentum of the fare strike campaign were used to build a mass riders' organization controlled by its members — a democratic Muni riders' union — the struggle could be continued by other means after the fare strike (marches, jamming city meetings, etc). At least a militant minority of working class Muni riders would have an organizational vehicle through which to self-manage their on-going struggle with Muni management, city leaders, and the corporate elite. The pressure could be maintained. But thus far there has been no effort towards the building of a member-controlled riders' union.

Francisco. For the first several months, the Social Strike group focused its efforts on outreach to the drivers.

The great majority of Muni drivers are workers of color. The 2000-member drivers' union, Transport Workers Union Local 250A, includes the largest group of unionized African-American workers in San Francisco. The Social Strike group were able to hook up with the Drivers Action Committee (DAC) — a group of about 40 dissident members of Local 250A. Several African-American bus drivers from DAC attended townhall meetings called by Social Strike to help further a driver/rider alliance.

In late April, DAC were able to get a Local 250A union meeting to endorse a mass refusal to cooperate with the next Muni general signup. In a general signup, drivers put in their preferences for which run they want. If the drivers refused to cooperate with the signup, it would not be possible for Muni to implement its proposed service cuts.

On June 17th, Bari McGruder and Victor Grayson, two African-American bus drivers who are active with DAC, were quoted in the S.F. Examiner to the effect that the leadership of TWU Local 250A are "in bed with management." They were quoted as calling for a one-day walkout. Grayson — a former Black Panther Party member in his 50s — says that his stance is motivated by "solidarity with the riders." He views the people who ride his bus as "just ordinary working people like me." He sees the current Muni struggle as part of a larger conflict with the "corporate rich."

The Examiner quotes provided the executive board of Local 250A with a pretext to clamp down against the dissidents in the union. McGruder and Grayson were brought up on charges by the executive board, fined $1,500 each, and suspended from the union for three years. This action threw the dissidents in the union on the defensive. It appears that the union's April call for non-cooperation with the general signup wasn't enforced,

have taken the first steps to set up a downtown transit assessment district, to force the downtown building owners to pay for Muni operations. However, Prop O was defeated at the polls through a massive disinformation campaign, financed by the Shorenstein Company — the largest office building owner in downtown — and the Building Owners and Managers Association.

Muni's structural deficit first became evident in the mid-'90s when Muni suffered through five years with 20 percent of the driver and mechanic positions left vacant. This generated problems of overcrowding and unreliability. To stave off another move to tax the downtown elite for Muni, the business elite moved pro-actively to impose their own solution to the structural deficit. The Chamber of Commerce began floating the idea of taking control of Muni away from the Board of Supervisors (the city council) and handing it over to an "independent" agency. The aim was to free the coordinator class cadres — Muni managers and professional staff — to solve the deficit by attacking the unions and forcing the riders to pay more. In 1998, SPUR (a business-oriented think tank) worked out a specific proposal but had a hard time gaining much acceptance for it.

The very broad-based ridership of Muni, combined with San Francisco's ongoing gentrification, mean that there is a substantial minority of professional and business people who ride Muni. In 1998 a group of white professionals used the deteriorated condition of transit service to build a riders organization, called Rescue Muni. The politics of the all-white leadership of this organization range from mainstream liberal to neo-liberal. Rescue Muni has supported both of the Muni fare hikes in 2003 2005.

Rescue Muni provided a mass base for SPUR's plan for "fixing" Muni, which was put on the ballot in 1998 as Proposition E. Prop E provided no new funding for Muni, but created the sort of independent agency the downtown elite were look-

ing for, called the Municipal Transportation Agency (MTA). With the local labor movement and political left asleep at the switch, Prop E was approved with little public debate. Under Prop E, the Supervisors have no line-item control over Muni and its budget. The MTA Board — politically connected lay people appointed by the Mayor — are in charge. Without their own source of information, they are putty in the hands of the Muni managerial staff.

Management empire building has been one result of Prop E. While cooking up ambitious expansion plans, much of the professional staff were moved out of rent-free, city-owned office space into expensive digs on Market Street, paying a rent of $53 a square foot. For a few years during the dot-com boom, Muni's structural deficit was hidden, as the city was rolling in cash. Even after the financial crunch re-appeared with the 2001 recession, top management continued to give substantial bonuses to scores of professionals and managers making over $100,000 a year. This bloated coordinator hierarchy at Muni is a source of inefficiency. One of my neighbors, a former operator who now works as a street supervisor, believes the highly paid top brass aren't even needed. "All we need to run the system," he tells me, "are the drivers, maintenance people, and" street supervisors like himself.

This year's struggle on Muni began in February with Muni management announcing another projected deficit. To fill the hole in the budget, the initial management proposal was a huge attack on the riders — a $1.75 fare, another hike to the $45 monthly pass, and charges for transfers. Tenant organizers employed by local non-profits initiated a Coalition for Transit Justice to fight back. With endorsements from over 35 community groups, the Coalition mobilized people to come out to MTA Board hearings to protest the proposed fare hikes and service cuts.

The protests did gain some concessions. Muni management backed off on their proposals for a hike in the monthly pass

and charges for transfers, and reduced the proposed fare hike to $1.50. On the other hand, it's possible that the more extreme management proposals were there to give them room for making concessions. Moreover, the MTA Board's plan includes widespread cuts in service on many bus lines. The Coalition's focus then shifted to the Board of Supervisors, to get the Supervisors to overrule the proposed fare hike, service cuts and layoffs. To do this, they'd need eight votes to reject the entire MTA budget. One of the Coalition's groups, Families in SROs — a group of Asian women and Latinas who live in residence hotels with their kids — trooped to city hall en masse to lobby the Supervisors in groups. In July, however, the Supervisors voted 8 to 3 to endorse the Muni management proposals for a fare hike, service cuts and layoffs.

This left Muni riders with no recourse but collective direct action. The proposal for a fare strike was initiated by groups of anti-capitalist radicals back in March. The first of these groups to come together was Muni Social Strike (www.socialstrike.net), initiated by two anarchist groups. Some time later, another group came together under the name Muni Fare Strike (www.munifarestrike.net). Despite personal and political differences, the two groups were able to cooperate and coordinate their efforts during the last weeks leading up to the onset of the fare strike on September 1st.

In the late '70s transit workers in Turin, Italy, carried out a type of on-the-job strike. The transit workers had their own issues but there were also popular demands for a lower transit fare. The workers continued to run the vehicles while refusing to collect fares, thus building solidarity with the riders. At the time, British libertarian Marxist writer Adam Cornford coined the phrase "social strike" to refer to this type of worker action where the benefit of their work is still provided to the consumer. The young anarchists who formed Muni Social Strike wanted to encourage this type of worker/rider alliance in San