



Women in Transit

Organizing for social justice in our communities



A Project of the Bus Riders Union



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*Power to the Sisters,
and therefore to the Class!*



Table of Contents

Introduction

Objectives	8
Practice and Theory	9
Unity and Struggle	11
Building a Movement	18

Defend & Expand Public Services

Transit is a Public Service	19
Working Class Women Need Public Transit	23
Attacks on the Rights of Working Class Women	24
Conclusion	37

End Transit Racism

Systemic Racism in Canada	39
What is Transit Racism?	41
Transit Racism Attacks Women	42
Conclusion	55

Public Health and Environmental Justice

Public Health & Environmental Justice	58
Understanding Health	58
Environmental Justice	61
Attacks on the Health of Working Class Women	62
Conclusion	79

Recommendations

Our Vision	81
Guiding Principles for Change	82
Specific Recommendations	86
Conclusion	90

Appendix

Appendix One: Workshop and Focus Group Summaries	96
Appendix Two: Testimonials	102
Appendix Three: Recommended Reading	127
Appendix Four: WIT Biographies	129

Women in Transit:

Organizing for social justice in our communities

The Women in Transit (WIT) project is a Participatory Action Research (PAR) initiative that grew out of the existing organizing work of the Bus Riders Union (BRU). The WIT project team developed over eight months, from January to August 2004. Six transit dependent women make up the WIT team: Heather Jones, Kirat Kaur, Jennifer Efting, Zailda Chan, Martha Roberts and Beth Grayer.

Objectives

Our goals in the WIT project are manifold. First, the WIT project is a challenge to TransLink as we expose the impacts of high fares and service withdrawals on the lives of working class women. Public transit is a women's equality issue. We highlight women's experiences and hold TransLink publicly accountable for the hardships that working class women face as a result of their decisions. The expertise gained through the WIT project positions the BRU to impact planning and operation of the current public transit system in favour of the public transit needs and vision of transit dependent women. Bus riders are the true transit experts, as we experience the indignities of inadequate service on an everyday basis. As we expose women's struggles in the transit system, we also expose women's unique visions for public transit. Through understanding the problems in our transit system, we gain a positive vision: a transit system built around the needs of working class communities.

Secondly, the WIT project poses a

challenge to the Bus Riders Union to meaningfully integrate a feminist analysis into every facet of our work. While women have been the leadership of the BRU since the beginning, the WIT project was our first initiative to look at the specific experiences of working class women on the bus, and our first step towards envisioning a transit system that puts working class women at the centre of planning and budget allocations. Our feminist analysis begins from the understanding that women are the super-exploited majority. The oppression of women is based in our exploitation within capitalism; we also experience sexist ideologies, violence, and harassment from rich and working class men that go beyond any economic imperative. Women experience unique oppression under the current capitalist system; our knowledge gives us the ability to struggle most effectively for change. Women are also the majority of bus riders in our region. It is crucial that the BRU builds leadership from women, especially women of colour and Aboriginal women, within the organization as a whole.

The WIT project is not just a research initiative. The WIT project trains women organizers from working class communities to struggle against regional neoliberal interests to assert their right to mobility and public transit. We develop our feminist theory and leadership to strengthen our ability to organize the unorganized. By collectively sharing experiences, women see that their individual experiences are shared by hundreds of women in the GVRD. We speak directly with



working class women about their experiences and aim to organize them into a movement that works to win short-term concrete gains while envisioning a long-term struggle to win genuine health and justice for working class communities.

Thirdly, the WIT project is a challenge to the male-dominated Left. From the social democrats in the NDP to radical communist revolutionaries, men overwhelmingly lead the Left in the GVRD. While we consider our organization a part of the Left community, we also challenge our community to position anti-sexist, anti-patriarchal and anti-racist organizing as fundamental to expanding the rights of the working class. When we challenge the violation of the rights of women and people of colour, we are engaging in class struggle. In turn, WIT challenges the mainstream women's movement to struggle for the expansion of the rights of the working class, as the liberation of women is impossible without an end to the exploitation of the working class.

Practice and Theory

Direct Contact Organizing

The WIT team talks with hundreds of working class women in our on-the-bus organizing, workshops, focus groups and community meetings. In the past 7 months we have held women-only workshops with high school students, single mothers, women on welfare, university students, and recent immigrants. We document the transit experiences that women shared in workshop brainstorming and focus group discussions. We also speak to women individually on the bus, in email exchanges and over the telephone.

We collect women's experiences through the "Women's Public Transit Rights Violation Form" (also referred to as the 'testimonial form') in the on-the-bus organizing, at workshops and at focus groups. The Violation form allows transit dependent women to document their experiences on paper in their own words. We quote women's

Participatory Action Research (PAR)

Oppressed people, primarily in the Third World, designed Participatory Action Research (PAR) to counter First World hegemony and the stealing of community-based knowledge for projects that ultimately exacerbate colonialism and the impacts of capitalism. It is a method of research that draws on the capabilities of oppressed people to lead research in their own communities. PAR builds community power with the goal of furthering the struggle for social and economic justice.

Through PAR, the WIT team works within our own transit dependent community to learn the impacts of poor transit on the lives of transit dependent women. We do this community-based research with the intention of changing the conditions of our lives for the better through collective action and strategizing.

PAR encourages a dialectical relationship between theory (literature review) and practice (direct-contact organizing). This relationship between theory and practice is called praxis. Our study of theoretical literature enriches our ability to engage in direct-contact organizing. In turn, our direct-contact organizing deepens our theoretical understanding.



direct experiences throughout this document, and all WIT testimonials are included in the Appendix for easy reference. Through the Violation form women share their experiences with the BRU and other bus riders to increase our grassroots understanding of women in transit. The Violation form allows women to see that their individual experiences with transit are also experienced by hundreds of other women in the region. The Violation Report Form is also a way for women to express their anger and resist against TransLink. Our experiences as working class women are so often made invisible that it is an act of resistance to document injustice and share our stories with one another and with TransLink.

Literature Review

In addition to this community-based research, the WIT project team also engages in group study of existing literature on the effects of neoliberalism on working class women and communities of colour. We study existing literature on public transit, community health, imperialism and the women's movement. The documents we collectively studied are listed in a 'recommended reading' appendix for reference.

As a team, we build our understanding of public services by connecting the theory articles we read collectively to the practice of talking



Yuly Chan (a member of the 'On The Bus Crew') talking to a woman on the bus

directly to working class women in the GVRD about the challenges they face because of poor bus service and high fares.

Unity and Struggle

The Bus Riders Union is a grassroots organization struggling to expand the social and economic rights of bus riders. We have been organizing in the Vancouver region since 2001, and now have over 700 members with an average of ten to twenty new members joining every week. The BRU represents the mass transit and public health needs of the transit dependent; we fight to put the

workshops & focus groups were hosted at:

Van Tech High school, the Port Coquitlam Women's Centre, the SFU Women's Centre, the Kiwassa Community Centre, the YWCA Housing Coop, YWCA Women-In-Focus Job Training Program, the Downtown Eastside Women's Centre, Multicultural Family Centre (African Women's Saturday Program), and twice by the BRU at the Lore Krill Co-op



needs of transit dependent people, overwhelmingly working class and disproportionately people of colour, at the centre of public policy.

We organize because affordable, reliable, and environmentally sound mass transit is a human right. Human and environmental needs must be the leading social, political, and economic priority. We fight to win a massive expansion of the clean-air bus fleet and lower bus fares for all bus

Our understanding builds from our lived experiences, from sharing experiences with one another, & from ongoing group & individual study of theory & history.

riders. We struggle to win short-term gains for our communities within the longer-term struggle for social justice.

The Bus Riders Union is a living experiment in Left movement building; we aim to build a vital multi-racial working class movement led by women. As bus riders unite to win more buses and lower fares, our struggle is not just to win a better transit system in the GVRD; our struggle is to expand the social and economic rights of the most exploited sectors of the working class.

Collective Analysis

The WIT team struggles for unity in our understanding of the forces that oppress and exploit us. Our understanding builds from our lived experiences, from sharing experiences with one another, and from ongoing group and individual study of theory and history. We must identify the root of our exploitation and oppression so we can

effectively strategize and struggle for change.

Imperialism

Why do we include an analysis of imperialism when we are discussing a regional issue like transit? Through our study and our on-the-ground practice, we know that the struggles we face as working class women are rooted in patriarchy, national oppression, and capitalism. Our everyday experiences as working class women, whether we are on the bus, at work or in the home, are shaped by these three intersecting systems of oppression and exploitation. Together, these systems of oppression and exploitation are imperialism. Imperialism is an all-encompassing economic system, which benefits the rich minority, while exploiting every opportunity to extract profit and exert domination over the poor and working class majority the world over (Program Demand Group, 6). As part of the most exploited and oppressed sectors of the working class in our region, transit dependent bus riders bear the brunt of imperialism.

National Oppression and Systemic Racism

National oppression refers to the systemic exploitation of an oppressed nation by a colonizing nation (Program Demand, 11). For the purposes of our project, we focus on the experiences of oppressed nationalities living within Canada. Oppressed nationalities in the GVRD include, but are not limited to, people of Asian (including East Asian, South Asian and South East Asian), African, Middle Eastern, South and Central American descent. These nations and peoples all have unique experiences of forced migration and exploitation;



together we refer to them as ‘people of colour’.

There also exist in Canada internally oppressed nations. Canada is a settler state founded on the theft and appropriation of Indigenous lands and genocide waged against entire peoples. BC in particular is unceded territory with few existing treaties. Aboriginal peoples in BC have survived and continue to resist the wholesale theft of their traditional territories, and the ongoing plunder of land and natural resources. Aboriginal people in BC struggle with modern colonial oppression and exploitation through such legislation as the Indian Act, the reserve system, and the BC Treaties process.

For many, the particular intersection of race and class begins in a racist immigration process that is rooted in the hegemony of the First World over the Third World. As the Third World continues to be forcibly underdeveloped through neoliberal economic policies enforced by the International Monetary Fund/World Bank and the WTO (World Trade Organization), people from the Third World are forced to leave their home countries to survive. This is the forced migration of Third World peoples to the First World. When women arrive in Canada through forced migration they are overwhelmingly transit dependent due to poverty.

Contrary to the popular myth of Canadian ‘multiculturalism’, within Canada oppressed nations and peoples are largely excluded from avenues of economic and social power. Oppressed nations and peoples are also the most exploited and oppressed within the working class. Although their need for a social wage is greatest, they have the least access to public services like health care,

education, and transit.

We know that a disproportionate number of poor and working class people in the GVRD are people of colour and Aboriginal people. Therefore, these communities are also disproportionately represented on the bus. By adopting a ‘colour blind’ approach to transit planning TransLink contributes to national oppression and systemic racism in our communities.

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Patriarchy

Patriarchy refers to the subjugation, objectification and domination of women by men. In the WIT team, we conclude, “the subjugation of women is based on the exploitation of women” (Program Demand, p.16). In other words, the rich (who are majority male) benefit materially from our daily struggles. Our productive and reproductive labour provides the surplus value necessary to sustain imperialism.

Reproductive labour is the work that creates and maintains workers. Childbearing, childcare, eldercare, teaching, cooking, cleaning, laundry and grocery shopping are all examples of reproductive labour. It is almost always women who are responsible for this work, which is overwhelmingly unpaid. Most reproductive labour is done privately in the home, so it is invisible in



the economy. If women were not super-exploited, the entire economy would fail.

Despite the critical position of women in our society TransLink still does not consider the specific needs of transit dependent women in their planning and budget priorities. Women are the majority of bus riders, and are over-represented among the transit dependent. By not integrating a gender analysis into transit resource allocation,

The bus system allows the most exploited sectors of the working class limited access to work, social services, family and friends without giving us full access to the region.

TransLink contributes to the oppression and exploitation of working class women.

Capitalism

Capitalism is the mode of production by which profit is extracted from the working class by the bourgeoisie through wage labour (Veltmeyer). Under capitalism, only a few people own the factories, the machines, the land and the natural resources (like fish and timber) that make up the means of production. Capitalism requires a few professionals to manage the state and accumulated resources on behalf of the rich. The rest of us are working class; we have nothing to sell but our labour. While we sell our labour to the rich the things we produce and the services we provide are worth much more than the wages we are paid. The working class does the work yet we rarely reap the benefits. Instead, the owners of the factories, land, and resources get rich off of our work.

Patriarchy and national oppression intersect with capitalist exploitation to ensure that the working class is majority women and disproportionately people of colour. Women and people of colour are the most exploited within the working class.

The hardships lived by working class communities are rooted in the exploitation of our labour, but the impacts go far beyond the factory/office/restaurant doors. Our class position affects every aspect of our lives, including our environment and our access to social services.

Similarly, the capitalist system uses ideology to reinforce the class system. Individualism enforces the notion of each to her/himself; we reap what we sow and we earn what we deserve. Neoliberalism promotes the idea that the market can sustain our communities and provide for our needs. Ideology props up the profit-driven consumer society and justifies the ongoing oppression and exploitation of the working class.

As the search intensifies for new ways to extract profit from the poor and working class of the world capitalism shifts ideologies and economics. During the post-Depression era, the expansion of the welfare state created a level of social and economic stability that was favourable to the pursuit of profit for large corporations and promoted the ideal of the ‘family wage’ and the ‘social wage’. However, starting in the 1970s, economic stagnation and a concurrent drive for increased profits led to a new economic and social order termed neoliberalism.

Neoliberalism dismantles the welfare state through privatization of public services and state-run corporations, the liberalization of trade, and



the deregulation of environmental and labour standards (Veltmeyer & Petras).

The simple fact remains that as a whole the wage labour system of capitalism cannot provide us with adequate resources to survive. Social services are a necessary 'social wage' to ensure working class people survive to work another day on sub-standard wages. Public transit is part of this 'social wage'. The bus system allows the most exploited sectors of the working class limited access to work, social services, family and friends without giving us full access to the region.

Neoliberalism in BC

Throughout BC, women and our communities have been facing intensifying neoliberalism for decades. The election of the Liberal Party in 2001 followed eight years of a provincial government led by the New Democratic Party (NDP). Despite their claim to being the social democratic 'people's party', the NDP attacked poor and working class people by cutting welfare, privatizing public services, and prioritizing corporate profit before human need as did governments before them. Neoliberal economics are devastating to women, regardless of the party that enacts them.

Under the current Liberal government neoliberalism has been substantially accelerated. Over the past three and a half years the Liberals have undermined every aspect of social welfare. The list of cuts and human rights violations is long, and we have selected a few examples to illustrate the anti-woman nature of the Liberal party and neoliberal economics.

The Liberals have increased the barriers to accessing welfare and implemented new require-

ments that single mothers must return to work after their child turns three. At the same time, funding for childcare subsidies has been reduced by 26 million dollars (BC CEDAW). Legal aid has been cut by 38%, resulting in the closure of 60 legal aid offices across BC. Post-secondary tuition has been deregulated, resulting in tuition increasing anywhere from twenty-two to three hundred percent (BC CEDAW). Funding to women's

Under the current Liberal government neoliberalism has been substantially accelerated . . . The impacts of neoliberalism on working class women in BC have been devastating.

centres has been eliminated, and the Ministry for Women's Equality has been closed. Minimum wage has been lowered to \$6 an hour, under the



HEU worker walking the picket line at St. Paul's Hospital in May 2004



guise of implementing a 'training wage' for 'new workers' (BC CEDAW).

Privatization in the form of contracting out has resulted in massive job losses in the public health care sector, and it is women who bear the brunt of these cuts. The Liberals have torn up the contracts for 160,000 workers. 83% of health care jobs lost were women's and 1/3 of all jobs lost were by immigrants and people of colour (BC CEDAW). Public sector unions broke historic ground in demanding pay equity for women employed by the government. These good paying jobs are being lost to contractors who pay low wages and offer no benefits or job security. The membership of the Hospital Employees Union, for example, is 87% women and majority women of

colour.

The impacts of neoliberalism on working class women in BC and the Lower Mainland have been devastating. The further privatization of public transit in the Lower Mainland will only serve to compound the increased economic and social hardships forced onto low-income and marginalized women by the recent cuts to social programs and social assistance. As women lose jobs, unemployment soars and welfare and other social services are impossible to access. Our health and social well being are compromised because of the lack of a good public transit system. We need an affordable transit system now more than ever.

Pat Jacobsen: The Failure of Liberal Feminism



TransLink CEO Pat Jacobsen is celebrated in some circles as a triumph of liberal feminism because she is among the few women who have reached positions of power among the business elite (Influential Women). She is the CEO of a major public institution yet holds the interests of private business to be paramount. She uses her power in the business and transit planning to further corporate interests, which exacerbates the economic and social marginalization of working class women.

Jacobsen was instrumental in pushing through the Richmond-Airport-Vancouver line, which is a privatization project that will divert millions of dollars away from the bus system.

Jacobsen has a long history of involvement in privatization schemes. She was a speaker at the 2002 conference of the Canadian Council for Public Private Partnerships. As transportation minister in Ontario she instituted a regressive taxation scheme in the form of highway tolls on the Highway 407 (Littlemore). Highway 407 was a groundbreaking privatized highway that dislocated Ontario communities and made travel many times more difficult.

We highlight Pat Jacobsen for two reasons. First, because her example exposes the failure of liberal feminism to ensure the emancipation of women. The participation of a few token women in transit planning does not ensure that the transit system meets the needs of working class women in the region. The advancement of a few bourgeois women is actually done at the expense of the majority of working class and marginalized women. Second, as TransLink CEO Pat Jacobsen has continued the legacy of former TransLink CEO Ken Dobell by prioritizing ultra-expensive SkyTrain expansion at the expense of the bus system. She embodies a contradiction within the transit system. While she is a public servant and CEO of a public transit system, she works in the interests of private corporations.



TransLink

The TransLink board runs the public transit system in the GVRD; this board determines funding priorities, policy development, and conducts long-term planning. Twelve mayors and city councilors from across Greater Vancouver comprise the TransLink board. The Greater Vancouver Regional District board appoints TransLink board members for a one-year term (Government of BC, Province). The current TransLink board is comprised of nine white men, two white women, and one man of colour. In comparison, bus riders are disproportionately people of colour, Aboriginal people, and women. The majority of the current TransLink board adheres to the ideologies of capitalism, as is reflected in their actions on the board.

We see TransLink as a local manifestation of imperialism. Cuts to transit services, fee increases, and privatization of the transit service increase the divisions between the working class and the rich. TransLink follows the global trend of neoliberalism as they destroy our public transit system, selling it to private corporations through privatization schemes like public-private-partnerships (PPP). The TransLink board (with ongoing encouragement from TransLink staff) has an established pattern of cutting bus service and raising fares while pouring billions of dollars into privatization initiatives like the Richmond-Airport-Vancouver (RAV) Project. By making decisions that do not consider and redress racial, gender and class inequities in the transit system, TransLink exacerbates these divisions and reinforces patriarchy, national oppression and class exploitation in the GVRD.

Transit dependent Women

Transit dependent women are those bus riders who do not have any other transportation option because they do not have access to a car. The transit dependent are majority poor people. Women, people of colour, and Aboriginal people are all disproportionately represented among the transit dependent precisely because they are the

Women in the GVRD are twenty percent more likely than men to depend on the bus as their mode of transportation to work.

most exploited and oppressed sectors of the working class and do not have enough money to buy a car.

Women are disproportionately transit dependent within communities of colour and Aboriginal communities as well. Women in the GVRD are twenty percent more likely than men to depend on the bus as their mode of transportation to work (Stats Canada, Community Profiles). In addition, women are twice as likely to depend on someone else to give them a ride to work, rather than drive themselves (Stats Canada, Community Profiles). Women who cannot drive because of age or disability are overwhelmingly transit dependent. Women who are older and women who are disabled are also more likely to be poor (Barile).

Working class women depend on social services like transit to negotiate complicated lives as workers, mothers, caregivers, family, friends and community members. Even in 2004 the average woman still makes 61 cents for every dollar that a man makes, and we are far more likely hold part



time and temporary employment (Centre for Social Justice, Gender). Since 1990 our real wages have fallen. Women in the GVRD are falling deeper into poverty as welfare is cut, employment insurance is increasingly impossible to access, and

Through fighting to win short-term gains for our community, we strengthen our selves and our communities for long-term victories: for justice & for genuine liberation.

unemployment levels soar at close to ten percent (Procaccini). Systemic racism exacerbates these gender inequities. Twenty percent of women in Canada live in poverty, but when we break it down it is clear that women of colour and Aboriginal women struggle with poverty to a much higher degree than white women. Thirty-seven percent of women of colour and forty-three percent of Aboriginal women live in poverty (Centre for Social Justice, Gender).

The average Canadian household spends \$9,078 per year on transportation costs; this is more than expenditures on recreation, health care, education and clothing combined (Stats Can, Household Expenditures). The amount spent on transportation is more than the average Canadian household spends on food (Stats Can, Household Expenditures). Due to the burden of reproductive labour, women are overwhelmingly responsible for balancing household budgets and juggling the necessities of life. Clearly, transit is an important need for working class women.

Building a Movement

As working class women, women of colour and Aboriginal women struggle for our right to public services we struggle against the local manifestations of imperialism. Through our daily struggles to put our needs and vision at the centre of regional public policy and planning, we demand our right to economic and social justice for all. Through fighting to win short-term gains for our community, we strengthen our selves and our communities for long-term victories: for justice and for genuine liberation.

This document is a reflection of our collective analysis and a vision of one concrete strategy in the struggle for our collective rights. In the collective writing and editing of this document, we worked to synthesize the many concrete and intangible lessons that we learned over the course of working together on the Women in Transit Project. We put this writing forward as a resource on the struggles that working class women live through every day. We also attempt to advance a positive vision of what transit could be if transit dependent women were at the centre of public policy.



Zail'a speaking at Youth of Colour in Consultation Against Systemic Racism rally



The first section of the document, “Defend and Expand Public Services” examines the role of public services in the lives of working class women as well as the economic forces working to destroy public services and enact privatization in transit. The second section, “End Transit Racism” explains how systemic racism, interpersonal racism and national oppression are manifested in the transit system. The third section, “Public Health & Environmental Justice Now” details the implications of inadequate public transit on the health and environment of women and our communities. After outlining these numerous ways that patriarchy, national oppression and class exploitation are manifested and exacerbated in the transit system, the document concludes with concrete recommendations for change.

We plan to continue the process of educating, organizing and mobilizing to build a movement for the true emancipation of working class women, and thus for social and economic justice for all oppressed people. By talking together, sharing experiences, clarifying the forces that oppose us, and struggling for change we are confident that we can achieve a transit system that contributes to social and economic equality for transit dependent women.



Members of the On-The-Bus crew preparing to fight the fare increase.

