

End Transit Racism

The Bus Riders Union knows from our on-the-ground organizing that working class communities of colour and Aboriginal communities are among the most exploited and oppressed groups in the Lower Mainland, and are

Racism is experienced not just in interpersonal relations, but is more deeply entrenched in the structures, policies and practices of the nation-state and of capital.

among the worst served by public transit. We recognize the existence of systemic and interpersonal racism in Canada. Therefore we insist that TransLink cannot be colour-blind in its provision of a public transit service. The public provision of transit services must include an analysis of systemic racism, and must address the needs of working class communities of colour and Aboriginal communities, particularly the needs of women of colour and Aboriginal women, in the transit planning process.

Systemic Racism in Canada

Canada is a systemically racist society. People of colour and Aboriginal people experience systemic racism daily, from the education system to the legal system to the health care system to public services and beyond. This means that racism is experienced not just in interpersonal relations, but is more deeply entrenched in the structures, policies and practices of the nation-state and of capital.

Colonization

Canada's racist history begins from its very inception as a colonial settler state. This means the exploitation and oppression of the indigenous peoples of this land, through appropriation and theft of land, forcing local indigenous communities onto reserves, and a genocidal residential school system. This oppression and exploitation continues today in the continued use of the Indian Act and the Treaty Process. This plays out in the lives of

The Indian Act

The Indian Act is legislation that was first devised in 1876 by Parliament (not by Aboriginal people), and has been updated several times. It is based on earlier legislation such as the 1858 Civilization of Indian Tribes Act whose main goal was the assimilation of Aboriginal people. Through the Indian Act, the Canadian government used treaties with Aboriginal leaders to expropriate the land, while allotting minor portions of it to the Aboriginal populations as reserves. However, much of BC remains unceded.

The Indian Act denied Aboriginal people the right to vote, prohibited them from purchasing land, outlawed spiritual ceremonies, forced their relocation and segregation on reserves, restricted their civil and political rights, and expropriated their land. Aboriginal women who married outside their 'race' would lose their position as Status Indian (until 1985), while Aboriginal men could maintain their status and gain status for their non-Aboriginal wife. While some of these restrictions have now been lifted, the Canadian government continues to use the Indian Act to keep Aboriginal people from struggling for self-determination.



both urban and reserve Aboriginal women.

Immigration Process

Since the inception of Canada as a colonial settler state, the nation has actively sought to lure migrants here to the (junior) 'land of milk and honey' in order to exploit them in the construction of the capitalist nation state. In the late 1800s and early 1900s, for example, Chinese labourers were imported to build the railroads for the Canadian Pacific Railway company in very exploitative conditions, as part of opening up the West of the continent for the colonial nation-building project that would benefit the European settlers. This trend of manipulating the migration of peoples in order to serve the needs of capital continues today.

Today's migrants are forced from their homelands due to difficult and repressive conditions created and maintained by the countries of the North, propelled by the hope for a 'better life'. They are selectively chosen by an

immigration system that calculates their value in terms of how well they can contribute to the perpetuation of a Canadian capitalist state. The immigration system imposes an ideology on those who are selected, making them feel like the 'lucky ones' and indebted to the state; this keeps them economically useful as workers and uncomplaining about the conditions they face when they arrive here. Immigrant women are made to feel grateful for being allowed into the country, and thus made to feel no sense of entitlement to public services such as health care, pension and transit.

Until the 1900s, immigrants came from European countries, the United States and Asia. But from 1900 until the Second World War, overtly racist policies became more exclusionary, ensuring that exclusively Europeans were admitted into Canada (Hiebert). Canada placed particular emphasis on entrepreneurial and investor immigrants, new categories made to attract

The Komagata Maru



The case of the Komagata Maru is an example of the ways in which Canada has, at several times in its history, systematically excluded communities of colour. In 1914, this Japanese ship carrying 376 Punjabi South Asians (only two were women and four were children) hoping to find work in Canada was docked at Vancouver Harbour for two months. After a long journey from India, the men and women were detained in the ship and barred from entry onto Canadian soil. After eight long weeks of hardship where they had limited access to food and other necessities and were forced to endure cramped and unpleasant conditions on the ship, the ship was finally forced to return and its passengers embarked on yet another arduous journey back to India. Legislation such as the Continuous Journey Provision of the Immigration Acts of 1908 and 1910 was used to justify the exclusion of the passengers of the Komagata Maru.



immigrants with business experience and capital to invest (Hiebert). The ‘changes’ in immigration policy in the 1900s were really moneymaking ventures designed to extract as much profit as possible from the backs of immigrant workers while denying them the benefits of citizenship and at times barring them from entry, as in the cases of the Chinese Immigration (Exclusion) Act of 1923 to 1947 and the Komagata Maru incident in 1914. Through the long history of overt racism against immigrants of colour, the Canadian government

status has become a part of the immigrant condition for migrants of colour.

The systemic racism only begins at the level of immigration policies; systemic racism continues to manifest itself in the invisibility of the cheap labour of immigrant communities and the unpaid reproductive labour of women.

What is Transit Racism?

While recent statistics indicate that residents of Vancouver are 36.9% people of colour and 2% Aboriginal people (Stats Can, Community Profiles), the Bus Riders Union knows from our experiences of organizing on the bus that people of colour and Aboriginal people are over-represented as bus riders, anywhere from 60 to 90% depending on the route. When TransLink makes decisions that prioritize corporate interests over those of bus riders, such as spending \$1.35 billion on a Richmond-Airport-Vancouver SkyTrain mega-project while planning to reduce service on all North-South bus routes, many of which serve predominantly working class communities of colour, they violate the right to mobility of a group that is largely Aboriginal and people of colour. When working class communities of colour and Aboriginal communities end up bearing the brunt of the right to mobility for the rich, yet have their own right to mobility violated, and when they are left with inadequate transit service so that the rich can profit off expensive and unnecessary transit projects, this is transit racism.

Transit racism is rampant in the transit system, especially in TransLink planning and policy decisions. People of colour and Aboriginal

Systemic racism continues to manifest itself in the invisibility of the cheap labour of immigrant communities and the unpaid reproductive labour of women.

could make immigrants of colour earn their entrance into Canada by putting their lifetime and generations of savings into the receding Canadian economy.

Then and now, immigrants are socialized to be thankful for the pressures of migration brought on by the illusion of opportunities – illusions ultimately shattered by everyday and generational experiences of unemployment, low wages, harsh working and living conditions, and intense segregation. Middle-class immigrants with money in their countries of origin bring in money to be able to survive economically while their families are torn between different sides of the world. Those who sold everything to come here and ‘invest’ soon become working class immigrants trying to earn their ‘citizenship’. Downward mobility in terms of class and social



people, particularly women, are disproportionately represented in the working class. A systemically racist transit system exacerbates the inequality of Aboriginal women and women of colour. A 1995 Centre for Social Justice (CSJ) fact sheet reported that people of colour earn on average 15% below the national average, even though they tend to have higher levels of education (Growing Gap). The CSJ reports that more than 1 in 3 people of colour live in poverty, compared to 1 in 5 of the rest of the Canadian population, and the gap is greatest for people of colour born in Canada (Growing Gap). Many people of colour and Aboriginal people in the Lower Mainland are forced to be transit dependent because they cannot afford a car or because their family shares a car, and they need to rely on public transit to provide for their needs. When the public transit system does not get them where they need to go, people of colour and Aboriginal people are negatively impacted and are

prevented from participating meaningfully in their communities.



Yang listening to speakers at the Youth in Consultation Against Systemic Racism Rally

Transit Racism Attacks Women

Working class women of colour and Aboriginal women are particularly impacted by transit racism because of the intersecting forces of race, class and gender in their lives. Transit

Many people of colour and Aboriginal people in the Lower Mainland are forced to be transit dependent because they cannot afford a car or because their family shares a car.

racism does not take into account the needs of transit dependent women of colour and Aboriginal women, and this has deep implications for their lives.

Aboriginal Women

An inadequate transit system serves to exacerbate the effects of historical conditions of colonization and continued exploitation on the lives of Aboriginal women.

Reserves

Poor public transit service to and from the reserves in the Lower Mainland has serious repercussions for the health and well being of Aboriginal women. Inadequate conditions on the reserve mean that Aboriginal women lack access to nutritious food, quality education, adequate housing, services, and other essential needs. One WIT organizer recalled a visit to a reservation where the only source of food was a Macs



convenience store.

Aboriginal women are forced to rely on public transit to access off-reserve services. However, the current public transit system does not serve this need. For instance, the closest bus stop to the Musqueam reserve in Vancouver (for the #41 bus) is at the corner of South West Marine Drive and Camosun, forcing women to walk at

For Aboriginal women living on Lower Mainland reserves, then, poor public transit service keeps them isolated and prevents them from accessing essential services that they need.

least 15 minutes from the bus stop to get to the reserve itself. Moreover, reserves are not recognized as valid landmarks when trying to do a trip plan on TransLink's website. TransLink customer service operators are often not helpful in providing information about transit access to reserves in the Lower Mainland. One WIT organizer who telephoned the TransLink customer information service phone line to find out how to get to the Musqueam reserve was told that the operator "[doesn't] know the area well" and was not provided with the information by TransLink on how to access reserves by transit. One young Aboriginal woman told us:

"One night I had to walk 3 hours from the PNE to my dad's house on the Musqueam reserve. I wasn't afraid, because my cousin was with me, but it was a long walk" ¹

For Aboriginal women living on Lower Mainland reserves, then, poor public transit service keeps them isolated and prevents them from

accessing essential services that they need.

Access to Services

75% of urban Aboriginal people in the Lower Mainland reside away from current Indian reserves (Didluck). Urban Aboriginal women living in the Lower Mainland, many of whom have been displaced from rural reserves in other parts of British Columbia and Canada, often lack social and cultural supports. The migration from rural reserve to unfamiliar urban territory, combined with a lack of access to a strong support system and essential services makes them even more marginalized in society.

The few support services that are in place for Aboriginal women are difficult to access due to inadequate transit service. For instance, while the city of Surrey has a large urban Aboriginal population, it does not deliver any direct Aboriginal community programs (Didluck). Most Aboriginal service agencies are located only in downtown Vancouver, particularly in the Downtown Eastside. The concentration of social and cultural services in Vancouver's downtown means urban Aboriginal women often need to travel there in order to access these services. An inadequate transit system acts as a systemic barrier for them to access these services.

Another barrier that Aboriginal women face in using transit to access essential support services is unaffordable bus fares. Urban Aboriginal women often have to choose between spending money on food or on the bus fare they need in order to access such essential services. One Aboriginal woman told us:

"From 8am to 9am the #9 is always crowded so I end up getting



to the Downtown Eastside Women's Centre later than I want. I don't take the SkyTrain in the morning because it is crowded – we are treated like sardines. It is unhealthy for me to stand for a long time because I had leg surgery. I have a yearly bus pass and I don't want the bus fares raised because the bus fares come out of my food money. Do not raise the fares”²

As a public service, the public transit system should be run based on the needs of the bus riders who rely on it the most. However, the fact that transit dependent Aboriginal women living in poverty are forced to pay high fares for an inadequate service that they need highlights the harsh reality that the public transit system is systemically racist in its denial of service to those who need it most.

Immigrant Women

Immigrant women, particularly Third World immigrant women, face numerous barriers to meaningful participation in their communities, and are harshly impacted by inadequate transit service.

Accreditation

Immigrant women from the Third World have traditionally been excluded from entry into Canada, and continue to face unique challenges in terms of migration. Those who do make it into Canada continue to be commodified in terms of their economic 'value' to Canadian capitalist society and face additional barriers in their lives. Many immigrants from the Third World face struggles over accreditation, as the Canadian state or professional association does not recognize their foreign credentials. Women become de-skilled because they face so many hurdles to actually working in their field.

Inadequate transit makes it even more difficult for immigrant women, particularly women with children, to go through the accreditation process. The WIT team heard many stories about the de-skilling of migrant women during our participatory research. A woman at the Kiwassa Neighbourhood House workshop who was an engineer in China is now out of work as she did not have the money to go through the accreditation

Accreditation of South Asian Women Physicians: A Case Study of Injustice

One study on South Asian women physicians who migrated to Canada in the 1960s found that most had to go through a four or five year process including an internship and a residency to re-qualify to practice as doctors when they came to Canada. One of the exams that was required was only offered once a year, the exam format (multiple choice) was unfamiliar to many, they often had trouble finding internships and residencies, and they often faced racial and gender biases at their workplace in terms of racist and sexist comments as well as being overworked and underpaid compared to other interns and residents. (Giri)



process due to the responsibilities of bringing up her young child.

An inaccessible and unaffordable transit system that is incomprehensible to newcomers who are not familiar with the geography of the GVRD makes it even more difficult for immigrant women to enquire about their accreditation applications, attend classes and take tests while

Infrequent and unaffordable transit service makes women's days even more challenging to plan and negotiate.

shouldering the responsibilities for other traditional areas of 'women's work' like buying groceries and taking the kids to and from childcare.

Employment

When immigrant women begin looking for work, they often face a Catch-22 situation; potential employers tell them that they cannot be hired because they do not have 'Canadian experience'. As a result, many immigrants are forced into low-paying, exploitative jobs or volunteer work, where they provide free labour to Canadian capitalists. Immigrants from Third World countries whose skills and university education are not recognized are forced to take the only jobs available – for instance low-wage jobs in security and the service industry, where they often have to work late at night. Inadequate transit creates additional barriers to accessing even those jobs.

A bus rider from China explains:
"I applied for janitorial job. Un-

able to apply because of lack of late night buses. I have a good chance because of a friend who worked there. Company asks for employees to have own transport because of no late night buses. Suffered depression as a result of loss of job opportunity" ³

The Bus Riders Union's campaign *Night Owl Buses: End the Curfew Now!* to win back late night bus service brought out clearly that those most impacted by the bus cuts were late night workers. These workers are mostly women and men of colour working as security guards, office cleaners, janitors and restaurant and bar staff (Bus Riders Union). One woman of colour told us:

"I'm going to get a night shift job as an RCA and I need bus to get me home. Relies on husband for a ride home at 1am because she does not wish to sleep in the hospital. Her husband must work the next day. Gas is expensive." ⁴



Two women reading over a WIT leaflet on the bus



Because immigrant women in particular are funnelled into temporary, part-time, on-call, shift and volunteer work, this often means that they have to move around several times in a day, at different times of the day. Infrequent and unaffordable transit service makes women's days even more challenging to plan and negotiate. The few support services that are in place for Aboriginal women are difficult to access due to inadequate transit service.

This woman of colour told a WIT organizer how transit impacts her life as a shift worker:

I do shift work and I sometimes take the bus after 9:30 am. The buses are not frequent at this time and I have to wait. Most people taking the bus do shift work. We should eliminate the zone structure. There is less service between 9:30 am and 3 p.m. Buses during this time are off schedule. Three times out of five the #19 is behind schedule. Buses are always packed, wall-to-wall, at 9 p.m. There aren't that many buses. Saturdays and Sundays they have to add more buses on the #19. Schedules: you can wait anywhere from 10-30 minutes. They cut service along the #19 when the Millennium line came in. Service used to be every 3-5 minutes.⁵

Moreover, many women of colour (mostly Filipino and South Asian women) work in the homes of rich Canadians as care-aids, Live-in Caregivers, nannies or maids. Their employers' homes are most often located in the high-income areas of the city like Shaughnessy and the British properties in West Vancouver – some of the areas worst served by transit. Women in such jobs have to work at all hours of the day and regularly on weekends as well, when transit service to these areas is ridiculously inaccessible or non-existent.

One East African Asian woman living in Coquitlam who works as a care-aid in a home in North Vancouver told a WIT organizer that she has to transfer 4 times between buses and the SkyTrain in a 2 or 3 hour journey to work everyday. On Sundays, when the bus between Lonsdale Quay and her employer's home does not run, she faces a 20 to 30 minute uphill walk in order to get to work.⁶

Women's' responsibilities do not end on Friday at the close of the traditional workweek, but they have to deal with inadequate transit service throughout the Lower Mainland on weekends.

Another South Asian woman told us:

We need more service on Saturdays

The Live-In Caregiver Program (LCP)

The Live-In Caregiver Program is another example of the systemically racist immigration system. Through this program, the Canadian government brings in women from the Third World, mostly from the Philippines, to work in the homes of rich Canadians as caregivers for children, the elderly or those with disabilities. These women often hold professional qualifications from their country of origin. They are forced to live in the homes of their employers, where they can be called on to work 24 hours a day, and are therefore paid below minimum wage for the work that they do. Live-In Caregivers must work 18 out of their 24-month contract, even if they have 'grievances' or 'complaints' about their employers, or they face deportation. Not only are they physically exploited in terms of the work they do, but the program requirements also put them at high risk of sexual exploitation by their employers.



end transit racism

*and Sundays and in the morning time also. Most people work on Saturdays and Sundays, we pay taxes too. I wait for a long time, then I'm late for work. That causes big problems.*⁷

Such stories expose the discrepancy between the transit needs of women of colour and the current inaccessibility of the Lower Mainland's transit

An incomprehensible, inaccessible and unaffordable transit system further attacks the independence of immigrant women, who face social isolation and decreased mental health when they are forced to stay home because of inadequate transit service.

system.

For transit dependent women, the way the transit system is designed can determine where they live and work. The transit hours, routes and cost determine when and where transit dependent women of colour can or cannot work; transit dependent women of colour are particularly vulnerable to being fired or losing work because of inadequate transit.

*"Denny's workers get off shift at 4am. 3 workers (all women) had to quit because can't get a bus home and busboy sleeps in the storeroom until bus runs again in the morning"*⁸

The concentration of women of colour in low-wage work and inner-city neighbourhoods, coupled with the inadequacies of the transit system, means women often have to 'choose' between walking and spending a portion of their

wages on an unaffordable taxi:

*"To walk all the way to Main and 60th. 3-hour walk home. 6 miles because I can't afford at \$20 cab ride, putting my health and safety and risk"*⁹

*"Have to call my son or call a taxi and pay \$16 – more than one hours' wages because I work until 2:30am and miss the last bus. I don't have a choice"*¹⁰

A poor public transit system thus exacerbates the marginalization of working class women of colour, and maintains their low social position among the ranks of the most exploited workers in the Lower Mainland.

Independence

Women are particularly impacted by racist and sexist immigration policies. Because the system places value on education, ability to speak English or French, and professional work experience – things immigrant women already face barriers to accessing in their home countries – women disproportionately have to be sponsored



Kinat + Yang participating in the Youth of Colour in Consultation Against Systemic Racism Conference



to enter Canada under the family class rather than apply as independents. This means that women enter the country already in an unequal power relationship to both the state and to their families within patriarchal societal structures. Immigration sponsorship regulations make women who enter Canada under the family class dependent on their sponsors financially and legally for ten years. This institutionalizes their unequal access to social entitlements like social housing, job training programs, and social assistance and old age security. “This processing of women under the family class increases their vulnerability to increased control by sponsors” (Thobani).

Moreover, as ‘dependants’, in both the legal and patriarchal sense, immigrant women are constructed as a ‘non-economic’ category, thus making invisible their unpaid work in the home, as well as their reproductive role of creating and caring for future generations of workers for the Canadian economy (Thobani). A transit system that is not centred around the lives of immigrant women who are disproportionately burdened with the responsibilities of housework and childcare makes even more invisible their unpaid and undervalued contributions to society and further marginalizes them in society.

An incomprehensible, inaccessible and unaffordable transit system further attacks the independence of immigrant women, who face social isolation and decreased mental health when they are forced to stay home because of inadequate transit service. One Iranian student at SFU told us:

“Had a meeting at Harbour Centre related to my area of study. After we decided to go for dinner.

After dinner buses passed were “not in service” and then only going to Kootenay loop (#135). Then the bus riders were drunk. Me coming from an Islamic country, I am not sure if the men are coming on to me. After that I try to be home early at 11:30. Don’t have family here so social activities are really important. Only thing I can get into in this country and to improve English, the only way is to talk to

Although many transit dependent women do not speak English or speak very little English, TransLink does not provide information, beyond limited information about paying fares, in any other languages.

people. Really important for success at school”¹¹

For this woman and many others, then, poor transit is a barrier to their ability to learn and practice English, and to participate fully in their communities.

Transit also represents the right to safety and independence, particularly for immigrant women whose everyday lives are shaped by their time and energy spent taking care of others – their children and their husbands as well as their extended families – parents and grandparents. For many immigrant women transit is an imperative to independence and safety, as without it many are forced to depend on others for a ride or to accept rides from strangers. It is disproportionately women who bear the effects of poor transit and become dependent on their husbands, as it is often men who drive when working class families are



forced to buy cars.

About 5% of people in the GVRD speak neither English nor French, and about 37% have another mother tongue, with Cantonese, Punjabi and Tagalog being the most common (Stats Canada, Mother Tongue). Although many transit dependent women do not speak English or speak very little English, TransLink does not provide information, beyond limited information about paying fares, in any other languages. This makes it very difficult for non-English-speaking transit dependent women to find out information about bus routes, schedules, and the running of the transit system in general. Even TransLink's new voice automated telephone information system discriminates against immigrants, by not recognizing words spoken with an accent different from the Canadian one. No translations of TransLink documents are available, making the decision-making process around our region's transit service even more undemocratic for non-English speakers. The mystification of the transit system for non-English-speaking immigrant women contributes to their isolation from their communities and poses a major challenge to immigrant women escaping abusive situations.

Refugee Women

A refugee is a person who has to flee her country of origin because of who she is or what she believes, and cannot return because her government will not or cannot protect her or because she is in danger of persecution, including torture, execution or 'disappearance'. There are currently approximately 36 million refugees, asylum-seekers and internally displaced persons around the

world, the majority of whom are in Africa and Asia (Amnesty International)¹².

Canada has a positive image as a 'great humanitarian nation' that takes in refugees out of the 'kindness of their hearts'. However, the real reason Canada is willing to allow refugees to come and live here is because refugees serve as a source of cheap and often highly-skilled labour.

Refugee women in the Lower Mainland are ill-served by an inadequate transit system. With already few overburdened social support services available for refugee women, a poor transit system that is inaccessible, unaffordable and incomprehensible adds another barrier to their ability to overcome their difficulties from having faced persecution.

An unaffordable transit system also attacks refugee women's right to mobility. While refugee claimants have the same rights as all other Canadians under the Charter, they are required to apply for a work permit in order to be able to hold a job in Canada. This is often a very long and bureaucratic process, forcing refugee women to rely on charity and insufficient social supports in order to survive. Enforced poverty means that



Jen talks with a woman on the bus during an on-the-bus organizing session



refugee women are often unable to afford too-expensive bus fares. The high cost of fares means women face hardships in accessing services, and face social isolation in an already alien environment; additional barriers to healing from the persecution they have escaped.

An ideology of gratitude is imposed even more strongly for refugee women than for immigrant women - an ideology that discourages women from fighting for better services. Even if women do decide to organize they are at risk of deportation. While refugee women have been able to escape persecution, they are often not much better off since their rights are still violated within Canada.

Like immigrant women, refugee women also suffer from a transit system that can be incomprehensible because of insufficient information and because TransLink does not provide translations of routes, schedules and other important information necessary to understand how to use the transit system.

Racial Profiling

Many First Nations women at the Downtown Eastside Women's Centre workshop shared experiences of racist bus drivers who drove past them as they were standing at the bus stop. Women are also verbally abused and regularly humiliated when they cannot afford the bus fare.

One woman told a WIT organizer: *"It's mainly a safety issue. The bus drivers who are old, white men take off before people have had a chance to get off the bus. I've had drivers pass me by, an instance of racism. They pick up white women. After I showed him my fare the*

*driver stopped the bus and came to the back of the bus to argue with me three times. He was a white, old man. There's an Aboriginal education centre at 5th and Main, the bus driver said: "are you going to that Indian school?" He was a white, older man. I've been kicked off the bus for defending myself"*¹³

Several African women at the Eastburn

High fares are user fees imposed on public services that disproportionately hurt communities that can afford transit the least and need it the most.

Community Centre workshop shared stories about being ignored by bus drivers who simply drove past them as they were standing at the bus stop. After much running and waving, a bus driver stopped and let a woman on while making racist comments like "You blend in the dark. I couldn't see you at the bus stop". Another African woman at the workshop said a similar incident of interpersonal racism happen to her. The bus driver said "You should smile to show your white teeth so I can see you in the dark". Yet another African woman said the bus driver ignored her and looked away as she was speaking to him directly, asking about routes and directions.¹⁴

A bus rider who was new to Canada said: *"I noticed bus drivers treat Chinese people differently from other people on the #3. Bus drivers shout very hard at them only and tell them to shut up when they talk on the bus"*¹⁵

The result is that both the interpersonal and



the systemic manifestations of racism are part of the everyday experiences of the working class of color and of Aboriginal communities, and are complicated by the forces of patriarchy for women of colour and Aboriginal women. These incidents of interpersonal racism are not isolated or accidental incidents where drivers ‘unintentionally’ display racist behavior. Any racist behavior -

As TransLink increases fares, more and more transit dependent Aboriginal women and women of colour are unable to afford the bus fare, and are forced to rely on others for rides or beg bus drivers to be let on for free.

whether indirect or unconscious - is still racist and serves to reinforce unequal positions between people.

As public servants, bus drivers should be accountable and respectful to all bus riders, regardless of race, class or gender. This is what public transit is for, to serve the needs of the people. The transit dependent are disproportionately Aboriginal people and people of color who are immigrants and refugees - a significant number of whom are women. The racist behaviour exhibited by some bus drivers poses both an individual and as a whole, a systemic problem for bus riders that TransLink needs to recognize in the transit system.

An Aboriginal bus rider asserted:
“I believe that drivers should be held accountable for their actions, this would reduce drivers from treating women and ethnic groups in violation of our right to safe public transit” ¹⁶

While we expose and challenge the racist behavior of some bus drivers, we also recognize that the conditions under which all drivers work largely impacts the extent to which they can fully serve the needs of the public. Infrequent service and the breakdown of old trolley buses lead to overcrowding and late buses; in this environment both drivers and riders become agitated and stressed, often at one another. Yet, these working conditions by no means justify racist behavior. Instead, these conditions further impede the role of public transit as a service that is safe and there to serve the needs of people who use it and need it the most.

Moreover, we recognize that the transit system creates hierarchies within the working class by dividing bus riders and bus drivers by the forces of race, gender and relative class status, and maintains our oppression by keeping us from uniting in our struggles against our common oppression and exploitation.

High Fares

TransLink’s decisions in the last five years to increase bus fares three times accompanied by a poorer service are reflected in the experiences of transit dependent women. People of colour and Aboriginal people, particularly women, are especially impacted by high fares because they disproportionately make lower wages. One Aboriginal woman said:

“We are treated like sardines. It is unhealthy for me to stand for a long time because I had leg surgery. I have a yearly bus pass and I don’t



want the bus fares raised because the bus fares come out of my food money. Do not raise the fares”¹⁷

As we can see, high fares not only systematically deny Aboriginal women and women of colour the right to mobility, but also deny them other basic necessities for their health and the health of their families:

“I have a family of 4. It costs 7\$ one way to use transit. Its expensive as it is to go out as a family (e.g. visit to Stanley Park). It’s a barrier to go shopping as well. So with the fare increase it will cost even more to go to the mall and back home. For a low-income family it’s really expensive”¹⁸

Working class people of colour and Aboriginal people are forced to buy cars, leading to more environmental pollution and economic hardship by families already facing barriers to employment.

“When we first came to Canada, we had to take our children out everywhere. My baby is very big - about 15kg - he’s very heavy. The stroller can’t go on the bus. So I had to stay home, and my husband and I had no choice but to buy a car. It’s very expensive, especially with the insurance and the gas. If the bus was working well, we wouldn’t need to spend so much money on a car. It’s hard to take 3 children on a bus. It’s very clumsy. The drivers are usually impatient for us to get on/off the bus. To stand at the bus station with kids, for 30 minutes, they can get frantic”¹⁹

High fares are user fees imposed on public services that disproportionately hurt communities

that can afford transit the least and need it the most. “What if I billed TransLink for the amount of time I spend waiting?”²⁰, asked out loud an Aboriginal woman in one of our workshops. Aboriginal women and women of colour are forced to pay out of their own pockets *and* with their time, as they spend hours waiting for the bus and travelling on the bus while businessmen will soon be able to

Racial and class profiling targets those who are already demonized in our society and pits bus riders against one another when, in fact, the real problem is that the fares are too high

travel in and out of the downtown core in minutes through the air-conditioned, frequent and state-of-the-art RAV line.

Criminalization

Along with the TransLink board’s decision to increase fares comes the creation of a ‘security’ budget where SkyTrain police are hired to check fares and give out fines to fare evaders. As TransLink increases fares, more and more transit-dependent Aboriginal women and women of colour are unable to afford the bus fare, and are forced to rely on others for rides or beg bus drivers to be let on for free. Transit-dependent women face stress, guilt and public humiliation if they are caught by the transit police for trying to access an increasingly inadequate public service. Meanwhile, public funds are being poured into securing bus fares and not into more buses and lower fares.

TransLink paints a picture of fare evaders



in the minds of other bus riders as ‘free-loaders’ and ‘bad citizens’, and then spends money on security to target and criminalize those who cannot afford the high fares.

In particular, TransLink targets youth of colour, older immigrants, and people who ‘look poor’. TransLink’s ‘Special Constables’ behave in intimidating and often violent ways that threaten

The ghettoization of working class people of colour means that we are systematically cut off from participation in society while our rights, needs and wants are unacknowledged to favour the needs of the predominantly white middle and upper class.

the safety of transit users.

One woman told us:

*“I take the SkyTrain to and from Joyce and Granville station. On several occasions I have stepped off the train at Joyce to see/hear the security guards dealing with people. I am not impressed with their attitude, tone (very aggressive), body language (very aggressive) and language choice (very very aggressive). But I do not feel safe when I get off the train to hear SkyTrain guards yelling and swearing. I saw many older immigrants get away from there as fast as they could”*²¹

Another woman who we talked to on the bus said: “What do they think we’re all criminals?”²² This racial and class profiling targets those who are already demonized in our society

and pits bus riders against one another when, in fact, the real problem is that the fares are too high.

Bus riders of colour and Aboriginal bus riders are being criminalized in a context where people of colour and Aboriginal people are already racially profiled in many other aspects of their lives. SkyTrain police target people of colour and Aboriginal people when checking fares, and have even been known to call Immigration Canada when bus riders do not provide identification. This means that transit-dependent immigrant and refugee women are faced with the constant threat of deportation even as they try to live their lives and go where they need to go on the public transit system. For refugee women in particular, who have recently left situations of conflict, war and torture, and have had to face a humiliating and degrading Canadian refugee claimant process, their criminalization in a public space puts them at higher risk of being forced to return to those situations, and adds to their stress and anxiety levels, seriously attacking their mental and physical health. We see this manifestation of the ‘war on terrorism’ in our public service, as TransLink uses its institutional power to attack the right to mobility of the most vulnerable in our society – women of colour and Aboriginal women.

Youth of Colour

TransLink policies requiring youth to ‘prove’ their age are a systemic attack on youth that treats them as criminals, since the underlying rationale is that youth are trying to ‘cheat’ the system by paying concession fares, which are already the highest in Canada (Orsini). Moreover, the need to prove that they are youth to SkyTrain



police places them in a powerless position as youth trying to defend themselves against older SkyTrain police who assert their authority.

As part of their daily experiences using transit, transit dependent youth of colour told us that they often face direct racism from SkyTrain police. At one of our WIT workshops at Vancouver Technical Secondary, where many students are transit dependent, a young woman of colour said “Skycops were mean” when she lost her Go Card, a card youth receive to ‘prove’ that they are in high school. As other young women in the room nodded in agreement, another woman said that Skycops intentionally “look for kids without Go Cards”.

TransLink’s ‘security’ budget for SkyTrain police manifests itself as both a form of systemic racism and interpersonal racism, exposing youth of colour as vulnerable targets of supposedly ‘random’ fare checks.

Segregation

There are push and pull factors that cause communities to become segregated in the Lower Mainland. In the context of a systemically racist society, people of colour must often ‘choose’ between familiar community and proximity to employment and services.

Although there are pockets of immigrants of colour throughout the GVRD, working class Aboriginal people and immigrants of colour are over-represented in certain areas, such as East Vancouver, with poor living and working conditions. Here, a reservoir of unemployed and low-wage workers exists, accompanied by a concentration of poverty with heavy police monitoring.

Dependency on public transit shapes the daily experiences of Aboriginal women and women of colour. A woman in a workshop at the YWCA employment program for single mothers exposed her typical day on the bus in her community:

“I ride the bus everyday. I leave at 7am get here at 9am. Leave here at 3pm and get home at 5pm. One

Environmental racism is the degradation of an environment over-represented by working class people of color and Aboriginal people brought on by institutions that implement the neoliberal imperative that gives the predominantly white middle and ruling class control over the entire environment.

week there was a problem with trolley buses – wanted 45 minutes for the bus for 2 mornings in a row. The buses are so crowded I had to fight to get on the bus. I feel unsafe on the bus. When I can afford it I want to stop riding the bus”²³

An Aboriginal single mother shared how inadequate transit traps her and her family in certain parts of the GVRD:

“Numerous times I’ve had to stay in Surrey due to lack of transportation back home to Vancouver on Sundays. Two times me and my son were stuck at New West station because there’s no bus to connect to at 12pm. The New West bus from downtown used to run late but now there’s no bus. You get stuck in New West; you have to wrap up by 10pm to get home. My mom lives in Surrey. My son bikes or walks from Vancouver to Surrey - he’s only sixteen- when he comes to visit me because there’s no bus after 11pm



in Surrey” ²⁴

Not all people of colour live in the same area. Class divisions within communities of colour are visible in the higher spread of middle and upper class people of colour throughout wealthy suburban neighbourhoods, contributing to drastically different experiences than working class communities of colour.

A disproportionate number of workers of colour rely on public transit or are forced to buy inexpensive used and polluting cars because of the inaccessibility of their work hours and location and to be able to take care of their families; whereas the Chinese Business Association supports the RAV line, since they profit from tourism and gentrification as private business and property owners.

Inadequate transit also prevents already-segregated women of colour from accessing religious and spiritual services that can connect them to their communities. During the month of prayer for Muslims, many go to the mosque early in the morning or late at night. At a presentation to the TransLink Board at the March 2004 meeting, one bus rider commented that many people could not go to pray with their community, families, and friends and take part in the important and sacred events because the buses stopped running at 1am and did not start until 6am (Barakat).

The ghettoization of working class people of colour means that we are systematically cut off from participation in society while our rights, needs and wants are unacknowledged to favour the needs of the predominantly white middle and upper class. By being unreliable, inaccessible and unaffordable

the public transit system poses systemic barriers that actually exacerbate the daily experiences of marginalized communities who rely on public services more than others in order to access jobs, public services, family and other forms of support.

Environmental Racism In Our Communities

Environmental racism is the degradation of an environment over-represented by working class people of color and Aboriginal people brought on by institutions that implement the neoliberal imperative that gives the predominantly white middle and ruling class control over the entire environment. Environmental racism is alive when diesel buses are put on the road each time older trolley buses (which were supposed to be replaced seven years ago) break down. The difference in air quality between poorer neighbourhoods where Aboriginal people and people of color dominate such as East Vancouver and parts of Surrey, and where predominantly white, middle class families live such as the West Side and West Vancouver, is astounding.

Conclusion

The Bus Riders Union’s continuous struggle to End Transit Racism has come out of the politicizing and collectivizing of everyday experiences disproportionately shared by Aboriginal people and people of colour, many of whom are immigrants and refugees from Third World countries forced to migrate and endure systemic racism under capitalism. Through the Women in Transit initiative, we gain a deeper understanding into the



lives of the most oppressed and exploited in our society – women of colour and Aboriginal women.

We are not saying that a poor transit system only affects Aboriginal people and people of colour, as it highly impacts everyone who is transit dependent, including white working class communities. However, transit service that is made unaffordable, unreliable and inaccessible because of irresponsible undemocratic spending of public funds that prioritize the interests of corporations and ‘choice-riders’ when a *disproportionate* number of Aboriginal women and women of colour who have no other way of mobility other than public transit cannot use it, this is systemic racism in our public transit system.

Dismissing the fact that racism exists in the transit system is an act of racism in itself, as it denies and devalues the everyday lived experiences of Aboriginal people and people of colour, particularly of women, in the Lower Mainland. TransLink cannot hide behind the rhetoric of multiculturalism, and must take into account the position of Aboriginal women and women of colour among the ranks of the most exploited and oppressed in our society.

The process and continuing fight against systemic racism comes with meeting the immediate transit needs of women, as they struggle to survive in a society where they are objectified as ‘exotic others’, serve as a pool of unemployed and cheap labour, and are further exploited in their undervalued, unpaid reproductive labour. The struggle against transit racism continues by building women’s power to put an end to their oppression and subjugation. We openly expose and criti-

cize TransLink’s systemically racist policies and practices and demand an End to Transit Racism!

¹ WIT Testimonial 72

² WIT Testimonial 7

³ Night Owls Testimonial 50

⁴ WIT Testimonial 17

⁵ WIT Testimonial 40

⁶ Kirat’s conversation with Zehra, April 2004.

⁷ WIT Testimonial 37

⁸ Night Owls Testimonial 33

⁹ Night Owls Testimonial 34

¹⁰ Night Owls Testimonial 45

¹¹ WIT testimonial 50

¹² <http://web.amnesty.org/pages/refugees-background-eng#refugee>

¹³ WIT testimonial 38

¹⁴ Eastburn Workshop on June 12, 2004

¹⁵ Zailda’s conversation with bus rider on the #3 Main, Spring 2004

¹⁶ WIT Testimonial 29

¹⁷ WIT Testimonial 7

¹⁸ WIT Testimonial 41

¹⁹ WIT Testimonial 53

²⁰ WIT Testimonial 43



²¹ WIT Testimonial 3

²² WIT Testimonial 24

²³ WIT Testimonial 1

²⁴ Night Owls Testimonial 7

