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Post mortem on the San Francisco fare strike, 2005

Tom Wetzel

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In September, 2005 several thousand riders of Muni — San Francisco's city-owned transit system — participated in a mass fare strike, to fight service cuts, layoffs, and the second fare hike in two years. More than five dozen people were actively involved in the organizing. The last action connected with the fare strike was a November 10th protest march, initiated by the organized day laborers. Only about 50 people participated in this march. The disappointing turnout marked an end to the fare strike, which failed to force any concessions from the local government leaders.

Let's step back for a moment and ask ourselves, What principles should we use in organizing?

For those of us who aim at a transformation of society, based on a self-organized working class movement that creates a post-capitalist society based on self-management and empowerment of workers, a major question that we face is: How can a movement of this kind come into being? Part of the reason that we support active participation of ordinary people in struggles, and creation of mass organizations run directly by their rank-and-file participants,

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is that we see this as a means to activating people and creating the kinds of movements that can change the society.

The present social order is able to reproduce itself from year to year because of the impacts on people's psyches of the kinds of actions that people are forced to take on. Doing work that is acquiescent to bosses, being subject to all kinds of controls on our lives, tends to generate in people habits of going along, of acceptance of the existing arrangement. That's because people will tend to develop the habits of mind that enable them to best "fit" in with the social circumstances they see no way to change. Changing those habits is not going to happen over night. So, how is this existing consciousness going to change?

The more widespread the level of solidarity and action, the greater the power working people will have. The greater the power being exhibited visibly in actions, the greater the impact on the self-confidence and consciousness of the working class. The greater the sense of power ordinary people have, the more likely people will be willing to entertain ideas of major changes.

On the other hand, the more invisible such action in support of each other is, the more people will be inclined to believe "You're on your own" in dealing with the dominating structures and institutions, the more people will feel that radical ideas are "unrealistic."

The degree of change ordinary people can bring about depends upon how widespread and how deep-seated is the willingness for action within the general population, against the dominant structures. That is, it depends upon the level of class consciousness that exists at a particular time.

But all collective actions, if they become visible and activate and motivate people, can contribute to raising consciousness and developing the willingness to fight in the future.

The Muni fare strike was — and could only be — a fight for a small change in the terms of our exploitation and subordination under the present system. To be a fight for us all, to enhance the sense of solidarity, it was essential that it be a fight for the interests of

The fare strike organizing could have been used as the way to build a mass riders' organization. If that had been done, then today there might be an on-going organization to continue the struggle. Instead, little was left behind after the fare protest subsided.

the mass of ordinary folks who depend on Muni. Some anarchists say that it is sufficient if a few of them are able to continue to engage, quietly, in fare evasion. But this viewpoint is individualistic; it doesn't take into account the importance of a visible mass movement that aims to defeat the austerity measures that have their harshest impact on the those with the least income.

From this point of view, I believe that the key thing in the strike should have been to focus on generalizing and extending participation. To do this, it is necessary, among other things, to avoid setting some arbitrary ideological litmus test that someone had to pass to be welcomed as a participant.

Organizing for the strike began in March, 2005, when the impending fare hike was announced by the Muni bureaucrats. The anarchists who formed Muni Social Strike were not interested in trying to organize a broad membership organization, a union of Muni riders. They were focused on the strike as an action, but also as an opportunity for putting forth their own anti-capitalist ideology.

The phrase "social strike" was originally coined in the '70s to refer to a job action by transit workers in Turin, Italy. Rather than strike to pursue their beefs with management, they continued to run the transit vehicles but refused to collect fares. Because there was widespread working class opposition to high fares, this action developed solidarity and support within the community. This type of action differs from simply a consumer strike because of the crucial role played by the workers. The Muni Social Strike group wanted to create this kind of worker/rider alliance. To this end, they concentrated their work in the first several months on outreach to the drivers.

After the fare strike got underway with the fare hike in September, a number of the anarchists in Social Strike did begin to more seriously consider the idea of a mass membership organization. However, some of them insisted this had to be a joint organization of workers and riders. An alliance between riders and work-

ers is essential, but a handful of (mostly white) revolutionaries who don't work for Muni can't organize the (overwhelmingly African-American, Latino and Asian) transit workers. The workers need to have their own movement. The problems they deal with on the job are not the same as the problems faced by the riders.

The recent victory in Atlanta shows the potential for a rider/worker alliance. In that case, a proposed 25 cent fare increase was defeated by an alliance of a Transit Riders Union (initiated by the local Jobs for Justice chapter) and the transit workers union.

A very assertive "left-communist" in Social Strike was particularly opposed to the formation of a mass organization. He tended to view Social Strike as a kind of vanguard to give direction to the struggle without mass participation in decision-making. Although Social Strike did eventually do some outreach to community groups, this left-communist's constant pattern of insults directed at everyone who disagreed with him tended to discourage outreach to other groups and drove away potential participants. Indeed, it was this individual's obnoxious behavior that led to the formation of another group, Muni Fare Strike.

Some activists tended to emphasize things like wall posters and stickers. This has its place but there is really no substitute for one-on-one organizing, which leads to conversations and new contacts. To its credit, the Muni Fare Strike group recognized the need to do one-on-one organizing of the riders, through leafleting to ordinary folks on the street. On the other hand, Muni Social Strike's emphasis on direct outreach to the drivers eventually led to a mutually supportive relationship with the Drivers' Action Committee — a dissident group in the drivers' union.

Muni Social Strike did put forward the idea of organizing "town hall meetings" which were to be the means of gaining mass participation. However, these meetings were poorly advertised and attended mainly by the same milieu of anarchists who started Social Strike, with the addition of a few Leninists, and a handful of African-American bus drivers from the Drivers Action Committee.

I think that if the organizers had begun early on doing tabling at major bus stops, to gain membership in a rider organization, they could perhaps have brought in a lot of ordinary folks outside the circuits of anarchist or radical left activism. These people could then have helped to spread the action to others. Part of the reason we want to reach out beyond the already existing radical activist circles is that we want to activate more ordinary working folks; we want to get more people involved, get them thinking about changing things, learning about how to do this. But to do that you have to create an environment where people who don't already have some 100% revolutionary perspective can feel comfortable being themselves and participating, not intimidated. It's hard to do this if some blowhard is constantly insulting people who don't subscribe to his hyper-alienated outlook.

Muni Fare Strike was more successful in doing outreach to community groups, and speakers from many groups spoke at the press conferences they organized. The most important extension of the struggle came about because Muni Fare Strike persuaded the participants in the Day Laborers' Program, mainly Mexican immigrants, to take over organizing among the Spanish-speaking immigrant population. They became the backbone of the organizing in the Mission District, which was a stronghold of support for the fare strike.

Some of the anarchists in Social Strike told me they were dubious about a Muni riders' union because of the likelihood it would be "reformist," embroiled in pressuring the city officials, and electoral politics. Here I gather they are thinking about the current level of consciousness within the general working class population.

But we can't have it both ways. Either we want to organize working people to fight and to control their struggles and learn and grow in the process, or not. If the numbers of people who have a 100% revolutionary anti-capitalist perspective are small in numbers now, we cannot expand that movement if we limit decision-making to only the revolutionaries.