A NEW BEGINNING FOR PROGRESSIVE LABOR EDUCATION & ACTIVISM

ATU ACQUIRES NATIONAL LABOR COLLEGE CAMPUS
Agreement in Guelph, ON, ends lockout

After the City of Guelph, ON, locked out members of Local 1189 for three weeks, city buses stopped running, and transit workers were out of work and out of a contract while commuters were left stranded. But bus service resumed after the members voted to ratify a new agreement with the city.

The city and Local 1189 started bargaining on October 30, 2013 for a new contact, which had expired at the end of June 2013. The city locked out their employees after they voted down the city’s first offer. “This has been a difficult process, but we’ve ended up in a better place,” says Local President Andrew Cleary.

Free mass transit gaining backers

Last spring the city of Paris gave further proof that the best things in life are free when the transit system eliminated all fares on local trams, buses, trains and subways. Traffic declined by nearly 20 percent and air pollution fell by six percent. Can a fare-free policy transform a region? For bigger cities, eliminating fares is a means to increase ridership, reduce traffic and pollution, and provide better mobility. Also, most cities have many transit-dependent residents who don’t own cars and don’t live close enough to walk to their workplace. When Topeka made transit free for May of 1988, ridership rose 98 percent; when Austin made transit free for the fall of 1990, ridership increased by 75 percent. Maybe it’s time for city governments to start considering giving their residents a free ride.
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Vancouver, BC local builds coalition to fight for public transit

“You can’t fight city hall.”

That’s what people say when government decides it’s going to run roughshod over its citizens – usually for the benefit of a few. But ATU locals are finding they can fight city hall if they engage their natural allies in the battle.

Local 1724 – Vancouver, BC, is a case in point:

Earlier this year, the Translink Board – Greater Vancouver’s transportation agency – began a “pilot project” diverting a portion of their paratransit riders into taxis, rather than the established Handi-DART system operated by Local 1724 members.

Local President Bob Chitrenky quickly determined that this would be a political battle, and that he would need to recruit allies into a coalition to successfully fight the proposal, which could cost his members jobs.

“We approached paratransit users,” Chitrenky said, “and told them they needed to get organized. We also contacted a paratransit group that had become dormant, and found them eager and willing to join the coalition. A lot of people were only too happy to jump on board.”

Next, the local began sponsoring “user group forums” to explain why taxicabs are inappropriate for paratransit, and made the public aware of the consequences of pressuring people who may be in delicate health into accepting rides from untrained drivers.

The forums also demonstrated that taxis are neither cheaper nor better than the service provided by Handi-DART’s professional workforce.

Eventually, Chitrenky says, the user group started taking over the leadership of the group. Now called the “Handi-DART Riders Alliance,” the coalition generated a lot of pressure and the taxicab paratransit proposal appeared to die.

‘Minor miracle’

But Local 1724 didn’t stop there. The local set about meeting with every mayor in the area to sell them on a $7.5 billion “business plan” to improve public transit in the Vancouver metropolitan area – a plan that included sufficient funding for the growing Handi-DART service.

As a result the Vancouver area Mayors’ Council on Regional Transportation adapted Local 1724’s business plan to produce a 30-year “vision” that defined the region’s transportation priorities and costs.
The response was immediate with the media using words like “impressive”, and “minor miracle” to describe the adaptation of the plan that Local 1725 dropped in the mayors’ laps.

Peter Ladner, writing in Business Vancouver, said the mayors, “produced a report of a quality that blew away stakeholders… They’ve mapped out a transit future that few could argue with, though some certainly will. For $7.5 billion in new capital spending, 70% of Metro Vancouver residents will be within walking distance of frequent transit. …This makes giving up one car a more realistic option for many, with savings of $10,000/year.”

Now comes the really hard part – finding the $7.5 billion needed to make the vision a reality.

Toward that end, it appears that there will be a referendum sometime soon to ask voters for their part of the funding. The plan also anticipates federal and provincial funding, and proceeds from the province’s carbon tax which are, by no means, a “given.” So there’s still a lot of work to do.

But, what’s most remarkable about all of this is that ATU members and a local coalition of transit advocates acting on their own with few resources, managed to make public transit “Topic A”, and get the ball rolling on an ambitious plan for transportation in their area.

In addition to all of this activity members of Local 1724 joined a group that travelled to Ottawa to lobby for the bill that would change the federal criminal code to create stiffer sentences for those convicted of assaulting a transit operator.

Constant vigilance

One of the lessons any successful political operation learns over the years is that you can never rest on your laurels. And that lesson is being underscored again by the recent decision of the Translink board to devote $1 million of Handi-DART’s already inadequate budget to taxicab service, even as the agency boasts a surplus in the bank.

This time, however, the Handi-DART Riders Alliance was easily activated, and is fighting the reallocation of paratransit funds.

Alliance spokesperson Tim Louis argues against the budget switch, saying, “As for TransLink offering taxi rides as replacements to trips they cannot handle because of service cutbacks and layoffs, this is not an alternative that meets most users needs. Taxi drivers, although they do their best, are not sufficiently trained to safely accommodate people with a wide variety of disabilities – HandyDart drivers are. … “Clearly, TransLink needs to stop slashing service levels, in the name of budget surplus, and focus on finding efficiencies elsewhere.”

In addition to supporting the Handi-DART Riders Alliance, Local 1724 is now planning to actively support candidates that favor their views in the next provincial election – which will eventually impact the selection of members of the Translink board.

‘Happy and Proud’

Of course, none of this could have been accomplished without the active participation of Local 1724 members. “They’ve been supportive all the way,” says Chitrenky, “I’m happy and proud of them.”

No doubt they will continue to be a force to reckon with in the Vancouver region for years to come.
OC Transpo preparing to hire chief safety officer

The bus drivers and citizens of Ottawa, ON have spoken and they want more measures to be enforced when it comes to their safety on OC Transpo.

Results from an independent review of the system’s safety and security revealed that passengers think OC Transpo should hire more special officers and create a standalone safety branch to beef up their security and address safety concerns.

With this feedback in mind, OC Transpo is now searching for a chief safety officer per the request of the riders.

On the top of the list of improvements needed will be developing a comprehensive safety program for the bus and light rail system. One of the key findings of the review is that the public would like OC Transpo to communicate with them better about incidents and how to report concerns back to them. The panel pointed to a recent move to promote the safe stop program, which allows riders to request a stop closer to their destination after 9 p.m., as a positive step.

OC Transpo’s current safety and security efforts, include de-escalation training for drivers who encounter conflicts with passengers, safe stop and night stop programs, a 24-hour transit communications center, outreach efforts such as the safety culture working group, and equipment such as emergency call boxes, alarms on buses, and security cameras.

While the review found that OC Transpo has some good safety and security initiatives, the programs need to be brought into a cohesive safety plan and the transit agency needs more staff members and better communications techniques in order to support increased and improved safety plans.

Calgary Transit welcomes 19 new peace officers

With violent attacks on bus drivers rising across Canada, Calgary, AB, Transit has decided to do something about it. The agency celebrated the graduation of 19 new peace officers, increasing the total number to 97. These officers are more than just security guards. They are full-fledged law enforcement officials, who will arrest unruly passengers if necessary. A peace officer is sworn to protect the public, transit employees, and the agency’s assets.

Over the course of a 10-week training program, the officers learned critical safety skills, how to communicate effectively in crisis and conflict, how to enforce the law, and how to exercise discretion. “Most importantly, they’ve learned what it means to be a Calgary Transit employee and how to connect with our customers and employees,” said Brian Whitelaw, co-coordinator of public safety and enforcement.

A specialized unit of eight peace officers will be assigned to routes that tend to attract troublesome riders. Calgary Transit hopes to have the bus security team out within a few months.

Edmonton city cops to team up with ETS to patrol transit routes

When drivers and passengers are on Edmonton, AB, public transportation, especially during evening hours, the last thing they need is to feel threatened or unsafe. Now they have one less problem to worry about, and one more reason to feel safer.

The Edmonton Transit System (ETS) and Edmonton Police Services (EPS) are joining forces by launching a pilot program appropriately called, “Transit and Police Partnership” (TAPP), a joint ETS/EPS initiative to enhance security on Edmonton’s LRT network.

Safety and security

Four police officers will be working alongside four ETS peace officers to patrol transit routes. These teams will patrol Edmonton Transit property and vehicles on a day-to-day basis, assisting riders and enhancing customer safety and security, primarily on the northern half of the LRT system.

With an increasing amount of ridership, the partnership comes at the perfect time. The program is set to run until mid-December with the hope that the partnership will make the Edmonton transit system more enjoyable and safer for travel.
ATU continues to take the lead in the campaign to get Parliament to pass legislation that would encourage judges to give stiffer sentences to persons convicted of assaulting transit operators.

ATU, the Canadian Urban Transportation Association (CUTA), Unifor (another Canadian union), and the City of Ottawa appeared before the Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs Committee in Parliament, June 18, to testify in support of Bill S-221, An Act to Amend the Criminal Code (assaults against public transit operators). The bill, introduced by Sen. Bob Runciman, of Brockville, ON, would make assaulting a transit operator or a taxi driver an aggravating circumstance to be considered by judges when sentencing persons convicted of those crimes.

Runciman crafted the legislation after ATU asked him to create a bill in the Senate that was similar to those that had failed earlier in the House of Commons. ATU reached out to Runciman after he made a statement in the Senate expressing his outrage about the release without charge of a man who had assaulted a transit operator.

‘A sad reality’

International Vice President Robin West testified in favor of the bill, saying, “In spite of more than a decade of increased efforts by our industry to reduce the number of assaults through training, real-time support and the installation of cameras… the frequency and severity of these attacks continue to rise…”

“It is a sad reality that most public transit operators have experienced the indignity of being spat on, have been punched in the head, or they know a colleague who has been subjected to a knife attack, been stomped upon or sexually assaulted… many suffer physical and emotional injuries that are life-threatening and career-ending. …

“Only by entrenching this protection into law will judges have the tools they need to ensure appropriate sentences are delivered and deterrents are in place.”

‘I want to help people, not be afraid of them’

West was followed by Suzanne Burgess, 279-Ottawa, ON, who related what happened to her earlier this year during a layover break on her bus. After spotting a woman walking between buses at the layover station, Burgess said, “I opened my window to tell her it was too dangerous for her to be there. Instead of coming to my window, she went to the door…

“She barged onto the bus, threatening me with vulgar language. I immediately radioed for assistance. When I hung up, she assaulted me by grabbing, scraping my face and neck, trying to drag me to the floor. It took 17 minutes for security to reach us, so I am very thankful that another driver heard my screams and came to my assistance…

“I want to help people, not be afraid of them. Today I say to you that enough is enough… Attacks on public transit workers must stop. … Please entrench this legislation into law so that judges have something in the criminal code to guide them when they are sentencing these attackers.”

Runciman believes that this bill will succeed where others have failed.

“I spoke to the Liberal House leader in the Senate the last day we were sitting and she’s assured me that they will support the bill, so I’m very optimistic it’ll pass in early fall of this year. Then, it’s on to the House (of Commons),” he says. ✤
International President Larry Hanley announced the creation of a new “ATU Training and Education Center” following the Union’s acquisition of the former National Labor College campus, July 29, in Silver Spring, MD. ATU plans to move its international headquarters from Washington, DC, to the Maryland location, in the near future.

“Today marks a rebirth and reinvigorated commitment to education and progressive training for organized labor as ATU expands its long-standing union education and activism program.”

— International President Hanley

“ATU has stepped up and assumed a greater leadership role in the molding of minds, values and progressive reform for both Canada and the United States. The state-of-the-art conference and training center will again be a hub of activity for our Union and the entire labor movement. It represents a new beginning in terms of our capacity to train not only our leaders and members, but also those who work every day to improve the life of our society.”

Over the past four years, ATU has made an unprecedented commitment to training and education to empower its members with the skills, strategies and knowledge needed to strengthen the Union and build community alliances.

ATU, which will train more than 10,000 members this year, will make the facilities of the new “ATU Training and Education Center” available to other unions and progressive groups seeking to educate and train their members, as well.
The events in Ferguson, MO, both the killing of an unarmed teen and the aftermath of civil unrest are having a spell-binding effect on people all over the world. A column by Kareem Abdul-Jabbar in *Time* magazine describes the underlying issue that nobody on TV is talking about.

The platform for the conflict

We need to step back a few feet from the TV facts, the 24 hour a day speculation about who was “right” and who was “wrong.” And let’s not get caught in the trap of thinking this is just a race issue. It is a class issue.

That so often working class police officers and working class (but usually unemployed young men and women) are in street confrontations is the product of a much deeper evil.

As Abdul Jabbar said in *Time* “Unless we want the Ferguson atrocity to also be swallowed and become nothing more than an intestinal irritant to history, we have to address the situation not just as another act of systemic racism, but as what else it is: class warfare.” He continues, “Rather than uniting to face the real foe — do-nothing politicians, legislators, and others in power— we fall into the trap of turning against each other, expending our energy battling our allies instead of our enemies.”

Unseen corporate leaders and useless politicians are draining America of our jobs, our hope and most importantly our unity. But we put the cops in the difficult position of enforcing laws while we allow poverty to swell in our communities.

Stripped of human dignity

If all the senators and members of Congress who create the policies that are making our country more poor and more tense, and all the Walmart and Koch Industries executives who cripple workers, steal pensions and break unions had to go and deal with the angry disenfranchised youth, whose lives they have ruined it would at least be a fair fight on moral grounds. But the real culprits - the ivory towered leeches of our world - are in hiding. They are creating the unrest by stripping working America of our human dignity.

The facts will eventually come out in Ferguson. We will learn more about who did what in Ferguson, and why. What all the motives were. But, as with the Staten Island (my hometown) case of police killing a man in a choke hold because he committed a petty nuisance crime, if we are to stop injustice we have to go to the root cause. We have to demand that our politicians change the priorities of our society. We have to see through the smoke and the tear gas of Ferguson to understand that Mike Brown and Eric Garner and so many others who find themselves in conflict with “the law” are people trying to survive in a society that very wealthy people are driving into the economic stone age.

Kareem Abdul Jabbar sums it up: “I’m not saying the protests in Ferguson aren’t justified— they are. In fact, we need more protests across the country. Where’s our Kent State? What will it take to mobilize four million students in peaceful protest? Because that’s what it will take to evoke actual change.

“The middle class has to join the poor, and whites have to join African-Americans in mass demonstrations, in ousting corrupt politicians, in boycotting exploitative businesses, in passing legislation that promotes economic equality and opportunity, and in punishing those who gamble with our financial future. Otherwise, all we’re going to get is what we got out of Ferguson: a bunch of politicians and celebrities expressing sympathy and outrage. If we don’t have a specific agenda—a list of exactly what we want to change and how—we will be gathering over and over again beside the dead bodies of our murdered children, parents, and neighbors.”

The entire column by Jabbar can be found at: http://time.com/3132635/ferguson-coming-race-war-class-warfare/

Please visit www.atu.org for more information and the latest ATU news.
Tourists and office workers walking in downtown Washington, DC this summer can be forgiven if they were momentarily confused by the sight of a 15-foot inflatable camel and group of transit workers and supporters outside of Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA) headquarters. But if they stopped to listen they got the point.

ATU members were there to denounce WMATA Chair Tom Downs for his conflict of interest as chair of the Board of Advisors at Veolia Transportation. Veolia, a private, Paris-based transit firm, has a reputation for wrecking public transportation service in major cities across the United States.

Local leaders from Detroit, MI; Oakland, CA; Niagara Falls, ON; and other cities across North America who were in DC for ATU public engagement training, joined Local 689-Washington, DC members for the “hump day” demonstration.

“It’s time for Downs to make a choice between serving the people of DMV (DC, Maryland and Virginia) and serving his corporate interests,” said Local 689 President Jackie Jeter. “He should be protecting the integrity and affordability of Metro. Instead he is raising fares on riders and failing to protest the decisions of the elected officials who appointed him that are not in the best interests of riders.”
Roll up for the ‘mystery tour’

THE MAGICAL MYSTERY TOUR IS WAITING TO TAKE YOU AWAY, WAITING TO TAKE YOU AWAY.

Does your city have a streetcar in operation, a start up or expansion planned? Is there a pending ballot initiative to fund the project? If you answered yes to any of these you’re not alone. You’re joined by 35 cities in the U.S. and Canada. In some cities our members are being transitioned for “back to the future,” jobs. In others, such as my hometown, the City has a master plan to privatize the work.

The debates have begun - what routes should be modified to accommodate a streetcar? Will doing so provide better transit? Some argue that many cities are in a “race to waste money”. Others ask, “Are streetcars mostly for tourists? Others point to massive project cost overruns. Arlington, VA, being an one example where Atlantic magazine reports the cost to be “$100 million more than the county’s last projection.

All too often transit planning is an afterthought without the coordinated interest of passengers, taxpayers and developers in mind. We know our passengers, but we must also learn and be experts on the facts, and lead our communities in the debate.

Bill Onasch, retired Local 1287-Kansas City, MO, VP recently penned an article on the same. I share some of his thoughts below and encourage you to use the link for the full article. It is a primer on the history of many streetcar systems. (http://kclabor.org/wordpress/?cat=7)

Retro Cool

“Streetcars are now being widely marketed as cool and ‘green.’ I don’t have any credentials for designating cool but I have some strong opinions, based on study and personal experience, about the conditions that could make streetcars useful today. While this article focuses on Kansas City, I think the basic issues and arguments are applicable throughout most of North America.
Highway Robbery

Willie Sutton, one of America’s most notorious bank robbers, when asked why he robbed banks, allegedly replied, “Because that’s where the money is.”

It’s a funny and oft-repeated line, but the U.S. Congress has just employed the “Sutton rule” in a way that isn’t funny at all.

You see the federal transportation authorizations bill (often called the “highway bill”) was set to expire on September 30. And the transportation trust fund – the source of vital support for U.S. highways and public transit – was about to dry up.

This created yet another fiscal crisis that Congress needed to fix before it went on its summer recess, August 1. As usual, the Democratic Senate and the Republican House were at odds.

’Smooth’ operators

When all was said and done the Senate agreed to a short-term reauthorizations bill, which contained a House provision that partially financed transportation through a process euphemistically called “pension smoothing.”

Pension smoothing is an insidious little fiscal device (which has also been used in the past by Democrats) that reduces the contributions employers are required to make to their employees’ pension funds. While that increases employers’ federal tax liability, it’s less expensive than paying a pension fund enough to safeguard workers’ retirements.

The federal government benefits from the increased revenue generated by the higher taxes levied on employers who cut the amount of money they contribute to their employees’ pension funds.

And, why are they targeting pension funds? You guessed it – because that’s where the money is – workers’ money. Short-term, money that really belongs to workers is being taken to subsidize government and increase employer profits. A better name for this highway bill might be “highway robbery.”

Folly

It’s not hard to see the folly that is embedded in this scheme. Employers will eventually have to increase contributions to sustain their pension funds, which will decrease their taxes and reduce government revenue. And, inevitably, at least some employers will not be able to come up with the money – leaving their employees without the retirement they earned and had every right to expect. Pensions provided by private employers are at least partially insured by the Pension Benefit Guaranty Corporation (PBGC); however the PBGC itself is woefully underfunded and is in danger of not providing all supposedly “guaranteed” benefits.

It seems Congress has learned nothing from the “Great Recession.” It’s still encouraging the rich to play dangerous games with other people’s money.

This should provide us all with extra incentive to engage in local transit action to demand that Congress pass a real, long-term funding bill that will restore and extend U.S. public transit without resorting to “highway robbery.”

Please visit www.atu.org for more information and the latest ATU news.
ATU International recently recognized financial secretaries who have provided excellent and superior performance for their locals. International President Larry Hanley praised the fin. secs. saying, “I know how hard and often thankless your job is as I was once a financial secretary in my local union.”

Called the “Oscar Award,” after International Secretary-Treasurer Oscar Owens, the recognition is based on a review of the officers’ reports to the International and government agencies, including audit and monthly per capita reports. Their reports were accurate, with few discrepancies, and were submitted on time.

Below are the local financial secretaries, so recognized:

**Financial Secretaries Recognized for Superior Performance**
- in local union order -

David Tancrati (Fin Sec/BA)
Local 448-Springfield, MA

Stephen Szucsik
Local 540-Trenton, NJ

Sheila Roberson
Local 682-Fort Wayne, IN

Joseph Krapfl
Local 779-Sioux City, IA

Albert Walcott
Local 843-Bellingham, WA

John Campanella
Local 880-Camden, NJ

Robert Paid
Local 1182-Saint John, NB

Mark Obert
Local 1603-Bethlehem, PA

**Financial Secretaries Recognized for Excellent Performance**
- in local union order -

William Graham
Local 285-Steubenville, OH

Steven Parrish
Local 1015-Spokane, WA

Kathleen Kelley
Local 1039-Lansing, MI

Douglas Behr
Local 1267-Ft. Lauderdale, FL

Eileen Zibura
Local 1279- Johnstown, PA

Elaine Clifford
Local 1384-Bremerton, WA

Christopher Crawford
Local 1496-Williamsport, PA
Not everyone is happy about having security cameras on buses. So far their chief value has been in identifying criminals after assaults, rather than deterring them, and, of course, there is the concern that the video can be used for disciplinary purposes.

Local 279-Ottawa, ON, was recently rejected in its request that OC Transpo adopt a policy of not using newly installed cameras to spy on its employees – except in cases of suspected criminal activity.

‘How would you do?’

“How would you do in your ability to concentrate if there was a camera placed in your office and you knew it could be turned on remotely at any time and started recording?” asks Local President Craig Watson.

OC’s general manager, John Maconi, countered, “This is definitely not about big brother watching you. I would not want a camera watching my every move, also. This is about safety of our customers, our operators and – I will say it – because there are cases where the operators need to be vindicated because (a situation) was not their fault.”

Watson acknowledged, “With the current management, yes, we don’t see an issue. But we don’t know what could come tomorrow.”

Over the last two years, ATU Local 1181 with assistance from the International has been working hard to fight for the rights and protections of NYC school bus workers, who had been vilified by former NYC Mayor Michael Bloomberg for the city’s financial woes.

School bus drivers and matrons were forced to go on strike in February 2013 when Bloomberg threatened to remove decades-old employee protection provisions (EPPs) from the city's school transportation contracts. It ended a month later when then-front-running candidate Bill de Blasio and other mayoral contenders promised that they would revisit the issue, if elected.

Before he left office Bloomberg removed the EPPs and many struggling school bus workers were forced to leave the industry or accept deep wage cuts last year.

Since de Blasio took office in January, Local 1181 President Michael Cordiello has been in countless meetings with representatives of de Blasio’s administration to reinstate the EPPs.

This has lead to de Blasio proposing a plan to encourage New York City school bus providers to employ veteran workers. Under his plan, $42 million in grants would compensate transportation contractors for some of the costs that they would incur by hiring qualified school bus workers. As of press time the NYC city council is expected to approve the proposal.

Cordiello called de Blasio’s plan a good start and vowed to continue to work to secure the EPPs. “For the last two years, ATU and Local 1181 leadership have fought for the reversal of these wrongheaded policies to restore fairness to our school busing system and stop targeting the men and women tasked with transporting our city’s schoolchildren under the false guise of savings,” said Cordiello. “This is a step in the right direction to rectify the reckless policies of the Bloomberg administration, but we will continue to fight for the rights of our members.”
New London drivers demand adequate bathroom breaks, safe and clean restrooms

The problem of inadequate bathroom breaks for operators continues to plague the transit industry, as computers take over more and more of transit scheduling. Managements looking only to do more with less, regularly disregard the basic human needs of their workers.

Local 1209 members in New London, CT, have brought the issue to the forefront again complaining that Southeast Area Transit (SEAT) is refusing to schedule sufficient time for bathroom breaks, as well as safe, clean bathrooms.

‘They wouldn’t let me speak’

The SEAT board denied Local President Jaroslaw Pizunski permission to present a petition signed by 600 workers asking them to rectify the problem. “They wouldn’t let me speak. They said it was a labor-management issue,” he says.

Pizunski says drivers, now, have to find businesses that will allow them to park their buses and use their bathrooms. Or, they just have to “hold it,” he says.

SEAT did reschedule two routes for driver bathroom break access. The local is pushing to get the transportation center opened for after-hours driver access, and reschedule two additional routes to allow for bathroom breaks.

Many have it so bad, Pizunski says, that, “I have drivers asking me, is it okay to wear a diaper to work.”

Diapers for drivers?

That idea is no laughing matter for conductors in Bangkok and several other areas of Thailand who have taken to wearing adult diapers to work because they are given no bathroom breaks at all.

The problem is leading to illness among these workers who must endure inhuman discomfort throughout their workday for very low wages.

Vancouver transit police address problem of mentally ill passengers

It’s seldom mentioned, yet most drivers have had to deal with it – the problem of the mentally ill passenger.

Now, Vancouver transit police are developing a new policy to address the issue where the number of troubled people taking mass transit seems to be increasing.

“We will not arrest our way out of this,” says Vancouver’s chief police officer. “We have to take a far more sophisticated approach.”

Ten percent of the calls Vancouver’s transit police receive in a year involve a mentally ill person – and the actual number of such calls they expect to receive this year is on track to increase by 20 percent.

Time and resources

But that’s not the whole story, because the amount of time and resources spent on incidents involving the mentally ill is usually far greater than other calls, and can cause long service disruptions as in the case of suicides.

The transit police must also factor in the needs of customers when responding to a mental illness call. Police need to be especially cautious when drugs or alcohol make mentally ill persons more dangerous to themselves and those around them.

The transit police expect to have their new policy complete by October.
Anyone who knows ATU understands that the Union is made up of bus drivers and maintenance workers in cities large and small across the U.S. and Canada. Fewer know that school bus and paratransit employees make up a significant percentage of the membership.

But even fewer know that there are ATU locals that don’t represent transit workers at all. Two of these locals are located in Florida where local laws mandate that all municipal workers be represented by a single union.

That’s why we have ATU locals in Florida that represent workers in every municipal occupation their city employs, and local officers who must acquaint themselves with a much wider variety of professions than the average officer.

Two of these, Local 1464-Tampa, FL, and Local 1591-Broward County, FL, have successfully represented workers such as these for 63 years and 33 years respectively. As you might imagine, their officers must have a broad skillset to promote the interests of those in so many trades.

While their contracts cover a wide variety of occupations – the issues are essentially the same as those faced by all ATU members and all workers. Wages, benefits, fair treatment – these are the concerns of every local no matter the jobs performed by the people they represent.

At the helm of the union is Local President Effrem Green who, along with his fellow officers and shop stewards, has his hands full representing so many different workers in a “right-to-work” state.

“Each section of the government is different,” he says, “and we have to be familiar with their particular cultures in addition to the work they do.”

And, even though the local has retained over 900 of the city’s 1,800 workers, they won’t be satisfied until membership hits 1,000 – hopefully by the end of this year.

‘Every employee should be a member of the Union’

“I believe every employee should be a member of the Union,” Green says, pointing to the benefits his local has achieved for Tampa’s municipal employees, which include pay increases and improvements in work rules in the most recent three-year contract.

Many different jobs create many different challenges such as a recent problem that arose when some of the city’s roadway crew was temporarily transferred to do work with the higher paid storm water crew without being paid the same the higher rate.

Fortunately, the local has cultivated a good relationship with the current mayor and his staff, and they have agreed to find a resolution to the problem that will not require a grievance or expensive arbitration. Because of the respect the mayor has for the local, city government managers are anxious to work things out before a problem hits his desk.

“They hate it,” Green acknowledges, “but they respect us, and that’s all I ask.” Even so, the local president admits, “we have our ups and downs,” but he is grateful that his members “have the right to fight for equality.”
‘Equality’

That’s a word that pops up a lot in Green’s conversation – equality. Being in a union means that “we have the right to fight for equality,” he says.

Teaching members what it means to be in a union is a big part of the local’s job. “You’ve got a contract,” he tells them, “and that has value.”

Green looks for every opportunity to send his officers to national ATU events so that they can tell those who say they “don’t need the union because they don’t get into trouble,” that the Union is about much more than that.

‘We like for our name to get out’

The local is very aware that a lot of their success depends on the efforts they make outside of the union. “We like for our name to get out,” Green explains.

“We formed a political group and sent them to Tallahassee, and they’ve brought back valuable information,” he says. And the local is endorsing a couple of candidates for office.

‘Walking the walk’

Like local officers everywhere, Local 1464’s officers work hard for their members, and that’s one reason they have retained membership in the right-to-work state. “You’ve got to show that the union is working for them,” Green explains.

“We’ve secured raises and changes in the contracts for the members,” he continues. “We walk the walk, and that speaks louder than words. Overall, our members know that we’re moving forward,” he says.

Local 1591-Broward County, FL

Local 1591-Broward County, FL, represents all of the “white collar” employees working for the Broward County Board of Commissioners. Receptionists, librarians, secretaries, and clerical workers are among those the local represents.

They work to improve the wages, benefits and working conditions of their workers, and, are learning that one of the benefits of being a part of the larger ATU is that the members across two nations work together to help each other out, regardless of the kind of work they do.

‘The union is for them’

The local goes out of its way to let Broward County employees know that “the union is for them.” And that can be a challenge in a “right-to-work” state.

When Local President April Williams is asked what keeps her going, she immediately responds with one word: “Justice!” And her main weapon, she says, is “Truth!”

“We need to let people know the truth,” she says.

‘We get it resolved’

The local has worked hard to maintain a good relationship with its employer, and has been successful in resolving a lot of disagreements before they get to the grievance stage.

“They hear us out and we get it resolved,” Williams says. As a result, they have had just two grievances and no arbitrations in the four years she has been president.

The local is helped in this process by advice from the International that is available, as it is to all local presidents, anytime she needs assistance.

The local is looking forward to a new round of collective bargaining beginning in August. This will be the first time the local will use the services of the International in negotiating a new contract – something that further emphasizes the connection they have with the wider membership.

Solidarity

These are only two of the many locals that represent workers other than those ATU has traditionally represented. That they have been successful in a tough right-to-work state is a testament to their hard work, as well as the solidarity that the entire Union shares with them.
Sometimes news about a heroic act is slow to get out because of the humility or reluctance of the hero to come forward. That is the case with Mamie Doyle, 689-Washington, DC, who risked her own life to stop a suicide from taking place.

It happened on a cold morning in February on Route 495 (the Washington “Beltway”) in Virginia. Doyle was driving her bus back to the garage after her first run of the day, when she noticed a woman walking dangerously in the highway toward the Route 1 overpass railing. She immediately called “911”.

Risked her own life

When she saw the woman start to lean over the side of the bridge, she stopped her bus, called the police, and risked her own life running across eight lanes of traffic toward the woman.

Doyle caught the woman by her scarf and jacket just as she was about to leap, and held on even as the woman screamed and cried and fought to escape Doyle’s grasp.

Soon a police officer arrived who managed to place himself on a small icy ledge between the disturbed woman and the drop down to Route 1. He pushed her back, as Doyle moved into a kneeling position to pull her, still struggling, over the rail onto the shoulder of the highway. Doyle physically sat on the woman until more help arrived.

Valor

It was later discovered that the woman had taken PCP, and that if the officer had known that, he would have told Doyle to let her go as the suicide’s presumed strength would have been a real danger to the Metro driver.

Doyle has received a letter of commendation and a “gold valor” award from the police. And she has ATU’s great admiration for her heroic actions far above and beyond the call of duty.

Quick thinking averts tragedy involving RIPTA bus in Providence

A potentially tragic accident was prevented through the heroic efforts of a Rhode Island Public Transit Authority (RIPTA) bus driver.

Heading back to his garage around midnight at the end of his shift, driver Rene Lavoie, 618-Providence, RI, found himself facing the headlights of a car heading the wrong way up his ramp. The driver seemed to be in distress, so Lavoie set his parking brake and offered assistance. Realizing the wrong-way driver was in trouble, Lavoie managed to get in the car, pull it off the ramp, and call for help.

Jamie Pereira, chief of security for RIPTA, said that Lavoie, a RIPTA employee for 20 years, recognized the other man as a fellow RIPTA employee who was on his way home from work and possibly was having a diabetic reaction brought on by low blood sugar.

Lavoie will be commended for his actions.
Rocked by allegations of sexual harassment and publically labeled a “toxic” work environment by female drivers, Ontario’s Hamilton Street Railway (HSR) is facing a leadership shakeup. City Manager Chris Murray led an eight-month probe into allegations of sexual harassment and a “poisoned” work environment.

Murray announced plans to hire a new HSR director to replace the current transportation head. Top HSR officials, were cited in an arbitrator’s decision last fall, awarding $25,000 to an unnamed female transit inspector, finding that a supervisor harassed her. The female worker listed profane insults, unwanted touching and pornographic emails among her complaints. The supervisor has denied these allegations and questioned the fairness of the arbitration proceedings.

Murray is also looking at claims that HSR bureaucrats provided the supervisor with “outstanding” references after firing him during the sexual harassment arbitration hearing. He received somewhere between $133,000 and $200,000 in severance from Hamilton, and was subsequently hired for a new city job in Guelph, ON. After news of the arbitration decision became public, he was fired from that job and has sued for wrongful dismissal.

Local President Eric Tuck, 107-Hamilton, ON, said his membership “wants to see serious changes at the top” and has expressed concerns that the city would “whitewash” the problems. Tuck noted that some members would be dissatisfied to see the current transportation chief retain his post, even in a reduced role. In 2013, the city asked a consultant to look at the HSR culture, but the union wasn’t allowed to see the findings.

‘Poisoned workplace’

Several female HSR drivers spoke out publicly – in spite of fear of reprisals – about a poisoned workplace with widespread harassment ranging from sexual insults to inappropriate touching.

Amy Semple, 37, a city bus driver for eight years, is worried that city leaders will view the arbitration as an “isolated incident,” adding, “I’m frustrated because that seems like the public perception. It’s not isolated. This sort of thing only happens if you have a systemic problem.”

She filed her own sexual harassment complaint with the city in 2009, and is not free to discuss it publicly since it included a nondisclosure agreement.

A former HSR driver, Jennifer Somogyi filed a grievance alleging harassment and a poisoned work environment in 2008, as well as discrimination based on sex. Somogyi’s complaint was settled and her case is also subject to a nondisclosure agreement. Troubling to her were the comments by the transportation head after the arbitration went public. “That’s a lesson I won’t have to learn twice,” he said after vowing to take such complaints more seriously.

“That is difficult for me to hear,” Somogyi said, noting that all the managers in charge when she made her complaint remain in charge today.

“We recognize that significant changes need to be made and the changes have already started,” Murray said. Murray also outlined a plan to bring in human resources specialists to “reshape the thinking, the actions of everyone” in the department.
Wisconsin transit activists say ‘stop the highway’

Transit activists rallied outside as the Wisconsin DOT formally proposed the latest highway expansion it wants to carve through Milwaukee. Their message was clear: “Stop the highway.” Calling the proposal “unnecessary, misguided, and a wasteful project,” the protesters called for different options: better transit, walking and bike connectors.

Frustrated with the agency’s focus on spending billions of dollars for another highway, the groups shouted dissatisfaction about the lavish funds spent without considering other alternatives. Currently, Wisconsin is only considering two options to widen 3.5 miles of highway.

Transit activists around the state and from Milwaukee are vehemently opposed to both. Bruce Speight of the Wisconsin Public Interest Group said, “The Wisconsin DOT should go back to the drawing board. We don’t need to expand the highway; we need to give people real options.”

Job access

Speight added that many low-income Milwaukee residents who rely on transit aren’t able to access jobs. Over the last ten years, Milwaukee transit riders have endured service cuts and fare hikes as budget pressures are squeezing their transit agency. The state has also been tapping funds from local road repairs to build even more excessive highways projects.

Recently, the same coalition representing racial minorities settled in court with the state over the $1.7 billion “Zoo Interchange” project, which they alleged was discriminatory. The judge issued an interim ruling in their favor and the groups agreed to a settlement that awarded $13.5 million in transit funding.

Protesters say that’s a drop in the bucket compared to what Wisconsin spends to move people faster in cars.

San Jose driver helps save woman at bus stop

It was a normal day for Valley Transportation Authority bus driver Janell Rubbo, 265-San Jose, CA, until she noticed a woman between the ages of 65 and 70 lying on the ground of San Jose’s busiest transit station. Rubbo said while it is not uncommon for her to see people napping or resting on the bus benches she had a feeling that something was not right. The woman’s head was lodged underneath the bus shelter, which immediately caught her eye.

After repeatedly asking the woman if she was ok, there was still no response. When there was no sign of movement from her chest, Rubbo took the stranger’s wrist and felt for a pulse. Nothing. With no time to panic, Rubbo ran to her bus, picked up her cellphone and called 911. The dispatcher told her to perform CPR on the woman and warned her that once she started she could not stop until the paramedics arrived at the scene. Rubbo continuously performed chest compressions for seven to nine minutes until paramedics arrived.

While performing chest compressions, the veteran bus driver became overwhelmed and exhausted. No matter how loud she cried out for help, people walked on by and ignored the situation. Out of nowhere a firefighter took her hands off the woman’s chest, and Rubbo rolled over onto her backs. Rubbo describes the scene as an “out-of-body experience.”

Her colleagues are deeming her a hero and have been lobbying for Rubbo to be named employee of the month.
Drivers’ tearful testimony helps pass Winnipeg anti-assault bill

VOCAL SUPPORTERS SQUELCH SINGING SANCTIONS ON CITY BUSES

Years of suffering poured out of ATU drivers as they recounted, through tears, the spitting, punching and humiliation they endured at the hands of passengers during the Winnipeg (MB) City Council's consideration of a bylaw that will put police cadets on city buses to keep the peace.

Local 1505 President John Callahan says his members are happy with the addition of the cadets because they have greater powers to “arrest and detain” than the inspectors.

“The main goal is obviously safety for our ridership and of course our members as well, and hopefully this will help to deter some of the more serious assaults,” Callahan says.

The passage of the legislation is the culmination of two years of work by ATU members and Councillor Brian Mayes (St. Vital), who choked up after the law passed, saying, “People told me their stories, it’s a health and safety issue for the passengers, for the drivers, and I sat through a lot of meetings of people breaking down in tears, even now it's an emotional thing.

This very important legislation was almost sidetracked at the last minute by a provision that was put into the bill banning singing on Winnipeg public transit.

No singing on the bus?

While the intent of the language was clear – that riders should be considerate of other passengers – the unusual prohibition caused a sensation in the city, and an outcry from those who enjoy vocal accompaniment of their morning and evening commutes.

The intonation injunction was subsequently removed allowing this serious safety legislation to be approved.

Toledo transit workers’ campaign for new funding mechanism wins support

Over the past few months Toledo transit workers have been engaged in a campaign to educate riders about the benefits of more public transportation and called on the Toledo Area Regional Transit Authority (TARTA) to change how the agency’s local tax subsidy is collected to fund transit.

Most regions use sales tax funding to pay for mass transit, but TARTA uses property taxes, which are an insufficient, unreliable, and unfair way to fund transit – especially when real estate values slump.

Now the Toledo Blade is backing Local 697’s plan, calling the “current system woefully inadequate” and supporting a regional sales tax to fund a unified, more robust transit system within the Toledo metropolitan area.

Nearly 14 percent of Toledo households do not own vehicles, and rely on public transportation. The Blade says the area needs a steady, reliable, and sustainable funding source to meet the region's increasing needs for mobility and economic growth.

Local 697 members plan to keep their foot on the pedal with the campaign to ensure Toledo has a robust transit system.
ATU denounces FirstGroup CEO pay grab at Scotland shareholders meeting

86% raise for FirstGroup head?

When was the last time you got an 86% raise? Like… never, right?

Well guess what? First Group, the Scottish owner of Greyhound Lines and First Transit in the U.S. and Canada asked its shareholders to sign-off on just that for its top guy – Tim O’Toole. That got the attention of ATU, which sent International Vice President Bruce Hamilton to represent the multinational’s North American employees at its shareholders’ meeting in Aberdeen.

The corporation wants to give O’Toole an £800,000 raise with an annual £600,000 bonus, which comes to a total pay package of £1.9 million. For those of us on this side of “the pond,” that equals a $1.37 million raise and bonuses of $1.03 million, which comes to $3.25 million per year. Pretty sweet, huh?

Thrifty? – Only in North America

But, wait! Aren’t the Scots renowned for their thriftiness and economy? That must only apply to what they pay their workers in North America – particularly their American terminal workers who make less than $11.00 per hour.

So, doing the math, if O’Toole were to work a typical 40-hour week, he’d be making 142 times more per hour than his American terminal employees. And, right now, First is balking at raising these workers’ wages to the point where he would be making only 104 times more per hour.

A FirstGroup spokesman would not comment on Greyhound workers’ pay but said that poor Mr. O’Toole’s salary was frozen at just $1.45 million for the last three years, and that he refused bonuses for the last two. Ouch!

‘Terminal workers deserve justice’

First Group has not responded with the commitment to the raise ATU is seeking for terminal workers. “If they think this is going to go away, they are wrong,” Hamilton asserts. “Terminal workers deserve justice, and they are going to fight until they have it.”

ATU was joined in Scotland by our ally – the International Transport Workers’ Federation. Together they stirred up enough trouble to create a “revolt” in which 25 percent of the shareholders rejected the company’s generous pay proposal.

Pay needs to be ‘thoroughly reviewed’

FirstGroup Chair John MacFarlane responded saying that he believed that executive pay and the gap between employee and senior management had escalated to levels that “probably needed to be thoroughly reviewed.”

Toward that end a new chair has been appointed to the company’s remuneration committee who will “engage with investors to seek their views and ensure ongoing support for the group’s remuneration policy and practices.”

Meanwhile, ATU will continue to fight for a just wage for Greyhound terminal workers until that goal is achieved.
Coach USA charged with NYC anti-trust violations

Confirming the suspicions of ATU and other transit unions around the country, Coach USA has agreed to a $19 million settlement in a class action civil suit after admitting to an audacious and illegal scheme to fix the prices on the popular “Hop on, Hop off” sightseeing buses in New York City.

The company, along with an alleged “competitor,” secretly colluded to fix higher prices on routes, and now have to shell out refunds to anyone who used the buses between 2009 and 2014. Any unclaimed monies will be paid to the New York State attorney general’s office.

Bigger problems

But there are bigger problems ahead for Coach, which faces a civil (not criminal) trial next spring on a complaint filed by the U.S. attorney and the New York attorney general.

According to court papers, this monopoly was not organized by an overzealous underling looking to impress the bus boss.

Indeed, federal and state court papers allege that Coach CEO “Sir” (yes, they give out such titles in the United Kingdom for union-busting) Brian Souter decided such sleight of hand was far too important for anyone to handle but himself.

Starting in June 2008, he flew into New York and hammered out a deal with a former competitor, City Sights, to join forces with the sole intent of raising prices ten percent, which is exactly what they did. They started a new company and took control of 99 percent of the market in New York, with Coach (no surprise there) getting the better end of the deal – 60 percent of the illegal skim.

Did he tell the truth?

What is not clear is what Souter told his board of directors back in the U.K. about how he managed to increase profits by breaking American laws. Did he tell board members the truth or did he hide the real story from them? Inquiring shareholders might want to know.

The court filings claim that helping Souter in this “Hop on, Rip off” plot was Dale Moser, the president of Stagecoach, the Scotland-based parent company of Coach. Instead of worrying about on-time schedules, clean buses, and decent labor contracts, Moser spent hours on New York City street corners “tracking City Sight’s activities, reporting directly to Stagecoach CEO Brian Souter on the frequency of City Sights buses and conducting Internet search queries at Souter’s request.”

The brazen rip-off in plain site was conducted under the watchful eyes of the “reform” Mayor Mike Bloomberg, who once called striking transit workers “thugs” and who never met an anti-union billionaire he didn’t like.

Brazen

Souter and Moser were so brazen that, after receiving subpoenas from the New York State attorney general, who was also investigating the case, they attempted an end-around move by going to the federal Surface Transportation Board (STB), claiming their scam was legal because their operations were “interstate” in nature. The STB stated its concern that the process “may have been manipulated to avoid the antitrust inquiry.”

The companies are being charged with violations of the Sherman Anti-Trust Act.
In a decision that will rob unions of millions of dollars and thousands of union members, the U.S. Supreme Court voted 5-4 to legalize “free riders” in cases where state or local governments and individuals jointly employ caregivers.

The court split along partisan lines, with all five Republican-appointed male justices in the majority and the four other justices – Elena Kagan, Stephen Breyer, Ruth Bader Ginsburg and Sonia Sotomayor – dissenting.

International President Larry Hanley said about the ruling, “The Supreme Court, today, struck down the collective bargaining rights of ‘partial’ public employees and told American personal care and home health care workers that their American Dream might actually become an American Nightmare.

“No one should be fooled into thinking that this decision is only about “partial” public sector workers. In doing the dirty work for the Koch brothers and their ilk, the high court lowered the bar that all employers will feel obligated to meet in compensating their workers.”

Violation of free speech

Justice Samuel Alito’s majority opinion in Harris vs. Quinn, a case involving caregivers from Illinois, said Illinois violated the workers’ 1st Amendment rights to free speech by requiring them to pay “agency fees” – money to cover costs of collective bargaining and contract administration – to the Service Employees, the union a majority voted for.

Capitulation to the privileged few

“Not only will this decision decrease the wages and benefits of many public sector employees,” says Hanley, “but it will degrade the vital services these workers provide the public. However, this capitulation to the privileged few will not go unchallenged.

“Transit workers, in particular, who millions depend upon for essential transportation, will energetically fight any attempt to rob them of their dignity and standard-of-living.”

RTW: Goal is to destroy unions

Dissenting Justice Kagan did find one silver lining: Rejection of the Right To Work group’s scheme to declare all public agencies as open shops, with no requirement for union dues from anyone in any enterprise, public or private. The Right To Work group’s lawyer told reporters after oral argument that destroying unions, in public agencies and in private enterprise, by yanking all dues is his group’s ultimate goal. He even said so, to Justice Antonin Scalia, in court. And that is what Hanley warned about in his statement:

“Make no mistake – this decision is part of an ongoing effort by the obscenely wealthy ultra-rich to render unions totally ineffective, if not eliminate them altogether. And that will ultimately accelerate the current erosion of the middle class and hasten the economic polarization of society that threatens the very foundations of our republic. It is time to fight back, and fight hard, and ATU is prepared to do just that.”

Hanley: Supreme Court decision a threat to all workers
French rail workers organize passengers too

Apparently ATU isn’t the only union in the world promoting justice for transit workers through an alliance with riders. The French workers above hold a banner which, in English, reads, “Rail workers, users – Resisting together for a real public service.” The rail workers employed by TGV, a French high-speed rail service, were holding a 24-hour strike to protest recent job cuts that they say will compromise safety.

‘Transit deserts’ impede access to jobs, depress economic development

A new study is highlighting something that most of us already know – that many people in our urban centers live in areas that can only be called “transit deserts.”

What’s that? According to “Transit Future” – a campaign to build a 21st century transit system in Cook County, IL, a transit desert is “an area that has high demand for transit but lacks access to high-quality transit, meaning that it is more than a half-mile from a rail transit stop and a quarter-mile from high-quality bus service.

The study found that approximately 438,500 Cook County residents live in transit deserts. Nearly a half-million people – roughly one-tenth of the entire population – face restricted mobility and limited access to all of the region’s jobs and amenities. That’s a lot of transit deserts between the lines that radiate out from downtown.

Transit deserts also add further burdens to the working poor who must have a car to get to entry-level jobs. The report shows how the lack of access to employment depresses the economic development of the entire region.

For the record, the CTA disputes the report, even though its findings reflect what other studies have shown in Chicago and all over the U.S.
It was a long hard fight, but Liberal Premier Kathleen Wynne’s public transit building budget was finally passed by Ontario’s newly elected provincial parliament.

It was essentially this budget that caused Leader Andrea Horwath’s New Democratic Party (NDP) to bolt their coalition government with the Liberal Party, and mandated the election that gave the Liberals a majority in the legislature.

Wynne, the first female and openly gay leader of Canada’s largest province, was free to form her own Liberal majority government. And with her party firmly in control of parliament, the budget “stone” which was rejected became the “cornerstone” of Ontario’s new 10-year transit plan.

The new budget calls for $29-billion in new funding for public transit, roads and bridges, and the creation of the Ontario Retirement Pension Plan, a pension for people who do not already have one through their employer.

Cause for concern

But the Liberals also plan to cut hundreds of millions in current spending — a cause for concern for the labor-oriented NDP, and public sector unions.

“It goes back to the story of the Trojan Horse,” says Horwath. It is seen as a big gift and everybody idolizes it, and it’s a wonderful thing to behold. Except that inside are warriors that create havoc. That’s what this budget is. It’s dressed up to look like something progressive but if you scratch the surface, you can see real problems.”

The Liberals will have a fight on their hands if they plan to build public transit on the backs of public sector workers, or if they resort to public/private partnerships (P3s) to accomplish their ends.

Public sector union leaders are also warning Wynne not to attempt a government pay freeze.

Wynne acknowledges that the path ahead will not be easy.

“The momentary glee at the passage of the budget is just that,” she said. “The implementation of this budget will be difficult … governing is not an easy activity, but that’s not the objective, to have a life or a government that does easy things. For me, the objective is to do important things.”

While the goals are laudable, workers will need to be vigilant to make sure that the money to pay the bills doesn’t come only out of their pockets.
Public transit continues to dominate
Toronto mayoral contest

Mark Twain once quoted a friend who said, “Everybody talks about the weather, but nobody does anything about it.”

Toronto’s commuters may well think that their mayoral candidates have fallen prey to the same problem as it relates to public transit in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). Their campaigns will continue until October 27, at which time the voters will essentially decide whose public transit vision they prefer.

Progressive Conservative (PC) candidate John Tory widened the lead between himself (35%) and the two other frontrunners – the scandal-plagued PC mayor, Rob Ford (27%), and New Democratic Party (NDP) candidate Olivia Chow (25%) – in a *Toronto Star* Forum Research poll taken August 5 – 6.

PC candidate Karen Stintz, and David Soknacki (described as a “small c” conservative) have yet to break out of single digits in polling.

John Tory

John Tory wants to build “SmartTrack”, a 53-kilometre, 22-stop surface rail line that would operate on existing GO Transit lines, and the Scarborough subway extension supported by Mayor Ford.

Tory says, “I have assumed that one of my jobs as mayor is going to have to be to go and champion [SmartTrack] with the other two levels of government. With respect to the federal government… if we don’t start the term of office by picking a fight with them on the Scarborough subway, they will be there.”

Rob Ford

Despite his now infamous admitted use of illegal drugs, and subsequent rehab program, Rob Ford has risen to the number two spot in the polls. Ford supports building a subway extension to Scarborough, rather than the previously planned light rail alternative, and would “bury” the Scarborough portion of the Eglinton Crosstown LRT if he’s re-elected – a move that would cost over a billion dollars.

Ford would cancel the recently approved $250-million “Eglinton Connects” project because it reduces driving lanes. He supports the creation of the proposed Yonge Street relief line, as a third priority after subway construction.

Olivia Chow

Olivia Chow, however, would scrap the Scarborough subway extension in favor of cheaper and more quickly built light rail. She would expand existing rush hour service by 10 percent, and favors creating the relief line.

Chow criticizes both Tory and Ford’s plans for creating needless tax burdens and taking far more time to complete. She has consequently positioned herself as the fiscal conservative in the transit debate.

All three candidates have funding plans that may or may not find favor with voters. And the provincial and federal governments will also have a say in how their plans are paid for, as well.

So the transit talk continues, as it has for years already. GTA residents, like Mark Twain, must dearly hope that someday, something will actually be done about it.
La violence cachée

Les événements de Ferguson, au Missouri, soit le meurtre d’un jeune homme qui n’était pas armé et les troubles civils subséquents, ont fait une forte impression partout à travers le monde. Dans une chronique du magazine Time, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar expose la cause profonde du problème, celle qui n’est jamais mentionnée à la télévision.

L’origine du problème

Nous devons prendre du recul et nous éloigner des faits présentés à la télévision, des spéculations sans fin sur la « légitimité » de l’un ou de l’autre des protagonistes. De plus, ne faisons pas l’erreur de croire que le problème s’arrête à la question raciale. Il s’agit d’un problème de classe.

Le fait que les policiers et la classe ouvrière (quoiqu’il s’agisse la plupart du temps de jeunes hommes et de jeunes femmes sans emploi) se confrontent dans la rue est le résultat d’un mal bien plus profond que la simple question raciale.

Comme le mentionne Abdul-Jabbar dans le Time, « à moins que nous voulions laisser l’atrocité de Ferguson se faire avaler par le temps et ne devenir rien de plus qu’un petit irritant historique, nous devons considérer la situation non pas comme un autre acte de racisme généralisé, mais sous un autre angle : celui de la lutte des classes ». Il poursuit ainsi : « Plutôt que de nous unir contre le véritable ennemi, soit les législateurs, politiciens et autres bons à rien au pouvoir, nous tombons dans le piège et nous dressons les uns contre les autres, dépensant notre énergie pour combattre nos alliés plutôt que nos ennemis ».

En Amérique, les dirigeants corporatifs invisibles et les politiciens inutiles cherchent à torpiller nos emplois, nos espoirs et, plus important encore, notre unité. Les policiers se retrouvent alors dans une position difficile où ils doivent assurer le respect de la loi alors que nous laissons la pauvreté se propager dans nos communautés.

Dépouillés de leur dignité humaine

D’un point de vue moral, nous serions en présence d’un combat à forces égales si les jeunes en colère et aux droits bafoués faisaient face à tous ces sénateurs et membres du Congrès qui élaborent les politiques appauvrissant notre pays et contribuant au climat de tension sociale, s’ils faisaient face à tous ces dirigeants de Walmart et de Koch Industries qui paralysent les travailleurs, volent les pensions et combattent les syndicats. Cependant, les sangsues de ce monde, les véritables coupables, se cachent dans leurs tours d’ivoire. Ce sont eux qui créent les troubles civils en nous dépouillant, travailleurs américains, de notre dignité humaine.

Les faits seront éventuellement établis à Ferguson. Nous saurons davantage sur les circonstances et les motifs du meurtre. Dans l’arrondissement de Staten Island à New York, où j’ai grandi, un policier a tué par prise d’étranglement un homme qui avait commis un crime mineur. Dans ce cas-ci comme dans l’autre, pour mettre fin à l’injustice nous devons nous attaquer au fond du problème. Nous devons exiger de nos politiciens qu’ils réorientent les priorités de notre société. Nous devons regarder au-delà de la fumée et des gaz lacrymogènes de Ferguson pour comprendre que Mike Brown, Eric Garner et bien d’autres qui se heurtent à “ la loi ” sont des gens qui tentent de survivre dans une société où les fortunés nous poussent économiquement vers l’âge de pierre.

Kareem Abdul-Jabbar résume bien la situation : « Je ne dis pas que les manifestations à Ferguson ne sont pas justifiées; elles le sont. En fait, nous avons besoin de plus de manifestations partout au pays. Où est notre Kent State University? [NDT : En 1970, suite à la fusillade de Kent State University, des manifestations furent organisées partout aux États-Unis] Que faudra-t-il pour déclencher des manifestations pacifiques de 4 millions d’étudiants? Il sera impossible de provoquer de véritables changements sans une telle mobilisation.

« La classe moyenne doit s’allier aux plus démunis et les Blancs doivent se joindre aux Afro-Américains dans des manifestations de masse afin de chasser du pouvoir les politiciens corrompus, boycotter les entreprises qui exploitent leur propre main-d’œuvre, adopter des lois qui favorisent l’égalité et les perspectives économiques et punir ceux qui mettent en péril notre avenir financier. Autrement, tout ce que nous obtiendrons de Ferguson est ceci : une bande de politiciens et de célébrités qui expriment leur sympathie et leur indignation. Sans un agenda spécifique, soit une liste précise des changements souhaités et de la manière de les concrétiser, nous devrons nous recueillir encore et toujours devant les dépouilles de nos enfants, parents et voisins assassinés. »


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Un tramway nommé « Dilapidation »

UNE COURSE AU GASPILLAGE D’ARGENT ET LE TRAMWAY DE KANSAS CITY

Votre ville possède-t-elle un service ou un projet de développement de tramway? Un projet de financement sera-t-il voté? Si vous avez répondu oui à l’une de ces questions, vous n’êtes pas seul. Vous avez joint 35 villes aux États-Unis et au Canada. Dans certaines villes, nos membres se voient transférés à des postes « retour vers le futur ». Dans d’autres, comme ma ville natale, Kansas City, un vaste plan de privatisation est en cours.

Les débats ont commencé. Quels itinéraires devraient être modifiés afin d’accommoder un tramway? De telles modifications permettraient-elles d’offrir un meilleur transport en commun?

Une course vers le gaspillage d’argent?

Selon certains, de nombreuses villes ont entrepris une « course vers le gaspillage d’argent ». D’autres se demandent si les tramways ne servent qu’aux touristes. D’autres encore mettent en avant les importants dépassements de coûts des projets. Arlington, dans l’État de la Virginie, est un des exemples cités dans le magazine Atlantic, lequel rapporte des coûts s’élevant à « 100 millions de dollars de plus que la projection précédente du comté ».

Trop souvent, la planification des transports en commun est une pensée après coup, une pensée sans considération pour les intérêts concertés des passagers, des contribuables et des promoteurs. Nous connaissons nos passagers, mais nous devons également connaître les faits de manière experte afin de guider nos communautés dans le débat.

Bill Onasch, vice-président à la retraite de la section locale 1287-Kansas City, au Missouri, a récemment écrit un article sur le même sujet. Je partage ci-dessous quelques-unes de ses observations et vous encourage à visiter le lien pour lire l’intégralité de l’article. Il s’agit d’une introduction à l’histoire de différents systèmes de tramway (http://kclabor.org/wordpress/?cat=7).

Rétro cool

« Les tramways sont largement présentés comme étant «cool» et «écologiques». Si je n’ai pas les qualifications pour déterminer ce qui est «cool», j’ai toutefois des opinions bien arrêtées sur les conditions qui pourraient rendre les tramways utiles, opinions fondées sur des études et mon expérience personnelle. Bien que cet article se concentre sur Kansas City, je crois que les problèmes et les arguments de base s’appliquent pratiquement partout en Amérique du Nord.

« Après des décennies d’études, le rejet des électeurs de plusieurs projets de train léger sur rail (TLR) et leur approbation d’un projet de TLR de type « Walt Disney » par un fauteur de trouble très habile à obtenir des signatures (plus tard mis au ban du conseil municipal), la construction d’un trajet de trois kilomètres parcourant le centre-ville de Kansas City a finalement débutée. Les rails sont posés à grands frais sur des rues déjà bien desservies par des autobus. Le tramway vers nulle part est identique à un plan de TLR antérieur, que le maire de l’époque avait qualifié, avec justesse, de « frou-frou pour touristes ».

« Hypocrisie »

« Le fait que ce projet ait été pris en charge par le conseil municipal plutôt que par l’agence des transports en commun responsable de la région métropolitaine suggère que nous sommes en présence d’un projet de « développement » payé par les contribuables qui profite aux riches et célèbres plus qu’il n’améliore le service de transport en commun, honteusement négligé. La décision de ne pas faire appel aux travailleurs syndiqués de la section locale 1287 afin de conduire et d’entretenir les nouveaux tramways s’apparente à une déclaration de guerre envers le Syndicat uni du transport de la part des gestionnaires municipaux de partout aux États-Unis.

Ce retour hypocrite au tramway cache une véritable cupidité et signifie un retour à la crise pour le transport en commun de Kansas City. Nous devons y répondre en exposant la vérité au public, en mobilisant les employés et les passagers des transports en commun, les membres du mouvement syndical, les environnementalistes, les étudiants et les aînés afin de forcer les politiciens à faire marche arrière. Une fois que nous aurons sauvagé nos intérêts, les mêmes forces à l’œuvre pourront imposer le développement et l’amélioration véritable du transport en commun.

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Un vol à main armée

Lorsqu’on a demandé à Willie Sutton, l’un des plus célèbres braqueurs de banque des États-Unis, pourquoi il braquait des banques, ce dernier aurait répondu : « Parce que c’est là où se trouve l’argent. »

Il s’agit d’une citation drôle et souvent répétée, mais le Congrès des États-Unis vient tout juste d’appliquer la « règle de Sutton » d’une manière qui n’est pas drôle du tout.

Voyez-vous, le projet de loi fédéral d’autorisation des transports (souvent appelé le projet de loi « autoroute ») devait prendre fin le 30 septembre. De plus, le fonds en fiducie du transport, la source vitale de soutien des autoroutes et du transport en commun des États-Unis, était sur le point de s’épuiser.

Ainsi est née une autre crise financière que le Congrès devait résoudre avant sa pause estivale, le 1er août. Comme d’habitude, le Sénat (à majorité démocrate) et la Chambre (à majorité républicaine) étaient en désaccord.

Des opérateurs « aplanis »

À la fin du processus, le Sénat a accepté de réapprouver à court terme le projet de loi, lequel comportait une disposition pour la Chambre permettant de financer en partie le transport par l’entremise d’un processus appelé, par euphémisme, un « aplanissement des pensions ».

L’aplanissement des pensions est en fait un mécanisme fiscal insidieux (déjà utilisé auparavant par les démocrates) qui réduit les contributions exigées des employeurs afin de constituer le fonds de pension de leurs employés. Bien que les employeurs voient ainsi augmenter leur charge fiscale fédérale, il leur en coûte moins cher que de payer un fonds de pension qui permet d’assurer la retraite des travailleurs.

Le gouvernement fédéral bénéficie d’une augmentation des revenus générés par les impôts supérieurs imposés aux employeurs, lesquels réduisent le montant de leur contribution aux fonds de pension de leurs employés.

Pourquoi cibler les fonds de pension? Vous l’avez deviné : parce que c’est là que se trouve l’argent. L’argent des travailleurs. À court terme, l’argent qui appartient en vérité aux travailleurs est utilisé afin de subventionner le gouvernement et augmenter les profits des employeurs.

Il serait peut-être préférable d’appeler ce projet de loi « autoroute » un « vol à main armée ».

Bêtise

Il n’est pas difficile de voir la bêtise de cette combine.

Les employeurs auront éventuellement à augmenter leurs contributions s’ils prévoient maintenir leurs fonds de pension, ce qui réduira leurs impôts et les revenus du gouvernement. Ensuite, inévitablement, au moins quelques employeurs ne seront pas en mesure d’amasser l’argent nécessaire. Les employés n’auront ainsi pas accès à la retraite qu’ils méritent et qu’ils sont en droit de réclamer. Les pensions offertes par les employeurs privés sont au moins partiellement assurées par la Pension Benefit Guaranty Corporation (société de garantie des prestations de pension) (PBGC). Cependant, la PBGC elle-même est lamentablement sousfinancée et risque de ne pas être en mesure de fournir toutes les prestations soi-disant « garanties ».

Il semblerait que le Congrès n’a rien appris de la « grande récession ». Il encourage toujours les riches à jouer des jeux dangereux avec l’argent du peuple.

Cette situation devrait nous stimuler davantage à nous engager dans les activités de nos sections locales afin d’exiger du Congrès qu’il adopte un projet de loi à long terme restaurant et développant le transport en commun aux États-Unis, et ce, sans avoir à commettre des « vols à main armée ».

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