

RADICAL TEACHER

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Occupying the Red Line—Radical Education, One Subway Car at a Time

by Joe Ramsey



PHOTO BY ERIC DROOKER

We work in teams of three or four, starting at the back of the train (in Davis Square, Somerville), and working our way forward, car by car, as the Red Line heads South (towards Ashmont, Dorchester). We carry stacks of leaflets, stickers, bundles of Boston Occupier newspapers, clipboards tucked under our arms—a band of guerilla radical educator-agitators, the revolution underground, riding the rails.

I take the speaker's position near the center of the car, where—with the right vocal projection—it is possible to reach riders at both ends at once. I wait until the car doors shut (a muffled loud-speaker announcement giving way to an electric ding ding), take a deep breath, and use my diaphragm to lift my voice above the grind and howl of the barreling train, without going shrill. Sometimes, on a crowded train, I will alert those passengers right beside me with a smile; things are about to get loud:

"Good afternoon, my fellow T-riders, if I may have your attention for 2 minutes? I know many of you have had a long day at work, so I promise to keep it short. I'm working with the Boston Fare Strike Coalition. That's Boston Fare Strike Coalition. We're a group of T-riders who have come together to defend our public transportation system, against the politicians and the bankers who are out to wreck it. They Say Fare Hike. We Say Fare Strike! As I'm sure most of you already know: the MBTA and the Mass State Legislature recently raised the price of riding the T in our city. On July 1, they jacked up our fares by 23%, while cutting services. Making us all pay more for less. They raised fares on students and seniors by close to 50%, and on the disabled by over 100%, balancing the budget on the backs of the most vulnerable members of our community. We say this is wrong."

Boston Fare Strike (BFS) grew out of the organization known as Occupy MBTA, or "Occupy the T," an official working group of Occupy Boston (OB) formed shortly after the police destruction of OB's encampment at Dewey Square, and in response to the Mass Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA)'s announcement in Jan. 2012, that to cover a projected \$100+ million budget shortfall, they would be resorting to a mix of draconian service cuts and fare hikes. Occupy MBTA's efforts included public outreach to T riders and other community organizations, as well as protest rallies and marches, street theater, and "mic checks" at MBTA hearings aimed at pressuring public officials, sharpening rider opposition, and shifting the public discourse around both the underlying causes and the

human impacts of the projected cuts to public transportation. What distinguished our work in Occupy MBTA from that of other T-advocacy groups (most notably the T-Riders Union, known as TRU) is how we worked to frame the T's budget crisis in a more radical way—by examining not only the history but also the corporate beneficiaries of the huge debt load that the transit system has been burdened with since 2000, by contrasting the lack of federal funding to mass transit with the immense resources poured into the military and prison budgets, by discussing mass transit expansion as a global environmental necessity, and by discussing wealth inequality and austerity (not just "bad policy" or "bad management") as the roots of the current public funding crisis. We also worked to introduce bolder forms of mass direct action and media spectacle into the campaign to "Save the T."

Occupy MBTA's work, in tandem—but also in tension—with that of longer established non-profit advocacy groups such as the TRU, whose pragmatic approach and investment in existing state structure often made them resistant to Occupy's approach, culminated in a major protest rally on April 4th inside and outside the Massachusetts Statehouse, alongside members of the local transit worker union the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU). In many ways, April 4th marked both Occupy MBTA's greatest victory, and its defeat; it was our largest and most spirited rally—several hundred attended (see video footage at www.occupymbta.org)—but it was also the date when the Massachusetts Department of Transportation formally enacted its regimen of cuts and especially of fare hikes, albeit over a massive rider outcry of "Shame! Shame! Shame!" The rally represented a significant declaration of opposition, but also marked the moment when the emergent Occupy-MBTA coalition began to stumble, stall and fracture. After all, the group had built its work around the clear and concrete (albeit largely reactive) demands: 1) no hikes, no cuts, no layoffs; and 2) a comprehensive, sustainable, and affordable public transportation plan that works for the 99%! With both hikes and cuts enacted and discussion of a "comprehensive" plan put off to the indefinite future, what was to become of such a defensive formation? From the start Occupy MBTA had been composed of a mix of radical and more liberal tendencies, of those inclined towards lobbying established politicians and those towards direct action. With the immediate, unifying force of a common

enemy no longer a threat but a fact of law, what was our coalition to do?

This tricky transition was compounded and obscured by the most audacious T-Occupier action yet, a 10-day occupation of the statehouse steps, kicked off at the April 4th rally, to protest the MBTA plan in the form of "Camp Charlie," named after the MBTA's ironic official mascot, the permanently imprisoned protagonist from "Charlie on the MTA." Made famous by the Kingston Trio in the 1950s as the "man who never returns," Charlie "rides for ever 'neath the streets of Boston," because he cannot afford the cost of the fare hike (then implemented as a 5 cent transfer fee). The affinity group that launched Camp Charlie, acting autonomously, and citing (understandable, but ultimately misplaced) "security concerns," failed to even inform other members of the Occupy MBTA coalition about its plans; some of us rallied to support the action in what ways we could, even though we had not been included in the planning; others did not.

Looking back, the Camp's main impact, despite some high moments (see for instance the excellent speech "From Occupy to Revolution" given there by Barbara Foley on YouTube, or the stunning public sculpture about fare-free mass transit, which occupiers erected) were five-fold: 1) to exhaust the most committed core members of the OccupyMBTA coalition; 2) to cut off the most integral organizers of the coalition from the (web-based) resources that had been key to the movements coordination; 3) to alienate many coalition members who had not been consulted about the dramatic tactical change; 4) to dilute the message of our particular struggle by drawing into the mix sectors of the movement more interested in physically occupying than in T issues; and 5) to disperse the focus of the movement, unceremoniously ending our weekly indoor meeting schedule and the more cohesive and targeted work of Occupy MBTA.

"Come together with your friends, co-workers, fellow riders, and other members of Boston Fare Strike and refuse to pay the fare."

After Camp Charlie, we all needed a break. Following a month of dispersion, exhaustion, recovery, and regroupment, Boston Fare Strike emerged in late May-early June 2012 as an effort to refocus, to radicalize what remained, and to move beyond protesting the MBTA plan,

to building actual direct action resistance against the fare hikes implementation in July, 2012.

Of course this organizational, strategic, and tactical shift called for a rhetorical shift when "riding the rails": we were no longer just trying to get riders to attend rallies and hearings, but to refuse to pay the raised fares themselves, in an act of civil disobedience:

"We at Boston Fare Strike say this fare hike amounts to making you pay an additional TAX just to get to work. A TAX to get to school. A TAX to get to the doctors or to get groceries. It's a TAX on T riders, on poor and working people, at the same time the rich are making record profits and DODGING taxes like never before. It's a wage CUT when wages are already too LOW as it is. We at BFS say that this is wrong. And we won't go along with it. We say it's right to resist this attack. It's right to refuse to be abused. They Say Fare Hike. We say Fare Strike!"

Sometimes I stop here. Sometimes I have to. The time between T stops varies, as does the mood of the passengers, not to mention my own ability to keep my rap clear while I address anywhere between twenty and ninety fellow riders at the top of my lungs. Most of the time, though, I am able to keep my focus and the crowd's interest and can continue on to the second half of the speech, where I draw out an interpretation of the underlying economic and political significance of the recent transportation cuts and hikes. From an educational standpoint, I see this second-half as key:

"The Big Lie here is that there 'isn't any money' so these cuts are 'necessary.' Don't believe it. These cuts aren't necessary. There's plenty of money. It's just in the hands of a few. The richest 1% of the population owns more wealth than the bottom 50% in our society. But they are telling US that we need to 'suck it up' and pay more, while the RICH run off with billions. It's time we get the money from the people that GOT the money, the people that TOOK the money. There's plenty of wealth in this world to make necessary things like Transportation free for all. The U.S. government spends TRILLIONS on war every year, trillions on bank bailouts. But when something that the people actually NEED is in budget crisis, then they act like 'there's no money.' The Banks Get Bailed Out, but We get Sold Out. We at Boston Fare Strike say, that 'If the Banks Get a Free Ride . . . Why Can't We?' We are calling for people to participate in a voluntary campaign of FARE REFUSAL across the city. Come together with your friends,

co-workers, fellow riders, and other members of Boston Fare Strike and refuse to pay the fare. Together we can send a message to the MBTA, the banks, and the politicians, and to our fellow riders that we won't be treated like cattle anymore. That we won't go along with an abusive plan that raises fares on the poor while continuing to pay interest profits to the rich. That public transportation is a right that belongs to all. At Boston Fare Strike, we say: It's right to refuse to be abused. Thank you for your time."

Sometimes, I close with a nod to the future cutbacks that are—sure as you can read this—coming, just as are bipartisan cuts to other social "entitlements." (Already another \$100 million+ budget deficit is being projected for next year, meaning that more service cuts and fare hikes are likely right around the corner, even as this article is appearing. Similar cuts appear to be on the way in New York City.) I always try to open and close with language that signals basic respect for the people I am addressing.

As I am speaking, others hand out leaflets that (on one side) explain why the T fare hikes are wrong and unfair, and (on the other) offer practical "how to" guidelines for avoiding the fare ("hold the door for the person behind you," "use a backpack to trigger the sensors"). Another fare striker tapes up flyers over the corporate advertising that has somehow become our subway's wallpaper. "They Say Fare Hike, We Say Fare Strike!" proclaims our leaflet cartoon striker, as she gleefully kicks over a turnstile. In a sense this leaflet holds together competing tendencies within our tenuous coalition; there are those of us more committed to mass education, and those committed more to "action"; tending to be more anarchist-inclined, their pedagogy at times amounts to the "propaganda of the deed." Preferring the mode of the saboteur to the agitator, these comrades' signature action is to help stickers find their way over the sensors that trigger the subway turnstile doors, liberating T stations, for a minute or an hour, making free rides available to all those coming into the station. The hope is that a taste of free transit, and of civil disobedience, will prove enticing, if not addictive. The hope is also that those, particularly youth in poor communities, who already often rely on fare evasion to move about the city, may come to see their already existing resistance in somewhat more politicized and social terms.

Afterwards we engage people in individual or small group discussions, field questions, invoke radical horizons,

speak to objections, clear up factual confusion, sometimes debate tactics, circulating the clipboard and sign-up sheet as we go. (We have had hundreds of people sign up in support, though we have found that email leaves much to be desired as a mode of follow-up with new contacts.) We are trying to find a way to turn these subway cars into radical classrooms—indeed, the Red Line rides about an hour from end to end, not too different in length from the typical college class. Nor are most T riders any less capable of or less interested than tuition-paying undergrads in having a critical conversation about how capitalist austerity and ruling class war demands a radical approach to fighting back. It is a ripe and teachable space, all the more so for the way they include a great number of people who are very likely to be excluded from our college classrooms, for not being able to pay. More recently, we have found bus stations (such as Ashmont, at the end of the Red Line) to be even more receptive—not surprising considering the class demographics of bus vs. subway riders)—though the MBTA police are quicker to descend on "solicitors" above ground than under it.

Make no mistake: this is not something that subway riders in Boston (anywhere?) are used to. Nor is it something we T-occupiers have quite figured out yet. But the reception is generally very positive, the prospects are real. Some T-riders applaud and cheer, others smile and nod. Some may never turn off their i-pods, but the vast majority do. People will give you two minutes, even three—that is one thing we have learned—at least if and when you seem passionately committed to the issues at hand. Many of them appear energized by a radical, class critique of the existing system. Often the more radical pitch gets the more enthusiastic response, and often it is not until one signals a more revolutionary aspiration—pointing out that the T struggle is really only one front in a wider struggle of the 99%, or that capitalism itself needs to go—that some riders get excited about the campaign. Many seem excited that someone is finally saying out loud and in public what they have been thinking privately. At worst, we are giving them a bit of free protest theater to fill the gray void of the commute. It depends on the part of the city we are working in, of course, but, especially in the historically working-class and non-white areas of the city (for instance Dorchester and Roxbury on the South side of the Red Line I most frequently ride), a strong majority of people are visibly and audibly appreciative of what we have to say. And the fact that we are looking to

hear what they think as well. In fact a significant adjustment we have made in the course of our campaign has been to try and slow down the dash from car to car, to give us a chance to really converse and connect with those who are most interested. We have much more work to do in this direction of deepening the conversation.

Once we have had a chance to leaflet and talk with those who are interested, we head out the doors and then back inside the next T car, holding the doors for one another, heading towards the front of the train, ready to create another fly-by guerilla radical classroom on the Red Line.

It is very much a work in progress, but it is an ongoing attempt to "Occupy the T," an attempt in Boston to bring the spirit of Occupy to the people, where they are at, to concretize the motto "We are the 99%" in ways that can contribute to stirring popular consciousness towards root-cause interpretation of everyday working-class issues. We are bringing radical political discourse into a public space where corporate ads and muffled loud speakers of the state usually rule, even as that public space—and the service it enables—is itself under attack, and even as T stations and T cars concentrate huge numbers of working-class people, outside the discipline of the workplace, on a day-to-day basis. What has been keeping us from turning T stations and T cars into radical popular classrooms? How many people could we reach each week, each month, if we took seriously the call to occupy our daily commute?

For many occupier-activists, post-occupation, this has been a big—and often an uncomfortable—step forward: engaging everyday people—reaching out directly to non-activists, struggling to express often radical beliefs in accessible and popular language that can reach people in demanding circumstances, preaching to the non-converted, dealing with people's questions and resistance, on your feet, in real time. (It would seem that radical teachers, who are familiar with operating in such a high-pressure

zone, could have lots to contribute to this sort of a campaign.) At the very least this effort to Occupy the T has taught many of us how long we still have to go on this radical Red Line we seek to ride, this train on which, as long-time Boston radical historian and activist Howard Zinn would say, no one can be neutral.

Once we hit the end of the line, we work the station in Ashmont, talking to those waiting for buses, sometimes 'liberating' more station doors. Then we head back North, starting again at the back of the train, working forward, car by car. In this way, it is possible to reach hundreds, sometimes even a thousand people in the course of not much more than an hour or two.

We have passed out thousands of newspapers and leaflets. Riding the rails has become one of the primary means through which our local occupy paper distributes thousands of free papers each month, one year after the police eviction of Dewey Square. Subways remain a place where people still actually do read print newspapers.

In a case of the form outstripping the content, even after the T-struggle has somewhat quieted here in Boston, at least until the next round of cuts, occupy activists continue to seek to transform mass transportation into both an occasion for and a site of radical popular education. We have learned that Occupying the T doesn't have to be about T-specific issues; that public transportation is a potential space for radical education on other issues as well. Like many public spaces, it is a potential weak link in the capitalist system, (even as it is essential to that system's functioning), a zone where the contradiction between socialized production and privatized control provides an opening, for outreach, agitation, education, investigation, and the constitution of new forms of working-class collectivity and resistance. But only if we take up the challenge.



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