

Building the Antiracist, Anti-Imperialist United Front:

Theory and Practice from the
L.A. Strategy Center and Bus Riders Union

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I. The National Context: The Rise of the Right and the Challenge to the Antiracist, Anti-Imperialist Left

The electoral victory of George Bush is an unmitigated disaster for people of color in the United States—the 90 percent of the black electorate who voted against Bush understood better than anyone the danger of the mass executioner from Texas. But the election also exposed the absence of a viable, nationally coordinated antiracist, anti-imperialist Left—as Gore disdainfully took for granted the black and Latino vote in a futile effort to pander to white, male, racist voters and Nader ran on the politics of white populist anticorporatism, completely ignoring the centrality of the antiracist struggle.¹ For those of us whose objective is to build an antiracist, anti-imperialist united front, we are confronted with an ascendant racist, pro-imperialist united front that incorporates the entire leadership and membership of the Republican Party as well as the majority of the Democratic Party dominated by the Democratic Leadership Council. This article addresses the challenge of building an independent, multiracial Left rooted in communities of color, specifically the working class, and

from that base “uniting all who can be united” in a series of strategic and tactical alliances to oppose such a formidable pro-imperialist bloc.

At the height of the revolutionary achievements of the “sixties”—1955 to 1975—the leaders of the antiracist and anti-imperialist movements were also the leaders of the multiracial Left—Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), Black Panther Party, League of Revolutionary Black Workers, Young Lords, Red Guards, I Wor Kuen, Brown Berets, La Raza Unida Party, August 29th Movement, and many influential radical and revolutionary collectives of women and people of color. Today, the historical split within the U.S. Left remains in stark relief: On one side is a white-dominated, chauvinist Left that sees the United States as an “advanced capitalist country” and frames class issues in a way to effectively liquidate the centrality of the struggle for national liberation inside and outside the United States; on the other side are predominantly people of color with an antiracist, anti-imperialist tendency who see the United States as a world empire and *the struggle of oppressed nations as the central class ques-*

tion as part of an international united front against our own government.

U.S. imperialism is a system of monopoly capitalism requiring the exploitation, oppression, and subjugation of whole nations and peoples. This makes the struggles of oppressed peoples inside the empire's home base very difficult. Given the social formation of the United States as a settler state based on virulent white supremacy, the racialization of all aspects of political life operates as a material force in itself—shaping and infecting every aspect of the political process. Thus any effective Left movement must confront and challenge the major fault lines of the empire at both its strongest and weakest links. In a racist, imperialist society, the only viable strategy for the Left is to build a movement against racism and imperialism—or else it is condemned to ally with the imperialist class and degrade its struggle to a larger share of the spoils of empire.

The Labor/Community Strategy Center (LCSC) is a Left institution, an experimental form that seeks to contribute to a united front against U.S. imperialism rooted in the strategic alliance of the multiracial, multinational working class in alliance with oppressed peoples and nations both inside and outside the United States. *In this alliance, the black and Latino working classes have a unique, essential, pivotal, and irreplaceable role—simultaneously as leaders of the entire working class and as leaders of their own people's struggle for full equality, national liberation, and self-determination.* Moreover, the working class of color is strategically located and is often the majority in the urban megacities vital to the empire—New York, Philadelphia, Atlanta, Chicago, Detroit, Cleveland, Houston, Miami, Oakland/San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Washington, D.C.

In the work of the Strategy Center and its affiliated mass campaigns—the United Auto Workers Campaign to Keep GM Van Nuys

Open (1982–1992), the Watchdog Environmental Justice Campaign (1990–1994), the Campaign to Defeat the Weed and Seed Program in Los Angeles (1992–1993) and the Bus Riders Union's (BRU) "Fight Transit Racism" campaign (1993–present)—the focus has been on building "independent social movements" that are antiracist, rooted in the working class of color, and fighting various manifestations of racism and national oppression.² These social movements are trying to build broad united fronts, but begin with what Mao Tse-tung referred to as "independence and initiative in the united front"—independent, working-class forces in a struggle for leadership within the elaborate network of often-vacillating, pro-imperialist gatekeepers, including the Democratic Party; corporate public-private partnerships; the white, regressive liberals; and the black, Latino, and Asian political establishment.

This article addresses a limited number of key questions in our organizing work that pose challenges for a broader Left strategy:

- The black/Latino working-class alliance
- The class struggle in communities of color
- The efforts to evolve an antiracist culture among whites and struggle against white chauvinism
- The challenges to civil rights law and the dangers of a legal nullification of the 1964 Civil Rights Act
- Future directions for the antiracist movement



II. The Los Angeles Context: Building a Movement of Resistance in an Imperialist Megacity

Theory-Driven Practice

In 1989, the founders of the Strategy Center reflected the intersection of three political traditions—the radical movements of the black and Latino communities in Los Angeles (Black Panthers, Chicano Moratorium, Chicano studies movement), the antirevisionist communist movements (League of Revolutionary Struggle, Revolutionary Communist Party, Communist Labor Party), and the Left wing of the United Auto Workers, (UAW Local 645, a militant, Chicano-led local and the national New Directions Movement). The Center saw itself as a transitional, experimental Left form—with less of a unified macro political line than a Left party, but in fact with very developed positions on the trade unions and an antiracist, anti-imperialist “theory driven practice.”

- At a time when the UAW campaign was under concerted attack from GM and the UAW International, the Center’s leadership looked to initiate additional “big picture” mass campaigns—participating in a hoped-for national and international Left movement from a strong base in a megacity with 10 million inhabitants.
- The Center’s National School for Strategic Organizing has recruited and trained more than seventy-five Left organizers, primarily women and people of color, to theorize their work and test their practice in mass campaigns; it has developed publications focusing on strategy and tactics, reaching out to “the opinion leaders of the oppressed.”

- The Center targeted transnational capitalist corporations such as GM and Texaco, corporate developers, Tutor Saliba, and Parsons Brinkerhoff, as well as institutions of the bourgeois state—the police, the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), the federal Weed and Seed Program, the South Coast Air Quality Management District, the Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA), the city council, the county board of supervisors, the state legislature, and the U.S. Congress.

In Search of the Working Class: The Bus As a Factory on Wheels.

As with all Center campaigns, the work in 1993 began with an investigation into the actual conditions of the multiracial working class. We quickly became excited about the positive “objective conditions” that the bus provided for organizing.

Given the high degree of spatial and social segregation of all the races, it is difficult to find neighborhoods or workplaces where black, Latino, Asian, and white workers congregate. This has been exacerbated by the deindustrialization of the heavy industrial factories—Ford Pico Rivera; Firestone and Goodyear tire; Bethlehem Steel; GM Southgate; and, after a ten-year struggle, the GM Van Nuys plant—in which more than 35,000 black, Latino, and white workers once shared common workplaces and common labor unions. Today, the buses of Los Angeles provide one of the few arenas in which to reconnect with the urban working class.

- *Composition.* The population of Los Angeles County is 45 percent Latino, but the bus riders are almost 50 percent Latino; the county is 10 percent black but the bus riders are 22 percent

black; the county is 13 percent Asian/Pacific Islander and the bus riders are the same percentage; the county is 30 percent white and the bus riders are 19 percent white. The bus ridership is 57 percent female. Sixty percent of all bus riders make a family income of \$15,000 a year, and another 20 percent make \$15,000 to \$30,000 a year. On most inner-city bus lines, the passengers are 100 percent people of color—black, Latino, and Asian.

- *Size and strategic placement.* There are 400,000 daily bus riders, the equivalent of 100 GM Van Nuys factories, or virtually the entire U.S. membership of the UAW. At a time when many workplaces have twenty-five to fifty employees, an overcrowded bus has forty-three people sitting and twenty-five to forty-three people standing. Ten organizers on ten different buses can reach 1,000 or more people in a single afternoon.
- *The fight for public space.* The bus driver is usually very cooperative, so the BRU organizer can carry out her work with relative impunity. By contrast, in our door-to-door work in the Los Angeles harbor area, many women, after brief periods of enthusiastic activity, literally disappeared, warning us not to come to their house out of fear of retaliation from a possessive or brutal husband or boyfriend. Similarly, it is difficult to contact immigrant and nonunion workers at their workplace because of repression from their employers, and in the downtown business district the office buildings act almost as armed fortresses. Public transportation is one of the few remaining public

spaces over which there can be effective contestation.

III. The Bus Riders Union/Sindicato de Pasejeros

The Bus Riders Union/Sindicato de Pasejeros (BRU) was initiated by the Strategy Center in 1993 to address the environmental racism of auto-based pollution; to establish a first-class, bus-centered mass transit system; and to fight for mobility for the working class of color to get to schools, jobs, hospitals, and recreation. The MTA, with a massive \$3 billion annual budget, had established a two-tiered separate and unequal mass transportation system—an opulent rail system for a significantly white, significantly suburban small group of “choice” rail riders (50,000 per day) and a dilapidated bus system for an overwhelmingly black, Latino, Asian, and low-income white “transit-dependent” population—400,000 daily riders, 94 percent of all the MTA’s passengers.

The political economy of the MTA reflects the structural adjustment model of Third World development—a cutting off of the social wage of the urban working class even as corporate developers use the bourgeois state and public funds to advance construction projects for private and political profit. The rail lines are prohibitively expensive—\$300 million a mile for subway track, \$200 million for above-ground “light” rail—and often underused once built because they do not provide the flexibility of bus service in a decentralized city where the affluent still prefer their cars.

This procapitalist development model is strongly supported by the AFL-CIO labor bureaucracy whose construction unions get fat contracts building rail projects, as the new bourgeois “economic development” class of color, still thwarted in the highest ranks of

corporate America, seizes the state as a patronage pit for its own petty politics.

Winning Legal Victories

In 1993–1994 the BRU protested the racism of the MTA's mass transit system, only to have the MTA defiantly try to finance its next rail project by raising the bus fare from \$1.10 to \$1.35 and eliminating the \$42 monthly bus/rail pass.

On September 1, 1994, the BRU, represented by the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund (LDF), marched into federal court to seek injunctive relief. Judge Terry Hatter found the MTA in violation of Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, inflicting "irreparable harm" on minority bus riders, and issued a temporary restraining order to stop the fare increases and the cancellation of the bus pass. That victory put the BRU on the political map and shifted the balance of power in the city in our favor for years to come.

For the next two years, LDF attorneys and Strategy Center staff compiled a powerful legal record of the MTA's racial discrimination. In October 1996, the LDF and the BRU reached an agreement with the MTA, reflected in a historic consent decree in the case of *Labor/Community Strategy Center et al. v. Los Angeles MTA*.³

- Although the consent decree did not produce a "finding of liability," convicting the MTA of racial discrimination, the media portrayed it as substantiation of the BRU's charges of transit racism.
- The MTA agreed to institutionalize the monthly bus/rail pass, restore its price to \$42, and create the first ever \$11 weekly bus pass.
- The consent decree created a legal entity, the Joint Working Group, with four members each from the MTA

and BRU, to implement the decree and jointly shape MTA policy. The court recognized the BRU as the "class representative" of 400,000 bus riders.

- The MTA agreed to replace old buses and expand its fleet. Through three years of BRU demonstrations, lobbying at every monthly MTA board meeting, and further legal actions by LDF, the MTA, in 1999, ordered 1,200 new buses to radically modernize its fleet. This was a massive structural victory for the BRU—a \$400 million capital improvement program for the urban poor of color.

Initiating Visible and Militant Mass Campaigns

The BRU's organizing has included

- Putting up 5,000 "We Won't Stand for It, No Somos Sardinas" posters, produced for the BRU by the guerrilla artist Robbie Conal.
- Militantly blocking the corner of Western and Wilshire, tying up traffic on a Saturday night, requiring 200 police officers, in a protest against the MTA's decision to reduce late night bus service; the sit-ins and pressure from the federal court convinced the MTA to restore the night service.
- Initiating a two-month "No Seat No Fare—No Asiento No Pago" campaign during which more than 30,000 daily bus riders refused to pay their fare; the BRU chanted "Don't pay for racism" and demanded the MTA purchase an *additional* 1,000 new buses to reduce overcrowding.
- Organizing a coalition to stop the MTA from substituting cheaper, car-

cinogenic diesel buses for clean-fuel compressed natural gas buses (CNG), charging the MTA board with environmental racism and endangering the public health of the entire city; the MTA backed down and purchased 330 new CNG buses.

Generating New Structures of Leadership Run by People of Color, Workers, Immigrants, and Women

The BRU has organized a monthly general membership meeting of sixty to one hundred members who vote on policy and ratify the direction of the work; an elected twelve-person Planning Committee that meets weekly to strategize and lead a mass organization of 3,000 dues-paying members; a fifteen-person Action Committee that initiates creative mass actions to win tactical victories; and an On-the-Bus Teatro that experiments with multilingual skits and plays of resistance.

Capturing the Public Imagination and Gaining Media Coverage

The fight against transit racism, rather than "isolating" the BRU as some have charged, has in fact been a fulcrum on which an ethical and political challenge to the broader capitalist society has been brought. The militant, yellow-t-shirted BRU members are a well-known group of urban fighters, and the David-versus-Goliath image of black, Latino, Asian, and white bus riders, young and elderly, walking and in wheelchairs, challenging the arrogant and corrupt MTA has captured the imagination of a cynical city. In August 2000, when the BRU brought 1,000 people to march at the Democratic convention, demanding of the Gore/Lieberman team, "Which side are you on, civil rights or racism?" office workers and professionals

came out of their buildings to cheer while construction workers yelled support from the scaffolding above. Because of frequent news features in the *Los Angeles Times*, *Christian Science Monitor*, *ABC World News Tonight*, *La Opinión*, and virtually every local television station, as well as in the critical Spanish-language, Korean, and black media, the BRU is a highly visible public force. The work has gained greater national attention through the release of a feature-length documentary, *Bus Riders Union*, by the Academy Award-winning cinematographer Haskell Wexler,⁴ which in turn has generated inquiries about setting up bus riders unions in other U.S. cities.

From "Bus" Consciousness to Class Consciousness

Strategy Center organizers are always trying to go beyond narrow "trade union" or "bus" consciousness to build a movement based on a more transformative, internationalist consciousness.

The organizer enters the bus, begins with a conversation with the driver, and appeals to the riders—trying to make connections between the clearly visible abuses on the bus and the politics, structures, and upcoming votes of the MTA (BRU motions to buy more buses, MTA motions to cut service and raise fares, votes on diesel or CNG).

Our organizing theory differs from the Alinsky model, which argues for the most immediate self-interest appeals. The riders most interested in joining the BRU are attracted to the broader politics and the intricacies of the struggle—more than a quick fix for better bus service. *Thus our focus is to find the leaders of the oppressed—riders with preexisting militant, progressive, or Left consciousness.* Some of the BRU leaders are immigrants with Left and often revolutionary histories in their native countries: Rosalio Mendiola, a room service waiter, was affiliated with the Partido Revolu-

cionia Democratio (PRD) in Mexico; Maria Guardado, from the Frente Farabundo Marti Liberación Nacional (FMLN) in El Salvador; Ricardo Zelada, a longtime communist in El Salvador and Honduras who studied in the Soviet Union. Others are furious about bus conditions and want to join a militant union/sindicato that fights for their rights: Eulalia Camargo, a domestic worker who came to fame in her portrayal of Superpasejera, the heroine of class struggle; Mari Aguirre, a domestic worker from Guatemala whose on-the-bus heroics were portrayed in *Time* magazine; Cirilo Juarez, a professional worker active in gay liberation issues who was attracted to the antiracist politics of the BRU; Elizabeth Medrano, a student from Mexico who went from being an angry bus rider to being a gifted organizer seemingly overnight.

The black members convey a similar diversity and complexity: the late Pat Elmore, who liked to describe herself as "a communist, Buddhist, feminist, black nationalist"; Woodrow Coleman, a veteran civil rights activist and a founder of the original Peace and Freedom Party; Della Bonner, a modern-day Rosa Parks and key negotiator of the consent decree; Norma Henry, a struggling filmmaker who exposes the abuses of bus privatization; Barbara Lott-Holland, an office worker who has become a leader in the BRU's theater group and planning committee.⁵

For all of us, it is the practice—the protracted war against the MTA and all that it symbolizes and the exhilaration of winning big victories for the bus riders and the Left—that drives the theory. But the ideology of the work is also a material force that motivates us; few of us would do all this work, not for eight years, if the struggle was only about buses.

New Issues Brought In by Members

Pat Elmore was part of Mothers Rock, a prisoners support group. Maria Guardado brings

BRU members to every march against police brutality. Rudy Pisani has helped organize large BRU contingents to demonstrations in support of Mumia Abu Jamal. Alex Caputo Pearl, Kirti Baranwal, and Simone Shah are public school teachers who have helped initiate the Coalition for Educational Justice, fighting for bilingual education and against the criminalization of black and Latino youth. Five Strategy Center and BRU members participated in the Black Radical Congress in Chicago.⁶ Rather than the Strategy Center functioning as "the party" and the BRU as the "mass organization" to be radicalized, the relationship is in fact more fluid, as many of the key members of the BRU have their own larger political agendas and have built connections to a citywide and national antiracist movement.

IV. Building the Alliance of the Black and Latino Working Class

The black and Latino working classes share many components of a common experience and oppression, but have many structural and cultural obstacles to unity.

During the urban rebellion of 1992, there was a black and Latino working-class alliance in the streets—a far greater unity of concerted mass action than has been seen before or since.

The Strategy Center worked to generate a Left postrebellion urban politics, in direct contradiction to the rainbow corporatism of the Rebuild L.A. guru Peter Uberroth. We worked in collaboration with Anthony Thigpenn and AGENDA, a south central Los Angeles organization, and Michael Zinzun of the Coalition Against Police Abuse (CAPA), to develop a citywide movement to defeat the federal Weed and Seed Program. Weed and Seed attempted to control social service agencies by placing their funding under the authority of the Justice Department, which criminal-

ized inner-city black and Latino youth through "target zones" in which they could be arrested and convicted under even more repressive federal statutes. In this movement, the leadership clearly came out of the black community, where there is a stronger historical opposition to the police and a far more effective multiclass united front, whereas many of the Latino elected officials and community residents were initially more supportive of a law-and-order attack on gang members. In this context, the Strategy Center organizers Lisa Durán and Martín Hernández and the Strategy Center founder Rodolfo Acuña provided essential and courageous leadership in the Latino community. We were successful in building an effective black/Latino united front to get the Los Angeles City Council to reject federal Weed and Seed money.

After a year's work, the Strategy Center published *Reconstructing Los Angeles from the Bottom Up*, a comprehensive program that included full rights for immigrants, an \$8-an-hour minimum wage in all government jobs that presaged later Living Wage campaigns, the strictest environmental protections for communities of color, community control of police, and a first-class public transportation system that countered transit racism and segregation. The report was launched at a press conference that generated a full-page story in the *Los Angeles Times* and attracted significant organizational support from the black, Latino, Korean, and white liberal communities. Finding common programs, working together to generate alternative politics against capitalist modes of economic development—these are some of the common terrains of rebuilding the black/Latino and multiracial working-class alliance at the core of the anti-imperialist united front.



The Struggle for Black Inclusion in Increasingly Latino Unions

Black and Latino working-class unity cannot be built without addressing historical, cultural, and structural contradictions as well. In Los Angeles, virtually the entire low-wage workforce is Latino, Asian, or black. The garment industry is Latino and Asian, most hotel and restaurant workers are Latino or Asian, most security guards are black men risking their lives to protect others' property for \$5 an hour. And yet, one arena of struggle within the united front is the need to address the system's replacement of black workers from unionized jobs and the continued exclusion of black workers from entire industries. For example, Justice for Janitors in Los Angeles is heralded, as it should be, for its courageous struggles to win better contracts. But the virtually all Latino union is a response to white corporate building owners who broke the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) affiliates of black janitors during the 1970s, and in turn replaced them with nonunion subcontractors who employed Latino immigrant workers. Similarly, for decades black workers have fought to break down the lily-white construction unions, and yet today in Los Angeles many entry-level well-paid unions like the Laborers are overwhelmingly Latino. As the union movement tries to rebuild itself and living wage campaigns offer higher pay in any jobs subcontracted to the Los Angeles governments, there needs to be a major effort to recruit black workers, including an *affirmative action of hiring of black workers* with the full support of Latino union officials and workers.

The Emphasis on Equality of Languages—Black Women's Leadership

An example of the positive dynamics of this cultural interchange is the struggle within the

BRU to understand the full equality of languages. At a critical stage in the early development of the BRU, several white members argued that the fully translated meetings were taking too long and argued that Latino members should be provided translation but should essentially sit in the corner. Ricardo Zelada countered that if there was not full translation the BRU was no better than many trade unions that discriminated against Latino workers. At that point, Pat Elmore made her now-famous formulation, "I am not in favor of bilingualism," and then after pausing for effect, "I am in favor of *multilingualism*. The BRU must provide translation in Spanish, English, Korean, and Tagalog if we ever want to unite all the races against the capitalists." Over time, the BRU moved to purchasing translation equipment—microphones and wireless transmission to headsets—and now runs its meetings with simultaneous translation. At several points in its development, the BRU has run meetings in English, Spanish, and Korean.

Pat Elmore, Della Bonner, Kikanza Ramsey (one of the finest translators), Norma Henry, and Barbara Lott Holland have all been among the most militant defenders of full equality of language for Spanish-speaking members, which has had a profound impact on black/Latino unity within the organization.

Learning from the Black Belt South

The Strategy Center and BRU have been collaborating with the Clark Atlanta Environmental Justice Resource Center in a sister city project for public transportation, the environment, and civil rights. In working with Dr. Robert Bullard, Glenn Johnson, and Angel Torres at Clark Atlanta and members of the Amalgamated Transit Union, a predominantly black union representing drivers and mechanics, we have heard chilling stories of

white counties refusing to be connected to black Atlanta's Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority (MARTA) and the physical danger black people face from racist violence "only a few miles outside of the Atlanta city limits." Saladin Muhammad and Dennis Orton of Black Workers for Justice described the economic underdevelopment of the South, the penetration by U.S., European, and Japanese capital in the areas of greatest black concentration, and the whip hand of management against black workers—with little commitment by the AFL-CIO to challenge racism in the black belt. A national campaign to focus on black voting and trade union rights, especially in the South, is an idea whose time has come, even as the shadow of the plantation still shapes the politics of the entire society.

V. In Search of the Antiracist Whites

According to the 2000 census, Los Angeles County is 30 percent white, but in the world of the BRU—the large inner-city core spanning East Los Angeles, South Los Angeles, Pico Union, Koreatown, Hollywood, Mid-Cities, and the downtown business district—the "city" appears to be 90 percent or more people of color.

The BRU attracts most of its white members among older, transit-dependent women for whom the bus system is their lifeline and the unreliable service the bane of their existence and explicitly political antiracist whites who are attracted to the organization's achievements, politics, and social composition.

Many of the white members bring essential energy and talent to the experiment and are very good at working in a context where they constitute a minority: Ruth Williams, a seventy-year-old Jewish woman, has become a fearless organizer, going on the buses of

Pasadena, often by herself, to leaflet and agitate; Joe Linton is a painter who has done excellent leaflet and poster illustrations for the BRU; Ann Abraham is a very low income white woman married to a Latino man who has experienced grueling poverty and seen racism and police harassment painfully first-hand; Herman Mullman is an activist for the elderly who often has to take a two-hour ride from the San Fernando Valley to attend monthly BRU meetings. The white members strengthen the mix, encouraging the Latino and black members that there are some white people willing to take a strong stand against discrimination and racism.

Given the overall and justified good feeling about the racial dynamics within the organization, it is difficult to find ways to effectively challenge instances and dynamics of white chauvinism. (By chauvinism I mean the complex culture, ideology, ideas, and personal habits of the dominant white culture that reflect, often unconsciously, a sense of superiority to people of color—as opposed to racism, the willful, institutional infliction of discrimination and abuse on people of color by whites.) For months, the BRU planning committee had long discussions about the best way to address what we felt were manifestations of white chauvinism and U.S. nativism in the organization, especially at the general membership meetings. Among the issues addressed were



- A view by some white members, raised vociferously and redundantly, that we were too harsh with the MTA and not critical enough of the antisocial behavior of gang members and other minority youth
- A view by some white members that the BRU talked too much about racism, arguing it would be better to talk about a first-class bus system

“for all” without using the word “racism”

- A tendency for white members to speak too much at meetings, often far out of proportion to the racial composition of the group (while, for example, many monolingual Spanish-speaking members, often women, did not speak for several meetings at a time)
- A tendency by some white and black members to refuse to use their translation headsets, effectively cutting themselves off from the comments and ideas of Spanish-speaking members.

The Planning Committee, after discussions with several members to get advice, voted twelve to zero to send a letter to the general membership explaining the problems of white chauvinism that we thought needed to be addressed. The following is a summing up of the Planning Committee's assessment of the general membership's discussion: (1) Although the conversation at the time seemed all over the map, the main struggle had been won. We had *not* “attacked” any white members, but we did have the obligation to take a stand against white chauvinism in order to retain the most militant and race-conscious people of color and to support the more effectively antiracist whites. (2) The culture of open, constructive debate on an issue this close to the bone is difficult, but in fact people did understand and a lot of progress was made, even if the discourse was not as orderly and logical as we had hoped. (3) It was historically important that the leadership of the Strategy Center and the BRU Planning Committee took a stand on the fight against white and U.S. chauvinism *within* antiracist organizations, as well meet head on the political challenge by a few white members to essentially liquidate the struggle against institu-

tional racism and national oppression. A month later at the annual Christmas party, a highly spirited membership raised more than \$600 from their own limited incomes for their own organization, and several of the white members who had been criticized made some generous overtures of unity.

VI. Unity and Struggles with the New Bourgeoisie of Color

The ruling class in Los Angeles and in the United States, at the highest levels, is overwhelmingly white. Richard Riordan, the venture capitalist lawyer, Eli Broad of Kaufman and Broad real estate and Transamerica investments, Ron Burkle of Ralphs and other national supermarket chains, Marvin Davis and Michael Ovitz from the movie industry, and dozens of others function openly as the city's benevolent ruling class, encouraged by social democratic theorists who dream of partnership of big capital and big labor but seem oblivious to the danger of a public/private, capital/labor corporate fascism.

They are the main enemy and often the main target of our work. In the fight against Governor Pete Wilson's initiation of the racist Proposition 187, in the fight against the stream of racist initiatives to criminalize youth of color—Three Strikes, the "Juvenile Justice" initiative that allows trying youth as adults—it is the white racist Right that is the main enemy, but often the conciliation of elected officials of color is still a functional impediment to an effective antiracist united front.

In the struggle over urban politics, however, the class and race relationships are more complex. For many years, blacks and Latinos by their numbers have become powerful political forces in the electoral arena, and white elected officials and white capitalists cannot govern directly—or if they do, they must do so with the strongest rainbow coalition of

power brokers, political bosses, and administrative classes from communities of color. In the BRU's organizing work the working class of color must directly confront the new political elites of color, and it is disrespectful and simply not true to suggest that these powerful players—Colin Powell and Condoleezza Rice, David Dinkins and Tom Bradley, Antonio Villaraigosa and Yvonne Brathwaite Burke—are simply puppets of the white man. They are dynamic and powerful political players, well aware of their contradictions with the white capitalists, but most of the time more in unity with them than in struggle. When they do struggle, it is to advance a procapitalist agenda to strengthen and expand the power and influence of the black and Latino capitalist class—such as getting "their share" of the bounty from rail lines—often in explicit contradiction to the needs and interests of the black and Latino working class. In the work of the MTA, no matter how often we have tried to focus on the more powerful strategic enemies—the white monopoly capitalist class—it is often the immediate opponents who must be confronted directly, because they are the most immediate tactical obstacle to achieving our objectives. In the entire work of the Strategy Center, this is *not* the case; at the national level our focus is on the Republicans, the Democratic Leadership Council, and the transnational corporations run by the white Fortune 500. It is in this strategic framework that we address the BRU's contradictions with the new bourgeoisie of color.

The changing class structure of the black and Latino communities does not liquidate the national liberation component of the class struggle or the need for a multiclass united front. It does heighten some of the contradictions *within* communities of color. From Mao's writings about the development of a comprador bourgeoisie, which he described as a native capitalist class that becomes integrated into the imperialist bourgeoisie, to E.

Franklin Frazier's *Black Bourgeoisie*, in which he identified a privileged strata of the black community that would work against the interests of the black working class, it is not a new concept that imperialism can simultaneously co-opt and "integrate" certain strata of an oppressed people while simultaneously superexploiting and oppressing a significant number or even majority of the native population.

In the past eight years of the BRU's work:

- The CEO Franklin White, who is black, and four black and Latino members of the thirteen-member MTA board were *defendants* in the BRU's civil rights suit against the MTA.
- Since the signing of the consent decree, the Latino elected officials Gloria Molina, Richard Alatorre, and Speaker of the Assembly Antonio Villaraigosa, supported by most black elected officials who hoped for reciprocity for a subsequent "black" rail line, forced through legislation to raid \$1 billion of MTA funds that were eligible for the bus system to establish the "Pasadena Construction Authority" expressly to make an end run around the BRU consent decree.
- The MTA chair Yvonne Burke has called the police on BRU members protesting MTA cuts in night service and has threatened black and Latino high school students with arrest for their militant—and dignified—testimony against the proposed service cuts.
- In September 2000, again seeking even more funds for rail, the MTA provoked a thirty-two-day strike with its 5,000 bus drivers, asking them to kick back more than \$23 million in take-aways to pave the way for priva-

tization and subcontracting. The United Transportation Union (UTU) is the last well-paid group of black workers in the city. Out of 5,000 bus drivers, perhaps 2,500 are black and 1,250 are Latino, with about 1,250 of these being women of color. Yet the MTA took out ads attacking the bus drivers as overpaid. The strike was initiated by an unholy alliance of four powerful board members—Richard Riordan, a venture capitalist Republican; Zev Yaroslavsky, the leading Jewish liberal from the West Side; and supervisors Gloria Molina and MTA chair Yvonne Burke. During the strike, 400,000 transit-dependent bus riders were stranded without any transportation. The strike ended with an MTA "victory"—the elimination of 500 full-time \$21-per-hour black and Latino jobs, and the creation of another 500 \$12-per-hour "part-time jobs."

The fact that many Latino and black elected officials equate themselves with "civil rights" and thus feel justified willfully violating the 1964 Civil Rights Act, a signed civil rights consent decree, and the court orders of a black federal judge indicates a level of class warfare that we had not anticipated. Understanding that some of these forces would vacillate, we did not assume them to be so clearly allied with imperialist interests.

Out of these constant struggles have come some new positive developments:

- Class and national consciousness has risen among the bus riders themselves. The black and Latino bus riders are very aware of their ethnicity, but the fight with their own bourgeoisie has become an essential tactical component in an overall war

against white structural racism—because it is often their own bourgeoisie that is attacking them most directly. The fact that the BRU has been able to organize several thousand black, Latino, Asian, and white bus riders to challenge the MTA's policies of transit racism is a breakthrough in constructing politically Left and independent social movements led by the black and Latino working class.

- There is a growing new constituency of black and Latino high school students who, encouraged by their teachers, have started attending MTA meetings en masse because they depend on public bus service to get to school—often for commutes that take more than an hour. At a recent MTA board meeting, a young black woman warned Yvonne Burke, “It’s obvious that you don’t care about us, but you wait until we are old enough to vote, we’ll get rid of you.” Although getting rid of powerful electoral players like Riordan and Burke may be all but impossible in the short term, the oppositional stance of the students is an encouraging development in the city.
- The relationship between the BRU and the UTU and progressives in the County Federation of Labor has dramatically improved since the MTA-provoked strike. The BRU became the most organized public defender of the drivers and the AFL-CIO County Federation chair Miguel Contreras attended his first BRU press conference. When the BRU argued that the MTA was scapegoating blacks, Latinos, and women who were making \$21 an hour, our explicit references to racism and sexism strengthened the drivers, who were feeling very demoralized by the attacks.

Today the BRU and UTU leadership are working together to anticipate the next contract negotiations and to construct an even stronger alliance between black and Latino drivers and riders. *Politics is a question of shifting alliances, and struggle is often a tool for greater unity.* The key to maintaining any united front is building your own base from which to deal with allies, opponents, and enemies. Sometimes the Left, if it can break with sectarianism, can carry out effective struggles with other forces, fighting for one’s immediate objectives without foreclosing longer-term developments and relationships.

For years before he became an elected official, Antonio Villaraigosa was a close ally of the Strategy Center. After he became Speaker of the Assembly, he engineered the Pasadena Blue Line theft of funds from the bus system. The BRU focused a great deal of energy trying to discredit him in Latino and progressive circles—confronting him at the “Progressive L.A.” conference, and picketing the Peoples College of Law awards ceremonies where he was given the “Clarence Darrow award.”

Now Villaraigosa has been “termed out” of the legislature and is running for mayor. As we found ourselves on the podium together in front of 4,000 striking bus drivers, we understood we were now tactical allies in a struggle. The next week, at our urging, Villaraigosa wrote a letter on our behalf to the MTA board opposing service cuts. Conversations are continuing about possible future alliances.

Similarly, even though Yvonne Burke has called the police on us several times, she responds to our letters on procedural protests, as she is chair of the MTA board, and we have collaborated on the clean fuel fight, where she was an ally.

In all of our work we try to be careful to not personalize our criticisms and to frame our militancy in terms of loyalty to our base and defense of our inalienable civil rights. In

our struggles with black and Latino corporate and political officials, we often experience them as immediate adversaries, but they are not the main enemy. We recognize that they still suffer national oppression and women's oppression even if they do not seem to care about oppressed nationality women and workers. We have to remind ourselves, "The United Front is our strategy, not theirs."

VII. The Opportunities and Limits of Civil Rights Law

In 1998, after the BRU argued that the MTA was reneging on purchasing expansion buses and hiring drivers as part of the consent decree agreement, Judge Hatter ordered the MTA to purchase 350 additional buses (at an estimated cost of \$120 million) as well as provide the requisite drivers (estimated at 700) and the requisite operating funds (estimated at \$60 million per year) to reduce overcrowding to standards agreed on in the decree.

Despite admonitions from Rev. James Lawson, a long-time colleague of Martin Luther King, Jr., who said that he felt he was addressing an arrogant southern school board in defiance of federal civil rights laws, the MTA voted twelve to one to appeal the case. Mayor Richard Riordan, and every board member of color—Yvonne Burke, Jenny Orapeza, Gloria Molina, Richard Alatorre—voted to appeal a federal court order from a black judge.

Within a few days, the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals issued a stay of Judge Hatter's order, in essence telling the MTA it did not have to purchase any buses until the appeals court ruled. In March 2000, during oral arguments in front of a three-judge panel at the Ninth Circuit, the MTA argued that it should be released from the very consent decree it signed, because the federal courts violated principles of "federalism" and did not have

the authority to compel a local government to abide even by a signed civil rights agreement.

For a year we waited for the Ninth Circuit decision—and we heard nothing. Already the Ninth Circuit has objectively taken action by issuing a stay and delaying a decision. The MTA has become far more defiant, assuming judge Hatter will be overturned, and has begun to initiate new multibillion-dollar rail lines that will literally steal money from bus riders.

Then in April 2001 the newly emboldened Scalia/Rehnquist/Thomas wing of the Supreme Court issued a five-to-four decision in the case of *Alexander v. Sandoval*, in which it ruled that "private parties," such as Sandoval, who had her rights to language equality violated, or the Bus Riders Union, for that matter, could no longer bring civil rights suits under Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act unless they could prove *intentional discrimination*—not simply discriminatory impacts of government policy. This decision is being challenged by other more liberal district courts but, pending a motion to strengthen the 1964 Civil Rights Act, this will be another legal setback for civil rights litigation—and a possible challenge to our own consent decree. And even if we do get a positive ruling from the Ninth Circuit, there is the danger that the MTA will appeal that decision to the "Supreme Klan."

Among our black members in particular, the actions by the courts are most devastating, because there is so much belief in the 1964 Civil Rights Act as the ultimate protector of their rights and because of their direct involvement in having fought for them in the first place. The court case has already won the BRU major victories, but we have to face the strong probability that our legal options, and the legal options of people of color in a legally and illegally racist society, are diminishing. The BRU's position is that the courts have the authority to compel the MTA to en-

force the civil rights of 400,000 bus riders, but they do not have the authority to abridge inalienable civil rights, minority rights, and human rights. The movement is already planning its future.

VIII. The National Reaction and the Urgency of Antiracist Challenges

In several years, the 1965 Voting Rights Act is coming up for reauthorization. There is a need for a national movement of antiracist organizers to initiate the most powerful series of strengthening amendments, in direct challenge to the Democrats and the Scalia court. The Florida election was an example of how the core of the voting rights "scandal" was the systematic disenfranchisement of black and Latino voters, the racist structuralism of the electoral college, and the even more fundamental issue that inalienable minority civil and human rights should not be "votable" issues in the first place and should be protected from the tyranny of the white majority. Al Gore, in his desperation, momentarily tried to challenge just the edges of the electoral fraud, but pulled back as his advisors warned him that any alliance with militant blacks would hurt his long-term plans, even as the national press began to demand that he back off and prove to be a good sport for the good of "the system." Jesse Jackson broke with Gore as much as his allegiances allowed him, but, again, there was a need for an independent antiracist movement to lead the charge—and it just did not exist.

Similarly, the "Welfare Reform" bill is up for reauthorization in 2002. In place of the usual liberal perspective that will accept the racist assumptions of the law but ask for additional years before people on welfare are permanently on the street, there is a need for the repeal of the act itself and replacing it with a new Aid to Families with Dependent Children Act (AFDC) that increases benefits

and proposes voluntary job placements with higher minimum wages, child care, and transportation allowances. In departing interviews, Clinton administration officials actually boasted that it was a brilliant move to kill the welfare system begun in the New Deal because they were aware of the national white backlash against black women and wanted to "deracialize" the issue by talking about "aid to working families." In fact, at the height of the civil rights movement, the struggle of black women for jobs, and for health care and child care and transportation, generated enormous benefits to women of all races—including white women, who constitute the largest single ethnic or racial group on welfare. Now that black and Latina women are being attacked, and the Democrats argue that they are inflicting punishment to protect people of color from even worse attacks from the Republicans, we know things have gone beyond decline into a deep moral and intellectual decay.

At the height of the revolutionary movements of the sixties, the *expansion* of AFDC and the *expansion* of voting rights were part of a civil rights movement that was part of a black liberation movement that was part of a world movement for national liberation and social revolution. If we are to begin again, it is strategy, not nostalgia, that requires placing the issue of national liberation, minority rights, self-determination, reparations to blacks in America, and the struggle against empire at the center of the national and international debate.

Notes

1. For a fuller discussion of the 1996 and 2000 elections, see Eric Mann and Lian Hurst Mann, "The Clinton Campaign's Center-Right Challenge to the Left: What Is the Nature of Electoral Opposition," *AhoraNow* (a bilingual political periodical), no. 3 (Fall 1996); "The 2000 Elections and the Anti-Imperialist Left," *AhoraNow* (September 2000). For a fuller discussion of the anti-imperialist program, see, "Towards a Program of Resis-

tance: We Make These Demands Against U.S. Imperialism," Program Demand Group, Labor/Community Strategy Center, October 2000.

2. Each of these campaigns is analyzed or agitated for in a series of publications distributed by the Strategy Center: Eric Mann, *Taking on General Motors: A Case Study of the UAW Campaign to Keep GM Van Nuys Open* (Los Angeles, UCLA Institute of Industrial Relations, 1987); *L.A.'s Lethal Air: New Strategies for Policy, Organizing and Action* (1991); *A Call to Defeat the Federal Weed and Seed Program* (1992); *Reconstructing Los Angeles, and U.S. Cities, from the Bottom Up* (1993); *Immigrant Rights and Wrongs*, (1997); *A New Vision for Urban Transportation: The Bus Riders Union Campaign for the Environment and Civil Rights* (1998).

3. For copies of the consent decree and the entire legal record of the case, see www.thestrategycenter.org and www.busridersunion.org.

4. Haskell Wexler, director, *Bus Riders Union*, 80 minutes, color, available in VHS, 16mm, 35mm, and with Spanish and Korean subtitles. Strategy Center Distributors.

5. For the voices of BRU members, see Della Bonner, "A Thirty Year Ride, My Eyes on the Prize," *AhoraNow*, no.1 (Winter 1996); Ricardo Zelada, "Bus Riders As a Class" *AhoraNow*, no.2 (Spring 1996).

6. For views on the Black Radical Congress, see Kikanza Ramsey, "The Black Liberation and the Liberation of All Oppressed Peoples"; Bill Fletcher, "The BRC: Putting Away the Hatchets"; Robin D.G. Kelley, "An Independent Black Radical Movement Can Connect with the Rest of the World," *AhoraNow*, no. 6 (November 1998) (Lian Hurst Mann, editor).