

Fight or Walk

Anarchists Organize “No Fare” Days in the Chicago Transit Fare Strike

Midwest Unrest

2005

In September 2004, the Chicago Transit Authority (CTA) declared January 2, 2005 to be “Doomsday.” Unless the transportation department received \$87 million from the state legislature, city bureaucrats threatened that Chicago’s public transit system would be slashed by 20 percent, eliminating numerous bus routes, overnight elevated train service (the “El”), and 1250 jobs.

Either way, transit fares for the disabled were to double. While the CTA blamed their budget crisis on a state funding formula, many community groups were not fooled. The CTA had made similar cuts in 1997 and did not use extra money received to restore them. Plans to build a \$2 billion “Circle Line,” criticized for helping to gentrify a working class Latino neighborhood, and to run express trains catering to yuppie tourists to the airport, had not been scrapped. It was obvious that the CTA was not really cutting service but instead restructuring itself to better meet business interests at the expense of transit dependent riders, mostly poor and minority.

In response, Midwest Unrest, a local anarchist collective, decided to call for a fare strike. We wanted riders to stop paying for service while workers stopped collecting fares, together putting economic pressure on the CTA.

We began by passing out flyers at bus garages and talking to drivers about a potential fare strike. The response was very positive. Unfortunately, drivers were less willing to not collect fares at all than to simply honor riders who declared they were on “fare strike”. Eventually, we held a public meeting where we decided to call for a fare strike starting December 15. We felt it was key to have the fare strike before the cuts went into effect, so that the 1000 drivers facing dismissal would still be working.

For weeks we promoted the strike with flyers and media interviews. Our resources were scarce but responses were overwhelmingly positive. Finally the 15th arrived. Due to the decentralized nature of the fare strike, we’ll never know how many people, either workers or riders, took part. From stories we’ve heard, we estimate at least a 50% success rate when riders tried to get on for free. In one instance, a bus driver let a rider sit at the front of a bus, handing out flyers for the entire route, letting about 200 people on without charge.

The final decision on the Doomsday budget was on the agenda at a December 16 CTA board meeting. The decision made was to delay any service cuts or decisions on them for six months. This had been at the request of state legislators who suggested that money would now be made available during the spring legislative session. Furthermore, the decision to double disabled fares in January, which had already been passed, was reversed. We then put out a statement declaring partial victory, and have stopped organizing fare evasion.

We estimate the number of people who rode without paying in December in the thousands, not the hundreds of thousands needed to put real economic pressure on the CTA. Nevertheless, it is no coincidence that the cuts were delayed when the public pressure was applied. In a context where the authorities feared there is widespread anger against the CTA and the beginnings of radical direct actions, it could quite easily snowball and cause a major disruption. It is not unreasonable to assume that the bureaucrats in the CTA, the city government, and even the state legislature wanted a cooling off period in order to keep this from happening.

Of course the fight is not over. We are encouraged by our successes so far and will continue to organize against the CTA.

– Midwest Unrest

For a more detailed account of the campaign, check out: http://www.midwestunrest.net/fight_or_walk.html

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