



Riding the Rails in Boston

Occupy takes on fare increases and service cuts to the “T.”

BY CHRIS STURR

My fellow T-riders! If can have your attention for two minutes—I promise to keep it short. I’m here working with Occupy the T. We’re working to defend public transportation in Boston. As you may have heard, the MBTA and the State Legislature are currently planning to make major cuts to your public transportation system, while at the same time raising your fares, making you pay more for less. ... We see their plan as an unjustified and unnecessary backdoor tax increase on the 99%. ... No Cuts, No Hikes, No Layoffs! Get the money from the 1%!

Jay Jubilee, whose activist *nom de guerre* alludes to the ancient tradition of debt cancellation, came up with this speech, which Occupy Boston activists have been using to fight proposed fare increases and service cuts by the Metropolitan Boston Transit Authority. The MBTA, known by Bostonians as “the T,” runs Boston-area buses, subways, commuter rail, and commuter ferries.

It’s part of a tactic activists call “riding the rails.” Here’s how it works: three Occupy activists get on the last car of a train at the beginning of a line. As soon as the doors close, one of them—usually Jay—makes the speech, loud enough for everyone on the car to hear. The others hand out flyers announcing an upcoming public hearing or rally, and copies of the *Boston Occupier*, the movement’s print newspaper. When they get to the next station, they exit the first car and run to the next one, where they make the announcement again and hand out more flyers and papers. The occupiers keep doing this until they finish the

whole train and then do it back in the other direction. The reaction has been remarkably positive. On several occasions, people have burst into applause at the end of the announcement (especially when Jay Jubilee delivers it).

In early January, when the MBTA announced two draconian scenarios for fare hikes and service cuts, resisting the MBTA’s plans quickly became high on Occupy Boston’s agenda. The issue combined finance and debt, the push for austerity, environmental dangers, and the privatization of public resources and space—all key issues for Occupy all along. Plus, transit users are the 99%, and there was almost universal opposition to the MBTA’s proposals. This was an opportunity for activists to show ordinary people that Occupy “has their backs,” and to unite this historically segregated city through struggle in the process.

But organizing around the proposed cutbacks has been a challenge and has required political education. The MBTA’s financial situation is complicated. Helping people move beyond grumbling about proposed fare increases and service cuts involves educating them about where the MBTA’s debt comes from. One key source was the State Legislature’s 2000 decision to fund the MBTA from a percentage of sales tax; when sales tax revenues faltered, the agency’s debt ballooned. The state also shifted \$3.3 billion in debt onto the MBTA, most of it from the notorious “Big Dig” tunnel project, so that public transit users are ending up subsidizing drivers (as well as oil and auto companies). Then there are the interest rate swaps (see this issue’s cover story, p. 11) that the agency took on in the hopes of reducing the debt. The financial crisis and changes in interest rates have meant that the agency now owes three banks—Deutsche Bank, UBS, and



In 2004, the T took on as its mascot the hero of “Charlie and the MTA,” the folk song about a man trapped in the subway because he couldn’t afford the exit fare. Occupy the T has reappropriated Charlie for the 99%.

JPMorgan Chase—around \$26 million more each year to service the debt.

The MBTA has backed down from its two original draconian scenarios. But they’ve proposed a new one, which would increase fares by 23% and still make service cuts. So Occupy the T has continued to organize—and ride the rails—to keep the pressure on until July 1, when the Transportation Department’s new fiscal year begins and the changes would be implemented. It’s hard to know in advance how effective the campaign will be. But this kind of activism is emblematic of how Occupy has claimed physical space as a way of opening up the political and intellectual space we need to revive the left. **D&S**

CHRIS STURR is co-editor of Dollars & Sense. A longer version of this article appeared in Progressive Planning magazine.