

Riding the Rails in Boston

Occupy Takes on Proposed Fare Increases and Service Cuts on Boston's T

By Chris Sturr

My fellow T-riders! If I could have your attention for two minutes: I promise to keep it short. I am here working with Occupy the T. That's Occupy the T—an offshoot of Occupy Boston that is working to defend public transportation in our city. As many of you have no doubt heard already, 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 at Occupy the T see their plan as an unjustified and unnecessary backdoor tax increase on the 99%.

It's a tax on workers trying to get to work, a tax on students who need to go to school, a tax on seniors and disabled persons who need to get to doctors appointments or to get groceries. . . . Tell the politicians to GET the money from the people who HAVE the money. Get the money from the people that TOOK the money. Corporations and rich people profit off of our labor at work every day; now they want us to pay more just to get to work in the first place?! Enough is enough! We at Occupy the T say: No Cuts, No Hikes, No Layoffs! Get the money from the 1 percent!



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JAY JUBILEE, whose activist *nom de guerre* alludes to the ancient tradition of debt cancellation, came up with this script, which Occupy Boston activists have been using in our work to fight proposed fare increases and service cuts by the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA). The MBTA, known by Bostonians as “the T,” runs Boston area buses, subways, commuter rail and commuter ferries.

It's part of an activist tactic we call “riding the rails.” Here's how it works. Three of us get on the last car of a train at the beginning of a line. As soon as the doors close, one of us, usually Jay, makes an announcement, drawing on the script, 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, which has been running front-page stories about the T service cuts. When we get to the next station, we exit the first car and run to the next one, where we make the announcement again and hand out more flyers and papers. We keep doing this until we finish the whole train—usually at the end of the line—and then we do it back in the other direction.

The reaction has been astounding and inspiring. Most people take the newspapers and flyers, many enthusiastically. When a car is crowded—we try to “ride the rails” around rush hour—people pass flyers and newspapers along to other passengers. On several occasions, people have burst into applause at the end of the announcement (especially when Jay Jubilee delivers it). We get lots of smiles, thumbs up and vocal expressions of thanks; some people are eager find out how to get involved, others are willing to be added to our email list. Sometimes we get

into conversations with people about the struggle to resist the fare increases and service cuts to the T.

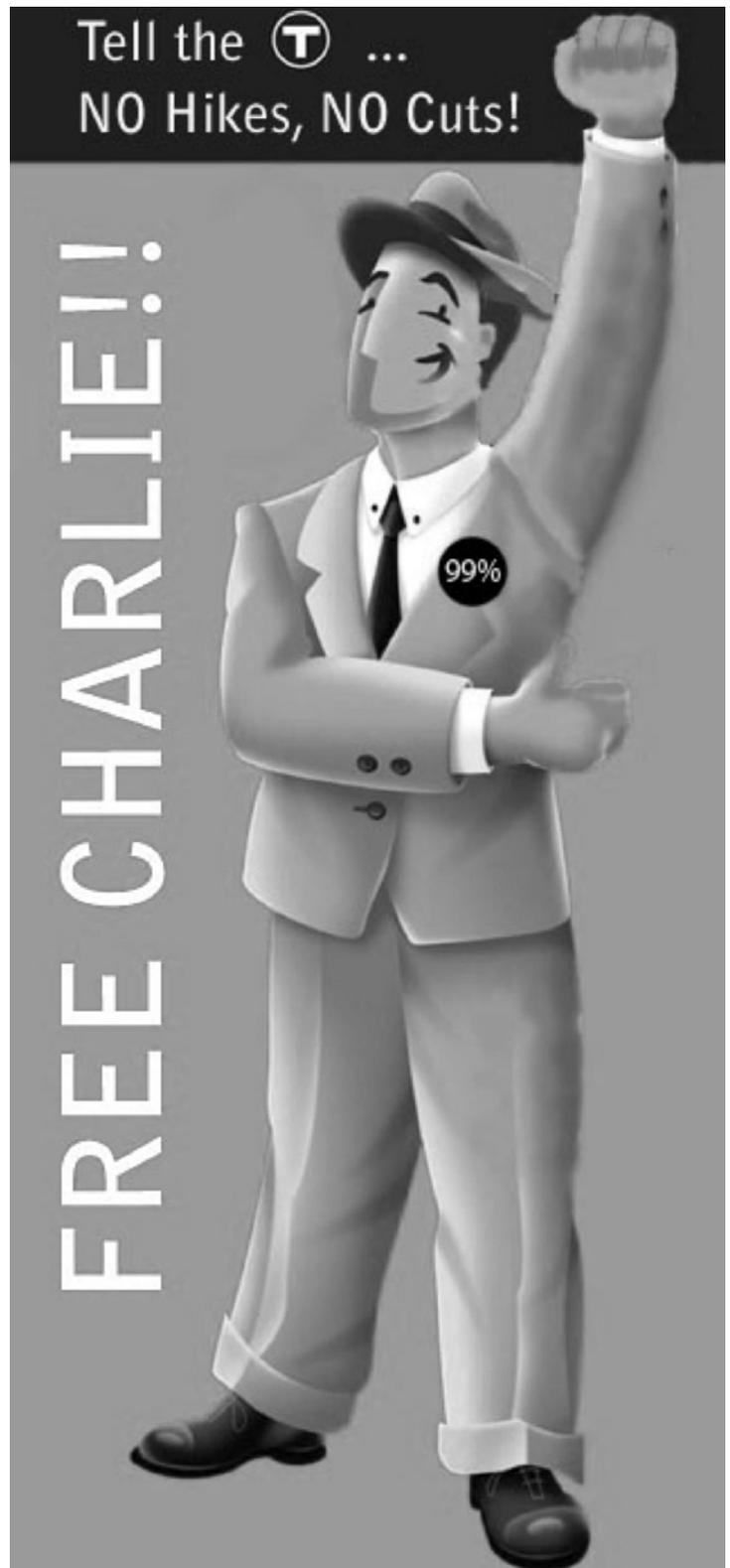
This and other tactics have already gotten the MBTA to back down from its two original draconian scenarios, but it has proposed a new one that would increase fares by 23 percent and still make service cuts. So, we're continuing to organize—and ride the rails—to publicize a huge rally at the statehouse for a National Day of Action on Transportation on April 4 and 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.

Occupy as Self-Clarification

When Occupy came on the scene last fall, starting in Zuccotti Park but quickly spreading to public spaces in cities and towns across the United States and beyond, skeptics asked: What are their demands? What do these people want? What is their message?

At one level, the “demand for demands” and the “demand for a message” was ridiculous on its face. As Dahlia Lithwick of *Slate* put it, “It takes a walloping amount of willful cluelessness to look at a mass of people holding up *signs* and claim that they have no message. Occupy Wall Street is not a movement without a message. It's a movement that has wisely shunned the one-note, pre-chewed, simple-minded messaging required for cable television as it now exists.”

There were lots of signs, and lots of messages, and lots of issues that participants rallied around—starting with inequality and the outsized influence of the financial sector and the super rich “1 percent” on the economy and the political system, but also including a whole range of traditional Left causes, from militarism to racism to climate change. At the same time, though, there has been resistance all along to the idea that the movement and its primary decision-making mechanism, the general assemblies, must coalesce around explicit demands.



One of the best explanations of this resistance came from David Graeber, an anarchist anthropologist who was one of the early organizers of OWS and is considered one of the intellectual leaders of the movement. In an interview for a *Washington Post* blog in early October, Graeber said: “If you make demands, you’re saying, in a way, that you’re asking the people in power and the existing institutions to do something different. And one reason people have been hesitant to do that is they see these institutions as the problem.” Just as the people who wondered why the movement focused on Wall Street rather than Washington just didn’t get it—the point is that Washington has been captured by Wall Street!—the people demanding demands didn’t get it: we don’t want different decisions; we want to change how decisions are made, and by whom.



Photo: weeklydig

But there is another explanation for resistance to the demand for demands: the movement needs time—and space—to think. In his 1843 letter to Arnold Ruge, Karl Marx defined “critical philosophy” as “the self-clarification of the wishes and struggles of the age.” The Left has been in retreat over the past thirty plus years in the face of a neoliberal onslaught that has only accelerated since the most recent financial crisis. The Occupy movement is, among other things, a collective “time-out” for the Left to take stock, regroup and clarify for ourselves the “struggles and wishes of the age”—how the whole range of issues Occupy has raised are related to each other, how they are related to the central themes of inequality and the outsized influence of finance and the wealthy and how all of this is related to capitalism and alternatives to it.

Claiming physical space has been a way to carve out the intellectual and political space that has been denied to us by a ruling order that has control over the means of communication and education—*hegemony*, to use a term from the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci. (The one area where ruling elites have had less success at controlling discourse and information is in the realm of new communication technology—the internet and social networking. This explains their central importance to recent popular resistance, from the Arab Spring to *Los Indignados* to Occupy.)

Gramsci drew a distinction between “common sense”—“the incoherent set of generally held assumptions and beliefs common to any given society”—which, on the whole, represents the perspective and interests of the ruling class, and “good sense,” which are those parts of common sense that can help us, collectively, tackle the problems we face in our societies and communities. But it takes a lot of individual and collective effort to sort out “good sense” from “common sense,” to overcome the ruling elite’s hegemony and to clarify the wishes and struggles of the age.

From the Greenway to the Red Line

Boston’s Occupy encampment, which lasted from October 3 through December 10, was located at Dewey Square, on the edge of the financial district and across from the Federal Reserve building. Its location on a parcel of the Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy Greenway made transportation and public space relevant from the beginning. For one thing, the Greenway was created out of land made available when the Central Artery was put underground in the project known locally as the “Big Dig,” now synonymous with graft, cost overruns and egregious overspending on behalf of passenger automobiles. A largely unaccountable private non-profit, the Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy Greenway Conservancy, leases the public land of the Greenway and runs it using mostly public funds, mostly in the service of neighborhood business interests. The Conservancy played a role in getting Occupy evicted from public lands, thereby preventing Occupy activists from exercising their rights to free speech and assembly.

There were mixed feelings and opinions about the loss of “camp.” While it was clearly a key to the visibility of the movement, it took a lot of energy to maintain, especially as winter approached. Some viewed it as a distraction from other important activist work. Indeed, Occupy Boston has gone in many directions since early December—from anti-foreclosure work, to resisting the push for a “three strikes” law in Massachusetts, to opposing immigrant detentions, among other struggles. But 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 percent, 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.

The MBTA had raised fares in 2004, when it eliminated tokens and introduced plastic fare cards (which make it all the easier to raise fares in the future). In what could be attributed to either cluelessness or hubris, the agency called the new cards “CharlieCards” and adopted as the T’s mascot Charlie, the hero of the song made popular by the Kingston Trio in the 1950s. Informally known as “Charlie on the M.T.A.,” the song is about a man who is trapped in the Boston subway because he can’t afford the five cent exit fare. Many have pointed out the irony of the fact that a song that complains about the high cost of the T was appropriated by the MBTA as part of a fare increase.

Fewer people know that the song was commissioned in 1949 by Walter A. O’Brien, a socialist mayoral candidate who campaigned on a wide range of Left issues, from public transit to militarism to affordable housing. By adopting and modifying the Charlie graphics from the MBTA’s PR campaign and adopting the slogan “Free Charlie,” Occupy the T is reappropriating Boston’s Left history, continuing the struggle for “a comprehensive, affordable and sustainable transportation plan that works for the 99 percent.”

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 how draconian the cuts are, but also on more arcane matters 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 Big Dig itself, so that public transit users are ending up subsidizing drivers (as well as oil and car companies). There are also complex derivatives—“interest rate swaps”—that the agency took on in the hopes of reducing the debt, but the financial crisis and changes in interest rates have meant that the agency now owes three banks—Deutsche Bank, UBS and JPMorgan Chase—around \$26 million more each year to service the debt.

Occupy the T and other organizations, including local labor unions and a T Riders Union that had formed a decade earlier, have conducted research about the origins of the MBTA’s debt, staged teach-ins on the MBTA’s finances and the public health effects of reducing mass transit and run articles in the *Boston Occupier*.

And then there is “riding the rails.” We hope to train dozens of occupiers to ride the rails as a way of communicating with T riders and building opposition to the cuts. Riding the rails also functions as a communication medium when most others have been co-opted, captured or monopolized by the 1 percent and its “common sense.” It provides an entree to the necessary political education that participants in the movement, and the general public, will need to resist and develop alternatives to the neoliberal agenda, in transportation and beyond.

Perhaps the most important role of riding the rails, though, is simply to remind people that it’s okay for them to talk about matters of mutual concern, and to do so in shared, public spaces, like T cars, public parks and the statehouse. Indeed, it is high time that we do so. **P²**