'FARE STRIKE! 2005: First-Hand Accounts'

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The leftist recuperator's version of events

'FARE STRIKE! 2005: First-Hand Accounts' is a collection of first-person stories from nine members of a group called Muni Fare Strike, which was involved in an attempt to get together a city-wide transit system fare strike in San Francisco in the summer and fall of 2005. 'FARE STRIKE!' begins by misrepresenting the politics that the pamphlet's authors asserted in the attempted fare strike, trying to make
their conventional leftist efforts sound implacably anti-capitalist and revolutionary. However, ‘FARE STRIKE!’ quickly shifts tone and, perhaps unintentionally, gives a more honest and accurate picture of the nine participants’ individual and collective befuddlement in the way they organized their efforts, in their admitted inability to effectively communicate their goals to transit system riders in the immediate context of the fare strike, and in their lack of a larger coherent anti-capitalist vision.

In an essay about the deficiencies of the detective fiction of his day, Dashiell Hammett wrote that for a pistol to be called a revolver it mush have something that revolves. For a contemporary class struggle effort to be authentically antagonistic to capitalist society it cannot be the exact same thing conventional leftists do, only done by people who will long after the fact boast of their window-shoppers' affinity for the ultra-left, and jazz up their wholly conventional leftist actions with references to Midnight Notes and Rosa Luxemburg and quotes from Guy Debord.

‘FARE STRIKE! 2005’ is formatted to look like a ‘workers inquiry’ doc from a serious and substantial autonomist Marxist-influenced European revolutionary group. The introduction says the document is "first-hand accounts of several San Francisco Fare Strike participants...coming from several different radical perspectives..." This neglects to mention that four out of the nine people in the pamphlet are long-time beer drinking buddies of the pamphlet's main author, who gives the initials GH in this doc, so five of these guys are at least nominal members of GH's Potemkin-Village "group," Insane Dialectical Posse. This is only one of many context-free aspects of the 'FARE STRIKE! 2005' pamphlet. (Names or initials given in this review are given as they appear in the 'FARE STRIKE!' pamphlet itself; no individual's privacy or security concerns are being flouted here.)

The bulk of ‘FARE STRIKE! 2005’ is made up of first person accounts of the various authors' experiences leafleting on the first day that the fare strike took place, September 1st. By many accounts September 1st was really the only day the strike happened.

In ‘FARE STRIKE!’ Dave Carr writes, "Despite our efforts, we had not reached enough people with the message before the first strike day." JZ writes, "It was clear that many riders had never heard of the fare strike" -- this on the morning of September 1st, a full four months after the effort was launched. Sally A. Frye writes, "I saw only a smattering of fare strike activity after September 1." As a woman working in a cafe in the Mission District put it to me soon after September 1st, "The fare strike lasted about a half-hour."

By all accounts other than those in 'FARE STRIKE! 2005' and by much of what is said in this pamphlet itself the 2005 San Francisco fare strike was an almost total failure. The attempted fare strike wasn't adequately prepared for. The message calling for a mass refusal to pay fares was not communicated effectively. Exhaustive microscopically detailed accounts of nine different people's similar experiences giving out leaflets in this pamphlet obscures an examination of the larger problems and possibilities involved. Whether this is intentional
or simply of a function of the author's consistent confusion and poor sense of organization is anyone's guess.

GH's account is the first one, describing his almost Pentecostal rapture at distributing a unpersuasive, un-radical and instantly forgettable Muni Fare Strike leaflet among Muni riders: "I was floored...It was totally amazing...and then we did it again...and again."

GH also tells of how he got the Muni Fare Strike leaflet translated into Korean. This would have been a great idea in Los Angeles, which has a large Korean and Korean American community. It was of next to no practical use in San Francisco, where the Korean-language population is small and very few Korean speakers are not already also fluent in English. This Korean-language leaflet was one of a series of actions whose main purpose was to one-up the group that started the whole direct action effort, Muni Social Strike, (note the ridiculously similar names) and had begun the attempt at a riders and drivers joint effort on Muni by concentrating its efforts on employees of the transit system, leafleting them in English.

From the beginning of the effort, GH did what he could to trash what could have been a new kind of working class-based anti-capitalist mass action, and helped to turn it into another easily ignored conventional leftist culture of failure event. And as is so often the case with him, GH gives the very rosielest of rose-colored depictions of the strength and success of his efforts. GH is consistently incapable of giving an honest and reliable account of his actions. Everything becomes a projection of what he wishes it to be and what he wishes his own role in it to be. His middle name should be "corrupted data."

The Commissar Vanishes...

One story from the Muni Fare Strike group not included in the 'FARE STRIKE!' pamphlet is that of a Marxist-Leninist named Marc Norton. From the outside, Norton appeared to be providing the Muni Fare Strike group with much or most of its political direction. Norton was repeatedly referred to as the spokesperson for the group in San Francisco's daily newspapers, the Examiner and the Chronicle, and was the only member of their group quoted in either paper.

The strategy of the Muni Social Strike group had been to emphasize leafleting Muni drivers and attempt to build contacts with them. The overall effort would fail and would be largely meaningless if it didn't try to unite employees of the transit system and working class riders in a refuse-to-pay action. Marc Norton's alternative was to ignore the employees of the transit system and focus solely on riders, and that's what the Muni Fare Strike group did.

Most importantly Marc Norton made it clear at a meeting of the Muni Social Strike group that he was the author of the content-poor and
unpersuasive leaflet that was the Muni Fare Strike group's main communications tool. (The Muni Fare Strike group's leaflet can be seen on the right margin with other leaflets in this article: http://www.infoshop.org/myep/muni_social_strikeout.html)

When asked to improve on this leaflet by coming up with a draft that would also address Muni drivers and their concerns Norton was adamant that he would not do this, at first giving a my-dog-ate-my-homework excuse, claiming that there wasn't a big enough margin at the bottom of the leaflet to allow room to say more. This meant that either this General Secretary of a one-man Stalinist party allows his word processing program to make his political judgment calls for him, or that his cognitive sclerosis is so extreme that he couldn't improvise with glue stick and a pair of scissors, the way we used to in olden days before desktop publishing. After he got more feedback repeatedly requesting he change the leaflet Norton dug in his heels and became childishly petulant, as if his sample of crappy writing was the fare striker's equivalent of a poem by Yeats or the Gettysburg Address, a masterpiece on the scale of 'Guernica' or a Vermeer.

Later, accounts by several of the people in the 'FARE STRIKE! 2005' doc acknowledge that their neglect of transit system operators was a jumbo-sized mistake. "I feel that openly supporting the drivers was something that should have happened more in our flyers," said JZ. This point had been repeatedly emphasized before the Muni Fare Strike group came into being, by me in particular, and the willful refusal to acknowledge this and act on it by the Muni Fare Strike group was striking.

Since the fare strike, several people who were in the Muni Fare Strike group have insisted that Marc Norton was not really the leader of the group, but that's not how it looked from the outside. It was easy to read Marc Norton; Norton is a standard issue 1970's-era Bay Area Marxist Leninist, and he is serious enough about his pro-wage labor leftist politics to have the energy and backbone to fight for his goals in a sustained, concerted manner. On the other hand, I'd also seen what the document's main author GH and his buddies amounted to in practical terms, and I'd seen again and again since the mid 1990's that this "posse" was all talk and no walk. GH and company had repeatedly proven that they could not act on any of those nice Marxian ideas that they were fond of spouting off about over brewskis. They had absolutely no practical political skills; their communications skills were so impoverished that collectively they couldn't even write a leaflet, even one as piss-poor as the one the Muni Fare Strike group came up with. The 'Insane Dialectical Posse' had proven again and again that their Historical Program came down to keeping proletarians employed by the Anheuser Busch Corporation and the Sofa Cushion Manufacturers of America from ending up on the unemployment line. Their lack of inventiveness and paucity of commitment, their indolence, sheepishness and inertia comes through in their 'FARE STRIKE! 2005' reminiscences. Given all this it looked like Marc Norton was the one providing what little coherent direction there was in the stumbling and bumbling Muni Fare Strike group.

II.
How to get the message out...

In 'FARE STRIKE! 2005,' Dave Carr writes, "Despite our efforts, we had not reached enough people with the message before the first strike day." In Account 4, Lee speaks of writing friends on the sixth day of the strike and saying, "...many drivers aren't clear if the fare strike is ongoing and for real, or if we're just shirking as individuals at this point."

The 2005 fare strike was a fiasco. It was an embarrassing flop. From a very early point in the effort, the Muni Fare Strike group took the lead in the effort, and the steps they took guaranteed that they would fail to communicate a message for a mass action on Muni in an effective manner.

It didn't have to be this way.

I don't want to blow my horn about this, but I initiated the not-begging-on-the-steps-of-City-Hall phase of resistance to the fare hikes, service cuts and austerity measures against Muni operators. When I did this I put forward a clear strategy for getting the word out in a big way:

1. Begin with a saturation leafleting of Muni operators. This was done, by me and by some of the anarchist rich kids I was trying to function with, and based on what Muni operators said it appears that most Muni operators got a copy of that leaflet,

2. Then hang posters calling attention to the event, the date it would begin and, most importantly, some of the larger issues behind a joint action of Muni drivers and riders. This emphasis on posters wasn't because I was trying to relive illusory past glories or because I have a hard-on for posters as such, but simply because in a relatively small city like San Francisco posters have proven in the past to be an extremely effective way to get a message out in a big way,

3. And then go for mass leafleting of Muni riders at bus stops and at the entrances of Muni underground stations. This kind of leafleting is crucial -- but only after the ground for it had been sufficiently prepared, and this preparation did not take place in the 2005 effort.

An effort like this is all about communication -- it cannot be "organized"; you have to get the message out in a big and bold way and then it has to take off on its own, through some mysterious confluence of favorable circumstances that cannot be foreseen in advance.
The only reason to examine a non-event like the 2005 Muni fare strike fiasco is to learn from the mistakes -- these were for the most part easily avoided mistakes -- and do better next time.

I initiated the effort to get together a large-scale, Italian-style "self-reduction" action of Muni drivers and riders as part of my involvement with a little anarchist group called Bay Area Anarchist Council. In this context Bay Area Anarchist Council gave rise to a group called Muni Social Strike. (That name was not my idea. I wanted to call it 'Refuse to Pay;' I thought that 'Muni Social Strike' had too much of a hard-to-immediately-understand, Mountain-Must-Come-to-Mohammed quality to it, but the rich kid anarchists thought it sounded good) The Muni Social Strike group launched the push for a city-wide direct action at a public meeting in San Francisco's Mission District on May 1st, 2005.

Soon after, another group called Muni Fare Strike emerged, positioning itself politically to the immediate right of the Muni Social Strike group.

The anarchists, every last one of them, bailed on the Muni effort at the time of a ridiculous and self-indulgent anarchist subculturalist riot on SF's Valencia Street, coinciding with the glamorous anti G-8 demos taking place in far away exotic Scotland the week of July 8th.

From that point onward, the Muni Fare Strike group became the main expression of what was going to pass for a direct action fight around the Muni transit system in the late summer and fall of 2005.

What follows is what I pushed for and tried to make happen in the Muni effort, and what the Muni Fare Strike group did instead:

1. At its inception, everybody in the Muni Social Strike group agreed that the direct action around Muni would be an anti-market economy action -- we would disdain to conceal our aims with this. The discontent that we hoped to stir up against austerity measures on Muni would be a foot in the door for voicing a larger antagonism to what market relations do to our lives.

-- No such perspective was even faintly present in the leaflets of the Muni Fare Strike group, or in any statements Marc Norton made in the news media.

Marc Norton, GH and company played the game the way capital wants it to be played. They presented the fare hike and services cuts as a
single issue phenomenon. Whether this was political timidity on their part, or the typical deceitful, arrogant and condescending attitude of professional leftists toward working people is known only to them.

2. At the May 1st public meeting launching the effort, I made a speech, saying that this effort must begin with mass leafleting of Muni operators. We had to make reaching operators a central priority and form an alliance between drivers and riders. We needed to make Muni employees and their concerns central to everything we would go for in this effort, and at least get them passively on our side.

-- The conventional leftists of the Muni Fare Strike group virtually ignored the transit system operators.

The efforts they made to get this leaflet out among Muni operators were negligible:

Gerry Jamin: "Union representatives allowed us into a meeting and even allowed us (?!?) to drop off 1500 fare strike flyers at a bus barn, but we have little indication that they actually made them available to the drivers."

The Muni Fare Strike people were so unassertive and unmotivated that they hoped union bureaucrats would be nice and do their leafleting for them.

JZ: "We did not coordinate with drivers enough, for different reason, many of which were largely out of our control at the time." (say what?)

Their leaflet said nothing to Muni employees. They did nothing to draw Muni employees into the effort, to persuade them to see this fight as their own and to pick up the ball and run with it on their own terms. Describing the goal of the effort as a "fare strike" concerning only Muni passengers was guaranteed to alienate the most important group of working people in this action and make them think they were going to be hassled and bum-rushed by mobs of riders whose interest they don't automatically understand to be their own.

This was a signal failing on the part of a "posse" of wannabe serious labor militants.

3. There needed to be a clear coherent strategy for a fairly small number of people to get the word out in a big way to a hundred thousand wage slaves riding Muni.

Like it or not, and whether anyone likes me as an individual or not, I have some small practical experience in getting an anti-capitalist message out in a big way among contemporary working people in this part of the world. The most effective of these efforts was limited to
one neighborhood, but the communications strategy and the methods employed could be used by a slightly larger group of people over the entire city; the methods in question are not my private property. San Francisco is a small and spatially concentrated urban area, and people here tend to be a little more receptive to a message like this than they might be in other US cities.

I wanted to apply what I've learned from the strengths and limits of those past efforts here, and that's what I pushed for at the beginning of the direct action effort around Muni in 2005.

-- The unimaginative and poorly-motivated leftists in the Muni Fare Strike group insisted there was nothing to be taken and used from any past efforts akin to this, and instead engaged in a haphazard and unfocused leafleting campaign, distributing many thousands of copies of an unpersuasive flyer. Marc Norton, GH and GH’s chucklebuddies have never successfully communicated anything to anybody and they didn't spoil that perfect record here. The predictable result was that their message went largely unheard and almost wholly unacted upon.

Their apparent awareness of their poor communication skills led to another step that was a waste of time and detrimental to any remaining anti-capitalist substance in the Muni effort:

4. An effort like this can be, should be, and has to be an open and honest step towards the creation of a wholly new type of working class-oriented, anti-capitalist/anti-state, mass politics, or anti-politics, if you want; a fully communist praxis rooted in the everyday life concerns of increasingly exploited, impoverished and beleaguered working people. It has to be conducted outside of and against, or at least aggressively ignoring, the usual protest ghetto ragbag of liberals, leftists, unpaid social workers and low-level government functionaries who cling to the atrophied left pinkie finger of the Democratic Party. As soon as an effort like this shows any signs of life those people will glom onto it and drag it back to palookaville with them. They will always turn something like this into an excuse for militant panhandling on the steps of City Hall.

-- In the face of their inability to get their message out on their own, and with the date of the fare strike fast approaching, the Muni Fare Strike people attempted to draw mainstream left liberals into their efforts by holding a press conference with a gaggle of "progressive" groups, in the middle of a workday, on Monday, August 29th at the BART Station Plaza at 24th and Mission in the Mission District. It was a poor choice of both time and location, as well as a poor choice of company. This press conference didn't expand the reach of their message to working class riders who hadn't heard it yet and weren't hearing it. The press conference was largely ignored by the media, and what coverage it received helped to make the fare strike effort bleed into the wallpaper of easily ignored, repetitive motion, work-within-the-system left-liberalism in San Francisco.
Sally A. Frye writes of this in 'FARE STRIKE! 2005':

"There was a press conference with various coalition groups (progressives, rather than radicals), including the Coalition for Transit Justice. The presence of progressive hangers-on was problematic in my view..."

5. An effort that is authentically against capitalism has to be outside of and against the decision-making apparatus of democratic capitalist society. There is no short cut through the conventional, legal and legitimate decision-making institutions of this society.

-- The web site for Muni Fare Strike displayed a call to vote in the then-upcoming November elections on the main page of their web site:

    Vote Tuesday
    March Thursday

    at this link:
    http://www.munifarestrike.net/

Gosh, what would Guy Debord say to that? This public service announcement gives the lie to the florid pro-situ plug for 'FARE STRIKE! 2005,' seen on various internet sites, trumpeting the bungled fare strike as an example of "the joy of refusal," sprouting wings and flying away altogether with the claim that "The alienated space of public transportation was briefly transformed into an arena of solidarity and radical possibility" Teleported onto the steps of City Hall and into the arena of the voting booth is what it looks like.

**Conclusion**

What did the individuals in 'FARE STRIKE! 2005: First Hand Accounts' learn from their experiences? They offer a consistent combination of lazy rationalizations for their failure and grudging acknowledgment that they should have pursued a very different set of tactics; tactics that were completely obvious and that had been spoken about exhaustively and at length from the beginning of the effort. The sluggish indifference on display in 'FARE STRIKE! 2005' indicates that most of these guys probably won't burden future attempts at public collective radical action with their contributions. If someone else hadn't initiated a direct action around Muni they wouldn't have been involved in the first place; they would never have tried to get this sort of thing going by themselves. It isn't in them to do anything that requires energy, initiative, commitment and nerve; this is evident on almost every page of 'FARE STRIKE! 2005: First-Hand Accounts.' They didn't know
what to say, and they didn't know how to say it, and if someone else hadn't written their minimalist leftist protester leaflet for them they would have been left without anything to say at all.

The little anarchist group that gave rise to Muni Social Strike was the latest of roughly a half-dozen little anarchist groups I'd been in since the first one I joined in Washington DC in the spring of 1981. It's always the same story, so call me a glutton for punishment, or say that I am the world's slowest learner. Subjectively radical young people converge around the words anarchist and anarchism. With any ten people who call themselves anarchists you may have ten different versions of what their anarchism means, and it's almost always some variation on a philosophy of harmless incoherent personal rebellion. Their anarchism is not about an organized collective fight for radical social change, which demands a level of effort and commitment that people who define themselves in these terms consistently prove incapable of giving. Their anarchism cannot function in the larger world, and it isn't about the larger world, anyway, but on some level about an imaginary escape from the overwhelming, confusing and depressing realities of contemporary society. If they relate to the larger world at all their version of anarchism means going to lots of protest ghetto events and doing whatever all the other protesters are doing, maybe dressing all in black while doing it, and maybe breaking a few windows when they can get away with it; this is the sole material form their version of revolutionary action takes.

In these little anarchist groups there is a visceral understanding that any complex discussion of ideas will pull the group apart. Little or no political discussion occurs, no ideas collectively develop, so no action autonomous from the rest of what little there is of a left in the US takes place. They meet until they tire of meeting and then the group falls apart. The group never disbands because of dramatic external pressure like state repression or violence from fascists or Stalinists, or a split over strongly held convictions, but simply because the group never had any real reason to come into being in the first place. Faced with any opportunity to show than their beliefs have any relevance to the world outside their ideological cocoon, they will always run away or fold. This is what happened with Bay Area Anarchist Council and it's all-protest, all-the-time Bobbsey Twin, Anarchist Action.

The anarchist teenagers and college kids in the Muni Social Strike group proved to be silly and childish flakes. They acted the way adolescents in a consumer society are supposed to act, so on some level they can't be blamed for being what they were. The anarchist wannabes bailed on what they committed to doing at the first opportunity, and by simply not being as completely flaky as the wannabes the conventional leftists of the Muni Fare Strike group were able to get over on them and come out ahead. This says something comic and pathetic in the extreme about what passes for an opposition to capitalist society in the San Francisco Bay Area in the first decade of the 21st century.

There are three outcomes for a mass self-reduction effort that would have been better than what took place in San Francisco in 2005:
The first one is the most likely one. If effective subversive communications tactics had been used, the immediate results would probably have been the same; the fare hike and service cuts would most likely have still gone through. But many more Muni riders would have heard the message, and heard a clear anti-market relations message with it. And a failure on a higher level can be a foot in the door for a more far-going effort with a greater chance of success the next time around.

Instead what we have today is that few people even remember that a fare strike took place on San Francisco's Muni in 2005. Sometimes when riding the bus or streetcar I'll ask a driver about it. A common response is that they shrug indifferently. Some respond by telling me a fare strike didn't happen.

The second is what might have happened if the message had been communicated more effectively, with more energy, daring and style; with enough Muni riders riding and refusing to pay, and enough Muni operators going along with the riders mass resistance, the fare hike, route cuts and concessions demanded from operators might have been successfully spiked.

The third and best scenario would be for the transit system operators to aggressively take the lead, in a city-wide mass action that begins as an on-the-job wildcat of drivers and station agents. This will involve a degree of anger, widespread awareness of their latent collective power, and a resulting self-organization of drivers parallel to and hostile to TWU Local 250a that didn't exist in 2005.

When transit system operators go on a wildcat of this sort, and even if the event only lasts for one day, the event could become something akin to a non-violent city-wide workers' revolt. The economy would be shut down, or slowed and stalled to an overwhelming degree. Everything else in town would be occurring around the event for the life of the festivities. It would set a precedent for similar actions elsewhere, and not just related to mass transit systems. This is hard to imagine now, but as social conditions become more extreme, and the decline of the US is accompanied by unprecedented major shock experiences we may see a number of surprising events take place.

Unfortunately what took place in the attempted Muni fare strike in San Francisco in 2005 didn't contribute to any of the more positive future scenarios I've outlined here. The event was a flop. It was run according to a multiple decades-old template of leftist failure and irrelevance in the San Francisco Bay Area. It was easy to ignore at the time and is almost impossible to remember now.

What did take place was a typical San Francisco Bay Area story; a potentially new type of radical anti-capitalist effort was smothered by the involvement of a-historical and in some ways almost a-political compulsive protester ding-a-lings. Most of them didn't have malevolent intentions; being leftist protest ghetto habitués they can't help but to suck up all the oxygen and room for maneuver that a new kind of
subversive praxis needs to live. That some of these template of leftist failure people make claims to being some subspecies of ultra-left Marxist doesn't alter the conventional left-wing of capital content of their actions, or change the fact that in the Bay Area there are many leftists and no revolutionaries.

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August 2008

Their version of events:
http://faresstrike.org/

My version of events:
Muni Social Strikeout -- The Failed Transit System Fare Strike in San Francisco in 2005

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