

Riding to Work on Empty Promises

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The promise of safe, reliable and affordable public transport comes as welcome news for the majority of working class and poor South Africans and immigrants to the country. The segregated town planning left behind by the system of racialised capitalism known as apartheid has meant that the majority of the population – also those who can least afford it – are often the ones who have the furthest to travel to work, schools, hospitals and so on.

This article looks at the Bus Rapid Transit system, what BRT really is, how our so-called leaders plan to implement it – since, as usual, there has been very little popular involvement – and whether our leaders, or BRT, can serve the needs of the poor and working class.

Ever since former transport minister Jeff Radebe announced that the Rea Vaya Bus Rapid Transit system prototype would be implemented in time for the 2009 Fifa Confederations Cup hosted in South Africa, we have been hearing a lot about Bus Rapid Transit (BRT). Needless to say the dead-line was missed, but the hype continued up to the launch in August 2009 and far beyond.

The promise of safe, reliable and affordable public transport comes as welcome news for the majority of working class and poor South Africans and immigrants to the country. The segregated town planning left behind by the system of racialised capitalism known as apartheid has meant that the majority of the population – also those who can least afford it – are often the ones who have the furthest to travel to work, schools, hospitals and so on. The burden of having to walk long distances to one's destination or to a taxi route is all the more difficult for pregnant women, disabled people and the elderly. The lack of affordable public transport often means that, because there are not enough schools in poor communities, children either have to walk long distances to school, or maybe just don't go regularly if their parents cannot afford the transport – not to mention the cost of school uniforms, books, stationery and school fees. Unemployed workers cannot afford the transport necessary to go out and look for work, and many workers must spend what little savings they may have – or be forced to borrow from ruthless loan-sharks – in order to pay for the transport needed to go back and forth to the Department of Labour trying in vain to get their Unemployment Insurance Fund (UIF) paid out. People who suffer from treatable diseases and injuries die because they cannot afford the transport needed to take them to a hospital or clinic to get treatment, and the public ambulance system is insufficient.

Most people would agree, then, that safe, affordable and reliable public transport is absolutely necessary to fighting poverty and unemployment (and all the social ills that come with it) in South Africa and securing a decent and dignified life for all. Let us then look at what BRT really is, how our so-called leaders plan to implement it – since, as usual, there has been very little popular involvement – and whether our leaders, or BRT, can serve the needs of the poor and working class. One thing is certain: if BRT or any other public transport system is going to be made to serve the needs of the popular classes – the poor, peasantry, lower middle class and working class – then it will re-quire the involvement of those classes to see to its proper implementation. We have now been promised decent public transport by the political rulers of this country, although for the last fifteen years the popular classes in South Africa seem to have lived on not much more than promises. But people cannot live on promises forever – as shown by the recent upsurge in township rebellions and protests which are undoubtedly, at least in part a response to the ANC's failure to live up to its election campaign promises, starting just two months after Jacob Zuma was inaugurated president of South Africa and growing all the more rapidly in recent months.

BRT IN BRIEF

BRT has been described as a “high quality, customer oriented transport system which will deliver fast, comfortable, and low cost urban mobility” involving “the construction of ‘bus way corridors’ on segregated lanes and modernised technology”.¹ It is said that BRT will not only service the central business districts of South Africa’s main cities, which were hosting the 2010 Fifa World Cup, but also surrounding townships such as Soshanguve, GaRankuwa and Mamelodi; and Rea Vaya stations are already in service in Soweto and elsewhere.

BRT is a road-based public transport system. It mimics rail systems through the use of dedicated bus lanes (trunk routes) that run, or will run, on what are now or were major taxi and bus operator routes. Smaller subsidiary corridors (feeder routes) feed into these routes. Instead of having to first travel to the central parts of the city to get another bus or taxi to one’s destination, people will, in theory, be able to avoid travelling via the CBD.² Presumably being able to take a more direct route to work with fewer transfers will mean a quicker and cheaper trip. It is also claimed that BRT will provide commuters with a high-frequency all-day service, which means that people should not have to queue for long periods during peak hours, nor should they have to wait for ages during off-peak times for scarce transport.

Among other benefits cited by those behind the implementation of BRT are physical provisions to ensure easy access for disabled people, the elderly and pregnant women; low-emission technology, which means less pollution; clear route maps and signage; increased reliability; and secure bus stations. Going by what we’ve been told, then, BRT should definitely be in the interests of the poor and working class, and worthy of our support. But, as with so many of the things that the government supposedly does *for* us – instead of *with* us – there has been very little public participation and consultation. Indeed, this lack of involvement has been one of the reasons why the taxi industry, which is also supposed to benefit from the implementation of BRT, has not been supportive.

TAXI TROUBLES

At present, ‘public’ transport in South Africa consists of the insufficient rail and bus systems, which are owned by the state but run for profit; and the unsubsidised and informal privately owned, gangster-operated minibus taxi systems – all of which compete for business. The idea of BRT, they say, is to incorporate bus and taxi operators into the new system, which will be run by a company jointly owned by the municipality and taxi owners; but the way in which this is being done has been contested by the taxi industry. Early on, the South African National Taxi Council (Santaco) raised concerns when government asked taxi associations to register their routes and then went on to place the BRT system on those same routes without consulting the taxi industry. Taxi drivers are thus justifiably angry and believe that the BRT system is an encroachment on their livelihood – a livelihood that was deeply troubled even before BRT came onto the scene.

Taxi drivers do not usually own the vehicles they drive, but hire them from a taxi owner – who very often will own a whole fleet of vehicles – at a certain fixed rate, regardless of income

¹ “Bus Rapid Transit” system planned ahead of 2010, www.sa2010.gov.za/node/861, 13 July 2007, By: David Masango and Themba Gadebe

² Bus Rapid Transit System [BRT] and Road Safety, www.arrivealive.co.za/pages.aspx?i=2874

generated, which they have to pay the owner at the end of the day or week. Having paid the taxi owner to use his vehicle, the driver is left with very little at the end of the day, and is thus compelled to drive faster, endangering lives, in order to fit in more trips and thus, hopefully, ensure that he³ can pay for the use of the vehicle and have a little extra to take home. Certainly never enough to save up for a vehicle of his own, however. This is the reason why taxi drivers overcrowd vehicles, as the more people they squeeze in the more money they can make from a single trip. The long hours, strenuous conditions and poor pay are some of the reasons why many taxi drivers become abusive and intolerant towards both their customers and other road users.⁴ This is not to excuse the dangerous driving and abusive character of some, but by no means all taxi drivers – many of whom are very reasonable people – but merely to suggest that it is the nature of the industry that is the cause of the problem, and that for people to be able to enjoy a safe and reliable service, it is the industry itself that needs to be changed. As both the taxi operators and their passengers stand to benefit from a less ruthless and exploitative industry, it stands to reason that both parties have an interest in working together to transform the industry.

But if this is the interest of taxi drivers and taxi users, the state has done little to help. The ANC government has guaranteed that no “legitimate jobs” (how they define this is open to question) in the taxi industry will be lost. But both taxi drivers and owners are adamant that there has not been a meaningful process of engagement and, as is so often the case, government drove the BRT ahead without the consultation of those it will most affect, particularly those who fear their livelihoods will come under threat. In response to government’s failure to properly engage the taxi associations around BRT, the industry embarked on a series of strikes to force government to come to the negotiating table. The result was that some prominent taxi owners and association bigwigs have bought into the BRT idea, and stand to profit considerably from these new interests, whereas the smaller taxi associations and small-scale owners, who were not seen as powerful enough players for government to want to integrate into the BRT project, are left out in the cold. While the municipality aims to integrate some of the larger associations into BRT, concerns are that others will be forced to give up their routes; to compete with the much more competitively priced BRT buses for passengers; or to operate on the periphery, away from the more lucrative routes, taken over by BRT.

A SOLUTION TO OUR TRANSPORT NEEDS?

When the first BRT system, Rea Vaya, was finally launched on Sunday 30 August 2009, most taxis did not move from their ranks despite the calling-off of a strike by the taxi industry leaders. The fear felt by many working class and poor taxi users, many of whom have been affected by taxi violence in the past, that taxi operators would resort to violence against the new bus system was soon realised. Just a few days after the launch of BRT, unidentified gunmen opened fire on a Rea Vaya bus near the Nancefield hostel in Soweto, injuring one police officer and one passenger. More recently one passenger was killed and several others injured when gunmen,

³ The large majority of taxi drivers are male. This sexism in employment is reflected in the broader social impact of the industry, as we saw with the Noord Street Taxi Rank incident. For more information see: www.anarkismo.net and apf.org.za

⁴ *Sobre o Passe Livre*, mpl.org.br

allegedly travelling in a minibus, opened fire on a Rea Vaya bus in Orlando West. There was a second instance of gunmen opening fire on a Rea Vaya bus, also in Soweto, the same evening.

In more recent strikes, taxi drivers have both acted as scabs on other striking drivers, and formed cross-class alliances with the taxi owners, the very people who exploit them, by continuing to provide a taxi service by driving private vehicles – still owned by the bosses – during the strikes. Instead of targeting commuters, perhaps they should go after the scabs undermining the strike by continuing to work for the taxi bosses – **and more importantly, the strikes should be organised by drivers alone, without the alliance with the owners that crosses the line of class interests.**

Despite the fear of violent reprisals against commuters for using BRT, and the long queues people waiting for Rea Vaya buses have had to endure as a result of the increased pressure the taxi strikes put on the new system, many poor and working class commuters expressed their support for BRT and said they would continue to use it. At the same time, the system is nowhere near sufficient: it only runs along one or two roads in Soweto, so most still have to take a taxi to get to the bus stop. A much more affordable, safer and more reliable transport system is desirable. The fact is that the taxi industry, perhaps because of the virtual monopoly on public transport that it has enjoyed for so long, and that people are fed up with the expensive taxis and the disrespectful and abusive way in which many taxi operators treat their customers – even to the point of a blatant disregard for life and safety – has lost the confidence and support of a large proportion of its users by virtue of the fact that it is run by a bunch of gangsters, and thus failed to win their sympathy and solidarity as taxi drivers struggle to keep their livelihoods in the face of BRT. BRT is never going to phase out the taxi industry as a whole, and the more taxis are replaced by BRT at the expense of at least some taxi industry workers, who are not integrated into the BRT system, the more we can expect protest, disruption and even violent resistance. All this will affect poor and working class commuters, who will be caught in the crossfire between the taxi drivers and owners on one side, and the government and BRT on the other.

CYCLE OF EXPLOITATION

Taxi drivers are exploited by the taxi owners because they have to sell their labour (driving) to the taxi owners in exchange for the use of their vehicles in order to earn a living. Because the taxi drivers do not own the vehicles they cannot keep all the money they make and must give most of it – an amount determined by the taxi associations, which are controlled by the owners – to the taxi owners. Bus drivers are exploited by the bus companies because they have to sell their labour power (driving) in exchange for a market-related wage, which is negotiated between the bus companies, government and union bosses who do not even transport people for a living, but get their salary from the union dues of the transport workers they supposedly represent. Because the bus drivers do not own the buses, they too receive only a fraction of what the service they provide generates. Most of the rest goes to the bus company bosses.

Working class and poor public transport users are also ripped off by the transport industry. Because they do not own the means of private transport, they are compelled to use so-called public transport, paying high market-related fares which are determined by the transport industry bosses and government. Thus those who have the most to gain from transforming the public transport industry are the taxi drivers, who have nothing in common with the rich and powerful

taxi owners who exploit them; working class and poor transport users, who have no control over what kinds of transport are available and how much fares are; the new BRT bus operators, who are also exploited by the BRT bosses; and public transport workers in already established sectors.

LEARNING FROM THE PAST AND PRESENT FOR A BETTER FUTURE: BRAZIL'S 'FREE PASS' MOVEMENT AND THE CNT IN REVOLUTIONARY SPAIN

Contemporary social movements in Brazil: The struggle for a free public transport system

Those championing BRT will often say that the BRT system was successfully implemented in, amongst others, the Brazilian city of Curitiba. Ironically, while the bosses look to Brazil for ideas on how to build a for-profit transport system, it is also to the Brazilian Movimento Passe Livre (MPL – Free Pass Movement) and its struggle for free public transport in cities including Curitiba – that the popular classes in South Africa can look for a way forward. In 2003 in Salvador, the capital of Bahia state in Brazil, thousands of students, youth and workers shut down public roads in protest against the increase in transport fares – much like when highways are barricaded in South Africa during “service delivery protests”, except on a larger scale. The event, which became known as the “Revolt of Buzu”, paralysed the city for 10 days. Initially, official student unions attempted to lead the revolt which they had not initiated. When they failed to seize control, the union leadership turned against what, from then on, became a spontaneous and autonomous social movement. Then, in 2004 in the city of Florianópolis, another revolt took place, inspired by the events in Salvador the previous year. Students and teachers, together with residents’ associations, trade unions and the general population, shut down the city in the “Revolt of Catraca”, demanding, once again, reduced bus fares. These two mass mobilisations of the class in struggle were so significant that, at the World Social Forum in 2005, the Movimento Passe Livre was officially launched. There, people from various cities across Brazil came together to discuss their visions for, and experiences of, the struggle for freely accessible collective transport. Wanting to escape the opportunism of the official student organisations, which had attempted to bring the movement under their control, they decided to organise Passe Livre around a set of basic principles, which were adopted at its founding in 2005: autonomy, independence, non-partisanship, horizontalism and decision-making by consensus. Later, at the Third National Encounter of the Movimento Passe Livre in 2006, federalism was added as a principle.

What this means is the following: that all the resources of the movement are administered by the movement itself; that it should not rely on donations from political parties, companies, NGOs or other organisations; that its affiliated collectives are independent in their local actions, provided they respect the national organisational principles; that it is independent of political parties, NGOs, governments and ideologies; that everyone in the MPL has the same decision-making powers and rights to voice and vote; and that it relies only on those that constitute the movement. Passe Livre is thus a popular social movement, organised from below, that fights for the decommodification of transport, for “real public transport, outside of private initiative”⁵ and for the replacement of the system of private transport by a genuinely public system that would

⁵ *Carta de princípios do Movimento Passe Livre*, mpl.org.br

guarantee universal access – free passes – to all sections of the population. Among the principal methods by which this struggle is waged is through mass direct action⁶ and popular mobilisation to pressurise government to meet people’s demands. On the question of parliamentary versus direct action, Passe Livre says, in its charter of principles: “The parliamentary road should not be the mainstay of the MPL, on the contrary, the impetus must come from the streets.”⁷ While anarchists would reject the possibility of the parliamentary road being useful at all, we can only agree that the driving force for transformation in transport must come from the streets.

A working class in the driver’s seat: Collectivisation of transport in revolutionary Spain, 1936–39

Another example of a popular movement driven from below – by the working class – which also dealt with the question of transport, is the Spanish National Confederation of Labour (CNT – Confederación Nacional del Trabajo), and, within the CNT, the Iberian Anarchist Federation (FAI – Federación Anarquista Ibérica). When right-wing generals attempted to overthrow an elected reformist government in July 1936, the CNT (at that time the biggest union federation in Spain, with 1.7-million members) called a general strike, and within hours of the fascist assault, workers had taken control of thousands of enterprises around Spain, particularly in the province of Catalonia. Workers recognised that they needed to keep production going in the absence of the bosses, who had fled the cities in the face of a workers’ revolution, and that they needed to take control of the transport system and get it going again so that worker militias and supplies could be sent to the front to fight the fascist army. All public transport services in cities like Barcelona were thus collectivised; until the revolution was finally crushed in 1939, rank-and-file workers directly ran the trams and other means of transport, through their revolutionary workers’ committees and the CNT – not for profit but to meet the transport needs of the revolutionary economy, a civil war, and the daily needs of the working class. They did this without bosses, high-salaried managers or state support, and yet many who lived through the revolution testified that the collectivised transport system, placed under worker self-management and run under the joint banner of the CNT and the FAI, was more efficient than at any other time.

About the Barcelona tramways, Deirdre Hogan writes: “Just five days after the fighting had stopped, the tramways lines had been cleared and repaired and seven hundred tramcars, which was a hundred more than the usual six hundred, appeared on the road, all painted diagonally across the side in the red and black colours of the CNT-FAI. The technical organisation of the tramways and the traffic operation was greatly improved, new safety and signalling systems were introduced and the tramway lines were straightened. One of the first measures of the collectivisation of the tramways had been the discharge of the excessively paid company executives and this then enabled the collective to reduce the fares for passengers. Wages approached basic equality with skilled workers earning only 1 [one] peseta more a day than unskilled labourers. Working conditions were greatly improved with better facilities supplied to the workers and a new free medical service was organised which served not only the Tramway workers but their families as well.” [8]

⁶ Direct Action is a tactic central to the anarchist tradition: it is action from below that addresses itself directly to the cause of the problem. Direct action therefore deals directly with a problem by striking at its source. As Ruth Kinna says, it is about breaking from dependency on others to run our lives. It is action taken not indirectly by “mediators” or “representatives” but directly by those affected; and it is intended to succeed, not just to gain publicity.

⁷ *Industrial Collectivisation during the Spanish Revolution* by Deirdre Hogan, flag.blackened.net/wsm/rbr/rbr7/spain.html

But the CNT and Spanish working class did not gain the strength to take control of industry and run it in the interests of the people overnight. Spanish workers had, through their organisations such as the CNT, been engaged for decades in a bitter and protracted class war against the state; against the bosses and the landlords; and against their hired thugs and hitmen. Both above and below ground, the CNT organised workers across industries, both on the factory floor and in their communities, and was subject to grave and often violent repression for decades leading up to the revolution. But it was only through the process of developing a working class counterculture of popular education and class struggle from below, informed by the revolutionary ideas of anarchism, that the Spanish working class and peasantry were able to gain the strength to effectively challenge the ruling class and – for a time – take their rightful place at the steering wheel of their own destiny. Similarly, it is only by building working class organisation that is based on the principles of direct democracy, horizontalism, accountability, participation and direct action – the principles of anarchism – that we, in South Africa as elsewhere, will be able to develop the capacity to effectively mount an offensive against capitalism and its state, and take our place at the driver’s seat.

CONCLUSION: MAKING TRANSPORT SERVE THE POOR AND WORKING CLASS

It must be made clear that both the taxi companies and the new BRT systems are privately owned businesses that provide crucial services for no other reason than to make money. Hence we must not expect either the taxi bosses or those of BRT to have the best interests of the public at heart. As with all the other public services that have been privatised or commercialised by the ANC government, such as the provision of water, transport provision is seen as a profit-making venture. Thus transport industry bosses try to get away with paying workers as little as possible, cutting corners in costs (for example safety standards) and charging users as much as they can get away with – all to increase profits. Because of the neo-liberal logic of the incumbent government, and all competing parties waiting in the wings for their day in the sun, this for-profit method of service delivery is defended by government, which represses workers’ and peoples’ demands to have more of a say in how the transport industry is run. The point, however, is that unless we struggle for a public transport system that is both affordable and tailored to our needs, it will not be long before working class and poor people are forced back onto dangerous and unroadworthy taxis, while the rich, who already have cars of their own, enjoy systems like BRT, which will have become too inaccessible for many ordinary people to use.

We need to build a popular mass movement that will fight for safe, affordable, reliable and sustainable public transport that is tailored to the transport needs of the poor and working class, and not to the business and political interests of the taxi and public transport bosses, the transport ministry, or government and private capital. In building such a movement we should demand that the people who are most in need of affordable public transport be involved in deciding where and how this transport should be implemented. We should demand to know why government went ahead with BRT without holding mass meetings to hear from the communities what their transport needs were. Why, for example, was Rea Vaya built from Soweto to Ellis Park when there are already many taxis travelling these routes? Why wasn’t it built from Sebokeng to Johannesburg? – Since it is much more expensive and time-consuming to make this journey.

Why is government prioritising the transport requirements of those tourists that came to South Africa (and took the Rea Vaya from Ellis Park stadium to go sightseeing in Soweto, or the Gautrain from the airport to Sandton) for a few weeks during the World Cup over the needs of the workers and poor living in South Africa? There are many questions that could be asked, but when we begin to look at its track record thus far, it becomes painfully evident that the implementation of BRT is not to serve the immediate transport needs of the popular classes in South Africa, but to make money – even at the expense of the people it is supposed to serve.

FORWARD! TO POPULAR TRANSPORT

In its Charter of Principles, Passe Livre talks about its strategic perspectives: “MPL is not an end in itself; it must be a means for the construction of another society. In the same way, the struggle for free passes to students does not have an end in itself. It is the initial instrument of debate about the transformation of the concept of urban public transport, rejecting the concept of marketing transport and opening the struggle for free, quality public transport, as a right for the whole of society; for collective transport outside of private initiative, under public control (of the workers and users). MPL should have the perspective of mobilising the youth and workers for the expropriation of collective transport, removing it from private initiative and, without compensation, putting it under the control of workers and the population. Thus, we must build MPL with demands that exceed the limits of capitalism, adding it to the revolutionary movements that challenge the existing order. Therefore it must participate in spaces that allow for articulation with other movements, always analysing what can be done according to the local situation [...] The MPL must fight to defend freedom of expression, against the repression and criminalisation of social movements” Thus, for Passe Livre, the struggle for free student transport is just one means to building a popular mass movement, through struggle, that has a revolutionary perspective and character by making demands that are beyond the means of capitalism. Thus it puts forward the alternative of a collectivised transport system under worker and community control, while at the same time struggling for improvements in the existing transport system that directly benefit its users. Similarly, anarchists today, like the anarchist workers in Spain – who had the revolutionary perspective of seizing all the means of production, distribution and transport and putting them under worker control – view the struggle for day-to-day improvements in the material and social conditions of the popular classes as a “revolutionary gymnasium” in which the working class develops the capacity and perspective for revolutionary struggle that transcends capitalism.

Transport is a vital service that affects millions of working class and poor people across the country. A popular movement for safe, reliable and affordable collective transport offers the prospect of building a long-term united front of the exploited and oppressed. A movement united not by political ideology, party-building or political aspirations, but rooted in struggle around a real and persistent social need. In South Africa we also have a tradition of struggle around transport: the tradition of bus boycotts. We should be talking to those who participated in them about what happened and how these struggles were organised so that we can preserve the historical memory of the class. If BRT is to mean anything for the poor and working class, it will be through our direct intervention, drawing from the experience of other past and present struggles.

If we want to have a free, accessible and reliable public transport service in South Africa, then we need to start now to mobilise workers and commuters to compel government to continue to develop and expand BRT and other public transport infrastructure after 2010, while at the same time providing subsidies to taxi drivers, maintaining and upgrading their vehicles, and requiring taxi bosses to pay workers a decent wage. We should struggle to ensure that this process is driven from below, through federated community, worker, student, and commuter associations with the strategic vision of seizing the buses, taxis and trains, putting them under the collective control of the workers and users, to be run not for profit, but to meet our needs.

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