

Bus Rider Rights

Interview with Manuel Criollo by B. Jesse Clarke

Manuel Criollo, Bus Riders Union lead organizer, is the son of immigrants from El Salvador and life-long resident of Pico/Union neighborhood of Los Angeles. Manuel was elected to the BRU Planning Committee before joining staff. He focuses on grassroots leadership development and mentoring organizers-in-training and new organizing staff.

Clarke: How is transportation an issue of human rights for the people you work with?

Criollo: “We are the BRU and this is our fight. Mass transportation is a human right. We want 50-cent fares and \$20 passes, because mass transportation belongs to the masses!” This was one of our breakout chants from the early 1990s. Transportation access is a critical human rights issue. If someone doesn’t have access to public transit, the system is in essence denying them basic human rights: access to education and healthy food; access to jobs; access to healthcare; and the pursuit of goals beyond mere survival. In a city like Los Angeles, with its many social and economic extremes, transportation denial further entrenches neighborhood and racial segregation.

Clarke: How does lack of access to public transit affect working class people, communities of color, and low income people?

Criollo: For the poorest of the poor to have mobility—I mean literal mobility as well as economic and educational mobility—we must have quality public transit. The over 500,000 primarily African American, Latino, Asian, and white working class bus riders of Los Angeles have had to negotiate their lives on a third-tier transit system that has historically failed them and systematically denies them access to quality jobs, schools, and hospitals.

We believe that transportation should meet the needs of those who are most dependent on it. We are not asking for “equity,” but true transformative change that can transfer wealth from political elites and transnational corporations to working class communities of color.

Clarke: Why should transportation be a central organizing issue?

Criollo: Transportation organizing is central because it’s a race, gender, economic justice, environmental, public health, and climate justice campaign all packed into one. Transportation justice is at the intersection of civil rights, mass transit, and environmental justice. In cities like Los Angeles, 90 percent of all bus riders are people of color, historically robbed of equitable funding by entrenched transit segregation policies pursued by the leadership of the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority (LA MTA). Women, more often than not, are your typical bus riders. They not only have to negotiate discriminatory transit policy, but are also at the frontlines of having to deal with unbearable overcrowding and often endure sexual harassment by their fellow passengers. Worst of all they have to juggle their lives from home to job to day care to groceries to doctors to schools for four to five hours a day on public transportation.

Our organizing and political viewpoint has been shaped and influenced by the Black Liberation Movement in the United States. The struggle for black people’s democratic and civil rights has been shaped by the transportation justice struggles—from the horrendous Plessey vs. Ferguson decision that legalized “Jim Crow” to the 1955 Montgomery Bus Boycott that was the first mass blow against it.

Transportation justice campaigns can support the growth of a broader, re-invigorated civil rights movement, and help promote the possibility of a progressive future for the United States.



Membership

Clarke: What strategies and tactics do you use to build your base?

Criollo: We engage bus riders on the root causes that impact the L.A. transit system—institutionalized racism, the corporatization of public policy and resources, and the ecological, moral, and ethical impacts of the massive subsidy to the single-passenger automobile and highway expansion.

Teams of organizers and members leave each morning to recruit new members, and educate and engage bus riders and drivers. Our key objective is to win political space on key bus lines and neighborhoods for our demands.

Our breakthrough 1994 Civil Rights Title VI lawsuit put us on the map of Los Angeles politics. More importantly, the Federal Court intervention and its early findings were grounded in the legal concept that the LA MTA, through its discriminatory policies, relinquished its ability to truly represent L.A. bus riders. In the lawsuit, and in effect at the political level, the Bus Riders Union is a class representative of the half-a-million African American, Latino, Asian, and working class bus riders.

We reach hundreds daily. Communication starts with organizing three major L.A. bus lines—the Wilshire corridor carries over 90,000 riders daily, the Vermont corridor carries about 50,000, and the Crenshaw carries over 20,000. We speak and carry organizing materials in three languages—Spanish, Korean and English.

Clarke: How do you transmit organizing information across a broad region like Los Angeles?

Criollo: We have tried almost every conceivable organizing tactic and educational methodology from bus teatro, poetry, and one-on-one organizing to media organizing, civil disobedience, and direct service tactics

to reach our people. One successful tactic has been our solid relationship with the so-called “ethnic” press. Often the Los Angeles media market is viewed as only the English broadcast networks and the *Los Angeles Times*. In fact, *La Opinion*, Telemundo, Univision, *Korea Times*, the *Sentinel*, and the *Wave* have a large number of loyal followers. Although they are not on our “side” per say, they do represent fair and balanced reporting that reaches our core base.

Clarke: How often do you actually go on to the buses in informational or membership campaigns?

Criollo: We organize on several L.A. buses six days a week. We do specific community bus line organizing in South Los Angeles, Pico-Union, Koreatown, East Los Angeles; and we have a growing base in the San Fernando Valley. As we board a bus, we often open up and break the ice by making a short and loud pitch, such as “My name is Esperanza, I am a Bus Riders Union organizer, a civil rights organization that is fighting the MTA’s racist fare increase and we are here to recruit new members to the struggle.” We cover the whole bus, flyer-it out, and recruit bus riders. Our membership dues are \$10–\$50 a year. You can start membership for \$1. Organizers and members collect phone numbers and emails to follow up on one-on-one conversations. That is the bread and butter of our organizing.

Governance

Clarke: What’s the decision-making process within the organization?

Criollo: We have an elected Planning Committee. Five volunteer members are elected for a one year term by the whole membership. The planning committee sets much of the political direction and policy for the entire organization. This year we had seven candidates for five slots. The elected members are

joined by four appointed full-time staff members. The body is composed so that volunteers are the majority, but staff are included both for organizational continuity and to ensure that staff are accountable to volunteer leaders. The BRU monthly meeting is also an important decision making space—it has been hard work to build a democratic, respectful, diverse body that attracts 80 to 100 members monthly.

Clarke: What sorts of work do the members do?

Criollo: They organize on the buses, Some run monthly membership drives, and others organize on their daily commute. There are three very active membership committees: 1) a mailing committee that produces a monthly mailer, 2) an action committees that execute actions and strategic activities set by the planning committee or general membership, and 3) a membership committee that sets up the monthly meeting and deals with the related logistics. In the past, we had a very active Teatro group that produced on-the-bus and street theatre. We had a city saturation committee that supported BRU campaigns by posting posters and lawn signs throughout the city. One of our most important membership assignments was to track MTA overcrowding by collecting and processing data for on-going monitoring of the civil rights Consent Decree.

Targets

Clarke: How do you balance electoral, grassroots, and judicial objectives in your organizing?

Criollo: We start from our overall goal: we are trying to build a progressive, independent, internationalist informed left in the United States. The Bus Riders Union is a comprehensive progressive mass organization on wheels. We see the electoral, grassroots, and legal objectives as tactics in our overall game plan—often moving together, sometimes emphasizing one tactic because it has more traction, but quickly returning to another tactic to move forward. We have no rigid view that one tactic is more important than another. Our primary objective is to expand our base and to strengthen the influence of the



communities that we represent—but tactical flexibility has been one of the keys to our experiment.

The courts are asked to support justice and civil rights, but they are also not necessarily our friends. The courts in the United States have supported slavery, separate and unequal doctrine, and other discriminatory forms. We often try to explain and educate our members about this contradiction.

When we have won court orders to MTA to buy buses to reduce overcrowding, MTA has stalled and filed appeals. During that legal lull, we launched a “No Seat, No Fare—We Won’t Pay for Racism” civil disobedience campaign to bring pressure from the streets for political intervention.

Prospects

Clarke: Do you have a national campaign?

Criollo: Yes, we are organizing for a new civil rights and environmental justice intervention led by transit riders for the re-authorization of the Federal Surface Transportation Act. The new initiative is called “Transit Riders for Public Transportation.” (See page 69 for the demands of the campaign.)

Overall, we are calling for 80 percent of funding to go towards public transit, and 20 percent for highway funding. [The exact opposite of current priorities.] The emphasis will be on reinstating operations funding for public transportation to reverse the national trend of higher fares and service cuts. We are also demanding specific equal protection clauses to restrict discriminatory local policies.

We are building this campaign with other organizations across the country including the New York-based West Harlem for Environmental Action and UPROSE, the Chicago-based Little Village Organization for Environmental Justice, the Atlanta T-Riders Union, PODER in Austin, Center for Environmental Human Rights in New Orleans, and Just Transition, Public Advocates, and Urban Habitat in California. ■

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