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Bus Strike



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If you haven't heard, the metropolitan transit system is on strike. Do you know why? Some may say, "Yeah, sure, it has something to do with lazy overpaid whiny union workers that think they don't get enough

benefits." Depending whether or not you are a union worker, this may be an appropriate summarization. But in my investigation, I ventured a little deeper than just making assumptions, I stumbled upon the Amalgamated Transit Union Local 1005's web site. There was to be a rally at the University of Minnesota, March 12th, at the West Bank in Minneapolis. My mother wouldn't approve of me going into the killing fields of Minneapolis unarmed, but at the expense of my own safety, and in the

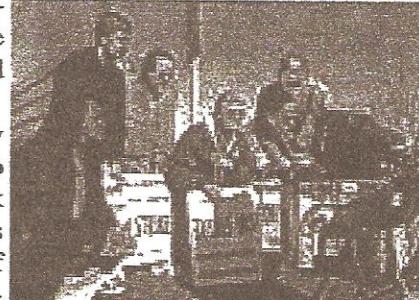
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comforting whiskey-stirred words of Johnny Cash, I Walked The Line.

For those who may be unfamiliar with the strike issues, here's what they look like: on one side, the ATU Local 1005 is asking the Metropolitan Council (the board of operations for Metro Transit), for more reasonable health and retirement benefits. While on the other hand, Met Council says the requests are irrational given the tight budget. The two groups haven't met as frequently as some would think providing these issues are going to be resolved sometime soon.

Friday came, and by noon, I was battling to get across traffic at Oak and University. I was now on the other side of the tracks, across the water, in the turf of our nasty neighbor to the West. A "Chattanooga Choo-Choo" propane barbecue grill designed as a steam locomotive adorned the small foothill that lay before the Gateway Building, property of retired Metro Transit driver Byron Jasperson's wife, who never uses it and doesn't know why she bought it. It bore the sign, "Peter Bell's Idea of Light Rail Transit". Peter Bell is the chairman of the Met Council and the



strikers' foe. And while Jasperson had attempted to prolong his career by trying out to be a driver on the LRT Hiawatha Line; he flunked the test.

Then there's Marlyn Roberts, on the job for 11 1/2 years, who called Metro Transit just yesterday only to find out that he could not retire because they're on strike. He's driven many routes, but lately, the ten, 22, and the infamous five line. "I think it sucks," said Roberts, then referring to Bell's statement, "In our negotiations with ATU Local 1005, we have asked the union to work with us in designing a new plan that would make coverage more affordable," Roberts went on to tell, "No it's not true. We offered to work until July 1st of

2004. The mediation had voted in, but the Metro Council was clueless."

Part-time bus driver Nona Woods takes whatever positions are available. "Think about it. I'm a female and every morning, there is always a drunk on the bus, at 7:00 A.M. I usually work three, three and a half hour shifts with NO bathroom break. And I'm sorry for being a woman, but when it's that time of the month, you can't help it.

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They (Metro Transit) says you can pull over, but if you do, you're late to the next stop, that person bitches, and what do they do? They call you in and you get reprimanded. We're doing this to benefit everybody for an equal life. If no one stands up, who will?" ranted Woods.

Keith Johnston, also a bus driver insisted, "If you guys don't wake up and smell the coffee, you'll be pickin' chicken (expletive). Just like my old man fought for his kids' kids' kids. He clubbed heads right there on University." When the 40 hours a week labor law came into effect, Johnston said they used to make his father work a full 40 hours, two days straight, but not after work control. Johnston's brother-in-law did carpentry work for 30 years and as he put it, "Poundin' nails with no benefits," He didn't belong to a union. "It's up to you young people to get Pawlenty out of here and get out of the Bushes," Johnston finished by stating his dislikes for Minnesota Governor Tim Pawlenty and President George Bush.

Signs began to wave over the heads of picketers, slightly reminiscent of last April's antiwar rally also at the U. One read, "Who the hell is Peter Bell? His ideas can go to hell!" Yet another sign inventively asked the question, "What's the difference between God and Peter Bell? God doesn't think he's Peter Bell."

Meanwhile, I hadn't moved from my location next to "Peter Bell's idea of LRT (light rail transit)" when a heavily bundled woman walked past with an ice cream bucket filled to the rim with twenty dollar bills and in magic marker labeled, "Donations." U of M campus busses, operated by Laidlaw Transportation, crowded the right lane of University Ave. The union workers had encircled me uttering dirty things of the campus bus drivers, all awaiting a chance to share their thoughts on the enemy.

That's when I chatted with Jory Ackerman, who has held his job since 1990, and in 1995 was a full time bus driver on the five line. I hadn't heard of the five line until that day, but all drivers were able to agree that the five line was, is, and will be the worst bus line ever. At Franklin and Chicago, Ackerman let somebody off the bus, when they turned around to shoot him in the face from only a short two feet away. It was a blank. He'd taken a month off to recover and said he'll never be the same since this happened. "Even in Brookdale, somebody called in to report a rider on the

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STRIKE From 10

bus carrying a gun, then the police stormed the bus with guns drawn. But these are just some risks you take with the job," He also deals with gang violence and race friction, "The blacks have never really liked the Native-Americans, but now it's the blacks and the Somalians."

Ackerman doesn't like the fact that management (maintenance, etc.) took a 5.1% pay increase last year, but Met Council wants to cut benefits for drivers putting their life on the line; this brings a feeling of possible discrimination amongst drivers.

"Metro Transit used to pay 2/3 the cost of health care, but now with part time medical at 200 %, if you subtract PT wages, you're left with two weeks pay every month," Ackerman figured.

Wages would only rise 1% in Met Council's final offer. Metro Transit is made up of 2,200 drivers and mechanics, and according to Peter Bell, has the second highest paying transit system in the United States, next to Seattle. The ATU Local 1005 and Met Council were scheduled to meet again March 22nd to renegotiate terms. After an all day "mediation process", Metro Transit General Manager Mike Setzer had had enough, criticizing the Union's efforts to

start negotiating and sent them a letter, received by the Union on March 25th. The Union then replied to Setzer's letter of disapproval with an April 26th letter which read,

"You are critical of the Union's proposal, but have failed to make a proposal of your own. In fact, you make it quite clear that you do not intend to make a proposal. It takes little creativity or courage to hurl insults and criticism. It takes great creativity and courage to introduce meaningful ideas."

Also at the March 22nd meeting, the Union had reduced its final proposal to the Met Council from 3% down to 2.5%, a point well made in the reply letter to Setzer. And in the first week of April, the Union had asked the public to slow to minimum speeds on metro interstates to show support for workers. Many see this as a safety risk, especially during rush hours.

No new meetings between Met Council and ATU Local 1005 are scheduled. However, Minneapolis Mayor R.T. Ryback has suggested that neutral parties help resolve the strike and that the two groups could possibly come together at a "neutral place" away from journalists. Already, this has been the longest transit strike in Minnesota's history.◊