

Free Transportation For All: A paradigmatic anarchist campaign in the difficult years of Syriza

I.

In early 2016 a far-reaching campaign in Athens began with a fairly modest announcement: “Free Transportation for All”. With a few initial actions that grabbed headlines, like an intervention at the OASA office near Alexandras and the destruction of ticket machines at several stations, began the appearance of a campaign that continues today, and has since seen its massification with several large central marches, topical demonstrations and leafletting, persistent and costly sabotage that the police are unable to stop despite their best efforts, and even reaching to igniting resistance among the transport workers themselves. As in the celebrated phrase of Clausewitz, this struggle is not a great burst of pyrotechnics, but the slow flame and long-lasting embers of irregular conflict, always waiting for the opportune moment to flare up once again.

This campaign is notable for several reasons, the first of which can justly be described as *tactical reproducibility meeting strategic coherence*. The sabotage of ticket machines, whether in the metro, on buses or trams, is an act that a group of just a few determined comrades can undertake with a little preparation. No one has to wait for a demonstration or a discussion in an assembly. It is also an act that is hard for the police to catch and prove, as the only group of people so far who have been charged for such crimes, have been found innocent. Moreover, several groups have gone to the trouble to publish very clearly their different methods of sabotage. These range from removing the front of the bus ticket machine with a small drill, smashing them with hammers, putting polyurethane foam or gum in the vending slots for the metro and tram, or even simply covering them with stickers, etc. &c. This has importance for several reasons: according to various establishment sources, these machines are valued at several thousand euros each, not including the time and labour having to replace them and the lost income from potential tickets, etc. When we begin to think of machines removed from a few buses or destroyed at a metro station, we already have economic damages in the range of tens of thousands, if not hundreds of thousands of euros. This says nothing of the hefty contract for the security company, and now police, that are required to guard this infrastructure. And this for an already bankrupt transport company, in a technically bankrupt country. The point is that by causing this damage, commuters are allowed to go on for free, and the entire goal behind the new ticket machines (the inevitable future privatization) is lost, as no investors will be interested in a system threatened with such a constant drain of resources. Moreover one of the primary functions of the postmodern globalized state, is to ensure the smooth capitalistic transport of commodities and individuals, and such a campaign directly menaces this role.

Overall, the campaign has met with some interest and support -although it needs more sustained collective effort from the wider movement still to become as dangerous as it could be. Mainly the issue though, is the campaign has not met with the *full comprehension* it deserves, and this is primarily what this piece aims to rectify. Incidentally this is one of the few places where detached, older observers can help the rest of the movement, provided their tone is generally positive and aims at clarification. At any rate, this confusion over the struggle is due largely to needed changes in collective thinking, as we enter the period where the old leftist methods of struggle no longer have much relevance for postmodern realities. Organizing in the party or trade union, marches around parliament, elections and referendums, posing demands to the state- all these have less and less meaning in our world. This campaign serves as a practical example of the new objectively anarchistic trends and tendencies in postmodern struggle, coming as it does in the period of attempted pacification and assimilation of the movement under the government of Syriza, which hastily modernized Greek capitalism (for instance, in its promotion of lifestyle consumption) and effectively dissolved the previous anti-austerity struggles, making very quickly for conditions of small minority resistances similar to other pacified West European societies.

This needed change in orientation makes sense if we want to study reality, not blinding ourselves with (most frequently Marxist) ideological preconceptions, but in searching for real political tendencies of our time; if our mentality becomes one where we see political conflict in general, and mass sabotage in particular, is in our era now oriented around causing economic damages, not around frontal confrontations with the riot police, nor around purely symbolic, pacifist and legalistic actions, nor even around a mythologized working class collectively striking in its factories. Indeed if conditions are those of a supposed ‘social factory’ then this is sabotage of just such an expanded model of domination. It is also worth noting that this is a type of radical campaign that has also been seen elsewhere in different countries recently, for instance in the past few years in Brasil, in Spain, in France and in Italy further back in the past. Therefore this is the Greek anarchist expression of a global trend of struggle in postmodern conditions, which focus on uniting metropolitan masses, outside of political parties and trade unions, in a decentralized and anarchist fashion, through protests and direct actions over themes of transportation. It also links the recent past of the Greek movement with the present, these different moments that need to be connected: for instance in the years after 2008, there was widespread sabotage of ticket machines and tram lines, and it became something of a widely-accepted social norm to share metro or bus tickets or just to ride for free in Athens. The new ticket system is a direct response to this. Therefore it is not enough simply to have made such a beginning, this new world also has to protect itself, and in many instances this means it has to go on the offensive when it reaches a certain inevitable maturity, in order to protect itself and to spread its goals further. Defense and offense, openness and firmness, are not seen as contradictory in this correct appreciation of events, but as flowing into each other at certain points of development.

If we begin with a serious study of these facts, we see that the groups and individuals participating in the campaign are running circles around the police, who now rush to protect the metro stations, now the busses, and again back to the metro. The targets are well chosen, as it is nearly impossible to protect them all. There have been also attacks on other parts of the broader supply chain of servicing the transport network (as for instance the arson of a building with computing equipment recently)-and this is related to the same postmodern social developments, of new anarchist methods of struggle. This also provides for all yet another vivid demonstration of class justice and the function of the state, as anyone on the street can see such huge governmental effort spent to enforce and protect an almost unbelievably malfunctioning, intrusive new system with waiting in long lines while all other things are left to crumble on their own (as e.g. in Moria and Mandra). This also provides an interesting lesson in postmodern communication, and relation to the media: because in picking a good target with clear actions, free publicity is provided as the metropolitan masses circulate through metro stations-broken machines are seen by thousands of commuters every day, the situation itself speaks volumes. In brief, a leaflet or an assembly speech is not the only way to communicate with the larger society. Plus, with these well-targeted actions is shown a lesson in gaining control of the establishment media, as these are forced every now and again to report on the damages, or new changes in the police or security guards at the stations or on buses. This comes purely from a well-run campaign, and the media attention has nothing to do with being presentable, leftist rhetoric, or playing by the rules. It all flows from a correct strategic appreciation of the present situation, and creating a favorable relation of forces.

II.

There could also be asked the question, whether quizzically or critically, is “free transport” actually a realistic demand? However, it is, and this is what makes for a part of the coherence of the campaign. The reality of such a proposal is already shown in the farcical reality of “tree transport”, that actually exists already for politicians, generals, and now cops. If anyone wanted to discuss hypothetical scenarios, it is all too clear and has been pointed out in some of the texts from the campaign that somehow money could be easily found by switching roles around (*or by not investing in American*

fighter jets!). Therefore there is no question of hard realities, it is a question of priorities, of which values are being promoted. In many countries and several larger cities in Europe, transport in the center is provided for free: for instance, in the quite innovative city of Tallinn, capital of Estonia. This is also a small country suffering from austerity, but while keeping to such an outlook, also finds free transportation more cost-effective in the long run. This is also the case in several cities in Holland, Belgium and France as well. Therefore there is no reason, even in capitalistic terms, why such a development should be declared *a priori* impossible in Athens.

However, hypothetical alternatives and proposals aside, the campaign does not petition the state or reformist politicians. Rather its great strength, and what shows the correctness of its anarchistic position, is that it already creates these zones of free transport. Its ends and means directly connect; there is no grand gulf between before and after, it is simply a progressive increase in spreading these liberated spaces. The terms shift from the idea of a sudden and total victory, with a grand distinction of before and after the revolution in the leftist sense (or the messianic sense of the apocalypse) to a long term struggle over slowly negating different portions of various networks of control. From the historic formal declarations of victory like in October 1917, we today move to slowly expanding zones of autonomy in different fields. This is because in the postmodern world of atomized consumers and digitized networks, the goal is not one of absolute prohibition or permission, but of increasing a partial access or promoting an ever larger denial of access or functioning. With determination and directed efforts, these small functions grow into knock-on effects that go through networks, rendering them more and more functionally inoperative. That is to say a certain threshold is reached beyond which they are no longer justifying basic expectations of performance, and thus are neutralized. In this specific case, there is the almost certain knowledge that such a metropolitan transport system will always be having its machines destroyed (whether on the bus, tram or metro), it will always be leaking money, it will always be a problem for the police to protect- the goal, of increased control and profitability for the transport system and then asking a higher price for privatization, will have been lost, after the expenditure of an immense amount of political capital, time, money and effort. These are some of the postmodern terms of analysis we are proposing for evaluating victory and defeat in specific struggles, and it is this struggle specifically that allows us to begin concretely grounding such a new way of thinking and acting. Since there have been no lasting revolutions yet made in postmodern conditions, there is no cause for any typical assurances or Marxist certitudes borrowed from the past or abstract theories. On the contrary, the value of this struggle is also that it demonstrates the importance of letting the actual developments speak for themselves, to the extent possible.

III.

In passing, with things becoming unpleasant, unhappy and unproductive in the a/a space generally, it becomes clear that the positive role of praise, admiration and constructive proposals, have been almost completely abandoned. With this text we are trying to move in a more positive direction, in a small but practical sense- but far more important it is to point out the practical fields of radical endeavour, which already have a positive and practical character, and which have survived the assimilation efforts of Syriza, and this campaign is a primary one. Therefore it is worthwhile to spread the example of these polymorphic tactics that have allowed anarchists to make a successful struggle with broad appeal, even in the difficult times of attempted assimilation under a leftist government.

Moreover, this campaign has great and large potential to respond to general movement problematics, through its decentralized and open nature, its unifying and positive potentialities, which can fit into the fragmented nature of the a/a space today, and help to revitalize it. For instance, many of the texts have had a positive or encouraging tone, and many have focused on spreading the technical practice of sabotage, not wanting to keep it for themselves as some sort of specialists. As well, the

variety of different groups participating have stuck to anonymity or pseudonymity, thus ensuring there is not a personalized, group-focused, or otherwise self-referential character to the campaign. Because the campaign is open, any group or tendency can participate as they like- all they have to do is accept that no one group or tendency manages the campaign. This form, instead of a hierarchical leftist model with generals and followers, is anarchist, and much more like an open-source software, or a patch of common land: everyone can do what they like, and bring what they want. So, to make such a potential list, e.g. there is the obvious anarchist reality of the struggle, but if some also support communization or communism, they have every reason to support such a campaign, which focuses on spreading these free relations, but in a realistic, non-governmental way, first in sectors of society where such a demand makes immediate sense. Or, if people are more in favor of individualistic themes, then this is a campaign against a clearly dystopian, digitized state control. If people want direct action, they can make it happen. If people like demonstrations, they can arrange these; or if others prefer a focus on workers, they can propose them to form committees of struggle outside the control of unions. There is something in the campaign for everyone, and this pluralistic reality makes for the present importance and great continuing potential of the campaign, especially as “the new normal” of Syriza begins to be destabilized. A window of opportunity is open, and this campaign is a great weapon in the hands of the movement to send Syriza off with a strong kick, and to defend and strengthen itself against tentatives of assimilation.

Such a successful campaign does not simply react or run after events, but shapes them (so it is worth remembering that the campaign began before the new ticket system-even though it has slowed down the implementation of the new system for about a year now). It does not reflexively negate any and every proposed metropolitan infrastructure project as typical in left-oriented groups, rather it has picked the most critical one and also comes forward with its own content, its radical anarchist proposals, and makes them a reality. It is not philanthropy, but solidarity, helping ourselves get free at the same time as the larger society. This campaign in its coherence is also showing the rest of society the correct relation: it is anarchy that is leading resistance to austerity and authority, even in the difficult times of a leftist government. In short, Anarchy is seen, in practice, to have more realistic proposals for resistance than the remnants of a collapsing left, and already points to greater potential changes, transcending the purely defensive struggles of leftist character, to an offensive and anarchistic spreading of freedom and revolt. It is bypassing the limited, isolated and sectoral form of foredoomed leftist struggles, and becoming a real force for spreading anarchy, in particular among the transport network, but in general throughout the metropolis.

Thus, “Free Transportation For All” has both the content and the form of an anarchistic campaign. The content is very clearly of a popular character for free transport, with anti-state, non-parliamentary focus, direct action and sabotage. The form is open to all who wish to participate, and this makes it so different from the other campaigns traditionally run by leftist parties, which are only about gaining new recruits, profoundly unstrategic pseudo-resistance to austerity, or micropolitical parliamentary games. In its very existence, in the connection between pluralistic form and radical anarchist content, the link between means and ends, Free Transportation For All is a living example of anarchist practice, of a different world struggling with all its might and intelligence to get out of the present. . .

So, in closing, this text is dedicated to those groups and individuals who have made Free Transportation a reality- and most especially, to our last great hope, the young generation, and the success they can hope for with such a new type of political campaign, new ways of thinking and acting in the new year and the new times we are entering. . .

-Athens, February 2018