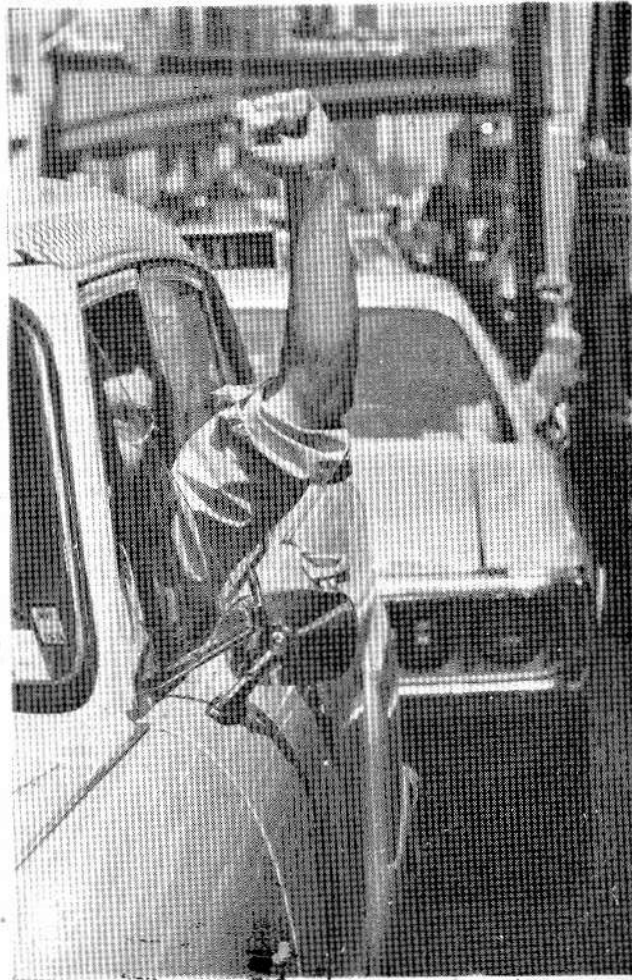


**TAXI AT THE CROSSROADS:  
WHICH WAY TO TURN ?**



**A Proposal from Taxi Rank & File Coalition**

## TAXI AT THE CROSSROADS: WHICH WAY TO TURN?

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## INTRODUCTION

Taxi workers in New York have never been well paid. When the union, Local 3036, was established eight years ago, drivers and inside workers expected things to change. The first two contracts the union negotiated did improve drivers' earnings a little. Our last contract, and the fare increase on which it was based, shot drivers' earnings to hell. Instead of going from a little slice of the pie to a slightly larger piece, we found ourselves getting less than before. The latest deal between the bosses and the union would further cut our earnings, since we'd get no pay increase and the 25 percent fare hike they're asking for would cut our tips and bookings.

Then, as now, they failed us by not negotiating a livable contract, by not giving us any voice in what was happening, by not actively opposing a fare hike which wiped out a large percentage of our tips, and by allowing work conditions in the garages and on the streets to deteriorate. Out of disillusionment and anger, Taxi Rank and File Coalition was formed in opposition to the union bureaucracy and in the interest of bettering the lives of taxi workers.

In the past three and a half years, the Rank & File Coalition has gone through many changes in both membership and in understanding of why we, as

taxi workers, always seem to get the short end of the stick. We've come to believe that, instead of driving beat-up cabs and ourselves into the ground to benefit our bosses, we taxi workers should be running the taxi industry to benefit ourselves and the various communities of New York.

Before this could happen, the taxi industry would have to be taken out of the hands of the fleetowners, integrated into New York's mass transit system, and run on the basis of need rather than profit. While municipalization by the present city government would be a step in this direction, we believe that a real worker-controlled taxi system, and a truly rational taxi system, could exist only in a socialist society, where all industries were run in a similar way. This pamphlet is our view of what the taxi industry is like and our vision of what it could be. We feel this vision of the future is important because although the road is long and filled with potholes and detours, it will help in giving us spirit and direction in the work we have to do.



## OUR JOBS TODAY



Before the last fare hike, a driver could easily do 35 to 40 trips and average over 25 percent in tips. Now we have to struggle to get 25 trips and are lucky to get 20 percent in tips. And if the new fare hike is passed, things will get worse.

But that's only part of the story. On top of this, two provisions in the contract further reduced drivers' earnings--the dime and the 43 percent. All of us lose five to ten dollars a week while the union leaders and the bosses steal dimes from every trip to finance benefits (or benefit their finances). But new drivers suffered the worst blow. They are forced to work for 6 percent less than the rest of us. Almost overnight, drivers lost anywhere from 20 to 30 percent of what they had made before the increase. Since then business has picked up somewhat and the loss isn't quite as severe. But already the bosses are going all out for another fare hike and the union has legitimized it by negotiating a contract based on even more of a hike that the bosses had originally asked for.

Inside workers got small raises in the contract. But the raises weren't nearly enough to bring them up to the level of mechanics in other industries. Starting pay for mechanics is \$140 a week (\$144.40 in the new proposal) while gas men get about \$100 for a forty hour week (\$110 in the new proposal).

At the same time prices have been skyrocketing. Food has shot up in the last three years. Rent controls have been weakened and rents are up in the atmosphere. Clothing, movies, phone bills, vacations, beer, gas-- everything has gone up. Especially the profits of the corporations. While we're paying the highest gas costs ever, Exxon's profits are up 300 percent over the previous year.

Over the last few years, most working people have had a hard time making ends meet. An already rampant inflation has been magnified by a war in South East Asia and the Nixon-Ford administration's policies of corporate giveaways. So even with raises it's been hard.

But for taxi drivers, it was much worse. Our wages didn't even go up a little--they went down. By now, some of us may be taking home a little more than we did 3 years ago. But those dollars aren't buying nearly what they did 3 years ago.

When it comes to fringe benefits, the story is no better. Part-timers get coverage that is more of an insult than anything else. But full-timers and inside workers don't really do that well either. We do not get major medical, dental, or optical coverage. All that we do get is minimum coverage of normal medical and hospital expenses. When something extraordinary happens, we're left high and dry. And if we fail to qualify in a quarter for one season or another, we lose even this meager coverage. In addition, drivers get no sick days. We get no holidays off with pay. We're forced to work weekends with no extra pay. We often need to work overtime--with no extra pay.

## Pensions

The worst benefit of all is the pension. Most of the people who slave their life away in this industry find up getting no pension at all. In order to qualify for a pension, we have to work 25 full-time consecutive years in the taxi industry (24 in the new proposal) and be 65 years old (or get a partial pension at 62). What happens more often than not is that a driver or inside worker either worked part-time for a year or two, or got out of the industry to try something else for awhile. If that something else didn't work out, they came back to the cabs. As a result, there are literally thousands of people who've spent 30 or more years in the industry who get nothing when they retire. The only way you get a pension, if you're in this category, is by working an extra year for every year you missed or worked part-time.

If you do qualify for the pension, you get the tremendous sum of \$100 per month. (The proposed contract raises that to \$125 a month, BUT only if the pension fund can afford it.) If you retired a few years ago, you may get as little as

\$65 per month. Even with the \$125, it's not enough to even pay the rent. Instead of retiring on an adequate pension, many retirees are forced to go on working. Even then, there's another catch--you can only work in the taxi industry. You can't even get a job that might pay a little more or, at least, be a little easier on you. And to top it all off, you can only work on Sundays and holidays--to make sure you don't forget what hard work is like. The new contract would let you work Saturday, but don't book too much or you'll lose your Social Security.

With Social Security, you may just get by. But after working most of our lives, aren't we entitled to more than just getting by?



## Working Conditions

Along with lousy pay and inadequate benefits, the conditions we work under make jobs in this industry a daily hell. It's hard to put the frustrations and aggravations of driving into words. How do you describe the combined impact of uncomfortable and unsafe cabs, of traffic, of lousy tips, of harassment, of accidents, of robberies, of competition, of long hours? It's hard but it's important, because only then will we be able to understand what's at the root of all these assaults on our minds and bodies.

Taxi drivers spend at least nine hours of every working day behind the wheel of a car that was not designed to be used the way a New York taxi is. There isn't a good fleet cab on the streets. While we need a vehicle specifically designed to be driven, comfortably and safely, in New York traffic and on New York streets, we instead get passenger cars that start to fall apart within weeks of their first day on the road. If a cab has some good things about it, it probably has just as many bad things. If it's easy to handle, it's probably too small. If it has enough room, it probably rattles your nerves away.

Although the cabs are inadequate to start with, two years of New York driving makes them moving death traps. Most of the bosses have a standard policy of only doing stop-gap maintenance and of running the cabs into the ground. As a result, we wind up driving cabs with bad brakes, untuned engines, slipping transmissions, useless shock absorbers, inadequate wipers, faulty steering columns and bald tires. And when the cabs break down, we often have to wait several hours for repairs.

The conditions of the cabs and the conditions on the streets (traffic, competition, dashing in between trucks and buses, etc.) set the stage for a nightmare of problems.

First of all, cab drivers suffer from a variety of ailments that are, in fact, occupational hazards. We get headaches, backaches, bladder and kidney trouble, and lung problems. The constant bouncing, the starting and stopping, the horn blowing and the polluted air--they all take their toll. A recent study on carbon monoxide in cities found dangerous

# YELLOW FEVER



My boss sends me out in rattling wrecks,  
He screws me, 42's me, steals dimes from my checks.  
My union's a loser without any guts.  
Driving a cab is driving me nuts.

I've cruised for an hour and gotten one trip;  
A ninety cent fare with a dime for a tip.  
A rich old couple with money to burn.  
Driving a cab is making me learn.

My union fights me instead of the boss.  
While they're playing footsie, I'm at a loss.  
I'm getting the shaft and want to fight back.  
Driving a cab is blowing my stack.

Get together and fight--they don't stand a chance.  
We'll kick Harry out by the seat of his pants.  
Then take on the bosses--don't stop till they bow.  
Driving a cab is showing me how.

levels of this toxic substance in city dwellers--with cab drivers being the occupational group most severely affected. If you drive often enough and for a long enough period of time, it's almost certain you won't come out of it healthy. And no research has been done to determine what driving really does to our bodies. The union should be demanding this research be done and be taking actions to eliminate the problems. Instead, if you ask a union official about this, he'll probably give you the name of his cousin who's a back specialist in the Bronx.

But the physical ailments are only part of the story. Driving gives us one worry after another. We worry about waiting on a line. We worry about getting cut off by someone while cruising. We worry about getting caught if we ride the arm. We worry about accidents. We worry about getting stuck in traffic. We worry about the cabs falling apart beneath us. We worry about the Taxi Commission. We worry about getting held up or worse. It gets so bad you want to scream.

But as bad as the hassles may be for men cab drivers, they're worse for the women who drive. Many bosses won't even hire them and others won't let them drive nights--unless they're stuck with some cabs. Passengers treat women drivers with condescending attitudes or make passes. Specific problems like maternity leave are ignored. And since there are so few women in the industry, the sense of alienation from their jobs is that much greater.

We all feel isolated while working alone in our cabs and that makes it easy for us to start thinking that these worries are our individual problems. That's a bad mistake. We all work under the same conditions and, for the most part, our problems are the same problems. Take accidents, for example. The bosses would have us think that accidents are the result of careless or bad drivers. Generally, that's nonsense. Accidents are the almost inevitable result of unsafe cabs, traffic conditions, and the pressure we're under. They're part of the job. Or take harassment. The Taxi Commission, the police and the bosses always attack us as individuals. We're written up alone, and we have our "hearings" alone. We're threatened

alone, suspended alone, and fired alone. But at one time or another, we're all harassed and threatened.

The union has gone along with this effort to attack us as individuals. When we're fired for an accident, they tell us to go to Safety School. When we get reported to the Taxi Commission, they tell us "It's nice to be nice". Rather than working to abolish the lousy conditions, the union wheels and deals to settle drivers' problems individually. Sometimes they don't even do that.

### Inside Workers

For inside workers, the working conditions are much different from the ones drivers face. But they're just as bad. The garages are usually filled with the fumes from paint and exhaust. Whatever safety procedures exist are scrapped in the rushed conditions under which repairs are made. The mechanics have to provide their own tools. Gas men often have to do 10 different jobs, in addition to the one(s) they were hired to do. They get no differential night rates. They're understaffed much of the time and are often cheated out of the overtime pay they're owed. Inside workers have even less influence over the union than drivers. Worst of all, they're caught between the bosses and the drivers.



Working right under the bosses' noses, inside workers are always being harassed about getting things done. The boss wants to keep the cabs on the road. Usually he doesn't care what has to be done to accomplish it. There are not enough mechanics to do the work--especially at night. So it's impossible for thorough repair work to be done. In nine out of ten garages, it's completely out of the question for mechanics to do any preventative maintenance--like wheel alignments.

So what happens? The cars get older and start to break down more and more often. While the mechanics are forced to keep them running with patchwork repairs, the drivers see only the lost hours. So they start to blame the inside workers, instead of the boss, for breakdowns. And that suits the boss just fine. If the workers are divided from each other, maybe they won't notice the bosses' responsibility for these conditions. Once again, our union leadership does nothing to overcome the problem.

Drivers and inside workers can't afford to let their differences divide them. Nor can we let the alienation we feel, which the bosses use to keep us apart, hide our real problems. We all work under crummy conditions and we all try to make the best of them. Drivers try to drive in the same places every day--like the terminals in the morning or the theaters at night--to minimize the disasters. Mechanics learn "tricks of the trade" that keep things together for a little longer. Some drivers ride the arm to earn a little more; mechanics sometimes do side work on private cars. But no matter what we do as individuals, the jobs remain crummy ones.

Alone, as individuals, there's no way for us to change the basic conditions in the industry. But those basic conditions must change because they stand in the way of satisfying lives for us.

## TAXI SERVICE



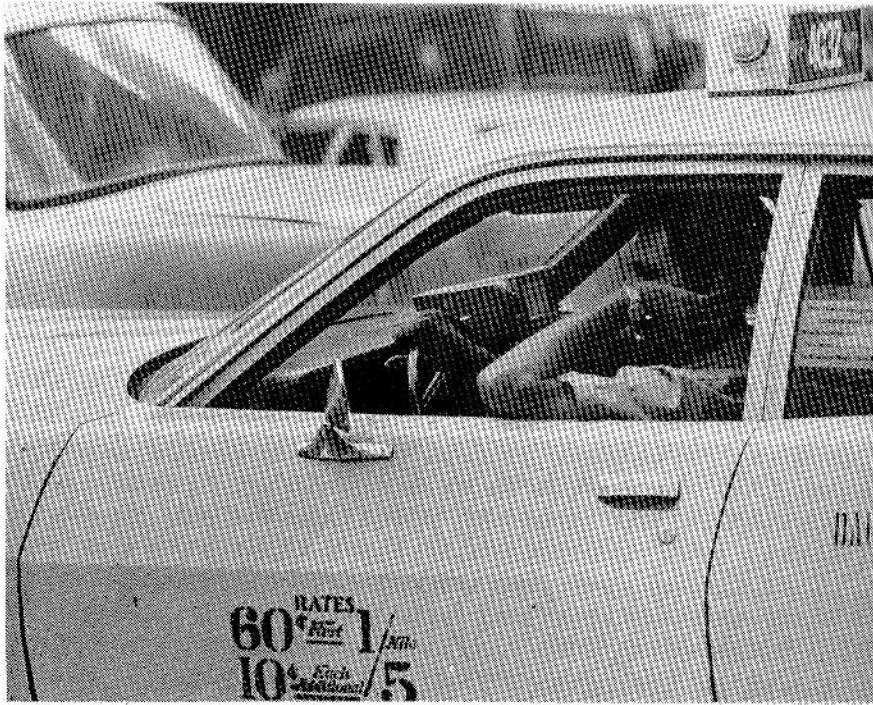
It's bad enough that we have to work under such degrading conditions for so little money. But to add insult to injury, it's hard to feel that the job we do serves any useful purpose. That's mainly because we spend most of our time driving around people who can afford cabs rather than those who really need them.

We all know that most of the business is in midtown Manhattan, because that's where the money is. And since we work on a commission system, most of us are forced to spend most of our time there. But when you think about it, that's the place in the city that least needs taxi service. There are plenty of subways and buses.

While we're busy driving people from Lexington & 86th to Lexington & 59th, or cruising empty up and down Park Ave. along with twenty other cabs, there's plenty of people who really need taxi service who aren't getting it. People who live on Ralph Avenue or Pelham Parkway could really use taxis. And that's true for most working and poor people, our friends and relatives, who live in neighborhoods where mass transit is much less convenient than in midtown.

But these people usually can't afford cabs, even when they really need them. So we rarely cruise their neighborhoods. And sick people, old people, handicapped people, people with young children--they could really use cab service. But most of them can't afford it either. So they have to hassle with mass transit or cut back on other necessities to make up for the money they blow on taxis. And to make matters worse, we're often impatient with them because of the time they take getting into and out of our cabs.

Do things have to be like this? Does taxi service have to be run mainly for the convenience of the rich? At a time when the energy crisis has taught us the need for cheap, varied and efficient means



of mass transportation, must taxi service primarily duplicate bus and subway service? Or can we find a way to use the unique features of taxicabs to blend them into a rational transportation system? Taxis are highly mobile and can go anywhere at any time. It's not hard to think of ways that taxis could and should be used.

Certainly we'd like to give more service to outlying areas in the boros where subway and bus service are inadequate. We could shuttle people between outlying subway stops and their homes, something that's especially needed at night. And we could try various forms of group riding and jitney service (where several people going in the same direction could be taken for much less than they now have to pay). Cabs could be used more effectively in transporting the sick and the handicapped. In Boston, for example, cabs are used to take handicapped and retarded children to and from school. And elderly people should be able to use taxis at rates they can afford.

But isn't all this just pie-in-the-sky dreaming? The bosses can't afford to provide that kind of rational taxi service throughout the city and still make the kind of money they want to. Especially not if we also want them to pay us a decent salary and change things so we don't have to work so hard under such inhuman conditions. And even if they could, why would they want to?

That's the way all of us tend to respond. And not just in relation to the taxi industry, but in most areas of our lives and our society. In spite of our deepest desires to lead full, meaningful lives, and to live in a world where that's true for everyone, our experience through the years has taught us to regard such thoughts with cynicism and helplessness. Although we know we deserve better, we accept the small sense of security our jobs give us and drive our asses off every day, struggling to make ends meet just so we can come back for more of the same.

Well, maybe that's the best way. It is a living after all. So why waste a lot of energy chasing impossible dreams? A few changes here and there--sure. A little more money now and then--why not? Though even that's getting harder to come by.

But maybe that's the point. The way things are going in the taxi industry we have to start wondering whether we can any longer expect things to keep on improving little by little. That sure didn't happen in our last contract.

Before then, everyone was getting 49%, we weren't losing a dime from every trip, bookings weren't that much lower than they are now, tips were much better, and prices were a hell of a lot lower. The latest deal between the bosses and the union will just make matters worse. Since it looks like things are going to keep going like this, it's time to take a good hard look at where the taxi industry is at today.



## TAXI AT THE CROSSROADS



The smoke had barely cleared after the 1971 fare hike and supposed contract when the bosses started screaming again about how broke they were. This broken record has been playing too long for anyone to take it at face value. We all know our bosses are making money. We know it from the cars they drive, from the places they live, from the money they spend lobbying city politicians, and from the very fact they keep sending out cabs.

Through a bunch of legal and accounting devices the bosses have for years managed to hide their profits. So while their corporate balance sheets keep showing them losing money or making very little, they've been lining their pockets through the back door. One common gimmick is for the owners of a garage to set up a separate real estate company which actually owns their property. Then they charge themselves (probably exorbitant) rent. That way their fleet profits come out looking thousands of dollars lower while they still have money stashed away in the real estate company. Using a lot of similar tricks, the bosses keep crying like they ought to be on welfare and pointing to their meager bank accounts whenever it's contract time, or whenever they're asking for a fare hike or a tax abatement or outside advertising. Meanwhile they all somehow manage to cruise around in Cadillacs or Imperials or chauffeur-driven Checkers.

But while it's true that most bosses are raking it in as individuals, it's also true that the taxi industry is approaching a major crisis point. As businessmen, the fleetowners are concerned with more than just bringing home their own bacon. They want to see a healthy profit on their investments. If they can't get it, they'd be just as well off putting their money into something like government bonds where they're guaranteed close to 10 percent returns. So even if they're showing, say, a 5 percent profit on their cabs, they're not going to be happy.

To keep up that kind of profit, the bosses have to make sure that the money they're taking in is increasing faster than their expenses. But with the price of gasoline and everything else going up, with inflation forcing more and more people to cut back on luxuries like cabs, and with the growth of legitimate but competitive services like the Carey buses from the airports, express buses from everywhere, and all the different private car services, the fleetowners' once substantial profits are being squeezed. And if they think that raising the fares is going to be of much help, they're in for a big surprise.

While most of the fleets are still making money, things seem to have reached the point where the only way the bosses can guarantee themselves big profits is by continuing to pay us garbage wages. With our wages low already, and with prices rising daily, that's a hard pill to swallow. But they have a powerful threat to hold over our heads. Their cabs and their medallions are worth a lot of money. If

### Ross the BOSS

This is the story of Ross the Boss  
Who claims his cabs operate at a loss.  
He's planning to put his drivers on  
the rack  
So he can buy his son a new Cadillac.

His life is so rough, he just gets by,  
Over half the meter is his slice of  
the pie.  
With such a small share he can barely  
eat,  
Instead of lobster, he only has meat.

He can't understand why his drivers  
complain,  
Sure the cabs are rotten, but they run  
all the same,  
If the drivers hustle, they'll make out  
all right.  
He can't understand why they're so  
uptight.

Ross sleeps without rest, dreaming of  
money,  
To him it's sweeter than sugar or  
honey.  
In his dreams drivers are merely  
dollars and dimes,  
His church of silver uses us as chimes.



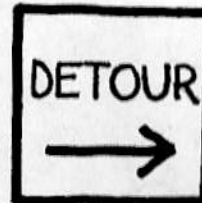
things get bad enough, they can always sell out to mini-fleets and invest their money in more profitable ventures. And this is no idle threat, as we know from the rapid growth of minis.

Another possibility is horsehiring, or leasing of cabs to drivers at a fixed weekly or monthly rate. Under this system, we'd pay for gas and the bosses' profit first, and take home only what's left after that. The fleetowners were making a lot of noise about leasing during the recent contract negotiations. While this may have been mainly a threat to scare us into accepting their terms (and it worked), we're bound to hear more about horsehiring in the future.

So where does this leave us? Our situation's getting more and more intolerable, but the bosses threaten to pack up and go home rather than grant us any significant improvements. While the taxi bosses have always been pretty heartless, the bind we're in today, a reflection of the larger economic crisis, is really a result of the profit system itself. There just isn't enough room to provide a decent living for taxi workers, adequate service to the public, and profits for the bosses.

The bosses say they come first. Our union should be questioning that assumption and challenging the entire set-up of the taxi industry. But the union leaders, who haven't even been able to fight for small gains, certainly aren't prepared to deal with this larger problem. Instead, they move from flatly opposing horsehiring to saying it can't happen unless the union approves. It's a serious situation. Our union's the only protection we've got. But we just can't trust it to do the job that's necessary.

## UNIONS—PAST, PRESENT, FUTURE



Local 3036, like most unions in this country, operates on the assumption that the way for workers to get money is to increase the bosses' profits. This approach has linked the fate of most workers to the well-being of the companies they work for, and has made it impossible for unions to challenge the basic structure of the corporations or of society as a whole. All too often, the personal positions of union leaders have also become linked to the companies they're supposed to be fighting. So unions often wind up selling out their members for the sake of preserving whatever cozy relationships union bureaucrats have developed with the bosses. (Remember the last fare hike which Harry supported. The bosses got their money, all right. The union leaders got a guaranteed income through the dues checkoff, and a lot of dimes to play around with. Our share was 10 cents off every trip, 43 percent and a productivity clause.)

But it hasn't always been that way. In the 1930's, when the wave of workers actions in the rubber, steel, electrical and auto industries began to build the industrial union movement, workers saw those unions as being a weapon of struggle against the bosses. Many saw two classes--that of the workers and that of the bosses. Furthermore, they saw their interests and those of the boss as being directly opposed--his profits came from paying them as little as possible and getting, in return, as much as possible. So it followed that unions were to be a weapon working men and women would use to struggle against the bosses and all their forms of power--from the factory to the White House. And since many saw capitalism serving only the interests of the ruling class, they saw as their goal, socialism--a classless society run by all workers for the benefit of everyone.

Auto workers fought long and hard to break one of the strongest "open-shop" monopolies in the



*Strikers in occupied G.M. plant (Flint, 1936) talk with supporters on the outside.*

country, General Motors. Faced with falling piece work rates, speedups, spies and blacklisting, they struck back. On Dec. 30, 1936, workers took over several key G.M. plants in Flint, Michigan. The strikers lived together and held the plants for 44 days, fighting off the police and vigilantes. When the word was out the state militia was to be used to retake the plant, thousands of workers poured into Flint to fight alongside the strikers. In the end, G.M. was forced to give in and recognize the union.

For many it's hard to reconcile this history with the United Auto Workers of today. The union now does G.M.'s work for it, by enforcing unpopular contracts and in breaking workers' wildcats. The U.A.W.'s hierarchial structure fits in with the same structure in the auto companies, making it that much easier for the boss and the union to work together.

How then did unions with such a fighting beginning become yet another way of keeping workers in line? There are several reasons.

Workers' struggles in the 30's in many industries had won victories locally and forced reforms nationally (like the National Recovery Act which for the first time recognized workers' rights to organize.) The bosses and the government gave where they had to, implementing reforms in an attempt to head off further militant actions. But along with the concessions, they began an offensive. The goal was to weaken the workers' movement; one form it took was anti-communism. Many socialists and communists who had been instrumental in building many of the unions and in keeping them fighting unions once established, were driven from office and/or membership. But it went far beyond even that. The only requirement for being a victim of this boss/government attack was militance. Slander, innuendo, and redbaiting did the rest. This atmosphere hardly aided in the building of fighting unions. And to ensure this worked, the bosses needed labor leaders who accepted their view of "labor-management" relations. They weren't hard to find.

Because there is another major reason behind today's sellout unions. Almost as soon as they were formed, most unions developed bureaucratic structures which tended to separate union officials from the workers. In their position, isolated from the working conditions and with vested interests of their own to protect, the class struggle began to lose it's urgency for them. So most trade union officials stopped fighting to reach larger goals and turned instead to appeals to the bosses and arbitration. (When contract time comes around, so does Vincnet McDonnell.)

The United Mine Workers is a prime example of how bureaucratic structure weakened the miners' cause. While John L. Lewis was a strong fighter for workers' rights against the bosses in the 30's, he also ran the U.M.W. with an iron hand. While under Lewis, this top-down bureaucracy won some concessions from the bosses, it also created the structure which brought Tony Boyle to power, who sold out miners every chance he got. (Today, fed up with that sellout unionism, miners are making

real progress towards building a rank and file fighting union.)

Although many workers resisted this trend towards bureaucratization and conciliation, it divided and severely weakened the labor movement. While it made workers' needs and demands dependent on the bosses' well-being, it also worked to some extent. Rapid industrial expansion, combined with the exploitation of the cheaper resources of poor countries, brought the bosses so much money that they could afford to give workers a little more and still rake in bigger and bigger profits for themselves.

When you're out of work or living on subsistence wages, any little improvement looks good. So many workers, tired after long years of struggle, gave up their long-range visions for the improvements and security their bosses were offering. Which suited union bureaucrats just fine.

Well, reality is catching up with the illusion of a common interest between bosses and workers. With many countries around the world freeing themselves of American economic colonialism, with inflation rampant and resources becoming scarce, there isn't any fat left over in the bosses' budgets to throw to the workers. And since profits still come first, workers are getting hit hard. Especially in taxi where the commission system ties us directly to how much we book for the boss.

The labor movement is no way prepared to deal with this new situation. Instead, we get a Harry Van Arsdale, who, after sneaking through a contract nobody but the bosses wanted, tells angry drivers at a union meeting, "the bosses are not your worst enemy." How many of us really believe that?

### **Top-Down Unionism**

Now it's true our union is not among the tops in its field. But even the few supposed "militant" unions aren't doing the job. Using traditional trade unionist approaches, these unions bargain with the boss for a better contract. At the workplace they agitate for better conditions and defend workers' rights. They try to build a strong union. But this doesn't go far enough.

Why are there bosses in the first place? What right does any individual have to make money off the work of others? Which is more important--the needs of the people or the profits of a few bosses? Unions today never ask such questions.

Not only do union leaders accept the bosses' right to run things, they set up a new set of bosses--themselves. Whenever there's bargaining between the boss and the union, the rank and file worker is left waiting in the garage for a broken-down cab. Union democracy, like workers' control of their jobs, is not a priority of the union leadership. In fact, movements for union democracy are a threat to their positions. So when union bosses are criticized by workers, they label the criticism as anti-union, claiming it creates disunity and weakness. And they often place the blame for their members' problem on some outside group. A good example is how Van Arsdale used the gypsy issue to hide his failure to get us a decent contract, just as the bosses try to get us



*Taxi union bureaucrats Tom Iandoli and Van Arsdale smiling with the biggest boss of all, Rockefeller.*

to blame the gypsies (a none-too-subtle appeal to racism) rather than themselves for the lousy money we're making.

So of course our union leaders aren't going to challenge the bosses' right to be bosses. Because if we start thinking we should be controlling our jobs, we're certainly going to want to control our union. And if the boss is accepted as being in his "rightful" throne it's contradictory to ask for greater, or even some, worker control.

How can workers control their workplace; how can that issue and issues about the nature of the taxi industry even be raised, when the union assumes the bosses' legitimacy? At best there is an exchange of threats, and a salary and list of rights is granted the workers; signed, sealed and delivered in a contract agreed to by union and "management". In return, the union agrees to keep the workers in line ("labor peace") and gives the boss the OK to do pretty much what he wants, outside things specified in the contract. Yet frozen outside this process are the very people all this wheeling and dealing affects.

In taxi we work in an industry where we'll be lucky to get a barely decent contract. As long as we see our "fortunes" tied to our bosses, we're bound to lose. It's only outside the context of the present taxi system that we'll be able to create better jobs for ourselves and better service for all New Yorkers. We need an industry which can relate to real needs by using the specific qualities of taxis to provide special services as an integral part of the mass transit system. We need an industry that provides those of us who work in it a decent living, doesn't destroy us in the process, allows us to feel we are doing something useful, and leaves us enough time and energy to add other dimensions to our lives. In all, we have to understand that the boss, in terms of the actual work being done, is unnecessary; that the profit system oppresses us as workers (unsafe cabs, harassment, etc.), prevents rational taxi service, and must end. And we need a union that operates on that assumption.

## Grass Roots Unionism

A union has responsibilities, but they are far different from the ones unions presently stress, such as enforcing a contract. First, it is essential to involve the membership in the functioning of the union--with decisions flowing from the rank and file up. This means decentralization--one form could be borough offices instead of one large city office. We could demand union officials work at least one day a week in the taxi industry. All the union's books, records, and dealings should be open to the members. To ensure that officials act in accordance with grassroot directives, they should be subject to recall. We don't need another set of bosses standing over us.

Secondly, unions should relate to events which affect the lives of their members and all working and poor people. Work is just part of the day; even with improved jobs, we'd still be put down in a lot of ways. As a political force, unions must be involved, but in a much different sense than they are now. Today we have the Central Labor Council, composed of union bureaucrats, spending its time and money pushing projects like the State Office Building in Harlem, instead of low-cost quality housing and schools. We need organizations of the rank and file of unions fighting to solve the real problems facing workers locally and nationally. Losing rent control affected the lives of many cab drivers as directly as the cut in commissions from 49 to 43 percent and the dimes. America's military madness wastes taxiworkers' dollars. We live in the midst of crime, corruption and pollution. All sorts of schemes and injustices are heaped upon us in the name of profits and the "free world". As a union of taxi workers we can most directly change the industry in which we work. But in so doing, we must recognize that's only part of the solution, that larger changes are necessary.

## CHANGE GOTTA COME



While the taxi bosses are the people most directly telling us what to do, they themselves have people standing over them. Banks decide whether or not, and on what terms, fleets will get loans. Insurance companies determine the terms and cost of insurance. Auto companies design the cabs and set the prices. Oil companies ask whatever outrageous rates they want. And taxi companies need the bank loans, insurance, cars and gas to operate.

When you think about it, these institutions-- the banks, the insurance companies, the auto and steel companies, the oil companies-- are the real centers of power in this country. They control vast sums of money and the basic raw materials all industries need to operate. They are controlled by a handful of unbelievably rich and powerful people, who run all the major corporations in the U. S. through a network of interlocking directorship and ownership. These people, the people who control the lives of the people who control our lives, are the ones who buy politicians, create oil crises, pay the CIA to overthrow "unfriendly" governments, and generally do whatever is necessary to get their way.

For a long time now, the means to satisfy our need for food, clothing, shelter and that less easily defined need, the need to use our minds and bodies to create happy lives, have been in the hands of these wealthy few. And despite all their propaganda, PROFIT has always been their most important product. As long as things remain that way, there is going to be a conflict between those few and the needs of many.

This unproductive elite has immense power over our lives. Behind all the facades, they manage us on the job, they control the TV programs we watch, they control the city councils, the legislatures and the taxi commissions. Property laws, labor laws, contracts--all are weighed heavily in the bosses' favor; and even then they don't live up to the bargain. And it's not the individual bosses who are to blame, though most of them couldn't care less about us. No matter how nice a boss is, the profit system itself forces him to put profit first and

human need last. And the scarcer resources get, the worse inflation gets, the more that's going to hurt us. Because of the way this system, capitalism, works, we think it is idealistic/unrealistic for anyone to think about changing things significantly without eliminating the profit system.

If we are ever going to live free, happy lives, then we must control the terms of our work and leisure time. To do that, taxi workers and all other workers must take power from the rich few; we must control our own lives in our work places and in our communities. As taxiworkers, we have to begin challenging the fleet-owners' right to make a profit at our expense. But eventually we're going to have to unite with other working people to take on the biggest bosses of them all. Our goal has to be to put power into the hands of working people everywhere. In different industries, in different countries, working people have begun this process of change.

AUTO WORKERS in Flint, Michigan, home of the sit-in against G.M., managed their day by "doubling up". One worker would do the job of two and let the other worker have free time. The bosses stopped this when they found out; they don't like workers acting on their own. LIP WATCHMAKERS in France, rather than see their factory moved elsewhere in order to make bigger profits for the bosses, took over their factory, produced and sold quality watches for up to 40 percent less than when the watches were being made for the bosses' profits. Working people throughout Europe bought these watches as an act of solidarity with the watchmakers. European workers in textiles and electrical appliances have also taken over their factories and produced goods not for profit, but to support themselves. IN PORTUGAL, after the overthrow of the Caetano dictatorship, workers weren't satisfied with mere promises of a better future. They immediately began to seize factories and run them as they knew they should be run. THE TAXI DRIVERS AND INSIDE WORKERS OF ONE TAXI FLEET IN CHILE before the fascist coup, took over their garage and ran it collectively, as was happening in all kinds of industries in Chile. They did what we are told is bosses' work--together they successfully managed the running of the



*LIP watch workers in France making decisions on the running of the factory they have seized.*

fleet. Other workers have moved to gain control over their jobs; NEW YORK TAXI WORKERS CAN TOO. But eventually things will have to move beyond workers' control in isolated cases. All industries must be transferred from the claws of the rich to the hands of everyone; we must create a worker-controlled socialist society.

### **Municipalization**

In the meantime, we have to work for short-term solutions to the immediate crisis in taxi. One possible direction is municipalization, where the city takes over the taxi industry and runs it similarly to the buses and subways. It would solve some of our problems but wouldn't go far enough. Taxi workers could expect somewhat better salaries, a base pay, better benefits, possibly a cost-of-living adjustment. If, beyond municipalization, we also fought to integrate taxi into the mass transit system, there could be additional improvements. Some experiments in new types of taxi service would have to be tried. And working together with all transit workers, we'd have more clout which would give us more control over our working conditions.

But there would still be problems. We'd still have

a bunch of bureaucrats standing over us making a lot of rules. We'd lose some of the little freedom we get from having a lot of different bosses. Once someone was fired that would be it. In addition, the fleet-owners would demand heavy compensation, which would be financed by the banks at high interest rates--a heavy compensation for medallions which the owners paid next to nothing for and have profited on many times over. As with the subways, we taxpayers would be paying off the banks for years to come and the big banks would end up being our behind-the-scenes bosses.

### **Gypsies**

Along with fleets, car services of every kind could be integrated into a mass transit system that serves the public. Like us, gypsies are a group of working people exploited by the medallion and non-medallion fleetowners and the capitalist system. The fleetowners have medallions worth nearly \$18,000 each. Poor people who saw a chance to make a living in ghetto areas (areas created by this system) couldn't afford medallions. Yellow cabs had avoided these poverty sections because of the high crime rate that goes with such places. So private car services began to service their communities. After the 1971 fare hike gypsies began to move into other areas. The bosses, afraid for their medallions, and the union leaders, wanting to keep workers' minds off the sell-out contract that went with the fare hike, started an anti-gypsy campaign that had racist overtones.

We shouldn't fall for the boss/union attack on gypsy drivers. They are working people like ourselves. The racist propaganda that has been used against them has hurt all of us. With the crime/drug problem in this city, there's no way we're going to eliminate robberies overnight. And with the fears and prejudices resulting from a society filled with racism, there's clearly no way we're going to have every driver willing to work every neighborhood overnight. Gypsy cabs provide a necessary service in black and Puerto Rican neighborhoods. The answer is not to deny that service.

The real issue is that everyone in the city should be guaranteed taxi service. And even more important, every taxi worker must be guaranteed a safe job. Yellow and gypsy drivers must get together with all transit workers

to provide services for all communities in the city. Municipalization may begin to solve the problem. But we think the only long-term solution is a worker-controlled industry within a worker-controlled society.

## Workers' Control

By "workers' control" we mean that we, the workers, would make the decisions concerning our job. It is the drivers and inside workers who have the most experience in and knowledge of the industry, and are most affected by it. Thus we are the people most competent to make the decisions necessary to run the industry (such as: what type of car should be used, the repairs, inspections and equipment they need, and the pay we need to live on.)

One way decisions could be made would be for all of us to meet in our garages to decide how the garage should be run and elect representatives to a city-wide group which could coordinate decision-making such as service priorities, dispatching systems and pay policies.

In terms of what the fare should be, where cab service is most need, and special cab services (cabs for the elderly, jitneys, and cabulance-- cab + ambulance), the drivers and the people we serve would be making the decisions together. To do this, there might be a joint board made up of community people and drivers' representatives from each borough.

Under workers' control, every cab driver now employed would be guaranteed a job where her/his services were most needed; if not as a cab driver, then driving a bus or a jitney, as a conductor or a dispatcher, or in some other transportation job.

We could set up a system where we got paid a minimum hourly or daily wage so we wouldn't have to kill ourselves all day and rely on luck and handouts (tips) for our living. Our pay would be based on what we need to live and not on whether the boss is making a big enough profit. Eventually, it would even be possible to vary our salaries depending on our different needs (for example, people with bigger families could get more money).

Workers' control would also mean a more healthy job. We could begin to choose cars based on safety and comfort rather than only on cost, as is presently done.

Cabs could be designed to eliminate the causes of physical disabilities common to cab drivers. Orthopedic seats would prevent back disorders. Effective shock absorbers and better built cars would prevent the constant rattling that leads to kidney disorders, headaches, tension, etc. Air conditioning and pollution-control devices would make the work more comfortable and would eliminate the major causes of respiratory diseases.



Conditions for inside workers could finally be made safe and clean. And parts and supplies could be kept on hand to ensure that mechanics are able to do a proper job. Thus, conflicts that arise between mechanics and drivers because the boss won't stock parts for proper repairs, would be eliminated. It would be possible to do quality repair work and preventative maintenance.

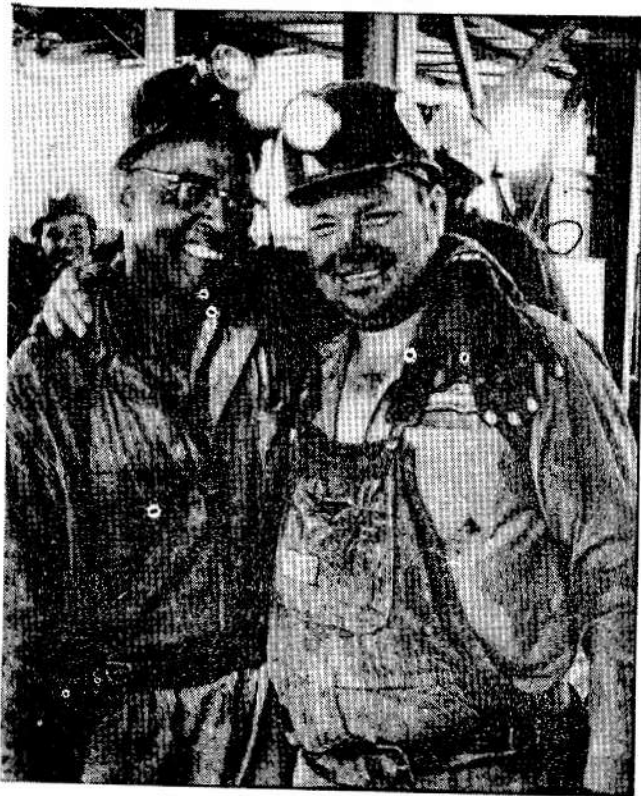


In discussions that would take place in garages we would be drawn together as we learned about, questioned and came to agreement about our different ideas. It's in working out these types of problems that we will learn more about each other and come closer together.

As a result of the reorganization of the industry and a guaranteed wage, the number of hours worked by each of us could be decreased. This will allow people to spend more time with families and friends and to develop special interests. Also, this extra time would be devoted to joining with other people in making the decisions about how the society as a whole, and the taxi industry in particular would operate.

### Socialism

This process, expanded and connected to all other industries, approaches our image of what a worker-controlled socialist society would be like. In addition to dealing with specific job-related problems, workers'



groups from all kinds of industries, along with community groups, will begin to deal with larger problems. Things will be very different. Ask yourself, for instance, if our international policy was made by worker-community councils on the basis of the public good, whether we'd have been involved in putting down popular movements in Vietnam or Chile (two places where corporate-military control of our foreign policy was most evident.) Or would workers see their interest served by tax-free luxury housing and sprawling ghettos rather than quality low-income housing for everyone?

This decision making process would develop the kind of unity and interdependence which could defeat the racism, sexism, and other divisions which keep workers apart and which the bosses have been all-too-ready to fuel. This won't be easy. The people who now run things will use all their power to keep what they have. We've seen what they're capable of in Vietnam, Chile, Attica, and Kent State. But we have power too--the power of our unity, our determination and our love. When we and our working sisters and brothers make the decisions, there's no end to the possibilities for the new and better lives we all could lead.

## NEW DIRECTIONS

Fighting for socialism doesn't mean that we should give up working for immediate gains. Socialism in America won't happen overnight, and it would be suicidal not to try to change things as much as possible right now. There's plenty of opportunity for immediate improvements--in our union, in our garages, in our cabs, in our contracts.

Taxi Rank & File Coalition has been fighting for such changes for the past three years. That's why we've gone to court to win taxi workers the right to vote on our contracts, elect garage committees and hold open, democratic union meetings. That's why we've fought the fare hike and tried to stop abuses at the garage level.

But those three years have also taught us the limits of such efforts. As long as a handful of

people are running things, and as long as profit is their main motivation, the basic conditions of our jobs and lives will remain the same.

So it's important to see whatever improvements we do win, not as alternatives to socialism, but as part of the process of all of us gaining control over our lives. To us, that's what socialism is all about. This proposal is part of our effort to link up the struggle for immediate gains with a long-range movement for socialism and workers' control. We hope that people will start thinking about socialism in new ways, taking it seriously as a possible way out of the incredible mess we're all in.

But more important than thinking is acting. To us socialism is not something to be imposed on people by a group of leaders who tell everyone what to do. So the immediate gains we win shouldn't be imposed on people either. They have to come from all drivers and inside workers wanting them and fighting for them. Rank & File does not want to become another set of "leaders" playing games with people's lives. And we don't want people to look to us for some miracle solution to all our problems.

More than anything we want to encourage taxi workers to feel that we all can and should be running the taxi industry together. Most of us tend to react against ideas like that because we've been taught all our lives that we don't deserve such things, that things aren't supposed to be that way, that it can't happen. But it's clear that the people running things have really blown it and are concerned only with their own gain. And it's clear that if we all sit back and let them keep doing what they want, we're headed for disaster.

For sure, working together can be difficult. We all have deeply ingrained attitudes that tend to divide us from people of different race, sex or age. But we can't let these things keep us apart. They have to be dealt with by all of us working them out together.

We're not saying that socialism will magically eliminate racism or sexism. Only we can do that. And that's the point, really. Socialism isn't some abstract thing out there to say yes or no to. It's all of us solving our problems together. It's all of

us taking power away from the bosses and politicians who keep forcing us to do what they want.

We don't have all the answers. Those can only come from the possibilities we all create together. We ask you to join us in creating these possibilities. It's a long struggle and the outcome is uncertain. But one thing we in Rank & File have found is that just by struggling we're living more meaningful, fulfilling and happier lives. And we're finding that as we keep going, we develop the confidence and the ability to go further and further, our visions of what's possible expand and clarify, and the conviction grows that it's all beautiful enough to be worth struggling for.

Think about it!



We're interested in hearing people's comments and criticisms of this proposal. Whether or not you agree with us, it's important for all of us to talk and grow together. If you're interested in working with us or just in talking, call or write us.

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