

Sisters in Action for Power Rides Transportation Equity Campaign to Victory

Former Portland Mayor (and Oregon Governor) Neil Goldschmidt landed his position as President Carter's Secretary of Transportation on the strength of Portland's public transit system. Since then, the Rose City's substantial investment in light rail, trolleys, and alternatives to the almighty auto has been considered a national model. Yet high school students — who have no yellow bus service — had to pay as much as \$33 a month to ride the public bus, while businesses, shoppers and tourists were offered free or reduced fares and other incentives to use public transit.



Over three years ago, Sisters in Action for Power launched a transportation equity campaign, calling on Tri-Met (Portland's regional transit authority) to invest in their youth riders, and particularly students who rely on public transportation to get to school. Members of Sisters in Action, primarily middle- and high-school girls, led a campaign geared towards giving youth, people of color and low income communities a chance to identify public transportation problems and propose policies to better meet the needs of those most dependent on public transit. On August 8, 2001, Tri-Met's Board of Directors voted unanimously to create a special pass just for students at only \$16 a month, benefiting over 200,000 students in the Portland Metro area.

Western States Center asked Sisters in Action's Lead Organizer **Darlene Lombos** about the campaign that produced this tremendous victory.

The true victory is the leaders who will continue to build a movement and fight for justice.

Darlene Lombos

Transportation equity fights are being waged in many other cities across the country — from Jackson, Mississippi, where there aren't enough daily buses to even call it public transportation, to Los Angeles, CA where new light rail lines run virtually empty. How did Portland's reputation for having one of the most advanced, integrated transit systems affect your campaign strategy?

We were able to use it to our advantage. We got people to see how ridiculous it was to spend so much money on a highly developed transportation system while students didn't even have a way to get to school. People from other cities would say things like, "We may not have fancy light rail, but at least we take care of our kids' education first." We used comments like these to get public officials, environmentalists, and mainstream media to support our campaign and shame Tri-Met into preserving Portland's progressive reputation. On the surface, Portland is known as a liberal city, a place where diversity is appreciated and everyone works together. But when low income women and girls of color told Tri-Met they had a right to help make decisions that directly affect their own community, this so-called public agency became immediately

defensive and worked to oppose the campaign. Our community organizing efforts exposed the fact that Portland's progressive image masks a conservative culture that serves corporate interests.

Can you give an example of opposition you faced from Tri-Met?

After two years of intense organizing — door-knocking, community research, rallies, and actions — Tri-Met decided to appoint well-known leaders in the community to form a Transportation Equity Advisory Committee. While this is typical of Portland's way of pretending to work with the community, our members knew from their own experiences and organizational discussions that these types of committees — task forces, working groups, advisory councils — are just another layer of bureaucracy not made up of people most affected by the issue. Essentially, forming this committee was an attempt to undermine the work led by low income women and girls of color, to divide the community further, and to assume authority over the issue. We were not surprised that in less than six months, they published a report that concluded student transportation was not an issue of transportation equity, and therefore, not Tri-Met's responsibility. Nonetheless, we continued to organize and eventually, Tri-Met gave in to our demands.

Your members must feel a great sense of accomplishment after so many years of hard work. How were you able to keep them involved for so long?

We've found that one way to keep people engaged is by doing direct action. It is a great way to have people most affected by the issues come together as a collective and shake up the balance of power. One of our young members always describes confronting a target as a "burning in the pit of your stomach that lasts a long time and reminds you that what you are doing is right." But the fun and excitement in working on a campaign is not the only reason why people stay involved in our organization. I think the real reason is the culture of our organization, which reflects our membership and where they are at, while at the same time providing a space to think critically and work collectively.

What lessons have you learned in this campaign about what it means to build power for low income communities and communities of color?

If we are really serious about building power in our communities, we have to learn how to share power better and be very clear about our commitment to leadership development and political education. While issue campaigns can be a great tool for developing leaders, there were times when I found myself making decisions on my own because of the pressure and pace of developments, rather than taking the time to make sure members were not just involved, but actively leading the campaign. I've learned that my role as an organizer is to provide opportunities for our members to develop organizing skills, to look for ways that will actively challenge members' critical thinking skills, and to create a culture in the organization for members to struggle as a collective. As staff organizers, it is important for us to remind ourselves that the "win" is not just about getting our demands met. The true victory is the leaders that emerge and develop who will then continue to build a movement and fight for justice.



credit: Sisters in Action

Western States Center, the fiscal sponsor for Sisters in Action for Power, has partnered with Sisters in Action to share the organizing expertise of its youth leaders and staff through the Community Strategic Training Initiative. Lead Organizer Darlene Lombos is a former Western States staff member, and Director Amara Perez is a graduate of the Center's advanced organizer training program, WILD.

SISTERS IN ACTION FOR POWER

- a community based, multi-racial, multi-issue intergenerational organization led by low income women and women and girls of color
- dedicated to promoting racial, gender and economic justice by developing the leadership and organizing skills of members in order to influence institutions, to re-shape dominant culture, and to build an organization that models our politics and principles
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