

## PREFACE TO THE NEW EDITION

This new edition of *In Transit* reprints, unchanged, the original text, with a new Epilogue that covers the period from 1966 to 2000. Since *In Transit* first appeared in 1989, interest in the history of the Transport Workers Union (TWU) has remained high among scholars and students, union activists, and transit workers and their families, intensified by a near transit strike in New York in 1999 and an insurgent victory in TWU elections in 2000. I am grateful to Stanley Aronowitz, Micah Kleit, and Temple University Press for the opportunity to make *In Transit* available again.

When I wrote *In Transit*, a new generation of labor historians had just begun re-examining the history of industrial unionism. Older studies had traced the institutional development of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). New studies, including *In Transit*, probed more deeply the social basis of industrial unionism, its relationship to ethnicity, radical politics, and the New Deal, its achievements and limitations, and the impact it had on daily work life. Inevitably, as understanding of these issues grew, new questions arose, such as how race and gender shaped worker behavior, how unionizing varied by region, how changes in the law transformed industrial relations, and what the relationship was between organized labor and the civil rights movement, the new left, and the women's movement. Undoubtedly, if *In Transit* were being written now, it would pay more attention to such issues. Nonetheless, the questions *In Transit* addresses, the story it tells, and the interpretations it puts forth still seem important as originally conceived.

The Epilogue, because of its brevity and the currency of the events it discusses, necessarily lacks the detail and analytic depth of the other chapters. What it does do is provide a preliminary chronicle of extraordinary changes in the New York transit industry and the TWU over the past third-of-a-century. Unlike the events described in the original text, I had the opportunity to observe some of the developments discussed in the Epilogue at close hand, and even, in the most minor way, participate in them.

I would like to thank the many transit workers with whom I have discussed union happenings since *In Transit* first came out, particularly Steve Downs and Marc Kagan, who also provided me with valuable source material. From them all, I learned an enormous amount.

# 1

## THE TRANSIT INDUSTRY

"In most businesses, competition forces the owners to write off obsolescence as technology progresses. But examination of a transit company will almost always reveal, as in a geological cross-section, the speculative abuses and vanished techniques of the past, capitalized for all eternity."

I.F. Stone, *New Republic*, August 10, 1938

For over a century, New York City has been utterly dependent on mass transit. In New York, as elsewhere, rapid urban growth after the Civil War stimulated the development and expansion of public transportation, which in turn played a major role in the spatial, economic, and political evolution of the city. A succession of technologies—horse cars, elevated steam railroads (els), cable cars, trolleys, electrified els, subways, buses, and trolley-busses—were developed that permitted the daily movement of millions of people between home and work and around the city. By the early 1930s, New York City had by far the largest transit system in the country. In 1930, the last year before the Depression cut into passenger loads, 3.1 billion fare passengers were carried, an average of 452 rides a year for every man, woman, and child in the City of New York. By contrast, that year only one out of twelve New Yorkers owned an automobile.<sup>1</sup>

The New York City transit system of the 1930s was not the relatively integrated system of today, but rather a tangle of separate, overlapping route networks. The largest sector of the industry was rapid transit: subways, elevated lines, and a few grade-level lines. In 1933 there were 1.8 billion rapid transit fare passengers, two-thirds of all New York City mass transit users and several times the combined passenger load of the entire United States steam railroad industry. Three separate rapid transit systems were in operation, two large, privately run systems, the IRT (Interborough Rapid Transit) and BMT (Brooklyn-Manhattan Transit), and the smaller but expanding municipally run ISS (Independent Subway System).

Subways and els were particularly well-suited for relatively long rides through densely traveled corridors. Complementing them were numerous privately owned surface lines that used trolleys or buses. These were utilized mostly for shorter rides or in less dense and developed parts of the city, where they provided primary transportation and fed into the rapid transit systems. In 1933 there were 732 million trolley fare passengers and another 164 million carried on buses.<sup>2</sup>

Mass transit was big business. In 1918 *Forbes* magazine found that three of the nation's thirty largest fortunes had been made primarily in transit. In 1930 the IRT, the BMT, and the Third Avenue Railway (a Bronx, Manhattan, and Westchester surface company) were among the nation's 200 largest non-banking companies, with combined assets of over \$850 million. Several of the most powerful financial interests in the world were heavily invested in New York transit.<sup>3</sup>

The corporate and financial structure of the industry was exceedingly complex. The New York transit companies of the 1930s were the end-product of numerous mergers, reorganizations, and divestitures. The greatest transit profits usually did not come from ongoing operations, but from the consolidation and restructuring of companies and the associated financial and stock market activity. In general, the strategy of transit financiers was to combine once separate lines and in doing so extract as much money as possible through watered stock, high dividends and debt, inter-company financial agreements, and other devices. Intricate arrangements of holding companies, leases, interlocking directorates, and subsidiary corporations were used to effect such maneuvers, making actual ownership and profit rates difficult to trace. High management salaries and large fees for banking, legal, and brokerage services further drained cash out of operations. With companies so milked, there was little money left for maintenance, rehabilitation, or modernization. Management could face both regulatory agencies and the work force with pleas of poverty. Such financial practices, however, left companies with high fixed costs and low cash reserves, susceptible to collapse whenever expenses unexpectedly rose or revenues dropped.<sup>4</sup>

The history of New York's largest transit company, the Interborough Rapid Transit Company, or IRT, illustrates many of these patterns. In the nineteenth century, New York transit facilities had been built, owned, and operated by private companies holding long-term or perpetual franchises. A different approach was taken in developing the subways. Under a plan approved in 1894, the city was to supply money to build a subway system which it would own, while private companies would lease, equip, and operate the lines.<sup>5</sup> In 1900 the city signed a contract for subway construction with J. B. McDonald, a leading railroad contractor backed by financier August Belmont. Both men were well connected with Tammany Hall, the local, ruling Democratic machine. Two years later Belmont formed the IRT to equip and run the new system and signed a second contract with the city to build and operate additional lines. The English House of Rothschild invested heavily in the new company.<sup>6</sup>

The planned IRT system posed a serious threat to the existing Manhattan trolleys and els. Four el lines, running up 2nd, 3rd, 6<sup>th</sup>, and 9th avenues, had been built in the nineteenth century and consolidated under the umbrella of the Manhattan Railway Co. George Gould (Jay's son), who controlled the company, had little interest in investing new capital to compete with Belmont. Accordingly, an agreement was reached in 1903 for the IRT to lease these els and absorb their work force.<sup>7</sup> A second consolidation came two years later when the IRT merged with the Metropolitan Street Railway Company, a holding corporation with a virtual monopoly over trolley transportation in Manhattan and the Bronx.<sup>8</sup>

The IRT was further enlarged by a third contract signed with the City of New

York in 1913. The IRT received the right to upgrade its leased el lines and to connect them with its subway system. The subways in turn were to be expanded using city and company funds. The end result was a physically integrated network of 117 miles of rapid transit reaching into every borough except Staten Island. After forty-nine years the entire system, except for the els, was to revert to city control, although the city could “recapture” the jointly constructed lines at any time after ten years by paying suitable compensation. A fixed fare of five cents was written into the agreement at the insistence of the IRT, which feared a popular clamor to lower the tariff.<sup>9</sup>

In theory, under this third contract IRT revenue was to be used to pay off both city and company investments and to provide profits for both. But the order of payment from established revenue pools was crucial. First to be taken out were the IRT’s costs for its various leases; then its tax, operating, maintenance, and depreciation costs. After these came “preferentials,” covering the IRT’s debt payments and providing a fixed annual return on its investment. Only after all these payments had been made, including any accumulated deficits, was the city to receive money for the servicing and repaying of its transit debt and as return on its investment. Whatever money remained was to be split as “profit.”

The IRT rapid transit system always produced a substantial operating surplus, but never any “profit” as contractually defined. Between 1909 and 1940 the city received, in addition to \$80 million rent for the lines built under the first two IRT contracts, only \$19 million, not enough even to cover the debt service on the \$188 million it had invested in IRT construction. The company, on the other hand, made a real cumulative profit of over \$90 million.<sup>10</sup>

In spite of these favorable terms, the IRT underwent a severe financial crisis after World War I, from which it never fully recovered. In taking over the els and trolleys, the IRT had greatly added to its already high fixed costs. Metropolitan Street Railway, overburdened by expensive leases, heavy debt, and highly watered stock, was a major drain on IRT revenue.<sup>11</sup> So was the Manhattan el lease; after 1917 el ridership unexpectedly failed to grow. Yet in spite of these problems, the IRT kept raising its dividends and failed to set aside adequate reserves. The company was thus unprepared for the inflation that came with World War I and the concurrent increase in labor costs, partially the result of strikes.

In 1919 the holding company that controlled the IRT and Metropolitan (by then renamed New York Railways) went into receivership and was ultimately dissolved. Under a reorganization plan worked out by the Morgan interests, who were heavy IRT investors, the two companies were separated, leaving the IRT as primarily a rapid transit company operating on leased lines. However, in spite of modifications in the Manhattan Railway lease and other financial adjustments, fixed costs remained high and prospects poor. Furthermore, a major influx of new capital was impossible; after World War I large investors shied away from the transit industry, unloading what securities they could on less sophisticated small investors (but retaining control through either voting trusts or sufficiently large minority positions).

Unable to reduce fixed costs or attract new capital, the IRT directors tried to cut operating expenses and increase revenue. However, a prolonged court battle to break the five-cent fare provision in the IRT’s contract with the city failed. The

company's lawyers, who had designed the clause, had done their work too well; in 1929 the Supreme Court dashed any hopes for a fare increase. The company then turned to an idea that was much-discussed throughout the 1920s; a government-sponsored unification of the New York transit system that would, among other things, bail out the IRT. But when unification finally came, in 1940, it was already too late; the Depression had caused a decline in IRT revenue and the company went into receivership in 1932. Thus when the TWU was founded, the IRT was under the ultimate jurisdiction of Federal Circuit Court Judge Julian W. Mack and under the immediate supervision of a receiver, Thomas E. Murray, Jr.<sup>12</sup>

The history of New York's second largest transit company, the Brooklyn-Manhattan Transit Corporation (BMT), was also complex. The BMT's immediate predecessor, the Brooklyn Rapid Transit Company (BRT), was a holding corporation that controlled a host of originally separate trolley, el, and private right-of-way surface lines, a sprawling empire that dominated Brooklyn and Queens transit. When the IRT signed its last contract with the City of New York, the BRT signed a similar agreement providing for the construction of a second subway system, to be interconnected with the BRT's existing rapid transit lines. Like the IRT contract, this agreement provided highly favorable terms to the company. By the 1930s a system of 101 route miles in Brooklyn, Manhattan, and Queens was in operation. (The IRT and BMT systems were physically and operationally distinct; free transfer between them was impossible). The BRT, and later the BMT, also operated the city's largest fleet of trolleys and buses; in the 1930s the BMT had the equivalent of 520 single track miles of surface lines, some of which dated back to the 1850s.<sup>13</sup>

The BRT engaged in many of the same financial practices and had many of the same problems as the IRT. It too was forced into receivership after World War I by a combination of high fixed costs, a fixed fare, and inflation. (It had problems with strikes and construction delays as well.) The company re-emerged in 1923 as the BMT. The new company had close ties to the Chase National Bank, the second largest national bank in the country. BMT Board Chairman Gerhard Dahl, an expert in financing, managing, and reorganizing transit and utility companies, had served as a vice president of Chase. Chase president Albert E. Wiggin headed the BMT Finance Committee.

Although the BMT was better-managed and more profitable than the IRT, its directors seemed more interested in insider stock trading and financial manipulations than actual operations. Like their IRT counterparts, they eventually came to see unification as the ultimate solution to their problems. In an effort to strengthen their hand in negotiations toward that end, during the 1920s a group of BMT investors bought a sizable block of IRT securities. By 1931 the group had obtained sufficient control to install Dahl as IRT board chairman and Wiggin as a director. Financially and operationally, though, the two companies remained separate.<sup>14</sup>

The third rapid transit system, the Independent Subway System (ISS), had a far shorter history. After World War I there was a public outcry over the terms of the IRT and BMT contracts and the financial practices and service deficiencies of the industry as a whole. Simultaneously, New York City was undergoing one of its periodic cycles of reform politics, electing a mayor opposed to Tammany Hall and its alliance with the transit industry. Accordingly, when the demand grew for more

mass transit, a city agency, a three-member, mayoral-appointed Board of Transportation, was established in 1924 to plan, finance, and construct a new series of subway lines. The Board tried to find a private company to actually operate and maintain the system, but when no bids were received the city itself opened the ISS in September 1932. For this purpose, the Board of Transportation was converted into an operating organization.

In its first full year of service, the Independent had only 15 route miles and carried but 59 million passengers. Five years later there were almost 56 miles of line and 350 million riders. Newer, better planned, and more attractive than its private competitors, the ISS drew passengers away from the BMT and especially the IRT, whose routes in many places it paralleled.<sup>15</sup>

Like rapid transit, surface transit—bus and trolley travel—was under highly concentrated control. While the BMT dominated surface transit in Brooklyn and parts of Queens, the Third Avenue Railway Company played an equivalent role in the Bronx, where it was a potent political force. Its nineteen subsidiaries also operated lines in Manhattan and Westchester County. In the city, trolleys were primarily used; in Westchester both buses and trolleys.<sup>16</sup>

Most Manhattan surface lines not controlled by, the Third Avenue were already converting to bus operation by the mid-1930s. The bulk of these routes were controlled by two interlocking companies, the Fifth Avenue Coach Company and New York City Omnibus, both descended from properties once controlled by the IRT. The former had always been a bus company, famous for its double-decker buses. The latter was set up by New York Railways to convert some of its trolley routes to bus operation. Control of both companies was obtained in the mid- 1920s by the Omnibus Corporation, a Chicago-based holding company that also owned the Chicago Motor Coach Company.

The co-founder of Omnibus, and president of both its New York subsidiaries, was John A. Ritchie. As chairman of General Motors' bus division he was a key figure in a nation-wide effort to undermine passenger rail and trolley systems, substituting GM-manufactured buses and automobiles. New York was one of his great successes; by 1936 the conversion of New York Railways to buses was complete and the company was dissolved, with its assets and liabilities taken over by N.Y.C. Omnibus.<sup>17</sup>

In spite of the success of large financial interests in capturing the bulk of the rapidly growing bus industry, the introduction of this new, relatively low-cost technology did create the opportunity for some smaller companies to enter the field. The small companies were effectively shut out of the Bronx and Brooklyn, and were usually outbid for franchises in Manhattan by N.Y.C. Omnibus. In Queens, though, they were more successful. North Shore Buss, Triborough Coach Company, and Green Bus, for example, each developed modest route networks. Thus while in the main bus operations, particularly in the densest parts of the city, were controlled by a few major companies, a number of smaller concerns did manage to establish themselves.<sup>18</sup>

Though enormous profits had been made in New York mass transit, by the 1930s the industry was generally in poor shape. Companies lacked capital, fixed costs were high, and equipment deteriorating. Still, the interests with the greatest financial

stakes in the industry were extremely powerful. Long accustomed to getting what they wanted, their reaction to hard times was to demand ever-greater concessions from the city, the public, and their workers.

To run a transit system as large as New York's, seven days a week, twenty-four hours a day, required a great many people, roughly 40,000 in 1933. The IRT had the largest work force, 16,403; the BMT was second with 13,427 on payroll, about equally divided between rapid transit and surface operations. The ISS had only 1,597 employees in 1933, but five years later it had 5,171. The Third Avenue, the largest surface company, employed 3,687, New York Railways 1,535, and Fifth Avenue Coach 1,447. The smaller trolley and bus companies each employed at most a few hundred workers.<sup>19</sup>

Although the major transit investors tended to be primarily concerned with finance and speculation, as the companies they controlled grew in size and complexity they realized the need for professional management. Copying from the railroads, they installed line and staff divisional structures and hired experienced managers. In 1907, for example, Belmont hired Theodore Shonts, a career railroad man, as IRT president, a job he held until his death twelve years later. He was succeeded first by Frank Hedley and then by George Keegan, both of whom had worked for the IRT from its very start. Even during the IRT's final receivership, Keegan remained in charge of day-to-day operations. Similarly, the president of the BMT, William S. Menden, was a professional manager, a Chicago transit executive who had joined the old BRT 1905.<sup>20</sup>

The long tenures of Hedley, Keegan, and Menden were not unusual. Although outsiders were sometimes hired, foremen, superintendents, and other transit officials tended to be promoted from within, and extended careers with one company were common. In 1932, for example, the Third Avenue's ten divisional transportation superintendents had been with the company for an average of twenty-seven years. Well into the 1930s it was possible to find managers who had begun working in the transit industry during the previous century.

Promoting from the ranks meant that transit managers tended to be technically knowledgeable and often of the same ethnicity as the workers they supervised. In general, their style was decidedly old-fashioned and strictly hierarchical. Many foremen, supervisors, and even top company officials were Masons, which probably reinforced their tendency to maintain their distance from the ranks, even if they themselves had started there. Although during the Progressive era, as we will see, the transit companies experimented with various innovations in the labor relations, by the 1930s no new initiatives were being taken, and for the most part line supervisors were in charge of dealing with labor.<sup>21</sup>

Transit jobs varied greatly in function, work setting, and skill level. Most companies had four main departments: transportation, shops and car barns, maintenance-of-way, and power. The transportation departments were the largest, since they included both the operating crews and the station workers. About one-third of the industry work force was engaged in actually operating transit vehicles. Trolleys and buses had either two-man crews, a driver and a conductor, or a single operator who handled both functions. On the subways and els, crews included motormen, con-

ductors, and guards (sometimes called trainmen). The motormen were the most skilled, working their way up through a series of other jobs, training programs, and examinations. Conductors were in charge of all aspects of a train except the actual locomotion, and along with the guards opened and closed the doors and supervised passenger flow. Switchmen, towermen, and yard men switched trains, made them up, and moved them into and out of yards and barns.<sup>22</sup>

Station employees included ticket agents, platform men, porters, and elevator-escalator operators. The largest group, ticket agents, had once actually sold tickets, which were then collected by "ticket choppers." By the 1930s, however, the name was largely anachronistic, since coin-operated turnstiles had been widely introduced and most agents were actually change makers. Platform men maintained order and safety during the loading and unloading of trains. During rush hours they would push aside those debarking and shove new passengers into the already crowded trains. Some platform men were guards or conductors with low seniority, and it was not uncommon to spend part of the day on the trains and part on the platforms. Generally speaking, the transportation promotional ladder was from platform man to guard to switchman to motorman, or platform man to agent. There were no promotional opportunities for the porters, who cleaned the stations.<sup>23</sup>

Maintaining the rolling stock and related equipment was a vast job. On the rapid transit lines it required almost a quarter of the work force. Trains and trolleys were regularly inspected at car barns, yards, or special inspection stations. The IRT, for example, had about 400 inspectors who checked each car every 1,000 or 1,200 miles, the equivalent of five or six days' use. During the inspections, while car cleaners swept and washed the equipment, minor repairs were performed. Each company also had at least one and usually several shops where major repairs and overhauls could be done. These were large, complex industrial establishments, employing hundreds of workers. Not only were parts replaced, they were often reconditioned or manufactured in the shops themselves. At one point the Third Avenue even constructed its own trolley cars, using new steel for the bodies and reconditioned motors and trucks. There were scores of different shop jobs, ranging from unskilled laborers to specialists, such as airbrake maintainers or armature oilers, to highly skilled craftsmen-machinists, mechanics, blacksmiths, tinsmiths, and the like. The bus companies performed equivalent work in their garages, where there were cleaners, mechanics, carpenters, blacksmiths, machinists, electricians, painters, oilers, tinnerns, and various sorts of helpers.

Much of the transit equipment, of course, had to be inspected, maintained, and repaired in place. This was the job of maintenance-of-way workers. They too encompassed a vast array of crafts and titles. Probably the largest group were the trackmen. On the combined trolley and train systems there were over 2,000 men engaged in maintaining and replacing track and several hundred trackwalkers, who literally walked the track looking for defective areas. Then there were men who maintained the tunnels and elevated structures, the pumping equipment, lighting and signal devices, the third rails, the turnstiles, the communications equipment, and so on. There were plumbers, painters, roofers, masons, electricians, laborers, carpenters, machinists, and blacksmiths assigned to maintenance-of-way.<sup>24</sup>

Finally, the power departments operated and maintained electrical distribution





Maintenance work at the shop of the Surface Transportation Company, a bus subsidiary of the Third Avenue Railway Co.

systems. The IRT and BMT generated their own electricity—the IRT at two plants in Manhattan and the BMT at one in Brooklyn—while the ISS and the trolley companies bought power. The transit powerhouses each employed several hundred men, ranging from highly skilled engineers to ashmen. The IRT had forty different basic power department titles. To train these men, the department ran its own school, complete with entrance examinations, grades, and graduations.<sup>23</sup>

The large transit work force, and the relatively few raw materials needed after initial construction (mostly coal for power generation), meant that transit was a labor intensive industry. Nationally, between 1907 and 1937 wages accounted for 48% of the industry's operating expenses (excluding buses and trolley-buses). On the New York rapid transit lines the figures were even higher: wages equaled 68% of operating expenses on the IRT (between 1909 and 1939), 59% on the BMT (between 1921 and 1939), and 64% on the ISS (between 1934 and 1940).<sup>26</sup> Given the relative inelasticity of consumer demand and the legal and political constraints on the fare, profits were highly dependent on the cost of labor. Thus one of the central tasks of transit management was to hold down labor costs.<sup>27</sup>

One way to do this was to reduce the size of the work force relative to the number of passengers carried. The companies had some success in this after World War I. The IRT transportation department, for example, went from 85 employees per

million car-miles in 1918 to 45 in 1928. Two changes were largely responsible for this increased productivity. First, the introduction of turnstiles decreased the need for station employees. Second, smaller operating crews were used. On the subways and els there originally had been a conductor or guard stationed in every car or between every set of two cars. In 1920 the IRT introduced multiple-unit door controls, which enabled one person to operate the doors of several cars. By installing these devices the company was able to replace the six men who previously had been needed to operate a ten-car express with three men: a motorman, a conductor, and a guard. The BMT followed suit, and by the mid-30s was running trains with just a motorman and a conductor. As a result, the combined total of IRT and BMT guards declined from over 5,200 in 1921 to just over 2,000 in 1939. (The ISS never employed guards at all.)<sup>28</sup> Likewise, the trolley companies introduced one-man cars, eliminating conductors. In 1928, 27.5% of the Third Avenue Railway trolleys were run by a single operator; by 1932 they all were. In the process scores of men, some with high seniority, were fired.<sup>29</sup>

Work force reductions, however, were only a secondary means of keeping down labor costs. The main technique was the extreme prolongation of the working week, compensated at subsistence or low wage levels, and worked under harsh conditions and strict discipline. Transit workers were forced to devote a staggering number of hours to their jobs. Many worked seven days a week, with work days often scheduled for as long as twelve hours, and sometimes in practice lasting eighteen. Work weeks of seventy or eighty hours were not uncommon. Only after the impact of the Depression was felt, followed by unionization, was there any dramatic decline in the hours of labor.

As late as 1940, of 103 surveyed industries, transit ranked fourth in the average number of hours worked. In the early 1930s, the seven-day week was standard in the IRT, BMT, Fifth Avenue Coach, and Third Avenue Railway transportation departments and part of IRT power. On the IRT, for example, agents generally worked seventy-two hours a week, with eighty-four hours not unheard of. Porters and platform men worked seven ten-hour days. Third Avenue operating personnel also worked an average of seventy hours a week. In the shops and barns hours were long, but not as long. IRT shop men generally worked around fifty hours and rarely more than six days a week; Third Avenue shop workers generally put in five nine-hour days and six hours on Saturday. Most transit workers received neither paid vacations nor holidays and many had no scheduled lunch or dinner breaks. The only major exception to this pattern was the ISS, which as of 1938 had a standard six-day, forty-eight hour work week which included a paid half-hour for lunch.<sup>30</sup>

These were the working hours seen from management's point of view, the number of hours for which their workers were paid. Seen from the workers' point of view, the situation looked different, and even worse. There are problems scheduling work assignments in any urban transit system because passenger loads fluctuate during the course of the day and special runs, called "trippers," are often needed during rush hours, at school release time, and for large public events. To avoid paying throughout the day a work force capable of handling the peak-load, transit companies made extensive use of swing (or split) runs and "extras."

In swing runs, employees worked the morning rush hour, then had an unpaid

“swing,” followed by a second stint in the evening. “Extras” were low seniority workers, without regular assignments, who on any given day might be sent out on a tripper or a short run, replace a sick worker for a full shift, or be sent home without work. The use of swings and extras meant that transportation department workers put in an enormous amount of unpaid time waiting for or between assignments.<sup>31</sup>

A few examples illustrate what this meant for workers’ lives. In 1933 John Nolan, a guard on the IRT Third Avenue el, was still an extra, in spite of four years’ seniority. He reported seven days a week for possible assignment, once at 6:45 a.m. and again at 1:00 p.m. Some weeks he worked only a single run, receiving a week’s pay of \$1.45. The next year he was transferred down to the subway. Although his hourly pay was reduced, he was given a regular platform assignment, three hours a day, five days a week. After his seniority built up a bit more, he received his first full-time job, on the Broadway line. He reported at 7:00 a.m. to the 96th Street station, where he worked on the platform for two hours before going home. Then, at 3:30 p.m., he went to 191st Street where he directed traffic at an elevator until 6:30. Finally, he traveled to 168th Street where he worked as an agent until 9:30. Nolan’s work day extended over fourteen-and-a-half hours, but he was paid for only eight.<sup>32</sup>

At the Kingsbridge barn of the Third Avenue Railway, extras with low seniority had to appear daily for the “dog-watch report” at 4:45 a.m. and remain until 2:45 p.m., even if they got no work. If they were fortunate enough to be given a regular shift, they might not finish until midnight, only a few hours before they would have to leave home again to report to work. BMT agents with low seniority had to go to a dispatching center; their waiting time and time spent traveling to assigned booths were uncompensated.<sup>33</sup>

Swing shifts were the plague of the operating crews. In 1914 daily paid time for BMT motormen ranged from seven-and-a-half to ten-and-a-half hours, but it took these workers between nine and fourteen hours to actually complete their shifts. Not until 1921 could 50% of the BMT rapid transit swing runs be completed within twelve hours. In the late 1920s and early 1930s, swings were still standard throughout the industry, and for workers with low seniority they could be considerable. When Patrick Reilly started as a platform man on the Ninth Avenue el in 1929, he had a four-hour swing; his working day stretched from 7:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m. for but eight hours’ pay. John Gallagher’s first regular run as a trolley conductor out of the Kingsbridge barn included a six-hour-and-ten-minute unpaid swing.<sup>34</sup>

The use of swings and extras, on top of long regular hours, meant that both full and part-time workers spent an inordinate percentage of their waking lives at the service of their employers. Here truly was an illustration of Marx’s comment that “in its blind unrestrainable passion, its were-wolf hunger for surplus labor, capital oversteps not only the moral, but even the merely physical maximum bounds of the working day.”<sup>35</sup>

For their lengthy toil, transit workers were not paid well. In 1933 full-time New York transit employees earned an average of \$32.82 a week. If managerial, clerical, and miscellaneous support workers are excluded, the figure drops to \$31.76; if those working part-time, usually involuntarily, are added in, the figure further decreases to \$29.65.<sup>36</sup> Generally craft workers in shop, maintenance, and power department jobs received the highest hourly rates, and many shop workers were also eligible for

piece-work bonuses. Prior to the onset of the Depression, for example, skilled shop workers employed by the Third Avenue Railway could make as much as \$38 to \$45 a week. However, unskilled shop workers made far less; in the rapid transit shops the least-paid workers earned only about half of what the best-paid took home.

Among transportation department workers, subway motormen were paid the most, between 72 and 86 cents an hour on the IRT and BMT. Although this was less than top shop rates, hours were longer and therefore weekly earnings, which averaged \$43 in 1933, often exceeded what shop craftsmen made. Average weekly pay for full-time trolley operators in 1933 was \$34; for rapid transit conductors, \$33; and for guards \$29. Fifth Avenue Coach bus drivers averaged \$34 a week and bus conductors \$28. In all companies, hourly rates for transportation workers increased with seniority, but it could take as long as ten years to reach the top of the scale.

At the bottom of the pay hierarchy were agents, porters, cleaners, and laborers. Citywide, in 1933 the average full-time agent received \$26 a week, with hourly rates ranging from a top of 45 cents on the IRT down to 29 cents for starting female agents on the BMT. Some IRT porters received as little as 34 cents an hour, while porters on the ISS got 40 cents an hour for a weekly sum of \$19.20. These figures are all for gross earnings; take-home pay was often less, since deductions were taken out for relief funds, company union dues, and pension payments.<sup>37</sup>

Nationally, transit workers on the average actually earned more than manufacturing production workers. To some extent this reflected their longer hours, but even when hourly rates are compared transit workers were better off. However, except for those at top rates, one could hardly call them well paid. Although efforts to define a national poverty line are notoriously difficult, if we accept the mean of several estimates that have been made for 1929 (\$1,650 a year for a family of four), the average New York transit worker hovered just above the divide.<sup>38</sup> A TWU summary of a 1937 survey of ISS workers gives a stark picture of what this meant:

The average wage for a 48 hour week per employee is \$26.886. Eighty-seven percent live in quarters which cost an average of \$27.94 per month and . . . [that] means that 87 percent of our employees are living in slums. Sixty-five percent were in debt to loan companies, banks, and loan sharks. Only ¼ of one percent were found to be free of debt. Eleven percent were advised by school authorities that their children suffer from malnutrition. Sixteen and one half percent had to refuse their children money requested by school authorities for items necessary to their proper education. As startling as it seems, *51 percent* had to make use of *free hospitalization and clinical services* for themselves or families because of inability to pay a private physician, dentist, etc.<sup>39</sup>

On top of everything else, transit working conditions were quite miserable, and quite dangerous. Between 1914 and 1934 there was an average of 18.1 accident-caused employee fatalities a year on the IRT and 6.4 on the BMT rapid transit lines for a twenty-one-year total of 490 deaths in rapid transit alone. That meant that roughly one out of a thousand rapid transit workers was killed annually on the job. There were also hundreds of serious injuries.<sup>40</sup>

Workers complained constantly about filthy, unsanitary conditions, especially where they were supposed to change, eat, or relieve themselves—if such facilities

were provided at all. In fact, train schedules often left little or no time to go to the bathroom. In one 1935 incident, an IRT conductor was killed crossing the tracks in his rush to relieve himself without throwing his train off schedule. Agents were forbidden to leave their booths unless a relief worker was present. Although the IRT did provide some relief men, ISS and RMT agents were expected to work eight hours and up with no relief. Besides discomfort, this could have serious medical consequences. Among female agents urinary tract problems were common, as were swollen legs and other ailments stemming from extended periods of standing. Older trolley drivers also developed urinary problems and some had to resort to "the motorman's friend," a urine collection tube and bottle that was strapped to the leg. Even in the shops, conditions were abysmal. At the 98th Street IRT shop, toilets had old, splintered seats and the toilet paper was cut up from newspapers that had been left on trains.

Each job had its own problems. Guards and conductors on old el trains frequently suffered ruptures from working manual gates. Stomach ulcers were so common among bus drivers that they were called "driver's stomach." El and subway motormen had to worry about suicides jumping in front of their trains and foreign objects, especially steel rail dust, getting in their eyes. Overheated booths and shops, cold weather for outdoor workers, crowded platforms, and decaying facilities all contributed to the dreary, discomforting, and unhealthful conditions. When the TWU began a free medical plan in 1939, resulting in a dramatic increase in transit worker doctor visits, a large number of previously undiagnosed cases of tuberculosis and other diseases was discovered.<sup>41</sup>

Discipline throughout the industry was harsh and repressive, designed to instill subservience and fear. One historian aptly characterized the IRT management as "autocratic." The companies had extensive rules governing every aspect of job performance and general behavior, and even minor infractions were stiffly punished. On most lines, for example, operating crews were required to buy expensive uniforms from company-designated stores and pass regular inspections. Irregularities as small as a missing button could result in disciplinary action. Workers repeatedly charged that the transit companies were in collusion with the uniform supply stores, with managers receiving kick-backs.

In the shops and other fixed work locations, foremen and supervisors were in charge of general discipline and making sure work was properly completed. However, since many transit workers, for instance train crews and ticket agents, did not work under direct supervision, the companies hired plainclothes agents, known among the workers as "beakies," to watch and report on employees. By one estimate, the IRT and BMT together had about 120 such operatives. Reports by unnamed beakies were sufficient grounds to fire or otherwise discipline employees, who had no recourse to established procedures for hearings or appeals. Furthermore, surveillance was not restricted to the job itself. According to an internal IRT memorandum, it was "regular practice of the Secret Service Department to go to the homes of employees . . . because a great many of the matters requiring shadowing have to do with a man's conduct both on and off the job."<sup>42</sup>

Old-time transit workers have many stories of harsh punishments for relatively

minor infractions. When John Nolan was caught reading a newspaper while on duty, he was suspended for two weeks and lost his pay for the run involved. When Gerald O'Reilly and four other IRT men took off St. Patrick's day to see the parade, they were suspended for a week. Eddie Cabral was once told to go home for punching in two minutes late at the IRT 98th Street shop. His repeated protests only brought a five-day suspension. On the BMT, under the so-called "jump system," trolley and bus drivers who were so little as a minute late to work on five occasions were dropped ten places on the seniority list. Nor did the companies hesitate to fire employees. During just nine months in 1934, the IRT fired 231 men, or about 1.5% of the work force, for disciplinary reasons.

While punishments were harsh, the means of administering them were particularly degrading. Men charged with infractions were sent to company offices where they had to wait for hours before being called in to see company officials. They were then scolded, insulted, and mocked, sometimes by top corporate officers, before being told their punishments. Third Avenue Railway divisional superintendents, in charge of discipline, sat behind high judges' benches as men were called in one by one to stand before them. The entire style of management was designed to terrify and belittle workers, to make them feel at the mercy of supervisors and the companies, to create and reinforce deferential and hierarchical relations. Degradation and dehumanization were basic management tools.<sup>43</sup>

In letters and articles written by transit workers in the 1920s and early 1930s, and in their later recollections of the pre-union era, one term of self-description appears over and over again, slaves:

The trolley-car workers are actually slaves. Even the slaves in early civilization had a few hours for recreation, but for us it is work, sleep and a few hurried meals.

Some of the foremen and subforemen seem to think we are nothing but slaves. They drive us, curse us—anything to get more work out of us.

[O]ur bosses can pay us better if they want to. They prefer instead to work us more and more unmercifully. They prefer to oppress their slaves even more cruelly.<sup>44</sup>

Wherever this language came from—perhaps from union or radical organizers—it was widely adopted because it seemed to fit. Transit workers did not use it metaphorically; transit work, as far as they were concerned, was a kind of slavery. Most people, of course, would object to this usage if taken literally, for in the traditional sense transit work was certainly "free labor." Yet, by the measure of time alone, it was within the domain of the companies that transit workers lived out most of their conscious existence. And within that domain (and to some extent outside it), every aspect of their lives, from what they wore, to what they did, to when they relieved themselves, was under the control of their employers. In that sense, transit workers' lives were not their own, and their recurring assertion that transit work was a form of slavery becomes understandable.