



**The wave of fare increases above all hits the least organised and the most isolated.**

Frankie Rickford

## The Hidden Victims

When the Law Lords ruled the Greater London Council's public transport subsidy illegal they stimulated a major debate on urban transport policy which despite the Government's reluctance to participate is unlikely to die while London fares remain the highest of any capital city in the world.

The economic and environmental arguments for attracting people out of cars with a cheap and reliable public transport system have been widely accepted. The London Chamber of Commerce and leader writers on the *Financial Times* have been among the many and varied voices to call for higher rates of subsidy to reduce traffic congestion, pollution, noise, road damage, accidents, fuel consumption and the waste of valuable land for car parks.

Much less attention has been paid to the fate of those Londoners unable to opt to travel by car when the fares doubled; whose experience will only be officially recorded by their absence from the tubes and buses. They are that growing chunk of the population with very low fixed incomes — the young, the unemployed, low paid and part-time workers and single parents. Their only alternative to forking out 40 pence or more for a mile's journey is to stay at home, as thousands will be forced to do.

Yet it is precisely these groups who are the biggest users of public transport all over the country, entirely dependent upon it as they are for their everyday business and much less frequent pleasure.

### Young women

According to the Department of Transport's most recently published National Travel Survey (1975-76) the most frequent bus travellers are young women aged between 16 to 20. They make

more than twice as many journeys to and from work as any other group in the population — an overall average of 2.63 a week. They also make greatest use of public transport for social, entertainment and holiday purposes — not because they go out more than their male peers but because men of the same age are more than three times as likely to have the use of a car. Young women are also the lowest earning group, so high fares may not only prevent them going to films, discos, evening classes or to visit friends but may also force them to refuse available jobs because they cannot afford to travel to work or give up jobs they already have.

The same problem confronts older 'unskilled' women whose husband and childcare responsibilities debar them from full-time jobs. I've personally met three women in London who said they had to leave jobs when the fares doubled, and I doubt if they are the only ones. If you are paid £1.50 or so an hour for 20 hours a week and have to find £2 a day for fares as well as the other expenses incurred by going out to work such as clothes, union dues and gifts for workmates, the job gets very expensive.

Nurses, office cleaners and catering workers on late night and early morning shifts also face the problem of poor or non-existent bus services at the times they need them. As a result of the fares increase and the anticipated drop in passenger traffic, London Transport has reduced all bus services especially during 'uneconomic' off peak periods. All services now start half an hour later and finish half an hour earlier and the entire night bus service may be withdrawn.

For women, waiting in the dark for a bus that does not arrive, or trying to cadge lifts, hitch-hike or walk is not only inconvenient, but dangerous. Assaults by men on nurses have now become so

frequent that the Royal College of Nursing has taken up the question in an official campaign.

Early this year a young woman was accused of 'contributory negligence' by an Ipswich judge sentencing a man who had admitted raping her after picking her up as a hitch-hiker. After a second woman hitch-hiker was raped in the same area two weeks after the trial finished it emerged that the last bus left the nearest town, Bury St Edmunds, at 5.30 in the afternoon. How many thousands of women must there be in rural areas trapped at home every single evening of their lives by such hopelessly inadequate public transport services coupled with the threat of male violence.

Not surprisingly there is a direct link between car availability and household income. (The London Borough of Bromley whose council initiated the legal action against the GLC fares policy, incidentally, has the highest number of cars per household in Greater London — three times the rate of Tower Hamlets.) But from the sex-based information available on people's travelling habits it is clear that where there is a car in the family, the man keeps the keys. About 60% of employed men in the DoT survey drove to work, compared to 36% of women. One in four women and one in ten men bussed.

### Non-job travel

But if the media, MPs and even the GLC leadership have neglected the problems of these car-less commuters, they have completely ignored the importance of non-job-related travel. Only 29% of the 62,000 bus trips in the national survey sample were made by people going to or coming from their jobs.

No passenger statistics can directly express the need of different groups in the population to travel. What appears to be an essential journey when you can afford the fare may have to be jettisoned if you cannot, and while for one person 'social' travel may mean going to a party, for another it means regular visits to a sick and aged relative who would otherwise be in an institution. Bus fares vary wildly from city to city — in Bristol for example you are well advised to carry a credit card for what in Sheffield would be a 7 pence trip — and London Transport is certain to find some sharp changes in the results of its monitoring programme after March 21.

London Transport's current monitor indicates that 57% of bus passengers and 60% of tube passengers are women, and according

to the national survey women use buses about 35% more frequently than men. Women's need to travel locally is greater because they carry the main burden of domestic and parental work. As well as shopping to feed and clothe a family, women have to visit family planning clinics, ante and post natal clinics, take their children to schools, doctors and dentists, 'keep an eye on' elderly relatives and are generally held responsible for sustaining family relationships.

The importance of public transport in carrying out these tasks is increasing week by week as small local hospitals and schools close, shopping facilities become more centralised, GPs leave their street corner surgeries for bigger health centres and families are dispersed by housing transfers. London Transport chairman Sir Peter Masefield's suggestion that hiking or walking would be a healthier alternative to expensive buses may be true for the childless in areas where the atmosphere still contains more air than exhaust fumes. But a two or three mile trek with a couple of

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miserable under fives and a stone or so of shopping in the borough of Hackney or Lewisham is not going to improve anyone's constitution.

For people dependent on supplementary benefit, public transport fare levels can make the difference between a tolerable and an intolerable existence. Two thirds of supplementary benefit claimants are single parents, predominantly women, occupying some of the worst housing in our inner cities. High fares means only absolutely essential journeys can be made, with the result that the parent and children can be literally trapped within buggy-pushing distance of home for days on end.

An added problem for many lone parents is their vulnerability, because of poverty and stress, to having their children taken into local authority care. In such circumstances, a court considering an application from the parent to take the child home will take account of the number of visits made to the residential home or foster parents' — visits which usually require a bus or underground journey. London Transport's introduction of adult fares for children after 9.00pm is a further blow to the freedom of the capital's 150,000 one parent families.

Pensioners enjoy travel concessions in most parts of the country so are not directly affected by fares increases. But as the second largest group of bus users they have to put up with the service, however bad. A free pass is little comfort when you've been waiting at a bus stop for three quarters of an hour on a winter's night for a bus that is full up when it eventually arrives.

### Isolated and demoralised

I have concentrated here on the impact on some groups of working class women's lives of local public transport policies. Other groups including schoolchildren, students, and unemployed men and women have also been severely punished by the Law Lords ruling, and the Government's refusal to legislate for subsidised fares in London. And it is worth pointing out that black people are over represented in all low income groups.

The people worst hit by an attack on public transport are those most isolated and demoralised by exhaustion and poverty. To then immobilise them by pricing travel beyond their means removes them further from society, confirming their sense of powerlessness.

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