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**Taking the Train to a Clean Environment, a Sustainable Economy & Jobs
Left Margin**

By Carl Bloice

BlackCommentator.com Editorial Board

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There was once a train that ran straight from downtown Los Angeles to Santa Monica on the coast. I think it was painted red - memory being what it is and being that is was when I was a kid. My family would leave home in South Central and be at the amusement pier or the beach in about an hour. It was part of the Pacific Electric Railway, at the time the largest trolley system in the world, running 1,100 miles around Southern California. Unfortunately, it went the way of so many rail lines in the country as LA yielded to the oil industry and the auto companies in their desire to put everybody into a car (or cars; there are two and a half cars for every family in the state.) or an exhaust-spewing bus. Now the only way to traverse that distance is on a thick maze of congested freeways.

I got to thinking about the red train the other day when I came across Paul Krugman's May 19 column, "Stranded in Suburbia," in the *New York Times*. Noting that oil prices continue to soar, and the idea that oil production will soon peak and go no higher is being widely assumed, Krugman noted that Europeans "who have achieved a high standard of living in spite of very high energy prices - gas in Germany costs more than \$8 a gallon - have a lot to teach us about how to deal with that world." He was writing from Berlin.

"If Europe's example is any guide, here are the two secrets of coping with expensive oil: own fuel-efficient cars, and don't drive them too much."

"I have seen the future, and it works," Krugman wrote. Those words immediately recalled to mind the feeling I had in making my way around Berlin last summer. My

feeling was not so much that I had seen the future but rather that I was experiencing the present and my homeland was so far in the past.

Krugman might have also mentioned Berlin's advances in environmentally-friendly building construction methods or the provision of other alternative transportation means such as widespread safe bike lanes and provisions for the physically challenged to get around.

The day after the *Times* column appeared, columnist Derrick Jackson took up the subject in the *Boston Globe*. He noted that over lunch with an Amtrak machinist, Presidential candidate Barack Obama commented, "The irony is, with the gas prices what they are, we should be expanding rail service." The previous week in Michigan, Obama had raised the question of fuel efficiency standards, concluding "We are taking steps in the right direction. American automakers are on the move. But we have to do more."

We can expect a lot of pandering to the auto industry between now and November, wrote Jackson. "Everyone knows that whatever Obama says about the US auto industry is subject to the obvious. American automakers are on the move all right, but to Washington, to lobby against higher fuel efficiency. Any steps in the right direction have been baby steps. High-speed rail could use some of this pampering and pandering."

Higher fuel efficiency standards are a given. The European Parliament is right now taking up a proposal to have every car sold on the continent in 2020 use less fuel than nearly all autos sold there today. And Jackson is quite right that right now in Washington fuel efficiency is the political battlefield. But that's a far cry from sane and sensible national transportation and environmental policies that will bring Americans even close to the Europeans. That's where his comments on Amtrak come in.

"It is obvious that the pressure will mount on Obama, the front-runner for the Democratic nomination for president, to bow to the interests of the auto and airline industries," wrote Jackson. "In 2000 and 2004, two-thirds of campaign contributions from both those industries went to Republican causes, according to the Center for Responsive Politics. In the 2008 cycle, the Democrats are getting about half of the money from both industries."

"It is one thing to meet with an Amtrak worker for a photo-op," wrote Jackson. "It is another to get on board for the rail service America needs for a green economy, less urban congestion, and a more civilized future. Obama says, 'Detroit won't find a better partner than me in the White House.' In the past, that has also meant making a pariah out of Amtrak. Nothing would symbolize a break from this past more than a whistle-stop tour in the presidential campaign, to promote trains themselves."

Both Krugman and Jackson cite some reasons for optimism. Jackson notes that rail travel is sharply on the rise in response to soaring gas prices. The problem is that it is a drop in the bucket. And Amtrak doesn't go everywhere people want - or sometimes need - to go. And it's expensive. It still cost more to go from one region of the country to another on the train than it does by air - even with the extra \$15 a bag.

"There have been many news stories in recent weeks about Americans who are

changing their behavior in response to expensive gasoline - they're trying to shop locally, they're canceling vacations that involve a lot of driving, and they're switching to public transit," says Krugman. "But none of it amounts to much. For example, some major public transit systems are excited about ridership gains of 5 or 10 percent. But fewer than 5 percent of Americans take public transit to work, so this surge of riders takes only a relative handful of drivers off the road."

It was reported last week that many working people in the country are deciding to give up on trying to meet their mortgage payments in order to be able to pay off their car loans - having no other way to get to their jobs.

Krugman speaks of the need to retreat from suburbia and learn to live in more compact areas, saying "Any serious reduction in American driving will require more than this - it will mean changing how and where many of us live." While that's not exactly utopian it's not likely to happen soon.

Jackson is quite right that the country needs greatly expanded rail service "for a green economy, less urban congestion, and a more civilized future."

However, there is one thing glaringly left out of these recent commentaries on the cost of fuel and the need for an improved public transportation system at all levels.

Jackson suggests that Obama and others are pandering not just to the auto industry as such but to auto workers as well. There's a reason for that. Unemployment rates are increasing and the ability to secure good, adequately remunerated jobs has to be one of the principle challenges before the nation.

There's been a lot of talk recently about the need to do something about repairing and upgrading the country's infrastructure, including roads, bridges and levees (another area where the Europeans and Asians are way out ahead). But mostly it's lip service. What we need is a massive public works program to create a physical environment suitable for the rest of the 21st Century. Any program to create a "green" economy or reducing dependency on petroleum must include the project of getting us out of the present cul-de-sac of over dependence on the automobile. There are new rail cars to be built, tracks to be laid, computer networks to be constructed and power lines to be erected. What better way to create meaningful work for those who can no longer depend on machinery production to fully meet the need and the urban youth increasingly faced with a dismal economic future?

Given the dismal depths to which the current electoral campaign has fallen, it would be hard to generate a sensible, comprehensive discussion of the country's future transportation policies. But it would be a good thing if it were somehow injected into the debate. It's a tall order but one that has to be faced up to if we are to avoid falling further behind. The future of train travel would be a good place to start.

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