

By David Moberg

AS PROBLEMS FOR THE LABOR movement have multiplied in recent years like fruit-flies on a ripe banana, many top leaders have refused to acknowledge that maybe they weren't doing everything right.

It's true that the biggest difficulties stem from a convulsive economy with high unemployment that has struck at some union strongholds and from the conservative political tide. Businesses have increasingly rejected the old, limited accommodation with unions and have gone on the attack. And unions have found, much to their dismay, the law stacked against them as they respond.

Yet the weakness of the labor movement and the low public esteem of its leaders reflect serious internal shortcomings as well. When the AFL-CIO Executive Council met for its winter session in Florida late in February, it received a decidedly unsunny report from its Committee on the Evolution of Work that was a first step toward admitting that some of the unions' frailties and flaws and seeking solutions.

"There are some real cold admissions of failure, and that's good," Machinist public relations director Robert Kalaski said. "It's a major step forward for that group."

Most of the recommendations remain vague and tentative. Some will be fleshed out in continued committee discussions. Even then, the AFL-CIO can do little to push unions to adopt any proposal. Yet the report gropes in a promising, if overly cautious way, toward more membership involvement in union affairs, recruitment of new members and a more innovative, effective unionism.

In the past, the labor movement was not as tied to contracts between workers and employers as it is now, which was noted by AFL-CIO President Lane Kirkland. Its goals extended far beyond better wages and working conditions. Labor unions often were a center of social life, a vehicle for radically transforming society, a source of economic benefits and a means for creating institutions from cooperatives to banks.

The new report argues that unions should offer some form of affiliation to former members and others not under a labor contract, possibly offering services such as job information or benefit plans. Unions must also address such neglected needs as pay equity between men and women and workers' desire for a greater voice in the workplace, the committee of union presidents concluded. There are also problematic hints of greater cooperation with management.

Labor's dilemma.

Therein lies a dilemma. Many workers would be drawn to a labor movement that showed more militancy and power. Yet others are worried that unions have too much power already.

A potential resolution is suggested by one of the many unflattering public opinion surveys included in the report. "One fact emerges from the survey data quite clearly:

Non-union workers do not perceive unions as pursuing an institutional agenda drawn from the needs and desires of their members," the study reports. Members see their unions as more responsive, but if the labor movement were viewed—and actually performed—as a more democratic expression of the members, its power would be more appealing (although fully 42 percent of non-union workers have doubts about any collective action).

The problems of the labor movement, some of which the report summarizes, are familiar. Union membership as a percentage of the labor force dropped last year to 18.8 percent, down from 23 percent in 1980. Private goods-producing workers suffered the sharpest drop, from 30.5 percent unionized to only 24 percent, far below the relatively steady 35.7 percent unionization of government workers but above the 10.5 percent unionization of service workers (down from 13.5 percent in 1980). Worse, the new jobs will be coming in industries and areas that are the least unionized.

The AFL-CIO report concludes that "the striking new factor [at work] is a shift in which Americans are less likely to see work as a straight economic transaction providing a means of survival and more likely to see it as a means of self-expression and self-development." Although such an outlook has been strong for at least a couple of decades, the labor movement is now more openly acknowledging that it must respond to the "insistence voiced by workers, union and non-union alike, to have a say in the 'how, why and wherefore' of their work." The favorable comments about quality of work life (QWL) policies are qualified with warnings about employers using QWL to speed up work or avoid unions. But the report offers no alternative union approach, which might include the "technology bill of rights" developed by the Machinists or an insistence that worker involvement extend to decisions about investments and products.

The proposals for better publicity about union accomplishments could hardly hurt, yet union image problems stem from reality as well as misunderstanding. Although union members earn roughly one-third more than non-union workers (the union-caused differential is somewhat less), in recent years union wage gains have fallen behind non-union gains, hardly encouragement to join a union. Last year the major union contracts brought 2.3 percent annual wage improvements, the lowest in the 17 years of record-keeping.

Membership involvement.

Far more important, the report recommends that unions get their members more involved, finding new forums besides the ill-attended monthly meetings, bringing leaders in contact with members, surveying members' opinions, providing an orientation of union history and goals to new members, training stewards and members, and recruiting to the union workers at organized plants who are not members—as many as two million workers.

Some unions have already undertaken such projects. The Machinists are reviving a "grassroots" project to increase communication between members and local leaders that was cut back because of financial problems. Although still hurting financially, the union is now driven by "desperation" and "the question of survival," Kalaski says.

The American Federation of Government Employees also initiated a political education program aimed at mobilizing members. But its success created a problem: newly activated workers in some cases began challenging elected leaders. Creative democracy can threaten old arrangements, giving some leaders a tragic stake in a weakened labor movement.

Greater democratization could lead to policy challenges. "Our direction has always been to democratic socialism," says Dick Greenwood, special assistant to Machinist President William Winpisinger. "If [other unions] start democratizing their own grassroots, they'll start understanding more of what we've been saying." Already the greater collegiality of the AFL-CIO Executive Council under Kirkland has given more leverage to liberal unions critical of military spending. At its recent meeting, the Council reluctantly concluded that it was "left with no choice but to insist that if vital domestic programs are to be cut or frozen, defense spending must also be frozen."

A revitalized membership could aid better-trained organizers using new tactics from TV ads to polling, because union members "are the best witnesses of trade union effectiveness," the report stated. Former members are crucial as well. Around 27 million workers, 28 percent of all non-union employees, once belonged to unions but left, in most cases, because they switched jobs.

Although the idea of a loose associate membership appealed to some unions, especially in the public sector, there were critics. "We should be a union," said Allen Zack, expressing the view of Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) President William Wynn. "That's our number-one role. We shouldn't take money from work-

ers we can't represent on the job. [Wynn] doesn't buy the conventional wisdom that you can't organize workers today."

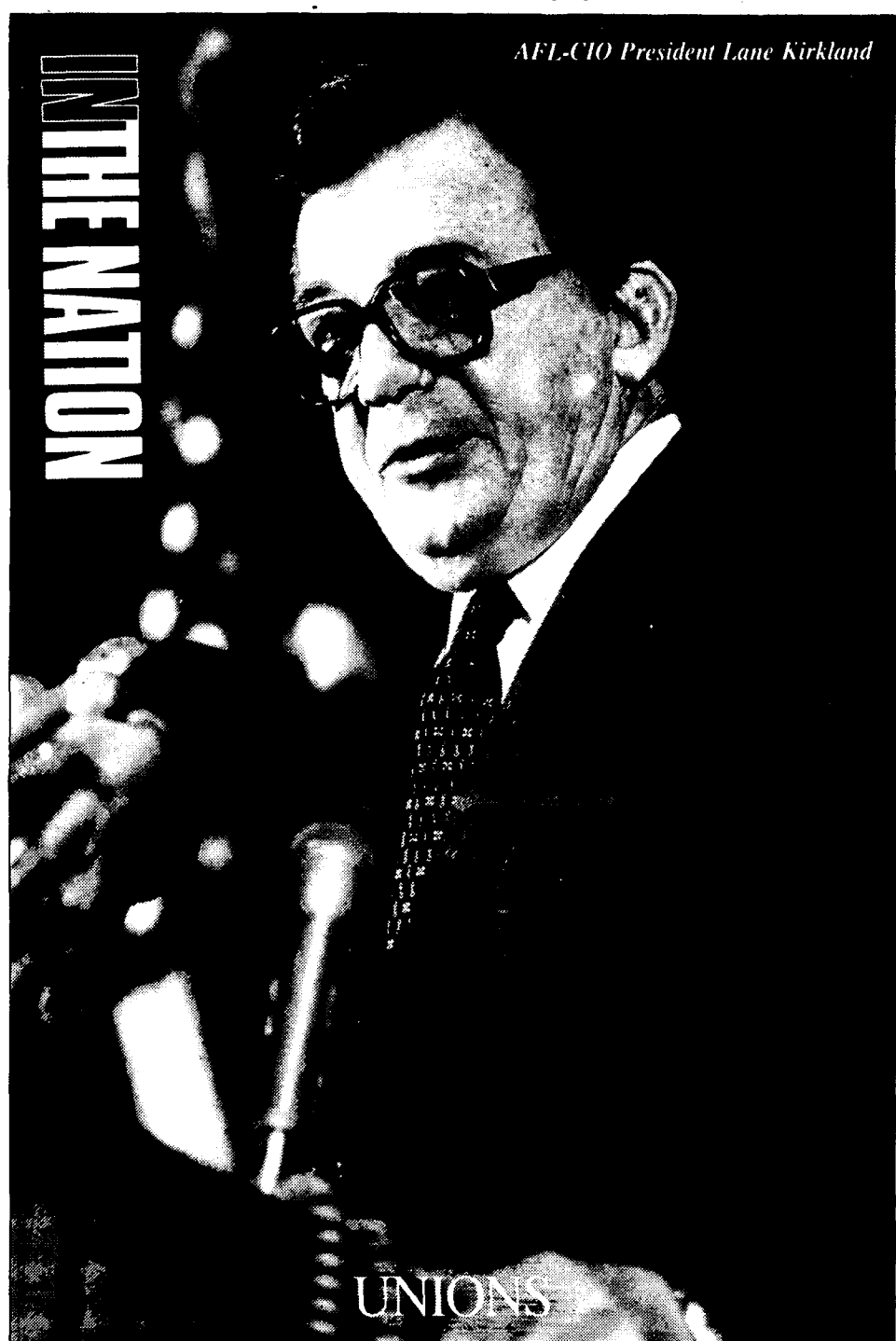
Indeed, UFCW had its best organizing year to date, bringing 58,313 new members in the U.S. Under Wynn's directive to avoid the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) and the endless appeals by management that can break organizing drives, 86 percent of the new UFCW members were organized outside the NLRB, often through organizing strikes to force recalcitrant employers to recognize the union majority support.

Corporate campaigns.

More unions have been applying pressure to companies through their financial ties and their links to communities. The committee report encouraged greater use of these coordinated campaigns, often called "corporate campaigns" after the distinctive model de-

Even innovative tactics, however, don't guarantee success. The Communications Workers (CWA) have supported a small High-Tech Network in Massachusetts, yet it is far from blossoming into a union. In its campaign to unionize Hanes hosiery workers, the Clothing and Textile Workers (ACTWU) used one of the committee's recommended tactics, first organizing around particular issues rather than the principle of collective bargaining. Promising as the strategy may be, it has not been a magic wand at Hanes nor at a small Indiana high-tech plant that was targeted by the CWA.

The report recommended forming special organizing committees, but Kirkland did not have in mind the Depression-era CIO committees but something more like the Beverly campaign—where a task force was freed to concentrate on organizing—or the Houston Organizing Project. Yet the Houston campaign has had limited success, and



New AFL-CIO report outlines labor revival

veloped by union consultant Ray Rogers.

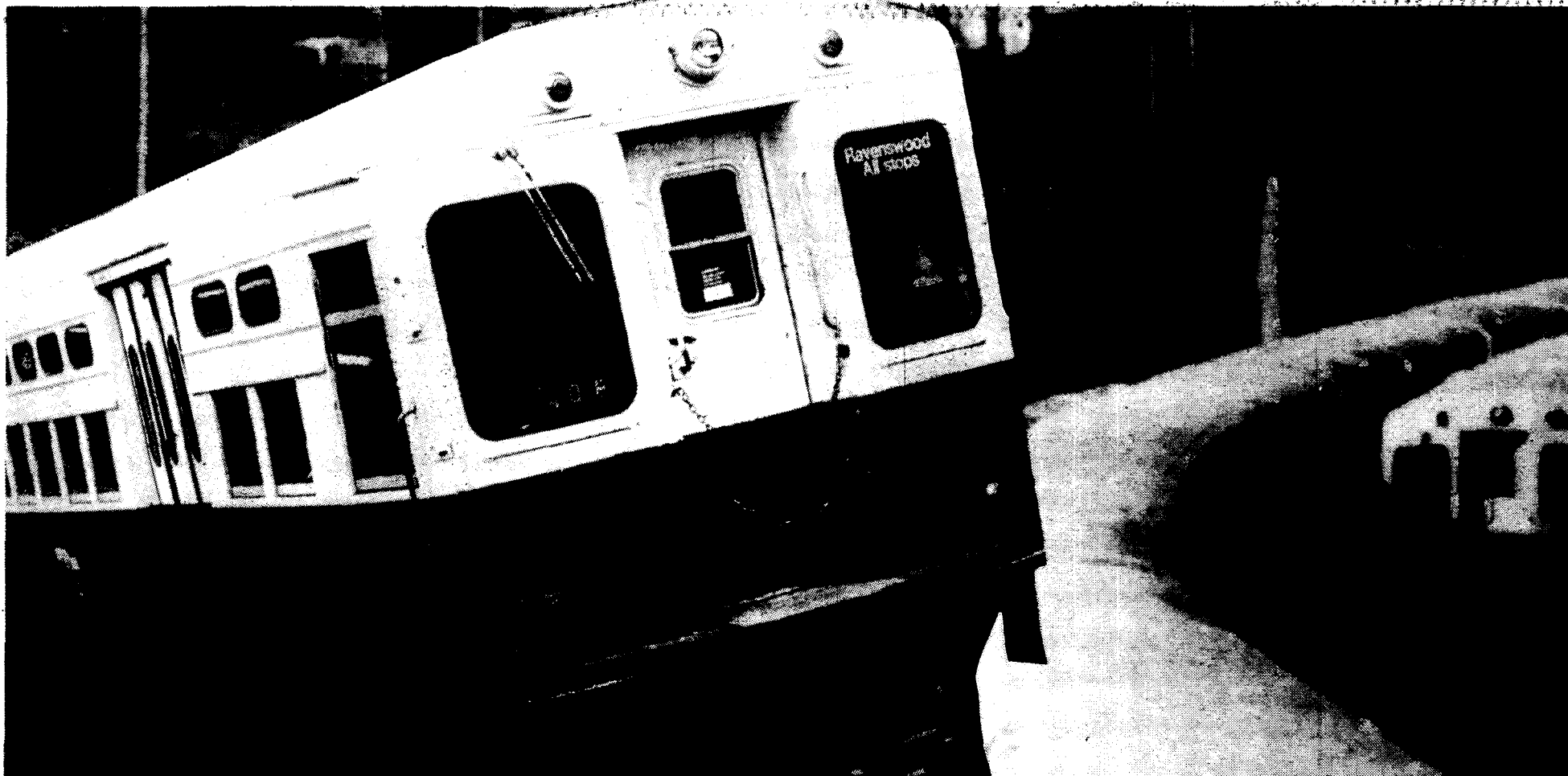
A joint all-fronts campaign by the UFCW and the Service Employees (SEIU) helped reduce anti-union activities by the nationwide Beverly nursing home chain. Since then the unions have won 70 percent of the 89 elections held and just recently negotiated their first contract—a sign both of success and of the great difficulties in organizing (recently unions have been unable to get a contract in 35 percent of the cases where they have won bargaining rights).

A similar attack on Equitable Life Assurance helped SEIU's District 925 win a contract in its Syracuse office, a small but significant breakthrough among women clericals in a largely unorganized industry. The committee report implicitly—but not very forcefully—argued that special interests of women workers must be taken more seriously.

two similar Industrial Union Department projects were canceled for lack of funds a few years ago. Many union organizers remain skeptical of the approach, despite its theoretical appeal.

Organizers must pick targets carefully, the committee concluded, giving special attention to small companies, where union organizing has been nearly twice as successful as at large companies in recent years. Despite the financial troubles unions now have with decreased membership, they will also have to spend more money. Real expenditures have declined sharply since the '50s and '60s, probably accounting in part for the lower rate of victory. (Unions won 46 percent of all NLRB representation elections last year, up from the all-time low of 43.8 percent in 1982, but there were less than half as many attempts as were made in 1980.)

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By Sheryl Larson

HUNDREDS OF MASS TRANSIT officials from around the country are expected to descend upon Washington, D.C., this week to plead their case before Congress. Like other interest groups that recently came before them—farmers, for example, in late February—they hope to persuade Congress members that President Reagan's budget axe should not be allowed to fall on mass transit. The administration wants to slash federal transit aid by two-thirds of its current level, wiping out \$875 million in operating subsidies and sharply reducing capital assistance from \$2.7 to \$1.1 billion.

Transportation Secretary Elizabeth Dole and other Reagan officials recently cited the following statistic as one justification for the hefty aid cut: just 7.5 percent of the nation's 97 million workers use mass transit. Or in other words, American taxpayers are footing the bill for a service used by only a small segment of the population. But this U.S. Census Bureau figure distorts the real ridership picture. It represents a survey of a lone work-day, assumes people use the same type of transport each day and doesn't include those who use mass transit for any purpose other than to travel to and from their job. "If the administration wants to play the numbers game," says one transit lobbyist, "another way to look at it is eight billion times a year Americans step onto a transit system."

This is not the first time Reagan has eyed mass transit as one way to trim the bloating budget deficit. Transit was high on a hit list released in 1981 by the Heritage Foundation, an influential right-wing think tank. It argued that federal operating assistance, which began in 1975 and often helps transit systems cover such line items as labor costs, weakens a local system's incentive to keep those costs down. If the government restricted its support to capital investment, then state and local governments would have a much greater interest in controlling costs because they alone would be responsible for covering the deficits.

Acting on the Heritage Foundation's proposals, the administration asked Congress in fiscal year 1982 to begin phasing out operating assistance. The goal was total elimination of that subsidy by 1986; capital assistance would remain at the 1982 level.

Popular program.

But the president soon discovered that mass transit is a popular program on Capitol Hill, especially among Congress members whose constituents reside in such transit-dependent areas as Boston or New York City. So despite Reagan's repeated attempts to shift the entire responsibility for operating assistance to the state and local

MASS TRANSIT

Reagan cuts would spell hard times ahead

levels, Congress saw to it that transit funding emerged from his first term virtually intact.

There was a change in the way the funds were raised, however, and this could yet prove an albatross to mass transit. Originally, all federal transit aid—both operating and capital assistance—came from the general fund. But a second funding source was added in 1982 when Congress raised the existing 4¢-a-gallon tax on gasoline to 9¢. One out of every nine cents was earmarked for capital assistance to mass transit. After then-Transportation Secretary Drew Lewis assured transit officials that revenues from the tax would be added to existing transit funds, not replace them, they lobbied hard for it.

But the 1986 Reagan budget does exactly what Lewis had promised transit officials would not happen: it eliminates both operating and capital assistance paid for by the general fund and retains only that portion of capital assistance covered by the gas tax.

"It seems there was a hidden agenda in the administration's big push for the gas tax," said a transit official who requested anonymity. "It gives them a convenient way to now say, 'Hey, the capital assistance that we supported in principle all along is still in the [1986] budget—and you always knew we didn't support operating assistance.' But what they don't say is that because of the juggling of funds, they are now perfectly positioned to request less than half the amount of capital assistance we were led to believe they supported."

A similar sentiment was voiced by Albert Engelken of the American Public Transit Association, the principal trade group that represents transit systems and their supporting companies. "The administration wants to reduce the deficit by about \$40 billion," he said. "Federal mass transit aid is just three-tenths of 1 percent of the entire federal budget, yet the \$2.5 billion [in transit aid reduction] represents 6 percent of the total budget Reagan wants to cut. That's asking transit systems to assume an unfair share of the burden."

Transit officials claim the elimination of operating subsidies would mean hard times ahead for many systems, in particular those serving small- and medium-sized cities. In a large urban area like New York, federal operating assistance makes up only about 7 percent of the city's transit budget, ac-

cording to Transportation Department statistics. But the federal government subsidizes close to 50 percent of operations in a medium-sized city like Rochester, Minn. And the subsidy is even higher in some small cities. One irony of Reagan's transit cuts is many cities that would be hit hardest are located in regions that are gaining population.

Transit officials say Reagan's capital assistance cuts would be devastating as well, especially for those systems whose equipment is outdated and deteriorating rapidly. Many would probably have to forego scheduled purchases of new equipment or postpone other modernization plans.

If Congress goes along with the cuts, financially strapped transit systems will face several choices. First, they can try to convince state and local governments to take up the slack. But the odds are against success since many of them are also trimming their budgets. Second, systems can raise fares, yet this is no guaranteed quick-

BATTLE OF THE BUDGET

fix either. Although no across-the-board formula applies, when a mass transit system hikes fares 10 percent, ridership usually declines permanently by 3 percent, according to Joseph Schofer, director of research at Northwestern University's Transportation Center.

A more promising way for transit systems to increase revenues and still retain ridership is to raise fares selectively, charging in proportion to distance traveled. Consumers generally respond more favorably to this type of equitable fare hike. A final option is to eliminate lightly traveled routes or restrict service to specific times.

Anticipating the Reagan cuts, the American Public Transit Association has been quietly lobbying Congress members since last year. But it stepped up its campaign in early February when it released to the media results of a recent survey of 152 transit systems that carry 75 percent of transit riders in the U.S. and of 63 manufacturers and suppliers that support the transit indus-

try. It forecasted that the industry will face a crisis situation if Congress adopts the administration's budget, and it predicted that the "aggregate impact will be a loss of support for more than 203,000 jobs and a loss of \$8 billion in private business revenues."

Joining the Transit Association in its congressional lobbying are the National League of Cities and the U.S. Conference of Mayors. Spokespersons there said that although they would ideally like to see Congress increase transit aid for 1986 above current levels, they would be greatly relieved if it froze spending at 1985 levels.

Several transit officials expressed frustration over the government's handling of aid in recent years. Since the late '70s, each time an administration has drawn up a budget, mass transit has been a target of sweeping cuts. This forces the industry to rush out and spend both time and money convincing Congress members to continue current levels of federal transit aid, robbing them of the opportunity to push for increased aid. Mass transit's scramble at each budget round spotlights the fact that the U.S. lacks a national transportation policy (see story on page 7).

The likely scenario.

Despite all the hand-wringing about federal transit aid cuts, it looks as if mass transit will once again escape Reagan's budget axe relatively unscathed. The most likely congressional scenario is a freeze on spending, according to aides to chairmen of key House and Senate committees. Yet the aides also indicated that some Congress members who usually support full funding are taking a wait-and-see attitude this budget fight: if Reagan will compromise on military spending, then they may warm up to the non-military cuts like transit aid.

Dale Tate, press secretary to Senate Majority Leader Robert Dole, told *In These Times* that Dole "does not believe that Congress will go along this year with total elimination [of aid from the general fund]. Instead, it will probably be phased out over several years."

Another consideration in the transit budget battle is that of the 22 Republican senators up for re-election next year, 16 are freshmen. Since the Republicans don't want to lose their 53-47 Senate edge, the desire to protect those seats may sway budget decisions.

In a February 19 interview with the *New York Times*, Sen. Alfonso D'Amato (R-NY) summarized the politics of federal transit funding in this terse way: a budget that threatens to demolish a popular program like mass transit can be a blessing in disguise for Republicans. Congress members who vote to restore funds can then turn around and pose as heroes to constituents back home.