

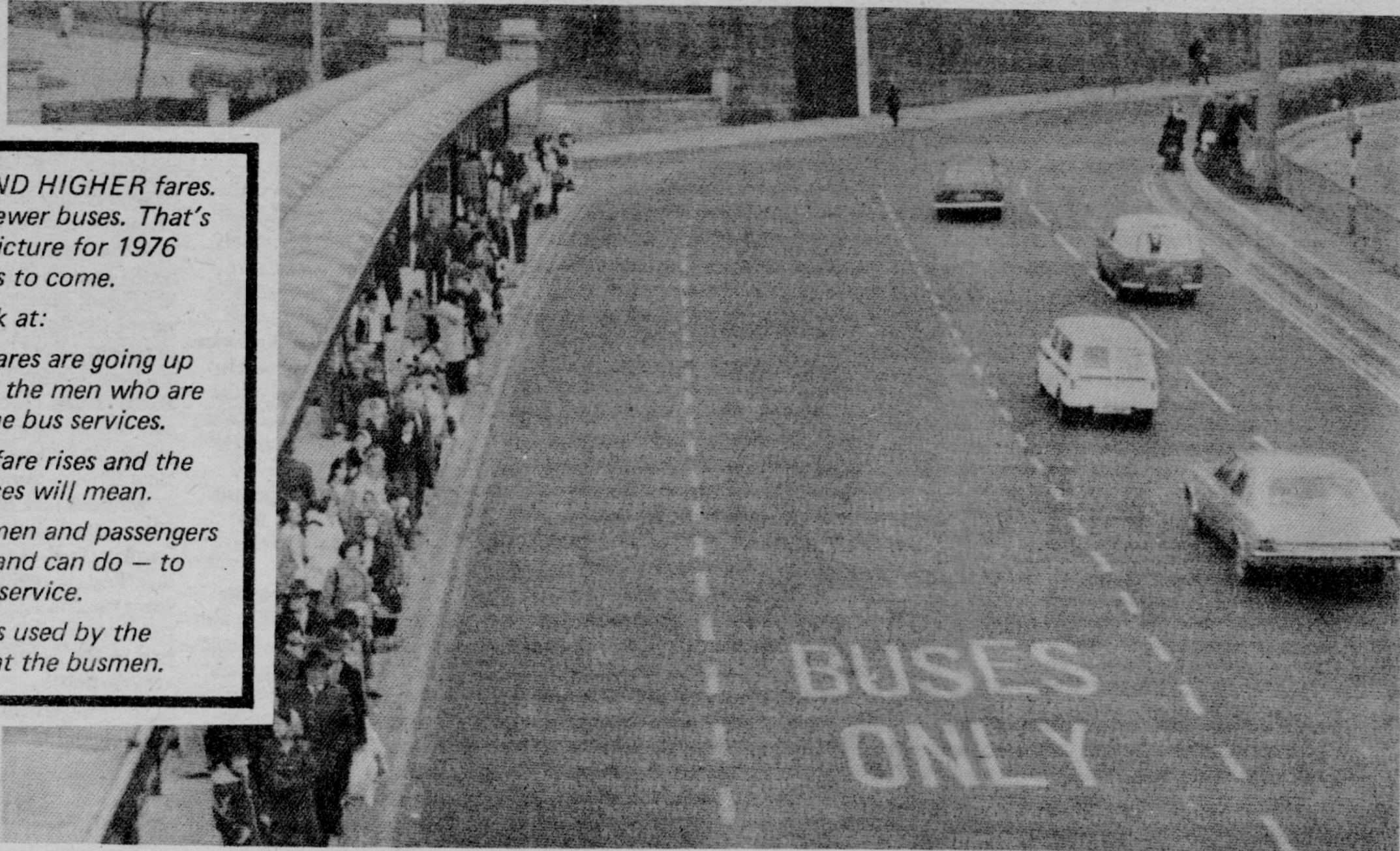
MISSING THE BUSES

WHAT TO DO ABOUT UNFAIR FARES

HIGHER AND HIGHER fares. Fewer and fewer buses. That's the dismal picture for 1976 and for years to come.

Here we look at:

- Why the fares are going up and up. And the men who are sacrificing the bus services.
- What the fare rises and the cuts in services will mean.
- What busmen and passengers are doing — and can do — to save the bus service.
- The tactics used by the MPTE to beat the busmen.



EVERY DAY bus drivers meet hundreds, and probably thousands of passengers. And yet sometimes the busmen and the bus users seem miles apart.

This seems particularly true during a bus strike. When the one day stoppage took place just before Christmas, newspapers immediately sent out reporters to collect angry comments from commuters.

And the store owners screamed that the public were being "held to ransom".

Yet a flourishing bus service is in the interests of both busmen and passengers. Only when the buses are run as a service will busmen's jobs be safe.

And a bus service run on the rates and not on fares would undoubtedly attract far more passengers. This was proved by the only 'free' service which has been run in Liverpool — the city centre 'Freeride'. When the 'Cityride' was made free the number of passengers doubled. Then the MPTE arbitrarily imposed a 5p fare.

Bus services to outlying estates could become so bad that residents may consider running their own service using a local coach operator.

This could be a useful tactic, but there are snags. You could end up doing the authority's job instead of putting pressure on it, and supporting private enterprise against public transport.

It might also threaten the jobs of local busmen, so discuss it with them first.

The difficulty is that the people in the best position to take action against the plans to cut buses are the busmen. Many drivers felt bitter when they were criticised by some members of the public for taking strike action. And yet their action was in the public interest... so far the busmen have held up cuts.

The MPTE originally planned to start the cuts in mid-November. They met opposition from the busmen who were sure there would be redundancies.

This was a real fear. During the last year, new drivers have had to sign papers saying they would accept redundancy.

Then the MPTE said the cuts should start on January 4, and later "by the end of January."

Only the united action of the busmen, with the backing of the public can hope to stave off the MPTE's plans.

But how do you show the common interests of passengers and busmen?

In Italy this happened when the busmen took unusual action. Faced with the same sort of cuts, the busmen chose not to strike.

Instead, they ran a completely free service, refusing to collect fares.

Already some busmen in south Liverpool are thinking about these tactics. One idea is to tell passengers to pay at the end of the journey. Then drivers would not be acting illegally by refusing to collect fares. But they could hardly stop passengers getting off without paying.

One way passengers can — and do — show they can't afford high fares is to ask for the cheapest ticket. One driver from the Speke depot said: "The 6p ticket is easily the biggest selling ticket."

But perhaps the biggest step forward would come if communities in different parts of Merseyside got together to fight the increases.

OFF THE ROAD

THE BUS SERVICE has been going from bad to worse for a number of years. The cuts haven't just suddenly happened.

But there has been little publicity given to the changes which have already taken place in the last year or so.

This is because the cuts weren't done in one swoop. Instead, buses weren't replaced. More buses broke down. More buses were left in the garage to be repaired.

As Mick Loftus, a steward from the Speke depot said: "I reckon up to 60% of the buses on the road at any one time have some defects. Once there was murder if a bus was in the garage for a long time. But not any more."

And the 1975 MPTE Annual Report openly boasts of the revised times of some buses: "Service 46. Penny Lane-Walton. Evening service reduced from 15 minutes to 20 minutes.

"Service 53. Wirral division. Withdrawal of hospital service.

"Service 84. Wirral division. Withdrawn following diversion of Crosville F17 and F18.

"Service 45. South division. Frequency reduced from 15 to 20 minutes and peak hour operation revised."

Without a doubt new fare rises mean some people have to cut down on their bus journeys. Busmen have noticed that since the November increase fewer people are using the buses on Sundays.

Naturally when this happens the

MPTE say fewer buses are needed. Strange logic.

The MPTE have already budgeted for a drop of about 7½ per cent in use of buses because of fare rises last November.

And fares which have doubled on average in a year will go up again, if the MPTE have their way, in April.

What will the new plans to take 60 buses off the road mean? Clearly longer queues and a longer wait. And one or two services will virtually disappear. Take the 87 service. This will operate at peak times only, from Monday to Friday.

Many other services will be greatly reduced during early morning and late evening.

Garston depot has been told to run fewer buses between 4 a.m. and 7 a.m. Buses will come every 30 minutes instead of every 15.

Routes already overcrowded — like the 81 from Bootle to Speke — will become almost impossible. At peak hours this bus picks up children from 14 different schools. The service will become utterly inadequate, as the intervals between buses will be stretched from ten minutes to twelve, so saving one bus every hour.

Other cuts originally proposed in October could come before long. These include the 1 and 500. The 1c from Seaforth to the Pier Head (a 20-minute service could disappear completely. The 500 from Speke to Kirkby could become a half-hour service. And the 92a and 92b (one bus per hour) could stop altogether.

How they split the busmen

THERE IS a traditional rivalry on Merseyside between drivers of the Crosville and Ribble services and those of the city buses.

It's a rivalry the MPTE are quick to take advantage of, and unless these three groups of workers can put up a united front it's unlikely that there can be an effective campaign against the cuts which will drastically reduce Merseyside's transport services.

Perhaps the main divisive weapon in the hands of the MPTE is their agreement with the National Bus Company (which includes Crosville and Ribble).

Under this agreement, signed in 1972, the MPTE guarantee Ribble and Crosville at least 26% of all the bus services on Merseyside.

It costs the MPTE 68p per mile to run a bus. But the National Bus Company have far fewer overheads. It costs them only 48p a mile to run a bus.

The MPTE guarantee any NBC losses up to 48p per mile per bus for their services on Merseyside. (This works out at £3.2 million a year.)

This means the MPTE can actually save money in two ways by introducing a new NBC service. They

can cut their own service on the same route, so forcing people on to the NBC bus.

This means the NBC can easily collect 48p a mile. So the MPTE don't have to give a subsidy.

This is the root cause of the MPTE busmen being angry at the introduction of the new Ribble L22/23 service. They see Ribble being given new services at the very time they are told to accept cuts.

Other depots which have buses running on a similar route to Crosville or Ribble are worried. They fear the MPTE will be axed.

This could eventually happen to services like the 78, which overlaps with an NBC route.

But the reverse happened last year when the MPTE's 92 route was extended into Crosby (NBC territory). Ribble and Crosville objected, but it went through as planned. The introduction of the L22/23 service is regarded by the NBC men as a redressing of the balance — a classic example of the way the MPTE can achieve their aims by playing one group off against the other.

In the same way different depots in the city can be used against each other by negotiating cuts with them individually, and taking more routes off one depot than another, so giving them no common ground for negotiation.

This happened recently when some garages refused to discuss the cuts and others, not so badly threatened, agreed to talk. Unable to reach an agreement, the MPTE attempted to impose the cuts anyway, which resulted in the one day stoppage in December.

During the strike, one depot out of the eight in the North and South Liverpool divisions carried on working. Their reason was: "We deliberately decided to go to work because there was confusion arising, due to there being different issues... different garages were on strike for different and contradictory reasons.

"Only when all garages have recognised the need for unity can any fight against the MPTE's plans have any chance of success."

If this unity is achieved it will not only be in the interests of the MPTE employees, but the passengers as well. At the moment it seems a long way off.

Why the going is harder

BY THE END of this month 60 buses may have been taken off the road. That's the plan of the MPTE. And this is just the start.

Fares will also go up again next April. They have already doubled on average within a year.

Why is there this two-pronged attack on busmen and bus users? The answer is simple. It's on the orders of the Labour government.

Councils have been told to make drastic cuts in their subsidies to bus and ferry services... a 50% reduction over three years.

On Merseyside these demands mean the MPTE have to save at least £13 million by the end of the financial year 1977.

The recent fare rises will have brought in about £8 million by then.

So the MPTE want to find another £5 million, and perhaps more if costs soar.

They have made the obvious moves: cuts in services and higher fares.

That's the reason. But who are the Merseyside men who are bowing to the Government's demands?

The MPTE is controlled by Merseyside County Council... which is dominated by Labour. And as usual Labour leader Bill Sefton has taken the initiative.

When the council's transport committee were being awkward and refusing to impose the cuts, Sefton stepped in.

He set up a special sub committee with complete delegated powers to act. This committee met in secret. And of course the cuts were agreed.

The Labour yes-men on the committee were: Hugh Baird (chairman), J. H. Roberts, Bill Wells, John King, Len Williams and W. A. Wiseman. The two Tories, councillors N. C. Goldrein and Mrs J. Leech agreed with them. Only Liberal councillor John Watton rebelled. And his vote was of no importance. So there we have it.

Already it costs 48p for people living in Kirkby to go to work in Speke... about £5 a week. And there's more to come. Already many parents cannot afford to take their children into the centre when shopping.

And yet the Labour Party, both nationally and locally are forcing through measures which will cause more hardship and hit the poor the hardest.