



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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Transgender activists end policy of gender markers on Philadelphia public transit

30 March

2010

to: 1 July

2013

Country: United States

Location City/State/Province: Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Goals:

Transgender activists aimed to pressure the Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority (SEPTA) to discontinue the use of M/F gender markers on weekly and monthly commuter passes due to the harassment and safety issues it was causing gender non-conforming passengers.

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 036. Performances of plays and music

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 013. Deputations
- 177. Speak-in › Disrupted meeting of the SEPTA board

Methods in 3rd segment:

Methods in 4th segment:

Methods in 5th segment:

- 005. Declarations of indictment and intention › SEPTA riders said they would intervene if they saw a trans person being hassled by a SEPTA employee.
- 063. Social disobedience › Trans people often refused to conform to conventional presentations of gender.

Methods in 6th segment:

- 005. Declarations of indictment and intention
- 063. Social disobedience

Classifications

Classification:

Change
Cluster:
Human Rights

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

Max Ray and Nico Amador were the primary organizers, and were joined by Charlene Arcila, Jaci Adams, Sheila Colson-Pope, Andrea Harrington

External allies:

Liberty City Democrats, ACT UP, State Representative Babette Josephs, COLOURS, Inc.

Involvement of social elites:

Pennsylvania State Representative Babette Josephs attended a community forum and sent a letter to SEPTA. Philadelphia City Council passed a resolution in support of removal of the gender stickers.

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- Liberty City Democrats

Groups in 2nd Segment:

- ACT-UP
- COLOURS
- Inc
- State Representative Babette Josephs
- social service agencies that serve LGTB people

Groups in 3rd Segment:

Groups in 4th Segment:

Groups in 5th Segment:

- Members of Philadelphia City Council

Groups in 6th Segment:

Segment Length: *Six and one-half months*

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

Southeastern Pennsylvania Transit Authority (SEPTA)

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

none

Campaigner violence:

none

Repressive Violence:

none

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

6 points out of 6 points

Survival:

1 point out of 1 points

Growth:

2 points out of 3 points

In 2007, a 46-year-old African American transwoman, Charlene Arcila, was told that she could not use her SEPTA commuter pass to board the bus she regularly used to get to her job in Philadelphia.

The Southeastern Pennsylvania Authority (SEPTA) required the use of M/F gender stickers on all monthly and weekly commuter passes, as well as passes for senior citizens and people with disabilities. SEPTA's rationale for the policy was that the gender stickers would prevent (presumably heterosexual) couples and others from sharing their passes with one another. There were no other forms of identification on the passes.

Mrs. Arcila had previously been told that she could not use a pass with a female sticker on it, but after buying a pass with a male sticker on it, she was denied service again. Equality Advocates of Philadelphia filed a complaint with the Philadelphia Human Relations Commission on Mrs. Arcila's behalf, arguing that the gender stickers violated the Philadelphia Fair Practices Ordinance and the Equal Protections clauses in the state and federal constitutions.

Mrs. Arcila's actions were the first public stance against the gender sticker policy. While the complaint stayed tied up in court proceedings for years after, it helped to generate awareness of how the gender sticker policy impacted trans and gender non-conforming riders on SEPTA.

In January 2009, a small group of individuals, convened by a local teacher and activist, Talia Young, met to discuss other options for how to address the gender sticker policy. This group, which originally included Talia Young, Rachel Fitchenbaum, David Conners, Max Ray, and Nico Amador, became known as Riders Against Gender Exclusion (RAGE).

RAGE was conceived as an all-volunteer, grassroots campaign with the explicit goal of pressuring SEPTA to discontinue the use of the gender stickers. All of the original members of RAGE were trans, genderqueer, or gay-identified and these members saw the campaign as an opportunity to demonstrate what self-determination and organizing could look like within these communities.

RAGE's first tactics focused on building support and engagement from Philadelphia residents. They collected over 20 testimonials from SEPTA riders and 2,000 petition signatures with the help of the Liberty City Democrats, got an endorsement from a community advisory committee within SEPTA, and held a happy hour aimed at recruiting other members of the trans community to assist with the campaign.

The happy hour, held at a local gay bar, was successful in establishing connection and support with several key leaders within the community of transwomen in Philadelphia. These leaders, who included Charlene Arcila, Jaci Adams, Sheila Colson-Pope, and Andrea Harrington, were integral in helping RAGE build legitimacy with a broader group of trans people and trans allies.

In October 2009, Nico Amador, Max Ray, and Jaci Adams met with SEPTA General Manager Joe Casey and other SEPTA officials to present the testimonials, petitions, and a request for SEPTA to discontinue the use of the gender stickers. At that time SEPTA said that their fare tariff policies prevented them from taking immediate action but that in 2012 SEPTA would implement a new electronic fare collection system that would make the gender stickers unnecessary.

Following the meeting, RAGE members continued outreach efforts to quietly build support for the campaign while waiting to

see if SEPTA would make good on their promise. During the winter of 2010, SEPTA announced that budgetary constraints would delay the implementation of a new pass system indefinitely.

RAGE responded by announcing their first major act of protest, “SEPTA is a Drag.” Billed as a public drag show, this action condemned SEPTA for “dragging their feet” and used the spectacle of a drag show to draw more media attention to the gender sticker issue. On the afternoon of March 30th, 2010, RAGE members and over forty supporters gathered at the City Hall transit station in downtown Philadelphia to stage the action, which included a performance by RAGE member Max Ray dressed in drag as the SEPTA General Manager Joe Casey. At this action RAGE also launched its own complaint reporting system so that RAGE could connect with riders who encountered problems on SEPTA related to the gender stickers.

“SEPTA is a Drag” was successful both in terms of community participation and coverage by the press. It launched RAGE into a new stage of organizing with a focus on direct action.

In the months that followed, RAGE held a community forum to draft a “Rider’s Bill of Rights” to articulate the respect and safety that trans and gender non-conforming riders deserve when using public transportation. RAGE used the Bill of Rights as a tool for further base-building and asked individuals and organizations around the city to “sign” the Bill of Rights in order to demonstrate support. The Bill of Rights was endorsed by over 25 LGBTQ organizations and other non-profits in the Philadelphia as well as many individuals. RAGE printed a large-scale version of the Bill of Rights on parchment paper and used it to interrupt a public budget hearing at the SEPTA offices. A group also went to SEPTA’s headquarters and demanded that an official receive the Bill of Rights; at first they met refusal, and then officials relented and accepted it.

This series of actions continued to increase visibility of RAGE’s campaign within the queer and trans community, as well as the general public. RAGE was given an honorable mention in Philadelphia’s Citypaper 2010 list of Activist/Watchdog groups in their Big Visionaries issue and received attention from other media outlets.

Despite their success at increasing attention to the issue of the gender stickers, internally RAGE struggled with stagnation and in 2011 experienced a drop off of participation from members. Nearly two years into the campaign, it did not appear that Joe Casey or other officials in SEPTA had moved at all in their position on the gender stickers and the RAGE Co-Chairs, Nico Amador and Max Ray, were at a loss for how to keep members engaged and achieve a victory on the issue. After some planning and consultation with allies, they decided on several shifts in the strategy that moved RAGE into what would end up being the final phase of the campaign.

First, Amador and Ray reframed winning as either getting SEPTA to stop using gender stickers on passes or changing the environment for trans and gender non-conforming riders by encouraging more passengers to intervene in incidents created by the gender stickers.

This new thinking led to sequence of public events that RAGE called its “Ride with Respect” campaign. “Ride with Respect” relied less on direct action and more on a community-based approach to pass out cards that gave tips for handling transphobic situations on SEPTA. RAGE asked people to sign cards pledging that they would watch out for the safety of trans riders and intervene if they saw a passenger who were being questioned or harassed because of the gender stickers.

“Ride with Respect” solved several problems for RAGE. It allowed the group to move from a more rigorous meeting structure to social gatherings such as potlucks, dance parties, and art-making sessions that allowed members to move in and out of the organizing structure more easily. The tactics used at this stage were less confrontational and this also helped to increase participation from trans members who were less willing to put themselves at risk. Furthermore, while the pledge cards didn’t target SEPTA directly, they did continue to help RAGE build power in numbers and demonstrate wide scale support on the issue.

While most of the membership was focused on the “Ride with Respect” campaign, a few RAGE members began having private meetings with members of Philadelphia’s City Council. The campaign had become visible enough that most of the City Council was familiar with the issue and friendly to the idea of supporting RAGE in its goals. On March 22, 2012 Councilwoman Blondell Reynolds Brown proposed a resolution in favor of the removal of the gender stickers and City Council passed the

resolution unanimously. The gesture was a symbolic one and did not name any consequences to SEPTA should they fail to remove the gender stickers.

However, shortly after that SEPTA announced that they would recommend removal of the gender stickers in that year's budget hearings. The recommendation was approved and on July 1st, 2013 SEPTA officially discontinued the use of the gender stickers.

Research Notes

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Name of researcher, and date dd/mm/yyyy:

Nico Amador, 20/08/2015

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