

**Misconceptions of Poverty,**  
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PNN – The underbrush that had cluttered the highway to desegregation was cleared by the apostles of the Civil Rights Movement. They plowed through the heartland of Jim Crow in a Greyhound bus. Those Freedom Riders of 1961 were driven by a 1946 Supreme Court ruling that struck down segregation as a violation of the United States Constitution.

Violations of economic and human rights let to the fueling of the engine of another freedom bus in November of 2000. Throughout the country and in the state of California, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, an instrument certified by the United Nations and signed by the United States, had been trampled upon and treated with contempt. Many people in America had been lulled into believing that poverty was their lot in life.

An organization with an 18-year history of fighting social injustices, the Women's Economic Agenda Project (WEAP) was prepared to chart the movement to eliminate poverty. The meat and potatoes of the movement was the Freedom Bus Tour. It was modeled after those same Freedom Rides of the Civil Rights Movement.

Many people were recruited in Oakland to travel to educate impoverished people through testimonials, teach-ins, presentations, speak-outs, panel discussions, videos, meetings, rallies, protests, marches and going door-to-door. The men, women and children who were recruited came from all walks of life but shared the philosophy that food, housing, health care, education and a living wage are basic economic rights for every person in the world, as expressed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Blanche Mackey, WEAP's social justice coordinator and a member of its brain trust, discussed the myths about the organizing poor people. "I felt that getting together a group of poor people to go around the state was an amazing experience, because there is the stigma that poor people cannot be organized. We learned that we can be organized, and we can follow instruction."

The Freedom Bus Tour was essentially a school on wheels. The Freedom Riders, nearly 40 men, women and children, were educated about their own misconceptions of poverty through discussions and videos while traveling over 2,900 miles through 20 towns and cities in California. The jumping-off principle that was taught to everyone was, "I do not deserve to live like this. I deserve a better life." When that principle had begun to journey through the mind of each individual, they became much more effective during their interaction with people in their towns.

From unprovoked attacks on peaceful demonstrators in Birmingham, Ala., to the hundreds of thousands of tents set up by Freedom Riders on the Mall during their March on Washington, the Freedom Riders were united in their conviction to cast the spotlight on glaring economic and human rights violations during their travels in the 1960s.

Not unlike those Freedom Riders, The Freedom Riders of 200 traveled extensively also. Riding from Northern California through Central on to Southern California, they drove home their message of hope to the hundreds of thousands of people whose humanity has been continually systematically stripped away. Each day, according to Freedom Riders' accounts, erodes a little more of the quality of life for a poor person because, they say, "Many people in this country believe that the poor do not deserve a better life."

A story was shared during the tour about a certain woman who saw a line of people one day. The woman went to the end of the line because she thought that she was going to miss out on something. After waiting for a long time, she reached the front of the line only to realize that it was a line for men waiting to take a shower.

The Freedom Riders' tour was a very carefully planned process. Every conceivable eventuality had been anticipated. WEAP California Coordinator Diana Polson told me what motivates her: "There are so many people in this country who are suffering in silence and struggling in poverty."

"Entering into the Central Valley, the Freedom Riders met with union organizers, other freedom fighters, migrant workers, members of the Green Party and churches," she said. "The many migrant workers we met with and talked to faced economic human rights abuses on a daily basis. Many companies flock to the Central Valley because they know there are a plethora of migrant workers who will work for little money."

"These migrant workers have their hands tied in numerous ways because they have so much fear of being reported to the authorities. They work for little money, in no-benefit jobs and in destitute circumstances, but cannot organize or demand anything better for fear of being deported."

"The owners of these companies and land have complete control over the lives of these workers, getting cheap labor and having to live up to any standards. On many farms, owners will give workers little shacks to live in and charge them high prices for rent, so the migrant workers have no money left after their paycheck.

"Some people we have talked to have been injured on the job, have contracted cancer due to working with pesticides in the fields and are left to suffer and die by these employers because they do not offer health insurance. The employers use migrant labor for their own benefit, with little thought about the well-being of the worker."

"We need to stop managing poverty and work towards eliminating it," continued Polson. "That will happen by joining forces amongst poor and working people of all walks of life. It will happen when they come together to add what they can to this movement and educate themselves about the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights."

Not only did WEAP educate communities and towns about the UN Declaration of Human Rights but also about the new movement of the Poor People's Economic Human Rights Campaign, created to address and shatter such notions as the poverty of people if directly proportionate to their failings. The Just Health Care Campaign was the arm of the body that the Freedom Riders used to address the dire health care status in California. Fact sheets were handed out on the need to conduct Just Health Care training.

Mackey said she felt the tour enlightened all the riders and the people and communities who were touched. She observed, "It has always been said that you can choose your friends, but you cannot choose your family, and we became a family on that bus."

Their camaraderie grew as they sang many songs along the route. "We Who Believe in Freedom" was a song especially enjoyed by many of the 20 women Freedom Riders and "A Rich Man's House" was a favorite with the 10 children and 10 men.

The Freedom Rider tour arrived in Los Angeles to meet an unprecedented 42,000 poor and homeless people who occupy the community known as Skid Row. That is the largest enclave of homeless people in America.

The Freedom Bus Tour documented over 500 economic human rights abuses. Seventeen Poor People's Economic Human Rights Committees were established throughout the state. According to WEAP, Freedom Bus Tour 2000 was overwhelmingly successful.