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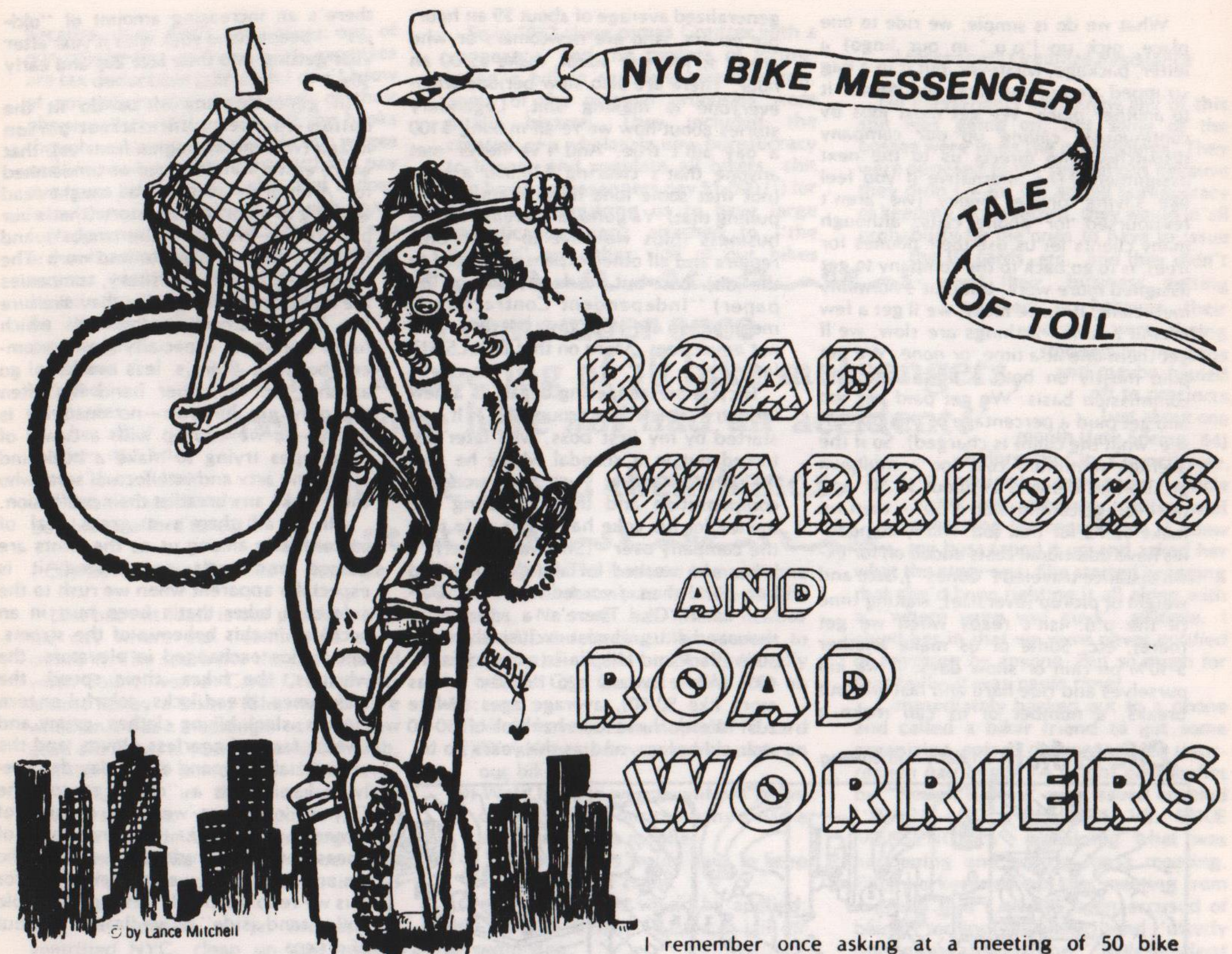
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ROAD WARRIORS AND ROAD WORRIERS

A PERSONAL HISTORY OF THE INDEPENDENT COURIERS

ASSOCIATION IN NEW YORK

By Bob McGlynn



by Bob McGlynn, a.k.a. The Enigmatic Emissary
(opinions expressed here are mine and not that of
any group or organization of messengers)

He was riding his bike on 46th toward Broadway. Up ahead was an illegally double-parked bus going in reverse, and across from the bus was a car that was pulling out of a parking lot, ready to enter 46th. The biker had the right of way but signaled the car anyway to let her know he would be proceeding on. The car driver accelerated, and the biker was caught between the forward motion of the car and the reversing bus. His body was crushed and he lost one leg immediately in a pool of blood. The cops showed up but basically did nothing. They didn't even fill out an accident report. They let the driver go. It was another biker who called the ambulance and found out the guy's name before he lost consciousness. The cops were white; the driver was white and was seemingly drunk. The biker was Black...and a NYC bicycle messenger."*

* a true story

I remember once asking at a meeting of 50 bike messengers, "has anyone here **not** had an accident?" No one raised their hands.

Such is the reality of bicycle messengering beneath the human interest stories which romanticise "those nonconformist free spirits, going for the big bucks" and/or condemning us for murderous wild riding, "law breaking," "bad attitudes," "mental retardation," etc.

I find that many peoples' overcuriosity about bike messengers borders on the neurotic. "You do **that**?... Wow..." or (jealously) "Well you've got some freedom but you **can't** do it **all** your life you know." Perhaps they want/need a little of that "free spirit" stuff: the relative frontier of the open street vis-a-vis the unnatural enclosedness of 9 to 5 land can be quite intriguing with its danger and autonomy.

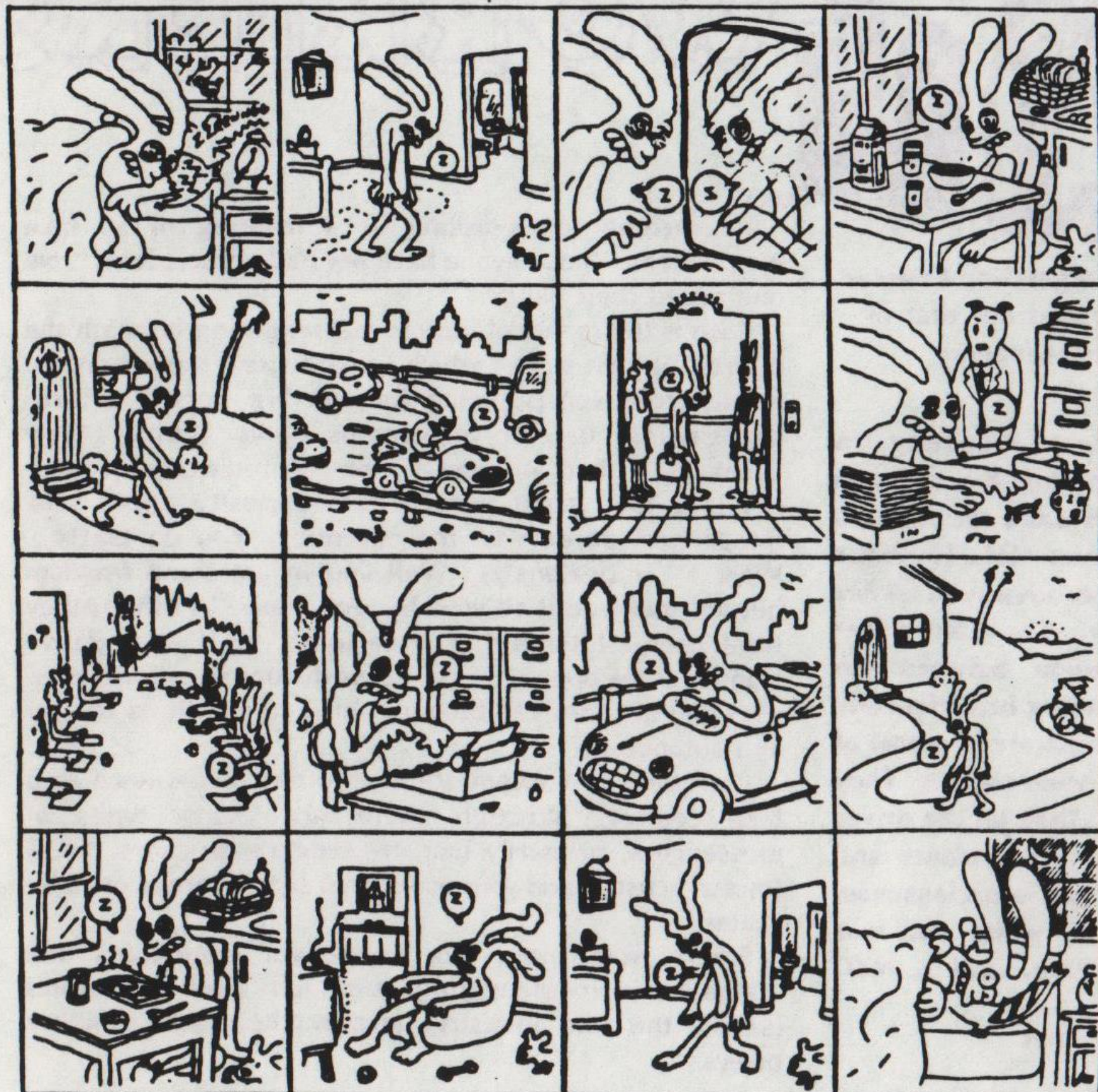
I'm going to concentrate on my own experience as a bike courier, although there are many types of messengers, primarily foot messengers, truckers, MC's (motorcyclists), and your occasional skateboarder or roller skater.

Bikers work mostly for messenger companies that specialize in messengering, although some companies (say in the film industry) employ their own in-house bikers.

What we do is simple; we ride to one place, pick up ('p.u.' in our lingo) a letter, package, whatever, put it in a bag strapped around our back, and deliver it to another place. We get most jobs by continuously calling up our company dispatcher who directs us to the next assignment. The alternative if you feel like saving phone money (we aren't reimbursed for phone calls, although many clients let us use their phones for free), is to go back to the company to get assigned more work, but that's normally inefficient. If we're lucky, we'll get a few jobs at a time—if things are slow, we'll get them one at a time, or none. We get paid mostly on both a piece rate and commission basis. We get paid per job and get paid a percentage of the job cost (i.e. what the client is charged). So if the average minimum cost for a midtown pickup and delivery is about \$5.50, and the average commission is 50%, then we make \$2.75 for that job. Many companies have additional costs added on for extra distance traveled ('zones'), size and weight of pickup (oversize), waiting time (if the p.u. isn't ready when we get there), etc. Some of us make another 5-10% on rain or snow days. If we kill ourselves and ride hard and fast without breaks, a number of us can make a

Life in Hell

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generalized average of about \$9 an hour, but others, who are newcomers or who aren't so lucky or adept, make \$5.00 an hour. There are also slow periods when everyone is making shit. Legendary stories about how we're all making \$100 a day ain't true. And I've never met anyone that's clearing \$18,000 a year (not that some lone lucky maniac isn't pulling that). Ya gotta take breaks in this business (plus we have to cover bike repairs and all other expenses related to the job). Last but not least, we are (on paper) "Independent Contractors": meaning we are "our own bosses," and not employees. More on that BULLSHIT later.

Bicycle messengering began as a new industry somewhere around 1972. It was started by my first boss, who later got forced out in a scandal where he was illegally charging us for workers' compensation and then pocketing the money for his coke habit. His wife took the company over—(She was formerly a biker who worked for and then married him—and then divorced him—Yo, Dallas in NYC!). There's a couple of thousand of us, almost exclusively male, 60% Black and Hispanic (mostly Black), 40% White (years ago I'd say it was more like 50-50), average ages 18-late 20s. We do have our handful of 50-70 year old heroes, and as the years go by,

there's an increasing amount of "oldies"—people who stick with it year after year getting into their late 20s and early 30s.

In general many of us do fit the outlaw-counterculture-street person image (with no apologies from us), that we're either romanticized or condemned for. A lot of us wouldn't be caught dead working in an office or factory (that's our preference—we ain't the snobs!) and biking is an easy place to find work. The scene is extremely transitory, companies are incessantly hiring, plus they overhire "to keep themselves covered" which fucks everyone, especially the newcomers because there's less work to go around. On the other hand it's often the only gig in town—no one else is hiring—so we end up with a crowd of poor types trying to make a buck and also some arty and intellectual sorts who can't make any bread at their profession.

All in all there's a great deal of camaraderie among us as the joints are passed and tools are shared—it is especially apparent when we rush to the side of a biker that's been hurt in an accident in this bohemia of the streets. The hellos exchanged in elevators, the whistles, the bikes, their speed, the nicknames, dread locks, colorful or torn clothes, sleek biking clothes, grimy and sweaty faces, fingerless gloves, and the superficial command of the day definitely makes bikers a "cool" group. The City is "ours" as we have an aura of strength that lacks of any trace of uneasiness or intimidation; we know who we are and where we are going and for this we reap a type of "respect." People will "stand aside" as we flash in and out of offices.

On the other hand, biking can be a grueling fuck of a job: dealing with the traffic, weather, cops, stolen bikes or bike parts, stuck up office workers and bosses, bus tailpipe in our faces, pollution, discrimination ("Are you a messenger? Please sign in before taking the elevator."), painful loads, exhaustion, and the accidents we all eventually have. The "Independent Contractor" status imposed by the companies is a joke. By claiming we are not employees, they don't have to worry about workers compensation or health plans, unemployment insurance, paid sick days (we're sort of prone to things like colds, sore throats, etc.), paid personal days (maybe our work is kind of hard and we need breaks once in a while?), holiday pay, etc., etc. Additionally, it makes us responsible for all job related gear and expenses like our bikes, bags, locks, tools, rain/snow gear, bike repairs and phone calls. It's a legalistic fiction and ruse since the real social relationship we have with the companies is like that of any other boss/worker situation. On the other hand the game is a plus for us

because they don't take taxes out of our paychecks, and our work expenses are tax deductible (although I don't know of any bikers that keep track of their phone calls!). We are not off the books though, as our companies file our wages and we're required to figure out and pay our taxes like everyone else. But it does leave the outlaws among us with some fun opportunities that the State and Feds are well aware of. For their own opportunistic reasons, they are trying to abolish the Independent Contractor bit and are battling out that gray legal area with the companies.

After all, if couriers don't pay their "dues," how will Ronnie and Nancy be able to afford to eat?!

City Government Decides to Regulate

Last but not least is our problem with the city where our "coming of age" comes in. The spark (for the city) started when Councilwoman Carol Greitzer was almost hit by a biker. (She was unsure whether it was a messenger or not.) Now good old Carol is your prototypical snob, just the kind of person your biker loves to hate, and in this situation, the visa-versa was very important; she began a crusade to get bikers regulated and licensed. The climate was certainly ripe—it's clean up and control time in America.

In the context of an increasingly gentrified NYC, clean up and control also meant a few local specifics such as: restricting food vendors (from whom the working class gets a relatively cheap and quick lunch) from midtown Manhattan and other parts of NYC, further regulation of cabbies that would have put uniforms on them—and of course—getting those rowdy messengers (there are other things of course, like NYC cops cleaning up graffiti by beating to death graffiti artists like Michael Stewart).

As an aggregate we messengers mess with the clean-cut sensibilities of the new "for the rich only" urbanization. It was bicycle messengers out of that trio, though, that ended up losing. This was due in part to the fact that messengers weren't organized. Organization is difficult because of our scattered "factory" of the streets' atomization. We were easy to pick on by politicians who wanted to score political points with constituencies whose prejudicial popular wisdom (fed by media distortion and the pols) had us pegged as crazies who unendingly mow down innocent civilians.

So in 1982 along comes Greitzer with a vengeance, and the process of formulating a bill to regulate bikers began. Some of the original proposals were totally bizarre. They included the creation of a wholesale new bureaucracy to license and regulate all bikers, shit like having messengers pay \$1,000 (!) for a license, requiring us to have large identification signs attached to "the baskets" on either side of our bikes

I remember once asking at a meeting of 50 bike messengers, 'has anyone here *not* had an accident?'

No one raised their hands."

(What a gem! The last time I saw anyone with wire baskets was in 1966 in the suburbs. No one has them in our industry!), and forcing bike couriers to keep a log of all their trips. Eventually the bill the City Council would vote on was:

- 1) We'd have to carry a special ID card
- 2) We'd have to have a license plate on our bikes
- 3) We'd have to wear a uniform jacket or T-shirt with our company's name and our license number
- 4) The companies would have to keep a record of our trips

Criminal penalties would be applied: \$100-250 fine and/or 15 days in jail for not complying.

The One Minute Manager



Messengers Organize Resistance

No messengers ever knew any of this shit was going on, but some of the bosses were in on the proceedings. They were opposed to the regulations because they didn't want the added bureaucracy of keeping a trip record, they would in all probability be the ones to have to issue the ID cards, etc., and they didn't need their business getting screwed up because their workers were being

stopped by the cops and maybe hauled off to precincts. Just about one month (late Spring '84) before the City Council vote, I noticed a newspaper article on my company's office wall concerning the regulations. I knew my boss taped it up and asked her

what the story was. She started bragging that she'd been fighting it all along with a "where were you guys" attitude. I clued her in that we were never notified of anything by anyone. But so much for that bull—it was panic time!

I immediately booked out to a phone and called a biker friend to get some organizing going; the messenger *insurrection* had begun! A bright pink leaflet by "Rough Riders" was issued entitled "WAR!!—CITY COUNCIL VS. BIKE MESSENGERS" explaining what was happening and calling for a meeting. Fifty workers came to this meeting from a group that's always been accused of being "too individualistic" and "utterly unorganizable." The "Independent Couriers Association" (ICA) was born that night ("Rough Riders" lost out as a name—oh well, too bad) which would be non-exclusionary; all messengers (foot, truck, etc.) would be welcome as would company office workers. But because of emergency circumstances regarding bikers, the flavor of organizing would orbit around us. Structurally the ICA was loose and democratic with a core of the most interested (people who regularly did the shit work, went to all meetings, etc.). Women played a role out of proportion to their small numbers in the bike messenger force. Over the next few weeks, we planned and did the works: we issued petitions, had phone-in campaigns and wrote letters to the mayor, City Council, and media—we demonstrated, lobbied, leafleted, held press conferences and chaotic "war-party" meetings of 50-100 bikers in the middle of Greenwich Village's Washington Square Park.

The heat was on; the cops were harassing the crap out of us—enforcing chickenshit laws to the max like ticketing

us for not having bells (Gimme a break—a loud “yo” or a whistle will do it, nobody needs the distraction of taking a hand off a brake to ring a bell no one may hear) or not bearing to the edge of traffic (the most dangerous place for us since people open car doors which we crash into—being “doored”—pedestrians walk in front of us from in between parked trucks where we can’t see them (crash) etc., etc.), and most importantly, for going through red lights and the wrong way down streets. Many stories circulated about bikers getting ticketed for laws they didn’t break, getting beaten up by the cops, and snagged by special police traps set up around midtown. Black couriers were getting it worse, and eventually we issued a special police complaint form for bikers to fill out. The media, of course, was uniformly opposed to us and backed the law.

Ostensibly the reason for the proposed bill was to help identify us if we hurt someone. It was also meant to deter us from busting red lights and booking the opposite way on one way streets, since if caught, we’d either have “proper ID” to get summoned (as opposed to giving a phony name and then ripping up the ticket), or else we’d have to pay stiff penalties. It all sounded sooo reasonable to a culture drowning in bureaucracy and

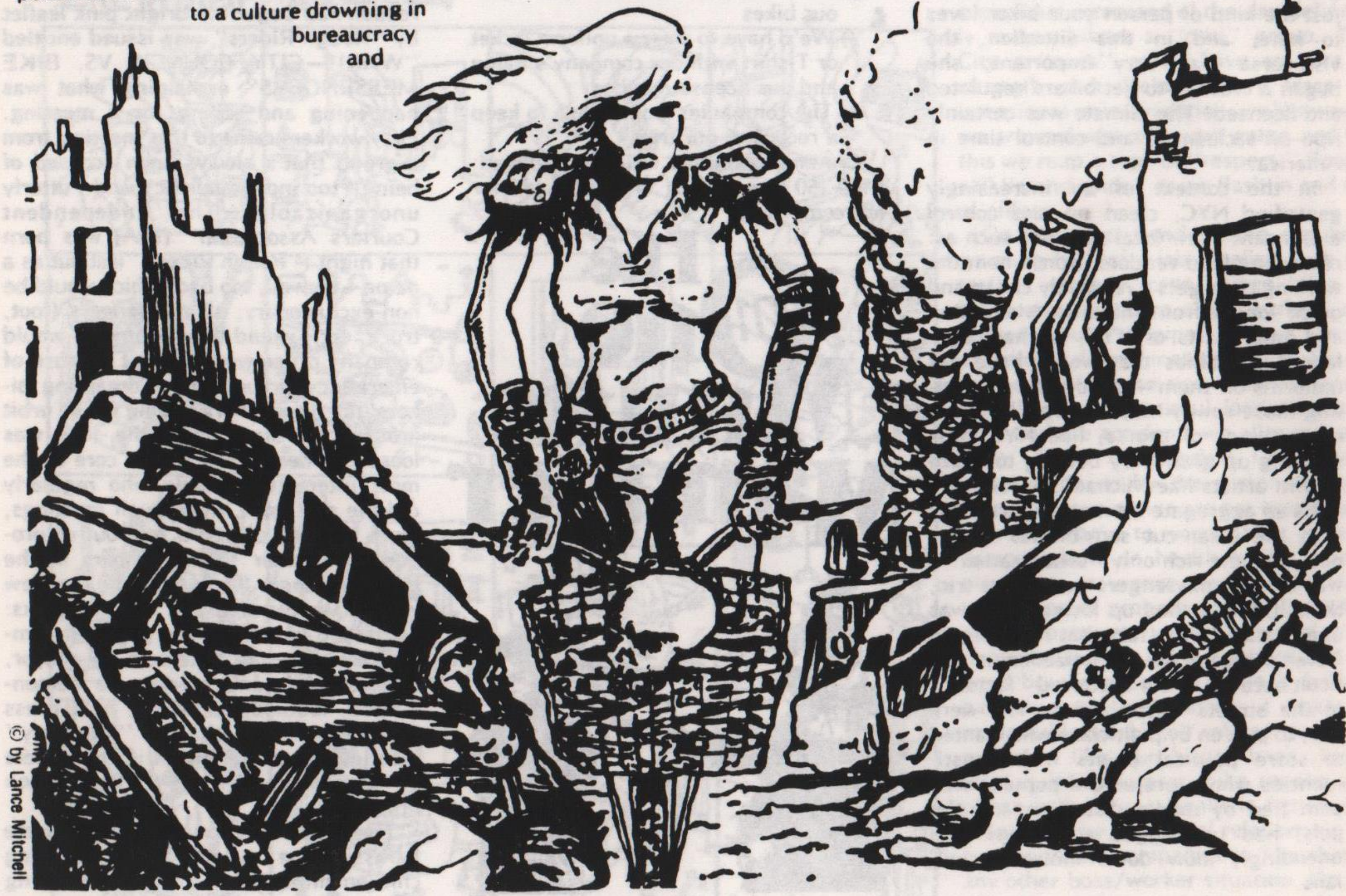
servility. To us it was an unnecessary, unworkable and abusive affront.

Why were we singled out to carry a special apartheid-like ID? The law did not concern all bikes, but only commercial bike riders (which besides us would also include delivery people from Chinese restaurants, drug stores, groceries, etc.—but clearly these laws would not be enforced against them) and was therefore discriminatory. The issue of hitting people was bullshit. We do often ride wild (we have to to make a buck), but hurting anyone is a rarity—we’re the “pros” out there while your normal biker is not. Statistics backed us up that we were involved in few collisions and they don’t say who’s fault those accidents were. We know damn well most accidents are the pedestrians’ fault (The New York Times that opposed us admitted that in an article). Stories about about “those crazy riders, one of them almost hit me the other day!”—the key word (for us) being “almost.” Bicycle messengers are like any of the rest of the “controlled chaos” of NYC’s cabs, cars, pedestrians, etc.; we gotta get to where we’re goin’, and fast!, with the inter-hostility and danger among us all being mutual. Our position was: Hey, if a messenger hurts someone, let him/her be dealt with

like anyone else in a similar situation.

All counter arguments against us were in the realm of “What if”—what if we break a light, hit a pedestrian and kill them? Well how about “What if a pedestrian breaks a light, jay-walks in front of a courier, the courier swerves over but it’s into a racing truck?” Should jay-walking be forcibly outlawed? Should pedestrians have IDs tattooed on to their foreheads? Perhaps midtown should be cleared of everyone. Both the light breaking biker and pedestrian have the same attitude—“give us a break, it’s no big deal.”

Crowded, fast-paced urban-



© by Lance Mitchell

zation is a sick unfortunate fact, and those of us stuck in it basically do the best we can with the marginal inconvenience we cause each other.

The uniform was the most disgusting thing; shove it we said, we are not prisoners or slaves (and if there were a license plate with the same info, why have it twice?) What if we forgot our uniform or ID card one day or our plate got stolen—should we get busted for that?

It would also clearly be unworkable and chaotic. There were no provisions in the bill for any central issuing agency or coordinating center.

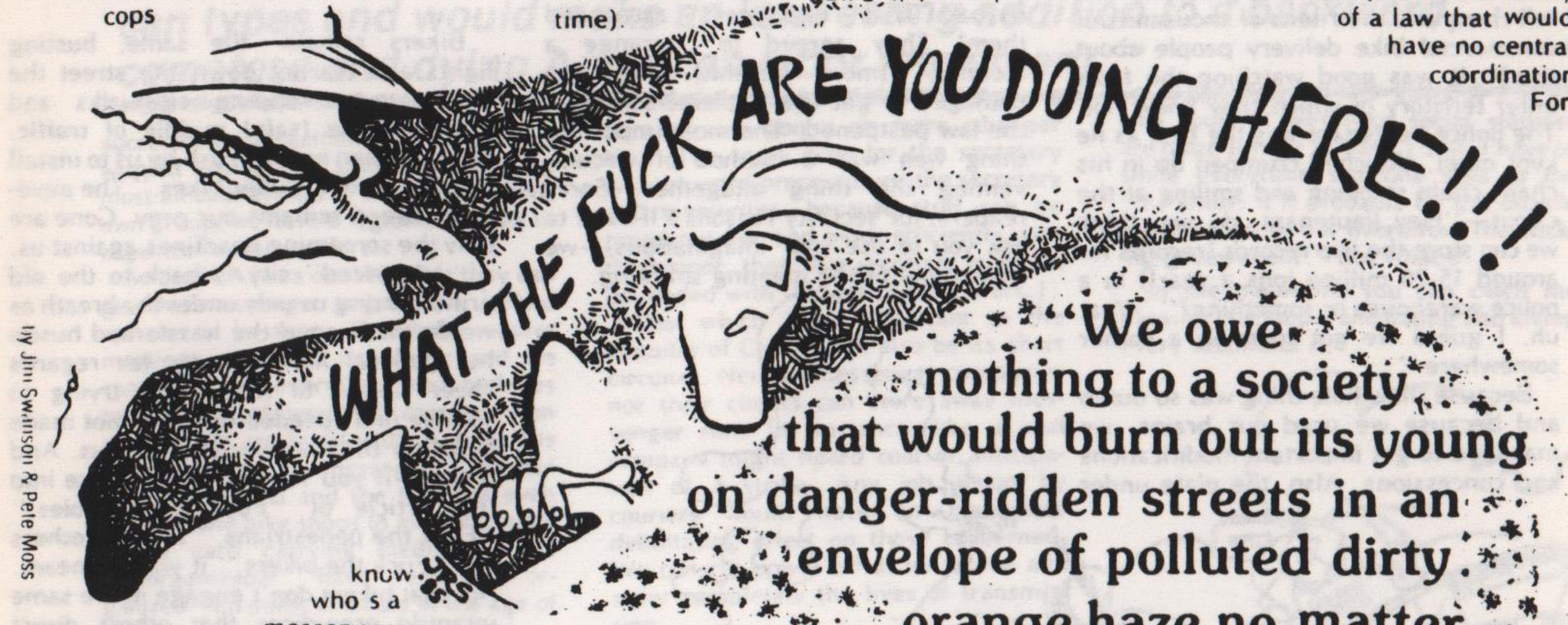
How would cops

shouldn’t we be able to do it?” Being prevented from doing so was our worst fear, and the law could definitely put a crimp in our style. Freedom of the road was a necessity since time and money were synonymous.

In all probability, though, the war against us was that type of political show that emerges every so often (headlines screaming “Crackdown on Pushers!” “Crackdown on Cabs!”), one columnist labeled us “The Killer Bikes”, and eventually the cops would pay attention to more important stuff and basically leave us alone (thereby the whole thing being a waste of everyone’s time).

So then came the process of hammering out the specifics for the regulations like who would issue the license plates, what color would they be and other nonsense. The ICA demanded to be in on that meeting, and that was accepted. (I had reservations about being in on my own “self-managed” oppression, but I wanted to observe the show.) In attendance was the ICA, company bosses, and reps from the mayor’s office, Dept. of Transportation and the cops.

Then the fun began. The people from the city didn’t know anything about how messengering works, and it was quite a laugh watching them trying to figure how to implement a turkey of a law that would have no central coordination. For



by Jim Swinson & Pete Moss

know who’s a messenger and who’s not? Would they summons someone on a bike who didn’t have the license, etc., but wasn’t a messenger? If they tried to summons a messenger, what would stop the messenger from saying she/he wasn’t one? Although most messengers carry similar bags and have a certain look, there’s no way a cop could really prove whether someone was really a courier on the spot. What if we’re out riding one day with our standard courier bag but were not actually working that day and we get stopped? What about the person who’s not a courier but digs our bags and carries one—will they be stopped by the cops for not having a license? This opened up a big area for police fascism and being that a lot of us are longhairs, Blacks, etc., we didn’t want the fuzz having an extra excuse to fuck with us. We also tried to make common cause with bicycle clubs but they didn’t show too much interest.

Our most militant argument was: WE JUST WEREN’T GONNA DO IT! And as for the obvious law-breaking stuff—going against the lights and the wrong way down the streets—the most vocal amongst us said it quite plainly: “Why

Practical Subversion

But back to the City Council. Predictably they passed the bill with only one abstention, Miriam Friedlander (a supposed “progressive,” she later supported it when the bill was partially modified) and one no vote. The bill then went on for Mayor Koch’s signature—but there was a surprise on that day. Fifty angry bikers showed up (while losing work time) to testify against the bill. Koch did something he never does; he postponed signing it, which was a moral victory in the fray if nothing else. We succeeded in setting the tone and atmosphere for the day; we put the city in the embarrassing position of being the bully picking on an ass-busting, hard-working, “defenseless” group of young people. Soon after of course, he did sign it with one provision watered down; the criminal penalties for not having the ID card would be dropped, and the fine for that reduced to \$50—big deal, right?

Archie Spigner, a Black conservative who made like he dug “the hard-working underdog.” Being one of the only City Council 3rd World people, he was awake enough to know that Blacks would be set up for harassment, and he brought in the NAACP to back us. Political opportunism being what it is though, we never heard from him after the bill signing—which leads me to a dig I just gotta get in. Big deal City Councilwoman, Ruth Messinger, was a prime backer of the bill. Messinger is a member of the Democratic Socialists of America and a darling and a halt with the mainstream “Left” in NYC. I love how conservatives like Spigner can act more hip than “democratic socialists” who have no more problem legislating (without conferring with us even!) shit on the working class than Stalinists do with using rifle butts to get their way. I guess we’re one “cause” she had no interest in.

instance, the law said the license was to only have three digits. Add on to that the fact that there would be no central list to refer to, and you'd have a lot of bikers with the same number! Who should be responsible for getting the plates, signs, and ID cards, the companies or the riders? Were we employees? Were we Independent Contractors? In a major victory before the negotiations started they dropped the uniform bit—but we'd have to have some sort of "sign" on our backs.

We asked (satirically) "How are you gonna contact all those thousand of Chinese restaurants and groceries and tell them and their tens of thousands of commercial bike delivery people about this?" It was good watching the fools enter territory of which they knew not. The police lieutenant was the best as he kept quiet, slouched crumped up in his chair, chain smoking and smiling at the circus—"Hey lieutenant, do you think we can store the trip records (records for around 15-20 million jobs a year!) in a police warehouse or something?" "Yea, uh, I guess we got room in a corner somewhere."

Because the whole thing was so dumb and because we used our brains, we managed to get important modifications and concessions. Also, the plate under

our seats would not be the large size the city planned on which would have been hell for our thighs and crotches as we mounted and dismounted. It could be as small as possible, as long as the company name (or abbreviation) and license number can fit in one inch letters and numbers (did any of the jerks ever ride a bike?) The sign on our back could simply be another license plate attached to our bag. We wouldn't back down on our insistence though, that the whole "sign" idea had to go. The city said "they'd consider it" (bullshit). We also demanded the cops have a meeting with us to discuss the way they were fucking with us bad. That "uppityness" astounded them! They agreed to "arrange a meeting" (more bullshit). We also managed to get the implementation of the law postponed. The most important thing won was a method of circumventing the thing altogether (Sorry readers, for security reasons I'll have to ask you to use your imaginations)—we walked out of the meeting *smirking*.

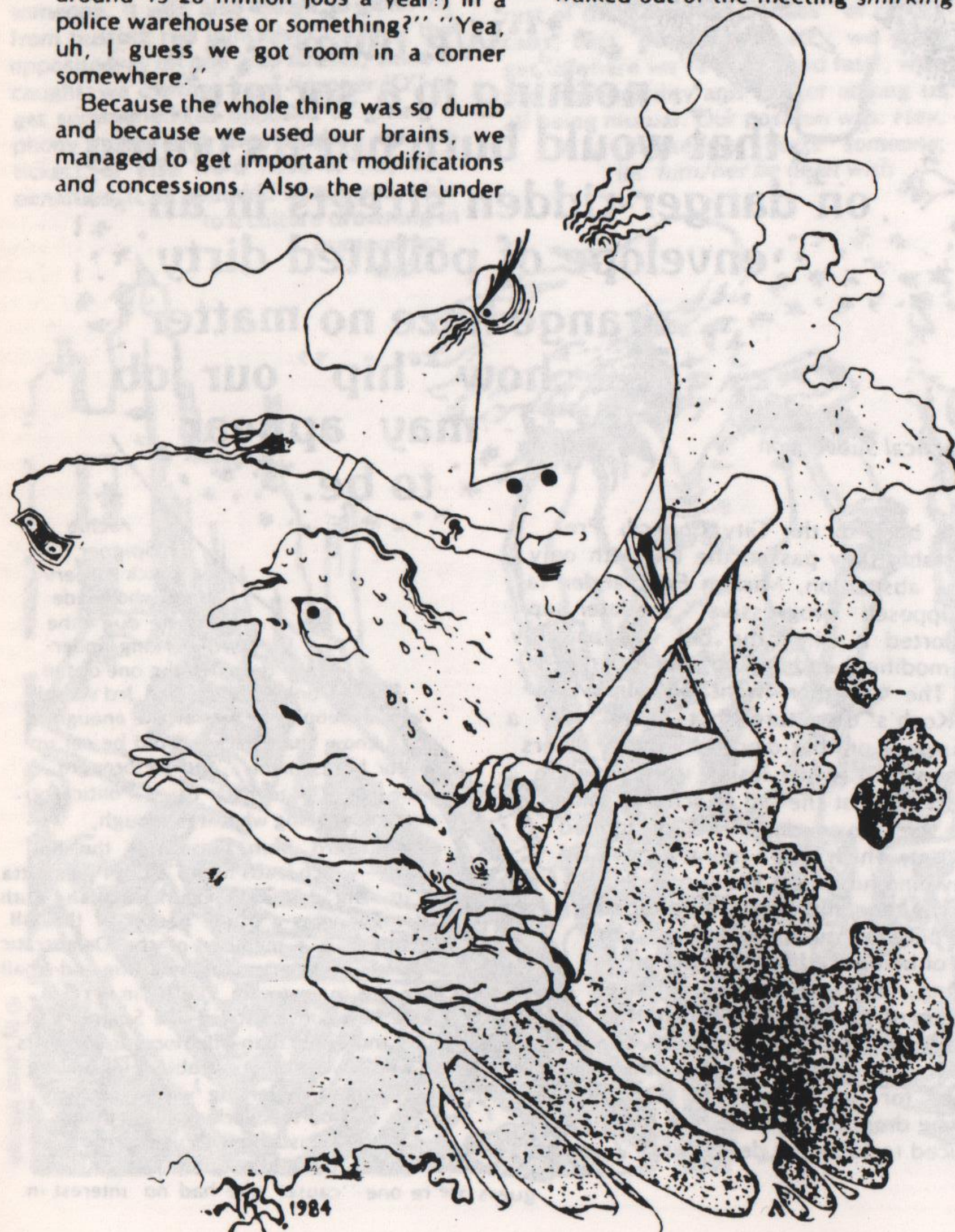


Illustration by Jim Swanson

And so...the charade went into effect January 85 in all its predictability. The heat from the cops had already cooled off, and the deadline for complying with the law came and went with zero fanfare. I'd say 75% *plus* of bikers aren't complying. Many are refusing and others work at companies that aren't even supplying the ID and stuff. The majority of those that do, do it only partially—they'll have the plate but not the sign, or visa-versa. Some will have a plate but keep it in their bag. I saw one plate that was on backwards!

The Song Remains The Same

Bikers remain the same, busting lights and tearing down the street the wrong way, hopping sidewalks and riding in the (safe) middle of traffic. There's been no mad rush by us to install "bells" on our "killer bikes." The pavement ahead remains our prey. Gone are only the screaming headlines against us. A "terrorized" city is back to the old grind cursing us only under the breath as we do them amid the hassle and hustle but general harmlessness (as regards sheer safety) of it all, just trying to survive in a speeded-up world not made by or for the majority of any of us. And please—if you've read an inference into this article of "Fuck the cabbies," "Fuck the pedestrians," the way others say "Fuck the bikers," it wasn't meant. Not that bikers don't engage in the same infantile prejudices that others direct against us. But inane hatreds and prejudices get us nowhere. The point is to look out for and love each other dummies!

It's good to see a nicely working dialectic sometimes. The bike regulations that were meant to repress us provided the catalyst for the only sustained bicycle messenger organization ever: The ICA. Some prior attempts included: couriers at one company that was overhiring too much trying to organize a union. That attempt fell apart in a few weeks. The Service Employees International Union tried it on a city-wide basis some time ago, but after some months, that too faded. Of recent memory is the Teamsters. Some messengers who had a Teamster visit were glad when the amazingly stereotypical mob type character left (reportedly he referred to the only woman courier there as "honey" and said "you fellas don't mind if I call her honey, do you?" to which one gutsy guy said "don't you think you should ask her?").

The word "union" is certainly scary to the bosses, but so do some bikers have problems with it. They fear it would mean the loss of the Independent Contractor status, and they'd have to face the regimentation of taxes being

pulled from their paychecks, they'd have to punch in and out (because some companies are lax now about your comings and goings and taking days off) and no company will pay an hourly wage similar to what can be made on commission. Besides unions have a bad name for being self-serving authoritarian bureaucracies—just the thing that many messengers dig escaping. There are examples though of other types of "Independent Contractors" that have

"Bicycle messengers as a group aren't exactly your young Republican types and would make an interesting addition to a backward, comatose and dying American labor movement."

successfully bargained with employers without losing their status. In any case most all couriers agree that we need our own group; we have a legitimate basis to organize for our welfare.

So the ICA lives on. Whether they can get the messenger regulations junked remains to be seen. They hold regular meetings, publish a newsletter and are concerned with everything from potholes to the lack of workers' compensation some riders are faced with. A grant has been received, a messenger concert/bash is planned and the ICA has even gotten some bike shops to give discounts to its card carrying members. The "unorganizable" have remained organized—an ironic anomaly in the age of Reagan.

Theoretical Insurrectional Addendum

...Bicycle messengers as a group aren't exactly your young Republican types and would make an interesting addition to a backward, comatose and dying American labor movement. Delivery services seem to be a growing industry amid the withering of your more traditional blue collar staples such as steel. Information as such has become a highly valued commodity and bicycle couriers, along with others such as computer workers, make up some of the labor of that circuitry. The narrowing of gaps in space by speeding up time is what makes your messenger on a ten-speed hurtling across midtown or your relative Federal Express efficiency attractive to a capitalism pathologically hungry for profits that depends on getting things done as quickly as possible. This is where the pivotal importance of information processors, circulators and transport work-

ers comes in. Capital is finding it much more efficient to bypass and circumvent the sometimes inefficiency of the Post Office and use the immediacy of such as bike messengers, private package carriers, and machinery that can zap text and graphics from one locale to another in seconds (Ironically less work—in terms of increased speed, efficiency and agility—often means more work here as peddling is harder than hoofing it, and because we can do more jobs per hour,

points of a future rebellion against this dollar- and object-centric society, and for a people- and life-oriented one? Imagine a coalition of the street (couriers) and office (secretaries, computer programmers, etc.)—Yo! It's the Revolution! OK, OK, so it's silly fantasy, but such wild imaginings have a habit of becoming very real in history a la France '68, Poland's Solidarity, or say Black insurrection in South Africa. If the farm-workers out west could get organized,

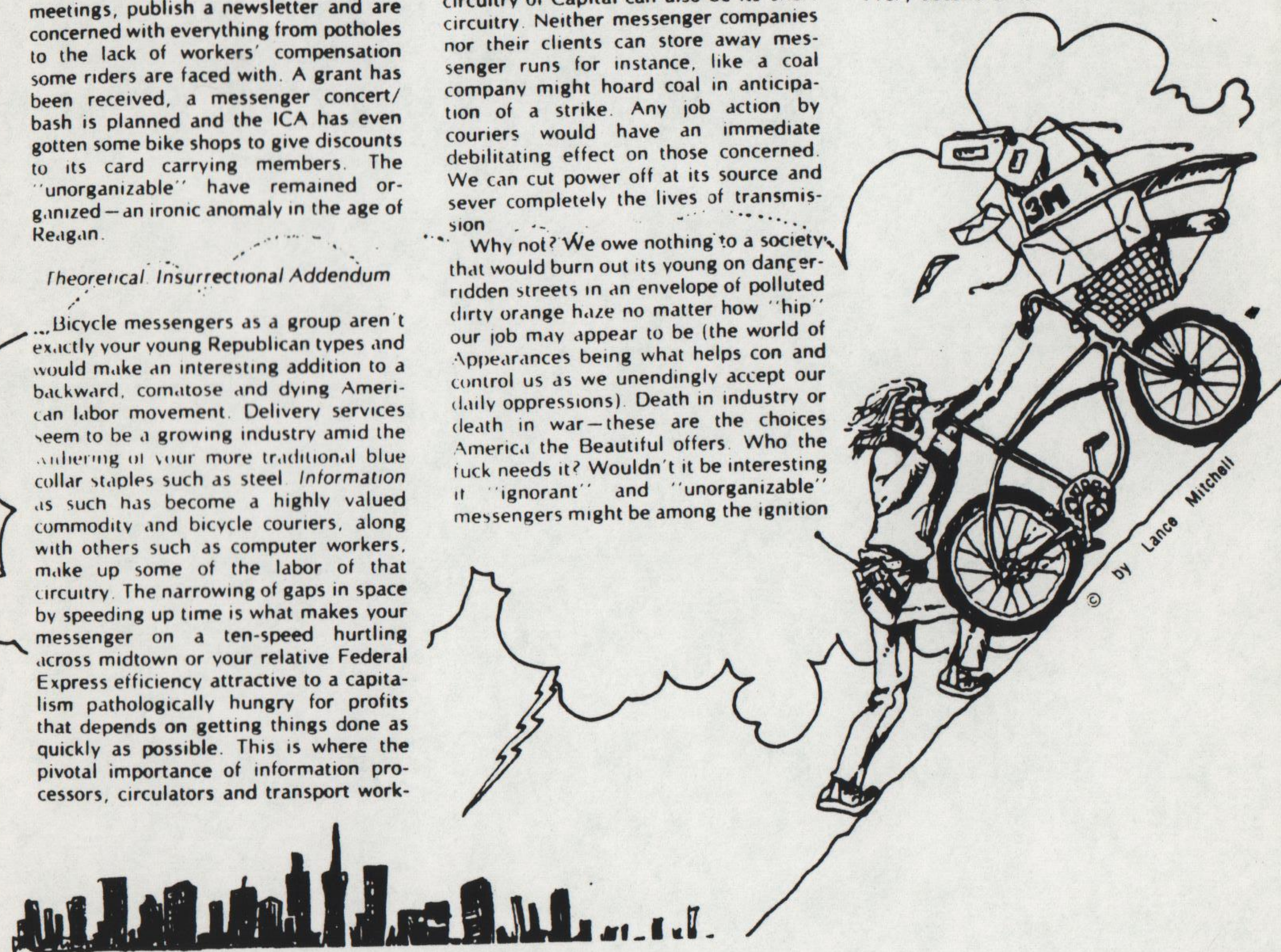
then we are gonna do more jobs per hour. The same goes for the secretary and the word processor vs. the secretary and typewriter—because stuff can be typed quicker and more efficiently with the former, then that secretary is gonna be loaded with that much more work.)

That which is so important to the circuitry of Capital can also be its short circuitry. Neither messenger companies nor their clients can store away messenger runs for instance, like a coal company might hoard coal in anticipation of a strike. Any job action by couriers would have an immediate debilitating effect on those concerned. We can cut power off at its source and sever completely the lives of transmission.

Why not? We owe nothing to a society that would burn out its young on danger-ridden streets in an envelope of polluted dirty orange haze no matter how "hip" our job may appear to be (the world of Appearances being what helps con and control us as we unendingly accept our daily oppressions). Death in industry or death in war—these are the choices America the Beautiful offers. Who the fuck needs it? Wouldn't it be interesting if "ignorant" and "unorganizable" messengers might be among the ignition

why couldn't we? (Our social statuses are quite similar in ways.) Still, I have to smile everytime someone says to me "Ya know, it'll probably be the bicycle messengers who'll overthrow the fucking government." But what if...?

In the meantime you can catch me plowing blackout—and hating and loving every second of it.



by Lance Mitchell

