DEMONSTRATORS WIN AGAINST BUS FARE INCREASE

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By Joseph (Hovsep) Dagdigian, Harvard, MA, 3 October 2013

The Yerevan city government and transportation authority recently approved a bus and minibus fare increase from 100 to 150 dram, a 50% increase. With dollar-to-dram conversion of about 410 dram per dollar, to outsiders this may not seem like a large increase, though the percentage increase is 50%. But this is deceiving. Many Armenians work for absurdly low wages, even though they may be highly educated. And many people cannot afford to work as transportation to and from work may consume most of their pay. Retirees on meager pension have difficulty paying for food, water, electricity, and heat in winter. Even an increase in transportation costs of $5/month presents a burden to many.

Young Protesters Near Yerevan's Music School

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One justification for the fare increase was the increased price of natural gas and gasoline, both used as fuels for vehicles. Though buses are owned by companies, the drivers pay for fuel, and many of the drivers are against the fare increase. The Yerevan government claims that fare increases are necessary to maintain the safety of the minibus and bus fleet; though such a fare increase is regressive, affecting the poorest and lowest paid segment of society.

Urging Passengers to Pay Only 100 Drams

When the fare increase took effect, young Armenians positioned themselves at bus stops and urged passengers to pay only 100 dram for transportation and asked the drivers to accept 100 dram fares. On occasion, drivers said they would accept 50 dram, and a few said they would let passengers ride for free. Such declarations evoked loud cheers of approval from the demonstrators. Other

demonstrators wearing or carrying signs urged rejection of the 150 dram fare and taped signs on the buses urging rejection of higher fares. I witnessed cars, driven by young people, stopping at bus stops and offering to drive people to their destination for free. The number of protestors steadily increased with older people in their 50s and 60s joining in. Protesters were accompanied by Armenian flags, drums, and bull horns. Although the demonstrators were noisy, they remained peaceful. With increased numbers of demonstrators was increased police presence in the streets, but there were no problems.

On the evening of August 25, I was on Abovian Street, heading toward the Republic Square. A large crowd of young protestors marched up Abovian, from the square, carrying flags, beating drums, and chanting "Victory – We Won". Indeed they did! The government declared that, for the time being, bus fares would remain at 100 dram. Later that evening the Republic Square was flooded with jubilant protestors waving flags and cheering so loudly that they could be heard blocks away.

Victorious Youth at Dusk, Republic Square

Recent statements by government officials indicate that they may still attempt to raise fares. Many believe this may well occur during the winter when students are in school and inclement weather would stifle demonstrations. Everyone I spoke with after the students' success indicated that whatever the students protest about, they will side with the students. One person told me that this generation of students has not lived under Communism and either was not born until after the cold, dark days following the collapse of the Soviet Union, or at least were too young to remember those trying days. Thus they have a different outlook on Armenia's condition and view of the future. Many expressed hope that this generation will provide the leadership that Armenia needs.