

Union leaders say a bus strike is near

OCTA proposes a 13 percent raise over three years, but drivers say it is not enough.

BY ELLYN PAK
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ORANGE • Union leaders said Wednesday that a massive bus strike is imminent if the Orange County Transportation Authority does not provide its drivers with a sufficient wage increase.

Teamster Local 952 representatives told members of a state-appointed ad hoc board that the OCTA's proposal — a 13 percent increase in wages and benefits over a three-year span for bus drivers — did not match projected living standards.

"In order to resolve this, they're going to have to dig in and find the money," said Patrick D. Kelly, principal officer of the bus local. "Or we're going to rock 'n' roll. ... We are mad."

OCTA representatives said the wage increase is based on economic projections prepared by Chapman University. Union leaders argued that Chapman's projections were off three years ago, during a previous contract negotiation, and were inaccurate during recent negotiations.

OCTA bus drivers' hourly wages are between \$13.72 and \$21.42. Union members are seeking a \$19 million contract, \$2.8 million more than the \$16.2 million that the OCTA proposed.

The three-person board was appointed by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger on Monday to gather facts about the dispute and submit a written report within seven days. The board comprises Kelly Montgomery, a former human-relations manager for the city of Sacramento; Edna Francis, a labor arbitrator; and Harry Low, a retired San Francisco appellate judge.

By stepping in, the governor ensured that it would be illegal for a strike to occur for one week.

The governor could order a 60-day cooling-off period beginning after next Monday, pushing off a strike by bus drivers.

Ten coach operators testified at Wednesday's meeting, held at the OCTA's headquarters in Orange. Most testified that they were living paycheck to paycheck and struggling to stay afloat in expensive Southern California; many bus drivers said they could not afford to live in the county.

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"You have to pay for quality," said Jan Wagner, a bus driver for 28 years. "You have to pay for quality individuals."

In the meantime, members of the board said they would like more information about how a strike could economically affect the county.

OCTA buses serve more than 200,000 daily passengers. About 77 percent of bus patrons use the OCTA system four to seven days a week, according to a survey that the agency conducted. In addition, 84 percent do not have a family car.

"Bus service in Orange County is important," said Ellen Burton, an OCTA executive. "It's important not only to

the people ... but the county as a whole."

Carolyn Cavecche, chairwoman of the OCTA, said she believes the agency "delivered a strong package" during negotiations and hopes to work with union leaders on a resolution.

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