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OCTA Buses

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Eds: Patrick Kelly, Teamsters representative, can be reached at (714) 740-6242; pager, (800) 652-2509; The OCTA's Ted Nguyen is at (888) 327-8872.

SANTA ANA (CNS) - Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger interceded today in a threatened Orange County transit strike by bus drivers by initiating a process leading to a seven-day cooling-off period, officials said.

Carolyn Cavecche, chair of the Orange County Transportation Authority, sent the governor a letter last week after bus drivers authorized a strike by a vote of 917 to 42, saying they were prepared to walk off the job if the OCTA board did not make a "realistic" offer.

The governor said he has appointed a board to prepare a written fact-finding report on the offer to the drivers, which the OCTA's Ted Nguyen has said would result in a more than 13 percent increase in wages and benefits over three years.

Patrick D. Kelly, secretary-treasurer of Teamsters Local 952, could not be reached for immediate comment.

Nguyen said a strike is prohibited during the seven days that the report is being prepared.

Upon receipt of the report, the governor can ask the state attorney general to petition the court to order a prohibition on a strike for 60 days, Nguyen said.

The process, which is authorized under the California Labor Code, permits the governor to take such action if he believes that a threatened strike will, if permitted to occur, significantly disrupt public transportation services and endanger the public's health, safety or welfare.

Kelly last week said union leaders do not want to resort to a strike, but claimed transit officials were leaving drivers little choice.

He said the board offered \$16.2 million in overall new money to the drivers, who want "less than \$3 million more" to keep pace with the local cost of living.

Nguyen said the governor's help was requested after the union leaders broke off negotiations.

"The union chose to walk away from discussion," he said. "We asked them to provide a response to the offer. We hope the governor's letter will bring the union back to the table."

Nguyen said the offer was made in conjunction with projections prepared at Chapman University and "represents a generous and fair offer."

The last strike by bus operators, who transport about 200,000 customers daily, took place in 1986, Nguyen said.