

## Gov.'s action averts O.C. bus driver strike

His appointed fact-finding panel will investigate the contract dispute with OCTA.

By David Reyes

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A strike was averted Monday when the governor intervened in a labor dispute that could have resulted in 1,100 Orange County bus drivers walking off the job today.

The Orange County Transportation Authority requested that Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger take action so that county bus service wouldn't be crippled. Drivers are seeking higher wages.

County transit employees haven't walked off the job since the mid-1980s.

The governor appointed a three-member panel to investigate the dispute between OCTA and Teamsters Local 952, which represents more than 1,400 employees — bus drivers, mechanics and other workers. Their contract expired Monday.

"Our hope is that union leaders return to the negotiating table," said Paul Taylor, an OCTA director.

Bus service for more than 200,000 daily customers will continue without disruption during the board's investigation, Taylor said.

Union officials said its membership had already voted to strike, giving union leaders the authority to call a walkout if there was no new contract or progress toward a resolution.

"We intend to honor the governor's action," said Donna Metcalfe, a union spokeswoman.

OCTA has offered a 13% increase in wages and benefits over three years; union leaders say wages would actually increase only 8%.

Kelly Montgomery, Edna Francis and Harry Low were appointed to the panel by Schwarzenegger, who asked them to investigate the labor dispute, call public hearings if necessary and submit a report by May 8.

Montgomery is the city of Sacramento's former human-relations manager, Francis is a labor arbitrator, and Low is a retired appellate court justice in San Francisco.

The governor has the authority to call for an investigation to avert a strike if it would "significantly disrupt" public transportation.

"No strike or lockout shall occur for seven days from the effective date of this appointment, during the period of investigation," Schwarzenegger wrote.

The governor's action automatically extends the drivers' contract during the investigation and any potential injunction, Taylor said.

Salaries for Orange County bus drivers are below those of Los Angeles and San Diego drivers. The top hourly wage of \$21.42 compares with \$24.30 for drivers in Los Angeles and \$21.61 for San Diego drivers, union officials said.

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