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PIONEER PRESS



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Bus strike is on

BY PHILLIP PIÑA and JACK SULLIVAN
Pioneer Press

Metro Transit bus drivers planned to strike at 2 a. m. today after several hours of last-ditch negotiations failed to produce agreement on a new contract, leaving 75,000 metro-area commuters to fend for themselves.

State mediator Alan Olson called the sides back unexpectedly Wednesday night. Talks resumed around 7:30 p.m. Metropolitan Council Chairman Peter Bell joined the negotiations for the first time since the contract talks began.

Gov. Tim Pawlenty was in touch with Met Council negotiators throughout the evening. He went to the Bureau of Mediation Services after bargainers reached an impasse on health care cost proposals — the sticking point in the labor dispute.

Union President Ron Lloyd emerged at midnight to say the strike was on.

New ideas were presented, he explained without providing details, but, "They didn't work out. We're still going ahead with the strike as planned. ... We just didn't work it out."

Bell and Pawlenty then faced reporters.

"We worked to the last minute here of the deadline we were facing but just couldn't get it done," Pawlenty said. "In the end, it didn't seem to me that the two sides were too far apart."



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The failure of the talks left metro-area residents facing the possibility of heavier traffic today and as long as the walkout lasts. Bus riders were scrambling to deal with strike consequences.

They lined up Wednesday outside a commuter advocacy office in Minneapolis looking for carpools. They rang the phones at area taxi companies off their hooks. And they made pleas for help to anybody with a car, from friends and co-workers to neighbors and fellow parishioners.

"I'm going to have to walk it, or wing it," said Jim White of St. Paul.

White, a mortgage loan officer who works in Vadnais Heights, can't drive because of a vision impairment. He rides the bus every day, and over the past few days he's been arranging rides with relatives, a member of his church, and even Realtors with whom he works.

Talks between the 2,200-member Amalgamated Transit Union Local 1005 and the Met Council had broken off Tues-day after a marathon bargaining session. Lloyd said the union was always ready to negotiate, but needed to see specific proposals before it would consider postponing the strike. He returned to the bargaining table Wednesday despite saying he had no such specifics.

HEALTH BENEFITS

The contract dispute centers on health care costs.

Metro Transit officials say those expenses, especially for retired workers, have gone through the roof in recent years.

Their offer eliminates retiree health benefits for new workers and restricts eligibility for current employees. The offer also gives union members a 1 percent pay raise over two years while potentially increasing their health insurance costs by \$136 per month, starting next year.

Earlier Wednesday, at the Capitol, a group of DFL legislators called on Pawlenty to step in, in hopes of heading off a strike.

"The governor and (Met Council Chairman Bell) have the ability to solve this today," said Sen. Scott Dibble, DFLMinneapolis.

TENSE TIME

The mood between Metro Transit and the union remained tense Wednesday. Union leaders questioned the intent behind a Metro Transit notice posted at job sites telling workers how they can cross picket lines.

"They're trying to bust our union," Lloyd said.

Steve Dornfeld, a Met Council spokesman, said that isn't the case. The notices were posted so people who came to work wouldn't feel like they were being locked out, he said. "We are not planning any replacement service at this point," he said.

The last time there was a bus strike, riders got two weeks to prepare after a deadline was set. This time they were getting about 33 hours.

Meagan Sommers waited until 4 p.m. Wednesday to sign up for carpooling.

"I'm going to try to drive with a couple of others tomorrow, and we'll see if we can get a parking spot," said Sommers, who commutes daily from her Anoka home to her job in downtown Minneapolis. She was among the 200-plus bus riders who descended on the Metro Commuter Services office in downtown Minneapolis' Pillsbury Center on Wednesday, looking for a ride.

Traffic watchers are putting their hopes on carpools to head off gridlock. About 5,000 people signed onto a metrowide commuter database in February for a ride. Some businesses and schools also have hired charter buses to shuttle workers, and at least one St. Paul school set up an online system so stranded students can still "attend" classes from home.

Large employers in the Twin Cities have been informing workers via e-mails and Web sites about transportation options. Wells Fargo & Co. set up an internal Web site and toll-free telephone number for employees with information such as parking ramp deals in downtown Minneapolis. Minnesota Life Insurance Co., one of downtown St. Paul's largest private employers with 2,300 people, created a company carpool registry and opened additional spaces in its parking garages.

RIDERS' CONCERNS

About one-third of all Metro Transit riders don't have a car. Many are recent immigrants who rely on the bus system to get them to work, said Omar Jamal, executive director of the Somali Justice Advocacy Center.

"People who haven't been following it in the news didn't know this had been coming," Jamal said. "We are running around, last minute, trying to find them rides. They are worried about losing their jobs."

Many Somalis work night-shift jobs in downtown Minneapolis. "This strike will have a dramatic impact on them," he said.

Job security is a real concern, said David Nordstrom of St. Paul. He was looking for a carpool Wednesday that would take him to the job he just started at the University of Minnesota. Checking computer listings, he found a lot of people needing a ride, and not enough folks offering one.

"I had no clue this would happen. I had no idea the strike was even possible," Nordstrom said.

Meanwhile, commuters were signing parking contracts and scouting out taxis. Workers at the Victory Ramp in downtown St. Paul were busy fielding calls from potential parkers. They expect to fill up today and said parking will only get tighter with the oncoming string of high school tournaments that attract people to downtown each year, said employee Mark Stinson.

The calls were nearly constant at Red & White Taxi in Minneapolis. Customers are trying to make appointments as well as get estimates on future wait times.

"We really can't tell them anything until it happens," said employee Susan Witt. "We really do expect to be swamped."

GETTING TO CLASS

Area schools were scurrying to find rides for the thousands of students who depend on Metro Transit each day. Hardest hit are charter schools that rely on the bus system to bring as much as 80 percent of their students to class. Many planned to open their doors earlier to fit parent schedules.

In downtown St. Paul, the Minnesota Business Academy chartered a small fleet of buses, while the Minnesota Academy of Technology set up a program to allow students to "attend" classes online, said Nancy Dana, academy director.

Despite all the preparations, the impact of a strike won't be known until today. Although some people had to walk several miles to make it to doctor's appointments and work during the 1995 transit strike, gloomy forecasts of traffic gridlock and overrun parking garages never materialized.

"If the weather is at all inclement, we're going to have traffic problems," said Teresa Wernecke, executive director of the Downtown Minneapolis Transportation Management Organization. Traffic tie-ups with bad weather, though, are normal. However, amid a strike, "It's going to be worse," she said.

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