

School bus drivers look for new jobs

After health premiums rise 760%

BY NICOLE BALDOCCHI

San Francisco Daily Staff Writer

San Francisco school bus drivers are considering applying for jobs at Muni after their health insurance premiums went up by more than 760% in one month. Some of them got paychecks that said they owed their employer money.

The drivers, who are employed by Laidlaw Transportation, which has the contract to provide bus service to the [See BUS DRIVERS, page 20]

BUS DRIVERS

[From page 1]

San Francisco public schools, saw the increase when they opened their paychecks last week.

The union filed a grievance against Laidlaw claiming the health insurance premium increase violated their contract.

"Part of why people take this job is because health care costs were decent ... working with kids, drivers get sick a lot," said Ange Beloy, president of the United Transportation Union Local 1741.

Premiums hiked

Premiums for single employees went up from \$18 to \$155 a month, Beloy said. For employees with one dependent, the rate increased from \$29 to \$345, and for those on the family plan, it went from \$35 to \$455, she said.

Laidlaw Spokesperson Tiffani Bloniarz said her company was only passing along increases by its health insurance carrier, Pac Care.

Most drivers make about \$30,000 annually. So if a driver is under the family plan, he pays more than \$5,000 per year for health insurance premiums, compared to last year's \$420. But, there is no guarantee that the costs won't increase

again when the drivers' union contract expires in September, according to Beloy.

Some paychecks less than \$30

When checks were distributed last Friday, four drivers picked up theirs in person, all of whom had paychecks of \$30 or less, said Brock Estes, vice president of the United Transportation Union Local 1741.

One of those drivers was in tears, Estes said.

The union had a meeting Wednesday afternoon but not all members were there. Of the 75 drivers at the meeting of about 240 members of the union, two had negative paychecks, meaning they owed money, four had zero-dollar paychecks, and 25 drivers received paychecks under \$25 net.

The next payday is not until Jan. 26. Beloy explained that people can't afford to put gas in their cars to get to work. Carpools and food boxes are being set up.

Looking for other jobs

No drivers have quit yet but many are considering working with Muni, Beloy said. Drivers have

picked up applications from Muni and the Department of Parking and Traffic, said Beloy. Some San Francisco drivers have dropped health care coverage already in the past week. Many drivers in San Rafael and San Mateo, also in the same union, couldn't afford health care. Many decided to go on public assistance if qualified.

'This will be a shame'

"This will be a shame that someone who meets the criteria to hold a school bus certificate will be doing a job that does not require the strict regulations we work under. In other words, it is harder to replace a school bus driver than a Muni driver," said Beloy.

Laidlaw offers two health care options to employees: Pac Care and Kaiser. The company is trying to get everyone over to Kaiser, but then Kaiser might increase too, said Beloy.

Mediation with Laidlaw officials could last until September. Laidlaw rejected the union's proposal for an expedited mediation.

The union officials said they hope mediation can resolve the health care problem.