

NEWS

Bus drivers squeezed

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The company that buses San Francisco schoolchildren has rejected a mediated settlement with drivers over health insurance costs, and trustees are worried the impasse could interrupt service.

Health insurance premiums have risen 800 percent for single coverage and even more for family coverage and will stay that way if they lose the arbitration, said Ange Belay, president of the bus drivers' union.

The mediator between Laidlaw

Health insurance settlement rejected

International Inc. and the union had determined that drivers should be reimbursed for all premium increases previously taken out of their checks, and should return to their pre-hike premiums, Belay said.

The health hikes had been so steep that some drivers received paychecks that had zero dollars in take-home pay after the insurance deductions.

But when the mediator informed Laidlaw, the company rejected the settlement, said Belay.

"We're willing to accept the mediator's decision and the company is not," said Belay.

Some drivers have already quit over the issue, and school board member Jane Kim is worried the situation could worsen.

"We're concerned as a district," Kim said. "We want to make sure our students are getting to our schools."

Kim said the issue was brought [See DRIVERS, page 27]

DRIVERS

[From page 3]

up at the labor relations committee meeting in March "to make a statement to Laidlaw that we are very concerned about it as a board."

Under its United Transportation Union contract, Laidlaw cannot make any changes until it expires in August, said Belay. The premiums from Pac Care, the health insurance carried by most drivers, went up in January.

Laidlaw is required to cover the first 20 percent of any increase but Pac Care increased its premiums by 49 percent, and the company said drivers would have to come up with the rest.

The bus union and Laidlaw are going to arbitration May 11, said Brock Estes, union vice chair. Laidlaw officials did not return calls made by the San Francisco Daily.