

UCP officials accuse strikers

of harassing staff, clients

By JULIE MACK
A three-week walkout by transportation employees for United Cerebral Palsy of New York State has taken on ugly overtones, with UCP officials accusing strikers of harassing direct care staff and clients on Staten Island and in other boroughs.

The harassment, reported to have escalated in the past few days, includes tire slashings, threatening phone calls and intimidation of cab drivers car-

rying UCP patients and staff who attempt to transport clients on mass transit, said Cora Hoffman, assistant executive director of UCP.

She also said that some strikers were picketing yesterday in Manhattan and Brooklyn with baseball bats in hand.

A union representative denied knowledge of any problems. "We are maintaining orderly picket lines," said Michael Lucivero, field representative of the Amalgamated Transit Union. Local

1181-1061. "We have no problems with the clients; some of our people have children with UCP and we are concerned that the clients are taken care of."

Yet others confirm reports of confrontations, which seem to signal increasing tensions in the contract dispute, which is no closer to being settled than when the strike began Sept. 26. No negotiations have been held since that time, although a meeting is scheduled for Monday.

Salary is the main issue in the

walkout, which involves about 100 bus drivers and bus monitors who transport mentally retarded patients from their residences to day programs and recreational activities.

UCP of New York State has 700 patients citywide, including about 400 on Staten Island.

Since the strike, UCP patients on Staten Island have been largely confined to their residential facilities. No patients have been allowed to leave the Karl D. Warner Center, which is UCP's

largest facility — with 280 patients — and has been the main focus of picketing. UCP administrators have decided not to replace UCP bus drivers with alternative bus service to avoid accusations of strike-breaking.

The situation is much the same at the Nina Eaton Center, on the grounds of South Beach Psychiatric Center, which has 50 patients. There, only a few patients have been allowed to leave the facility using alternative transportation already in place before

the strike began. Even those clients may soon be housebound if strikers go through with rumored plans to picket the Eaton center beginning Monday; administrators say they will not ask carriers to cross picket lines.

Lucivero says there have been no conflicts between strikers and UCP employees at the Warner center, despite reports of a tire-slashing incident and an effort to stop laundry deliveries two

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weeks ago. More recently, said Keith Penman, director of the Warner center, 38 tires were found slashed yesterday on UCP-owned vans parked at the Warner center, which is located on the grounds of the Staten Island Developmental Center.

But that charge was denied by Lucivero. "I don't believe that's the truth," he said. "I don't believe that statistic."

Penman also said that there have been about a dozen incidents of UCP employees reporting that the car tires have been cut.

Of 300 UCP patients who live in supervised apartments scattered throughout the five boroughs, most have been able to maintain their regular schedules during the strike. About half traditionally use vans operated by other agencies, transportation that is unaffected by the strike; the others, who normally rely on UCP drivers, are now using mass transit.

But in the past few days, said UCP assistant executive director Mrs. Hoffman, strikers have attempted to interfere with trans-

portation of the community clients through threats and harassment. Among the reported incidents:

● At one Manhattan location Thursday, an "ambulette" driver ready to load wheelchair patients into her vehicle was told by strikers that if the patients were put in the van, they would be removed by the strikers.

"This was all said in front of the kids, and they became very frightened," said Mrs. Hoffman. "The kids were taken back into the apartment, and the staff didn't even try to get them out this morning (Friday)."

● A van, owned by another agency contracted to transport UCP patients in upper Manhattan, had its tires slashed. "This was not a case of strike-breaking," said Mrs. Hoffman. "This particular carrier has been serving those children for years."

● Strikers carrying baseball bats were said to be patrolling outside Ruppert Towers in Manhattan, where UCP supervises three apartments, and at a UCP facility in Brooklyn.

● Outside a UCP apartment at 82nd Street in Manhattan, a cab driver was told if he transported UCP patients, his cab would be

torn apart. ● A UCP staff member who has been transporting one Manhattan patient on mass transit was told "not to do that anymore," said Mrs. Hoffman, with the implication of trouble if the practice continued.

● Scattered harassing phone calls to UCP apartments, with threats to the direct care staff about taking the patients out on mass transit.

"We are still attempting to get kids out to their programs when we can, but about 50 of our clients were directly affected by problems on Thursday," said Mrs. Hoffman.

"Right now, there's a sense of anxiety," said Mrs. Hoffman. "Certainly our position has been that discretion is the better part of valor, as to protect the kids. We've given out the instructions that there will be no confrontations by staff. We're trying to keep it as calm as possible."

But that hasn't been easy, she said. "Of course, there's fear among the direct care staff. Who wants to face a baseball bat?"

"Well, as far as I know, I don't see any problems," said Lucivero.

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Police stand by while a private van carrying United Cerebral Palsy clients pulls away from the Fountains, Syunnsyde, under the watchful eyes of striking UCP employees.