

Bus drivers approve contract

By JULIE MACK

A day after a deadlocked vote, transportation workers for United Cerebral Palsy of New York State (UCP) overwhelmingly approved a new contract, ending a bitter and occasionally violent 10-week strike.

The vote means that bus transportation for mentally retarded patients at the Karl Warner Center on Staten Island may begin by the end of this week, and full service for all UCP patients should resume by Monday.

The bus drivers and monitors who take UCP clients to day training classes and recreational activities approved the agreement yesterday by a four-to-one margin. Forty-four of the 68 workers handed in ballots.

A vote Monday on the same contract ended in a deadlock, according to Michael Lucivero, field representative of the Amalgamated Transit Union Local 1181-1061, which represents the employees.

Lucivero said the workers decided to accept the contract after "lots of things were explained to them and they were told why the contract was recommended at this time."

Lucivero stressed that the contract is really an "interim agreement" that expires in June, a year after the old contract ran out. Negotiations between UCP and the Amalgamated Transit Union will continue in hopes of agreeing on a longer contract next summer.

The contract gives workers a 7 percent minimum pay increase, with junior employees

receiving a larger raise. One of the main goals of the union has been to close the gap between salaries of the senior and junior workers. Currently, the salary range is \$9,500 to \$12,000 annually.

The union was originally asking for a minimum annual salary of \$14,000.

UCP has been offering a 7 percent raise since the beginning of the strike, but Lucivero said it was only when it offered to "close the gap" that the union seriously considered the offer.

The union membership's decision to accept the contract was undoubtedly influenced by UCP's recent financial problems. The organization filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy in October, citing an inability to pay past debts of almost \$8 million.

"This is only an interim agreement, to give UCP a chance to restructure their operation," said Lucivero, in reference to the bankruptcy proceedings. "We'll be having ongoing negotiations, and they'll have to come up with some answers for us in the next six months."

Cora Hoffman, assistant executive director, said UCP hopes to finalize another settlement with the transit workers by June.

"We don't want to have to go through this again," she said.

UCP is contracted by the state Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities

to care for almost 700 mentally retarded persons. About half of those clients live on Staten Island, including about 280 at the Karl Warner Center on the grounds of the Staten Island Developmental Center and 50 at the Nina Eaton Center on the grounds of South Beach Psychiatric Center.

Mrs. Hoffman said that limited bus operations may begin tomorrow for residents at the Warner Center, who have not been outside the center grounds

since the strike began Sept. 26. "Those are the kids who've had the hardest time," she said.

Patients in supervised apartments and group homes in other boroughs have continued attending day training classes and recreational activities by using mass transportation and taxicabs. That was not possible for UCP patients on Staten Island because many of the patients here are more severely disabled and cannot use mass transit. In addition, picketing was concentrated at Warner Center, and UCP administrators expressed concern about crossing picket lines with patients.

The concern was amplified by alleged harassment by strikers. UCP officials have claimed that on numerous occasions cab drivers and UCP staff members were threatened by union members.

The most notable incident of strike-related violence on Staten Island occurred last week, when two vehicles had their tires slashed and windows broken.