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Tentative deal in NY drivers' strike

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A tentative settlement has been reached between striking van drivers and the companies that provide public transportation for thousands of disabled riders, but the week-old strike will continue until drivers vote on the deal, a union spokeswoman said.

The parties said Monday they agreed not to publicly discuss specifics of the proposed settlement until after the vote.

The 1,500 members of the Para Transit Drivers and Mechanics of the Amalgamated Transit Union Local 1181-1061 will vote on the settlement on Wednesday in Queens, said union vice president Tommy Mullins.

"We think it's worth their consideration or we wouldn't be taking it back," Mullins said. "That's going to be their decision."

Mullins said a federal mediator who recently became involved in the negotiations was key to reaching the tentative offer.

The Paratransit Operators Coalition represents four of the 14 companies that provide the Access-A-Ride van service for the Metropolitan Transportation Authority. The MTA, which runs the public bus and subway system, was not involved in the negotiations.

As many as 20,000 riders use the service each weekday, and about 8,000 of those were affected by the strike.

The chief negotiator for the Paratransit Operators Coalition, Jeff Pollack, said the offer was "a very fair and equitable package."

"We think it should be ratified, and we hope it will be ratified," Pollack said. "We want to get the people back to work and get back to transporting our passengers."

The commissioner of the federal Mediation and Conciliation Service, Ralph Quattrocchi, who entered the talks last week after Gov. Eliot Spitzer got involved, said, "We're hopeful this proposal will meet the needs of the union membership and will be ratified."

The drivers will remain on strike pending the vote's outcome, Mullins said.

The two sides had been negotiating at a hotel at John F. Kennedy International Airport.

During the strike last week, between 65 percent and 70 percent of scheduled routes were served.

The strike has upset riders such as Pamela Bates, a retired real estate agent who has spinal muscular atrophy and degenerative joint disease and uses a motorized wheelchair. She worried about the strike's physical and psychological toll on riders.

Transit officials are using other transportation providers and private van carriers, and some riders receive vouchers for taxis or car services. Bates said she was offered a voucher for a taxi but would have had to pay the fare upfront and wait to be reimbursed. She said she didn't have the money.