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(* * Special to PASSENGER TRANSPORT * *)

LACMTA ROLLS OUT NEARLY 400 BUSES, KEEPS RAIL LINES RUNNING DURING 9-DAY WORK STOPPAGE

Twice in the last three years as contracts with the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority's three principal unions drew to a close, MTA put together strike contingency service plans to carry as many people as possible using non-union personnel, should the unions decide to walk off their jobs.

In 1991, MTA and its unions reached agreement, and the plan was never needed. But on July 25, 1994, the unions walked for nine days -- and MTA's locally unprecedented emergency service plan kicked into action.

MTA had prepared its riders for the possibility of a strike weeks in advance. "The MTA needed to explore creative ways of reducing labor costs and improving the efficiency of its work rules," said Franklin White, MTA's chief executive officer. "To help accomplish this, and to maintain public support for the MTA, a comprehensive public information campaign was begun, as were plans to operate as much service as possible."

When the strike started, Los Angeles was hit by major traffic jams and lengthy delays. People who depend on public transportation were stranded; even those with automobiles suffered major negative impacts.

"Our first priority during the strike was serving our riders as best we could," said Arthur Leahy, MTA's executive officer for operations. "Due to the diligence of our non-contract employees and the patience of our riders, we were able to transport more 1.5 million passengers during the nine-day walkout."

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The task of coordinating the strike operations fell to Assistant Transportation Director Ralph Wilson, a veteran of 27 years in virtually all facets of bus operation -- including driving one.

"Mr. Wilson's experience as a bus operator, division manager and staff assistant over the years was invaluable to him in his effort ensure that the emergency service worked as well as it did," Leahy noted. "He and his strike contingency team accomplished a remarkable feat under great pressure for which I, and the public who rode buses and trains during the strike, thank him."

MTA accountants, planners, and other non-represented employees suddenly found themselves on common ground when they began learning how to drive 40-foot buses. By the time the walkout occurred, several hundred of them had received state-mandated training for a skill they thought they would never have: driving a public transit bus.

The contingency plan called for a gradual increase in the training of non-represented employees up to about 500, if necessary. MTA began by fielding about 300 buses on 30 of the systems most heavily-used lines to provide a basic network of service. As the week went on with no settlement, more buses were added. By the fourth day of the strike, four more lines and 20 more buses had been added.

Though the work stoppage was still an inconvenience for the majority of MTA's 1.2 million daily bus and train passengers, about 200,000 of them each day were still able to get around from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. on weekdays. They could either climb aboard one of about 130 MTA buses that were running, or one of about 270 school buses being operated under contract by two other private carriers.

Metro Blue Line and Red Line trains also were kept rolling by trainers and other supervisory personnel. Both lines ran a full complement of service between 6 a.m. and 6 p.m. on weekdays.

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Workers returned to their jobs 10 days after the initial walkout when the MTA's mechanics union agreed to a contract. MTA fielded 82 percent of its service the day after the strike ended, with full service being restored two days later.

The successful provision of strike contingency service during a work stoppage was the first time in recent American public transportation history that such service has been provided. "We have heard of other properties running some substitute bus service, and other cities have run emergency rail, but this is the first time we know of that both buses and trains were operated despite a walkout by operating, maintenance and clerical personnel," Leahy noted.

Passenger response to the strike service was "very favorable," White said. "People appreciated the fact that we were doing all we could to maintain mobility in the region," he said.

White also praised MTA's negotiating team, which worked around the clock during the nine days to reach contract agreements with all three unions, thus avoiding a prolonged strike.

"We hope future contract negotiations are completed in time to avoid a strike," White said. "At the same time, it is gratifying to know that, if large-scale emergency service is ever needed because of a work stoppage or for any other reason, we are capable of rolling a lot of buses onto the street with proper planning and foresight."

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