

Deal averts ambulance workers' strike plan

By Claire Cummings, Globe Correspondent | July 30, 2007

The union representing employees of a private ambulance company that serves 40 New England communities called off today's strike after reaching a tentative agreement with American Medical Response yesterday, parties from both sides announced.

"We reached a tentative agreement this afternoon," company spokeswoman Deborah Hileman said. "We expect them to report as scheduled."

The proposal calls for union employees to receive increased health benefits and a pay raise, among other contract changes, said Torren Colcord, president of the National Emergency Medical Services Association, the union that represents company responders.

The company has 1,000 employees and serves communities in Maine, New Hampshire, and Eastern Massachusetts.

"We were not optimistic going into it, but after some initial rocky beginnings we were able to get our initial demands and a little more," Colcord said yesterday by telephone. "There were lots of high fives and good handshakes amongst the team."

Hileman declined to comment on the agreement, saying she wanted to wait until employees were notified. But Colcord said employees, who were faced with a 1-percent wage cut before negotiations, would now receive a wage increase of roughly 15 to 19 percent over two years. That would come from money generated when nonunion workers -- who now pay less for health benefits than union employees -- begin paying the same amount under the new contract, Colcord said.

He said the contract, which would begin on Aug. 1, calls for improved working conditions in stations and more flexibility in use of paid vacation time for employees. He said the company's willingness to agree to the terms shows an improved relationship between the company and its employees.

Colcord and Hileman said they expect employees to ratify the two-year agreement, a process expected to happen within two weeks, Colcord said.

The parties have met about 25 times since late January to devise a new contract. Their previous one expired in September.

The company provides primary 911 response in 18 Massachusetts communities, including Brockton, Newton, Framingham, and Plymouth.■

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