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There's little sympathy in Santa Ana for the bus drivers

By Jennifer Delson

Three days into a strike by Orange County bus drivers, the walkout is resonating in Santa Ana with an urgency unfelt in neighboring cities.

Here in the county's civic core, low-paid immigrant workers say they depend on public transportation not only to get to work but to travel to the grocery store, take children to health clinics and to keep basic appointments.

And finding sympathy here for striking drivers, some of whom earn more than \$20 an hour, is a tall order.

On Monday, workers began long commutes riding bicycles, walking or bargaining for rides with unlicensed cabbies who have spotted the sudden business opportunity.

Experts say Santa Ana fits the profile of a city dependent on public transportation. In 2004, the Rockefeller Institute of Government, the public policy research arm of the State University of New York, singled out Santa Ana as the city with the greatest level of "urban hardship" in the United States. High rents and low wages factor into that distinction.

Santa Ana remains a magnet for new immigrants, and 10% of city residents — double the state average — rely on public transportation, according to census data. The Orange County Transportation Authority reports that two-thirds of its bus riders are Latino.

At the corner of Pine and Main streets, where unlicensed taxi drivers typically wait for customers willing to pay \$20 a head for rides to Tijuana, even

drivers commiserated with customers they're now driving to local destinations.

"I couldn't even force myself to charge anyone," said driver Angel Benji, who transports clients in a late-model green van.

"I had a woman here crying that she would lose her job in Huntington Beach if she couldn't get there, and she had no money. She only makes \$5 an hour as a nanny for some rich people," Benji said. "This is the sort of person affected by this strike — the poorest of the poor. How can we show compassion for a bus driver making \$20 an hour?"

One bus driver, Benjamin C. Garcia, said he and his co-workers were just trying to keep up with the cost of living in Orange County.

"We are not asking to live in luxury. We are asking for what we need," said Garcia, 39. "Everything is going up. Gas, food and rent. We just want to be treated fairly."

In downtown Santa Ana, that message did little to placate those who rely on buses.

Hilda Cuellar, who works at Hugo's Beauty Salon, said she usually has 45 to 60 customers a weekend. She said that last weekend, with the strike in progress, she had only 12. Other business owners said foot traffic was alarmingly light on the weekend.

"People are calling to ask if there's any bus to our shop," Cuellar said. "I can't give them any good news. It's very frustrating. These people [bus drivers] want more money for their jobs, and we are hurting here. We have no customers and we still have to pay our bills, our taxes, and the people don't care."

Angel Paredes, 40, said he walked 45 minutes to South Main Street in Santa Ana, where he got a ride with a friend to a warehouse job about five miles away. He had planned for another friend to pick him

up from work at 4:30 p.m. and take him to a second job at a fast-food chain. Paredes said he works 11 hours a day and makes about \$500 a week.

Over the weekend, he and his wife skipped their usual grocery shopping because of the bus strike. Walking and hauling their groceries back home would have been too much, he said.

Nazario Garibay left his Santa Ana home at 5 a.m. to get to Orange, but by 7 had given up on getting to his gardening job, which pays \$60 a day.

“It’s getting harder and harder to just work in this country,” said Garibay, 52, who vowed to return to his native Mexico if the bus strike continued.

Mario Gomez Garcia, 28, paid an unlicensed taxi driver \$15 for a ride to Brea, where he earns \$8 an hour shaping and cutting palm trees.

“I know that I’m giving the first two hours of salary to the cab driver, but it’s better than losing the job,” Gomez Garcia said. “Without a car, without a bus, we are really lost in this region.”