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## **Bus owners threaten stoppage over subsidy during July strike**

### **Transport Association is paid €60,000 a day**

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Bus owners are threatening to bring public transport to a halt in two weeks' time over the issue of government subsidies deducted for the four days during which they were on strike last July.

The government said it would not bow to the pressure of threats and would again withhold the subsidy should another strike be held. The authorities have not paid €240,000 in subsidies for last summer's strike, which had brought public transport across the island to a halt for four days. Mini buses, taxis and hearses had taken part in the strike.

The Public Transport Association (ATP) is insisting the subsidy issue should be resolved through arbitration.

The Transport Ministry said it had received an ultimatum from the ATP over the unpaid subsidy for the days when the buses did not operate. "The association expected to be paid a subsidy for days during which it did not work," the ministry said.

It added that during negotiations leading to the strike's termination, the two sides had agreed to resolve the subsidy issue through arbitration because no agreement had been reached.

The ministry said the ATP was expecting the government to pay the subsidy for the strike days and then go to arbitration. While the government was willing to respect any decision taken following arbitration, it would not tolerate threats.

The association is paid €60,000 a day, with the government forking out the difference of what is not earned through ticket sales.

ATP president Victor Spiteri insisted that the amount could not be reached through ticket sales alone, adding that fares would have to be increased if the government did not subsidise public transport.

He said the authorities had also failed to settle a €1.5 million bill for subsidies owed last year, which is usually paid by mid-January. To rub salt into the wound, the government had sent its auditors to look through the ATP's accounts, Mr Spiteri said.

Mr Spiteri specified last night that the ATP had never declared it was not prepared to accept that the subsidies are deducted for the days of the July strike. In fact the association agreed that the subsidy is deducted.

But, Mr Spiteri added, according to an agreement reached at the end of the strike, the amount would be decided upon by arbitration. Yet, the sum of €240,000 was withheld for the four days of the strike without first going to arbitration.

Furthermore, Mr Spiteri said, the association was still owed another €1.5 million in connection with last year's subsidies to make up for the lower fares for elderly people and students, among others.

Such payments were usually cleared by mid-January. Mr Spiteri said that without such subsidy the passengers in question would have to pay three times their present bus fare.

Comments poured in on timesofmalta.com yesterday, with readers saying one should not get paid for not reporting to work. One reader said that if bus owners strike again, the government should revoke their permit indefinitely and another said that if the government accepted such demands it would prove to be "the most incompetent Administration in decades".