

# Willowbrook charged with payroll abuses

By FRANK HAGELBERG

Officers and employes at Willowbrook State School met in a day-long session with representatives of the state's attorney general, controller, and Department of Mental Hygiene to hear allegations of irregularities in payroll procedures at the school.

The meeting was called at the school after a group of employes had travelled to the Albany offices of Controller Arthur Levitt last week to complain of "illegal and un-

fair" payment policies.

The employes charged that mistakes by payroll officials at the sprawling state complex had resulted in erroneous and delayed paychecks for some of the more than 3,000 workers at the facility.

In addition, the payroll accountant and business manager were charged with holding up employes' checks and inducing workers to join a credit union and "pay interest on money earned."

Principals at yesterday's session were: Henry P. Lipscomb, Jr., assistant state attorney general; William J. Corrigan, labor relations representative of the Mental Hygiene Department; Mrs. Helen Degnan and Frank D'Ambrosy, payroll technicians from the state Department of Audit and Control; Dr. Jack Hammond, director of Willowbrook State School; Ernest C. Palcic, senior business officer; and Thomas Delaney, payroll accountant at Willowbrook.

A group of about 20 employes, led by Eager Smith, presented individual complaints and asked that the state agencies investigate the charges of impropriety and racial discrimination at the school.

Signed and sworn affidavits from 16 employes at the school were read at the meeting by Smith. Charges contained in the documents alleged that:

- Checks were withheld by the payroll office because employes owed money to the credit union or because, in at least one instance, a bill for a phone call made by an employe remained unpaid. But Palcic said that while a full investigation had not been conducted, employes joining the credit

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(From Page 1) ... union signed a power of attorney allowing their paychecks to be withheld until loans were fully paid.

- Employes were given applications for membership in the credit union without being told for what they were signing. The employes were reportedly given the impression that signing the papers was a prerequisite of obtaining a paycheck.

- Overpayments on checks were deducted from later paychecks in one lump sum instead of being divided—in accordance with state-approved procedures — among several later paychecks to ease the burden.

- Employes were taken off the payroll improperly, and when checks were not issued they were told they could get money to tide them over by joining the credit union.

- Employes were not informed of the exact salary to which they were entitled, and received different amounts during successive pay periods without explanation.

- Employes were told state funds were not available to reimburse them for personal property destroyed by vandals at the school.

Assistant Attorney General Lipscomb said the controller's office would be asked to check into payroll procedures at the school as well as the propriety of the operations of the credit union. A spokesman for the department of Audit and Control said the bureau was participating in the investigation in a spirit of problem-solving.

While noting that the attorney general's office was limited jurisdictionally in the kinds of cases it could handle, Lipscomb pledged that "the attorney general will cooperate 100 per cent to see that the laws will be applied to the allegations made here."

Problems with the paychecks appear to stem from three major areas. The discussions

revealed:

- While payroll statistics are compiled at Willowbrook for each two-week pay period, the figures are transmitted to the state controller's office in Albany, where the paychecks are written. Mistakes in the figures submitted by Willowbrook officials require several weeks to clear up, and when payroll officials at the school have tried to rectify them locally, confusion has resulted.

- A new state civil service salary law that went into effect April 1 has been criticized by state officials as being unwieldy and incomprehensible to persons not trained in legislative interpretation.

- No contingency of petty cash funds are available to provide employes with temporary cash if their paychecks are lost or contain errors. State procedures call for the return of the checks to Albany, and when the checks are returned, or are not delivered, employes are forced to use the "cheapest and most convenient" means of obtaining money: The federally chartered credit union at the facility.

Employes charged that a conflict of interest exists resulting in improper operation of the credit union since Palcic, the business manager, is also president of the credit union.

Dr. Hammond, who remained silent through much of the meeting following a challenge to the presence of a reporter and a public relations consultant, said later that many of the allegations were at variance with the truth.

A burdensome administrative workload, combined with erroneous information from some employes badly informed of the proper and usual payroll procedures, have contributed to the problem, he said.

Reports on investigations stemming from yesterday's meeting are expected from the state attorney general and the controller.