

# The Willowbrook stalemate: Mistrust, misunderstandings

By FRANK HAGELBERG

It's been more than two weeks since a group of Willowbrook State School employes, convinced they'd been getting the short end on payday, traveled to Albany to talk with the state controller.

They were listened to, and promised that action would be taken to correct the situation. What's been done since then? "Nothing," according to the leader of the protesting workers.

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The problems at Willowbrook are more complex than a few outrageous paychecks would indicate. The state is faced with overseeing the 5,000 patients and 3,000 employes at the school, as well as their counterparts at more than 40 other institutions for the mentally ailing throughout the state.

The Willowbrook administration, led by a man both concerned with and inundated by the problems of running the school, is confronted by a tight budget and an absentee rate among many employes that runs as high as 15 per cent on an average day.

And the employes — supervisors, ward attendants, therapists, recreation counselors, and the rest — are caught in the middle of a bitter feud between three labor organizations at the facility.

The result has been misunderstanding, mistrust, and exasperation, as the various groups and individuals work to find solutions, advance their personal aims, or simply try to keep their heads above water amid the confusion.

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The payroll difficulties are the most visible of the internal afflictions at Willowbrook, and

as a result they've gotten the most attention. The staffs of the governor, the attorney general, the controller, and the commissioner of mental hygiene have all become involved.

At present, the agencies all seem to be waiting for some word from the controller. And if statements from Arthur

## Analysis

Levitt's office are to be taken at face value, the Department of Audit and Control is a long way from coming up with any answers.

"We're not an investigatory agency," a spokesman complained, when asked whether the controller is looking into the problems and charges. Refusing to get specific, he claimed the department was "doing what has to be done."

Dr. Jack Hammond, the director of Willowbrook, an imposing man who can be stern, sarcastic, and friendly, all within the space of a minute, says that school officials are already doing everything by the book, and if "proper adherence to state procedures" has created "misunderstandings," that's quite a different problem.

The books at Willowbrook are open for inspection by any properly authorized state authority, Hammond maintains.

And yet a young woman at the school reportedly is paid \$1.62 for four weeks' work.

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The Civil Service Employees Association (CSEA), Council 50 of the AFL-CIO, and the International Union for Advancement (IUA) all claim

members among the employes at the school.

Leaders of the three groups are jealous of each other, a year after a bitter election, won by the CSEA, to pick the sole bargaining agent for the employes.

The AFL chapter and the IUA remain at the institution, with legally-recognized existence and checkoff privileges, but little else. Most employes belong to more than one of the unions simultaneously because of the variety of benefits available.

Eager Smith, the man who has led the fight against the alleged payroll abuses and "corruption" at the school, is also the president of the IUA and not coincidentally.

According to Smith, it is the IUA, and not either of the other organizations, that really represents the Willowbrook workers, regardless of what the membership lists may show.

"Most of us can't relate to the CSEA people," Smith says. "They just take the money, but they don't do nothing for us."

Nothing proves this point better, he claims, than the fact that payroll accountant Thomas Delaney, target of many of the workers' charges, is also president of the local CSEA chapter.

Delaney, many workers believe, is responsible for most of the payroll errors, and pickets at Gov. Rockefeller's office last Monday questioned his record, his capability, and his honesty.

To compound the mistrust of the protesting employes, Delaney's immediate boss, Ernest Palcic, chief business officer at the school, is also president of the employes' credit union.

As yet, no concrete, substantiated charges have been

made to back up the claims of conflict of interest. But spokesmen for the group insist they can back up their charges of impropriety if they can only get someone they trust to listen to them.

Mrs. Adele West, a CSEA field representative, says someone is listening, claiming that the workers could have gone to her or to other CSEA representatives at the school to present their grievances. "Instead, I've been ignored," she says.

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Administrative inefficiencies and alleged corruption notwithstanding, the question facing Willowbrook is who can best act on behalf of the employes. The CSEA righteously maintains it can. The IUA says it is the group that can best understand the workers' hopes, desires, and demands.

Sure it's political, sure it's wrought with legal complications, and sure it's permeated with racial overtones. But the problem continues to pose one very real danger:

If the difficulties at the school remain unresolved, and workers continue to press their demands at protest meetings and on picket lines, forecasting the eventual winner may be difficult.

But identifying the loser is a cinch. The patients at Willowbrook will suffer if those taking care of them have other things on their mind.