

Willowbrook Pair Won't Be Reinstated

By BARBARA YUNCKER

The two discharged employees who have been at the center of a dramatic confrontation at Willowbrook State School for the retarded will not be reinstated.

The step, "in the interests of patient care and employee morale," is being announced by Mental Hygiene Commissioner Dr. Alan D. Miller in Albany today.

Miller said he had reversed his previous plan to restore Dr. Michael Wilkins and Mrs. Elizabeth Lee to their jobs because of "the tremendous distress it would cause to a majority of our employees."

Wilkins and Mrs. Lee, a social worker, who were provisional employees at Willowbrook, are being invited to consider other jobs in the department. "Their strong motivation . . . to find better ways to help the retarded should be put to use if at all possible," Miller said. "I very much hope they will accept my invitation."

Anthony Pinto, head of the organization of patients' parents, said: "We won't accept the decision. We have told the commissioner that he has relinquished his administrative authority and bowed to the union. We cannot live with this abdication of responsibility."

(The Civil Service Employees Union chapter at the school was prominent in the fight to sustain the firings of the two aides.)

Wilkins and Mrs. Lee indicated they would not take other jobs—although they did not completely close that door—but would continue to fight within the department for reinstatement.

Wilkins said 43 of the 45 persons who had worked with the pair on the day shift in Building 6 had signed a petition asking their return. The petition is to be sent to Miller and Gov. Rockefeller.

The decision reverses one of six days ago when Miller, after long negotiations with parents' group agreed to formula to reinstate the

two. The Benevolent Society for the Retarded Children of Willowbrook had pressed for the reinstatement because they and the two ousted aides felt that the firings resulted from efforts by Wilkins and Mrs. Lee to encourage parent activities and from their bringing reporters into the school.

The reinstatement plan came unglued when some 200 workers demonstrated last Friday and took their protests to Albany. Miller said "day and night efforts at reconciliation have been going on since then, but these two people have become such a storm center representing different kinds

of grievances to different employee groups that to return them would have been a gross flouting of deeply felt feelings. I don't think it would have been in their behalf either.

"This may not seem fair to Dr. Wilkins and Mrs. Lee but it was the truest reading of the situation that we could arrive at. We chose the best middle ground we could find."

Miller indicated that the determining factor was a mass meeting Tuesday attended by an estimated 1200 employees, almost all from the day shift. "There was great and varied sentiment at that meeting . . . that to force the return of Dr. Wilkins and Mrs. Lee would have created profound unhappiness."

Referring to the same meeting, Wilkins accused the Willowbrook administration of renegeing on an agreement to have a meeting of explanation and conciliation.

Wilkins and Mrs. Lee had each worked a few weeks more than a year at the Staten Island institution, which is the largest residence for retarded in the nation. They were fired Jan. 4 by hospital director Dr. Jack Hammond for what he said was a series of infractions and defiance of regulations.

Wilkins then arranged the firing by Ch. 7 of a series on retarded children. The series has been appearing for the last three weeks, and culminated in a documentary summary last night, which depicted conditions at Willowbrook and other institutions.

Miller said his decision not to reinstate the two was not directly related to the television expose "which I hope might actually help us in the end." But it was related to the "deep sense of resentment" which the employees felt at being made to seem the villains in a situation in which they saw themselves as victims, along with the patients.

Willowbrook houses in excess of 5000 patients. Its approved employee strength is 3,600 but has never gone above 3350. However that strength was cut back gradually by the state job freeze and budgetary restrictions to 2700 at the lowest early this year.

Last March Miller warned in letters to the legislators that cuts in his "stay-level" budget of \$630 million could jeopardize safety. Interfere with basic feeding and cost children's lives. But the cuts were made anyway and a job freeze installed to bar hiring to fill any job which was vacated.

As a result, Willowbrook was unable to replace 650 employees who left. A recent budget restoration of \$5 million for the whole department has begun, to allow the gradual rehiring of 300 employees at Willowbrook.