



In the administration building, at Willowbrook State School one of the residents complains about the firing of Mrs. Rosemarie Siegel to deputy director, Harry Eliazarian. S.I. Advance Photos by Frank J. Johns

Firing at Willowbrook spurs workers' protest

By JOAN MOTYKA

Outraged and frustrated, employees of Willowbrook's Building 23 yesterday marched with their resident-wards to the state school's administration building to protest the recent firing of team leader, Mrs. Rosemarie Siegel, and the conduct of unit chief Dr. Eric Sheldon.

Shouting "Mrs. Siegel's the best thing that ever happened

to Building 23," and accusing Dr. Sheldon of a wide variety of charges, the employees confronted Harry Eliazarian, deputy director of the institution, since the director, Dr. Miodrag Ristich, was in Manhattan.

Mrs. Siegel, a New Brighton resident, team leader of what is considered one of Willowbrook's most difficult buildings, was told Tuesday by Sheldon that he was firing her

with the consent of Dr. Ristich.

She claims Sheldon said they "couldn't work together" and that she was "derelict on duty." Sheldon charged, during yesterday's disturbance that "she didn't discharge her duties competently and neglected many items she was asked to do."

For the attendants, Mrs. Siegel's dismissal appeared as the final outrage in a long series of grievances based in Building 23.

Called the "last outpost of non-civilization in this place" by Mrs. Siegel, the building houses 151 moderately to severely retarded adolescent and adult women. Traditionally, she claims, it has been used as a punishment building, both for residents and employees who did not "work out" in other buildings.

It is unique in that it has collected, most serious behavior problem cases in the institution, making it what one attendant

called, "the worst female building in the State of New York."

Mrs. Siegel claims there are more accident reports coming out of her building than from anywhere else in the institution, with from five to 10 accidents occurring every day. Serious fights between residents are an "every day thing," as well as residents becoming so emotionally disturbed that they will "wreck a whole ward."

Attendants have been bitten so badly that they have had to take a month-long leaves, they have been thrown up against walls and punched, and handfuls of their hair have been pulled out.

2 FOR 45

Mrs. Siegel herself was recently attacked when a resident became emotionally disturbed and went to her almost-deserted office area and began beating her with a high-heeled shoe. Luckily an attendant was nearby.

While Building 23 attendants are subjected to these conditions, they are paid the same as attendants in other, less-active buildings.

A shortage of attendants, resulting from a high attrition rate and a critical need throughout the facility, generally causes two attendants to supervise 45 mostly hyperactive residents.

Often only one attendant is present for ward duty, and recently one attendant refused, out of fear, to enter the ward under those circumstances.

A high absenteeism rate, according to Mrs. Siegel, is caused not by morale problems, but by exhaustion.

"If you get kicked or beaten one day, on the next morning you might not want to get out of bed. You're exhausted and you dread it happening again," she says.

The attendants who do stay on the job, she claims are often in need of the salary and many put up with the conditions for the paycheck.

One attendant claimed the problems resulted because "We don't get the cooperation from the people that we should," and added that Dr. Sheldon was "the block of the building."

On June 28, 89 employees in the three buildings that comprise Dr. Sheldon's unit, signed and sent a petition to Dr. Ristich requesting a meeting with him to "discuss the terrible situation which currently exists" in relation to Sheldon.

8 CHARGES

"In general, Dr. Sheldon's contempt for employes, poor judgement, and unprofessional behavior, undermines morale and paralyzes our ability to effectively discharge our duties," the summary of eight charges reads.

Specifically the charges range from his "insulting attitude and verbal abuse toward the employes" to his "inequitable treatment of employes, predicated on racial differences, in the execution of discharge and suspension practices."

Attendants, feeling that Mrs. Siegel was a driving force working to get things done in spite of Sheldon, were outraged over her dismissal.

"When you see people who have been here for 20 years getting riled up, you know something's wrong," one attendant shouted during the demonstration.

Some of the attendants, in protesting the firing of Mrs. Siegel, called for the dismissal of Sheldon. He was charged with racial prejudice, in a building where most of the employes are Negro. One attendant claimed he called them "dumb black employes," or "dumb black children."

Sheldon, claiming he was probably the only person in the unit who has ever been in a concentration camp, dismissed the charges as "nonsense."

Asked about his response to the demonstration that had about 100 residents marching and more than a dozen women attendants screaming, he called it "a deplorable misuse of patients . . . so damn tragic."

"Do you think these retarded residents know what's going on?" he asked.

The residents were brought with the employes, according to one of the organizers, to dramatize the situation and "so that nobody can say we neglected the kids."

Harry Eliazarian, deputy director who met with the demonstrators, called for the return of the residents to their building and claimed he had "no knowledge of anything" relating to the firing of Mrs. Siegel and the subsequent protest.

Mrs. Siegel was hired as a team leader last February. She had worked as a psychiatric social worker at Willowbrook for four years beginning in 1965, and later became senior counselor, then an administrator at Arthur Kill Rehabilitation Center.

When she arrived at Willowbrook "a conflict in personalities" appeared between her and Sheldon, one of the employes claimed.

Mrs. Siegel claimed he did not meet his responsibility as far as her building was concerned, that he ignored the problems and tried to cover them up.

Sheldon felt that the basic "thing" about Mrs. Siegel was that "she agreed with the staff, gave them a great deal of support, and in terms of making demands of people, made relatively few." As a result, he claimed, things did not get done.

He called the charges made in the petition concerning him and those at yesterday's demonstration, "not justified," but rather the product of "all the anger built up over the years" over conditions.

"They've got legitimate requests" concerning the conditions, he claimed.

Mrs. Siegel was allegedly fired at Sheldon's request. Since she had taken the job of team leader after the civil service test for team leaders was given, her employment status was provisional, and according to a union representative, at the discretion of the director.

Mrs. Siegel was told of her dismissal by Sheldon, but as of yesterday afternoon, had not yet received written notification.

Employes taking part in yesterday's demonstration expressed their hope that the protest would lead to investigations into Mrs. Siegel's dismissal, conditions in the building and the conduct of Sheldon.