

Worker claims state school used lethal paint on its walls

By ELAINE BOIES

A painter at Willowbrook State School has charged that the institution painted the exteriors of two buildings last summer with lethal lead-based paint and that the paint is now scaling and falling in chips where children play.

The painter, Richard Cunningham, says he is unable to file a formal complaint about the situation, "because nobody will take it."

His supervisor allegedly told him that Buildings 76 and 77 would be painted over eventually, and when he attempted to file a grievance against his supervisor, the union representative told him to "cool it."

Cunningham told the Advance two weeks ago there was a storeroom at Willowbrook containing at least 1,000 pounds

of white lead in paste form, which he called "the purest form of lead there is."

Yesterday, the lead paste was gone.

In what may be just coincidental timing, Willowbrook is presently awaiting word on a chemical analysis of the paint from the State Department of Mental Hygiene in Albany.

Donald Fleming, deputy director for administration, said yesterday that paint chips given to him by Cunningham, as well as others taken from interior walls, had been sent to Albany "two to three weeks ago."

The city health code, which is the same as the state's, considers a lead content of .06 of one per cent dangerous. The Bureau of Lead Poisoning can run the tests and get results back in about five days.

But Fleming was informed by a maintenance foreman, Leo

Leonard, that it usually takes the state six to eight weeks to report on similar tests. Leonard also told Fleming that the paint check was an annual procedure, requested by the state.

In the meantime, Cunningham said, he was being threatened with loss of his job for "making waves."

Thursday afternoon, he said, he was called into the office by Joseph Sykora, maintenance supervisor, and in the presence of Leonard and Joseph Fontano, whom he identified as "second in command of maintenance," was asked to write a letter.

The letter, according to Cunningham, was to say "I was completely satisfied with what they were doing about the lead paint, and that they were completely exonerated of any wrongdoing."

Cunningham refused to write such a letter and claims that

Friday he was threatened with loss of his job.

The Willowbrook administration confirms that Cunningham, who has only been employed there for the past four months, is considered "disruptive" by his supervisor and the foreman.

But the painter contends the charges against him are trumped up because of his interest in the lead paint.

Moreover, Cunningham charges, his superiors told him that steel-based paint had originally been ordered, but the superintendent, Zack Warnecke, "turned it down because it was too expensive."

"The thing I'm concerned about," he said, "is they're just going to paint over it, and it'll keep peeling, with the lead still there, in the chips. It shouldn't have been done in the first place. Somebody has to be responsible."