

Willowbrook staff set to fight takeover

By SYDNEY FREEDBERG

An army of dissatisfied state workers serving Willowbrook Developmental Center apparently is poised to do battle next month with the new, privately hired staff.

Union leaders disclosed yesterday they are polling their membership to establish if there is sentiment for an institutionwide walkout Sept. 5, the day the state plans to surrender authority over seven center buildings to the United Cerebral Palsy Associations.

The ballot asks members to endorse a strike, a sickout or a demonstration — moves apparently designed to stall the public-to-private transition.

"We will not give in on this issue," Felton King, president of the local representing Willowbrook workers, told 200 members during a union meeting yesterday.

"Our jobs are at stake and our back is being forced against the wall," King said, adding that the state has no cohesive plan for the redeployment of 700 workers who will lose their current posts to UCP's private staff.

King's statement came just minutes after the departure from the center's grounds of Democratic mayoral candidate Bella S. Abzug, who picked up the

backing of giant Local 479 of the Civil Service Employees Association, the bargaining unit for 4,500 Willowbrook workers.

With King and other union leaders, Mrs. Abzug toured the baby complex, which is to be the heart of the privately run center. The complex houses approximately 450 mentally retarded children, said to receive the best care Willowbrook has to offer.

King briefed Mrs. Abzug on the takeover during their walk. She was careful not to take a position. She greeted state workers assigned to the buildings and took the hands of some mentally retarded children, mostly unaware of the guest in their midst.

She addressed the union members and then, in return for their support, pledged to "bring your concern to the attention of the governor and the commissioner of the Department of Mental Hygiene."

But while the former congresswoman from Manhattan stressed that every state worker "should be guaranteed job security," she stopped shy of endorsing the union's headline opposition to the private takeover.

"I am not the governor and I am not

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Felton King, president of Willowbrook's union, briefs mayoral hopeful Bella Abzug on the private takeover of seven outbuildings at the center.

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the courts," Mrs. Abzug maintained, referring to a series of court orders defining the constitutional rights of the institutionalized retarded and setting strict guidelines for turning around Willowbrook's history of abuse and neglect.

But she indicated she does "not have power" over the Brooklyn Federal

Court judge who agreed in March to the UCP takeover.

Nor could she halt such a prospect, she indicated.

But Mrs. Abzug added: "I share your concern for quality health care. I share your concern for what happens to residents. And I share your concern for what happens to working people here."

Department of Mental Hygiene offi-

cialists have "assured me," Mrs. Abzug insisted, that no layoffs will result from the UCP takeover and that 700 affected workers will be trained and reassigned to the remaining 20 buildings, housing approximately 1,800 residents.

"I wish not to make any false promises," Mrs. Abzug said, adding that as mayor she would not permit "the dumping of residents" into community facilities that did not attain the proper standards.

After Mrs. Abzug left Willowbrook, heading for a visit to Village Greens in Arden Heights, the 200 workers began to talk over a strategy for Sept. 5, the date the UCP employe phase-in is set to begin.

Union representatives from two other Island state facilities — South Beach Psychiatric Center and the Institute for Basic Research in Willowbrook — vowed to support any action the Willow-

brook local planned.

But the representatives refused to say if that meant their membership might walk off their jobs also — should the Willowbrook workers choose such a route.

King told the workers and Mrs. Abzug before her departure that the private palsy group has "little experience in dealing with the retarded."

"If they (UCP) do a better job," he said, "it will only be because they will get the money the Department of Mental Hygiene refuses to give us."

The local president also urged the membership to join a demonstration Aug. 25 at UCP's executive offices in Midtown Manhattan "to show solid opposition to this takeover."