

Willowbrook aides authorize a strike

By SYDNEY FREEDBERG

Workers at Willowbrook Developmental Center authorized a strike last night to protest the state's surrender of seven center buildings, housing 641 retarded residents, to the United Cerebral Palsy Association.

In a series of meetings yesterday in the Plaza Casino, West Brighton, an estimated 1,000 state employees — well less than half of Willowbrook's unionized membership, voted to give strike authorization to Felton King, president of the Willowbrook chapter of the Civil Service Employees Association.

King said after the meeting that the walkout would be scheduled for "sometime in the near future." The union leader was expected to be in Albany today to inform central CSEA officials of the intended action.

Strikes by public workers are forbidden under the state's Taylor Law, which King insisted he was not afraid to break, "since the state (by agreeing to the UCP takeover) has violated the state constitution, the Mental Hygiene Law and our job contract."

While admitting that a major job action would jeopardize the lives of at least 1,800 Willowbrook residents, King maintained it was the only response to the situation.

"Resident care is going to suffer," King admitted. He added, "We're very concerned about that. But we're also concerned about our jobs."

He said that although only 700 institutional workers were directly affected in the UCP takeover — of those, approxi-

mately 500 face job reassignments to state-run buildings at Willowbrook. The Department of Mental Hygiene's decision to hand the private group the buildings will lead to a steady decay of state jobs.

It was unclear yesterday how widespread support for a strike would be. Many public employees interviewed at Willowbrook in recent weeks, while clearly upset by the takeover, expressed doubt that a major job action would provide the solution to a complex and seemingly insurmountable problem.

The problem, as workers see it, involves more than UCP. State policy, they explain, now dictates that large institutions like Willowbrook are to be phased out in coming years, to be replaced by small community facilities run by local governments.

The fate of state institutional workers as civil servants remains unclear in this framework, they believe. Emergency precautions and contingency measures were being taken by administrators yesterday in the event that the CSEA carries out the strike threat.

Elim Howe, Willowbrook's acting director, said more than 1,000 non-union supervisory workers would be called in to substitute for striking workers.

In addition, she said, a strike would mean the immediate cancellation of holiday passes, vacation days and personnel leave for state employees who elected to report to work. They would also be urged to work overtime, she added.

"There is absolutely no point to a strike at this point in time," Miss Howe said. She said "The path for the union seems to be the courts," and added that King viewed the courts "as a last resort."

The SEA has mounted two challenges to the takeover, both pending — one in Brooklyn Federal Court and another in State Supreme Court in Albany.

If a strike is called, the seven UCP-operated buildings presumably would continue to be staffed by privately hired non-union workers. King neglected to say, however, whether UCP personnel would be allowed on the grounds of the center in the event of a strike.

He did say that the union leadership would retaliate against state workers who would break strike lines.

The 24 state-controlled buildings would have difficulty maintaining patient care since the staff — consisting of direct-treatment therapists, teachers, kitchen workers and others — would be idled.

Ironically, the great majority of residents at Willowbrook would not even realize a strike was occurring. Most of Willowbrook's residents are irretrievably brain damaged, so helpless that they are completely dependent upon others for life support.

A three-day strike was called by public workers in 1972. At that time, volunteers were called in.