

Willowbrook workers uncertain about hitting picket line

By BRUCE ALPERT and SYDNEY FREEDBERG

Gary Peterson of Great Kills, like many of his co-workers at the Willowbrook Developmental Center, says he isn't sure what he will do if picket lines go up outside the state institution next week.

"I want to work because I can't afford to give up the salary right now," said Peterson, a resident attendant at Willowbrook for a little more than a year. "But if there's a picket line, I don't know what I will do."

Peterson's uncertainty about whether or not to join a threatened strike by the Civil Service Association, which represents the institution's 4,000 workers, is typical of the reaction of a large number of Willowbrook employees.

Other employees, questioned during their lunch hour yesterday, fell into two basic categories: Those who adamantly support a strike to protest the takeover of seven of the institution's 31 buildings by the private United Cerebral Palsy Association and those who believe a strike will do nothing to provide the job security sought by the union.

"I view a strike as a double-edged sword," said John Jasak, an assistant teacher from Willowbrook. "I think we have to do something to protect our jobs, because I don't believe the state when they say there won't be any layoffs as a result of the UCP takeover."

But Jasak said that he had serious reservations of walking out and leaving the 1,750 residents still under state care without proper supervision.

Jasak and other workers also expressed concern about state threats to impose the penalties of the Taylor Law against striking employees. The Taylor Law, which forbids strikes by public employees, provides for the dismissal of striking workers or a loss of two days

pay for everyday on strike.

"I don't think they'd fire all of us," said Louriane Smith of Dongan Hills, "but I know myself that I can't afford to give up two days pay for each day on strike. I think a lot of people, including myself, will be making up our minds on the day a strike is called."

Despite the uncertainty expressed by many Willowbrook employees, union activists predict that a strike will be joined by almost all state employees at the institution.

"Listen, nobody wants to go out on strike," Billy Williams, a mental hygienist from Building 12, said. "But we're fighting for our jobs and when the time comes to be counted, I'm sure that everybody will stand together."

A union meeting on Tuesday which authorized a strike at an undetermined date next week, Williams said, was attended by more than 1,000 workers. "I've been here five years and I have never seen as much interest shown before. I saw people at the meeting that I've never seen attend union meetings in the past," he said.

Williams said the strike was necessary because the UCP takeover threatened the jobs of hundreds of state workers, a charge which is denied by Willowbrook administrators who pledge no layoffs for at least two years.

Several workers, however, complained that the time to protest was prior to the takeover by UCP last week of the care of 641 of the institution's 2,400 patients.

"It's too late to do anything now," said a teacher from Concord. "The UCP is already operating here and there's no way we're going to get them out. I just wish we had protested more vehemently earlier."

The union had organized several mass demonstrations in Manhattan and Albany prior to the takeover and had initiated legal action, which is still pend-

ing, in an attempt to obtain a court order against the private organization.

"The union just didn't do enough," said the teacher who asked not to be identified. "Sure, I'll honor a picket line, but that was the time to be militant, not now."

Only one worker would say outright that she will continue to work even if there is a strike.

"I'd like to strike, but I'm a probationary employe and there's nothing the union can do for me if there's a strike and I'm fired," said a therapy aide from Mariners Harbor.

She said she resented statements made by Willowbrook CSEA Chapter President Felton King that workers who cross picket-lines will be treated harshly. "The union hasn't done anything for me," she said, "and I'm not going to be intimidated."

Elin Howe, acting director of the institution, said that Willowbrook administrators had an emergency plan ready to maintain basic services to residents if a strike is called.

"I just hope the workers decide that a strike is not called," said Miss Howe. "I don't think it will accomplish anything since the decision on the legality of the UCP takeover is now being decided by the courts."