

Union boss says state forcing strike at Willowbrook by refusing to talk

By SYDNEY FREEDBERG

Will there be a strike at the Willowbrook Developmental Center?

State officials say there will not and the union representing an estimated 4,000 institutional public workers has given its word — no work stoppage for now.

But union leaders of Willowbrook's Civil Service Employees Association say: "What are you talking about?" while continuing to affirm a walkout to protest the state's disputed agreement with United Cerebral Palsy Association is still a live threat.

There was no strike yesterday, though, and the concerned parties in the

Willowbrook saga breathed a sigh of relief.

Felton King, Willowbrook's union president, sent out some feelers to Department of Mental Hygiene officials, indicating he and his board were willing to sit down, cool off and talk about the serious labor-management problems plaguing the 2,380-bed institution for the retarded.

"We've offered some proposals," King said, "and we're willing to talk some more. But the department (of Mental Hygiene) refuses to listen and is putting us in the position of having no alternative but to strike."

King said Willowbrook workers, upset with UCP operation of seven center

buildings and the larger issue of job security, were willing to accept an expanded private role in the training of state workers, but not UCP's presence at Willowbrook.

State officials, however, contending the state-to-private transfer of care of 640 residents is a court-invoked remedy to some of the institution's problems, indicated the agreement with UCP is entirely non-negotiable.

"We will attempt to cooperate with the CSEA to ensure compliance with the court order," a spokesman for Thomas A. Coughlin, deputy commissioner of the mental hygiene agency, said. "But

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the union is asking us to revoke the contract with UCP, and that's ridiculous."

The threatened job action became an issue as a result of the UCP takeover of a portion of Willowbrook two weeks ago. The controversy centers on potential layoffs at the institution and the larger issue of job security for state employees.

Although the state contends the agreement with the private group will not, in itself, lead to job loss, it has focused attention on a problem that could become increasingly more critical as Willowbrook's population decreases to meet a court-mandated limit of 250 residents by 1981.

Coughlin's spokesman, Cora Hoffmann, said a number of administrative alternatives to minimize "and possibly eliminate" the termination of state workers at Willowbrook are now "under study," but she admitted none of them are yet viable.

One option, she said, that holds the promise of substantial relief would involve a change in state regulations that block the automatic transfer of public workers from one state developmental center to another.

"If the system were modified to centralize the appointing authority," Mrs. Hoffmann said, "it would allow for a steady and continuous flow of employees

from centers like Willowbrook being phased down to nearby facilities where vacancies exist."

King, when told of the mental hygiene agency's suggestion, said: "It does not address the problem of UCP at Willowbrook, which is our primary concern right now."

Instead of a strike yesterday, the Albany brass of the CSEA, which represents approximately 143,000 workers statewide, came to Willowbrook to tour the UCP-run complex and to confront the institution's acting director, Elin M. Howe, "about the state's plans."

Miss Howe told William McGowan, CSEA's president, and other central union officials that "our intentions now are dictated by the courts...UCP will continue to operate as a separate unit of Willowbrook Developmental Center; but if there are any employee problems, we should get together and talk about them."

McGowan, at least, seemed ready to talk. He sought assurances from Miss Howe that state workers in three shared-staff buildings — where the state has direct treatment staff and UCP supervisory control — are guaranteed the same rights as workers in 24 still publicly operated buildings.

"We want to make sure the same

rules apply across the board, McGowan said, pointing out, for instance, that a UCP policy of locking its facility doors was prohibiting union access to privately run buildings.

Robert Schonhorn, UCP's executive director, told the union leaders that the private organization locks its doors for two reasons: "To keep the flies out and to make sure the kids aren't roaming around the grounds and getting lost."

"But we'll make sure," he said, "that anyone displaying a CSEA or a valid ID will be able to enter."

A tour through the shared-staff buildings indicated that some hostility exists between state and private workers, with programs there for nearly 200 mostly multiple handicapped adolescents still at a minimum.

And although the dialogue among state, private and union officials seemed a hopeful sign, King said no resolution to the takeover dispute will be possible without "UCP out of Willowbrook."

He repeated that state workers feel litigation of the union's protest — pending in both state and federal courts — "could take months or years and that's too long."

"My board is meeting Monday," King said, "to decide what action to take. "My telephone lines will be open in the meantime to await some proposals from the state."