

Parents group, union chief rivalry perils

Woodbridge State School Lawsuits, verbal punches could reduce care for retarded

By ROBERT J. BRAUN

The Woodbridge State School, often cited as a model for care for the severely retarded, is locked in a labor struggle that has pitted a state labor leader against a parent group in what one participant called a "ferocious" battle of wills.

The union leader — Al Wurf, executive director of the New Jersey Council of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), AFL-CIO — has vowed to destroy the influence of the parents group.

The parents group — the Woodbridge State School Parents Association — has vowed to topple Wurf from his union post by making him a national embarrassment to the parent AFSCME union that, incidentally, is run by Wurf's brother, Jerry.

Caught in the middle is the school and the school's 1,000 residents — ranging in age from 5 to 80, with an average IQ score of less than 20. Both sides — and

a state administration that is trying to avoid being drawn into the conflict — are predicting that, without a resolution, care at the facility will decline.

"We lived in a Camelot for retarded citizens," said a parent active in the association. "But that Camelot is being destroyed."

Wurf and the parents group are bombarding each other with law suits, administrative actions, press statements, investigations and a torrent of angry words — and both sides say they are determined to continue until the other loses.

The union leader has accused the parents of "carrying on like maniacs." Wurf has hired private detectives to probe the personal business dealings of the parent association leaders. — and then turned the detectives' reports over to local newspapers in Middlesex County

for "investigative stories."

He has brought a defamation suit against four employees who sympathized with the parents and filed unfair labor practice charges against them. He most recently demanded that the children of parent group leaders be transferred to other state schools — a demand rejected by State Human Services Commissioner Ann Klein.

Wurf's side of the battle has shown some success. The union leader claims credit for the resignation of Louis Pirone, the school's superintendent and a close ally of the parents group. Although Pirone cited "ill health" as the reason for his resignation, the school chief quit after Wurf's private investigations — picked up by the attorney general's office — revealed Pirone's extensive business relationship with a number of parents and school staff members. The attorney general, however, found nothing illegal about the business practices.

The union chief also managed to extract an agreement from the state that carried an item — unprecedented in public labor negotiations — that required the attorney general to investigate Pirone and Pirone's assistant, now acting superintendent, Alan Sweet.

Despite his successes, Wurf concedes he is concerned about the "ferocity" of the parent group.

"No matter what happens, no matter what I do, they keep coming at me. They're trying to knock my block off."

Marvin Mills, a former parent group leader and former president of the New Jersey Association for Retarded Citizens

(ARC), openly admits his organization is doing whatever it can to discredit Wurf and to "drive him out of New Jersey."

"Wurf has said we're out to bust the union," said Mills. "But we're not out to bust the union. We're out to bust Al Wurf."

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In the process, Mills' group also has achieved a precedent — one that might have widespread implications for all school labor talks. The parent group, angered by the state refusal to seek court action against two "mini-strikes" called by Wurf this year, was able to obtain a restraining order itself against the union.

The granting of the injunction — ultimately defied by Wurf's union — represents one of the few times, perhaps the only time in the history of American labor law, that parents have won standing in a school labor dispute.

The precedent could be used by parent groups in local public school labor disputes in which the school board is unwilling to seek an injunction or in college strikes to grant students standing.

But the Woodbridge parents haven't stopped with the restraining order. They recently asked Superior Court Judge David Furman for contempt citations against Wurf and his union. The parents want Wurf fined and jailed, removed from his union leadership post and his union "decertified" as bargaining agent for the school's employees.

The parents also are supporting the court positions of four employees Wurf is suing for slander for criticizing the union leadership. Mills said he expected the employees to counter with a civil rights action against Wurf.

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Mills says the anger of the parents is motivated by concern for their children, disgust at the state's refusal to act and the fear that the process of Willowbrook coming to Woodbridge already has begun.

Willowbrook is the name of a New York facility for severely retarded persons that received national attention for poor conditions about a decade ago. At the time, Wurf was in charge of the employe union there and Mills charges the union leaders' actions resulted in the conditions.

"Willowbrook happens when the employes begin to look at their union leaders as their bosses and the leaders care only about protecting their members," said Mills. "Wurf wants the same power at Woodbridge he had at Willowbrook — but the parents will stop him."

Wurf, who says his actions led to improvements at the New York school, bristles at the charge.

"That's the crassest thing I've ever heard," he said. "As long as they say things like that, there will be no peace between me and the Woodbridge parents."

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The labor-management peace at Woodbridge began to come apart last June when an AFSCME shop steward was brought up on disciplinary charges and dismissed by the school. Wurf vowed then he would topple Pirone. In July, Wurf accused Pirone of being a partner in a corporation that owned and operated a number of stores, some of which advertised in the parent-subsidized school newspaper.

In August, Wurf called the school an animal farm — a remark he later

publicly retracted — and charged that supervisors were "beating up" workers and generally being disrespectful. He set a strike date for Sept. 12.

The union leader called off the walk-out after state officials agreed to listen to employe grievances. Nearly 50 workers testified at the hearing and, while they complained about the distastefulness of the job and the disrespectful attitude of supervisors, only one worker claimed she had been physically abused by a supervisor.

Later that month, Wurf and the state reached an agreement which promised continuing reviews of personnel practices, training programs — and the attorney general's probe into Pirone's personal business affairs.

In March and April, AFSCME conducted two statewide strikes — the first, for five hours, the second for two. Mills' group obtained the restraining order after submitting affidavits to the court warning the health of the retarded residents would be endangered. They subsequently filed affidavits contending that at least two children were injured during the walkouts.

The parent association also has won a promise from the Assembly Institutions Committee to conduct a public hearing into Wurf's conduct. The hearings, Mills said, will give his group "the forum we need to show exactly what happens when a power-hungry labor leader tries to take over a state school."

Wurf, meanwhile, warned that conditions will worsen unless the parents cease their attacks on him.

"The attitudes of the workers toward the children are bound to be affected if they know their union is under attack and their leader might be imprisoned. That doesn't mean retribution — it just means the nuances of care might be changed."