

O. D. HECK

short staffing, hazardous conditions, erosion of services

ALBANY — Furious over deteriorating effects a state-imposed hiring freeze is having on patient care and working conditions at the O. D. Heck Developmental Center near here, a group of Heck employees last week conducted a protest demonstration in front of the State Department of Mental Hygiene offices at 44 Holland Avenue, Albany.

"We can no longer tolerate the hazardous conditions and erosion in services to clients," O. D. Heck Civil Service Employees Assn. Local 445 President Peter Looker told reporters as workers behind him chanted, "Short staffing is no staffing," "Lift the freeze now" and "Quality care now."

According to Looker, staffing is down by approximately 20 percent from just one year ago, but the state tells him it must drop to 90 percent before the freeze will be lifted. "In my unit alone the average number of workers has gone from eight to five in 14 months and the state

BOB WAXMAN participated in protest demonstration by O. D. Heck employees. He is at the center of a heated controversy, claiming his public statements about poor care and working conditions at the facility are behind management's efforts to fire him. His sign reads, "Freedom of speech? Forget it if you're a state worker. It will be hazardous to your job."

enough employees to cover for those taking classes. He says they are getting only 50-60 hours of training a year, when they should be getting 200 hours.

And instead of being taught behavioral management and crisis intervention techniques, which they need to handle the multiple handicapped and severely disabled clients at O. D. Heck, the employees are simply learning how to physically care for their charges. "Naturally, this training is important," says Looker, "but it must go beyond the physical to enable us to give quality care."

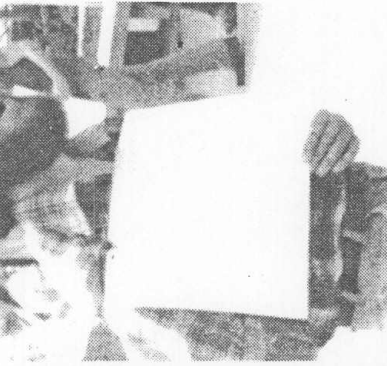
Forced overtime is another sore spot with the employees. They are being required to work a 16-hour day to provide minimum coverage on the units, and some have been harassed by management for refusing to stay. "The administration thinks it is cutting corners by hav-

ing employees stay overtime, but it would be more economical to hire more staff than to pay present employees time and a half in overtime," Looker commented.

"We just hope the demonstration has opened some eyes," said Looker. "We cannot work like this any longer and we'll be back if we don't see some improvement soon."

The demonstration had originally been planned for April, but was postponed by the union when the Associate Commissioner of DMH Zygmund Slezak promised major staffing changes and the hiring of eight nurses.

However, instead of hiring six LPN's which the union felt were needed to best handle patients, the state hired five RN's. Also, according to Williams, the staff changes resulted in the removal of three nurses from direct patient care to supervisory duties.



WHILE O. D. HECK EMPLOYEES march in protest behind them, O. D. Heck CSEA Local 445 President Peter Looker, left, discusses the union's position with CSEA Field Representative Donald McCarthy and Joyce Smi, Local 445 Secretary.