

# Union presents 5 demands to end Willowbrook sickout

By ANEMONA HARTOCOLLIS

Union leadership at the Staten Island Developmental Center yesterday presented five combinations for halting an employee sickout to the center administration and the state's commissioner for mental retardation. The sickout is now in its third day.

Felton King, president of Local 149 of the Civil Service Employees Association (CSEA), pressed for immediate hiring of at least 300 direct care workers. He charged that officially sanctioned understaffing has endangered the welfare of both workers and mentally retarded residents at the Willowbrook institution.

The state-run center is under a federal court order to virtually empty the facility by May 1981. King said, and administrators agreed, that in anticipation of that goal employees have been transferred to other facilities at a considerably higher rate than residents, who currently number about 1,100.

"Unless management does something about this," King said, "I can see this sickout escalating. It's not that our employees don't want to work. It's just that they can't work under these conditions."

Absenteeism during the job action, after reaching a peak of one out of three workers Thursday, has been hovering at about 20 percent — twice the norm for the summer season, according to administrators.

The state's Office for Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities has imposed a hiring freeze for the past five years at the developmental center. But James Shea, the institution's deputy director, said yesterday, "We can ask for an exception on that."

James Introne, mental retardation commissioner, could not be reached for comment yesterday.

Added Shea, "We've been moving toward moving staff back."

Remaining residents, Shea said, generally are

the more severely disabled and difficult to treat, and are harder to place in community-based group homes, as ordered by the court. "That concentration could contribute to lowering morale," he said.

Shea said the administration, although it did not consider the sickout a debilitating situation, is willing to negotiate with the union.

Other CSEA demands addressed dissatisfaction with employee leave days and working hours.

One additional major demand was for United Cerebral Palsy (UCP) of New York State, a private organization which shares operations with the state in six buildings of the 16-building complex, to abandon a newly opened day training center.

The center, at the former Richmond Racquet Club on Forest Ave., Mariners Harbor, is "unsafe" for use by the handicapped, King said. He cited an unfavorable Fire Department inspection report made last fall.

"All city departments have approved this structure, and we have a temporary certificate of occupancy," Walter Rosenthal, a UCP spokesman, said yesterday. "If the CSEA wants to object, they should fight with the city, which gave us the approval in the first place."

"Our residents are happy and well treated as far as we are concerned," Rosenthal added.

CSEA represents about 1,000 direct care workers at the developmental center. They are non-professional employees responsible for such basic services as washing, feeding and dressing residents.

Clinical staff, who belong to a separate union, have been recruited to work overtime during the sickout.

Louis Magnotti, a shop steward for the professionals' union, said yesterday that clinical employees were stepping out of role only to feed residents. "We don't want the other union to feel we're interfering with anything they're doing," he said.