

Developmental workers won't budge in fight over withheld money

By ADAM PFEFFER

Staten Island Developmental Center workers continued for the second straight day their demonstration inside the administration building yesterday, banging trashcans and warning they will stay until they are reimbursed the money denied to them because of an alleged sickout last month.

While more than 100 demonstrators, most of them therapy aides at the center, occupied the building Thursday night, by yesterday afternoon only about 20 remained. Many of the workers who participated in Thursday night's protest were busy fulfilling their normal responsibilities at the center yesterday, fearing invocation of the Taylor Law.

Because of a four-day period between July 24 and July 27 in which 800 employees called in sick, administration officials refused to pay 371 workers who did not provide a legitimate excuse for their absence.

The workers are members of Civil Service Employees Association (CSEA) Local 429. According to Union President Felton King, all 371 workers who were docked pay are black.

"It is blatant discrimination and the administration knows this," King said.

According to Elin Howe, director of the center, however, the administration does not think the issue is one of racial bias.

"The issue is clearly one of labor problems, not racial problems," Howe said. She also denied that all 371 of the workers are black, although she admitted that a high percentage of blacks are involved in the dispute.

King said if the problem is not cleared up by Tuesday he is planning to file a civil rights suit with the Civil Rights Health and Human Service Commission against the state and the center. "The administration has showed racism all along and now it is coming to light," he added.

The amount of money lost to each protesting worker ranges from \$45 to \$150. In one instance, a worker with pay stub in hand revealed that

she had been denied \$140.76 for three sick days.

According to King, the workers will not leave the administration building until they receive their docked pay. "We will do the same thing this weekend and we will not give up the building until the administration gives in to our demands," he said.

Meanwhile, according to Howe, the administration is attempting to resolve the issue. She said officials were trying to work out an agreeable solution with the state commissioner of mental retardation in Albany.

For now, however, the administration's view on the issue has not changed. "Our position is exactly as it was. There has been no change in that," Howe said.

The workers' alleged sickout last month resulted from what they called serious understaffing that had endangered the welfare of both workers and the 1,100 mentally retarded at the center.

In a speech before the National Conference for the Mentally Retarded last May, it was noted that therapy aides "who devote their time entirely to residents are the least well paid, the least respected and the least listened to. In the hierarchy of staff members working in an institution they are at the bottom."