

Developmental Center is quiet again after workers end protest

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Protesting workers halted their ear-splitting demonstration in the Staten Island Developmental Center, Willowbrook, yesterday just as police, equipped with helmets and clubs, prepared to arrest them.

"Troops, let's march on . . . peacefully," declared Felton King, union leader for the 20 employees who had drawn into a tight circle in the lobby of the institution's administration building, pounding rhythmically on trash cans and pots with bats and sticks.

Speaking through a bullhorn, King thus directed his members out of the building shortly before 4:30 p.m., ending a continuous five-day vigil by the workers, sparked by the institutions docking of three days' pay for 371 employees. He said the workers had gotten the point across."

The withholding of pay stemmed from a reported sickout which center officials and some workers said occurred between July 24 and 27. The reported job action was to protest cuts in staffing levels at Willowbrook, which is being phased out under a 1974 court order.

With a short pep talk, King, who is president of Local 429 of the Civil Service Employees Association (CSEA), ordered the latest action ended minutes after the demonstrators saw police officers from the 122nd Precinct, carrying helmets and clubs, walk past them up the steps to the second floor of the building.

There they conferred in a room, opposite the offices of the director and deputy director of the institution who, behind closed doors, reportedly stayed in phone contact with their superiors in the state mental hygiene agency.

The police had been called in as a backup to assist in case of violence against Willowbrook's peace-officer force, who would have made the arrests. Seven of them sat or stood on the balcony of the second floor overlooking the demonstration, awaiting orders.

Albany officials told the Advance earlier in the day that their strategy

would have been to first suspend the workers so they then could be legally arrested for trespassing.

Bill Knowlton, an agency spokesman in Albany, said during the morning that a restraining order could have been sought on safety grounds. He reasoned that since the building's switchboard was rendered almost useless because of the noise, reaching medical help in case of an emergency could have been hindered.

Although the protest was called to an end, the dispute appears far from over. The center's director, Elin Howe, said officials remain undecided about possible disciplinary action against workers who she alleged were demonstrating while they should have been working at assigned duties.

Union officials said the workers involved, who are assigned to wash, dress and care for the center's 1,100

remaining residents, were off duty when protesting.

King, who is black, yesterday repeated charges — emphatically denied by center officials — that racism caused the controversy.

His union is continuing to demand that all 371 of the workers, mostly get their docked funds, ranging from \$90 to \$140 per worker, returned immediately. Some 36 of those who called in sick during the four-day action have been reimbursed after showing doctor's notes or other documentation that they were legitimately absent.

Miss Howe said the center still is working to process other checks for docked pay that may have been unjustified.

King's order to end the sit-in demonstration followed a meeting in Manhattan between him and Dora Rodriguez, a civil rights officer for the U.S. Health and Human Services Department, who he said told him

that racism charges could make a strong case.

Miss Howe, while saying afterward that she was "not thrilled" about another in an apparent series of various investigations into the institution, maintained that most of the docked workers are black and Hispanic because they constitute a majority of the institutional, or "direct-care," workers.

She responded to charges by the union by saying those workers were selected out of an overall 800 who called in sick over the four-day period because it was in that department that her staff had heard the threat of a sick-out before July 24.

Roy Hargrove, second vice president of the local, and Tyrone Daniels, its executive director, maintained that from their activities at the center they know that only whites in other departments of the center get promoted.

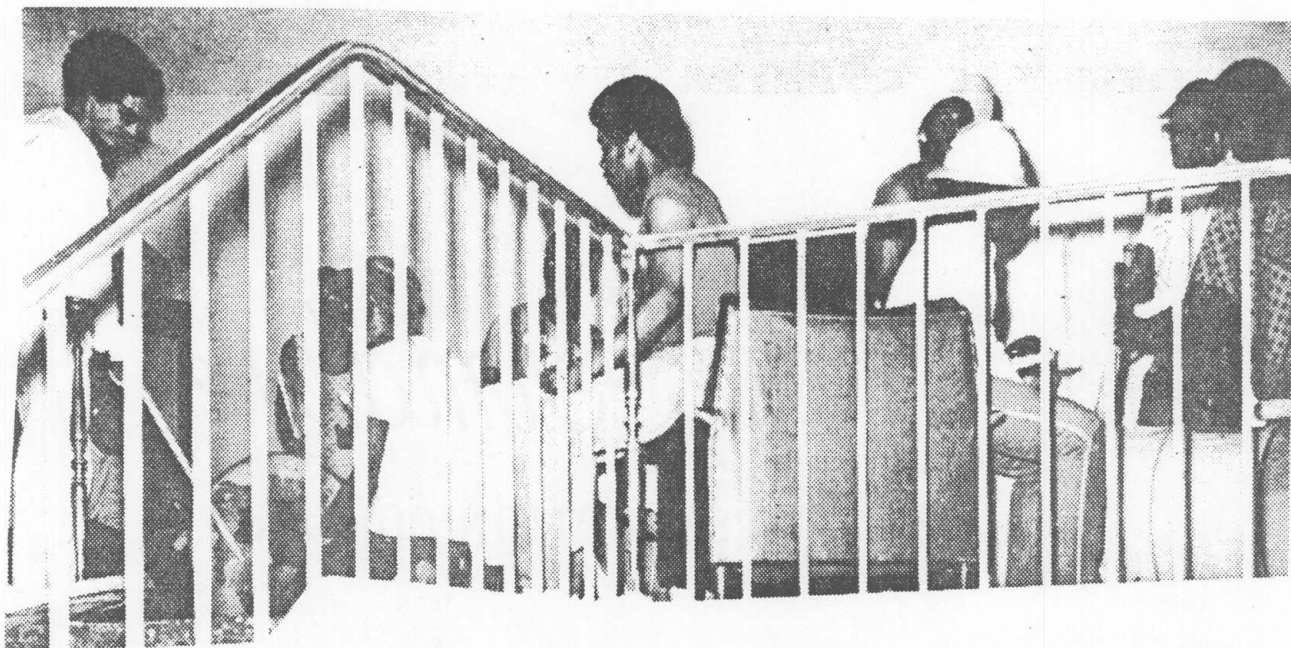
Union and management also have tangled over the ratio of

direct-care employees to patients. While labor says they need more staff and that the phase-out has gone too fast in their department, Willowbrook officials point to a high absentee rate among the workers much of the time.

King said the U.S. Office of Equal Opportunity and the U.S. Human Rights Commission also would be investigating his charges of racism and a civil suit will be filed.

Workers have claimed that their contract with the state protects them from being docked for the alleged sickout. It states: "A doctor's certificate will not be routinely required for absences of four days or less due to illness."

It is the word "routinely," though, that the agency is using to justify the legality of docking pay at Willowbrook. Hargrove explained yesterday that the union previously had fought without success to get that word deleted from the agreement.



Workers who occupied Building One at the Staten Island Developmental Center are seen rhythmically striking battered garbage cans, creating a din that drove themselves and others inside to wearing earplugs.

S.I. Advance Photo by Tony Carannante

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