

# Union chief suspended for role in protest action at Willowbrook

By ANEMONA HARTOCOLLIS

Felton King, the union chief for non-professional employees of the Staten Island Developmental Center, Willowbrook, was suspended without pay yesterday and ultimately faces termination from his full-time union position, which is on the state payroll.

The action, taken by the state Office for Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities (OMRDD), stemmed from King's role in a five-day sit-down protest in the administration building of the Willowbrook institution.

In addition, state officials said about half a dozen lower-level union officials have been suspended and proposed for termination from the institution, while about 20 unionized employees have been notified that disciplinary action is being considered against them. They also are reputed to have joined in the sit-down Aug. 21-25 at the state-operated facility.

Developmental center management refused yesterday to disclose the identities of those being disciplined. But OMRDD Commissioner James E. Introne confirmed that King was among them and asserted that the penalties being invoked "are not out of line" with alleged misconduct.

King, the commissioner explained, was believed to be "a disruptive, dangerous person to have on the campus."

Reached shortly after the 12:15 p.m. notice of his immediate suspension, King, president of Local 429 of the Civil Service Employees Association (CSEA), said: "You can rest assured that we are not going to sit back with our hands in our pockets. The charges are unfounded. They are a way of letting the membership know that they carry no weight."

King said OMRDD had served him papers charging him with four counts of misconduct, including provoking a "disruptive" demonstration, directing the "forcible" occupation of a building, failing to comply with an order to vacate the building and abandoning his workpost.

As head of a CSEA local in a large institution, King is paid by the state to conduct union affairs full time and has no other institutional responsibilities.

Expressing confidence that he would be cleared of the charges of orchestrating the demonstration, King denied receiving an order to break up the protest action.

The charges, including lesser but similar accusations of misconduct against other union members and officials, will be reviewed by a committee of OMRDD and CSEA officials, as provided in the labor contract. Determinations of guilt or innocence and penalties, including firing, invoked by the committee are further subject to binding arbitration by an independent arbitrator.

State officials said they expect the review process to begin within 10 days.

Introne said three union leaders below King have not been implicated in the sit-down, leaving them to represent workers' interests in the wake of King's suspension.

The sit-down from which the charges stem was staged in late August to protest the docking by the institution of three days' pay for 371 employees. The employees' salaries had been withheld to penalize them for absenteeism between July 24 and 27. Developmental center officials contend that the absenteeism constituted an illegal "sickout," or job action.

Some workers who agree that an organized sickout occurred explained that those absent were attempting to dramatize their complaints of understaffing at the institution, which is being phased out under a 1975 federal court order.

Union officials assert the absences were not illegal because workers were due vacation and other forms of leave. The employees involved mainly were assigned to wash, dress and feed the facility's 1,100 mentally retarded residents.

The sit-down strike began with about 100 workers, dwindling to 20 on the fifth day of continuous vigil. On the final day, police officers from the 122nd Precinct appeared, carrying helmets and clubs. At that

point, King quieted the protestors, who had been banging rhythmically on trash cans and pots, and told them: "Troops, let's march on . . . peacefully."

King said he planned to meet yesterday evening with legal counsel and regional CSEA executives to discuss the state's disciplinary moves, which he characterized as an attempt to muzzle grievances about conditions such as alleged under staffing, adverse to workers and patients.

He noted that he has met with lawyers to prepare papers charging racial discrimination by the institution against its workers, which he intends to file with the U.S. Office of Equal Opportunity and U.S. Human Rights Commission. A large proportion of the institution's basic-care staff is black or Hispanic.

Introne said his office is investigating the possibility of dealing in court with the employees who participated in the reputed sickout and in the subsequent sit-down — a more radical step than the agency disciplinary proceedings now under way.

So far, however, his agency has avoided opportunities to go that route. In August, for example, OMRDD officials said they had considered and scuttled plans to make arrests for criminal trespass of workers occupying the developmental center's administration building.