

Demonstrators protest state layoffs

A small group of shop stewards demonstrated at the front gate of the Staten Island Developmental Center in Willowbrook yesterday afternoon to protest the layoff earlier this month of 40 professional workers there and the transfer of about 60 others to off-Island state institutions.

The protest by members of Division 280 of the Public Employees Federation was one of six demonstrations conducted throughout the state at facilities operated by the Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities.

But the round of transfers and layoffs that took place Oct. 1 was most severe at the Staten Island Developmental Center, where state officials are under a federal court order to reduce the patient population to 250 by 1985. The current population is about 800.

The Public Employees Federation, representing teachers, social workers, psychiatrists and other professional staff, is currently seeking to roll back the transfers and layoffs in two separate lawsuits pending in state Supreme Court in Albany. Hearings in those cases are scheduled for Nov. 5.

"Many people were under the impression that we didn't have any layoffs here, that people were just transferred," said Willa May Thompson, union leader, in explaining the reason for the demonstration. "The purpose was to inform the public, and other employees about what happened here on Oct. 1."

The demonstration lasted about two hours yesterday afternoon and was without serious incident, as placard-carrying shop stewards distributed literature and answered questions from other developmental center employees and some passing motorists.

Mrs. Thompson said the demonstrators had received permission to take the time off from their jobs in order to picket.

Nearby, two patrol cars from the 120th Precinct stood by to prevent possible confrontations.

Mrs. Thompson claimed that the layoff of about 40 teachers and the transfer of 60 other teachers, social workers and occupational therapists has already had an effect on the level of care that patients are receiving.

"Services have been curtailed," she said, "and patient goals are now being monitored by a number of different people instead of one teacher."

Workers at the Island institution were asked several months ago to fill out forms outlining to which, if any, other boroughs they would accept transfers.

A seniority "bumping system" was then instituted to place Willowbrook workers in other borough institutions where openings existed.

In some cases, however, workers on Staten Island with many years of experience

were laid off if they did not opt for transfer to another borough.

"One teacher supervisor with 31 years experience was among those laid off," Mrs. Thompson said.

Some of the laid-off and transferred workers are now pursuing grievance procedures within the state agency.

The lawsuits currently pending in Albany basically charge that the transfers and layoffs were illegal because the state is currently contracting out the operation of several buildings at the developmental center to a United Cerebral Palsy agency.

The lawsuit also calls for the dissolution of the "lag" payroll system, under which state employees would postpone receipt of two weeks' pay until their retirement.

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