

300 UCP staffers rally to protest cuts in funding

Nearly 300 employees of United Cerebral Palsy, a private agency that cares for hundreds of mentally retarded patients in New York City, rallied outside the World Trade Center yesterday to demand more state funding.

UCP executive director Robert Schonhorn, addressing his employees through a bullhorn, said that the agency is nearly bankrupt. UCP will be forced to shut down all of its residential and educational programs on June 15 unless the state provides more money, Schonhorn said. The agency is responsible for 700 mentally retarded patients.

The demonstrators chanted "Hell no, we won't go" and "Fight." Picket signs said, "No More Snakepit" and "UCP's love for the kids is 100-percent natural."

Schonhorn said Gov. Mario M. Cuomo and state budget officials had refused to award UCP a contract that reflected agency costs. "I can't believe that someone so dedicated to humanity as our governor has been doesn't care," he said.

State budget officials want to continue negotiating with Schonhorn, according to Richard Starkey, a spokesman for Cuomo. But Starkey added: "They're not terribly optimistic that they can meet his demands. There isn't enough money to satisfy him."

United Cerebral Palsy Associations of New York State has a Medicaid-funded contract to run 60 apartments and three institutions for the mentally retarded. The institutions include the 310-bed Karl D. Warner Center in

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Willowbrook and the 54-bed Nina Eaton Center in South Beach.

UCP — which spends more than \$25 million in Medicaid funds a year — is the biggest non-profit agency running state programs for the mentally retarded.

Sue LaCorte, a demonstrator, said she feared that her 39-year-old retarded son, Kenneth, would be sent back to the Staten Island Developmental Center if his UCP apartment in Manhattan closed down. She said Kenneth had spent 15 years at the state-run center in Willowbrook. "That was no joke. It was a disgrace. Now he gets decent meals and decent clothes and recreation," Mrs. LaCorte said.

Scott Ellner, a speech patholo-

gist at the Warner Center, said he taught patients "cause and effect." Patients flip switches that make a toy panda bear play the drums; or they learn that "when they make a noise it means something," he said. "It's better than flipping over wheelchairs or taking their clothes off or screaming."

Ellner said UCP programs ensured that the patients would practice their skills every day. Parents and public school teachers, he said, often lacked that kind of persistence.

Steve Clohessy, a Graniteville resident and carpenter-mechanic for UCP programs throughout the city, said he adapted living spaces for the handicapped patients. He installs grab bars, non-skid surfaces in bathtubs and sinks that allow a wheelchair to fit underneath. "We like to see them do things on their own," he said.

In an interview, Schonhorn said he has accrued a \$5.5-million debt since July 1982. He said the state Medicaid rate for the Nina Eaton Center is \$113 per patient per day, while his actual costs are \$135. The rate for the Karl D. Warner Center is \$159, while actual costs are \$185, he said.

Schonhorn said he had been

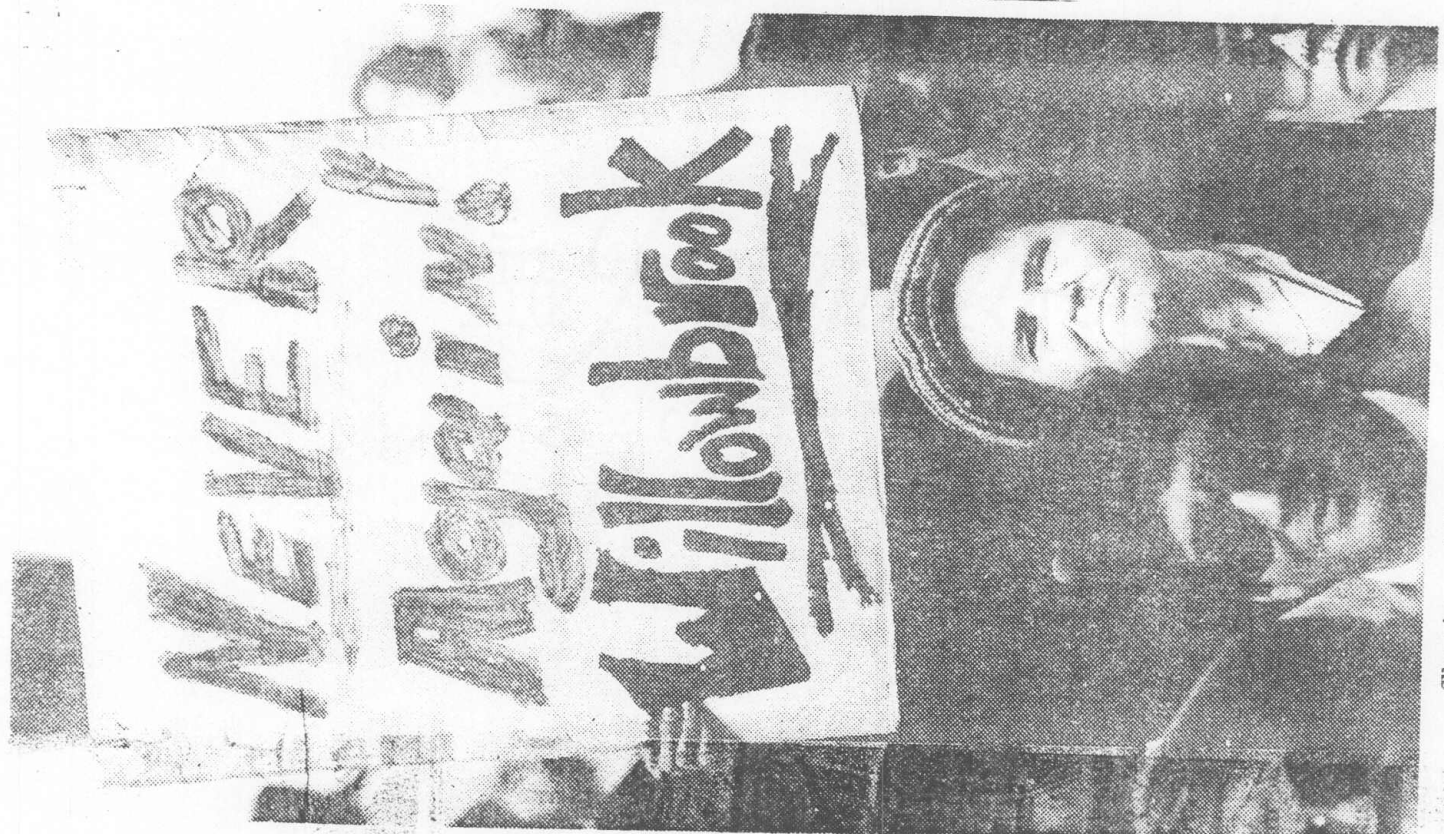
unable to pay food and house-keeping vendors. Recently, top administrators have agreed to defer their salaries, he added. UCP laid off 149 employees on March 5. The agency had 2,000 people on its payroll.

Last June, the state retroactively increased UCP's Medicaid rate for every year since 1975, according to Schonhorn. He said the revised rates entitled him to \$12.5 million in additional Medicaid funds. But the funds went to pay off an old debt for utilities, rent, groundskeeping and other services that the state had supplied to UCP, he said.

Schonhorn denied that his plan to dissolve UCP programs is an idle threat. "They'll find they've created a monster," he said. "If I have no clients to be concerned about, then I'll become one of the worst advocates they have seen."

UCP employees said the demonstration left many patients with only custodial care yesterday. Some employees said they were using vacation time to attend the rally. Others said they assumed, since the rally was organized by UCP administrators, that they were being paid to attend.

Cora Hoffman, a spokesman for the agency, said attendance at the rally would be deducted from vacation or personal leave time.



The sign and face of a protester tells the story.



Among the several hundred UCP demonstrators at the World Trade Center are Lillie Epner, left, of Queens, a Karl Warner employee, and Kathy Jason of Castleton Corners, also an employee.

S.I. Advance Photos by Tony Dugal