

The Chief

Civil Service **LEADER**

THE CIVIL EMPLOYEES' WEEKLY

UNIONS: INMATES EMBOLDENED

New Violence at Rikers Blamed on Budget Cuts

By MARK TOOR

Correction unions are pointing to a disturbance at Rikers Island Nov. 23 as an example of the problems that arise because of what labor leaders call inadequate staffing, a perennial point of contention between them and the Mayor's Office.

Inmates in a first-floor housing unit at the Otis Bantum Correctional Center began fighting with each other in the evening, and as correction personnel tried to lock down the rest of the unit other inmates resisted and turned on the officers, said Patrick Ferraiuolo, president of the Correction Captains Association. It took three waves of response teams before the area was calm, he said. More inmates became involved as more officers arrived, said Norman Seabrook, president of the Correction Officers Benevolent Association.

The unions said after a similar disturbance Oct. 19 that the unit involved was short-staffed because of budget cuts. After a previous incident in April, in which the Correction Department said staffing was normal, the unions warned that budget reductions were endangering officers.

A second fight that occurred in another unit about the same time was more easily contained, Mr. Ferraiuolo said.

The unions said officers are being endangered by the city's moves to reduce staffing. "Correction Officers are being violently attacked at the hands of inmates because they know that staffing levels are low and the Department of Correction continues to cut posts, jeopardizing the safety and security of Correction Officers and inmates alike," Mr. Seabrook said. "It's just a matter of time before an officer is killed at the hands of one of these violent individuals."

Mr. Ferraiuolo said there was no indication that staffing in the unit was lower than usual. But, he said, "the violence is escalating...Our job is extremely dangerous. The inmates are extremely violent. The city needs to realize we don't need to cut staff, we need to increase staff"

At Least 16 Officers Injured

The Correction Department said there were two fights, one involving two inmates and one involving four, on different floors within an hour of each other. In both cases, the department said, inmates turned on the officers and additional officers arrived to help deal with the problem. Three Captains and 13 Correction Officers were taken to hospitals with injuries, a spokesman said. The department also said in a statement: "In response to COBA President Norman Seabrook's assertion re staffing levels:

The two housing areas where these incidents occurred were fully staffed. More than 20 officers eventually responded to the scene and there was ample manpower available at all times."

Mr. Ferraiuolo said that actually four Captains—Edith Margarito, Arthur Spencer, Winston Deplet and Delroy Morrison—were injured and all were released later on the night of the incident. He said injuries to other officers included wounds that needed suturing and a broken eye socket. Mr. Seabrook said one of his officers was in a neck brace with possible spinal problems.

"It's becoming like it was in the '80s and early '90s," Mr. Ferraiuolo said of the violence.

'Coddling' Inmates

Mr. Seabrook said he needed proper equipment and proper staffing levels and decried "mismanagement by an agency that thinks it's okay to coddle these inmates...Some of them have no problem trying to kill a CO."

"I need three CO's in each housing area," he said. That number has recently been reduced to two, he said, and the department is looking at assigning only one officer in some areas.