



Watching And Waiting

These two custodial workers at Leigh Memorial Hospital are looking for a brighter future. Hopefully with moves made to rectify the discriminatory practices at Medical Center Hospitals, they will find one soon. (Photo by Patrick McMahon).

What Can Be Done About Racism At MCH?

By Phil Wilayto
Part VI

NORFOLK—Since this will be the last in a series of articles investigating charges of discrimination at Medical Center Hospitals, the proper question now would seem to be, "What can be done about racism at MCH?"

The MCH administration has already made some efforts at improving its image in the community. For one thing, Director of Public

Relations Mike Keating has paid his first visit to the office of the *Journal and Guide*, bringing some pictures of a group of black Girl Scouts visiting Leigh Memorial.

Not stopping there, the administration has also hired a labor relations consultant firm called "Modern Management Methods" that has sent in a special black/white team to investigate, evaluate, and draw up suggestions for the ad-

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What Can Be Done About Racism

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ministration on how to deal with some of the bad publicity it's been receiving lately. Another name for this type of outfit is "Union-Buster," so one might well be a little skeptical as to its true motives.

None of these "changes," however, really get to the heart of the matter, to the complaints of widespread patterns of discrimination in hiring into certain departments, in promotions, in disciplinary actions, and in the area of corporate control, responsibility, and power.

So what kinds of remedies do employees really have?

Well, one option is to sue. A number of employees in the past have filed charges of discrimination against MCH. If it can be proven that MCH has denied an employee his or her rights because of racial or sexual prejudice, there's the possibility that the individual could receive back pay and/or promotions as part of a court settlement. Suits of this type involving large numbers of present, former, or potential employees (called "class action" suits) have in the past resulted in the payment of millions of dollars by companies such as the Norfolk and Western Railroad.

George Banks, president of the Norfolk Branch of the NAACP told the Guide this week that "We'd be happy to talk to anyone at MCH who feels they've been discriminated against." The NAACP maintains a list of local lawyers who are interested in civil rights cases, and some of these lawyers are already involved in preparing suits against the hospitals.

The mailing address for the Norfolk Branch is: NAACP, P.O. Box 4664, Norfolk, Va. 23523, and the phone number is 627-1096.

One government agency that takes complaints about racial and sexual discrimination is the Equal Employment Opportunities Commission. Complaints to this agency in the early 1970s resulted in an order to MCH to start an Affirmative Action program to increase the promotions of non-whites. That program, however, was largely ineffective. The EEOC is badly understaffed and back-logged with complaints, and the office also no longer accepts class action-type complaints. Complaints to this office may be sent to: EEOC, 1717 H St. N.W., Washington D.C. 20006. The phone number is (202) 653-6818.

Another government agency is the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. This is the agency that must approve federal grants and loans for hospital building programs, and, according to the Hill-Burton Act of Congress, approval for this money is supposed to be based in part on compliance with certain anti-discrimination laws. In other words, if employees can prove that MCH discriminates against non-whites and women, then the administration may have to make some big changes or face the cut-off of federal money.

Both Norfolk General and the old Leigh Memorial Hospital were investigated by HEW back in 1975 and were found to be "out of compliance" with the requirements of Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, because, among other things, the hospitals weren't recruiting enough non-white students into their nurse training programs and because there was evidence that room assignments for patients were based in part on race. However, investigators from HEW reportedly never came back to see if the administration had made any changes. A year after HEW reported its findings to the hospitals, this reporter, while working as a painter at Norfolk General, personally watched while a white patient was transferred from one room to another because she had complained that there were "too many Black people in there."

Also, while painting the student nurses dormitory, this reporter noticed a total absence of black student nurses in the area. So, as with the EEOC, there are some problems with dealing with HEW, but the laws are there on the books.

The address of the HEW office that did the 1975 investigation is: HEW, Region III, 3535 Market St., Philadelphia, PA 19101. The phone number is (215) 596-6638.

One promising development at MCH has been the efforts by employees to organize a union. An organizing drive among the registered nurses (RNs) by the Retail Clerks International Union Local 233 has resulted in enough authorization cards being signed for the union to request that a representation election be set up by the National Labor Relations Board. According to Local

233 Organizing Director Larry Tueller, that request was sent to the NLRB this past Monday, May 14.

"I see a logical chain reaction coming from this," Tueller told the Guide this week. "We've had LPNs who have been assisting the RNs and we'll be doing an organizing drive among them and the technicians. Right now, service and maintenance workers are the next group after the RNs. They're the most ready."

Besides the obvious advantages of higher wages, better benefits, job security, and a real grievance procedure, Tueller went on to discuss what a union contract could do to help employees fight against discrimination at MCH.

"We've had complaints from every department concerning discrimination in employment," he said, "the same type of complaints documented in the *Journal and Guide* articles. In our union contract, we have a clause that forbids discrimination in hiring, firing, promotions, transfers, etc., and this clause is enforced through the grievance procedure, which includes the right to appeal to binding arbitration."

"And since promotions are a major problem at MCH, we would demand that the union be told what promotions are available, who is eligible for them, and who is promoted, so we can publicize this information to all the employees. All other things being equal, the determining factor would be seniority, so if this information were publicized, each employee would be able to tell if they were being unjustly passed over for promotions. If discrimination did occur, we would be able to help the employee involved fight it through the grievance procedure and binding arbitration."

Tueller said that while the union's organizing efforts are concentrating first on the RNs, he would be very interested in talking with workers from other departments. Local 233 is located at 3620 Tidewater Drive, Norfolk, Virginia 23509. Larry Tueller's office number is 623-9444 or 245-0204.

And finally, discrimination at MCH will also be one of the topics discussed at a public meeting to be held this Sunday, May 20.

Organized by the Virginia Chapter of the Center for United Labor Action

and entitled "Discrimination, Affirmative Action, and the Weber Case," the meeting will deal with the issue of discrimination and affirmative action in employment. (See article on page 3.) This reporter, who is a member of the Center for United Labor Action, will be one of the speakers at this meeting, addressing the question of discrimination of MCH.

Court suits, HEW complaints, public meetings, union organizing drives, all of these options are good ones and are already involving growing numbers of MCH employees: men and women, black, white, and Filipino.

The problems go very deep, the corporation is controlled by some very powerful people, and the struggle will not be an easy one, but the first steps have already been taken. Using this series as a public platform to speak from, many MCH employees have chosen to speak out against injustices that have existed for years, and by doing so have given courage to their co-workers and have put the administration on the defensive. Now is the time to increase these efforts, while the momentum is growing. As

one MCH employee recently told the Guide, "Now is the time for each worker to ask himself, 'What can I do today to end discrimination at Medical Center Hospitals?'"

