

300 welfare officers back on job, but...

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The 300 striking assistant social welfare officers last night agreed to return to work tomorrow — temporarily.

And, depending on the outcome of a meeting with the Deputy Director of Social Welfare, Mr Jimmy Sweetman, and representatives of the Civil Service Branch, they may end their strike action.

This meeting will be held tomorrow morning.

A spokesman for the assistant social welfare officers, Mr Wong Wai-cheun, said they decided on this course of action following a meeting with Mr Sweetman yesterday at which he offered to begin immediate talks with them if they returned to work.

Mr Wong said they had insisted that these demands be met:

- Entry qualifications will be restricted to university graduates with social work training instead of post secondary college graduates as was proposed.

- The revised salary scale must not be in any way inferior to that of officers in similar grades in other departments.

- The department should be changed from a four-tier to a three-tier structure by abolishing the principal social welfare officer grade so that promotion can be faster.

Mr Wong said the Government had described these demands as reasonable. He said there was now some common grounds for negotiations.

However, 500 welfare assistants will continue with their strike action, which began yesterday and was planned to last two weeks.

Social welfare services were badly disrupted yesterday by the sit-in strike.

The needs of the elderly, the poor and the mentally retarded were ignored as the workers began their fight for

higher pay and improved working conditions.

Work at the department's 26 social security field units came to a virtual standstill and more than 200 mentally retarded children who turned up for classes at six rehabilitation centres found their teachers were on strike.

Hundreds of old people who turned up at the social security field units to apply for the old age allowance were told to write down their names and addresses and to return in two weeks.

The worst hit section was the social security division, which is almost entirely staffed by welfare assistants and principal welfare assistants.

And, despite earlier assurances from the department that every effort would be made to divert available manpower to handle urgent public assistance cases, no extra staff was sent to the social security field units.

As a result, the supervisors of each unit who are drawn from the social welfare officers grade were left to manage as best they could.

"They won't even answer the telephones," said one supervisor who looked round the room in disgust as her subordinates sat at their desks reading newspapers or gazing vacantly into space.

The Social Welfare Department did not issue any statement on the matter but a spokesman for the department had said earlier they were trying to maintain a dialogue with the staff.

Asked if the department had any contingency plans to deal with the situation, the spokesman said they were working on alternative arrangements to help those who urgently need public assistance.

He noted, however, that the highest priority is being given to enlisting the help of the social welfare officers to deal with any emergency situations such as fires, landslides or typhoons.

The assistant social welfare officers had declared they would help in the event of a disaster occurring.

But, the 500 welfare assistants are adamant that even after the sit-in period they will:

- Refuse to help if an emergency occurs.
- Refuse to handle applications for old age allowance.
- Refuse to carry out home visits to the old, the sick and the poor.
- Refuse to perform any clerical duties.