

Janitors in court and on streets as protests continue

By Kerry Tesoriero
and Eve Sullivan
Staff Writers

While a group of demonstrators fought charges against them in state court yesterday, another group was charged in a protest outside the Stamford train station.

The protests are in connection with the Fairfield County janitors' strike, which has been ongoing since Oct. 2.

Janitors are seeking better wages, benefits and more full-time work. Eleven janitorial contractors are negotiating with the union, Local 531 of the Service Employees International Union.

State politicians and union leaders were arrested yesterday morning after they blocked traffic outside the Stewart B. McKinney Transportation Center in support of the striking janitors.

Deputy Chief Richard Priolo said about 30 protesters blocked Station Place at 8:40 a.m., during morning rush-hour traffic.

Priolo said the protesters refused to move when asked by a police lieutenant. They were warned a second time, and all but seven left the roadway, he said.

Those seven were asked to leave again, but refused.

Police placed them under arrest.

Michael Lawlor, 43, of East Haven, Christopher Donovan, 47, of Meriden, Theresa Geratana, 51, of New Britain, and Denise Miller, 52, of Mansfield, all state representatives, were charged with obstructing free passage.

Also charged were union organizers Autumn Weintraub, 26, of Norwalk, and Jill Hurst, 41, and Baylah Tressier, 24, both of Hartford.

The arrests last month of eight demonstrators in Stamford and Greenwich in connection with the janitors' strike were groundless, attorneys for the strikers argued yesterday in state Superior Court in Stamford.

During an Oct. 24 rally outside of the UST Inc. building on West Putnam Avenue in Greenwich, the janitors and union organizers entered the vestibule of the building. They were asked to leave and did so, after demonstrating for several minutes, the janitors' attorneys said. Greenwich police arrested the group after it left, charging the protesters with breach of peace and second-degree criminal trespass.

"We wanted to get the attention of the tenants regarding the strike," organizer Valery Rey-Alzaga said. "We had tried to go into the lobby, and they told us to leave."

Rey-Alzaga said the group made some noise and left after about three minutes. The protesters drove away and were arrested six or seven blocks from the building, she said.

Three Stamford attorneys, Matthew Maddox, Lindy Urso and Wayne Keeney, are representing the arrested demonstrators pro bono in a show of

support, they said.

"The arrests were warrantless," said Maddox. "The arrests happened after the fact, based on information that did not justify anything — a stop, detainment or arrest of these individuals."

"They were exercising their constitutional right to gather and to speak, exercising their peaceful human right to seek better working conditions," Maddox said. "The problem is in this area, and I daresay particularly in Greenwich, is we have forgotten that people have

a right to a peaceful fight for a living wage, health insurance and the things that the vast majority of people in our area take for granted."

"They've been left behind in the so-called prosperity of the past eight years," Urso said. "They work for the richest building owners in the country."

Arrested were Rey-Alzaga, 28, Catherine Ginn Slack, 22, Hugo Roberto Veliz, 31, Kito Bravo Alvarez, 21, Mirti Cruz-Hernandez, 27, Miguel Guerrero, 20, Martha Matato, 48, and

Berladys Hernandez, 45.

They are free on \$250 bond each. Each pleaded not guilty yesterday in state Superior Court and asked for a jury trial.

Judge James Bingham continued their cases to Dec. 1.

The demonstration at the Stamford transportation center yesterday is the fourth act of civil disobedience related to the janitors' strike, which has resulted in arrests in recent weeks, police said.

On Tuesday afternoon, seven area religious leaders protested in the lobby of GE Capital on Sum-

mer Street and were arrested.

Later that night, 10 janitors and union leaders were arrested when they blocked traffic at the intersection of Atlantic Street and Tresser Boulevard.

Negotiations between the union and cleaning contractors broke down Monday after the contractors offered raises that were not sufficient to the union leaders. The disagreement spurred the acts of civil disobedience, according to the union.

The two sides were meeting again last night.