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## **Talks Continue For Better Security At Willie Mae Pratt**

**By Bianca Symonette**

**Days after a group of residents of the Willie Mae Pratt Centre for Girls broke out of their dorms, John Pinder, president of the Bahamas Public Services Union which represents workers employed at the center, is still attempting to negotiate with officials for better security measures.**

Employees of the center staged a protest on Monday, claiming that they fear for their safety and their lives.

Mr. Pinder said he met with officials at the Department of Social Services on Tuesday afternoon and attempted to negotiate better conditions and a number of other priority matters. He said, however, they were unable to come up with a final agreement on anything considering that the government has changed.

"We have another meeting scheduled for the next couple of weeks. We will allow the new Minister of Labor to get acquainted. But we will be discussing outstanding issues of the employees at Willie Mae Pratt Centre," Mr. Pinder said.

According to the union president, he was informed by Social Services officials that a number of upgrades were on tap for the all girls centre, however those plans will have to put on hold since there is a new minister.

"We are still not satisfied with the security at the centre because we have matrons fearing for their lives because there is no programme in place to reform the girls," said Mr. Pinder.

"They treat this experience like a home away from home when in fact they are there for reform. I think the centre needs to be somewhat like a semi-military base in order for the girls to be reformed."

The union president explained that when girls are placed in the home, due to the limited space, a 12-year-old may end up being housed with a girl charged with offenses and this creates a problem when hardened criminals are mixed with the other wards.

"This is the primary reason why the staffers want to be placed under [the Ministry of] National Security because of the stiffer disciplinary procedures because The Bahamas complies with the rights of a child law which is also stipulated in America. However that law only speaks to protection while living at home and not in a correctional facility," Mr. Pinder said.

"While we do respect the child rights law, we must also respect the working environment that these staffers have to endure and ensure that they have a healthy and safe environment."

On Monday, the staff at the Willie Mae Pratt Centre refused to work for the morning and most of the afternoon hours a day after six of seven girls freed themselves from their dormitories on Sunday. Only one managed to actually escape the compound. She was found shortly afterwards.

Pearl Gray, a shop steward at the facility, said that on several occasions the girls had physically attacked staff at the facility.

In addition to the physical abuse, she said that often staff members were verbally abused and the girls were allowed to act out their frustrations without being disciplined.

Ms. Gray also indicated that the staff is seeking risk allowance, medical insurance and additional staff and security guards at the facility.