

Lillian Roberts: A LIFE IN LABOR

By DIANE S. WILLIAMS

AFTER winning long-awaited pay increases in a new economic contract for 100,000 members, District Council 37 Executive Director Lillian Roberts announced that she will retire Dec. 31, ending on her terms a career in labor that spans six decades and culminated with five consecutive terms as the head of DC 37, which she had helped build into New York City's largest municipal labor union.

"It's been a long fight. I believe the members are in a better place now, so I am ready to come off the battlefield," Roberts said.

A union member since 1948, Roberts had humble beginnings as a Nurse's Aide caring for patients in the University of Chicago Hospital, where she

faced daily insults from arbitrary managers who changed workers' shifts with little notice as an overworked employee. When the situation became intolerable, as a shop steward Roberts stood up to management to reclaim dignity for her coworkers and herself.

"The labor movement was like religion to me," Roberts said. She preached the gospel of unionism in Chicago and alongside Victor Gotbaum, who was DC 37's executive director, she organized more than 20,000 workers at four hospitals forming five locals under the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees.

Her zeal and ability impressed Gotbaum, who brought her to New York City. Roberts was active in the bitter 28-day strike by SSEU Local 371 in 1965 that expanded collective bargaining rights for city public service workers.

Roberts led the historic "do-or-die" public hospital organizing campaign that made DC 37 the union for most New York City employees and brought 22,000 public hospital workers into Clerical-Administrative Local 1549 and Hospital Employees Local 420.

Facing threats and violence during that crucial drive, Roberts said she walked with a brick in her purse for months. She recalls that victory as one of her greatest accomplishments for city workers, along with the course she started in 1967 that helped 165 workers in the formerly dead-end Nurse's Aides title to advance to Licensed Practical Nurse and kicked off DC 37's education program, now the largest of any U.S. union.

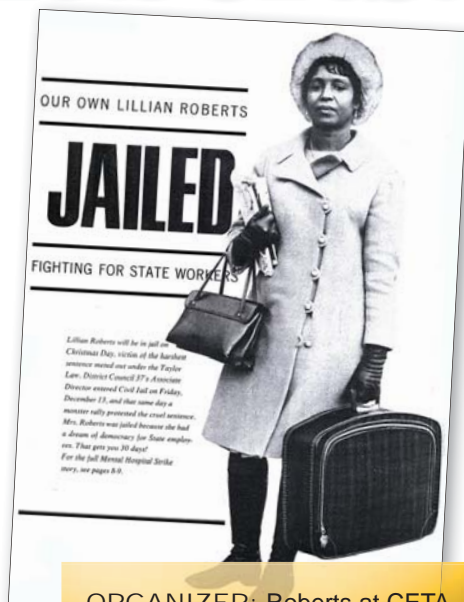
"The union gave those Aides an opportunity I never had, and they responded with not one dropout," Roberts said.

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ABOVE: Roberts and Labor Commissioner Robert Linn shake on 2014 economic agreement. RIGHT: Roberts at demonstration to save affordable housing.

Lillian Roberts: six decades o



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SHATTERING glass ceilings, she became the union's Hospitals Division director and DC 37 associate director, helping grow DC 37 to a peak membership of 125,000 in 1,000 job titles.

AFSCME sent Roberts to take on the challenge of organizing New York state mental hospital workers, but in 1968 Roberts was jailed for two weeks after she took on Gov. Nelson Rockefeller when he "shut out the union and invited an association to represent the workers without an election," she said. "We ran radio ads and campaigned at Creedmore until those state workers found a home in AFSCME."

"You can't maintain your dignity if you kowtow to injustice," said Roberts, who worked to tear down barriers for minorities and women in public service, a lifelong commitment that she advanced again this year in her final contract negotiations.

Under Gov. Hugh Carey, Roberts served as state labor commissioner from 1981 to 1987 — the first woman and African American to hold the position. Former New York City Mayor David Dinkins called her "an iron fist in a velvet glove."

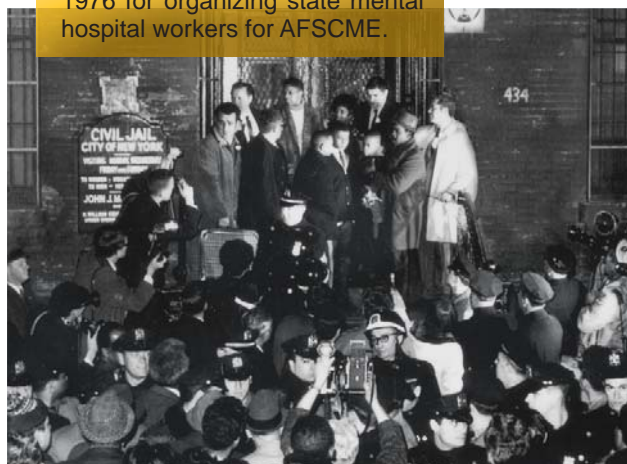
In 1998, after scandals rocked DC 37 and AFSCME placed it under administratorship, current AFSCME President Lee A. Saunders and DC 37 leaders brought back the tenacious organizer to help stabilize the union. Two years later DC 37's delegates elected her executive director and Roberts was again on the frontlines of labor's struggles at the union she helped build.

After 9/11, the world changed dramatically, and billionaire businessman Michael R. Bloomberg became mayor. Extending an olive branch, DC 37 endorsed him.

"Bloomberg was the toughest mayor I have ever faced," Roberts said. "He turned on unions and set out to destroy what we built. I was not going to let him do that, so our relationship became turbulent."

"He saw layoffs as the only solution to the city's economic problems. But you can't lay off the workers while you are giving away tax exemptions and bloated contracts to big corporations. That was not fair or just," Roberts said. The Bloomberg administration presided over "vast waste, corruption and the greatest transfer of public funds into private pockets in the history of any city," she said, "and

ORGANIZER: Roberts at CETA rally. **TOP:** Jailed for two weeks in 1976 for organizing state mental hospital workers for AFSCME.



the worst scandals on record."

The union expanded its role as fiscal watchdog as Roberts and Associate Director Henry Garrido presented a series of white papers to expose the waste in contracting out public services. "I could not stand by and let city services erode. We did our homework, found \$3 billion in savings and showed that New York City was not broke. We showed how tax dollars were being wasted."

The union's research was largely ignored by Bloomberg and mainstream media, but City Council allies, such as Bill de Blasio (now mayor), Charles Barron (now a state Assembly member), Robert Jackson, Leticia James (now Public Advocate), Melissa Mark-Viverito (now Speaker) and former City Comptroller John Liu, took up the cause.

Battling for career opportunities for members, Roberts led the fightback against contracts that replaced unionized public employees with overpaid private consultants, which, she said, "opened the door to corruption, bias and an inevitable decline in city services."

DC 37 exposed the CityTime scandal, where a payroll computerization contract ballooned from \$70 million to \$700 million. Justice and the union prevailed as private consultants had to repay \$500 million to New York City and \$40 million to the federal authorities; eight consultants were convicted



TOP: AFSCME honors Roberts at 2014 convention. **RIGHT:** Roberts and Mayor Bill d

of fraud. Roberts also shined light on the Bloomberg administration's lack of oversight regarding the use of federal funds for contracted-out services, at a 2012 hearing at union headquarters before the New York congressional delegation.

Under her watchful eye, the City Council overrode Bloomberg's veto to pass the Outsourcing Accountability Act and DC 37's research eventually forced the city to re-evaluate its spending on contracted-out projects.

"Over the last 13 years I have focused on the deficit to substantiate that our members are not the problem but the solution to many of the city's problems," Roberts said. "We do the job better and with considerable cost savings."

Under Roberts' leadership DC 37 also uncovered the city's failure to collect revenue from businesses that did not pay their fair share of taxes to this city and state.

In her career at DC 37, Roberts' spearheaded the union's fight to represent thousands of Job Training Participants, and she is responsible for creating key union services, including the Education Fund, the College of New Rochelle

f fighting for working people



LEFT: Roberts with Hillary Clinton. ABOVE: Roberts flanked by U.S. Senators Kirsten Gillibrand and Charles Schumer.



ABOVE LEFT: Roberts and DC 37 leaders at anti-Blasio announce new contract July 2, at City Hall.



campus at union headquarters, the Municipal Employees Legal Services, the Personal Services Unit and the Municipal Employees Housing Program.

To cope with the dearth of affordable housing in New York City, in 2005 the MEHP became the first union-based affordable housing initiative, and to date, 400 participants have purchased homes with no foreclosures. And through legislation, again passed over mayoral opposition, she won a relaxation of residency requirements to let municipal employees live in six surrounding counties.

“DC 37 is about lifting the lives of the members, so our services help the whole person. It’s not just wages and benefits,” said Roberts.

Roberts negotiated three wage agreements during her tenure. The new contract pays members retroactively to 2011 and saved members from paying health insurance premiums.

The new contract includes a major advance in “civil rights for civil servants,” Roberts said, establishing a joint committee that can examine the city’s use of the one-in-

three rule that “has held back too many minorities and women for too long.”

Roberts said, “politics is the lifeblood of a public service union,” and cites the major shift from the layoffs and service cuts of the last two decades of harsh Republican administrations toward the focus on a fairer distribution of resources and improving public services and schools in underserved neighborhoods under the administration of Mayor Bill de Blasio, whose candidacy the union strongly supported.

“Now we have things we have been screaming for and demonstrated about. Living wages so people can afford to live here: universal pre-K and a universal school lunch program that provides the only meals some children get,” Roberts said, “and they cannot learn if they are hungry.”

Roberts commended DC 37’s members for their commitment to duty in the city’s worst crises. “We have been tested by 9/11, blackouts, and evacuations and devastation brought on by superstorms Irene and Sandy. I’m proud to lead these workers who stand on the frontlines and run

toward danger to preserve lives and deliver vital services,” she said. “Most of our members are not in uniform, but they are dedicated — they go above and beyond for others — and they deserve recognition for it.”

Roberts led DC 37’s battles to protect members’ jobs at schools, libraries, public housing and hospitals where services were privatized under the former administration’s Road Ahead plan. DC 37 is working to have those contracts revoked.

“When the city tried to lay off over 600 School Aides, we went to Washington with help from AFSCME to ask ‘How can this happen while the school system wastes billions of dollars of federal money on contracting out?’ Those aides are on the job today.”

To combat the current right-wing attacks on unions, Roberts said, members need to be watchful, take nothing for granted, get involved in the union and vote in every election.

“We have to recognize that anti-labor forces don’t want to pay their fair share of taxes. They benefit from contracted-out public services and the lack of real accountability,” she said. “We are presenting facts and figures and naming names. We know how our tax money is being spent and wasted. We are the voice they want silenced, so they attack us.”

“DC 37 will have a very bright future,” Roberts said. In October she recommended Associate Director Henry Garrido as her successor to complete the final year of her term as executive director, a move the Executive Board approved unanimously.

“Every member is important to this great union,” Roberts said. “From Accountants to Zookeepers, we share common interests. We have differences but we have to keep supporting each other. No local can stand without the others. All are vital in DC 37, and DC 37 is the essential key to the strength of all.”

“I listened to the members, gave voice to their needs and built strength from their pain to make their lives better for them and their families and our communities,” Roberts said.

“I know I was doing God’s work, but without members’ support I could not have succeeded. Their plight made me more sensitive and more loving. They gave me reason and purpose in life,” Roberts said. “After 60 years in the labor movement, I know why I exist.”