

Battling Reagan, the union-busting president

BY JANE LaTOUR

THE COLLISION between labor and two Republican presidents who shared the philosophy that “government is the problem, not the solution,” — Ronald Reagan (1981-1988) and George H.W. Bush (1989-1993) — defined the 1980s and thrust DC 37 into the forefront of important struggles.

After the end of the costly Vietnam War, unions and progressives hoped to use the expected “peace dividend” for unmet social and urban needs, but Reagan put the funds into the military budget. The United States intervened in the civil war in El Salvador to support the military government and made a crooked deal to sell weapons to Iran to fund the right-wing Contras in Nicaragua. Reagan’s tax cuts for the rich, budget cuts and ballooning federal deficits left little for domestic programs and put the squeeze on cities.

Fight back on many fronts

In New York City, DC 37 led the fight to preserve public housing, public hospitals and public jobs. During the 1970s, the city had eliminated the School Crossing Guards, but after nine schoolchildren died on the streets, the union succeeded in bringing the Crossing Guards back. Mayor Edward Koch tried to close and privatize Sydenham, Woodhull and Metropolitan hospitals; DC 37 fought back and Woodhull and Metropolitan are still caring for patients today.

Reagan kicked off a full-fledged class war against working people in August 1981, when he fired 12,000 Air Traffic Controllers who struck for better working conditions and greater safety for air travelers and jailed the leaders of the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization. DC 37 and its parent union, the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, pressed for a united labor fightback.

On Sept. 19, Executive Director Victor Gotbaum led a huge DC 37 contingent to Washington as half a million unionists made Solidarity Day the largest labor demonstration in U.S. history. Protesters attacked Reagan’s budget cuts and anti-worker policies as they marched with the fired PATCO workers.

In 1981, Gotbaum named former SSEU Local 371 President Stanley Hill associate director to replace Lillian Roberts, who became the first African American woman to hold the post of New



Half-million unionists protest Reagan’s anti-worker policies on Solidarity Day, Sept. 19, 1981, in Washington.

York State Labor Commissioner.

Reagan’s assaults on working people escalated, but his effort to cut Social Security failed as labor mounted fierce resistance. DC 37 members marched in protest against funding the death squads in El Salvador.

Battle for safe jobs

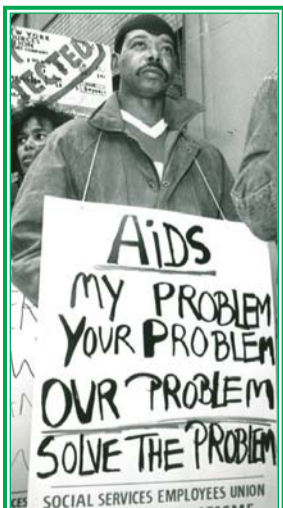
On-the-job fatalities in the 1980s underscored the urgency of the union’s fight to win safety protections for public employees, which finally succeeded with the enactment of the New York State Public Employee Safety and Health Law.

DC 37 members were also on the front lines in the fight against AIDS, the epidemic that grew silently during the 1970s. The federal government issued its first precautions for health-care workers in 1983 as union members worked to educate the public, serve the sick and fight for adequate support from city agencies.

After a career of building DC 37 to its greatest strength and leading a united municipal union movement in helping save the city from bankruptcy, Gotbaum retired in 1986. The Delegates Council elected Stanley Hill DC 37’s first African American executive director — a move of tremendous significance in a union that had seen major demographic shifts since its founding in 1944.

Hill soon led a DC 37 delegation of 2,500 to Washington, carrying banners calling for “Peace in Central America” and “Money for jobs, not for war.” In New York, he addressed a demonstration against anti-white bias in promotions at the Human Resources Administration.

In the 1989 mayoral election, DC 37 went all-out to show that Republican Rudolph Giuliani was the “point man” for bringing Reagan’s policies to New York City, and on Nov. 7, New Yorkers celebrated the victory of David Dinkins as the city’s first African American mayor.



DC37 member (l.) at 1989 rally demanding more city support in the battle against AIDS. Exec. Director Stanley Hill (r.) marches in 1983 Labor Day Parade.



Then-Associate Director Lillian Roberts speaks at 1981 rally against Reagan’s plan to cut Social Security (l.). Members march in 1988 Labor Day Parade (r.).

