

Born in struggle



City workers in DC37 marched and struck in the 1950s to advance from “collective begging” to collective bargaining.

By JANE LaTOUR

The earliest years of District Council 37 were rocky and unpromising. Private sector workers won the right to organize and bargain in 1935, but there were no provisions for public employee unions and strikes were illegal.

Founded in the Midwest in 1936, the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees had but a handful of weak, disconnected locals in New York City. AFSCME sought to unite them, first by issuing a charter that put them together into DC 37 in 1944, and then in 1947 by handing the helm to a fiery, brilliant, idealistic young socialist civil rights and labor advocate, native New Yorker Jerry Wurf.

Wurf's mission was to shed the vestiges of “collective begging,” break the municipal labor relations pattern of private political deals with City Hall, weld DC 37's locals into a powerful union and fight for real collective bargaining. He and a small band of dedicated organizers — staff and local leaders — set to work building the foundations of local unions inside every department and city hospital.

In 1952 Wurf replaced outside lawyers — who had made a racket of representing prevailing-rate employees in multiyear proceedings and claiming part of the workers' raises as their fees — with a quick, simple union-run system that brought large raises. Laborers Local 924 gained 4,000 members, mainly in the city parks, and became DC 37's battering ram in the fight for bargaining rights.

Repeated demonstrations finally convinced Mayor Robert F. Wagner Jr. to issue an executive order establishing a labor

relations code of rights for city workers on July 21, 1954. The order stopped short of calling for collective bargaining, but employees were officially entitled to join unions and agencies were directed to set up mechanisms to hear workers' grievances.

Fighting oppression on the job

City departments resisted implementing the order — led by the toughest administrator, anti-union Parks Commissioner Robert Moses. Moses ran a quasi-military operation, built a network of internal spies, forced a 72-hour workweek on employees, and threatened to fire union members.

DC 37 fought Moses, one of the most powerful individuals in the state, with a demonstration that in all but name was a one-day strike.

Over 2,000 employees began Nov. 3, 1955, by filing leave-of-absence forms

ner's executive order, and established itself as a power on the city labor scene. Later that year, DC 37 won the 40-hour week for hospital and park workers, voluntary dues checkoff began in 1957, and on March 31, 1958, Wagner agreed to collective bargaining in Executive Order 49.

In the crucible of struggle for workers' rights, DC 37 was born. The eight-hour job action and the election marked a historic turning point in municipal labor relations, not only for the Laborers but for all New York City workers and for public employees nationwide. DC 37 grew to 25,000 members by 1957 and was poised for the battle to make bargaining a reality.



Challenged by autocratic, anti-union Commissioner Robert Moses, Parks Dept. workers (above) voted 4,097 to 173 for DC 37 on Jan. 27, 1956. Left: First DC 37 Executive Director Jerry Wurf, a fiery, aggressive organizer, built the union by leading members in the struggle to win bargaining rights.