

Building a better union

By GREGORY N. HEIRES

FROM THE BEGINNING of District Council 37's history in 1944 until today, its national parent union, the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, has been a strong partner in the fight for justice for municipal workers.

When DC 37 went through its darkest days, AFSCME came to the rescue. Members were shocked in 1998 when financial improprieties and contract vote rigging by union officials came to light — and AFSCME President Gerald W. McEntee responded quickly.

He sent in a team of legal, financial and management experts headed by his top assistant, Lee Saunders, to restore the strength and reputation of DC 37—AFSCME's historic flagship—which had been a beacon of progressive unionism for decades.

"We owe AFSCME a debt of gratitude for their vital help in this time of need," said DC 37 Executive Director Lillian Roberts.

Saunders served as administrator of DC 37 for nearly four years. Working with a new Executive Board, he relit DC 37's aggressive spark and replaced a culture of corruption with one of change, hope and vitality. Greater membership involvement enlivened the contract negotiations process, and hundreds of shop stewards and political activists mobilized grassroots support for a massive multi-union demonstration in May 1999 that paved the way for improved health benefits and raises that totaled 9 percent in the 27-month 2001–2002 contract.

Historic pension gains

A new team restored the union's political clout, strengthening DC 37's role in elections and lobbying efforts and winning historic pension improvements in Albany.

Driven out of its 125 Barclay St. headquarters for six months by the devastation of the 9/11 terrorist attacks one block to the south, the union dispersed its operations to sites around the city. But DC 37 still maintained the strength to stop Mayor Rudolph Giuliani from contracting out work such as running the massive cleanup at Ground Zero, which was done



AFSCME President Gerald W. McEntee, right, decided to put District Council 37 under trusteeship after reports of theft and a fraudulent contract vote surfaced. He appointed his top assistant, Lee Saunders, left, as administrator.

by a team of Local 375 members.

Members and leaders debated whether to change the voting structure of the union and stuck with the current delegate-based system for electing top leaders rather than the one-member-one-vote method. A self-described reform group, the DC 37 Committee for Real Change, became a player at the union for a time.

Committed to greater transparency, Saunders encouraged the PEP to report on Manhattan District Attorney Robert Morgenthau's prosecutions of 38 former officials as well as AFSCME's own forensic and financial investigations. PEP's change to full-color printing, a new website and a new communications director improved the union's outreach to members and the public, which came to know DC 37 workers as "Everyday Heroes."

Safeguards

Significantly, Saunders worked with the leadership to institute important safeguards to protect members' dues and to prevent widespread improprieties from occurring again. These included:

- independent, third-party oversight of contract votes,
- an Ethical Practices Code and an independent Ethical Practices Officer,
- a constitutional amendment guaranteeing members' right to review union financial records,
- strict accounting procedures requiring independent, outside audits of locals,
- competitive bidding on union purchases of goods and services, and
- distribution of DC 37 budgets and audits to all local union presidents.

Roberts, who led key organizing drives in the 1960s and '70s that put DC 37 on the path toward growing from 30,000 members to 120,000, became part of the team that assisted Saunders in the rebuilding process.

Seeing the corruption at the union she had worked so hard to build "broke my heart," said Roberts, who accepted Saunders' invitation to return to DC 37 to help restore members' confidence.

Known for her tenacity and special rapport with rank-and-file members, Roberts emerged as the consensus candidate of the union's elected leaders to head DC 37. Immediately after she was sworn in as District Council 37 executive director on Feb. 26, 2002, Saunders announced that the trusteeship was over to the applause of more than 300 union delegates. "You have your union back," he said.



"My life has come a full circle," said Roberts, after she took the oath of office. Roberts said she looked forward to restoring the tremendous faith members had in the union during its heyday in the 1960s and 1970s.

"I will never let you down," Roberts told the delegates.

"We all want to make sure that the members of this union get the respect and services they deserve. And we are working closely with AFSCME, which is prepared to take an active role at any time if we need their help."