

# Fighting for equality

By JANE LaTOUR

**A** STRONG COMMITMENT to human rights runs like a current through the history of District Council 37. No matter how tough the battle for bread and butter, this union always championed the struggle for civil rights and economic justice for all.

In 1963, when Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was jailed in Birmingham, Ala., activists hit the streets with picket signs demanding his release. Busloads of members joined the mighty March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, where King gave his famous “I Have a Dream” speech.

Georgia Congressman John Lewis, who spoke at the march as head of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, told PEP that, “From the early days of the movement and through the years, the struggle for equality and justice for all Americans relied on AFSCME and DC 37 more than any other union. You were not just supporters, you were part of the civil rights movement.”

## Boycotting injustice

The union carried its commitment to equality into the international struggle against the apartheid segregation system in South Africa. The campaign to make the city stop buying products from the apartheid regime began in the kitchen of a homeless shelter, where SSEU Local 371 members refused to serve up South African canned pineapple, and culminated in victory as the City Council passed DC 37-backed boycott legislation.

DC 37 Executive Director Victor Gotbaum led the successful campaign for the city pension funds to divest themselves of the stocks of companies doing business there.

In 1984 and 1985, Gotbaum and then-Associate Director Stanley Hill were arrested with dozens of members and staff in demonstrations at the South African embassy in Washington and a site in New York City.

The union’s drive for equal rights for all led to strong support for the women’s movement and battles to close pay and pension gaps between male and female city workers. In 1980, then-Associate Director Lillian Roberts addressed a Local 1930 reception that kicked off a rally for the Equal Rights Amendment, and DC 37 prepared pro-ERA fliers for the statewide campaign.

The union joined a lawsuit charging that Police Dept. 911 operators, mainly minority women, got far



Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York University

A protest in Feb. 1985 outside the South African embassy in Washington D.C., led to the arrest of 78 members of DC 37, one of numerous actions by union members to oppose the system of apartheid.

less pay than their mainly white male counterparts in the Fire Dept. In the 1991 settlement of one of the nation’s largest pay discrimination cases, the Local 1549 members won big financial gains, including pay parity with the Fire Dept. operators. Lawsuits decided by the U.S. Supreme Court in the late 1980s ended inequities in women’s pension contributions and retirement checks.

## Equal rights for all is a union issue

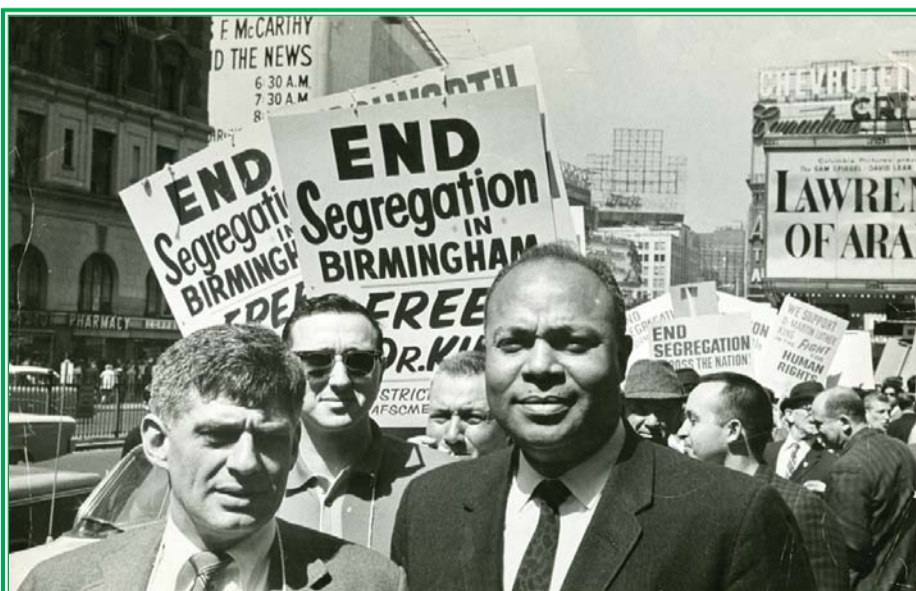
Broadening its battles for equality, DC 37 became one of the first unions in New York City to back equal rights for people with differing sexual orientations. Gotbaum testified in 1986 for a gay rights bill in the City Council, and members formed the union’s Lesbian and Gay Issues Committee in 1988 and pursued the organizing efforts that led to the AFL-CIO’s Pride at Work group. In its continuing drive to create a level playing field for all, the union started its Disability Advisory Committee in 1982.

Through DC 37’s history, the richness of its membership has led to a series of key firsts in leadership positions. Stanley Hill took office in 1987 as the first African American executive director, Local 1113 President Victor Guadalupe became the union’s first Latino officer when he was elected DC 37 president in 1994, and Lillian Roberts became the first woman and the first African American woman executive director in 2002.

## Unite and fight

DC 37’s calendar is punctuated by celebrations of members’ African American, Latino, Caribbean, Irish, Italian, Jewish and Asian heritages, honoring the observation that the union gains strength from its diversity.

This diverse membership has been at the center of the nation’s struggles for equal rights since DC 37 was founded in 1944 — volunteering, marching, boycotting and even going to jail for justice.



DC 37 Exec. Dir. Jerry Wurf, Local 924 Laborer Len Seelig and staffer James Farmer rallied when Martin Luther King Jr. was jailed in Birmingham in 1963.



DC 37 Exec. Dir. Victor Gotbaum testifies at a 1986 hearing at City Hall for a bill to protect gay rights. The union was in the forefront of this struggle.