

Lillian Roberts takes the helm

By DIANE S. WILLIAMS

AFTER ITS POWERFUL PARENT, AFSCME, helped District Council 37 erase the scourge of corruption and restore its reputation for integrity, members wanted new leadership for the new millennium. A broad consensus built around the beloved former Associate Director Lillian Roberts, who started her union activism in Chicago as a Nurse's Aide, led DC 37's key organizing drives in the 1960s and participated in the cleanup.

Roberts was well known to DC 37 members for her aggressive leadership, her insistence that management treat all city workers with respect and her consistent focus on providing the best services and benefits for members. On Feb. 26, 2002, she was unanimously elected executive director.

Roberts took office facing the toughest political climate to confront any DC 37 leader in history. A right-wing Republican took over the White House, a conservative was governor and a billionaire businessman occupied City Hall. Massive budget cuts threatened public services and members' jobs.

"The policies many Republicans had adopted attacked the safety net of vital social services our members provide," said Roberts. President George W. Bush's war in Iraq decimated federal funds and the state slashed aid for health care and education, welfare and more.

Fighting contracting out

"The city started contracting out more," Roberts explained, "handing taxpayers' dollars to private businesses and all but abandoning public services." Fighting back, Roberts issued white papers that documented the city's vast contracting waste and its shadow government of private consultants who did the same work as municipal workers, but were paid much more. The 2009 white paper exposed the \$9 billion the city is spending on contracts as it lays off public employees.

In almost eight years as executive director, Roberts and DC 37 have led grassroots coalitions in battles to save public hospitals, win federal funds for public housing and improve the Workers' Compensation

program. When job cuts took place, the union pressed agencies to re-deploy laid-off members to other city work, and the DC 37 Health and Security Fund extended benefits to unemployed members.

Under her leadership, DC 37 negotiated two economic agreements that gave members raises totaling 9.42 percent and 8.18 percent, setting the pattern for other civilian unions. The union also won the right to represent 2,600 Job Training Participants; DC 37 constantly pushes the city to hire them after they complete their training.

With members facing a shortage of affordable housing in one of the nation's most expensive cities, Roberts established a new benefit. The Municipal Employees Housing Program has already helped hundreds of city workers buy homes by providing ownership and budgeting classes as well as grants and low-interest mortgage loans. MEHP, the most extensive housing program provided by any union, also helps union members find rental apartments and avoid foreclosure.

The housing crunch also sparked the drive Roberts led to change the residency rule to give members the right for the first time in 25 years to live outside the five boroughs. This struggle for parity with unionized employees ended



PEP photos by Clarence Elie-Rivera

LEADING THE FIGHT FOR AFFORDABLE HOUSING: DC 37's Lillian Roberts with former CLC Director Ed Ott and City Council members Charles Barron and Vincent Gentile at a 2007 rally to stop the sale of Stuyvesant Town.



MEMBERS FIRST: Lillian Roberts, officers and executive board members being sworn into office after union delegates voted in February 2007.

in a tremendous victory Feb. 11 when the City Council voted 50-1 to override Mayor Bloomberg's veto and lift the residency restriction.

After years of Off-Track Betting Corp. losses under an unfair distribution formula, the mayor threatened to close the New York City parlors and fire 1,500 Local 2021 members, who he called "bookies." With the leadership of Local 2021, Roberts lobbied lawmakers and Gov. David Paterson, who put OTB under state jurisdiction. The union saved the jobs and continues to fight to

protect members as OTB restructures.

DC 37 is currently pressing to keep the Dept. of Citywide Administrative Services from undermining the civil service system, "because our members deserve real opportunities for fair employment and advancement," Roberts said.

She also guided the union's recent implementation of a contractual panel to review ways to bring work in-house.

Our votes count

With the election of Lillian Roberts in 2002, District Council 37 entered a new period of progress as its bargaining strength, political clout and benefits expanded apace. Members' faith in the union reached a high point this year as 1,500 joined DC 37's Green Machine of political action volunteers on Nov. 3.

"The city is very fortunate to have a loyal workforce who know their jobs and do them well," Roberts said. "We are the first responders on the front lines who handle terrorist attacks, anthrax, blackouts, the H1N1 pandemic and more. We are constantly tested and we have never failed New York City."

"Mayors come and mayors go, but our members provide stability and continuity of services," Roberts said. "Politics plays a significant role in our lives. If taxes are raised or services are cut, that affects our jobs and our wages, our families and communities, so we are constantly involved in the struggle for economic and social justice. I will never let our votes and our voice be ignored."