

Strike wave, dramatic



In 1967, 25,000 workers protested anti-strike Taylor Law at Madison Square Garden, and (right) Mayor Lindsay signed Office of Collective Bargaining bill with Jerry Wurf (4th from l.) and Vic Gotbaum (r.).

“It was cold beyond belief, but it was an honor to be on those picket lines and even in jail, because we were fighting not only for ourselves but for the powerless people we served.”

—Ishmael Lahab, SSEU Vice President during 1965 Welfare Strike



By ALFREDO ALVARADO

DC 37 LAUNCHED its greatest organizing drives and won huge advances for municipal workers amid the social progress and tragedies of the turbulent 1960s.

The sit-ins and Freedom Rides, the March on Washington, the Civil Rights and Voting Rights acts of 1964 and 1965 showed that sometimes making gains required defying bad laws and sparked hope among minorities and working people that was not quenched by the heartbreaking assassinations of President John F. Kennedy, his brother Robert, and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

In New York City, poorly paid municipal employees — like the striking AFSCME sanitation workers King was supporting when he was killed — wrote a new chapter in American labor history as they struck repeatedly and won unprecedented collective bargaining victories.

Their struggles and achievements reverberated nationwide, inspiring public employees around the country to organize and fight for rights, pay and benefits to match private-sector labor.

Momentum builds

District Council 37 built momentum and began developing into a labor powerhouse in the late 1950s, winning strikes for recognition and pay increases in cultural institutions and negotiating the 40-hour week for hospital and park workers.

Transit Authority clericals in Local 1655 kicked off the 1960s by becoming the first to win a written agreement. When Local 983’s negotiations broke off in 1962, 2,000 Motor Vehicle Operators defied the anti-strike Condon-Wadlin Law. Their two-week strike achieved a major breakthrough — the first welfare fund for non-uniformed city employees

— as well as a wage and benefit increase that doubled the city’s last offer before the walkout.

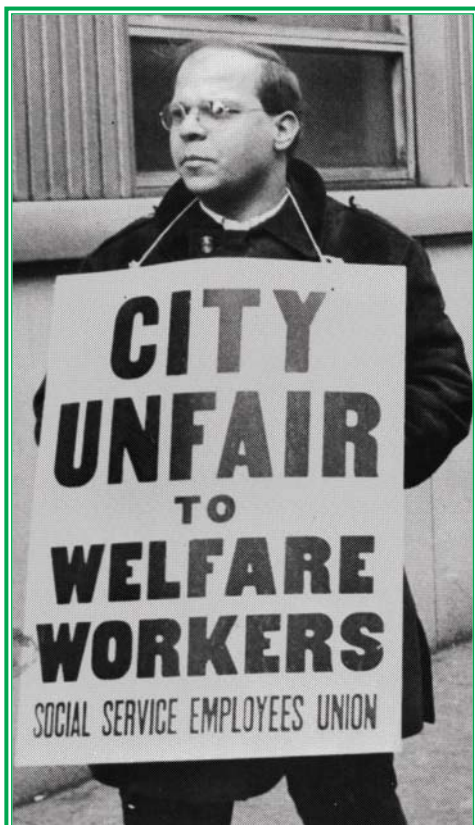
Strike victories led to organizing gains and city workers joined DC 37 in droves. In 1963 alone, Local 372 won bargaining rights for 6,200 school lunch employees and a majority of the city’s 5,000 engineers and architects joined Local 375 and won a written memorandum of agreement.

Tough, fiery DC 37 Executive Director Jerry Wurf led these struggles. In 1964 he took the helm of DC 37’s national union, the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, and built it into one of the most powerful unions in the United States.

After eight years of organizing for AFSCME in Chicago, Brooklyn native Victor Gotbaum — who led DC 37 to some of its greatest victories and built it into the largest union of municipal workers in any city in the country — became executive director in 1965.

He was immediately thrown into action as 8,000 members in the Welfare Dept. (now the Human Resources Administration) walked out on the first workday of a frigid January 1965.

Fed up with oversized caseloads and low pay, the work-



Overwork and city’s intransigence sparked 28-day strike in January 1965.



The 1965 strike by 8,000 welfare workers in Social Service Employees Union and Local 371 was the longest in city history.



Union solidarity peaked as welfare workers braved frigid weather to win big gains in 1965.

growth, huge gains



ers hit the bricks when the city refused to negotiate on workload and other key issues. Two locals led the strike, the militant, independent Social Services Employees Union, which had just won bargaining rights for 6,000 Caseworkers, and DC 37's Local 371, which represented Supervisors — as well as clericals, who showed magnificent solidarity by striking even though they could not gain directly.

Mayor Robert Wagner fired all the strikers and threw 19 leaders in jail for two weeks.

Historic gains

“It was a very exciting time, because I had never been involved with something like that,” recalled jailed Local 371 clerical leader Patricia Caldwell. “We were successful because the union offered members a better life.” The locals won the 28-day strike — the longest by public employees in the history of New York City — with picket line solidarity and support from organized labor and the civil rights movement.

The strikers won a comprehensive written contract with 9 percent raises, impartial arbitration, the first 100 percent city-paid health insurance for civilian employees, the first union education fund for city workers, and the right to bargain on a wide range of issues.

The historic strike produced a revolution in collective bargaining as the city centralized its dealings with unions by starting the Office of Labor Relations in 1966 and worked with the unions to form the impartial Office of Collective Bargaining in 1967. In 1969, SSEU and Local 371 united to form one of the largest locals in DC 37.

The most important collective bargaining election in DC 37's history came on Dec. 3, 1965, in an organizing drive led by Executive Director Lillian Roberts, a former Chicago Nurse's Aide who was then director of the Hospital Division.

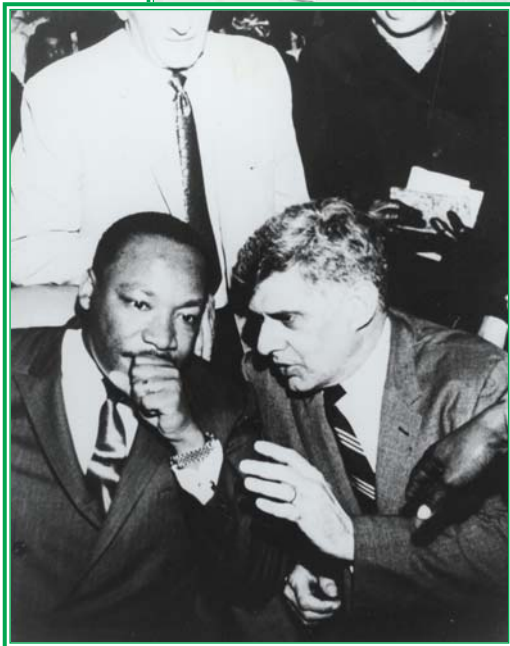
“That election was a major turning point, because back then we were considered more of an association than a union,” said Roberts. “We were talking about 22,000 members and if we were going to be taken seriously and considered major players in New York City we had to win that election.” The Teamsters were fighting to represent the same workers. “Things got very nasty,” she recalled.

Roberts won the election for DC 37 by offering the workers a dream beyond better pay and working conditions — dignity on the job through a strong union and hope for a better future through union training and upgrading programs.

The election victory in the Hospital Dept., then the city's largest, gave DC 37 bargaining rights for all hospital aides and a citywide majority among clerical workers. These gains produced a DC 37 majority among non-uniformed city



DC 37 members joined huge demonstration in Memphis, Tenn., after Dr. King was assassinated while supporting striking AFSCME sanitation workers.



Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and AFSCME chief Jerry Wurf talk strategy during 1968 Memphis sanitation workers strike.

employees that allowed the union to negotiate pensions and other non-pay issues for 100,000 city workers.

The next year, the clerical-administrative employees, who united in the new Local 1549, and hospital aides won their first contracts, and in 1967 bargaining began for a citywide non-wage agreement. Settled in 1968 through mediation by the Office of

Collective Bargaining, the pact made giant strides for city workers — the Tier 1 pension plan, with a 40 percent increase in retirement checks, higher meal and mileage payments, and the first cash overtime pay, shift differentials, and days off for Saturday holidays.

The union's growing power did not go unnoticed by Gov. Nelson Rockefeller. The successful 1965 strike had proved

the Condon-Wadlin Law unenforceable, and the governor pushed the new anti-labor Taylor Law, with harsh penalties on striking unions and workers, through the Legislature.

In protest, DC 37 and other unions filled Madison Square Garden with 25,000 members on May 23, 1967, but Rockefeller's attacks on public employees — including jailing Lillian Roberts — intensified in the following years (see next PEP). The dramatic gains of the 1960s resulted from “sacrifice and struggle,” said Caldwell. “We have to keep fighting today to protect these victories.”



It took strikes in the 1950's and '60's to win union recognition at many cultural institutions.



Welfare strike leaders leave men's civil jail on Feb. 1, 1965. Women leaders were also jailed.



Local 983 struck for two weeks in 1962 and won the first welfare fund for non-uniformed workers.