

Defiance: The 1965 welfare strike



By MIKE LEE

FIFTY YEARS ago last month, thousands of militant workers at the New York City Welfare Dept. — Social Workers, Clericals, Supervisors and other staffers — defied City Hall and went on strike for better pay and working conditions. By doing so, they risked their jobs and having their leaders thrown in jail.

This bold strike galvanized New York City's labor unions — and unions around the country.

The city's public employees carried out numerous job actions in the past. But none had as great an impact on the city's labor movement as the 1965 strike.

Its success empowered District Council 37 and helped make it one of the most powerful players in the city's labor movement for the remainder of the decade and beyond.

The month-long strike had its genesis during the tough years before DC 37 was founded. Beginning in the 1930s, social workers began to organize. Under the early organization Association of Workers in Public Relief Agencies, they won their first collective bargaining agreement by the end of the decade.

Because of intense anti-trade union policies, activism diminished during the 1950s. Nevertheless, many progressives found a safe haven in DC 37's Local 371.

By the 1960s, inspired and radicalized by the civil rights movement, a fresh group of socially conscious and dedicated college educated youth joined the city's welfare agency.

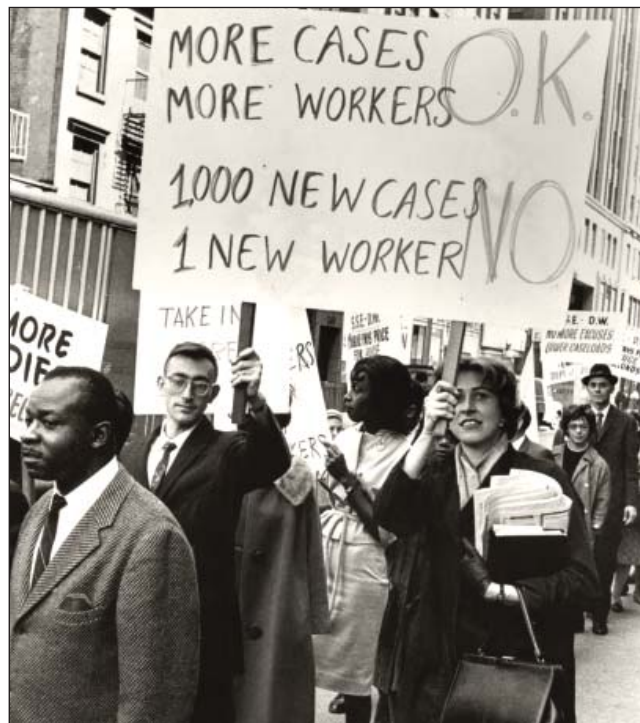
Some of these young workers had been involved in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and Congress of Racial Equality in the segregated South. That experience galvanized them to collaborate with welfare rights advocates while energetically building an organized labor presence within the city Welfare Dept.

Workers prepare for a militant fightback

At the end of 1964, the department was represented by DC 37's Local 371, and also by the insurgent independent union, the Social Service Employees Union.

In the two years leading up to the January 1965 strike, DC 37 engaged in various job actions, including a pivotal

The strike that transformed



12-day strike in 1962 by Local 983 that resulted in substantial raises and a welfare fund for the drivers, the first of its kind for non-uniformed civil servants in New York City.

This victory helped set the stage for a new wave of organizing that led to confrontations with the administration of Mayor Robert Wagner. Meanwhile, the city began negotiations with the recently recognized SSEU in late 1964, while fresh progressive leadership emerged in Local 371 with the elections of President Alan Viani and Vice President Pat Caldwell.

However, for the hardworking Case Workers in the Welfare



In 28 days, the welfare workers strike united community welfare clients, activists, civil rights leaders, trade union leaders in a growing coalition that forced the

Dept., conditions remained dire. Overburdened Case Workers were dramatically underpaid. Caseloads were as much as 50 percent beyond the federal guidelines, thus diminishing client services and undermining vital assistance for the half million residents utilizing Welfare Dept. services.

“How about 126 cases at once,” remembered former DC 37 Executive Director Stanley Hill, describing his workload in the years before the 1965 strike when he was a Case Supervisor in the Welfare Dept.

When negotiations between the city and the unions began

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The total commitment shown by strikers and supporters during the longest strike in city history ended in victory, including freeing the jailed 19 leaders of Local 371 and SSEU on Feb. 3, 1965 (center). Leading the celebration, at front, are Local 371 President Alan Viani, SSEU President Joe Tepedino and SSEU 1st Vice President Ishmael Lahab.

ed public sector unionism



Community groups, unionists and n... to the table.



in the late fall of 1964, the Wagner administration dismissed many of the initial proposals and refused to negotiate working conditions, in particular the demand for smaller individual caseloads.

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fact-finding panel, both unions voted to strike. Picketing began Jan. 4, 1965.

The stakes were high for DC 37 and SSEU, and for the 8,000 striking workers. By walking out, they defied the

After the leadership and rank-and-file of Local 371 and SSEU roundly rejected the recommendations of a city-rigged

Condon-Wadlin Act, passed by the New York legislature in 1947 at the height of anti-labor hysteria. The act banned strikes by public employees, and it imposed draconian penalties on violators, including termination of employment and extended pay freezes for reinstated employees.

In defiance, the workers stood strong. They shut down 10 of the city's 25 welfare offices and reduced the remaining fifteen to doing little more than issuing checks. Nearly 90 percent of the Case Workers stood their ground.

Union demands were radical and far-reaching, going beyond basic collective bargaining rights. The strikers made indirect demands on behalf of their clients by calling for better offices, and the hiring of more Case Workers to improve service. They also demanded reforms in providing for basic needs — including a direct clothing grant for welfare clients.

“Rehabilitation, Not Humiliation” became a slogan as strikers were joined on the picket lines by their clients, welfare rights groups and civil rights organizations.

Members from other unions, especially from the Seafarers International Union, joined and helped hold the line as the winter strike continued through the month.

The unions encouraged welfare clients to flood the offices and support the strikers' struggle against the city. As SSEU President Joseph Tepedino told the New York Post at the time, “Most of the clients have been staying away thinking that staying away would help us. But we are asking that they return to their welfare centers and demand their normal services. If the city cannot deal with them, maybe it will deal with us.”

The city's response was immediate. The Wagner administration sought and received an injunction.

The judge hearing the case, State Supreme Court Justice Irving Saypol, was as brutally unsympathetic to the strikers as he was a decade before as the chief prosecutor in the Rosenberg espionage case. He issued a no-strike order, and several days later held the strikers and their leaders

“presumptively guilty,” threatening the leaders with jail and civil fines. Under Condon-Wadlin, thousands walking on the picket lines were fired. This was only the second time the law was used in this draconian manner.

Still, the strike progressed even as Judge Saypol continued to issue his threats. Finally, on Jan. 20, Saypol hauled into court the Local 371 and SSEU leadership, jailing three of them for 30 days for contempt. On Jan. 25, 16 more were imprisoned.

Despite these legal actions, it became apparent the pressure was actually building on Mayor Wagner to settle the strike.

Labor leaders Jerry Wurf, the newly elected president of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, DC 37's parent union, and the newly appointed executive director of DC 37, Victor Gotbaum, pressed Wagner to negotiate fairly. They fought on with major help from the AFL-CIO leadership and civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr.

Within days after the sentencing, Wagner agreed to an impartial commission, which issued recommendations for a negotiated agreement. On Jan. 31, the strike leaders were released. After this difficult 28-day strike, the union scored a major victory.

A dramatic victory for public sector unions

The agreement was remarkable. The welfare workers received paid health insurance, a 9 percent salary increase, and a caseload cap of 60 for Social Workers. The groundbreaking agreement also included improved vacation time, sick leave and reduced work hours.

The agreement also addressed client needs, including an automatic clothing grant, which did not require a Case Workers' signature.

As then-SSEU President Judy Mage explained in an article in *The New York Times Magazine* in 1967, “It is unusual for a union, I suppose, to ask for money for the clients. But what affects the client, affects our jobs.”

Most importantly, the agreement created a panel of city, labor and ordinary New Yorkers to develop legislation for a collective bargaining framework. This led to the creation of the Office of Collective Bargaining, which impartially settles labor-management issues.

Although the picket lines came down, this struggle continued well into the summer until a contract agreement was reached.

By establishing fair and permanent standards for collective bargaining and labor disputes, the victory of the welfare workers shaped future negotiations in the city and helped improve the rights of public employees nationwide.

The inspiring solidarity of those strikers during that cold January set a spark that eventually led to a merger in 1969 of Local 371 and SSEU, creating the “mighty, mighty union” of SSEU Local 371.

A half-century later, the legacy of those thousands of striking workers inspires us with their militant adherence to their ideals, opening the way forward as we continue our fight in the difficult struggles ahead.

Efforts are underway nationwide to deny collective bargaining rights to public workers. *Friedrichs v. California Teachers Association*, a case before the U.S. Supreme Court, could cripple unions financially. A negative ruling in *Fredrichs* would have a catastrophic impact on public sector unions like DC 37 in their ability to collect dues and retain members.

Like the welfare workers, once again labor must be vigilant and strong in holding the line by protecting members and defending hard-fought gains. There is no choice — we must stand and fight.