



**Lillian Roberts at the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, AFL-CIO, bi-annual convention in Chicago, August 2006.**

CLARENCE ELIE-RIVERA



At age 79, Lillian Roberts is the heavyweight champion of labor organizers

By Audrey Edwards

# Back - in the Ring

**I**t has been a comeback to rival Rocky Balboa's. Twenty-one years after leaving the union she helped build, labor organizer Lillian Roberts is back in the ring, going a few more rounds in the vast, tough arena that makes up New York City's District Council 37 (DC 37), the sprawling local union affiliate of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME). When Roberts came out of retirement in 2002 to run DC 37, the union was reeling from scandal. With more than 20 of its officials having been convicted of crimes ranging from election fraud to embezzlement, AFSCME placed the unit in trusteeship in 1999.

"My God, we'd come so far, and stood to lose all the gains we'd made," says Roberts, explaining why she gave in to the pleas of union workers to come back, at age 74, and take charge as DC 37's executive director. Now 79, Roberts is proving to be a fighter — still fit and still standing — at the top of her game.

"I never really left," Roberts says of her return as the union's leader. "The union was always a part of my soul."

With its 121,000 members, 50,000 retirees, annual operating budget of \$37 million and colossal \$50-billion pension fund, DC 37 is the nation's largest labor organization representing city employees. Its size and wealth leave it ripe for the kind of corruption that has



been known to rock unions since the days of Jimmy Hoffa. It would take a feisty lady in her seventies with a reputation for integrity and honesty to reassure AFSCME that DC 37 could be put back in the hands of the New York local.

Warriors like Roberts never retreat or even really retire. As long as there are people without power to be spoken for or a social wrong to be righted, they are down for the struggle — at any age.

Because she is Black and female, and shrewdly exhibits a low-key style in labor's rough-riding, male-dominated bastion, Roberts has never become as well-known as labor giants such as A. Philip Randolph or even her former DC 37 boss, the legendary Victor Gotbaum. But don't let her youthful good looks, great figure, stylish St. John suits or soft-spoken voice fool you. "Miss Lillian" can go toe-to-toe with the best of them. No one is better or tougher at the bargaining table.

"Well-behaved women seldom make history," says New York City Councilmember Letitia James, who has seen Roberts in action. "At some meetings Lillian has gotten downright strident, and the usual protocols went out the window because she drew a line in the sand on behalf of her union members. But women like me hold her up as a model for what strong leadership should be, particularly for women in the labor movement."

Roberts easily won a third, three-year term to lead DC 37 in January when she trounced her male opponent by a ratio of nearly 3-to-1. The election gave her full control of a contentious board that cut her salary after her first election, thinking she wouldn't be around for long. Not only did she prove them wrong, she sued for race, sex and age discrimination to get her salary back. But before the lawsuit could go to court, the makeup of DC 37's board changed and the new members voted to restore Roberts's pay and make it retroactive. In addition, the trusteeship was lifted when Roberts took over.

That's why Roberts was recently named one of the 30 most influential Black people in New York City by the *New York Post*.

"Lillian Roberts is one of the most exciting leaders I've known," says Rep. Charles Rangel (D-N.Y.), chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee. "She never stops. She has total energy. She's a tough negotiator, but a tender lady and a wonderful person."

Roberts cut her teeth in the labor movement more than 50 years ago back in her native Chicago. She was the first Black person hired as a nurse's aide at the University of Chicago's Lying-In Hospital in 1946. Roberts organized nurses and soon moved up to become shop steward. When Gotbaum, then a special representative from DC 37, was in Chicago in the late 1950s to organize Chicago's city workers, he met Roberts. He was impressed with her skills in handling grievances and recruited Roberts to assist him.

When Gotbaum became executive director of DC 37 in 1964, he asked Roberts to come to New York to help organize hospital workers. She took a leave of absence from her job in Chicago to go to New York. Within a year she relocated to the city, bringing

her husband, her mother and her sister's three children, whom she supported after her sister was killed by her husband. Roberts's husband never wanted her involved with the unions. He left after a year in New York.

"He had this terrible concept of what unions were all about," she recalls. "But the union was paying me three times what I



**On Election Day, Nov. 7, 2006, union organizer Lillian Roberts works the polls. She thanks the young people in line for participating in the political process.**

could have made anywhere else, and I had these children and a mother to take care of. I told him, "Look, I have to stay with this job." Plus," she adds, "I really loved it."

By the time Roberts left DC 37 in 1981 to accept an appointment as New York State labor commissioner, she had risen to become associate executive director and had helped forge a massive union of city employees encompassing nearly 60 affiliated locals covering every job from secretary to zookeeper. More impressive than the scope of the membership, however, is the breadth of the benefits this lumpen proletariat has been able to extract from a city dominated by money and privilege.

"You won't find another city union in the United States with the benefits we have," Roberts boasts.

And that's no exaggeration. Last fall, Roberts negotiated the best wage contract DC 37 has had in 20 years — the average starting annual pay for city workers is now \$30,000, close to the starting pay for New York City police officers. In addition, DC 37 members have a comprehensive health and welfare benefits plan that includes drug prescription services, access to free legal services and a program that offers assistance with personal problems. In perhaps the most progressive partnership between labor and education, the union also has a campus near its lower Manhattan headquarters that is affiliated with the College of New Rochelle. The campus was the first in the country set up solely for union members. DC 37 reimburses its members 80 percent of the costs for classes they attend at the college.

"It's always challenging getting money to fund these ser-



vices," says Rosa Esperon, administrator for DC 37's Health and Welfare Benefits Plan, "but Ms. Roberts knows there is more than one way to skin a cat. You can do more with collective bargaining, but it's not the only way. She is very perceptive and can see through to all sides of an issue."

Roberts is particularly pleased with the inroads she has made in making housing in pricey New York City affordable and accessible for her union members.

"The cost of living is so high here," she says. "We have 200 members ready to buy a home right now, but the question is where? They'll get fired if they live outside the city. We've had this geographical restriction on the bargaining table for over 20 years and haven't been able to get it lifted."

Under the DC 37's housing program, 5 percent of any new housing being built in the city will be offered at below-market cost to qualified DC 37 home buyers. Roberts has also enlisted 12 banks to contribute \$1 for every \$2 union members save toward the purchase of a home. Moreover, members can get up to \$20,000 in federal grants for either the down payment or closing costs on the purchase of a home.

One of her biggest allies in this initiative has been the billionaire mayor who runs the city. "I can work with [Michael] Bloomberg," Roberts says. "He doesn't owe anybody and will listen. He got the city housing commissioner to sit with me, and we came up with the same 5 percent set-aside program in housing for our members that the police, firefighter and teacher unions negotiated for their members."

Next on Roberts's list is securing 24-hour, on-site day care services for union members.

"I've never thought a union should just be about wages, hours and working conditions," she says. "We have to take into account the needs of the whole working person, and become a community organization to make sure we're players in whatever is developing in the city. We have to be on top of making sure there is a change in the distribution of resources."

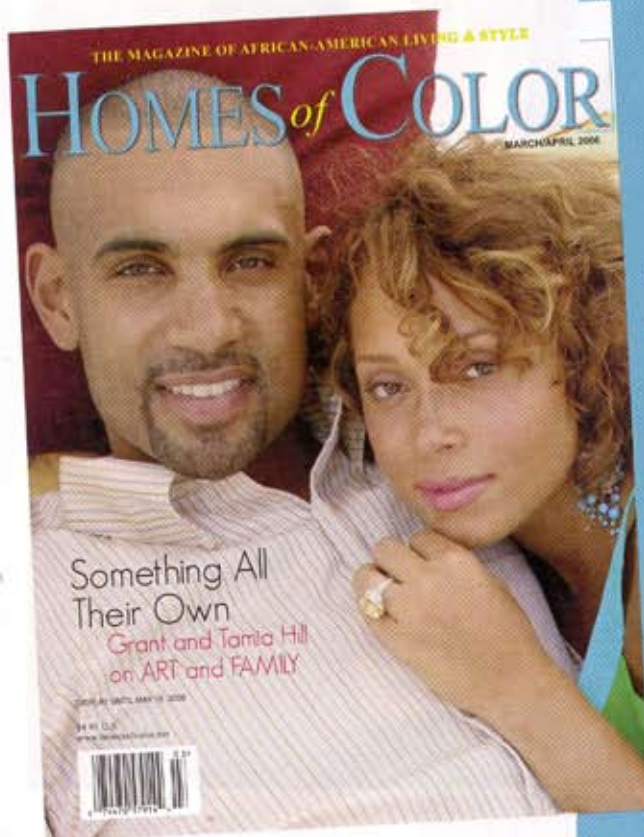
To that end, Roberts is a watchdog as well as a union leader. During her five years in office, the union issued a series of white papers investigating city mismanagement, exposing, among other things, the billions of dollars the city was spending giving out contracts to private companies for work that should have been done by unionized city employees. This "shadow government" had spent about \$8 billion when Roberts returned to run DC 37, she says.

"The city was laying off workers, saying it didn't have money, when there was all this mismanagement and spending of money in other areas. We raised hell and finally held a demonstration, putting 30,000 people in the street, to say we weren't going for it. Things started to change," she says.

Roberts has always believed in the rights of rank-and-file city workers to have dignity, a livable wage and bargaining power. After all these years, it is that quality that makes her a fighter who is still winning.

"If you believe in something, but don't fight to protect it, then you might as well not believe," she says.

**Audrey Edwards**, former executive editor of *Essence* and *Black Enterprise* magazines, is a contributing writer for *Essence* and *More* magazines. She is also the co-author of *Children of the Dream: The Psychology of Black Success* (Doubleday, 1992).



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