

Razzle Dazzle

A Strike That Changed City

By RICHARD STEIER

The 40th anniversary of the city welfare strike was marked last month by a total lack of attention from the city's general interest news media.

This was not surprising to several veterans of that 28-day walkout who are still involved in the city's social services network as either employees or union representatives. As much as anything, their lack of visibility to the general public, and the lack of respect this translated to in dealing with city officials, was what sent 8,000 workers to the picket line on Jan. 4, 1965.

The battle for a measure of dignity and some understanding of the way that conditions hampered their efforts to help clients kept them on strike despite threats of firing that were actually carried out, some financial hardship, and the kind of weather not conducive to union protests.



'We Stood Up, United'

After it was halted Jan. 31 by the city's agreement to have a special panel consider both salary and working condition issues, the employees returned to work two days later—a Monday—not certain how many of their demands would be met. They knew, however, according to some of those interviewed last week, that they had made their point.

"We stood up, united, for what we believed in," said Sybil Alexander, who at the time held the Social Investigator title that has since been replaced by Caseworker, and today is a Supervisor 2 in the Adult Protective Services Brooklyn Field Office on Livingston St.

John Talbutt, who is executive assistant to the president of Social Service Employees Union Local 371 of District Council 37—which combines the two unions involved in that 1965 strike—said that workers' feelings about how they were treated by management were summed up by one of the prime slogans on the picket line: "End rule by fear."

Mayor Robert F. Wagner halted the walkout by agreeing to a recommendation by a special task force he created establishing a five-member fact-finding board. It consisted of two city officials, two union officials, and a neutral member with a special expertise in the social work field, who served as its chairman.

Working with uncommon speed for such proceedings, the panel held day and night hearings and on March 4, 1965 issued a contract award.

The most tangible aspect of it was pay raises of between 9.44 and 11.57 percent, depending on the job title, and the creation of a three-step salary plan for the affected workers. Those who were working towards master's degrees became eligible for a pay differential based on the credits they had amassed.

Just as important, steps were announced that would ease the burdensome caseloads that sometimes were twice the maximum permitted in New York State. Staff handling cases involving children was increased as part of the award, and pools of personnel were created to shift workers into particular neighborhoods when average caseloads in those areas reached untenable levels.

Some of the strikers said they believed conditions had gotten so bad because of the lack of public sympathy for the clients they served, which bred a corresponding indifference to the work that they were doing.

'They Thought We Helped Bums'

"The majority attitude of the public," Ms. Alexander said, "was that those on welfare were lazy bums and we should not do anything for them." As the employees who made decisions on granting public assistance and who were supposed to verify that recipients continued to qualify for it, she said, "The public saw us, and maybe the city saw us, as bleeding-heart liberals giving away the tax revenues."

And so there was not the mixed reaction that might have accompanied a job action by police or Teachers, who could generate public sympathy because their work was appreciated, offsetting resentment at the inconvenience their striking could cause. It was that much more ironic, then, that the biggest changes that resulted from the strike affected those other employee groups in ways they would never have imagined.

The five-member factfinding panel chaired by a neutral was created because the two unions—Local 371 of District Council 37 and the Social Service Employees Union—had balked at the old manner by which the city handled such disputes: a panel whose tiebreaking vote went to the Mayor's chief negotiator.

The tripartite setup, with a neutral party sorting through the advocacy of the labor and management designees on both

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Workers Look Back on '65 Welfare Strike That Changed City

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contracts and grievances, became formalized with the creation of the Office of Collective Bargaining a year later. This form of even-handed dispute resolution was as much a factor in most city unions' willingness to forgo the strike as their primary contract weapon as was passage of the Taylor Law in 1967 that imposed harsh penalties on strikers and unions alike.

Firing an Empty Threat

This state law was more effective than the draconian Condon-Wadlin Act that it replaced, which made striking a firing offense for public workers.

The weakness in the old law became evident during the welfare strike: how could you fire 8,000 people from jobs that the city traditionally had trouble filling because of miserly salaries and poor working conditions? Unhappiness over those conditions became clear months before the strike actually began, as many workers then represented by Local 371 voted to disaffiliate and join the more-militant SSEU in October 1964. Although Local 371 retained bargaining rights for Welfare Department supervisors and clerical staff, the SSEU now represented Social Investigators, as well as Children's Counselors, Homemakers and Home Economists, giving it a clear majority of the agency's staff.

The union election got the attention of Jerry Wurf, the firebrand who had long run DC 37 and had recently taken over as president of its international union, the American Federation of

State, County and Municipal Employees.

It also elevated a young Social Investigator named Al Viani, who had become an activist in Local 371. At a meeting immediately after the local's defeat in the representation election, its leadership was castigating the tactics and the character of its SSEU rivals when the 29-year-old Mr. Viani interrupted to state that Local 371 had lost the vote on the merits because its leaders were "out of touch" with the rank and file. This touched off a flurry of internal disputes that ended in the leadership's resignations and his taking over as president of the local.

'Respected Their Anger'

The youthfulness of activists like Mr. Viani would eventually play an important role in the willingness of workers to go on strike for an extended period. But so would the frustrations felt by older workers in the system, many of whom had families and therefore were more likely to feel the financial pinch that would accompany a work stoppage.

Fred Smith, who became a Social Investigator in Octo-

ber 1964, not long after he was graduated from New York University, said that while he had little experience within the system, "I just knew that the older people were very dissatisfied because they were treated very shabbily. I saw myself as a rookie guy and I felt if the people who were more experienced felt this sense of indignation, I had to respect it."

Some of those involved, like Ms. Alexander, had already developed a taste for putting themselves at risk for the promise of a better, more just existence.

After growing up in Hot Springs, Ark., in 1958 she enrolled at Allen University, an all-black college in Columbia, S.C. When she visited the state capital building a short time after arriving, she recalled, "We were told that one side was for whites and one side was for everybody else."

Not long afterward, the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and his top assistant, the Rev. Ralph Abernathy, came to Allen to speak, "and the next thing I knew we were on a picket line to desegregate lunch counters." Television coverage of one protest prompted a call from her mother in Hot Springs to remind her that this wasn't why she was attending college.

'Have to Stand Up'

Ms. Alexander thought otherwise, however, and she carried the lessons she learned as an undergraduate to New York after getting her degree, becoming a Social Investigator in 1962 assigned to the Brownsville Welfare Center in Brooklyn.

"That mentality came with me," she said. "You either

you believe in or you don't get anyplace."

That welfare center on Bradford St. became a winter gathering place for neighborhood residents who got little or no heat in their homes—many of whom were not welfare clients—from the time the center opened to the late-afternoon hour when it closed.

That didn't mean it was a refuge with many amenities. "The front porch fell off," Ms. Alexander said, noting that the ancient building had previously housed one of Brooklyn's first public schools. "There were holes in the floor."

Pleas Unanswered

There was also an overwhelming number of clients to visit to ensure that they still qualified for welfare and that they were being properly serviced. "I started out with 60 cases [the state maximum at the time] and wound up with 135 the first year," Ms. Alexander said. "Of course we complained. Our supervisors complained. They were told they were nothing they could do, they couldn't and didn't hire any more workers."

"We learned to survive," she continued. If seven or eight of her clients lived in the same apartment building, she would make appointments to meet with all of them in one apartment to speed the interviews.

Stan Leibowitz, who made the salary presentation for SSEU before the fact-finding panel and now is president of the DC 37 Retirees' Association, remembered "visiting an apartment where the refrigerator had no door. It was a mother of 10, and I asked her, 'How do you manage

ishables?' She said, 'I have to buy fresh every day.'

"And that was eating up her [welfare] grant," Mr. Leibowitz continued. "I was able to get her a new refrigerator because I had a good supervisor. But there were other supervisors who would sweat their workers: 'Why do they need this?' In order to get clients their money, you had to go through rings and rings to prove they deserved it."

The feeling that they themselves were being neglected led some staffers to identify more closely with their clients than with the agency that employed them, several of those interviewed said.

"We felt we were disposable," Mr. Leibowitz remarked. "If they didn't like you, you could be taken from one location and bounced to anywhere in the city. We had no say in transfers then. The welfare centers were usually in the worst facilities: abandoned schools and factories. It seemed nobody cared. And to top that off, we weren't getting paid."

At that time, starting pay for Social Investigators was \$5,750 a year. Someone with two years' experience in the agency and a college degree earned \$6,000, Mr. Leibowitz said; those same qualifications could get you a Probation Officer's job that paid \$2,000 more.

of a steady paycheck that would result. But the prospect that the city would invoke the Condon-Wadlin Act and fire them held no terror for the activists, several of them said.

Didn't Fear Job Loss

"First of all, we were young and stupid," noted Mr. Leibowitz, who was 23 at the time. "We were college-educated, and if you had a degree you weren't going to have a problem getting another job in those days."

"They had a constant shortage of staff," Mr. Talbutt said of the Welfare Department. "I went to Mexico in July 1963 knowing I would have a job waiting for me when I came back. Unless you were a complete screw-up, they wanted you back."

Ms. Alexander said that years earlier, a grand-aunt had advised her "to put away enough money to take care of you for six months in case anything happens." In slightly more than two years working in the system, she had saved enough to sustain her for a three-month strike, if necessary.

Mayor Wagner was regarded as a pro-labor executive, making it a bit harder to convince the public that the unions had legitimate grievances. "But there was a thought that things weren't getting any better," Ms. Alexander said, "and there were questions about how far [Welfare Commissioner James] Dumpson was willing to stick out his neck for us."

The city responded by sending out termination letters to the striking workers—"I had two or three notices telling me I was fired," Ms. Alexander said—and jailing 19 officers from the two unions who were considered the strike's ringleaders.

Jail Had Its Upside

This wasn't necessarily a traumatizing experience for some union officials. Mr. Viani would later say that his toughest moment had come a couple of months earlier on his first day as president of Local 371, when he entered his office and the responsibility of the job suddenly dawned on him, leading him to shut his door so no one would see that he was shaking uncontrollably.

During a roast for Mr. Viani two months ago, city Labor Relations Commissioner Jim Hanley pointed out, "During the strike it was 3 degrees outside, and Al was inside, nice and warm."

Unions' Demands

The two unions were seeking raises in salary maximums of as much as 25 percent, a reduction in the maximum allowable caseload from 60 to 50, a cut in workweeks from 35 hours to 30, and the hiring of an additional 1,000 Social Investigators.

The city countered by offering a \$300-a-year increase for all positions. It refused to negotiate on working conditions such as hours, caseload and staffing.

In early December of 1964, a union meeting was called at Manhattan Center to discuss strike preparations. "Before the meeting," Mr. Talbutt recalled, "a chant started: 'No contract, no work,' and it went on for 10 minutes. It shook the rafters. I knew right then that the strike was solid."

Some of the workers were single with no commitments; others had families to support, making them unlikely candidates to welcome an extended walkout and the lack

His counterpart at SSEU, Judy Mage, also found some consolation in being behind bars. Mr. Talbutt recalled her saying that after working up to 20 hours a day preparing for the strike, "Jail was a great rest."

The news media, including the city's more liberal outlets, was not kind to the strikers, perhaps because of the 1963 newspaper strike that badly bruised all of the city's eight daily papers and would cause the demise of half of them over the following three years.

A New York Times editorial called the walkout "a rebellion against government and the law."

Except for WNBC-TV reporter Gabe Pressman and New York Post columnist Murray Kempton, "the press wasn't very nice," Mr. Talbutt said.

Embraced by Movement

But the strikers got a surprisingly large amount of support from national labor leaders and civil rights leaders.

"Jacob Potofsky [the head of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers Union], Harry Van Arsdale, George Meany all came to New York City in January '65 to get behind these crazy social workers and see whether they could create a breakthrough," Mr. Viani recalled.

The picket line was visited by A. Philip Randolph, a pioneer of trade-unionism as the head of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, Mr. Viani recalled. His protégé, Bayard Rustin, who had organized the 1963 March on Washington at which Dr. King gave his "I Have a Dream" speech, was a constant presence. Mr. Talbutt recalled his speaking at a union rally at Manhattan Center 15 days into the strike and telling the audi-

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ence, "I smell victory—and I have a very good nose."

United Federation of Teachers President Albert Shanker had his union contribute hundreds of thousands of dollars toward a union strike fund, Mr. Viani said. Help also came from AFL-CIO New York City Central Labor Council President Harry Van Arsdale, who, Mr. Talbutt noted, had a daughter who was a Social Investigator and one of the strikers.

Hall the Great Equalizer

AFSCME was not on the executive council of the national AFL-CIO, but Mr. Wurf had an ally who more than compensated: Paul Hall, the larger-than-life president of the Seafarers Union. Mr. Hall supplied troops for the picket line and food and money as well. He also, at one point when city officials were warning of drastic action unless the strike ended, countered that if they wanted to see who was tougher, he was prepared to close the Port of New York, a threat he was capable of making good on.

According to Mr. Talbutt, at one point the Mayor asked Mr. Dumpson how long his agency could function during a strike without major problems in servicing its clients, and the Welfare Commissioner responded that it could operate for a month at maximum. "And that's exactly when they ended the strike," Mr. Talbutt said.

The city had proposed that the strikers return to work and have their grievances decided in binding arbitration. Since the tie-breaking vote at that time in arbitration cases was exercised by the Mayor's own Labor Commissioner, this proposal was swiftly rejected.

'No Reward for Strike'

"We were afraid," Mr. Talbutt said, "we would get a decision saying, 'You broke the law and therefore you can't be rewarded.'"

The unions were amenable, however, to putting their case before a fact-finding panel consisting of the Mayor's Budget and Personnel Directors, Mr. Wurf and Mr. Hall on the union side, and Charles Schottland as the impartial chairman.

And so, on the first Monday in February, the strikers returned to work. Mr. Talbutt, who was an SSEU dele-

gate for the Nonresidents Shelter on West 31st St. in Manhattan, recalled an immediate skirmish that morning. A clerical worker, who did not belong to either of the striking unions but had honored the picket line, was called into the office to face disciplinary action. "We had insisted there be no reprisals," Mr. Talbutt said, and in case management thought that only applied to members of the affected bargaining unit, the shelter staff threatened to walk back out the door.

"There was a different spirit within the workplace," Mr. Talbutt said, noting that the disciplinary threat quickly was scrapped.

Some of the strikers weren't sure that the concerns that led them to walk off the job for a month would be adequately addressed by the fact-finders.

"We felt that the tradeoff might not have been worth it," Mr. Smith said, referring to himself and his coworkers at the Soundview Welfare Center in The Bronx. "We had lost a month's pay and the public wasn't that outraged at what happened to welfare workers."

'Downtrodden Roared'

Even the panel's recommendations, including the creation of a three-step salary plan that would significantly increase compensation for experienced workers, was viewed as a somewhat limited victory, Mr. Smith said. The biggest saving grace that he could see, he said, was "that this group of downtrodden workers had been able to roar for a while."

Ms. Alexander's reaction at the time, she remembered, was pride that "we had made our point. By Feb. 1, I couldn't say I was happy, but

by Feb. 1 of the next year I was. We had real collective bargaining; Victor [Gotbaum] didn't have to go to City Hall with his hat in his hand."

Mr. Leibowitz, who would later serve for more than a decade as Local 371's vice president for negotiations, quickly grasped the impact of the factfinder's ruling that third-party arbitration be required to resolve contract disputes, with provision made for the American Arbitration Association to appoint an arbitrator any time a new contract had not been reached within 30 days of the existing one's expiration.

This order was modified when OCB was created so that arbitrators were designated by its Board of Collective Bargaining, whose members occasionally served as the arbitration panel on a contract case.

Heart of the Matter

"The issue that kept us out on strike was impartial arbitration," Mr. Leibowitz said. "We wanted it for bargaining; we wanted it for grievances," which the BCB also handles.

The factfinders refused to shorten the workweek for the welfare employees, and they did not address the unions' concerns about workers being transferred without their consent.

"But," Mr. Leibowitz said, "we survived and lived to fight another day. The contract after that was when we got the transfer policy."

Ms. Alexander said her younger co-workers at what is now the Human Resources Administration know very little about the welfare strike, and there is no longer the camaraderie among staff that developed because of the walkout.

"We supported each other and we assisted each other," she recalled. "We were together, and the non-public service union leaders understood our struggle. I met friends on the picket line."

"So yes, I do remember it fondly."