

Charles Ensley Scholarship Fund Dinner

Charles Ensley earned his right to be a part of the labor relations history of our country. That story goes back to before Charles was born.

In 1912, the Lloyd-La Follette Act allowed government workers to belong to a union. By 1917, the American Federation of Labor (AFL) had chartered a national government workers union for federal employees, and, in 1936, the AFL chartered the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees.

By 1937, the left wing of AFSCME, led by public sector Caseworker unions, broke off from AFSCME and joined the Congress of Industrial Organizations. After a number of splits and mergers, in 1946, the United Public Workers of America became the dominant union for NYC Caseworkers and Public Hospital Workers. It was also the largest public employee union in the country.

That was the high point.

Thereafter, between 1946 and 1953, Congress and the nation at large became consumed by the red scare. The United Public Workers of America was a casualty of that period of anti-communist hysteria.

It was sad because the UPWA was a militant union that had taken strong stands against racism and disparities in pay based on the sex of the employee, and was in favor of public service workers in general. The first African American woman to lead a union in New York was Eleanor Godling of the UPWA. She also served on the National Board of the CIO. The last President of the UPWA, Abram Flaxer, was sent to jail in 1953. He had refused to turn over the union membership list to the House Un-American Activities Committee.

And so, there was an end to the militancy by those anti-racist, anti-sexist, pro-worker Caseworkers... or was there?

In 1961, eight years after the total destruction, demise and extinction of the UPWA, a group of Caseworkers and Supervisors created the Social Service Employees Union. SSEU did not exactly start slowly. Between 1961 and 1964, they organized a union, broke off from Local 371 and DC37, and showed such militancy that Jerry Wurf, head of DC37, was pushed to the left in self-defense. In 1965 both SSEU and DC37 struck the Welfare Department for 28 freezing cold days in January. They won, and they won big. They even helped their clients.

SSEU members can read their union history on their website, but it is a matter of record that the militance of that one group of social workers has affected all of New York City labor relations for the past half-century.

Presidents came and went at SSEU in the years that followed. Joe Tepedino was followed by Judy Mage, then Marty Morgenstern and Stanley Hill. Bart Cohn left to join DC37's negotiation office, and was replaced by Mary Pinkett. Mary, in turn, went off to represent her neighborhood on the City Council. Thereafter, Pat Knight led the union for two years, and he was followed by Joe Sperling. Joe served for a record six years. Briefly, Joe Nazario held the post thereafter.

Finally, in 1982, Charles Ensley was elected President of the union that had become SSEU Local 371.

Charles and I worked together at 817 Broadway for a number of years in the late 70's up until 1982. We were part of a tempestuous, but very strong, local union. We both were young and single at the time, and each of us spent a dozen or more hours on union business every weekday and most weekends. It was fine. It was exciting to be part of a famously tough union, one that had made labor history and kept on making history.

When Charles became President of SSEU Local 371, many of the old fights had been won, or at least greatly advanced, but no generation ever gets to simply rest.

First, there was Ed Koch, and he was a problem all by himself. The Child Welfare caseload soared, to cite one area of neglect by City Hall.

Then came David Dinkins. Charles went from ecstatic to despairing during that period. He had high hopes for Dinkins, as did many of us.

Our hopes were not realized. Soon after taking office, the Mayor announced layoffs, including 1100 layoffs of Child Protective Service Caseworkers. That agency's leader, the exceptionally good Commissioner Robert Little, called Charles and together they worked out a lawsuit. The lawsuit argued that Child Welfare could not legally lay off 1100 Caseworkers. If they did so, they would be unable to meet the State Mandate to protect children.

Mayor Dinkins and Deputy Mayor Harvey Robins tried to pressure Commissioner Little to testify that ACS could do its job, even with the layoffs. Commissioner Little pointed out he would be under oath in court, so he could not lie.

The result was that the City now was forced to negotiate with Charles and most of the layoffs were revoked.

At HRA, the problem was different. There, an exceptionally bad Commissioner had been appointed. Barbara Sabol did not respect civil service and she was apparently very, very prejudiced. When two promotional lists came out, Supervisors II and III, Commissioner Sabol created a commission to screen candidates for fitness for appointment. Her hand-picked committee of provisional appointees decided that some candidates, primarily white Jewish males, were racially insensitive and should not be promoted.

All of us wondered why racially insensitive males would choose to spend their entire lives working in the most racially diverse agency in New York City, and why somehow that made them ineligible for promotion.

Charles appealed directly to Mayor Dinkins and went to court. You see, to an SSEU President, all of the union members are our brothers and sisters.

Anything less is treason to our union and that for which it stands.

Charles became so outspoken against Mayor Dinkins that, when Rudy Giuliani was elected Mayor, he put Charles on his transition team. For the next eight years, Rudy thought Charles was his friend, but Charles made no such mistake about Rudy.

There came one particular five-year contract. Rudy wanted us to accept two years of zero-percent increases and, not surprisingly, neither Charles Ensley nor SSEU Local 371 agreed. Pretty much all of DC37 wanted to reject that contract, but we were told that Local 1549 had voted by mail ballot, overwhelming in favor of it.

Since SSEU-Local 371 workers are co-located with 1549 members in many work locations, Charles Ensley could accurately judge how likely it was that 1549 members had voted yes on the contract. Years later, the District Attorney called Charles in and asked him, what did he know and when did he know it?

Charles told the DA that he didn't know anything except that he found it inconceivable that the members of 1549 would ever vote to accept such a contract. He said so, publically, at the time the contract was voted upon and long before the subsequent scandal exploded. The scandal led to trusteeship, and that only ended when Charles was able to bring back Lillian Roberts to be Executive Director.

Eventually, Charles Ensley became a serious candidate for the position of Executive Director of DC37. He made his case for one person, one vote but he lost, by a little.

Sometime thereafter, physical disability and death cut short a story which should have gone on for a few more chapters.

From the thirties, when Caseworkers led in the creation of United Public Workers, through the persecution and suppression of the late 40's and early 50's, our story continued. We rose again like a phoenix from the ashes when SSEU asserted itself, and we have continued from that day to this.

Charles and I had the privilege of working with old timers such as Sol Gorelick and many others, and there was a continuity of concern for all the people of this world which went far beyond our just being a union.

SSEU-Local 371 is a union, but like the UPWA before it, it is a special sort of a union. Charles preserved and maintained a culture that is an odd combination of caring for those in need, mixed with a willingness to take on the whole world, if the world is wrong.

Establishing a labor studies scholarship is a good thing. Dedicating it to Charles Ensley is very, very appropriate.