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Bookshelf

THE QUEENS LIBRARY GUILD, LOCAL 1321 NEWSLETTER

Leo Morris and Lillian Roberts, The Passing of Two Great Union Leaders



Queens Library Guild, Local 1321 is extremely saddened by the loss of two great and compassionate union leaders, Leo Morris III and Lillian Roberts. Many of us knew and worked directly with Leo Morris and many of us knew of Lillian Roberts. Regardless of your relationship with them, both were inspirations to all and cared deeply about the members and the union movement.

Leo Morris, 1981-2026, Stalwart Fighter for Local 1321 Members and Working People



As many Local 1321 members know, Leo Morris began working with the Local in 2012 as a Legislative Assistant in DC 37's Political Action Department. He helped Local 1321 fight to restore Mayor Bloomberg's annual budget cuts. He was also very helpful during the Local's fight to stop the Administration from contracting out custodial work.

In 2016, Leo became the Local's DC 37 Representative. In that role, many got to know Leo firsthand through his visits to every location, his advocacy, and his willingness to be there for the Local. He helped many of us advocate for our issues; shepherded us through some very traumatic situations; helped us obtain DC 37 and government benefits; counseled us with sage wisdom; and fought for us tirelessly. In 2024, Leo became the Local's Negotiator where he laid the groundwork for the unprecedented MVOs' mediated settlement; the upcoming contract negotiations; the Customer Service Redesign; and more.

Leo was a film buff, a dedicated unionist, a book lover, and a sports fanatic who loved

watching all sports but especially loved his Knicks, Yankees, and Giants. He worked so hard and did all of this with grace, compassion, selflessness, care, and humility, even as he went through his own health issues. To the very end, he was fighting for working people to get their fair share in life.

Lillian Roberts, 1928-2026, Compassionate, Fearless, Trailblazing Union Leader



Lillian Roberts was a giant in the labor movement and had direct and indirect impacts on Local 1321 as far back as our founding in 1968. The many obituaries detail all her trailblazing accomplishments as the daughter of Black parents who moved to Chicago from the deep south for a better life.

In the 1940s, Lillian Roberts, while working for University of Chicago Hospital organized her fellow colleagues into an AFSCME local, giving them union rights and protections. In the late 1950s, AFSCME invited Lillian Roberts to be a full-time organizer in Chicago.

In the 1960s, Lillian Roberts and Victor Gotbaum, having successfully organized thousands of public sector workers in Chicago, moved to New York City to help reenergize DC 37 and organize city workers. Victor Gotbaum became DC 37's Executive Director and Lillian Roberts became DC 37's Associate Executive Director. The two transformed DC 37 into a union juggernaut. Her and Victor Gotbaum's organizing successes convinced Queens Public Library workers to ask DC 37 to help them organize a union, which they did in 1968.

During the fiscal crisis of the 1970s, Lillian Roberts' efforts to fight citywide layoffs, when the rest of the country was telling New York City to rot, saved thousands of public sector workers and our city. Those efforts extended to Queens Public Library, she and DC 37 successfully lessened the number of library workers who lost their jobs, and parlayed a temporary work program to help library workers keep their jobs. Eventually, as the City regained its fiscal security, those workers became permanent.

In the 1990s, a number of local presidents and DC 37 staff were arrested or removed for their criminal activities. AFSCME placed DC 37 under administratorship with Lee Saunders acting as Administrator. As the administratorship wound down, DC 37 coalesced around Lillian Roberts as the person to lead the union into the 21st century.

Lillian Roberts guided DC 37 through a number of significant crises—the aftermath of 9/11, Bloomberg’s contracting out efforts, one of the largest contracting out fraud campaigns in the City’s history, the 2008 financial crisis, layoffs, and more. Throughout, she continued to stabilize DC 37 and made it more responsive to the members’ needs.

She directly impacted Local 1321 during the Library Administration’s layoff of workers in 2010, allocating DC 37 resources to fight the Administration and blunt their impact. In 2013 and 2014, she allocated DC 37 resources to help the Local fight the Administration’s attempts to contract out custodial work. At the tail end of her tenure she helped the Local uncover Queens Library President/CEO’s questionable spending. That eventually led to the removal of Board of Trustees members, the President/CEO, administration staff, and the rehiring of the forty-four Local 1321 members the Administration had laid off.

Leo Morris and Lillian Roberts were dedicated and selfless union leaders who fought for working people. Their intelligence, tenacity, clear understanding of right and wrong, compassion, hardwork, and selflessness organized the unorganized, maintained and expanded union benefits, and helped countless people. Their leadership had a positive impact on all of us and the union movement. We are so fortunate to have had them in our lives.

On a personal note, Leo was a true and dear friend. His loss meant a lot to me. I will miss him.