

LABOR

1199: For dignity and justice

PART ONE

The unique aspect of the hospital workers union is the way that it unites labor concerns and human rights issues.

By Dan Marshall

NEW YORK

ABOVE THE ENTRANCE TO THE "Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Labor Center," the headquarters of District 1199, the National Hospital Union, is a mosaic mural that stands in bold contrast to the dingy restaurants, broken bottles and porno bookstores on West 43rd Street in midtown Manhattan.

In the left part of that mural a group of black, white and Hispanic hospital workers help a patient while union organizers hand out leaflets in the background. To the right the same group engages in educational and cultural activities—teaching a child to read, surveying the globe, singing and picnicking—under a bright sun and a dove of peace.

Two giant hands unite the scenes: one holds a partially crumbled leaf with Frederick Douglas' words—"If there is no struggle, there can be no progress."

The mural, by Anton Refregier, describes District 1199's central purpose—to provide hospital workers with the human dignity and decent wages that will allow them to pursue the "good things in life" denied them so long.

"The hospital workers' struggle is more than a fight for union rights," Martin Luther King commented in 1959, "It is part and parcel of the larger fight in our community against discrimination and exploitation...against all forms of degradation that result from poverty and human misery."

This year marks the 20th anniversary of 1199's first major hospital organizing victory at Montefiore Hospital in New York City. Since 1958 the union has organized some 90,000 members in 13 states, making it the nation's largest hospital union. Its story presents an inspiring chronicle of how a union, initially small in numbers but rich in militancy and a commitment to civil rights, can overcome enormous economic and political power to improve the working and living conditions of some of this country's poorest workers.

Now spreading from coast to coast, District 1199 remains unique in its active alliance with the civil rights movement and its integration of culture into the union's internal life.

Founded in 1932 as the Pharmacists Union of Greater New York, 1199 eventually encompassed 6,000 pharmacists, porters, clerks and other drugstore workers. Its opposition to discrimination was evident at the outset. In 1936, after joining the AFL and acquiring the name Local 1199, the union conducted a seven-week winter strike for the right of black pharmacists to work in Harlem drug stores. With Harlem residents' and community leaders' backing, the union won.

In 1954, after the union had organized the city's major drug store chains, it gave financial aid to the Montgomery Bus Boycott. King called Local 1199 "my favorite union." A life-long friendship ensued.

Coalition with civil rights.

The union's campaign to organize hospital workers was linked to its coalition with the civil rights movement. A crusading spirit was essential for organizing voluntary hospitals—those subsidized by philanthropic agencies and other "charitable" institutions. The vast majority of these workers were blacks and Hispanics earning as little as \$20 for a 44-hour week; or-



Above: Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. addressing 1199 members at the union's 1968 annual "Salute to Freedom" dinner honoring contributions to the civil rights cause. This appearance was one of his last before his assassination.

ganization could hardly swell union treasuries.

Representational elections were not required, since the Taft-Hartley Act excluded nonprofit institutions from the jurisdiction of the National Labor Relations Board. But hospital workers had little legal protection. They could be fired for joining unions and management could easily obtain injunctions.

Drawing from the dynamic CIO tradition of organizing the unorganized, Local 1199 realized the potential of the voluntary hospitals' 1.5 million employees, few of whom were union members. Its campaign was spearheaded by Elliott Godoff, who had spent 25 years organizing hospitals for other unions and was a long-time associate of 1199 president Leon Davis.

In 1958 the union went after Montefiore Hospital, forming "crack of dawn brigades," with drugstore workers who distributed leaflets before leaving for their regular jobs. After an eight-month effort the hospital agreed to a representational election and the union triumphed with a dramatic 628-31 vote.

Torrent of pro-union sentiment.

The Montefiore breakthrough unleashed a torrent of pro-union sentiment. Within three months 6,000 hospital workers joined the union. When other hospitals refused elections 3,500 workers at seven institutions walked off their jobs in May 1959. A coalition of 235 black and Puerto Rican community leaders supported their strike.

"Harry Van Arsdale, president of the Central Labor Council, was instrumental in rallying labor support to an unprecedented degree," Moe Foner, the union's executive secretary, told *IN THESE TIMES*. "This was because of his strong commitment to organizing poor workers and his ability to see that the organization of hospital workers could be an important factor in uniting both sectors of the labor movement."

The strike, though impressive, did not achieve a union contract. Wages were increased \$5 per week and the 40-hour week was instituted. A 1962 strike during which president Davis was jailed for 30 days for contempt of court, was settled when the governor pledged to secure passage of state collective bargaining legislation. When enacted the law made hospital strikes illegal and provided for compulsory arbitration of disputes.

The 1962 strike also convinced the un-

ion of the necessity to organize all levels of hospital workers—from the unskilled service employees through the professional, technical and clerical staffs—because doctors, nurses and other personnel had been used to keep the hospitals functioning. Local 1199 was well-suited to this task, because of its industrial-union tradition and its experience in meeting the needs of white collar workers.

Unlike other unions in the field 1199 attempts to integrate unskilled and professional employees into a single union, thereby breaking the barriers that often undercut strikes. While not always successful 1199 has gradually won professionals away from associations with little collective bargaining expertise.

"The union structure is unique," says Foner. "The union initially had ties with pharmacists as well as porters in drug stores. It organized blacks and whites into an industrial union. It was concerned with the special needs of professionals, but had the skills and background to run a democratic union over a long period. Now we negotiate in hospitals together but take into account the special needs of the different divisions."

The union now has four divisions: hospital (service employees), drug (pharmacists), guild (clerical, technical) and RN (registered nurses). Each elects delegates who meet monthly to make decisions. A training and upgrading program is conducted to give union members promotion opportunities. For the professional divisions, the union conducts regular conferences on industry trends and developments around health and safety, infectious disease, pharmacology and related health care topics.

District 1199's relationship to other unions is also unusual. In 1969, as it began spreading to other cities, it became the National Union of Hospital and Health Care Employees, District 1199, a division of the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU). A national union within an international, District 1199 is functionally autonomous. It obtains its affiliation with the AFL-CIO through the RWDSU.

Charleston strike.

The union's alliance with the civil rights movement culminated in 1969 when 500 workers at two hospitals in Charleston, S.C., walked off their jobs and sought assistance from 1199. "So we jumped in with both feet, arms and everything else," recalls Foner. "We were able to make

Charleston a national issue, mainly by convincing the Southern Christian Leadership Conference to send their staff in full time. The people heading that staff were Andy Young and Stoney Cooks."

The Rev. Ralph Abernathy and SCLC members led mass marches and support demonstrations through the center of town. The state sent in the National Guard with tanks and bayonets. Over 100 people were arrested, including 1199 president Davis and Rev. Abernathy. After 113 days the union achieved a settlement that granted *de facto* union recognition, pay raises, a credit union with a method for deducting union dues, and a grievance procedure.

In addition the strike produced one of 1199's best films: "I Am Somebody." The union has made five films that serve as historical documents as well as vehicles for educating union members and communicating 199 activities to a wider audience.

Because minorities constitute about 70 percent of the union's membership it promotes cultural activities that dramatize their common interests and that encourage a sense of self-identity and ethnic pride. The union sponsors an annual Salute to Freedom, an evening of entertainment saluting civil rights achievements, along with a Latin American Fiesta Night and a Salute to Israel.

"The biggest step in terms of cultural activities," according to Foner, is "Gallery 1199," the first permanent art gallery in an American union headquarters. As many as 3,000 people have come to see exhibitions, usually consisting of social realist art relating to the lives of 1199 members. One recent exhibit was "In Our Blood: Coal Miners in the Seventies," a selection of Earl Dotter's photography.

District 1199 has continued to earn distinction in the ranks of labor during the last decade. One of the first unions actively to oppose the Vietnam war, it helped mobilize opposition to it within the labor movement. In 1973 it fought Nixon's wage controls by conducting the largest hospital strike in the nation's history, involving 35,000 workers.

The nationwide growth of District 1199 was fostered in 1974 when Congress removed the exemption of voluntary hospitals from the National Labor Relations Act. Like other unions, however, it has suffered from the recession, high unemployment, the fiscal crisis of major urban centers, and a renewed management offensive.

IN THE WORLD

SPAIN

Legalized unions launch strike wave

In spite of steady rain, an estimated 300,000 people in Madrid took part in last week's May Day parade jointly organized by the Communist and Socialist labor unions. According to reports, about a million people throughout Spain demonstrated in this first freely celebrated May Day since Francisco Franco's seizure of power four decades ago. Repeated shouts of "Unity! Unity!" expressed the dominant sentiment for working class and left unity among the Madrid rally participants.

By Barbara Mann Franck

CORRESPONDING TO INNUMERABLE collective contracts up for renewal and following up on the Communist victory in shop representatives elections, Spain is being swept by the broadest and most militant wave of strikes since King Juan Carlos came to power in 1975. By the first week of March, an estimated one million work days had been lost to strikes in 1978. Some of the largest actions have been staged since then. Over half a million workers were on strike around the country on various days in mid-April.

The strikes have been characterized by high levels of worker participation in many sectors and regions and by effective picket committees in extending strikes, building mass support for them and keeping out strike breakers.

A mid-April strike in support of contract demands drew 80 percent of the nation's 450,000 textile workers; in Catalonia, where the industry is concentrated, participation was estimated at 95 percent. Regional metallurgy strikes affected 180,000 in Madrid (three one-day strike demonstrations in March), 80 percent of Barcelona metal workers (April 4) and 80,000 workers in Guipuzcoa (April 4-6).

Picket committees formed during a week-long dairy farmers strike in mid-March in Vizcaya—which spread to Malaga, Sevilla, Cordoba and Granada—prevented processing companies from distributing milk; the final weekend of the strike the city of Bilbao was without milk. Actions by large picket groups stopped deliveries by trucks from outlying provinces, despite right-wing harassment and the arrest of over a hundred picketers, during a five-day Barcelona strike that affected 95 percent of the transport sector in the province. And striking Catalan farmers distributed leaflets in provincial capitals, informed shoppers and distributors at central markets about their strike platform and eventually blocked the sale of fresh fruits and vegetables as part of a week-long strike beginning March 8 that saw 20,000 tractors parked along major roadways.

Not waiting for Parliament.

Negotiations on all collective contracts that have expired since last December had been held in abeyance until minimal labor reform legislation and factory election could be completed. The Communist party-dominated *Comisiones Obreras* (Workers Commissions, the CC.OO.) won 35 percent of representative posts in the recent elections, with the Socialist party's *Union General de Trabajadores* (the UGT) running a close second. Unions affiliated with Suarez' political party took a measly 3 percent.

When the European Confederation of Syndicates issued its call for a Western European day of struggle on April 5, four million Spanish workers—800,000 in Ma-

drid and 500,000 in Catalonia—responded. Work stoppages, assemblies and demonstrations drew 95 percent of workers in some Spanish provinces.

Like activities on April 5, many of the recent strikes have been orderly, limited actions, in line with the strategies of the Socialist and Communist parties. As in the nationwide textile and regional metal strikes, they have served as a show of strength and a warning to recalcitrant industry negotiators. Similarly, unemployed and striking Andalusian farmworkers staged one-day symbolic occupations of four large plantations as part of a region-wide "Week against Unemployment" in early March.

Andalusian provinces like Cadiz and Malaga have a 20 percent unemployment rate, and the misery of the southern villages is awakening response in the region's industrialized capitals. Seventy percent of Seville's construction workers went out on strike March 1 in solidarity with the farmworkers. In the surrounding province the farm strike became a total one.

Rank and file solidarity.

Other strikes have been wildcat, have continued after majority unions (CC.OO., UGT) called for their end, or have hardened into bitter conflict with street fighting and police violence. A nationwide teachers strike that drew 56,000 public high school teachers and 24,000 teachers from private schools was prolonged indefinitely beyond the original three-day call even though it was declared illegal by the government from its opening day April 18.

A daily Barcelona assembly of 15,000 graphics arts workers voted to continue a mid-April strike affecting 80 percent



Over 300,000 people took part in May Day demonstrations in Spain. They were a further sign of growing militancy among Spanish workers.

of a total Catalonia census of 55,000 workers on three consecutive days following the CC.OO.'s decision to settle. Thanks to the work of picket committees, a majority of Barcelona bookstores and newsstands closed in solidarity with the strikers, who won an important demand that their collective contract be extended to include many additional categories of workers in jobs related to the publishing industry.

When a large Vigo (Galicia) shipbuilding firm suspended payments and began laying off employees, workers initiated a public protest. Police violence provoked periodic street fighting and barricades and led to the death of one worker from "emotional shock" when police fired into a demonstration. A total strike in solidarity with the workers at the plant and with those fired was called for April 25 in Vigo.

Similarly, a 24-day old strike of 2,000 Cadiz port workers and fishermen erupted when police tried to block strikers from

the port area. During day-long street fighting on March 28 three workers were wounded. Twenty striking farmers were wounded by police in early March in Aragon, and police prevented groups of more than two from gathering in public markets in Reus during the farm strike. *Guardia Civil* have been used repeatedly to protect strike breakers—e.g., riding with state-controlled fuel company trucks during the Barcelona transport strike, to harass strikers and to inhibit picket actions.

This strike wave provides a tribute to Spain's new labor unions, which were legalized only last May. Under pressure from Spain's militant working class, in less than a year the unions have built organizations capable of mobilizing industries nationwide, and—in spite of distinctly different political tendencies ranging from social democrat to anarchist to nationalist (Basque, Catalan)—they have managed to maintain solidarity and unity.

MIDEAST

Weizman stirs hope in West Bank

By Gidion Eshet

JERUSALEM

EZER WEIZMAN, ISRAEL'S defense Minister, is gaining popularity among the Arabs. Until last week he had been President Anwar Sadat's wonder boy. This week it is also the people of the West Bank who think he is different from other Israeli leaders.

It all started with the publication in *Time* magazine of the riots in the town of Beit Jallah near Bethlehem, south of Jerusalem. Students in one of the high schools demonstrated against the Israeli invasion into southern Lebanon and blocked one of the main roads in that village.

Israeli security forces were rushed to the scene. They dispersed the students and ordered them to return to their classes and shut the windows. This concluded, one window was opened and tear gas grenades were thrown into the classrooms. The students who could not bear the gas jumped from the windows and seven of them were injured.

Immediately after the *Time* publication, the army spokesman denied the story. Only one grenade was thrown, but into the courtyard, the spokesman said. He added that the soldiers did not enter the school at

all, in line with standing orders. The spokesman made this statement after an investigation conducted by orders of the Military Governor of the West Bank, Gen. David Hagoel.

Weizman was unhappy with this investigation and ordered another. The result: Gen. Hagoel was fired and two other officers are to be tried in a military court. These two officers—the Military Governor of Bethlehem and his deputy—are to be charged with violating army orders on dispersing demonstrators. Hagoel was sacked for the coverup of the actions of the other two officers.

The last time such severe action was taken against a high officer was in 1956. Then Col. Uri Ben Ari, currently Israel's Consul General in New York, was sacked by Premier Ben Gurion for his coverup of two officers who stole sugar sacks from Arabs in the Gaza Strip. Since then Israel has been proud of its "clean" army.

Many Israelis were unhappy with the way the army was handling its affairs. But the sacred cow had not been touched.

Sacking Hagoel, however, has more political impact than the disciplinary action against a general. Weizman has been building himself a reputation of a moderate Israeli leader.

But he is the proponent of a separate

agreement with Egypt and is fighting for further Israeli concessions to that country so that an agreement can be reached. He is known to oppose settlements in northern Sinai that are blocking the way to an understanding with Egypt.

To increase his power within the cabinet Weizman suggested some months ago the establishment of a "peace government." He did not clarify what this meant but his aides said that he wants to include the Labour party in the coalition. Begin was unhappy with this suggestion because it implied that the present government was not a "peace government" and Weizman dropped his idea.

Now he has taken a step to appease the West Bankers. Together with sacking Hagoel, the curfew imposed on Nablus last week after an attack on a tourist coach was lifted. To the anger of many rightists, Weizman does not hesitate to visit pro-PLO leaders like Karim Khalef, mayor of Ramallah.

These Israelis mistake him for a dove, which he is not. On the crucial issue of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, Weizman has proved to be as hawkish as Begin. But in the present mood in Israel, seeking some way to break the political deadlock with Egypt and the U.S., Weizman is looked upon as the new savior.