

On the Backs of Women

Minimum wage women are paying high union dues.
Guess where the money goes? *Rael Jean Isaac* tells all



WHEN NEW YORK power broker Charles Hughes traveled abroad, he took along his nearest and dearest. His entourage for a jaunt to Egypt, Prague, London, and Paris numbered fourteen family members. Hughes also threw legendary Christmas parties at swank New York hotels, which featured such Lucullan treats as roast suckling pig and sides of beef; there were rock bands, too, and one year Hughes hired a circus to entertain.

Hughes was a New York union boss. Unfortunately, his lifestyle was made possible by a little-noticed form of the abuse of women: exploitation of women in low-paying jobs by high-living union officials. Accused by New York City's D.A.'s office of corruption, Hughes finally pleaded guilty, in April, to stealing \$2 million from Local 372, which represents school cafeteria workers and crossing guards, the majority of whom are women.

For the privilege of being represented by Hughes, a cafeteria worker making around \$11,000 a year paid union dues of \$600. Hughes' local is one of fifty-six New York locals that make up New York's District Council 37, which, in turn, is part of the powerful American Federation of State, City, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), the nation's second largest labor union.

CLARICE WILSON is the flip side of the Charles Hughes saga: A black, single mother—now a grandmother—Wilson has been a member of Local 983, which represents motor vehicle drivers, for eight years. As a civilian employee of the police department, she daily tours construction sites throughout the five boroughs looking for violations. Over the years Wilson's dues have added up to around \$3,500.

What did she get for her money? When Wilson was required to work overtime without being paid for it, she sent an SOS to Local 983; the union did not even bother to respond. "All that was necessary was for the union to sit down with management one on one to rectify that," she told me. "But when I'd call, it was always, 'He's not here. Can I take a message?' and they never got back to me." When she went to complain in person, there was nobody in the office but a secretary.

Another member of Wilson's local, Mark Rosenthal, a park trash collector, decided to challenge the unresponsive leadership by running for president of Local 983. Rosenthal received so many anonymous death threats and up-front intimidation from muscle men that his experiences sound like something out of *On the Waterfront*, the 1950s Marlon Brando movie about union corruption. After his entire slate was overwhelmingly defeated, Rosenthal approached New York District Attorney Robert Morgenthau.

As a result, Morgenthau launched an investigation that turned up widespread corruption (including the Hughes story) and vote fraud among union officials representing government workers. Despite the brouhaha, nobody made the connection: An overwhelmingly female membership was being exploited by overwhelmingly male leadership.

Morgenthau's team learned that stealing had been easy. Indeed, Hughes' attorney argued that the very ease of establishing the case against his client proved his innocence: Hughes' "mile long" paper trail showed he thought that he had done nothing wrong. More likely, it showed how invulnerable Hughes felt after three decades of being in power.

Hughes seemed to have nursed delusions of grandeur. He had used union clout and money to try to become something of a statesman, conducting a "peace mission" to Nicaragua and setting himself up as the patron of Ethiopian Jews in Israel. Hughes journeyed to the Caribbean to study disaster relief.

His international aspirations, however, did not make him forget the folks back home in Millen, Georgia, where Hughes built a \$400,000 house. The local boy made good dispensed free

holiday turkeys, paid for by his long-suffering New York local. This largesse sparked a mini-riot the year would-be turkey takers outnumbered the birds.

In contrast to the underpaid Clarice Wilson, the D.A.'s office found that Hughes received overtime pay for hours he hadn't worked—\$685,000 (on top of an annual salary of \$224,000). The local had also picked up \$325,000 in Hughes' family credit card bills, \$590,000 for attending union board meetings, and \$163,000 from petty cash.

Small change by comparison, other officials (including Hughes' son and son-in-law) were accused of spending \$10,000 of union funds in topless bars, and paying \$78,000 for an expensive trip to the Super Bowl. No wonder that, despite collecting \$19 million a year, in 1999 Hughes' local found itself \$8 million in debt!

Hughes' final female victim deserves mention: His seventy-six-year-old secretary, Mildred Stephens, pleaded guilty to helping Hughes steal—she had taken nothing for herself. Stephens was placed on probation.

ALFRED DIOP HEADED Local 1549, DC 37's clerical workers union, for two decades. With 22,000 members, it is easily the largest local in DC 37. On dues from his overwhelmingly female membership—average salary \$25,000—Diop maintained a Manhattan penthouse apartment costing \$6,000 a month in the building housing DC 37's offices.

And how did he keep that big penthouse tidy? A cleaning service, to the tune of another \$1,200-1,600 a month. According to the indictment, some of the money spent under this rubric may have gone for male prostitutes. And, despite having a neat pad,

the D.A.'s office claims Diop ran up a bill for \$162,000 staying in city hotels.

Diop traveled in style, too. An internal union investigation launched after the D.A.'s office began its series of indictments found that Diop rented Lincoln Town cars—another \$135,000—even though he already had a car allowance of over \$665 a month, spent \$46,000 for clothing and jewelry, \$82,000 for cameras and other electrical equipment, and \$22,000 at pawnshops, all at union expense. In its June 1999 indictment, the D.A.'s office claimed Diop had walked off with an impressive total of \$1.6 million through various schemes.

While Hughes and Diop were the biggest spenders—presiding over the lowest paid but largest locals—a substantial number of other DC 37 officials have been indicted. One sent his office the \$15,000 bill for more than 200 visits to a Brooklyn short-stay motel (\$53 for a four-hour tryst). Several engaged in a turkey kickback scheme: It was a tradition to give turkeys at holidays; the officials simply doubled the actual cost. These human turkeys then pocketed the difference.

STANLEY HILL, then-director of District 37, negotiated a five-year contract with New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani in 1995. The contract featured a provision that made it highly unwelcome to the low-salaried membership: a wage freeze for the first two years. Moreover, this contract would set the pattern for the city's contract with all the other municipal unions, from teachers to firemen. Angry members voted it down.

Apparently trying to avoid embarrassment, union officials used a variety of methods to alter the results. Mail-in votes were steamed open with irons, and "no" votes became "yes" votes.

One local—where the minutes showed fewer than a hundred members had voted—reported 400 "yes" votes. Just in case, the final count was held off at one local (Diop's) until the rest were in, and the shortfall was then made up with phony votes. It was announced that the unpopular contract had been approved by a vote of 10,000 to 2,000. (Absent phony ballots, the clerical workers resoundingly defeated it.)

Immediately after the fraudulent contract vote, the leadership raised members' dues across the board, with director Hill explaining the raise as "a clear mandate that we must not reduce our efforts to protect the interests of our members." Though not personally accused of corruption, but rather of letting it flourish around him, Hill has been forced to step down.

As things stand, says Kenneth Boehm, chairman of the National Legal and Policy Center, heading a DC 37 local is virtually "a license to steal." Nor does its parent union AFSCME seem interested in the structural reforms that would make corruption less likely, including direct election of union officers, independent auditing of local accounts, and opening up audited accounts to member scrutiny, among others. True, national headquarters sent a trustee to take over DC 37 when the D.A.'s findings made intervention inevitable, but when the trustee selected fourteen members of a new executive board (the old executive board was a who's who of indictments), he deliberately excluded the reformers.

Political leaders, especially Democratic Party leaders who benefit from millions of dollars in donations from AFSCME and its locals, not to mention its phone banks on election eves, are of no mind to take on the unions. Both Al Gore and Hillary Clinton made pilgrimages to DC 37 headquar-

ters at the height of the indictments; neither said a word about the situation. That's scarcely surprising in the case of Gore since AFSCME is headed by Gerald McEntee, a key supporter. As for Hillary, her vaunted concern for poor women was nowhere in evidence.

As women become an ever larger proportion of organized labor, its (largely male) leaders strive to appeal to them with "women's rights departments," conferences on women's issues, campaigns against sexual harassment and domestic violence, and most recently a large-scale survey of the opinions of working women. In a rousing speech at a "Working Women 2000" conference in Chicago on March 11, John Sweeney, president of the AFL-CIO, announced the chief finding of the union's survey of working women: Asked what they wanted most out of their jobs, said Sweeney, women "answered with one word, 'respect.'" He declared his "outrage" that "working women are far too often being treated like the doormats of our economy."

What women union members require from their leaders are not women's rights departments and rhetorical allegiance to trendy causes popular with middle-class professional women. "Respect" means above all respect for their hard-earned dues and for their voices, whether expressed in voting for officers of their locals or for the contracts negotiated on their behalf. "Respect" means first and foremost that their own leaders cease using them as doormats for their personal and political agendas. ♦

Rael Jean Isaac's most recent book, Madness in the Streets: How Psychiatry and the Law Abandoned the Mentally Ill (co-authored with Virginia Armat) is published by the Free Press.

BENEFACTRESS, sporting woman, gadfly, world-class flirt, steel magnolia from Kansas City, cookbook author, widow (and sole heir) of the legendary Cornelius Vanderbilt Whitney, Marylou Whitney, seventy-three, is an old-fashioned girl at heart. Mrs. Whitney's late husband, Cornelius Vanderbilt "Sonny" Whitney, had gone through three wives by the time he married Marylou. Very fond of the company of ladies, 'C.V.' led a life crowded with incident and accomplishment—the two don't always go together. He met Marylou, former host of "Private Smiles," a popular Kansas City radio show for servicemen, when she auditioned for a role in *The Missouri Traveler*, a movie C.V. was producing. At the time, Marylou was in the process of obtaining a divorce from her first husband, an alcoholic.

What followed is best described by Cleveland Amory: "In 1958 Whitney was divorced for the third time in a particularly messy action after which, within a few hours, he married for the fourth time. The first that Mrs. Whitney No.3 knew of Mrs. Whitney No.4 was via a press conference held by Whitney in which he said that she was 'married to the telephone, a social career, and a love of luxury.'" (The third Mrs. Whitney became a traveling evangelist, who preached in Africa with the Rev. Billy Graham.)

Mrs. Whitney No.4, on the other hand, seems to have been married not to the telephone or love of luxury but to Mr. Whitney, with whom her life was most agreeable. She pampered him outrageously. C.V. began each day with a love letter on his breakfast tray. "I thought of every day with Sonny as a play," she once remarked. "All right, the curtain is going up. I want to be as good as I can be." Whitney died in

Dowager Power: Marylou Flexes Her Muscles

It takes a Whitney to take on the avant-garde Whitney Museum of American Art. *Jon Newlin* praises steely coquette Marylou Whitney for doing just that



1992, leaving Marylou \$100 million and a string of seven houses.

Marylou's romantic third marriage to John Hendrickson, a man decades younger, hardly fits the stereotype of the rich older lady/younger man. "He's obsessed with her," a business associate said. Indeed, they can't stop looking at each other. When Hendrickson, a lad in his thirties, represented his wife in selling a pristine parcel of Adirondacks wilderness to the state of New York, his strong-arm tactics led to recurrent suggestions that Hendrickson, more pit bull than Pomeranian, was doing Marylou's dirty work.

Marylou does not exactly deny this. "Yes," she purred to *New York* magazine, "John did do some of the dirty work. But isn't that what a man does?"

In a more mannerly world, absolutely. In a more mannerly world, however, Marylou Whitney would not have been forced to take up arms this spring against the museum that bears her revered late husband's name—the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York. The Whitney was founded by Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney, Marylou's mother-in-law. Gertrude already was dead when Marylou married C.V.; nevertheless Marylou feels a certain fealty to Gertrude Whitney's legacy.

An artist herself—generally of robust male figures—Gertrude Whitney was a remarkable woman. She bought widely and generously of contemporary artists, and in 1929 offered New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art her entire collection of six hundred works by American artists. The Met indicated that it had "a cellar full" of that kind of thing and rejected the offer. In November of 1931, Gertrude Whitney opened the Whitney Museum of American Art in four redone town houses on Eighth Street.