



How we helped Obama win—pages 2, 6-7

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Community allies help organizing drive

Key community groups have come together to support DC 37's campaign to organize hundreds of parks workers.

Several grassroots organizations have formed the Friends of NYC Park Workers

Organizing Committee, which is building public support for the organizing drive and providing a mini-army of activists for outreach activities and protests.

"The community's support is particu-

larly important as we run into resistance from the employer," said Edgar deJesus, DC 37's interim organizing director.

In June, Committee Chair Sondra Youdelman fired off a letter to Thomas L. Kemper Jr., chair of the Board of Trustees of the Central Park Conservancy, calling on the CPC to end its "intimidation of Conservancy employees working to form a union in Central Park."

DC 37 launched its organizing drive at the beginning of the year. Soon, management responded by holding closed-door meetings where it pressured its employees not to sign union cards. The Conservancy's fear tactics and misinformation have intimidated workers from being vocal about their support for the union.

A member of the solidarity committee, Rabbi Michael Feinberg, who heads of the NY Labor-Religion Coalition, said he wasn't surprised by management's hard-nosed response, which is typical of employers across the the country. Feinberg said the counterattack only underscored the workers' need for a union.

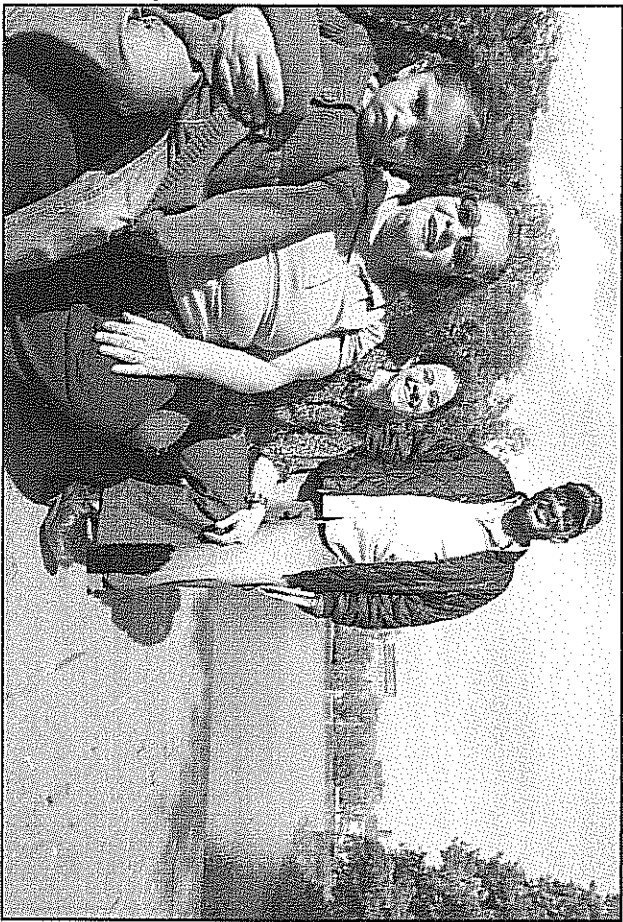
"The workers deserve a fair shake," Feinberg said. "They have a right to decent wages and benefits and the right to join a union."

Youdelman is executive director of Community Voices Heard, which has helped DC 37 fight for the rights of welfare recipients in the Work Experience Program and organize Job Training participants being trained in the Parks Opportunity Program of the Parks Dept. "Many of the Conservancy workers are former WEPS and JTPs," she said. "We want to help improve their working conditions."

The growth of nonprofit groups like the Central Park Conservancy reflects an effort to "bleed" the public sector, Youdelman said. Indeed, as the Dept. of Parks and Recreation has reduced its workforce to 2,200 from 7,500 years ago, nonprofit groups have popped up throughout the city to maintain neighborhood parks with a parallel, nonunion workforce.

Other committee members include Jobs with Justice, Catholic Scholars for Worker Justice, the NY Labor Council for Latin American Advancement, Judson Memorial Church, the National Institute for Latino Policy and the NYC Central Labor Council.

Activists with the Friends Committee picketed with DC 37 at a Conservancy fund-raiser in June and helped organize outreach days at Central and Prospect parks this summer.



PEP Photo by Clarence Elle-Rivera

At Central Park, Sondra Youdelman, second from right, chair of NYC Parks Workers Organizing Committee, with activists of Community Voices Heard.