

## **Black History Month:**

### **Labour history must include contributions of Black labour activists**

Black History Month is celebrated in Canada to recognize the contributions of Black peoples to the growth and development of this country and their importance to its history.

The contributions of African Canadians are still far from being integrated into the mainstream of Canadian history. However, many now know of Mathieu Da Costa, a man of African heritage who arrived into this land in 1604 with French explorer Samuel de Champlain and who served as an interpreter between the Europeans and the Mik'maq people. Many also know about Harriet Tubman and the Underground Railway, a network of safehouses and individuals that helped Black people escape slavery in the United States.

Less well-known, however, are the contributions of Black activists to the labour movement. This aspect of our history is important to recognize because the labour movement was and continues to be instrumental in fighting for human rights and equality for workers and all Canadians. The simple truth is that our struggles for human rights and equity would not have been completely effective without the hard and persistent struggles of Black workers.

All accounts of Canadian labour history must include the collective and individual contributions of Black workers and labour activists. Examples of these include the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, a Black-led trade union in Canada that fought to end discrimination in railway employment, and the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists. There are also some pioneering Black labour activists such as Stanley G. Grizzle who was a leader in the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and who, in 1961, became the first Black labour relations officer in a provincial labour relations board. There is Fred Upshaw, who in 1990, became the first Black person to head a major Canadian union, the Ontario Public Service Employees Union. More recently, there is Marie Clarke Walker, who is currently the executive vice-president of the Canadian Labour Congress, the first African Canadian to hold such a position.

As the PSAC celebrates its 40th Anniversary, it recognizes and is grateful to the contributions of its Black members and members of African heritage. The actions and dedication of these members has helped advance the PSAC, and put us in the forefront in the struggle for human rights and equality. Their strength, courage and vibrancy are exemplified in the success of the union in negotiations, membership representation, political advocacy and the various committees, including the Equal Opportunities and Human Rights committees.

As part of promoting the contributions of peoples of African heritage to the labour movement, throughout the month of February, Black History Month, we will post on the web some short articles on the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists. We will also post a web quiz at the end of the month.