



Ontario Federation of Labour Statement: Black History Month 2010

Black History Month should be embraced and recognized as an important time of reflection and celebration for all in our society, says Ontario Federation of Labour president Sid Ryan. “An understanding of the struggles, setbacks and triumphs of African Canadians reveals lessons that are valuable for all of us, not just the African-Canadian community.”

“The OFL takes great pride in our partnerships with vital community groups like the Colour of Change Network, with whom we recently co-sponsored a Human Rights Forum. Black History is not static, it continues to be made every day,” says OFL executive vice-president Terry Downey. “It’s 2010. As trade union and community activists, let’s take this month to celebrate the achievements of African Canadian women and men and continue to partner with them proactively in their struggle for equity for all of Canadian society.”

A number of African Canadian organizations have been celebrating black history month in February since the 1950s. The Ontario Black History Society as instrumental in having February proclaimed as the official time period for this celebration both in Toronto in 1979 and Canada wide in 1995.

Between 1840 and 1860, thousands of enslaved Africans travelled the Underground Railroad to freedom in Canada. As a race, many blacks globally saw Canada as a place where they would have the freedom to reside and work prejudice and racism free. Unfortunately, that perception was a myth. Societal and governmental barriers that they did not create were in place. The colour of their skin became the deciding factor in how they were negatively treated in society. However, this did not deter this phenomenal race from fighting for human rights and eliminating barriers to equal participation in the workplace and society both then and now.

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Over 50 years ago Stanley Grizzle and Jack White were the first Black Canadian candidates to run for election to the Legislative Assembly of Ontario for the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (the predecessor to the New Democratic Party).

Their efforts to fight for justice and equality should be acknowledged all year around because they have made a difference. Lobby efforts by activists like Stan Grizzle, Bromley Armstrong, Harry Gairey, Daniel Hill and community organizations like the Canadian Negro Women's Association were instrumental in creating change through legislation by the formation of human rights laws that ensured that social and employment equity were upheld by employers, landlords, and institutions.

Rosemary Brown a staunch NDPer was the first black woman to serve in a legislature in Canada. In a 1973 Rosemary quoted "to be Black and female in a society which is both racist and sexist is to be in the unique position of having nowhere to go but up!" That the first woman to run for the leadership of a political party in Canada was a black woman should be a matter of pride for the feminist movement and for the entire country – but it is rarely even mentioned. Black Canadians of all backgrounds are united around common causes and can count on the labour movement to be a committed partner around these human rights issues.

For information: Terry Downey
Executive Vice-President
Ontario Federation of Labour
416.578.3230 (mobile)