



Canadian Labour Congress

Congrès du travail du Canada

S T A T E M E N T BLACK HISTORY MONTH FEBRUARY 2010

The Canadian Labour Congress representing 3.2 million unionized workers acknowledges the month of February is an important opportunity to recognize and celebrate the significant contributions made by members of the African-Diaspora to our unions, workplaces and communities.

Here are just two historic examples worth remembering.

During the late 1800's Elijah McCoy originally from Colchester, Ontario, worked as a mechanical engineer in Michigan. McCoy was concerned with workers safety when the lubrication of moving machinery was needed. Many of these workers were young black boys who did this dangerous work because they were small and agile. McCoy developed a self-lubricating device with a drip cup which revolutionized industry. The device allowed machines to work continuously without anyone having to risk life and limb to apply oil while machines remained in operation. The device had a range of applications, from locomotives to industry.

McCoy's first drip cup invention was so effective and highly regarded that other manufacturers copied it. However, none worked as well as McCoy's invention. Canadian and American railroaders asked for it by name as the "real McCoy," giving rise to the expression denoting authenticity. McCoy went on to own his own firm and was an accomplished inventor filing fifty-seven other patents in Canada and the United States.

In 1946, Viola Desmond purchased a movie ticket in New Glasgow, Nova Scotia. She took a seat on the main floor, unaware that tickets sold to African-Canadians in this town were to sit in the balcony while the main floor was reserved solely for white patrons. In 1946 in Canada, there was racial segregation in many public places, like: churches, restaurants, schools, and movie theatres.

Viola was dragged out from the movie theatre by police and charged with defrauding the government of Nova Scotia the difference in the tax between a ground floor and a balcony seat, which amounted to one cent. She spent a night in jail and was fined \$20. Viola demonstrated great courage throughout her ordeal and went on to challenge the racist seating policy in court.

Her struggle exposed how false notions of tax evasion were being used to maintain systemic discrimination. Viola Desmond's experience helped to galvanize public opinion locally and internationally and to raise awareness about the reality of Canadian segregation.

Few Canadians realize that Viola took her prominent seat in history nearly a decade before Rosa Parks took her seat in the white section of a bus in Montgomery, Alabama, an action that was a key part of the U.S. civil rights movement.

These are just a few of many important historic contributions made by African-Canadians.

Members of the African Diaspora continue to make our workplaces and our communities a more just and safe place. This year, during Black History month, the Canadian Labour Congress encourages union members to take note of contributions being made by your fellow workers from the African Diaspora. Send us a short note to AR-HR@clc-ctc.ca detailing contributions being made today by your brothers and sisters during this important month.

Let's celebrate them together and in solidarity.