Introduction

My name is Mark Brown, I am a proud CUPW member and I bring you greetings on behalf of the 8000 Postal Workers in the Metro Toronto Region and some 52000 postal workers from cost to cost to cost. On behalf of those 52000 postal workers let me express my gratitude for the privilege of addressing the Coalition of Black Trade Unionist and our Supporters.

History

Brothers and sisters in the labour movement we come together today representing the latest of a long line of men and women who built this country from the bottom up. Some of whom came to Canada as slaves on slave ships. Some of whom came as nannies and domestic workers looking for a better life for themselves and their children. Many of whom worked as housekeepers and porters because society at that time stipulated that they could only rise so high on the economic scale and not higher. I am speaking about a generation of workers that society permitted to clean the hotel, not manage the hotel and could only dream about one day owning the hotel. I’m speaking about a generation of workers who understood that in order to maintain what we now call white privilege it had to be done at the expense of people of colour.

We Represent a generation of workers whose parents new that in order to get ahead they did not have the luxury of being equal to their co-workers but rather had to far excel there co-workers just to get by. A generation of workers whose parents still remember grocery shopping at Nob Hill Farms on lamdsdown avenue and back to school shopping at Honest Ed. A generation of workers who had to know how to make a dollar out of fifteen cents because they would too often be the last one hired in the good times and one of the first ones hired in the bad times. We represent a generation of workers who refused to be crushed by their struggles but instead were strengthened by their struggles. Equally important we represent a generation of workers who knew that for them the best kind of job was a unionised job.

It was not all gloom and doom. We continue to make great individual strides along the way. On January 25, 1960, a former Jamaica Constabulary Force officer named Larry McLarty became the Toronto Police Service’s first black officer – paving the way for all officers of all races and cultures for the future. Fred Upshaw in 1990 was the first black trade unionist to lead a major Canadian union. There was the Late Honourable Lincoln Alexander who served as Lieutenant-Governor of Ontario from 1985 to 1991. And who can forget where they were on January 20, 2009 when a black man born in Hawaii (wink wink) named Barack Hussein Obama was inaugurated as the 44th President of the United States of America.

Not accepting a glass ceiling for us or our children

Supporting our allies with our allies also supporting us as we strive to obtain leadership positions

The inauguration of the 44th president of the United Stated showed every man woman and child throughout North America and beyond that workers of colour no longer have to accept a glass ceiling for us and our children alike. The inauguration showed that workers of colour can participate in the political process without fear of retribution. The inauguration showed that if a black man can be elected the 44th president of the United States then each and every one of us can be leaders within our union. No longer are the people of colour’s role within our organisations limited to supporting our allies as they run for leadership positions. Now is the time for our allies to support us as we run for leadership positions also.

Brothers and Sisters we have made some great achievement throughout the labour movement. I’m speaking about achievements such as unemployment insurance. As Postal workers we are proud of the role we played in achieving maternity leave in the 80’s and when the Federation of Labour lead thousands of workers through the streets of down town Toronto during the negotiations on the Provincial budget. The Government had no choice but to concede to a 2% surcharge on those making more than 250000 a year. It was Labour that made that happen, your labour that made that happen as we are a significant part of this equation in Ontario and throughout the country.

No such thing as a bad job

Brothers and sisters we have more ahead of us work to do. When five migrant workers can fall off of a scaffold on the side of a building, when four can be killed and one seriously injured we have more work to do. When the employer can receive a fine of $200000 or just approximately 40000 per deceased worker we have more work to do. And when an employer can kill 4 workers, seriously injure one and not spend a single day in jail we defiantly have more work to do. Weather it is a migrant worker who falls off of scaffolding or a construction worker killed because of contact with asbestos that problem must be our problem because it threatens each and every one of us as workers. It is the fundamental belief that “I am my brother’s keeper” that is what makes union solidarity work.

As you know we have significant struggles ahead of us. We have a conservative government whose views of a good job in Canada are substantially different than the views of many Canadians. I’m speaking of a government who may very well introduce what some have called a right to work (For Less) law affecting thousands if not millions of Canadian workers throughout the province. Some where I heard it said that there is no such thing as a bad job in Canada. Some where I heard that the only bad job is having no job. Well I say tell that to the migrant workers who after working an unspeakable amount of hours each day under unbearable conditions with little and know protection have been rewarded with a 5 to 15% pay cut from the government. I say tell that to the seasonal worker who through no fault of their own is frequently unemployed who will now be forced into those migrant jobs paying 15% less affecting their future unemployment insurance claims. And I say tell that to every single family member that every one of these workers represents.

Brothers and Sisters economic progress has always been driven by workers. Supporting middle class workers and their families is common scene. It’s an investment into tomorrow that government must makes today and there is no better investment that can be made into middle class workers and their families whether they are workers of colour or not than for those workers belonging to a union. It’s not rocket science that the economy is stronger when workers today are paid good benefits and good wages. It’s not brain surgery that the economy is stronger when our seniors can retire and live in a manner similar to how they lived when they were working.

You don’t need to have the intelligent of Albert Enstien to understand that the economy is strongest when the same rights, the same opportunities the same dreams within reach of our daughters and our sons alike.

Maybe I’m a little bit old fashion but I still believe in a Canada where hard work pays off and responsibility is rewarded regardless of the colour of your skin, regardless of religious belief and regardless of sexual orientation.

Maybe I am dreaming in techno colour but I still believe in a Canada with good middle class Jobs and good public services so people can have confidence that if they work hard they can get ahead.

Maybe I’m completely off my rocker when I still believe in a Canada where you don’t have to be rich to reach your full potential and where the doors of opportunity remain open to all.

Maybe I’m a little out of touch but I still believe in a Canada where your name is no barrier to success.

I Have a Dream

Dr. King said it best when he said “I have a dream”. Well permit me to paraphrase if I may because I believe the Labour Movement also has a dream.

A dream where the government of the day gives grants to companies that create good jobs in Canada, maintains good jobs in Canada and doesn’t ship those jobs out of Canada in search of cheap……pardon me flexible labour to the detriment of Canadian workers and their families.

A dream of a Canada with good public services a strong auto sector and where a decent wage and a decent pension are not considered by the government to be out of touch with the current economic environment.

And a dream of a Canada where the law clearly states that as an employer IF YOU KILL A WORKER IN THE PROVENCE OR IN THE COUNTRY YOU-WILL -GO-TO- JAIL.

Conclusion

The challenges that we face in the labour movement today are unlike the challenges at any other time in history. Gone are the days when the labour movement can be divided on who it elects to political office. Gone are the days when workers can cry out for a fair piece of the pie and then elect candidates into office that do not fight for the rights of workers. Gone are the days when the labour movement can sit back as these candidates pass legislation detrimental to workers and their families. And gone are the days when the house of labour can be divided and remain divided to the detriment of the workers and their families that each and every one of us represents.

Whether you are a Teacher in the province of Ontario or a factory worker in Wisconsin whether you’re an Auto Worker in Michigan or a Postal Worker in Quebec now is the time for workers on both sides of the border to rise to the challenge together, fight the good fight together, side by side, arm and arm, shoulder to shoulder because together “We are North America”!

My name is Mark Brown and I’m a proud Postal Worker.

Thank you.