

## **The Party Is Over – It is Time For Community Building**

*Speech by Christopher Wilson, Regional Coordinator (Public Service Alliance of Canada – Ontario Region) at the 13<sup>th</sup> Annual Coalition of Black Trade Unionists Annual Awards Dinner Dance on November 14<sup>th</sup>, 2009*

I have been asked to speak tonight on the topic ***Its Time For Community Building!*** I am speaking to you tonight as a proud member of the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists. I am also the Ontario Regional Coordinator for the Public Service Alliance of Canada. My remarks tonight combine both my perspective as a community activist and my experiences as a Trade Unionist.

Initially I struggled with this topic. To me the idea that it is time for community building is self-evident. I was a community activist before I was a labour activist so of course it is time for community building. It has always been the time for community building.

I reflected further upon my personal experience to try to figure out how I wanted to approach the topic of community building. As a law student I was involved in the Black Law Students Association of Canada. Upon graduation I became active in the Canadian Association of Black Lawyers and volunteered time at the African Canadian Legal Clinic. Then one day I saw a story in the Toronto Star

that announced the creation of the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists (Ontario Chapter). I did not know June Veacock very well at that time but I liked where she was going i.e. to create a community organization with the mandate to both advocate within the labour movement for the African-Canadian community and at the same time challenge the labour movement itself to become more inclusive of African-Canadians and racialized workers. I signed my membership card immediately because CBTU spoke to both my personal and professional aspirations.

About 1 year after I joined CBTU I started my career within the labour movement as a Union organizer for the Office & Professional Employees International Union. Ten years later I remain active in the labour movement as the Regional Coordinator for the Public Service Alliance of Canada. I have been a member of CBTU throughout my ten year career within the Labour Movement.

My personal story is not unlike the story of many in this room. We became involved in the community before we become active in the labour movement. Many in the room tonight share my belief that it is the community that is the focus of our activism and that the labour movement is a vehicle for community building. Not the other way around.

It was at this time that I realized that it is not the people in this room that need to be convinced that It Is Time For Community Building - the labour movement itself

needs a renewed vision of community building. Now all labour leaders will immediately say that the movement supports community building. But does the labour movement share our vision of community building? That is the question that I wish to talk about tonight.

So instead of the topic ***It is time for Community Building*** I have revised my speech to be titled ***The Party is Over – It is Time for Community Building***.

Now members of CBTU will know what I mean when I say that the Party is Over. However, for those of you who have not yet signed your CBTU membership card (and I know that you will by the end of the night) I will explain the back story to the Party is Over.

A legendary story within CBTU was the time when Gord Wilson, who was the former President of the Ontario Federation of Labour approached June Veacock for advice on how to build support among rank and file labour activists for employment equity and at the same time convey the message to the elected leadership (many of whom were white) that the movement itself needed to become more diverse. In response June Veacock provided a very succinct answer she said say - ***The Party is Over***

Along this theme, I would like to outline what I envision the role of the labour movement should be with regards to community building. I will refer to four

subjects (a) Employment Equity Compliance (b) building inclusive Unions (c) building community partnerships and finally and most importantly (d) taking action!

## ***1. Employment Equity Compliance***

First and foremost the labour movement must reflect the diversity of its membership and the labour force. This simple proposition laid the foundation for the creation of the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists.

For those of you who have not yet signed your CBTU membership card (and I know that you will by the end of the night) I will share the story of the Report Card.

A decade ago June Veacock and the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists produced a Report Card on the level of representativeness of labour Unions attending the Ontario Federation of Labour Convention. At that time many if not all Labour Unions did not have internal employment equity plans (and for that matter many still do not) so there were no available statistics to base this survey so CBTU developed the report card old school style i.e. members picked up the phone, called community activists to find out how many African-Canadians and racialized workers were employed by affiliated Unions attending the Convention.

The results of the Report Card shook the Labour Movement to its core because the results (or lack thereof) sent a very clear message – very few (and in some instances no) African-Canadians or racialized workers were employed by various Labour Unions.

The Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC) reacted to the Report Card and started the process of developing an internal employment equity plan specifically targeting the under-representation of four designated groups: women, persons with disabilities, Aboriginal workers and racialized workers. I reference PSAC for a variety of reasons but most importantly because within the Labour Movement PSAC has the greatest self-interest to advocate for an internal employment equity plan because a large percentage of the membership are covered by the *Federal Employment Equity Act*. Consequently the Union has a key role to play to advocate on behalf of their membership for employment equity within the Federal Public Service. PSAC's ability to advocate effectively for the membership is reinforced if PSAC as an employer has achieved employment equity compliance.

My vision of community building; however, is not based upon the presence of an employment equity plan but whether the results of the plan have been achieved. I want to know that at any given time if CBTU develops a report card that Labour Unions including PSAC will pass the grade. That is the starting point for my vision of community building. It is my starting point because Unions that do not reflect our Community will not successfully gain the support of our Community. Ten years after the Report Card progress has been made but we are still not there yet. There remains a significant under-representation of African-Canadians and racialized staff within the Labour Movement as a whole and PSAC is not

exempt. This under-representation must be addressed prior to any meaningful community building.

So let me outline in very broad terms what I consider to be the essential steps to achieving employment equity compliance:

1. First and Foremost a plan should exist. Not all Labour Unions have internal employment equity plans. How can a Labour Union make a genuine commitment to reflect its membership and the diversity within the Labour Force without a plan to achieve those objectives. If a Labour Union does not even have a plan don't show up to my door and say that your Union is committed to support the African-Canadian Community.

2. Secondly, the plan should make employment equity compliance a critical objective. By this I mean that there should not be an under-representation of African-Canadians or racialized workers when compared to the most recent labour market availability rates according to the most recent census statistics. This is where I must stop for a moment because I am not aware of a Labour Union that has yet achieved this objective. I know for example that PSAC would score higher today on June Veacock's Report Card but I suspect that PSAC is the #1 leader in terms of internal employment equity initiatives and yet significant work remains to achieve employment equity compliance for racialized workers.

3. Employment equity compliance is irrelevant if employment systems (and in particular the hiring processes) are not equitable. Otherwise any gains will be transitory and quickly lost. It is a truism that power has a tendency to reproduce itself. Or to use a quote often cited by CBTU by Frederick Douglass – Power concedes nothing without a demand it never has and it never will. Achieving employment equity compliance should involve establishing specific targets with mechanisms for accountability but it has taken over a decade and there remains significant work to be done – so there are systemic and ideological barriers to achieving employment equity compliance.

I want to recognize that challenging existing systems of racial inequality involves taking risks. Our elders took risks for us to be here tonight. And I am under no illusions that the next generation of activists will have to continue their struggle if we are going to build a truly inclusive movement. So CBTU remains as relevant today as the first day that I signed a membership card ten years ago. Regardless of the commitments that have been made or will be made within the Labour Movement CBTU has clearly established that African-Canadians and racialized workers need to remain united, as we mobilize, agitate and defend our right to fair and equitable employment within our workplaces and within the Labour Movement – and employment equity compliance is just the starting point which brings me to the next subject:

## ***2. Building An Inclusive Union***

It is possible for a Union to achieve employment equity compliance without building an Inclusive Union. However, for a Union to have legitimacy to build meaningful community partnerships Unions must ensure that African-Canadians and racialized workers are included within their decision-making processes. It is not enough to say that a Union has hired a certain number of racialized workers if the distribution of power and decision-making authority remains unaltered. Again this sounds like a simple proposition. The fact remains however, that the corridors of power within the Labour Movement have not yet been fully opened up to racialized workers. There have been real challenges to existing power structures within the Labour Movement such as the elections of Marie Clarke Walker to the position of Executive Vice-President of the CLC, Hassan Yusuf to the position of Secretary-Treasurer of the CLC and the historic campaign launched by Carol Wall for the Presidency of the CLC. We have had successes and setbacks but at its core we know as Trade Unionists that we have the right to expect that Canadian Labour Unions can build a truly inclusive movement where the corridors of power and decision-making include African-Canadians and racialized workers at every level within every affiliated Union.

### ***3. Building Community Partnerships***

There is nothing that I have said that has not been said before in one way or another but there is an important shift that is occurring within the Labour Movement. The demographics of the labour force are becoming more diverse. The trends are inescapable. Workers of Colour will represent over 50% of the labour force in the Greater Toronto Area within the next decade. Aboriginal workers are the fastest growing population within the Prairies and Quebec. The pressure upon Unions to increase their legitimacy by building meaningful community partnerships with racialized communities and aboriginal communities is irreversible.

So what will meaningful community partnerships look like? – When I ask this question I think of the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists. This volunteer organization with comparatively speaking a tiny budget is able to advocate on behalf of the African-Canadian community in ways that would make any Union envious. For example I donated some of my daughters toys that they had outgrown to a CBTU sidewalk sale fundraiser. The only Union that I know that has held sidewalk sales to raise money was HERE who had a sidewalk sale for an employer who claimed no to have any money for a decent wage package. Even though CBTU's budget is tiny what Union could pull together a night like tonight with such involvement from the community?

So the Labour Movements needs to build community partnerships by learning how community organizations are able to make such significant differences within the community with far less resources. Legitimacy and humility will lay the foundation for meaningful community partnerships.

#### ***4. Taking Action***

The last point that I wish to make to quote Angela Davis is that: “we are sick and tired or being sick and tired.” We want action! Labour Unions including PSAC have taken very important initiatives that have affected our community. For example, PSAC raised over 1 million dollars for community organizations through the Unity Way and responded to hurricanes in the Caribbean through very substantial relief funding from PSACs social justice fund. PSAC members participate in community events for example through our make poverty history and Think Public campaigns and consistent patronage of the CBTU Annual Dinner Dance. It is these initiatives that compel myself and other racialized activists to continue to advocate within the movement for community building because we recognize that Unions’ capacity to affect change is enormous.

As much as has been done – more can be achieved through genuine community based partnerships. The under-representation of racialized workers in the Federal Public Service has been a travesty for over a decade, the segregation of the labour market based upon race has been well documented, pay equity for

racialized workers remains a distant goal, racism in the workplace remains a health & safety issue, barriers to post-secondary education continue to be erected along class lines, the continued privatization of health care services impacts upon our community. The issues that we face are serious and need serious action to resolve. 4 million Unionized workers across Canada if working in genuine partnership with our community can make a difference – that is why it is time for Community Building.

## **5. Conclusion**

I will conclude my remarks with the following prediction: we will win. We will win because we must.

- We will win because 400 years of unwavering struggle in Canada have strengthened us for this fight.

- We will win because we know that struggle is the only salve for the sting of racism.

- We will win because white privilege will buckle under black activism

We will win because our journey has taught us the difference between any ally who stands with us when times are easy and an ally who is steadfast when the battle appears bleak.

- This victory will be ours because we have always known that the shout of a community for what is just is stronger than the lone cry of an individual clinging to injustice.

Finally, I know that we will win because there are fierce angels on our side and the long arch of the universe points towards justice. To those here among us who may surrender to apathy, know this: Our elders will find us if we choose silence. And to those who will oppose us, know this – The Party is Over – here we come. Thank you and God bless.