

I am honoured to have been invited here today to bring greetings from the Ontario Chapter to this 39th International Convention of the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists. I would like to thank President Bill Lucy and my Chapter President Janice Gairey for inviting me to speak.

CBTU Conventions have always been a place for me – for us - to get re-energized and this Convention will be no exception. The feeling that I get being here today is the same feeling that I get after being on the road for some time – it is good to be home.

I would like to ask the delegates from the Ontario Chapter to stand. We are bringing the international to this International Convention.

The agenda for the Convention centres around the theme: *Yesterdays Vision, Tomorrows Reality* which is the same theme that will frame my remarks.

Yesterdays Vision

I understand the Visions of our ancestors through stories. There is one story in particular that I would like to share with you today.

The Viola Desmond Story

Viola Desmond is unofficially recognized as Canada's Rosa Parks. Or as some of us like to say, Rosa Parks is the U.S.'s Viola Desmond, because Viola Desmond's story pre-dates Rosa Park's historic decision in 1955 to refuse to give up her seat on a Montgomery, Ala., bus to a white man.

Viola Desmond, then a 32-year-old beautician, was driving from Halifax to Sydney, Nova Scotia on Nov. 8, 1946, when her car broke down in New Glasgow. She decided to see a movie at the Roseland Theatre while she waited for repairs.

Desmond sat downstairs, unaware of the theatre's rule that blacks could sit only in the balcony seats. She was asked to leave but refused. Eventually, the manager and a police officer pulled her out.

Desmond spent the night in jail. The next morning, she was convicted of tax evasion. Prosecutors made no mention of race. They told the judge that Desmond didn't pay the full price to sit up front and therefore didn't pay the proper tax — a difference of one cent. That is racism Canadian style – instead of saying: coloured people are not allowed in the front seats Viola Desmond was fined \$20 and sentenced to 30 days in jail for failing to pay the tax on the one cent differential between the whites only seats and the balcony seats.

Desmond decided to fight the case with the help of the newly created Nova Scotia Association for the Advancement of Coloured People. She lost the first

appeal but won a second attempt on a technicality. The Nova Scotia provincial government ended up dismantling its segregation laws.

Viola Desmond had a Vision: we have the right to be human beings, to be respected as human beings and to be given the rights of human beings which includes the right to equal access to public and private services without discrimination based upon our race. A clear concept but it took 65 years of struggle by Viola Desmond, her family and the Nova Scotian Black community before the Nova Scotia government formally apologized and granted a pardon to Viola Desmond this year! It took 65 years of struggle to right this wrong.

Tomorrow Realities

So where do we go from here?

Now Frederick Douglas taught us that power concedes nothing without a demand – it never has and it never will. So CBTU is as relevant today as the day it was created. As CBTU activists I would like to consider one specific area of activism: health care.

Health Care

I listened to the health care debate in the United States. I did not know much about the US health care system prior to this debate, but I knew how critical it was to Obama to pass health care reform legislation and I wanted to see him succeed. So when the debate started and I heard a reference to a “Public Option” I was shocked. I said to myself I can’t believe that the Republicans want to make public health care optional. See in Canada our health care system is universal and publically funded. But as I listened more to the debate I realized that it was actually the Democrats who were arguing that the US should introduce a public option into the health care system because the current system is privatized. I knew that approximately 40 million Americans (a disproportionate number of whom were African-Americans) did not have access to health care but I did not fully appreciated that there are people in the US (for ease of reference I will refer to them as Sarah Palin) who think that it is a good idea for someone to have the right to own a hospital for profit.

As CBTU activists in Canada we must oppose efforts to privatize our health care system. We should never be placed in a position of having to decide whether to put food on our table or pay to visit a doctor to take care of the ulcer that we have from the stress of fighting racism in the workplace. And let there be no mistake about it, Sarah Palin did not visit Hamilton recently because she believes that health care in Canada should remain publically funded. And Jean Charest, the premier of Quebec has recently introduced health care user fees. I don’t know

where Jean Charest got this idea of user fees because Sarah Palin can't see Quebec from her house. In Canada we must reject the Jean Charest budget, we must tell McGuinty, the premier of Ontario to stop delisting health care services and start re-listing services and we have to vote Harper, the Conservative Prime Minister of Canada out of office.

As CBTU activists in the United States we must continue to struggle until the Constitutional right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness includes the right for all to access quality publically funded health care services. Because we are sick and tired of being sick and tired and I don't understand how I can pursue happiness if I can't access quality publically funded health care when I am sick. It sounds like Obama took a bold first and important step. Now lets get him re-elected to finish what was started!

We will Win

Now CBTU members in Ontario know that I like to conclude by making a prediction.

I predict that we will win. We will win because we must.

- We will win because we were born from a throne older than Rome and our flag will rise again.

- We will win because we will never let the sacrifices of our ancestors go in vain.
- We will win because our struggle against racism pre-dates us and will continue past us and during our lives we will teach our daughters and sons that they are young, gifted and black.
- We will win because the demographics in Canada and the United States are rapidly changing to the point where so-called “Visible Minority” will mean “white” by 2031
- We will win because we have learned the difference between an ally who stands with us when times are easy and an ally who stands with us when the battle appears bleak
- We will win because the long arm of the universe points towards justice and we have fierce angels on our side.
- We will win because the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists has assembled black activists from across North America who have the audacity of hope.

- We will win because we remember what we were told at the CBTU Convention in New Orleans – it doesn't matter how big the storm or how strong the winds – we will never leave our shotgun house.
- We will win because our adversaries have failed to understand that our identities as individuals are integrally connected to our identity with our community. We gain strength from being here together today and will continue to build from strength to strength from CBTU Convention to CBTU Convention
- To those among us who may feel that they have become big enough that they can stand alone – remember that Barak Obama is the biggest man in the world and he knows that he will need the support of CBTU next election to take out some of those Tea Party votes.
- To those among us who may chose to surrender to silence – know this that our elders will find us if we chose to remain silent
- To those who oppose us know this – we will fulfill the Visions of our ancestors. A Vision that they were prepared to die for and a Vision that we are prepared to live for!
- Thank you, God bless and let's have a great Convention.