



The Brief

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Kendra Levi-Paul asks New Brunswickers and their government to open their hearts and demand change for First Nations children

By OSCAR BAKER



Indigenous youth activist Kendra Levi-Paul, 11, on the steps of the New Brunswick Legislative Assembly on Feb. 13, 2018. Photo by Michael Hawkins/Wicked Ideas.

Eleven-year-old Kendra Levi-Paul is asking the Government of New Brunswick to have a heart and fully enact Jordan’s Principle to guarantee First Nations children equal access to education, health care, and social services in Canada.

Standing on the steps of the Legislative Assembly on February 13, when temperatures reached -13 degrees Celsius with the windchill, Levi-Paul told the small crowd who came out to support her that “equality doesn’t always mean equal.” Joining her were youth performers T.J. Sock, Mason and Madison Milliea, as well as Aqtamgiaq Tepgunset Augustine who danced in traditional regalia. They were joined by Indigenous drummers who sang chants and drummed as they demanded change.

“We need better education and to protect the rights of the children and Indigenous people,” said Levi-Paul, who is Mi’kmaw and Wolastoq. Her parents are from New Brunswick’s two largest reserves, Elsipogtog and Tobique First Nation and the sixth grader attends school in Listuguj First Nation in Quebec after moving there from Elsipogtog.

“I would like our schools to be beautifully furnished and people have really good healthcare,” said Levi-Paul, who described her family’s move to Listuguj as “the best move ever” because it gives her access to a better school than the one she left behind in Elsipogtog. However, she says, many First Nations students don’t have the opportunity to move to better conditions.

“It just hurts to know somebody is hurting,” said Levi-Paul.

Levi-Paul’s speech comes a day before the national “Have a Heart Day,” which is hosted by the First Nations Child and Family Caring Society of Canada and dedicated to improving the well-being of Indigenous children in Canada. It encourages people to send valentines and letters to MPs and the Prime Minister calling for improvements in the child welfare services in Canada and to implement Jordan’s Principle.

First Nations Child and Family Caring Society executive director Cindy Blackstock is a national advocate for Indigenous youth rights and a pen pal to Levi-Paul. The two met two years ago and Levi-Paul was inspired to get involved.

“We talked to her and so I thought so well I’m youth. I should be fighting for my rights and protecting my rights so they don’t get violated,” said Levi-Paul, who presented her letter to New Brunswick Deputy Premier and Minister of Families and Children Stephen Horsman.

Last year, she and her classmates planted seeds but this year Levi-Paul wanted to do more and decided to write a letter to New Brunswick Premier Brian Gallant and Prime Minister Justin Trudeau. With only three weeks to plan, her mother Lisa Levi-Paul reached out to her work place, Mawiw Council, which advocates for the needs of Elsipogtog, Tobique, and Burnt Church First Nations, to help organize the rally.

Lisa Levi-Paul said her work place did not hesitate to support the rally and that she could not be prouder of her daughter. “Kendra’s really a smart girl. You can explain to her complex things to her and she finds a way to understand,” said Levi-Paul, adding thinking about her daughters actions made her heart about to burst.

Also in attendance was Kendra’s grandmother, Laura Levi of Elsipogtog First Nation. She was happy to see the participation but spoke about how dire the conditions can be because of underfunding .

“Most of the children that are growing up are hopeless because of that, and I hope with the program with Cindy Blackstock, it will move things forward.”

Levi said throughout the years government programs have funded just enough to “barely keep us alive.”

She said Canadians should consider their own children’s suffering as Indigenous children and maybe then things would change faster. But she’s hopeful that change is coming soon because there’s so much that First Nations children lack. “If their [Canadian] children are suffering as much as our children they would care,” says Levi, “They would stand with their children.”

Oscar Baker is an award-winning multimedia reporter from Elsipogtog First Nation and St. Augustine, Florida. He is the winner of the David Adams Richards award for non-fiction writing for The Violent Ones. Follow him on Twitter @oggycane4lyfe

This article was first published by Wicked Ideas.

Paul Robeson in Saint John in 1945 : A concert that was more than a concert

By DAVID FRANK

I remember listening to Paul Robeson, many years ago, in a class on American history. It was an LP called Ballad for Americans, and we played that ten-minute title track, first recorded in 1939, over and over. Robeson’s bass baritone boomed out a condensed version of American history, and as we listened, we covered the board with words such as Liberty, Equality, Slavery, Exploitation, Discrimination, Democracy – terms that captured the tensions between the American dream and the American reality. It was a perfect introduction to the course.

And it was a perfect introduction to Robeson. He was born in New Jersey in 1898. His father was a runaway slave who became a minister in the Presbyterian Church. His mother came from a family of free blacks active in anti-slavery agitation. As a young man, Robeson distinguished himself as a scholar, athlete, actor and singer. In between stage, film, record and radio work, Robeson toured as a concert artist, performing in the world’s biggest concert halls.

An accomplished citizen of the world, Robeson never stopped loving his home country. But he was also a critic of its failures, especially in protecting the rights of African-Americans. He attracted an enormous FBI file, and in the 1950s his passport was taken away on the grounds that it was “not in the interests of the United States” for him to travel abroad.

In 1945, Robeson was at the peak of his fame. He had finished a long run as Othello, the first black actor in more than a century to play Shakespeare’s tragic hero. In September Robeson returned to New York City after performing for troops in Europe. Then he started a seven-month North American tour. One of his first stops was Saint John.

The visit was organized by the Saint John Community Concert Association. Their shows at Saint John High School that year featured several prominent performers, including the Trapp Family Singers, whose story was later fictionalized in The Sound of Music. But nobody that year was bigger than Robeson.

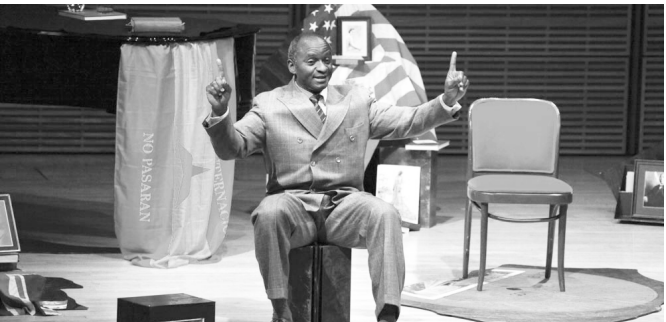
Not many details of the visit are known, but the late Lena O’Ree, a leader in the fight against racial discrimination in New Brunswick, has recalled that Robeson was refused accommodation at the Admiral Beatty Hotel.

Robeson was more than familiar with the colour bar. When he was booked to perform at the Hollywood Bowl a few years earlier, every hotel in Los Angeles turned him down. When he agreed to take a room under an assumed name, Robeson insisted on sitting in the lobby for several hours every day, where he would be easily recognized. He reasoned this would make it more difficult to refuse people of colour in the future.

In Saint John, any number of families, black or white, would happily have taken Robeson into their homes. But, O’Ree recalled, another large establishment, the Royal Hotel, “made an exception.” It is tempting to imagine Robeson sitting in the lobby of the Royal Hotel on the day of the concert, all six foot four inches, again deliberately making himself impossible to overlook.

An audience of 1,000 was considered a full house at Saint John High. On the night of the performance on Wednesday 3 October, extra seats were placed on stage and in all available spaces. Hundreds of people had to be turned away.

Robeson did not disappoint. Accompanied by his friend Lawrence Brown on piano, Robeson’s huge voice commanded total attention.



Tayo Aluko performed “Call Mr. Robeson” to NB audiences in February.

It’s time for a higher N.B. minimum wage

By JEAN-CLAUDE BASQUE

It is time for New Brunswick to increase its minimum wage. And contrary to the view of opponents, there are many convincing arguments for adopting this policy change.

Consider that for the past 15 years, the number of workers at the minimum wage has fluctuated between six and ten per cent of the labour force. The majority of these workers have always been women. The percentage of teenagers, however, has decreased over the years, which means that almost sixty per cent of today’s minimum-wage workers are twenty years and older.

The salary of minimum wage workers has constantly fallen under the poverty line. Working conditions offered to minimum wage workers are outdated. As 90 per cent of workers at the minimum wage are not unionized, their workplace falls under employment standards adopted by the provincial government. These standards are really basic and do not provide much coverage.

Presently, under the Employment Standards Act and Regulations, most minimum wage workers don’t have sick leave, child care, family responsibilities or compassionate care paid leaves. They are only paid time-and-a-half of the minimum wage for hours worked after 44 hours during a work week. They get four per cent of vacation pay if they worked less than eight years and six per cent of vacation pay after eight years.

Most of the time, workers must pay for the required employers’ uniform since there is no mention in the Regulations that the employer must provide it.

Each time there is talk of increasing the minimum wage or bringing forward better employment standards, we hear strong voices from the business community opposing these changes. One of their main arguments is that small and medium-sized businesses cannot absorb the cost and there will be job losses.

It is interesting to note that when you check this argument against the facts, we get a completely different picture. Indeed, between 2008 and 2018, the province has increased the minimum wage 12 times and the sky has not fallen. Further research into Statistics Canada’s database on the number of employees by enterprise size reveals that for small and medium-sized businesses, the number of employees has increased in the last ten years.

This certainly goes against the urban myth that minimum wage increases are job killers. The same data shows that job losses occurred in large enterprises that employ 500 workers or more. This situation can be explained in part by the devastation of our industrial

base, especially in the forestry sector, with the closing of pulp and paper mills and sawmills, the 2008-09 financial crisis, and the fluctuation of the Canadian dollar, but certainly not by increases to the minimum wage.

Raising the minimum wage brings a wide range of benefits for workers and their families, as well as for employers and the economy of the province.

First and foremost, any increase to the minimum wage puts more dollars in workers’ pockets. Minimum-wage workers and their families are struggling to provide for their basic needs. The cost of food, heating and rent increases every year. These are not luxuries; they are everyday necessities.

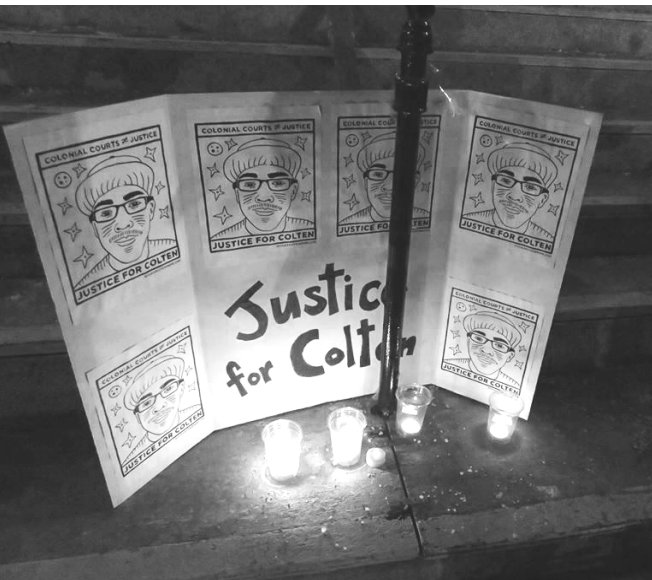
Extra income would enable workers to provide more necessities rather than having to choose what essential needs will have to be sacrificed. Not only does the family unit benefit from having a decent revenue, but the entire community benefits as well. Community services such as food banks, soup kitchens, school breakfast programs, and housing programs won’t be run thin on resources. There will be a decrease in the need for government help such as subsidies.

Higher wages will result in a lower turnover rate, which saves money for employers. Employees with higher wages will stay longer and become more knowledgeable and confident; therefore, they will increase their productivity. Higher wages also means these workers, who have more money in their pockets, will spend it in their local economy since workers at minimum wage aren’t going out of the country on vacation or investing in RRSPs. Increasing a worker’s minimum wage will bring more consumers in the economy, which will translate into more economic growth for his region and his community.

A minimum wage increase is a win-win situation, since it helps not only the employee, but also the employer and the economy.

Hopefully, the province will follow the lead of Alberta, Ontario and now British Columbia and plan right now to increase our minimum wage to \$15 an hour, be it over the next four years. It should also review our employment standards to reflect the ever-changing needs of workers and their families. Most certainly, these two actions would go a long way to attain one of the goals of the Poverty reduction Plan which is to reduce poverty in our province.

Jean-Claude Basque is provincial coordinator for the NB Common Front for Social Justice.



Over 150 people attended a vigil for justice for Colten Boushie in Fredericton on Feb. 12, 2018. Vigils were held across the country after a judge and jury acquitted Gerald Stanley of all charges in the death of Boushie, a 22-year-old from Red Pheasant Cree Nation in Saskatchewan. In August 2016, Boushie was shot dead by Stanley with a handgun on his farm while out for a drive with his friends. Photo by Charles LeBlanc.



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Community Calendar

To list your community event, email info@nbmediacoop.org. For an updated listing of events, check nbmediacoop.org.

NB Media Co-op Fake News Trivia

Thurs, March 15 at 7:00pm. Grad House, 676 Windsor St., Fredericton. A fun ‘true or false’ trivia night for politicians, media watchers, and anyone else! Bring a team of your media savvy friends or come solo and we will find you a team. **Prizes to be won!** Contact: info@nbmediacoop.org.

A concert that was more than a concert

The performance drew from great classics as well as folk music and contemporary song. He started with Beethoven and Mozart, and continued with old French and English traditional songs and a favourite spiritual, “Scandalize My Name.”

A second group of songs also featured old and new, starting with Moussorgsky, Shakespeare and several spirituals. He also introduced songs that he had performed for the Loyalist forces in the Spanish Civil War in 1938. There may have been some rumblings in the audience over this, as one listener wrote: “With few exceptions, everyone stayed and loved it.”

A third set delved deeper into the African-American tradition: “Deep River,” “I Got a Robe,” “I’m Going to Tell God all my Troubles” and “Great Gittin’ Up Mornin’.” Spirituals such as these were intended to uplift audiences, to instill optimism and confidence, always one of Robeson’s purposes.

At the end, there were encores, including “Old Man River,” made famous by Robeson in stage and film versions of the musical Show Boat. Since first performing it in 1928, he had taken to changing the words to express resolution instead of resignation: “But I keeps laffin’/ Instead of cryin’ / I must keep fightin’; / Until I’m dyin’, / And Ol’ Man River, / He’ll just keep rollin’ along!”

Any remarks Robeson made from the stage were not reported in detail, but he was not one to hide his political views. One audience member wrote that the concert “would have warmed the heart of any Socialist” and added a comment that captured much of Robeson’s appeal: “The simplicity and natural dignity of Robeson is a living reproach to spreaders of race prejudice, all of whom are not to be favoured in fascist countries alone.”

That was probably the message Robeson most wanted to deliver at this time. From his point of view, at the end of the war there was much to do to ensure that the allies fulfilled their democratic obligations at home. He was encouraged by the achievements of the New Deal in making progress towards social justice in America.

After 1945 Robeson became an increasingly fierce critic of racism and militarism as practised by his own country. He was a leading spokesman for the Council on African Affairs and repeatedly demanded that the American government introduce anti-lynching legislation. With the arrival of the Cold War, he was accused of being too friendly to Communist causes, possibly even a member of the Communist Party. Robeson denied it, and the FBI was never able to prove otherwise.

As far as is known, Robeson never returned to the Maritimes. When his passport was confiscated, he sang for several years at an annual open-air picnic at the Peace Arch Park on the Washington-British Columbia border. He was allowed to visit Canada briefly in 1956, but later that year the Canadian government refused permission for a planned seventeen-city tour across Canada.

Eventually, the courts forced the government to return his passport, and Robeson was again able to travel and perform around the world. But his influence in the United States had been greatly diminished by the blacklist and persecution, and by the 1960s his health was in serious decline. At the time of his death in 1976, around the time we were playing his old record in a history class, interest in Robeson was starting to revive.

Did he have an influence in Saint John? Possibly. His artistic message was straightforward. It was the invitation of all great culture to overcome divisions and strengthen the universal bonds of humanity. But Robeson also knew that if ideals are to be more than sentiments, they needed to be translated into practical causes.

The ideals of the war were already stirring things up in New Brunswick. Only a few weeks before Robeson’s visit in 1945, a young woman in Fredericton, Thelma O’Ree, published a protest against the conditions facing black men returning from the war. Coming home, she wrote, they found an unchanged segregated world: “I am referring to the humiliating and degrading treatment we have had to contend with in our theatres, hotels, restaurants and places of amusement. What does Democracy mean? When does it begin at home?” A few years later, in 1958, Thelma’s younger brother, Willie O’Ree, would become the first black player in the National Hockey League.

When Robeson came to Saint John in 1945, Lena O’Ree too was already earning her reputation as an activist in the black community, as she had helped to integrate the city’s YWCA. Some years later, when she was working as an elevator attendant at the Admiral Beatty in the 1950s, O’Ree insisted on her right to enter the building through the front door. It was a famous gesture that helped lead to the desegregation of the hotel and other city institutions.

O’Ree herself, one of the founders of Saint John’s black cultural association, PRUDE, received the New Brunswick Human Rights Award in 1998, one hundred years after the birth of Paul Robeson. She had not forgotten his visit. On several occasions in the years before her death in 2003, O’Ree shared recollections of the time Robeson came to Saint John.

It was a concert that was always more than just a concert.

David Frank is a professor emeritus in Canadian history at the University of New Brunswick.