

# FRED UPSHAW

## An OPSEU Stalwart

### *Humble Beginnings*

**B**orn in 1935 in Halifax, Fred moved to Toronto with his mother when he was six years old. He learned his street smarts growing up black, the eldest of six children in a single parent family in Kensington Market.

In 1952, his high school decided on mandatory uniforms for all students: Blue tunics for the girls and grey flannel pants for the boys. There had been no consultation with the students. As student council president, Fred led a revolt. "I objected to them imposing that type of regulation without at least conferring with the student council," Fred recalls. "We called on the student body to come to school, but not go inside." Under Fred's leadership, the students stayed out and the administration backed down. Fred was suspended for a day, but he won the issue.

### *Singing – one of this many talents*

As a youngster, Fred always sang in the church choir. In his teens he was soloist for the Kingston Road United Church in Toronto. It was his first paid professional position in what was to later become a successful singing career.

After Grade 12, Fred left school and began working because, as the oldest child in the family he thought it was time for him to help his mother and siblings. He landed a job as clerk at a customs brokerage firm on downtown Bay Street.

In 1956, he married Rosemarie Williams. At 36, with five young children, Fred found himself out of work and decided to go back to school. He secured employment at the Whitby Psychiatric Hospital, where he previously volunteered. Working as a full-time attendant, he took the nursing course at Durham College.

### *In Union There is Strength*

When he joined the union in 1972, our union was still called the Civil Service Association of Ontario and had just won limited bargaining rights with the Ontario government. Three years later, OPSEU was born. Fred was soon elected chief steward, then president of OPSEU Local 331, representing more than 1,000 staff of the hospital.

Fred was elected to the OPSEU Executive Board in 1980 from Region 3. In 1984, Fred was elected OPSEU First Vice-President and Treasurer. Fred succeeded James Clancy as president of OPSEU Sept. 6, 1990, after Clancy was elected president of the National Union of Public and General Employees (NUPGE). Fred won the OPSEU presidency in his own right at the 1991 OPSEU Convention, and was re-elected in 1993.

As OPSEU President, Fred served on the boards of both the union-run Workers Health and Safety Centre and the joint Workplace Health and Safety Agency. He continued to teach at OPSEU weekend educationals, making speeches for the Jaycees, and as a judge for various speaking competitions.

### *Leadership Triumphs*

During Fred's first three years in office, the union negotiated a big raise for civil servants, bargaining unit reform and human rights language. OPSEU won the right to strike for provincial civil servants; joint control over the pension plan in the OPS and the colleges; political rights for Crown employees and sectoral bargaining for BPS ambulance officers.

As the first black person to lead a major trade union in Canada, Fred had experienced systemic barriers faced by people of colour. He avidly promoted employment equity, both within the OPSEU membership and in the Union's own staff hiring. In 1991, Fred held a summit with Ontario Chief Gordon Peters, and the union launched a province-wide education program to bring OPSEU leaders to Indian reserves and Native Friendship Centres. "For me, this was the inspirational highlight of my first term as OPSEU president," Fred said.

When Bob Rae unveiled the social contract to chop \$2 billion from public services and freeze public sector wages for three years, Fred fought hard for his members and the preservation of free collective bargaining. "The social contract had one positive effect that the government did not foresee," Fred said. "It united members across the province in a fight-back campaign unprecedented in our history to that time."

In April 1995 Convention, Fred lost the presidency and graciously turned over the reins of power to Leah Casselman. He returned to nursing at Whitby Psych.

### *Activism Continues*

During the 1996 OPS strike, Fred organized and led the strike in the Whitby and Oshawa area.

At the April, 1999 OPSEU Convention, Fred became the first recipient of the OPSEU Human Rights Award, given to the individual exemplifying the pursuit of equity and human rights, in recognition of his work as a member of the human rights committees of both the Ontario Federation of Labour and the Canadian Labour Congress. Convention delegates also awarded him a Lifetime Membership in OPSEU.

Fred is still active in the Retiree's Division of OPSEU. He is also the Secretary-Treasurer of the Durham Region Labour Council.

