

Convention 2001 highlights

Stanley Knowles Humanitarian Award honours Stephen Lewis

Stephen Lewis, an articulate spokesperson for the powerless, the needy, the dispossessed and the disadvantaged, received OPSEU's highest honour at the 2001 Convention.

Lewis, former Ontario NDP leader, former Canadian ambassador to the United Nations, and currently UN special envoy to Africa dealing with AIDS, has been a constant friend of organized labour, and has worked with OPSEU on several occasions.

He was moved by receiving the recognition from a union.

And he spoke passionately about the devastation wreaked by HIV/AIDS across east and south Africa.

"It is almost impossible to find words to describe how that continent is shredded, its infrastructure destroyed, by a virus of such incomparably damaging proportions. 16 million have died; 25 million carry the virus; 2 million die each year; 4 million new people are infected. How do you deal with a statistic of 13 million orphans? I can't convey what it means in a continent like Africa."

One result is families headed by little girls of 11 to 14, trying to look after siblings without resources.

"It is perverse and racist how we deal with Africa," he said.

"It is unfathomable that we are willing to watch tens of millions of people die and become infected with a sickness not seen since the bubonic plague, but for the donor countries and global institutions I have never seen anything like the response. It is so pathetically slow; so slow as to be inconsequential and inert," he said.

Lewis has held a series of UN positions

since resigning as ambassador in 1988.

He did a special report on race relations in Ontario, which influenced government policy on policing, criminal justice systems, employment equity, education and anti-racism.

The Organization of African Unity appointed him to an International Panel of Eminent Personalities to investigate the 1994 genocide in Rwanda.

For the full text of Stephen Lewis' speech to the convention, see the OPSEU website at: www.opseu.org/convention/slewis.htm

The award, named after its first recipient, Stanley Knowles, recognizes outstanding contributions

to bettering the human condition.

Past recipients, in addition to Knowles have been:

- South Africa's first black prime minister, Nelson Mandela,
- Assassinated Brazilian rubber-worker and environmentalist Chico Mendes,
- The National Action Committee on the Status of Women,
- Manitoba MLA Elijah Harper,
- Farmworker leader Cesar Chavez,
- Guatemalan human rights activist Rigoberta Menchu,
- Canadian human rights activist Bromley Armstrong,
- Children's activist Craig Kielburger,
- Nigerian writer and activist Ken Saro-Wiwa,
- Indonesian union leader Mucktar Pakpahan,
- The late NDP leader Tommy Douglas, father of Medicare, and
- The late American singer, social rights crusader and human rights activist Paul Robeson. ▲



Annie Daynes photo