

LOCAL HEROES

BLACK HISTORY MONTH



Paul Robeson

Submitted by: Lenshina from Fair and Fabulous

Location: Newcastle Emlyn, Wales

I grew up as a child in London during the 1970s – a time when groups such as the Anti Nazi League and Rock Against Racism took on, and largely defeated, the racist National Front. I must have been around the age that our managing director (young daughter!) is now when we went to one of the big anti-racism marches. We were stood at the edge of the road watching all the beautiful trade union banners going by when there was a lone Welsh miner, complete with miner's lamp and covered in coal dust, walking on his own with a sign that saying something along the lines of the fact that when you were down a mine everyone was black. I don't exactly remember the wording, or know why he was on his own, or how I know he was Welsh, but I do remember my dad going out into the road to applaud him.

Fast forward to now, when it seems that many of the battles we thought had been won are having to be fought all over again, this lone marcher came to my mind and with him the story of Paul Robeson and his links with the miners of South Wales.

Paul Robeson was born in April 1898, the son of an escaped slave, and went on to become an acclaimed singer, one of the best American football players of his generation, a Shakespearean actor, a Hollywood film star, a lawyer, civil rights campaigner and political activist. But the connection between his activism and Wales is less well known. It all began by accident. Robeson was in London performing in Show Boat when, on the way back from a matinee performance, when he came across a group of miners from the Rhondda valley who had walked to London to protest the loss of their jobs following the general strike of 1926. Struck initially by their singing, he joined their protest and sang to them on the steps of a city building. He then paid for the miners to be able to go home by train and provided them with food and clothing.

This was the beginning of a relationship that lasted many years, with Robeson travelling across Wales, singing, marching and raising money for mining charities. It was his interactions with the miners' cause and understanding their harsh working conditions that helped to ignite Robeson's political activism and change his view on the world. "It's from the miners in Wales," Robeson said, "[that] I first understood the struggle of Negro and white together." In later life, when he found himself blacklisted in the US with his passport confiscated because of his political views, the Welsh mining community supported him in return by inviting him to perform at the Miner's Eisteddfod in Porthcawl via a transatlantic telephone link. The miners also added their voices and signatures to the petition that eventually led to his passport being restored.

In Robeson's 1940 film 'The Proud Valley', (the film he was most proud of) where he played a black miner in the valleys, one character says "Aren't we all black down that pit?". Maybe my lone miner had seen the film, and maybe me seeing that miner that day influenced my decision to move to Wales and make my life here.

Robeson once said "The artist must take sides. He must elect to fight for freedom or slavery. I have made my choice. I had no alternative." This is also true for many of us in the Fair Trade movement, made particularly relevant by the fact that miners, including children, are still working in appalling conditions today to provide us with gold and precious metals for our jewellery and technology.