Unifor celebrates Asian and South Asian Heritage Month 2019
May 14, 2019

B.C.’s gold rush fueled the first big wave of Chinese immigrants more than one hundred and fifty years ago and others from across the Asian continent followed. Since then, Asian Canadians have played a significant role in shaping our country by enriching its diversity, economy and culture.

During May, Unifor celebrates their contributions, as we feature members from these communities and highlight their activism.

Asian and South Asian Heritage Month aims to combat racism and discrimination. Unfortunately, the Canadian government’s treatment of early immigrants is a shameful part of our history.

Responding to anti-immigration sentiment in 1885, the federal parliament passed the Chinese Immigration Act, otherwise known as a head tax. All Chinese entering Canada had to pay a $50 fee. By 1903, the fee rose to $500.

On the eve of the First World War, in May 1914, the Komagatu Maru sailed into Vancouver, with passengers from India. It was denied docking under the continuous journey regulation of Canada’s Immigration Act, a law used to deter immigrants from Asia. After two months living onboard in squalid conditions, most of the passengers were forced to return to India, where 19 died in a clash with police.

Shortly after Japan's entry into the Second World War, Canadians of Japanese origin were forcibly removed from their homes on the west coast. They were placed in camps, despite very little evidence to show that they were a security threat.

Today, Canadians with Asian ancestry comprise the largest and fastest growing visible minority group in Canada, with 17.7% of the population. Many have overcome great adversity to live here and generations of hard work have transformed communities and helped make Canada prosperous.

As the union for everyone, Unifor is committed to promoting equality, diversity and inclusion and to breaking down barriers and stereotypes. To combat racism, Unifor recently held nation-wide roundtables where participants learned strategies to fight discrimination in workplaces and communities.