

A GUIDE TO PRIMARY AND SECONDARY RESOURCES FOR EDUCATORS

Themes include: solidarity across communities; the impact of grassroots action; and refusals to be bystanders to injustice. Responsibility remains with educators to ensure that materials are age appropriate for their students.

Asquith Xavier breaks the colour bar at Euston Station, 1966

In spring 1966 Asquith Xavier, a 46 year old porter for ten years at Marylebone station, applied to become a guard at Euston station. Before leaving Soufrière in the Commonwealth of Dominica in the West Indies for Britain, he had been a police officer and had been in the army. Asquith had natural authority. He was well spoken, always immaculately dressed and a source of wise advice and support to his friends, colleagues and family.

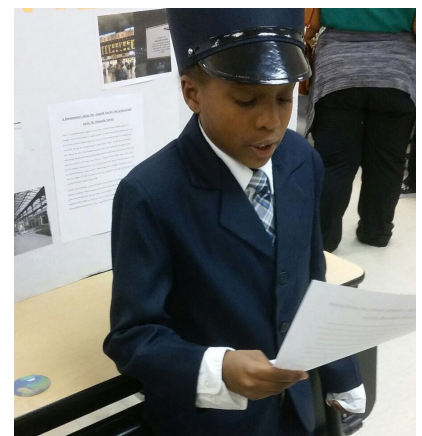
In March he received a letter from the local staff committee at Euston saying that he could not be a guard as Euston station did not accept “coloured men” in that post. The committee included members of the National Union of Railwaymen (NUR). This discrimination was legal in 1966. The Race Relations Act of 1965 had made discrimination in several situations illegal, but not in employment or housing. Asquith decided to challenge the ‘colour bar’. The stress probably led to Asquith being hospitalized with a stomach ulcer in July.

There was a history of ‘colour bars’ in London stations. In 1957 some union members at Kings Cross station had campaigned against “coloured workers.” Other members opposed this discrimination and Ewan MacColl’s song *The Colour Bar Strike* about it concluded: “They did not like the coloured man/They wouldn’t work with him, they said/In truth, it touched their overtime/And to a colour bar it led.” A BBC Panorama documentary in 1956 found the ‘colour bar’ at Euston was active.

Asquith’s NUR colleague from Marylebone, Jim Prendergast, gave the story to the press. The transport minister Barbara Castle was asked by the Holborn and St Pancras South MP Lena Jeger whether she would direct the Railway Board to end discrimination against “coloured workers.” Castle referred to Asquith’s case in her written answer in Parliament: “The Board tell me that they have reemphasised to all concerned throughout the undertaking the need for vigilance to prevent discrimination and for using every endeavour to resolve these difficulties when they do arise, as in the case which has recently received so much publicity.”

By July, the national press reported that the union and British Rail Board had reached an agreement which enabled Asquith to start work on 15 August. He received death threats and had a police escort to work. The Daily Mirror on 16 July reported that he had been refused the job “because the station’s 1,200 railmen were against coloured men having permanent jobs there”. In the NUR magazine from 22 July, an article claimed that there never had been a ‘colour bar’ at Euston. Asquith faced all this down to demand his right to work and came to be highly respected in his new role, as he had been in his previous ones.

Photo thanks to Maria Asquith



Asquith’s relative dressed up as him at a Black History Month event in school

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Tony Donaghey recalls Asquith looking out for him at Marylebone when Donaghey was a young man in his early career. Asquith educated him about discrimination.

Tony eventually became President of the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers, the successor organization to the National Union of Railwaymen. A plaque at Euston station commemorates the heroic struggle.

In 1968 a new Race Relations Act outlawed racial discrimination at work and in housing. Asquith's stand had increased pressure for this change. His family remains very proud of his bravery.

Lord Herman Ouseley reflects: "Asquith was a trailblazer at a time when he was excluded from access to work. He helped to break the colour bar in employment at Euston station, when British Railways were forced to overturn the ban in 1966. His contribution to the struggle for equality, inclusion and justice is noteworthy as every 'small victory' was massive in breaking down the walls of racial prejudice, ignorance and intolerance."

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