



Black politics and unions



RACIST TRADE UNIONS?

It has been a year in which the involvement and representation of black workers has been, if not quite centre-stage, nevertheless an important issue. However, assessments have varied about just how much progress has been achieved to date, while discussion, sometimes heated, has continued on what role, if any, should be played by black groups within trade unions. Both Ken Gill's speech at the TUC Congress and the Labour Research Department's assessment contained in their pamphlet *Black Workers, Trade Unions and the Law* expressed the view that significant progress had been made. This has to be contrasted both to the damning evidence contained in a pamphlet produced by the Lancashire Association of Trades Councils, *Trade Union Structures and Black Workers' Participation*, and the experience of many black activists, which shows that racism continues to be endemic at all levels of the movement.

Any assumption that the trade union movement will naturally and progressively tread the road to anti-racism cannot be sustained in the face of the movement's own history. As late as the end of the 1940s, the National Union of Seamen banned black sailors from British ships; the 'colour bar' operated widely in the 50s, often supported by the trade unions at the workplace, and throughout the 60s the TUC supported a specifically racist immigration policy which formed the basis of the Labour government's 1971 Immigration Act. Even in the 1970s, white workers crossed the picket lines of black workers during several disputes.

This persistent culture of racism within

the trade union movement was only challenged effectively in the late 70s and since then some progress has been made. Several unions are now producing race equality policy statements, taking part, with management, in ethnic monitoring of the workforce and issuing anti-racist publications. But these developments are almost totally confined to national level, have taken place in only some unions and have so far had little impact on local practice or in challenging the racism which continues to exist within the trade unions themselves and amongst the membership.

What is needed to achieve this is a clear strategic perspective and this is singularly lacking at the moment. For the Left, the self-organisation of black people within the movement should be seen as a vital part of any such strategy. Yet, with some exceptions, the trade union movement in general, including some left-led unions like NUPE, are opposed to the formation of black workers' groups within their organisations. Why is this? On whose terms should black workers be involved? Is it because black workers' groups may be difficult to control?

The case for supporting black workers' groups where they are demanded is a very strong one: black workers themselves, while sharing the common experience of racism, are differentiated by culture and ethnicity and therefore need to establish a consensus amongst themselves about what they view as 'the problem'; they need to build confidence, develop skills and form a network of support; and lastly, they need to formulate the policies which will offer a real way forward for the trade union movement.

The trade union movement needs to face up to two important and related issues if it is to move beyond policy statements: equality for black people means that trade unionists will have to recognise the need for fundamental ideological and structural changes within the trade union movement itself. But the crisis of representation of black people is also part of a far wider one of representation and democracy within the trade union movement as a whole. Black groups could play an important role in both.

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