

# The Impact of Religion on Trade Union Relations with Black Workers in UK

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**Editor's Note:** This is a summary of a large report of 60 pages. The full report contains research documentation and references but is not ready for publication at this stage. The authors expect to write a fuller article for publication at a later stage.

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## Introduction

This research project has sought to conduct a preliminary investigation of two central frameworks we have identified within the British trade union movement for the recruitment and organising of Black workers:

1. those that fall within the remit of 'Black self-organisation' and
2. those that ascribe to the 'community unionism' model – notably 'broad-based alliances' between secular and religious organisations initiated primarily by the Citizen Organising Foundation.

This project has aimed to assess such initiatives and examine the contrasts and synergies between them. The research has also reflected five broader current issues notably:

1. the resurgence of a religious identity at both individual and group level;
2. the de-secularisation of public policy; and
3. the implications of new race relations and religious discrimination regulations on the world of work.
4. the debate on the decline of trade union membership and density in the UK and its consequence for black workers
5. the discussion on alternative methods of organising, in particular the notion of 'community unionism'.

This phase of the research has only touched the surface of these contextual current issues and has considered them only in relation to the organisation of black trade unionists. It is preliminary inquiry and is based upon a review of secondary sources' an analysis of empirical data collected through three focus groups

(involving a total of 29 trade unionists, anti racists and representatives of community and faith initiatives) and an additional four individual in depth interviews with 'key respondents'.

## The Research Findings

### Trade Unions and Anti-racism

Despite the poor historical record of trade unions in fighting racism, there was a clear and unquestioned consensus among the interviewees that unions have a huge role to play in this regard. However, concern was expressed that this work was not carried out effectively, consistently or strategically and that often anti fascist work was confused with anti-racist work. The evidence suggests that despite the presence of many racial discrimination

grievances, unions rarely take an initiative in dealing with them. Furthermore, the loss of resources and members has led many unions to behave 'defensively' and to reduce activities that are considered by the leadership to have a low chance of success—including the defence of individual members in race discrimination cases.

In addition, the dilemma persists among some trade unionists regarding their perceived obligation to represent their members' interest whatever these might be even when this might compromise their commitment to anti racism.

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### Is Black Self Organisation Still Relevant?

Black self-organisation within the trade union and labour movement is by now an accepted structural imperative, although its practice and level of embeddedness varies greatly from union to union. Many of our respondents recognised that the concept of political Blackness had been contested but they disputed the basis for this, seeing such a challenge as part of a strategy to fragment a collective response to racism:

### Black Workers' Forums and Community-Based Organising

A new 'Black led' approach to organising Black workers in the form of Black Workers' Forums was welcomed. These emerged from the resolution was passed at Congress in 2003 calling for the

TUC to support regional roundtable debates between Black trade unionists and Black community organisations as part of its commitment to organising Black workers. In the Midlands those involved with the one-day roundtable event decided to establish a longer-term alliance between Black activists within trade unions and community organisations. The specific objective of this alliance was to develop strategies for unionising and organising Black workers and tackling racism.

The Black Workers' Forum is a practical example of an alternative to the community unionism model. It is an example of an alternative model of organising which takes into account the criticisms of past failures highlighted in

many of the contributions in the focus groups.

### **Community Unionism**

Many respondents in our study were not yet familiar with the term 'community unionism' and those that had heard of it suggested it was woolly and vague. Advocates of community unionism argue that it has the potential to revive trade union branch membership and activity and make substantial gains for Black, migrant and undocumented workers. One form of Community unionism in UK is evidenced by the work of Citizen Organising Foundation. It has been involved in two particularly high profile workers campaigns: the Living Wage Campaign and Strangers into Citizens. However, the study also found that these campaigns fall short on a number of levels. Firstly, their attempts to move beyond 'race' and identity politics by

building broad alliances against economic injustice has in some ways lead to a denial of racism as a factor shaping the lives of Black and migrant workers. This is related to a second key problem that the alliances lack a shared vision precisely because the Chapters depend upon reaching an agreement between disparate partners including socially conservative religious groups that lead to less than radical campaigning demands. Thirdly, respondents in this study raised concerns about the longer-term implications of such alliances where religious groups play such a central role and could build legitimacy and power for fundamentalist forces particularly in Black communities.

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### **The Impact of the *Employment Equality (Religion and Belief) Regulations, 2003***

Part of the debate in the focus groups related to the incidence of discrimination on the grounds of religion and belief and the ways in which this had complicated trade union responses to racism and organising Black workers. Trade unionists in this pilot study noted the expression of three kinds of religious demands in the workplace: the timing of holidays and access to non-Christian holidays; the wearing of religious dress and symbols; the establishment of prayer rooms and permission for prayer breaks. A number of these demands were seen as unquestionable and requiring a commonsense response. None of the

participants took issue with the demand for prayer rooms for instance and some drew an analogy between accommodati

ng prayer and accommodating smoking breaks or smoking areas. Many of the trade unionists who participated in this pilot study talked about how difficult it has been to ignore claims relating to religious observance even if their idea of secular workplaces meant that they personally wanted to keep religion and religious identity out of the public sphere. In particular, two reasons were given for this. Firstly, the new Religion and Belief Regulations had lead directly to the articulation of a particular set of rights around religion and in turn potentially created a role for trade union activists to ensure that these are dispensed.

Whilst there was an unquestionable commitment amongst all participants to

tackle discrimination in all its forms, the possibility that cases of religious discrimination may strengthen religious political identities was viewed by and large as divisive and problematic. A number of participants raised concerns about the impact of the regulations on the development of organising strategies. The Religion and Belief Regulations occupy an anomalous position when compared to other anti discriminatory measures on race, gender, sexuality, disability and even age which relate in some way to existing self-organisation

structures within trade unions and distinct equality bodies. Several trade unionists argued that it would be difficult if not impossible to create self organised structures relating to this new anti discrimination

stream without in turn discriminating against one religious group or another or indeed against people that see themselves as having non religious beliefs. Hence there was a widespread opposition to any strategy that might contribute to the politicisation of 'religion' such as through self-organisation along faith lines.

## Conclusion

From the foregoing it is clear that much more work needs to be done in order to present a less London-based analysis of what is clearly an important issue for Black communities and for the trade union movement as a whole throughout the UK. So far this study has highlighted some of the conceptual and practical issues relating to the anti-racist role of trade unions. It has also presented some initial research on

the extent to which issues mediated through religious organisations help or hinder this work. Religious discrimination was recognised as an important issue in its own right but it is quite clear that the tendency to fuse racial and religious discrimination often serves to mask the former. Religious organisations, especially those perceived as 'fundamentalist' (of whatever persuasion) were regarded with some suspicion as often aspects of their agenda did not chime with the equality commitments of many Black trade unionists.

The work of the Citizen Organising Foundation, where it was known, had a mixed reception. In general, however, there was limited awareness

or interest among Black trade unionists in the work of the COF. Further work needs to be done to assess the impact of the COF's Living Wage initiative and its campaign among migrant workers; 'Strangers into Citizens'. This assessment needs to be made alongside that of the trade union movement on similar issues. The notion of 'community unionism' was largely unknown among our respondents and was counter posed to the concept of community-based trade unionism in which the unions themselves initiated a broad based alliance of Black community organisations campaigning on a range of issues. This was a model clearly favoured by Black activists within the trade union and anti racist movements since it was regarded as a way in which unions could show their commitment to the anti racist struggle outside the workplace as well as inside it, thereby establishing a potentially

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powerful link between workplace and community which, if carefully crafted, could form the basis for a renewal of Black self organisation. The Midlands Black Workers Forum is an example of this initiative. Although TUC policy, it is as yet unclear how far and to what extent this

example will be followed in other TUC regions. However, more detailed research is necessary to critically examine the community unionism concept and in addition an evaluation of the Black Workers' Forum would be useful.

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