

UNEQUAL COMRADES: TRADE UNIONS,
EQUAL OPPORTUNITY AND RACISM

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This paper will appear as part of a book on Racism and Equal Opportunity Policies in the 1980s: Rhetoric and Reality, edited by Richard Jenkins and John Solomos, which will be published by Cambridge University Press. Other papers in this volume will analyse the context of equal opportunity in relation to the law, politics, youth training, local authorities, public and private employing organisations, as well as introductory and concluding chapters by the editors.

UNEQUAL COMRADES: TRADE UNIONS, EQUAL OPPORTUNITY AND RACISM

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"We are convinced that trade unions are more decisive than any other organisations in the struggle to uproot racist prejudice, check racist discrimination and help our country to achieve true equal opportunity in jobs, promotion, education, housing and the whole of the social services."

In much of the literature and the debate on equal opportunity within organisations it is true to say that trade unions themselves do not figure prominently as examples. Yet it could be argued that, more than any other public or private employers, local authority or government agency, trade unions are a key sector where equal opportunity and anti-racism should be addressed with the utmost priority. There are two broad divisions to this activity: firstly, trade unions have an essential role to play in the promotion of racial equality in workplace negotiations with employers. Secondly, within their own organisations themselves, trade unions must be seen to be embracing equal opportunity and anti-racism, both in the treatment of a union's own employees, and in the organisation and servicing of its own membership, (activity which must include tackling racism amongst union members). And if, as the opening quotation suggests, trade unions can be more effective than other organisations in furthering the struggle for racial equality, then it also follows that a shirking from equal opportunity issues and a connivance in racism by trade unions must have particularly severe implications for black people.

This article looks at the record of trade unions in the area of equal opportunity and anti-racism. It describes the progress that has been made, as well as showing that there is nothing to be complacent about. The article looks first at the unfortunate history of trade unions in relation to black labour within this country. It describes the early open racism of white trade unionists, the poor example set by trade union and Labour leaders, the early resistance by black workers to their treatment and their organisation among themselves to fight the racism of both employers and unions. It describes the development of TUC initiatives on race and the continuing reality of racism in more subtle and varied forms. It considers the factors influencing the participation of black members within unions, the growth of separate black support organisations, and the ways in which some unions have responded positively to pressure for change by black and white activists. The fight for equal opportunity within unions is put in the context of unemployment, recession and structural change in the economy. Finally it considers some of the most recent investigations, criticisms and proposals for change, and union responses to these, and concludes that further progress in the area of equal opportunity will be achieved only through the continuing momentum of organisation and pressure by black members themselves.

THE FALLACY OF 'CHEAP LABOUR'

Trade union membership amongst migrant workers is one indicator of whether or not they are being employed to undercut indigenous working class standards. In Britain for many years, in the late 1940's and 1950's, the common reaction of white trade unionists to black migrant workers was to see them as a 'cheap labour' threat, and as potential strike breakers.

The 'cheap labour' argument is explored by Fevre (1984) in the case of Asian textile workers in Bradford. He found, in fact, no evidence of Asian workers directly undercutting prevailing wage rates by taking jobs in Bradford's mills at lower rates of pay than those who preceded them. It could be argued

that Asian workers provided 'cheap labour' only if the term is used to describe a situation where workers are employed at a rate of pay which the employer would normally expect to result in an eventual labour shortage: "More often.....the employer of cheap labour does not reduce wages, but rather refuses to increase them" (Fevre 1984, p.4).

Such circumstances do not readily enable the label of 'scab labour' to be attached to black migrant workers, particularly as white workers were not noticeably in competition for these jobs at a time of labour shortage. If there was any truth in the assertion that black workers were commonly undercutting white rates and strike breaking, this would have been reflected in lower rates of union membership. In fact, there is much evidence to suggest that Afro-Caribbean and Asian workers have had an above average propensity to join trade unions. The observation of Radin in 1966 that "coloured workers were as receptive to overtures to join the union as were English workers if not more so" (Radin 1966, p.166) was confirmed by the surveys of Smith in 1977 and 1981, and Rex and Tomlinson in 1979. More recently, the PSI survey found in 1982 that 56% of Asian and West Indian employees were union members, compared with 47% of white employees (Brown 1984, p. 169). Although much of this difference today is explainable by the different types of job done by black and white workers, historically the greater inclination for black workers to join unions held true regardless of occupational differences (Brown 1984, p. 182).

Not only were black men and women good 'joiners' of unions - they also demonstrated, from the early days, that they were not afraid to protect their interests in collective action. Radin described this as the "impatience of the newcomer". (Radin 1966, p. 172) However, many of the black migrant workers were not new to organisation and struggle - they brought with them a tradition and experience of militant collective action gained in their countries of origin, both within trade unions and, when such unions were perceived to be reactionary, outside them. Added to this, some black communities (like some mining communities in Britain) have had the benefit of strong support in their struggles from their own local communities. For black workers this has proved invaluable in those many cases over the last 30 years when their struggles were ignored or abandoned by the local union branch.

Collective action is, perhaps, more significant than union membership, which, as Phizacklea and Miles argue (1980, p.35) could only be an expedient form of action. In fact, black workers have demonstrated a much greater willingness to support their white workmates in collective action than white workers have shown in return. As one black trade unionist told Lee (1984, p.2):

"They know that when they call us out we will be solid, but the rest of the time they don't want to know"

UNIONS AND RACE: AN UNFORTUNATE HISTORY

This leads us to the poor record of the trade union movement in this sphere: to put it bluntly, black workers in this country have served the unions far better than the unions have served black workers. According to the features that are normally associated with trade unions: comradeship, solidarity and a desire to bring about improvements in the conditions of working people, this should not have been so.

In reality, history shows the record of the trade union movement to be characterised at worst by appalling racism and often by an indefensible neglect of the issues of race and equal opportunity. Between the two world wars, there was an effective colour bar in British industry, supported openly by individual unions. Apparently the greater 'tolerance' which operated towards black workers during both wars was clearly understood by white workers and their unions to be temporary. For example, in the spring of 1919 about 120 black workers who had been employed for years in Liverpool sugar refineries and oil

cake mills were sacked because white workers refused to work with them, and from 1918 onwards the seamen's unions formally and openly opposed the employment of black seamen when white crews were available (Fryer 1984, p.299 & 298).

Although such incidents are written off by trade unionists today as 'history', the uncomfortable fact remains that some of the most notorious cases of union hypocrisy and racism have occurred since the Second World War. Some of the most dramatic instances - those which have entered the labour movements' chamber of horrors - (such as Coneygre Foundry, Mansfield Hosiery, Imperial Typewriters) are discussed below. In as much as such disputes surface only intermittently they too are dismissed within a couple of years as the 'bad old days', an attitude which ignores the enduring injustices experienced by black union members.

Some of the main failings of the trade union movement with regard to its black membership may be summarised as follows:

1 The failure of the trade union leadership to entertain the idea that black members were faced with any different problems from those of the ordinary white membership, or that this necessitated any special policies.

2 Cases of direct and active collusion of local shop stewards and officials in arrangements of discrimination. (In addition to this, in some notorious cases, the union withheld support from striking black workers who were protesting about this adverse treatment in relation to white workers).

3 Cases of more passive collusion of union officers and shop stewards in practices which were demonstrated to have been discriminatory in outcome, along with a resistance to change these practices.

4 Individual cases of racism by unsympathetic, unenlightened or even racially-bigoted shop stewards and local officials, and a reluctance on the part of unions to take disciplinary action against racist offenders.

5 A general lack of awareness of the issues of race and equal opportunity and the particular circumstances of ethnic minority members, which may not manifest itself as racism but in effect lessens the participation of black members in the union.

These failings are set in a background history of years of prejudice and ignorance by white trade unionists and officials who have been ever ready to categorise black members in terms of simplistic stereotypes, whether as scabs and strike breakers, or as unreasonably militant hot-heads

SETTING A BAD EXAMPLE FROM THE TOP

The sluggish and blinkered reaction of the trade union leadership to its discovery that the movement possessed black members was quite consistent with the earlier response to black immigration by the leadership of the Labour Party. It was during the time of the post-war labour government that attitudes towards black people in Britain underwent something of a change. During the war traditional antipathy towards black workers had been tempered by an appreciation of their effort in industry and the services in a 'common cause. After the war, even though this was a time of labour shortage, it was trade unionists and Labour party members who were the first to voice objections to 'coloured immigration'. Meanwhile the Labour government was washing its hands of any responsibility or guidance on the reception of immigrants. The Labour government was 'blind' to racism - it was seen to be the concern of those involved with colonial affairs, "something external, not germane, to the main-stream of the labour movement" (Joshi and Carter 1984, p.55).

The government's laissez-faire attitude was to set the pattern for later Trades Union Congress inaction.

The Labour government's view was that to make any special welfare or housing provision would be to discriminate against the indigenous population; this view was echoed by the TUC in the 1950's and 1960's. As one TUC official told Radin (1966, p.159)

"There are no differences between an immigrant worker and an English worker. We believe that all workers should have the same rights and don't require any different or special considerations"

The trade union leadership saw no differences between the problems faced by black migrant workers and those by the white working class generally, and their inability to perceive any particular implications for unions of increasing numbers of black members led to a failure to develop any special policies. Rather than concerning themselves with the problems of racial discrimination, the TUC seemed to be more preoccupied with the necessity for the black immigrants to integrate with the host society (Radin 1966, p. 161). The first statement of a different tone to come out of the TUC General Council was in 1965 when "immigrants lacking an adequate knowledge of English and British customs" were seen as a growing problem. At the time that she was writing, Radin noted that the TUC was continuing to hold on to its "rather muddled" position, alleging that immigrants caused problems but refusing to do anything because "all men are brothers" (Radin 1966, p.161).

As late as 1970, Vic Feather, the then General Secretary of the TUC, could insist that,

"The trade union movement is concerned with a man or woman as a worker. The colour of a man's skin has no relevance whatever to his work" (quoted in Sunday Times, 3 December 1972).

In 1955 the annual Trades Union Congress had passed a resolution condemning all manifestations of racial discrimination or colour prejudice and urging the General Council to give special attention to the problems of racial friction.

Similar resolutions were affirmed at the congresses of 1959, 1966 and 1968. However, there was a noticeable gap between formal policy and practical action. As McIlroy writes (1982, p.4) the obvious racism practised by rank and file and union officials and the TUC's policy of opposition to race relations legislation made the TUC's exhortations seem rather hollow.

WHITE EXCLUSION ATTEMPTS AND BLACK RESISTANCE

Post-war attempts at racial exclusion by white trade unionists took forms which were sometimes surprisingly blunt. In many industries white trade unionists insisted on a quota system restricting black workers to a maximum of (generally) 5 per cent, and there were understandings with management that the principle of 'last in first out' at a time of redundancy would not apply if this was to mean that white workers would lose their jobs before blacks (Fryer 1984, p.376). In 1955 Wolverhampton bus workers banned overtime and West Bromwich bus workers staged one day strikes in protest against the employment of black labour on the buses. That year there were motions from transport workers to the TGWU annual conference asking the union to ban black workers from the buses. Similarly, hospital branches of the Confederation of Health Service Employees passed resolutions objecting to the recruitment of coloured nurses (Bentley

1976, p. 135). There was a "determined effort" by the National Union of Seamen to keep black seamen off British ships after the war. The assistant general secretary told the 1948 conference that Liverpool and other British ports were to be 'no go' areas for black seafarers (Fryer 1984, p.367).

In reality it did not need overt, public motions and statements of racism for black workers to become consolidated into limited areas of work, and for lines to be drawn around those jobs where they were not expected to go. Their jobs were often low paid, menial and dirty (and disproportionately dangerous - as shown by Lee and Wrench, 1980). The assumption by white workers that black workers should be the first to be made redundant was aided by this job segregation, as it could always be argued that particular classes of jobs were being shed, rather than particular groups of workers.

Sivanandan has catalogued early black resistance to this treatment. To start with, he argues, resistance was "more spontaneous than organised" (1982, p.5). Early attempts to form work-based groups were frustrated within the factory walls and so black workers had to establish themselves outside - this was one reason why black organisations developed as more 'community-based' rather than simply work-based groups. In the context of trade union racism this was to be a strategic strength, as later disputes would show. Throughout the 1960's a series of industrial disputes demonstrated that rank and file black men and women were not going to passively accept racism at work. What Sivanandan calls the "first important 'immigrant' strike" took place at Courtaulds' Red Scar Mill, Preston, where white workers and the union had collaborated with management in the attempt to force Asian workers to work more machines for proportionately less pay (Sivanandan 1982, p15). Later that year a strike by Asian workers at the Woolf Rubber Company was lost through lack of official union backing. In the late 1960's there were a number of strikes characterised by a strong support of Asian workers by local community associations and an equally noticeable lack of support by the local trade union.

There then occurred a number of disputes which generated adverse publicity and shook the complacency of the trade union movement. Perhaps the best known of these are the disputes at the Coneygre Foundry in Tipton in 1967-8, Mansfield Hosiery in Loughborough in 1972, and Imperial Typewriters in Leicester in 1974. At a Coneygre Foundry management precipitated a strike by Asian workers (members of the TGWU) through racial discrimination in its redundancy procedures: management refused to operate the generally accepted trade union principle of 'last in first out' and instead selected 21 Indians - and no whites - to go. The TGWU refused to make the strike official and rejected the idea that racial discrimination was involved; the white workers in the Amalgamated Union of Foundry Workers crossed the picket line and were supported in this by a local AUFW official, who explained that his members were not involved in the redundancies and therefore not in the strike. However, the strikers received support from other Asian workers and the Indian Workers Association, and eventually management was forced to take back all those of the 21 made redundant who wished to return (Duffield, forthcoming).

At Mansfield Hosiery, the 500 strong Asian workforce had been effectively denied access to the best paid jobs on knitting machines, and the union had failed to support the Asians in their attempts over many years to gain promotion. When, in 1972, a strike was called over this and other anomalies in the payment system, the management, supported by the white workers and the local union, recruited 36 outside trainees, all white, for the knitting jobs. Eventually - and belatedly - the National Union of Hosiery and Knitwear Workers made the strike official, but without calling out its white membership. The eventual success of the strikers was made possible not because of the help of the union, but because of the support of local community organisations and political groups, and Asian workers from other factories.

The success of the strike at the Mansfield Hosiery Mills was one factor among several which encouraged black workers in further collective action. One outcome of the dispute was a conference of Trade Unions against Racism, held in Birmingham in June 1973, one aim of which was to pressure the trade union movement to match its words with action. (Sivanandan 1982, pp.35-6). One year later what Sivanandan called "the apotheosis of racism... and therefore the resistance to it" was reached with the Imperial Typewriters dispute. This Leicester company employed about 1,100 Asians in its 1,650 strong manual workforce, a large proportion of these being women from Uganda. From a background of long-standing grievances over low pay, bad conditions and racial discrimination, a strike began involving 40 workers over the bonus system. After an ultimatum by management and a public denial of support by the union, about 400 workers came out on strike. The dispute lasted 3 months, with no support from the strikers' union, the TGWU, even though the strikers had discovered that the company had been cheating on its bonus payments for over a year (TUC 1983, p.37). Instead the strikers found an alternative source of support from within their own community (see Parmar 1982,p.264).

1974 - SIGNS OF CHANGE

The disjunction between TUC policy and trade union action at this time was still marked. Smith in his Political and Economic Planning Report set out a list of eight points of action which should have been implied by the TUC's formal position: - for example, one of these was "energetic representation of any workers from minority groups who are being discriminated against by management" (Smith 1974, p.6~67). By comparing these points with actual practice, as revealed in his survey, he concluded that little or nothing was being done in this respect. For Smith there were both positive and negative sides to his findings:

"On the one hand the unions have seldom made formal representations against ethnic minorities. On the other hand they have seldom made positive representations either" (Smith 1974, p.68-9).

However, in the light of evidence, the "absence of formal representations against ethnic minorities" was less reassuring than it might initially have seemed. With the discrimination that was clearly happening in the 1970s there was no need for the sort of formal representations that took place in the 1950s. A study of the processes which excluded black school leavers from apprenticeships found the discriminatory processes operating quietly and systematically in the routine practices of institutions, often disguised as custom and practice agreed with unions - for example: an agreement not to advertise widely, and to give preference to the family of employees when recruiting (Lee and Wrench 1983). In fact Smith's own evidence illustrates a number of the quiet agreements between union and management so effective in excluding black workers (Smith 1974, p.69).

Around 1974 changes could be detected at the official trade union level with the official stance of many unions increasingly acknowledging the need to move away from a laissez faire position towards a more active role. A number of factors might have contributed to this change: First there were the increasingly public criticisms voiced by black trade unionists frustrated by the union neglect of their interests. Secondly, there were the recent embarrassingly well publicised disputes in the Midlands which had produced damning evidence of union racism. Thirdly, the TUC was still, as McIlroy put it (1982 p.5) "smarting under the verdict" of a House of Commons select committee which stated in 1974 that:

the record of the TUC is similar to that of the CBI in that both organisations have declared their opposition to racial discrimination, but have taken wholly inadequate steps to ensure that their members work effectively to eradicate it"

Fourthly, there had been a growing lobby of grassroots activists in the trade unions, local trades councils and the Labour party who regularly voiced their criticisms through delegates at annual conferences. Finally there was the worrying growth in the National Front in the early 1970's. Thus the TUC, having dropped its opposition to race relations legislation, now started active campaigns against racism in the movement.

THE CONTINUATION OF RACISM IN PRACTICE

Of the 5 earlier mentioned 'failings' of the trade union movement, the first - the failure of the leadership to produce any special policy - had begun to change by 1974. with respect to the others, change is less easy to produce centrally, and there is much evidence that the institution of active campaigns at the top does not necessarily produce much change lower down.

The second of the five 'failings' was that local union officials and shop stewards actively participated in racist practices. Examples in the 1970's and 80's are easy to find. For example:- in July 1977 a black Birmingham-born man applied for a job at British Leyland's Castle Bromwich plant as a machine tool fitter, a job for which he was well qualified. Some of the toolroom maintenance fitters asked the AUEW shop steward to arrange a meeting, and a motion was passed that they would not accept a coloured fitter. Consequently Mr Jones, the black applicant, was rejected for the job. The case came to light after a white employee informed the CRE some 9 months after the event, and a formal investigation by the CRE found that BL Cars Ltd and the two AUEW shop stewards had contravened the Race Relations Act (CRE, 1981). (It is important to note that at that time BL was supposedly an "Equal Opportunity" employer and was colluding in discriminatory practices with a union which had passed a number of conference resolutions on the importance of equal opportunity).

In 1981 two black electricians employed by the GLC complained that they were getting lower wages and bonuses and less overtime than equally qualified white workers, as a result of being consistently allocated the least remunerative work. At the enquiry the black workers refused to be defended by the EEPTU -(indeed, the EEPTU senior steward had allegedly threatened to expel the black workers from the union), - and they turned for help to the Black Trade Unionists Solidarity Movement. The enquiry lasted five days and found in the black electricians' favour on almost every point.

These cases illustrates a more general point, that members of craft unions in particular have long been willing to practice racial discrimination. Lee and Wrench (1983) found resistance to black co-workers particularly strong in skilled areas, for example, in toolroom, maintenance and sheet metal working areas.

Another 'failing' was the more passive collusion of union officers in practices which were discriminatory in their outcomes, and a reluctance to change these practices. Inertia and indirect discrimination can be just as effective in excluding black workers as can direct and open racism, and with the higher profile of the TUC on racism, along with the passing of the Race Relations Act in 1976, it could be argued that this more covert racism has increased in significance. Such practices were shown to be a large part of the reason for the finding that within a cohort of fifth form school leavers who (realistically) aspired to a craft apprenticeship, only 13% of Asian and 15% of

West Indians were successful, compared to 44% for white boys (Lee and Wrench 1983 p.61).

One of the practices that worked against black applicants was the reliance of companies on word-of-mouth recruitment, as opposed to advertising or using the careers service. (Word-of-mouth recruitment is apparently a remarkably widespread management practice - see Jenkins 1982, 1984). Sometimes recruitment took place only from white catchment areas, and preference was frequently given to the sons of existing employees. Although many managers were quite happy to go along with this practice of recruiting from the family of employees, in many cases the main instigators of it were the workers themselves and their shop stewards, with the approval of the unions (Lee and Wrench 1983 p.33-35).

The effectiveness of such practices in creating systematic racial exclusion could be seen in the case of Massey Ferguson, investigated by the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE 1982). At the Banner Lane plant in Coventry in 1975, out of 6,800 employees, only 10 were black, and out of 200 employees recruited in 1977, none were black. The main reason for this was the company's policy of not advertising for hourly paid jobs, but relying on letters of application from people who had heard of jobs by word-of-mouth. In quite a large part of the engineering industry (as well as in printing) recruitment is carried out through the trade union itself, which helps to perpetuate white workforces.

This discriminatory custom and practice is not just characteristic of manual unions. An attempt at the Greater London Council to widen the recruitment base GLC staff in line with its Equal Opportunities Policy was opposed by the main white collar staff union. Previously, movement up the staff hierarchy was usually restricted to representation. For example, after a dispute in a Smethwick factory in 1978, during which Asian workers had received less than adequate support from the National Society of Metal Mechanics, a union official remarked:

"Don't get me wrong, I'm not racist but I think everyone who enters this country should be given a test to make sure they can read and write English properly. I don't blame employers being selective about whom they employ." (Bishton 1984 p.50).

As Bishton remarks, a union official who sympathises with management even when he is aware how badly exploited the Asian workers are, (often coming to this country to do dirty jobs where the ability to speak English was not needed), is hardly the man to help them achieve much (Bishton 1984 p50).

THE ROLE OF TRADE UNION EDUCATION

Cases such as those discussed above demonstrate the need for, at the very least, programmes of education for shop stewards and officials. The TUC has now recognised the need for resources to be allocated to anti-racist education courses. In 1977 it produced a 19 page booklet for use on a 10-day release shop stewards course, and in 1983 it produced 'Race Relations at Work' and the 'TUC Workbook on Racism'. (However, critics argue that this particular arm of the anti-racist struggle is still under-resourced: see McIlroy 1982p.5).

At the best of times tutors involved in race relations courses for trade unions have found it difficult to do justice to the subject. Trade unionists on the courses often begin with a less than receptive attitude to the material. One tutor involved in running courses in the West Midlands on Race Relations and communication for shop stewards from different unions writes that

3 issues were usually uppermost in shop stewards minds when they began the course:

"The issue of immigration was always raised, often emotively, and without any knowledge of the economic causes (especially in Britain) of immigration. Secondly, cultural differences were emphasised, sometimes with racist jokes or derogatory anecdotes. Thirdly, the issue of unity, participation and communication in the union came up, sometimes with reference to some of the bitter disputes (especially in the Smethwick area) on either side of 1970 when both English and Asian strikers claimed that they were not getting support from the other group" (Murray 1981 p.38)

Educators in a situation of this kind find themselves faced with a dilemma: because of the 'normal' racism within many shop stewards there is a danger felt by tutors that an over emphasis on race within courses could jeopardise the other areas too. This in turn, of course, makes it less likely that racist assumptions will be challenged.

There are differing views on the best approach to race relations training: some feel that, in order to give it the weight it deserves, race relations requires separate courses; others argue that this will attract only the 'already committed' and that a race relations component ought to be one part of a wider course covering a range of issues that are important for shop stewards.

Another side of education is the provision of special courses directed towards black workers themselves. The most common in the past have been courses of language training when needed by Asian workers, often through Industrial Language Training Units. Some courses are designed to increase the awareness of Asian workers to union activities, with information printed in ethnic minority languages. Some have the aim of encouraging the participation of black workers to become lay officials, and active within the union structure. The need for such courses is recognised more readily now than it was ten years ago, when a more likely reaction from many unions would have been that to make special provision for any one group of members was to be sectionalist and divisive. Arguments that certain groups of workers suffer particular problems and need special resources were won first by women and later by black members.

There are a number of reservations that must be born in mind on the role of education in the pursuit of equal opportunities. First an over- emphasis on 'special needs' education carries the implication that if only the black workers had better language ability and more knowledge of the movement they would be able to participate fully in the union. The experiences of English speaking and second generation blacks has shown that there are fundamental barriers to participation in the unions, other than those of language. Secondly, race relations education for shop stewards is beset with problems. Through the resistance of shop stewards themselves it may become a neglected part of the course. Furthermore, those particularly bigoted shop stewards and officers who would benefit most from attending such courses tend to stay away as they feel that such provisions are a waste of time and money (GLC Anti-Racist Trade Union Working Group 1984,p.S).

In the current economic crisis, shop stewards are being granted less time away from work to spend on courses, and with the new employment legislation and other threats to the work of trade unions from central government and employers it becomes easy for 'race' to slip down the list of priorities in trade union education. Also, it must be remembered that in itself education is unlikely to produce fundamental changes in attitudes and behaviour. It needs to proceed hand in hand with other measures such as positive equal opportunity measures and active strategies in opposition to racism.

FURTHER TUC INITIATIVES

In 1977 Congress called upon the general council of the TUC to conduct a campaign against racialists in the unions. In 1979 the TUC sent out a circular to all its affiliated unions recommending that they should adopt a policy on racialists. In 1981 the TUC published "Black Workers: A TUC Charter for Equal Opportunity". This encourages unions to be active in equal opportunities instead of just talking about it, and stresses that they should review their own structures and procedures. The Charter's main points include: the removal of barriers which prevent black workers from reaching union office and decision making bodies, the need for vigorous action on employment grievances concerning racial discrimination, a commitment to countering racist propaganda, an emphasis on personnel procedures for recruitment and promotion being clearly laid down, the production of material in relevant ethnic languages when necessary, and the inclusion of equal opportunity clauses in collective agreements.

The TUC has also cooperated with the CRE in the production of a 'Code of Practice', (1984) and is encouraging unions to make use of the code.

Some unions are setting up Race Relations committees and national officers responsible for encouraging the participation of black members and furthering equal opportunities. (for a list of those who have set up bodies to monitor race issues and have issued positive statements against racism, see GLC Anti-Racist Trade Union Working Group 1984, p. 13 and Labour Research July 1983). Increasingly, collective agreements are being made which include the model equal opportunities clause of the TUC.

THE PARTICIPATION OF BLACK MEMBERS IN UNIONS

It remains to be seen, however, whether any of these measures will help to increase the participation of black members in unions. Recent evidence suggests that they remain underrepresented in union posts: the Policy Studies Institute survey found that black members are much less likely to hold an elected post than white members, even though they are more likely to join unions than white people, and attend meetings with about the same frequency (Brown 1984, p.170). To explain the low participation of black workers in unions the Runnymede Trust in 1974 wrote

"there are forces at work which make it more difficult for coloured and immigrant workers to play their full part in the movement. These include factors such as language differences, shift working, ethnic work groups and lack of trade union experience" (Runnymede Trust 1974-5, p.24).

This explanation puts much of the emphasis on the characteristics and special needs of the black workers themselves. There is no mention in this explanation, of for example, the experience of racism. In 1980 Miles and Phizacklea did take account of this, arguing that an awareness of racial discrimination and racism at the place of work and within the union was a factor in explaining the lower level of black participation in workplace union activity. (Phizacklea and Miles 1980 p.125 :see also Phizacklea 1982). The reason there were so few black shop stewards was not because they were 'new' - they weren't - but rather because they weren't 'invited' through the usual informal processes. Alternatively, a black worker who felt that racism was a feature of the work environment would be less likely to take on a position which entailed making "personal sacrifices for the collective good" (Phizacklea and Miles 1980 p. 125).

It was the perception that, despite the range of initiatives over the last few years, black members still have relatively low rates of participation in unions, that prompted an initiative by the West Midlands Regional TUC. As one full-time officer put it

"Despite the thousands of black members they don't seem to participate in trade union activism outside work ... We want to be active in wider social concern for ethnic minorities as well as for whites. At the moment there is a void"

Thus the West Midlands Regional TUC sponsored a research project (with financial support from the Economic and Social Research Council) on 'Trade Unionism and Race', (Lee, 1984). In this, black union members reported a lack of confidence in trade unions to look after their interests, a view born out of their own day to day experiences as well as a recognition of the recent past history of trade union failings. One complaint was that trade union officers were reluctant to take action over racial discrimination and did not perceive race issues as something to fight management about. Racially aware white officials admitted that there was a reluctance in the movement to act on race issues, one reason being the fear of losing white support.

Lee concluded that, at present, trade unions are only really tackling the problems of black workers if they are those also faced by white workers. They are not acting on issues such as under-representation in certain areas of work, promotion, the differential impact of redundancies, or racial abuse. She argues that union officers only feel comfortable with the idea of treating everyone alike, regardless of colour, and feel that giving any special attention to the grievances of black workers is to give them "two bites at the cherry" (Lee 1984, p.12).

White trade unionists tended to explain the lack of participation and involvement by black workers as primarily due to their inertia and lack of interest. Black members themselves argued that, after years of racism within the unions, and with day-to-day evidence of its persistence, it is not surprising that they were reluctant to put themselves forward. They dismissed union efforts on equal opportunities as "a front", "tokenism" or "lip service". One talked of "subtle ways of discouraging black people" from becoming involved in the union - for example, black members might not have the requisite insight into union history and internal politics if they did not already have certain informal links with long-standing trade unionists. Or the barriers might be more practical, such as holding meetings in public houses, which deterred many Asian women from participating.

When black workers did get themselves involved in meetings they would often feel that 'their' issues were being excluded. 'Unpopular' race items would be left late on the agenda, or would be omitted altogether because of the apathy of the white majority. The fact that black workers are usually in a minority at meetings means that it is difficult to sway opinions to get race on the agenda. This was found to be one of the fundamental problems: that of being a minority in an institution run by majority interest.

"How are you going to work within a democratic system where by the sheer virtue of a majority they can prevent progress by the minority?" (black trade unionist, quoted in Lee 1984, p.9).

It was, as one respondent put it, "the kind of democracy which is holding back progress," (Lee 1984, p.19). This kind of experience had converted many black trade unionists to support the establishment of a black caucus within individual unions, and the relative success of women trade unionists in getting

the caucus principle accepted reinforced their views. Others pressed for proportional representation or reserved seats, pointing to women's success in gaining these too, and arguing that this in itself would encourage black participation, (Lee 1984, p.21).

White officials, however, were more resistant to this idea, claiming that it would be sectarian, divisive, or even patronising to black members. Lee concludes:

It is with great reluctance that ... (black)...members have come to believe that such a move is necessary. Black people want to be elected to positions on their merit, in line with custom and practice within trade unions. It is only through sheer frustration that more are now coming to the conclusion that, as a minority, they cannot beat the exclusionary tactics which a majority can operate within a democratic system." (Lee 1984, p.24-5).

TOWARD SEPARATE BLACK ORGANISATIONS?

At the TUC 1983 conference, Ken Gill, speaking on behalf of the General Council, warned that unless there was an urgent response from unions over equal opportunity and racial inequality, there was a danger that black workers would lose whatever confidence they had in the willingness of trade unions adequately to represent their interests (CRE Employment Report, October 1984 p. 11). The TUC is understandably worried that black members may drift away from the main body of the unions. The formation of a separate black trade union is something which black trade unionists have so far resisted, though many acknowledge that this may be a future option if nothing changes.

The move for a separate black union poses a real dilemma for black activists. At the present time they see their particular interests to be ignored by unions; however, there would be dangers in creating a separate union specifically to cover these interests. A separate black union might become isolated and relatively easily ignored by other unions and management; internal pressure on other unions to act on race issues would be weakened, and the end result could be a reduction in the collective power of organised black labour. The fact that black trade unionists have not yet set up their own separate trade unions does not mean that they have been satisfied with the record of trade unions - rather that they are aware of the problems of separatism. None of the black trade unionists interviewed by Lee were in favour of a separate union.

One of the founder members of the Black Trade Unionists Solidarity Movement, was insistent that there was no question of forming separate black union because "we don't want to let the unions off the hook" (Morning Star 25 January 1983). The more effective option is seen to be the formation of pressure groups and organisations to influence the existing trade unions, something that organisations such as the Indian Workers Association has been doing for years. The IWA acts not as a black trade union, but through existing unions; it expects its members to belong to unions and be active within them, and makes representations at branch, district or TUC level. The IWA believes that over the years it has had an effect on the unions and has contributed to changes in attitudes to race issues within the movement.

More recently, new work-based black groups have been started, with the aim of putting pressure on unions - for example, black workers in the National Health Service have formed an association to influence the range of unions to which they belong. Sometimes black organisations have sprung up in response to specific events, such as the one formed after the incident at BL's Cowley plant when, after a black contract worker was arrested on suspicion of theft, the Chief Security Officer sent a memo instructing his staff to "check the identity of every black trying to enter". The black workers, with the

support of the shop stewards committee, succeeded in getting the memo withdrawn and the incident led to the formation of a Black Workers Rights Committee (McIlroy 1982 p.4). After the 1981 summer riots the Black Trade Unionists Solidarity Movement was formed, by black trade unionists "who were concerned at the racist reaction in the Labour Movement to the disturbances in Brixton, Southall and other parts of Britain."

The aims were, amongst other things, to work for changes in trade union structure to enhance the participation of black workers, to act as an advice and support resource for black members, and to work for equal opportunity by positive action in the workplace.³

The movement held its first conference in London in June 1983. The organisation was to be a "pressure group within the trade union movement" to "expose racism in the unions through the media and by picketing union conferences". The BTUSM stressed the value of racial awareness courses, "employing specialists to overhaul union rule books and expunge discriminatory practices", and checking whether the procedures for the recruitment of union officers were indirectly discriminatory.

Other groups are more locally focussed: for example, the Camden Black Workers Group, formed in 1983 to put active pressure on Camden Council as employer, and on the relevant unions, to put teeth into their equal opportunity policies. As a group they insist that their full members belong to a trade union, covering with their membership both manual and white collar unions. The group has lobbied the National Association of Local Government Officers over adequate black participation at annual conferences, and over seats on the NALGO Executive, and has gained the right to represent black workers at grievance and disciplinary hearings (GLC Economic Policy Group 1984).

NALGO itself had a National Working Party on Race Equality which produced a report for its June 1 1984 Annual Conference, recommending amongst other things, changes in the union structure to strengthen ethnic minority representation, race training priority for stewards including advice on how to take up discrimination cases, recommendations for negotiators to include a policy whereby posts are simultaneously advertised internally and externally, and a recommendation that the rulebook is changed in order to make it clear that deliberate acts of unlawful discrimination are "incompatible with NALGO membership and racist activities in the workplace should be subject to disciplinary action" (CRE Employment Report July 1984).

NALGO has responded better than many unions to race issues: nevertheless it too has come under criticism from black members over lack of consultation. A meeting of 250 black NALGO members in Birmingham in May 1984 refused to recognise the race relations working party because of inadequate black representation on it. One complained:

We are angry and disappointed at the lack of representation in our own union. The white members are the riders and we are remaining the horses. Now we want a go at the reins as well." (Birmingham Evening Mail, 10 May 1984).

As the Camden Black Workers Action Group put it:

"Freedom and equality cannot be given from the top. They can only be secured by people who suffer subordination." (GLC Economic Policy Group 1984).

THE RECESSION, THE UNIONS AND EQUAL OPPORTUNITY

It is striking that the period when black workers have finally made some progress in the battle for influence within the union movement is the same period when the unions themselves have seen their own influence in society seriously decline. Government and many employers are taking full advantage of the recession and unemployment to reduce shop-floor strength and weaken trade union organisation; public sector employers are responding to government cuts by making an assault on public sector unions. Some employers are employing 'union-busting' consultants; others are tearing up long-standing union agreements, and new employment legislation has on occasion made it difficult for unions to carry out their traditional role effectively whilst remaining within the law. The introduction of the Youth Training Scheme has further eroded hard won union control in the area of recruitment and training, and the very structure of YTS has made it difficult for unions to make their influence felt.⁴ Legislation to protect the low paid is being eroded, and, all in all, there has been something of a shift in power away from the shop floor and the unions to management.

In 1984, for the first time since 1975, less than half of Britain's workers were organised in unions affiliated to the TUC (Labour Research 1984 p. 192). The level of trade union organisation has also fallen: the decline is not only due to the overall fall in employment, but also because the recession has hit hardest many of those industries such as manufacturing, and in particular engineering, where unions have been most effectively organised. These are also those sectors where black workers have been concentrated.

As might be expected in a time of recession, traditional manufacturers have in part been replaced by 'sweatshop' manufacturers. Since the late 1970's these establishments have mushroomed in inner-city areas of Birmingham and the Black country, taking advantage of cheap premises, central locations and access to a reservoir of local labour with few alternative employment prospects. In clothing sweatshops it is often Asian women who are exploited (often by Asian employers) in these illegal working conditions, in small, dirty and unsafe premises where fire regulations are ignored and sanitary and safety provision negligible, working long erratic hours for low pay without union protection (see Hoel, 1982).

"These women are quite literally sweating. They are under constant pressure. It is hard to believe that we are living in the 1980's. Industrial conditions are more like the 1880's" (Raghib Ahsan, West Midlands Low Pay Unit, Birmingham Evening Mail, 20 October 1984).

The growth of sweatshops poses a whole new challenge to trade unions in their relationship with black workers. Previously these workers had been relatively neglected by unions as a fringe sector, perceived as difficult to organise, not only because of the many dispersed and transient locations of production but also because Asian women in particular have been seen by white male trade union officers as lacking a knowledge and tradition of trade unionism, and possibly resistant to organisation. Union officers are just as prone as anyone else in white society to stereotyped views of ethnic minorities, in this case the view that Asian women are passive, inhibited and exclusively family-centred. Such a view is implied, for example, in a feature article on sweatshops in the Birmingham Evening Mail (20 October 1984) where Asian women were described as "ideal sweatshop fodder" because of, amongst other things, their "non-union traditions" and "limited understanding of employees' rights." To apply this view to Asian women in general is an oversimplification which displays an ignorance of the many Asian women who have been at the forefront of collective workplace struggles for many years. Two of the 'classic' disputes - Imperial Typewriters and Grunwick - concerned mainly Asian women; more recently there have been a number of important disputes in the sweatshops of the West Midlands which have demonstrated the readiness of Asian women to resist what the

general secretary of the Indian Workers Association called "feudal draconian working conditions" (Birmingham Evening Mail 20 October 1984).

Without full union support and the access to the media that often comes from it, such struggles are often unnoticed by the wider trade union movement. More recently some union officials in the West Midlands have belatedly recognised the importance of this particular category of potential members. For one thing, this sector is seen as one source of replacement members of those lost in the collapse of metal-based manufacturing in the area. For another, the very existence of a significant and increasing number of low paid, non-unionised workers in the heart of the region constitutes a long term potential threat to the conditions of trade unionists outside the sweatshop sector. However, as in so many other instances, the record of trade unions in supporting black workers in the sweatshop sector is mixed - and often lamentable - and knowledge of this has been one barrier to overcome when convincing vulnerable workers of the wisdom of joining a trade union.

In recent years in the West Midlands there has been a number of disputes in this sector: for example, Reeve Polishing and Plating, Smethwick in 1978; R J Vickers in 1980; Raindi Textiles in 1982; Sandhar and Kang in 1982; Kewal Brothers in 1984; G & M Plastics, Redditch also in 1984. (Some of these disputes are described in detail in Bishton's report on sweatshops, 1984). All of these disputes involved Asian workers, often women, and most had as one precipitating factor management strategies to thwart union organisation.

In some of the earlier of these disputes union support was at best half-hearted (Bishton 1984 p.58). In more recent cases union support has been more forthcoming (although sometimes appearing a little late). For example, at Sadhar and Kang the TGWU aided the picketing by getting its member drivers to block deliveries from the large companies who supplied Sadhar and Kang (Bishton 1984 p.55), and the strike did have a degree of success.

UNION RESPONSES TO CRITICISM

Unions have moved from a position of not supporting black workers in their employment struggles because they were black, to a position of being more likely to support black workers because they are trade unionists. This is progress. But this is often still in a context of being 'colour blind'; of seeing black workers as faced with exactly the same problems as white workers. This position displays an ignorance of all the kinds of circumstances which have been described in this paper so far, and renders meaningless any idea of equal opportunity.

In a survey by the GLC's Anti-Racist Trade Union Working Group this 'colour blind' attitude was found to be one of the main problems that black workers had to face in -unions.

"The fact is that black workers suffer from all the problems experienced by white workers but also from problems associated with racism which are manifested in prejudice, discrimination and harassment" (GLC ARTUWG 1984 p.6).

The Working Group sent questionnaires to 50 different unions requesting information on their stated position and activities in the area of race and equal opportunity. About a half failed to respond, leaving the researchers to infer a low priority in this area. The evidence from those who replied was that although there were from a number of unions some encouraging "signs and symbols of commitment to combating racism", as yet rather little had been achieved.

Nine unions had adopted formal anti-racist policies, but many others still felt it unnecessary formally to declare their opposition to racism as they felt that equal opportunity had always existed in their organisation. For example, the respondent from the NUR wrote:

"Most of the questions in the questionnaire appear to me to be irrelevant to the situation in this union as all our members have equal opportunity and there is no discrimination against any member for any reason whatsoever." (GLC ARTUWG 1984 p.14).

Yet the working group was aware of incidents and case histories in this and other unions which had responded similarly, demonstrating that discrimination was "frequently conspicuous".

Several unions had made internal provisions for combatting racism, such as working parties, day schools, and advice sheets. Six unions, however, stated that they had implemented no provisions to combat racism because it was unnecessary.

The report criticised the record of unions as employers themselves. Many of the unions did not see the need for an equal opportunity programme for its own employees, even though the same unions could well find themselves pushing for such a policy for other employers. Most unions were not in favour of monitoring the ethnicity of their own workforce, which demonstrated a lack of awareness of the potential contradiction in their own failure to keep ethnic records whilst demanding that employers with whom they bargain should carry out such measures. (GLC ARTUWG 1984 p. 17).

The Working Group argue that there is a 'vital need' for records, not as ends in themselves but rather as means to highlight procedures of unions as employers, and any possible detrimental effects these may have on black applicants.

"Without the information to demonstrate that equality is a fact, it remains a fallacy" (GLC ARTUWG 1984 p. 19).

The findings of the GLC survey confirm the suspicions of many activists that despite the history of disputes and struggles, the research, the educational material, and the prosecutions, there remains a body of trade union officers who simply do not understand - or are unwilling to acknowledge - what racism and racial inequality are, what their effects are, how they operate, and what sorts of measures are needed to oppose them. A critical response to the GLC survey by John Torode (Guardian 17 December 1984) demonstrates a number of the 'classic' defensive positions argued by union officers when confronted with criticisms of union failings on race. For example, he writes:

"the embittered and all embracing distaste for trade union orthodoxy which the working group displays is an insult to those trade unions who have made honourable colour-blind efforts to absorb minorities."

This argument displays an ignorance of the way that an 'honourable colour blindness' has long been one of the rationalisations for a refusal to support black workers in struggle, a refusal to acknowledge or oppose racism, and a neglect of many of the real needs of one whole section of trade union membership. Torode also puts forward the 'standard' opposition to ethnic monitoring:

"How many of us want our ethnic origins ("Jewish", "Black", "half-caste" even) stamped on our union files? We sense it as degrading and potentially dangerous. It smacks too much of National Socialism or the anti-semitic internal passports issued by the Soviet Union".

Again, this argument shows an ignorance of the equal opportunity literature and of the aspirations of the black membership. As the GLC working group argues, there is an important distinction to be made between ethnic monitoring carried out by trade unions for the purpose of improving its anti-racist practices, and that carried out by official agencies such as the DHSS where there is no such aim, no control over the data, and real fears about its misuse. (GLC ARTUWG 1984, p. 18).

Like others have done, Torode defends the unions' record on race by pointing to their "brave and successful stands" against National Front activity. However, to criticise a union's record on race is not to ignore or denigrate this important part of anti - racist activity. But, as Phizacklea and Miles argue, while such campaigns are important, they bring little if any material improvement in the position of black workers (Phizacklea and Miles 1980 p.35).

A proper test of a union's commitment to equal opportunity is its willingness to take on board policies which involve ultimately the re-allocation of resources to its black members (and where these resources are fixed this will inevitably mean a reduction in their availability to white members.) Examples of such resources could be time - making space for black issues at union meetings; money - making funds available for ethnic monitoring, for black conferences and literature; jobs - assisting black workers to overcome barriers around positions occupied by whites, and so on.

The final set of arguments of the 'old guard' are those in reaction to the development of black pressure groups and caucuses within unions, arguments which are also going on within the Labour Party. Opponents of these developments often talk of 'discrimination in reverse' or 'racism by blacks'. For example, in September 1984 a meeting of 70 black delegates at a conference at Birmingham's Afro-Caribbean Resource Centre agreed to set up a Black Trade Unionists Solidarity Group, to represent the rights of black trade union members and appoint liaison officers to deal with race matters in unions. This was condemned by Labour Councillor O' Keefe who was quoted in the Birmingham Evening Mail (21 September 1984) as saying:

"I have never seen so much racialism - I will oppose it entirely. It is apartheid in reverse".

Again, such arguments would only make sense in a world where black trade unionists had not had a history of the kinds of experience described in this paper. For years black workers have seen the failure of unions to take up their issues. Time and time again black trade unionists have attempted to use normal union procedures to get action on the sorts of injustices which have been described above, but without success. Often, the very fact that unions are relatively democratic organisations has meant that the majority voice has predominated, and minority groups get over-ruled. Consequently, black workers have learned that the way to make their voices heard is through self organisation within unions. Their success in this has produced change in some unions in the discrepancy between yearly conference motions on equal opportunity and complete inactivity on a practical level. The removal of this major inconsistency between policy and practice, and the shake up of union procedures and rhetoric resulting from pressure by organised black members, has been in the interests of all members, and should not be dismissed as a victory for sectionalism or 'apartheid' within unions. (In many cases, where majority votes

in union branches have been necessary for changes in branch rules to enable the setting up of black sections, this has only been made possible through the active support of white members too.)

The ultimate excuse for inaction by a union official is the statement that "whilst I agree with you, I can't take action on this because the white membership won't wear it." From a historical perspective there is some irony in the defence that it is the membership, not the leadership, who are racist. It could be plausibly argued that one reason for the widespread racist attitudes amongst trade union members today is the absence of a good example from the leaders in the past. It was the leaders of the labour movement who originally helped to structure the view of 'race as a problem' in previous decades.

"When black workers began to arrive here in some numbers in the 1950's there was no progressive, anti-racist political/ideological framework which would have enabled the working class to 'make sense' of a black presence in Britain. Before the working class could fashion a response from within its collective traditions and experiences of poverty and hardship, its reformist leadership had structured such a response around 'colour as a problem'. (Joshi and Carter 1984. p5).

Thus this defensive position by union officers sounds rather hollow: at the risk of sounding trite, one might re-interpret their stance as "because over the years we have failed to take a lead in anti-racism, our membership has been encouraged in its own racism, which means that we cannot take a lead in anti-racism."

Obviously there are occasions when a progressive white official has been hamstrung by a reactionary white membership. But it is equally obvious that this excuse is used far too easily by officials even when there is little basis for this opinion. Part of the role of official or shop steward is to inform and educate the membership when necessary - has every shop steward who has raised this defence attempted to do this? (such an excuse may well reflect badly on his or her previous record on race issues). What is more, there have been many cases in union history where trade unions have led campaigns in advance of the views of their membership - in some areas of health and safety, for example, a workforce has appeared to be reasonably content with arrangements which a union has found intolerable: in such circumstances the union has led the way in change, and the attitudes of the workforce have followed.

The conservatism of unions on race is all the more galling in the knowledge that in many other areas of employment reform - such as health and safety - it is the unions which have taken the initiative against management. Yet in some local authorities we see the phenomenon of management pushing progressive race employment policies on to reluctant unions. After a decision in 1984 by the education authority in Birmingham to monitor the ethnic background of teachers as part of its equal opportunity in employment policy the deputy general secretary of the Birmingham group of the National Association of Schoolmaster/Union of Women Teachers complained "We do not see why the authority needs to know the composition of the existing workforce for its equal opportunities policy" (Birmingham Evening Mail 24 September 1984). The question to ask the union in return is, "How can the effectiveness of an equal opportunity policy be measured without knowing the ethnic composition of the workforce? For example, how could the success of the recent initiative in the London Fire Brigade be known without the statistics to show that in 1984 seventy out of six thousand uniformed staff were of ethnic minority origin compared with only seven in 1981? (GLC 1984 p. 12). As the GLC working group argue, monitoring is not an end in itself but a means to an end; one more tool in the struggle for

greater equality, and indispensable for any consideration of whether an organisation is functioning fairly (GLC ARTUWG 1984, p. 19).

In some local authority unions, local branch practice lags behind formal union policy at a national level. It is very important that local unions take on a racial equality commitment: not only are existing equal opportunity strategies by a local authority likely to fail if they do not have union backing, but there is also the possibility that an authority currently committed to such strategies may undergo a change in political control at a future election with a corresponding decline in the impetus on equal opportunity policies from the top. The union may then become the major custodian and guardian of good racial equality policy.

CONCLUSION

It might be argued that this discussion has been too negative in its concentration on the many illustrations of union failings on race to the neglect of those occasions when unions have taken positive action in support of black members. To this the reply would be that, despite the progress of recent years, it is still not the time for complacency and self-congratulation, particularly in the light of the dangerous view still widespread amongst many trade unionists that there is "no problem here".

This article began with a brief reminder of the unfortunate recent history of trade union treatment of black workers. Again some progressive trade unionists might argue that to dwell on these events has been a rather negative exercise. If they subscribe to the dictum that one should "Look not mournfully into the Past" but "Wisely improve the present",⁵ then a critical scrutiny of history may in turn be defended by the warning that "Those who do not remember the past are condemned to relive it."⁶ The overall conclusion is mixed: there are both positive and negative aspects of the current picture. The trade union leadership has made progressive shifts from an archaic position; progressive activists have made their voices heard; some unions have devoted some resources to equal opportunities and anti-racism. On the other hand it is clear that a real barrier to future progress is still the ignorance, the defensiveness, the misguided colour blindness and indefensible racism of some men and women in positions of power and influence in the trade union hierarchy, as well as within the rank and file.

There are a range of arguments which could be drawn on by "pessimists": these include whole new areas of sociological debate which the current paper has no room to address. Arguments from this point of view refer to the "natural" sectionalism of unions, their reformist character in relationship to capital, the ossifying bureaucratic procedures and remote leadership of unions (as described by Michels), the endemic racism of the British working class, as well as the views that the recent interest of union leaders in black members is based on expedience rather than ideological commitment, and that this interest will serve to absorb and deflect the radical energy of black groups. To do justice to these debates would require a whole new paper. Nevertheless, a totally pessimistic view is often founded on somewhat simplistic reasoning. For example, there is a common assumption that in a recession, "scapegoating" racism will automatically increase. The view of prejudice based on economic and political competition is summed up by Aronson: "Prejudiced attitudes tend to increase when times are tense and there is conflict over mutually exclusive goals" (1972, p.208). However, it is not at all clear that racism, at least in the work arena, has increased in the recent years of recession. As many white workers have been thrust into positions of under-privilege and hardship along with black workers, there has been an awareness of common cause and common interest. A simple "recession increases racism" assumption neglects the role of

political education and the experience of struggle. The 1984/5 miners strike saw instances of striking miners standing on black workers' picket lines outside Birmingham sweatshops, of black groups sending speakers to miners' meetings, of Asian women workers organising collections for the miners, and so on. This is part of one positive development of recent years - the increasing organisation of black workers and their success in making their influence felt within the labour movement.

Along with the miners it is the black working class who have often had a strong ideological basis to their struggles, and a powerfully supportive community base to fight from. Like the miners they have the potential for making a greater than average contribution to the struggles of organised labour. But in complete contrast to the miners they have not had the advantage of a committed union organisation behind them. Black workers are organising themselves in order to change this neglect by unions, and it might well be argued that until greater racial equality is achieved within working men's and women's own organisations there will be little chance of success in other spheres.

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Footnotes

1. Taken from a circular from 'Liberation: the Anti-Imperialist, Anti-Racist Organisation' announcing a conference "Trade Unions and the GLC year against racism", 1984.
2. Personal communication with the author.
3. Taken from a circular announcing the first conference for the Black Trade Unionists Solidarity Movement, held in London, June 1983.
4. For a discussion of the implications of the introduction of YTS for trade unions and equal opportunity see Wrench, forthcoming.
5. From H W Longfellow Hyperion (1839), H G Clarke 1848.
6. From George Santayana The Life of Reason (1905-6), Constable 1954.

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