Building anti-racist workplaces: a short guide for UCU branches

June 2020

Background

In recent weeks, many institutions have declared support for George Floyd whilst reiterating their anti-racist credentials. While these statements are welcome, it is concerning to note that such declarations have largely been absent through decades of state sanctioned violence imposed on black[1] people.

These incidents are not a new phenomenon, and we know there is evidence that institutional racism is not unique to America. It also exists in the UK, including in the workplace - something black people are acutely aware of.

The racist events of the last few weeks are difficult for us all to deal with in normal times, but during lockdown black communities are also experiencing a heightened sense of anxiety.

Racism has a cumulative impact on the well-being of black people. Bearing witness to the brutal murders of black people alongside the disproportionate numbers of people of colour dying from Covid-19 has been a stark and troubling reminder that inequality has a life and death impact.

The sinews which connect systemic brutality with the daily, lived experience of the discrimination faced by UCU's black members are evident throughout UCU's Witness report: **https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/8476/Witness-Feb-17/pdf/WITNESS_-_Voice_of_UCU_Black_Members_-_Feb_2017.pdf**

It is more important than ever for branches to consider how they can challenge racism at all levels and work to create anti-racist environments.

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[1] **What do we mean by 'black'?** UCU uses the term 'black' in a political sense to refer to people who are descended, through one or both parents, from Africa, the Caribbean, Asia (the middle-East to China) and Latin America. It refers to those from a visible minority who have a shared experience of oppression. The word is used to foster a sense of solidarity and empowerment.

What can branches do to challenge racism and create anti-racist workplaces?

- **Engage with your employer:** UCU branches are advised to speak to employers about the steps that can be taken to create an anti-racist workplace. Please convene branch meetings to discuss how best to take this forward. A sample motion is attached to assist with branch deliberations.

- **Decolonise your workplace:** Now is the time to change a workplace which suffers from irresolvable tensions arising from imperial histories. If you find that your workplace is trapped between an imperial (not so) past and a corporatist present, the UCU Decolonising Education diagnostic tool may prove useful in identifying areas to challenge and seek change: **https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/9205/decolonising-education-diagnostics/pdf/Day_of_Action_-_Diagnostic.pdf**

- **Take time to reflect:** It's important to recognise that unions are not immune to racism and we need to be vigilant in challenging it within our own ranks as well as in the workplace. Branches should use this opportunity to reflect on their own activity, tackle bias at all levels and think about how to better engage and support black staff and students. Consider, is there more you can do to directly involve black staff in the union and give visibility to their concerns? Are you actively embedding issues linked to racial inequality in your bargaining approaches?

- **Start a conversation:** It may be the case that talking about race specifically is something many of us find challenging, but branches and members are urged to begin or continue to have conversations about race and racism. Organising a screening of UCU's Witness film and using the associated resources to stimulate a discussion could be a useful first step: **https://www.ucu.org.uk/action-against-workplace-racism**

- **Educate yourself:** Educating yourself and challenging your own preconceptions about race is an important step in creating an anti-racist environment. It's important to ensure black voices are heard, but please don't place the burden on black people to teach you about racism. There are a number of resources which may be useful to start this process here: **https://lectureinprogress.com/journal/resources-for-supporting-black-lives-matter-movement**

- **Create a safe space:** This may be a traumatic time for many of your black colleagues. Consider what you can do to ensure black colleagues have a safe space to connect with each other and share experiences and concerns.

- **Encourage allyship:** Branches and members may also wish to consider how they can become more effective allies to black staff. A guide to this can be found here **https://guidetoallyship.com/**

'A marginalized individual cannot easily cast away the weight of their identity shaped through oppression on a whim. They must carry that weight every single day, for better or for worse. An ally understands that this is a weight that they, too, must be willing to carry and never put down.'
Introduction from the Guide to Allyship

- **Build connections:** Develop joint campaigns and shared goals to advance anti-racist work within your campus/college. Contact your local NUS branch, BLM group and other community-based organisations. NUS activists and community groups may be at the sharp end of the protests. Branches will want to consider the type of support that could be offered whilst building a broader anti-racist coalition to effect change in the workplace. Be prepared to listen to different perspectives and experiences. The NUS national position can be found here:
  https://sustainability.nus.org.uk/articles/black-lives-matter-0767
- **Use and share your expertise:** Branches will each have their own expertise and resources to draw upon. We encourage you to share these on the UCU 'black voices' blog **https://www.ucu.org.uk/black-voices**. Please note that this is a moderated space and contributions should be sent in the first instance to Chris Nicholas (**cnicholas@ucu.org.uk**). Alternatively, you can share what is happening in your branch and we'll share this with members on the Equality page.
- **Protect black members' mental health:** Whilst the recent attention and desire for change in regard to racism is welcome, we must be mindful of the potential impact on the mental health of our black colleagues. The lived experiences of black workers, as highlighted in our series of 'Witness' films and written testimonials discussing the subtleties and microaggressions of racism, are only now being recognised as a daily reality and not a 'chip on black people's shoulders'. There are a number of mental health services specifically addressing issues facing black people, including:
  - **Black Minds Matter (https://www.blackmindsmatteruk.com/)**
  - **The Black, African and Asian Therapy Network (https://www.baatn.org.uk/free-services/)**
  - **Black Thrive (https://www.blackthrive.org.uk/)**
  - **MIND (https://www.mind.org.uk)**

Useful links and further information

You can find a number of resources for your branch on the UCU Week of Action Against Workplace Racism page **https://www.ucu.org.uk/action-against-workplace-racism**

UCU's statement in solidarity with protests following the death of George Floyd can be found on UCU's Equality webpage: **www.ucu.org.uk/equality**

UCU is also affiliated to a number of anti-racist organisations nationally, to which your branch may also be able to affiliate locally:

- The United Families & Friends Campaign (UFFC) is a coalition of those affected by deaths in police, prison and psychiatric custody, and supports others in similar situations: **https://uffcampaign.org**
- Hope not Hate was founded in 2004 to provide a positive antidote to the politics of hate: **https://www.hopenothate.org.uk**

- Stand Up to Racism is broad organisation that brings people together to build solidarity with refugees and confront racism, Islamophobia and anti-Semitism: **https://www.standuptoracism.org.uk**

Contact

For more information about UCU's work in this area please contact Chris Nicholas at **cnicholas@ucu.org.uk.**

Sample UCU branch motion on anti-racist education/BLM

This branch notes:

- that the University and College Union stands proudly against racism and has released a statement in support of Black Lives Matter: **https://www.ucu.org.uk/equality**
- that the Black Lives Matter movement and its focus on addressing and tackling the issue of race discrimination has the potential to positively impact on the wellbeing of our black staff and students
- not responding with anti-racist initiatives has the potential to bring the institute into disrepute – potentially impacting the recruitment and retention of staff and students from diverse backgrounds
- that we must address the legacy of our imperial past and its impact on our corporate present.

This branch believes:

- Black Lives Matter
- that the racial tensions and inequalities seen in the USA are not unique to the USA and are often witnessed and experienced within UK society, in UK education establishments and worldwide
- that more must be done by the college/university/institution to ensure that students and staff from a diverse range of backgrounds feel welcome, feel safe, are represented at every level of the institute
- the curriculum must be decolonised
- this is a matter of urgency.

This branch resolves to:

- to call on the college/university/institution and insist that the following measures are put in place:
  - immediately review course/curriculum provision to begin the process of decolonisation
  - all committees charged with delivering equality report directly to the principal/VC/CEO presenting actions for the delivery of the anti-racist agenda.
- this branch resolves to call on the institution to ensure that staff race equality training is delivered at all levels as well as E&D training and that this is delivered regularly
- this branch resolves to call on the institution to review all learning materials and reading lists to ensure that a diverse range of voices are heard from and represented within the curriculum
- this branch resolves to call on the institution to create a safe space to allow staff (and students) to raise concerns regarding discrimination or inequitable treatment
- this branch resolves to encourage individuals to sign the petition demanding justice for George Floyd: **www.change.org/p/mayor-jacob-frey-justice-for-george-floyd**.