

Building an Anti-Racism Network

**TUC Anti-Racism Taskforce, Public Policy Workstream:
Anti-Racism Network roundtables summary**



Background

In 2020 the TUC General Council launched an Anti-Racism Taskforce to tackle structural racism with the labour market and wider society. The Taskforce is in operation for two years.

The Taskforce will lead the trade union movement's renewed campaign against racism at work. It will engage with Black workers across the UK to hear about their experiences. And it will produce recommendations on tackling structural racism in the UK, in workplaces and in unions themselves.

The Taskforce, led by NASUWT General Secretary Dr Patrick Roach, will then develop an action plan for change across UK workplaces – and within unions themselves.

It is our aim to use our trade union leverage to press for change across UK workplaces and to lead by example by demonstrating our capacity as a movement to secure racial justice at work.

The Taskforce now in its second year and is made up of senior leaders from the trade union movement and expert representatives from civil society and academia, including patron of the Taskforce Neville Lawrence.

The Taskforce is organised by four working groups: Collective Bargaining; Organising; Public Policy and Unions as Employers.

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Congress House, Great Russell Street, London WC1B 3LS

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Introduction

As part of the TUC Anti-Racism Taskforce, public policy workstream output, two roundtables were held in May and June 2022 exploring the possibility of convening an anti-racism network. Key players working in race policy in the UK took part to explore what are the current challenges the anti-racist movement faces. And what is needed to create a successful and sustainable network of anti-racist organisations to come together and collectively campaign on pressing policy issues.

The two roundtables were set up in order to help understand the current state of the anti-racism movement and if an anti-racism network was the best way to build toward a stronger anti-racism presence in the UK.

The roundtables were chaired by Ali Torabi, Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust and Riz Hussain, TUC.

Participants came from the organisations listed below:

- Amnesty International UK
- The Baring Foundation
- Institute of Race Relations
- Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants (JCWI)
- Migrants' Rights Network (MRN)
- Open Rights Group
- Race On The Agenda (ROTA)
- Runnymede Trust
- The Monitoring Group (TMG)
- A number of trade union representatives.

This paper is the summary and collective contributions made by the roundtable participants.

Context

The term anti-racism is being actively corrupted and diluted by the right, including the government, to divorce it from its structural roots. In the past 20 years the issue of racism has worsened. Particularly since Brexit, the fault lines that existed prior have become accentuated. The government is actively weaponising race to stoke the culture wars and divide people, workers and communities.

The Anti-Racism Network should be the space that can bring the anti-racist movement together and provide a neutral ground for diverse groups to meet, strategise, talk about policy and campaigns, and agree on the most effective actions they could take together.

The anti-racism movement has a massive gap between trade union activism and community-led activism. There is a wealth of individual and small organisational responses but not a network that could share the initial analysis of critical challenges and strategise on campaigning.

The big questions for the Network are: how do we create a forum where trust can be built between the members and how do we ensure that it will be effective?

The challenges

The trade union movement's history of racism

For the trade union movement to be considered as a possible neutral place for the Anti-Racism Network to call its home, we must get to work to get its house in order. We cannot be convening an anti-racist network while significant levels of racism remain within trade unions. Therefore, the work of the TUC Anti-Racism Taskforce is vital in renewing the trade unions' commitments to racial justice for Black workers in a racist labour market, and equally importantly within union structures themselves. They should ensure that they recognise their place in the history of the anti-racism movement and acknowledge the racism that Black workers have faced by the trade union movement themselves.

Internal competition and leadership within the anti-racist movement

There is an existing coalition of core race equality organisations that sometimes shows up as being territorial and competitive with one another. There is an opportunity to shift the culture towards collaboration and making space for new, younger voices and new ways of organising.

Need to broaden the scope of anti-racist work

The Network needs to think about the role we play in understanding what intersectional race, class and gender analysis means at this moment.

With anti-racist work in the UK, it is imperative that our discussions include the European and global contexts, as, without these, our work is incomplete. A lot of the politics of right-wing populism and far-right ethno-nationalism are phenomena originating from European and global contexts and must be addressed as such.

We must also think and act more holistically across campaign issues. Current campaigns in the climate movement, migrant justice, and supply chains and workers already recognise this and take action to include anti-racism in their work. So, as trade unions, we mustn't limit our scope to the UK and to the factory gates, but work more holistically, in community spaces and across borders.

Hostile environment policies

There has been a simultaneous rise in racist policies and efforts to divide the anti-racist movement by the current UK government. The government has very successfully carried out a divide and rule strategy, by unlinking anti-immigration policy from racism and

watering down anti-racist praxis. As a result, Black people are being killed and exploited by racist policies and institutions on an ever-greater scale. For example, because of the government's initial refusal to hold a public inquiry into the pandemic response, more Black healthcare workers continued to die in greater numbers than their white colleagues. Another example is the uptick in immigration raids; the state has been weaponising raids to sow fear and divide in communities and make them more easily exploitable.

Ambiguity in anti-racist praxis

There is a growing gap between campaigners working from grassroots anti-racist foundations and campaigners promoting more individualistic ideas of racism. Another way to look at this is race scholar Ambalavaner Sivanandan's famous quote: "there is a racism that kills and a racism that discriminates". Radical anti-racism foundations are built on the idea of institutionalised racism, which "discriminates", and street or state violence, which "kills" Black people. The process of shifting away from the political and economic links to racism has resulted in a focus on individual identity and self-reliance. This leads to atomising and culturalising people's experience of racism, and introducing a hierarchy between the "deserving" and "not-deserving", to de-emphasise collective action against racism.

The government has been using notions of meritocracy to create a hierarchy and move away from acknowledging the racism that kills. By doing so, they promote the false narrative that if you work hard and play by the rules, you can rise up.

The opportunity

A vision for anti-racist organising

A vision of the change we want to make in society is really important in itself because it inspires people and draws them into the movement. We must clarify and communicate what our notion of anti-racism means to us and break out of the mould of more individualistic versions of anti-racism. This means linking anti-racism with anti-imperialism and the economic system.

Move away from placing lived experiences as the primary source of authenticity in anti-racist discourse - the current Home Secretary claims lived experience of migration and successfully twists it for hard-right agenda.

We must also be wary of using Americanisms. A lot of people talk about “systemic” racism – an Americanism that appears to be a more acceptable term as it is vaguer than institutional racism, which is more relevant to the UK context and which is being swept away. But although it is an imperfect definition, it’s useful for the movement as it’s a legal term defined in the Macpherson Report.

The Network should avoid getting stuck on a rut of making high-level decisions on behalf of grassroots campaigners and should instead create an infrastructure that allows them to learn and transmit knowledge to one another. Most campaigners have little experience in moving from the opposition to winning on issues over the last 20 years, so it’s essential to create a sustainable infrastructure through which the anti-racism movement can build power.

Cross-sector anti-racism education

Many activists and officers in the labour movement do not fully understand the roots of racism and what anti-racism looks like. This can become especially significant when addressing workplace race discrimination cases, which has been highlighted by a number of workshops and sessions the TUC Anti-Racism Taskforce has held with Black members and activists.

A big win for the anti-racism movement would be to create an organising space that’s built with the resources of the trade union movement, its networks and its reach.

Political education isn’t a one-time action, it is continuous and should be acknowledged as such. Political education is something that we must engage with and continue offering education for activists across and outside the movement. A part of this education must pay attention to the framing used in communications about racism – building a political narrative of us.

It's essential that any education programme we develop is intergenerational and cross-issue. By doing so, we can not only approach campaigning in a more holistic manner that includes the full scope of intersections in anti-racist action but also captures important historical moments of union solidarity in anti-racism, such as the Grunwick dispute and Mangrove Nine. By doing so, we avoid reinventing the wheel and solidify the legacy of class solidarity for anti-racism in the UK.

Anti-racist education must be selective and require that participants also deliver an element of the training to other activists that is not a generational or thematic peer. Training should lay out the next steps for campaigners and activists to use their learnings for strengthening the movement.

Resourcing

For the trade union movement and the TUC to be considered as a convenor in the space of anti-racism - they must scale back on outsourcing work to external organisations. In doing this, they should employ staff, preferably on permanent contracts, to enable long-term, sustained positive outcomes on racial justice in workplaces. And practice more movement generosity when it comes to supporting smaller groups and organisations working on anti-racism by providing a regular network space.

Strategic collaborations

The Network could learn from organisers and young campaigners outside of the trade union movement, particularly those operating in schools, university and in their local communities. Anti-racist organisers have made positive steps in countering racism and have created training programmes to replicate their successes among other organisers. These are positive steps that should be recognised and replicated more often in the TUC unions. We should explore how we build the trust, learning from these groups who are working on anti-racist initiatives. If our aim is to establish a network with an understanding of racism that covers immigration struggles and the labour market, then it would be a big misstep to not invite these organisations to sit at the table.

Conclusion and next steps

Both Anti-Racism Network roundtables have been a crucial step in the right direction for starting work on building a network which is sustainable and can outlive the lifespan of the Taskforce. Both groups agreed that there must be a follow-up discussion and work carried out on a shared analysis of anti-racism and a framework for the network.

The participants from each of the roundtables have agreed to the following steps:

The TUC to set up an in-person meeting to be held in September 2022. This will give an opportunity to discuss in detail the framework of the anti-racism network and the group has agreed henceforth to have an annual gathering of the network. This meeting will be extended to a wider group of organisations and race relations campaigners. And where the 2022-2023 programme of dates of the Network will be agreed upon and confirmed.

The action above will be featured in the TUC Taskforce report to Congress 2022 – for the trade union movement to adopt the principle of the TUC organising an annual gathering of anti-racist organisations, campaigns and trade unionists: the Anti-Racism Network.