

The South East Region TUC — Anti Racist — Anti Fascist Broadsheet

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A STEP FORWARD — FOUR BLACK LABOUR MPs

Along with many others in the trade union and labour movement the SERTUC's Race Working Party, welcomed the election to Parliament, last June of four black Labour MPs. The following is an interview with Bernie Grant. We asked him what his election means for black people, how he intends to pursue his work, and what his views are about black workers and trade unions.

Prior to the election there was a lot of debate about the 'role' of black MPs. How is your 'role' developing and is it different from what you anticipated?

There was a lot of debate about the role of black MPs and there still is. As there are no precedents for our situation we run into an immediate difficulty and that is black people's expectations — they do expect tremendous things from us. We also of course have to cope with the reality of the situation which is that the Labour party is not in power and that is a major problem. Even if the Labour party were in power, we are still outnumbered to such an extent that I believe that what we can actually come up with is going to be very small indeed.

Primarily, I see our role as an enabling one, enabling people to fight for themselves. **What we need is for the black community themselves to organise and make demands on us and through us, make demands on the system.** For instance, when we take up issues like immigration inside Parliament we can take it up with the knowledge that there are large numbers of black people out there who are going to push us and support us. That strengthens our case, so the role of an enabler is an important one.

The second role I see for us is developing links with black struggles throughout the world. For example, the struggle of black people in America. We have already been in touch with the congressional black caucus, and we want to build links. If we can link and join together, on issues like South Africa, we can influence both our Parliaments and make a stronger case.

We are also developing links with black and third world countries. The level of Third World debt to the IMF presents many of those countries with serious economic and political problems.

This linking extends to individual countries and I am already doing a lot of work on the Caribbean because of my connections there. For example since it has been privatised, British Airways, having already taken over Air Jamaica is now trying to run BWIA, which is the National airline of Trinidad & Tobago. I am

trying to do something about that. I would also like to see Britain import more from the Caribbean. I know Paul Boateng wants to be involved with Africa, Diane Abbot with America, and Keith Vaz wants to work on the Middle and Far East, so this is a developing role.

We also of course have a role in educating the Labour party and Labour members about racism and about their attitudes towards racism.

To sum up then, we are seeking to ensure that black people are properly represented; that they have the opportunity to speak for themselves wherever possible, and we are trying to educate people in the Labour party about racism in its many forms.

You said that black people are writing to you from all over the country. Is that because they feel that you represent their interests?

And what sort of issues dominate your post bag?

People don't just write to me from all over the country about their problems, they also visit my surgery. Mostly I can't deal with their cases and wouldn't because it would mean that I would be doing other MP's work.

The sort of issues that dominate my post bag are the abortion bill, the NHS, ILEA, local government, dog licences, the gun lobby, that sort of thing. A lot of letters are congratulatory, about different appearances I might have made on television or about something I have said in the House and most of them are supportive. I do however get quite a lot of racist mail. Maybe you would like to have a look at some examples of it. I have an enormous box which is kept in Haringey council. I must say, I don't get as much now as an MP as I did when I was leader of the Council. But there is still an awful lot. For example, whenever I attack Thatcher in the House of Commons on South Africa, I get a lot of letters "... How dare you speak to our Prime Minister like this, you're defiling Parliament, you're a disgrace". People actually print their names and addresses!

I do get a lot of enquiries about immigration. In the past 3 months I have handled about 500



MIKE COHEN — MORNING STAR

cases solely on that issue. Not many people write about racism, but they do write to me about things that affect them like the cuts in local government.

The two issues that dominate my surgeries are immigration and housing. And they are two very major issues, both of which I can do very little about. On immigration I can make a fuss, and I think I've got more done in immigration than in housing. In housing it really is hopeless and it is a problem, because people come to me when they have been everywhere else. And they come to me expecting something to happen, but I can't do much really because the resources are just not there.

To what extent do you think you represent all of your constituents?

There are no two ways about it. I clearly represent all of my constituency. A significant proportion of the cases I deal with are for white people, within the surgery or by letter, and I always make sure that the representation I give them is the same that I would give to anybody.

But, I find that the people who come to me most are black people, and they are often the

A STEP FORWARD From Page 1

most disadvantaged. **As socialists, we must prioritise those who are most disadvantaged.** So I give the same representation to everybody, but I seem to give more representation to black people because they are more in number, they come to my surgery more, and secondly because their cases are often more urgent. They certainly for example, have a lot more housing problems. One of the reasons for this is because in the past the Council gave black people the worst housing in the Borough. So there is a legacy of discrimination against black people in terms of transfers, in terms of homelessness and so on, which has to be dealt with.

What are the obstacles blocking the advance of black people in taking up positions in the Labour movement?

One of the major obstacles is institutionalised racism. Personal racism in some instances, and a feeling by black people, that what they say is not going to be taken seriously. **For instance, if you are dealing with people who for hundreds of years were slaves or who have been made to feel that they were 2nd class. If you want those people to become an integral part of your organisation, you have to do something about it. You cannot expect them to just come in and walk in the door like other people who haven't had all those pressures.** Care and sensitivity is needed. The Party and the trade unions have to recognise that they have been racist, sometimes overtly racist. A whole number of unions and the TUC have, in the past, passed policies which have discriminated against black people.

truthful and in doing so it will do two things, it will stop the racists on the shop floor who say "Oh there are no problems here" because it will be possible to demonstrate that there were problems, and this is what happened as a result of them.

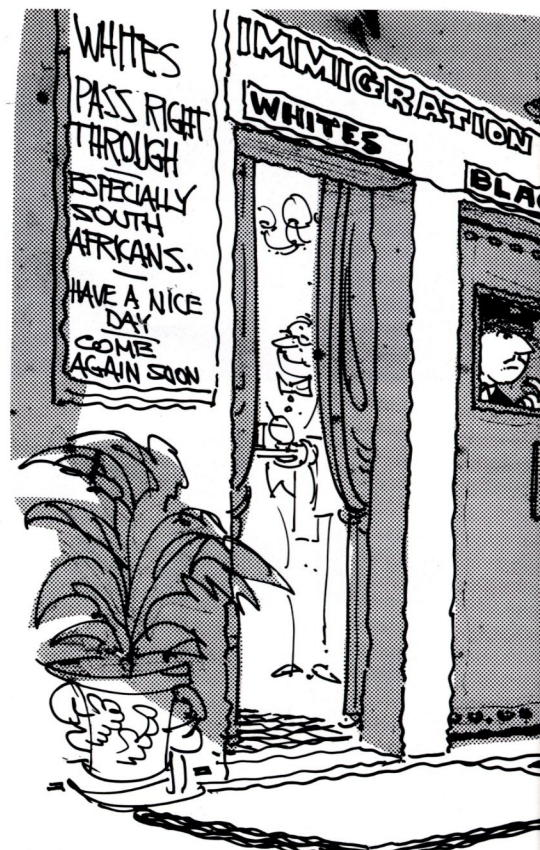
Secondly it will also give confidence to black members of trade unions that the unions are taking the matter seriously. Unless this is done, unions will not be seen as properly addressing the problems of racism.

So you see institutionalised racism as a big obstacle, but what about trade union structures?

Structures are not a major problem, because black people are accustomed to structures, there are trade unions in the Caribbean, there are trade unions in Africa. **Remember that Britain's Empire meant the export of trade unionism as well, there are many ex-colonies where trade unionism is very strong.**

The problem is confronting racism on the shop floor. I don't think the problem lies with black people joining trade unions. Afro-caribbean people join trade unions in a much higher density than their white sisters and brothers.

Where people work is also important; many black people work in the public sector or in transport, both of which are areas where there was already a high degree of trade unionism. This is where black people worked when they first came to this country. You don't get the same level of organisation amongst Indian workers and there is the problem of sweatshops we must address. The contradiction here of course, is, that the largest black trade union organisation



get those black trade unionists into the Party and working actively within it.

Why is it that the public sector unions like NUPE and NALGO have a much better record in their fight against racism?

When black people first came here in great numbers they went into the public sector, into transport, hospitals, some local government posts. These were then the low paid jobs that white people did not want to do. So we have a concentration of black people in low paid industries in the public sector and that's where they've had more of a voice in their unions. There are industries in the private sector which operate a father-son type of relationship and it has been virtually impossible in the past to get black people into those industries. So if they're not in those industries they won't be in the unions which organise there.

As far as NUPE is concerned they didn't just develop policies out of the goodness of their heart — they were forced by their members to do this. I remember when I was a full-time officer, we pushed issues, we pushed to have a race advisory committee in London, we pushed in other areas. The black members took up the issues and pushed NUPE into taking positions like supporting black sections in the early days, it was pressure from the membership. We also haven't had a history of racism in NUPE, there may have been the odd branch secretary where we had problems in the past, but we have not had the same amount of concentrated racism as there have been in other unions.

So we still have a long way to go? But the situation is not all bad. You have been involved in the Labour and trade union movement now for about 15 years, have you seen change? We are moving aren't we?

I think that certainly within the public sector there have been tremendous moves, especially within local authorities. There is a recognition from people that we need to combat racism and the sort of racism I used to encounter when I was a full-time official would not now be

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and it makes a nonsense of the slogan
"...workers of the world unite"

What sort of policies?

For example, some years ago, the TUC had a policy that there should be no foreign nurses in Britain who needed to be trained. Now that is racist. There were a lot of nurses from the Caribbean, Hong Kong, the Philippines, and other parts of the world who were prevented from coming to Britain to earn a living and acquire qualifications.

There was discrimination against these people, and it makes a nonsense of the slogan "... Workers of the world Unite". **In the past, unions have passed resolutions at their national conferences which I consider were racist.** In the 1950s & 60s, in Birmingham and in the Midlands, we can find much evidence of overt racism by trade unionists against black workers. At one time there were no black bus drivers or bus conductors. These things came from the unions themselves. What we are saying as black people is that the unions need to expunge their racism, to recognise and acknowledge it, and say yes, we were guilty of carrying out racist policies in the past and we recognise that.

Now I think that unless you start from that point and sort of cleanse the past, then you're not really going to convince black people that you are serious. It is important for us to be

in Britain is the Indian Workers Association which has 18,000 members.

Unions are particularly bad in terms of the numbers of black full-time officers. When I was a full-time official for NUPE, there were very few black full-timers around and I think that is still the case. In some industries you just don't get black people in those positions. **For some reason, blacks get so far, they may become a convenor, but they never seem to become a full-time official. This is something that needs to be looked at.**

Should we have black sections in the trade union movement?

I think that the TUC actually agreed that there should be black sections. But there is a big contradiction here, because whilst the TUC agrees on black caucuses within the trade unions, they don't feel the same way about having them in the Labour party. Those people who voted for the TUC to have black sections appear to have voted against them in the Labour party. There are more black activists in the unions than there are in the Labour party. When you attend Labour party conference you see a fair amount of black people, but they don't come from the trade union delegations, they come from the constituency parties. What we need to do is to



acceptable.

I cannot say what the position is in the private sector because that is not where my experience lies. There have been tremendous changes in the public sector, when I worked in Newham, for example, the unions agreed to ethnic monitoring and that was a tremendous leap forward. I know this is now common place up and down the country, but one of the main reasons for this has been because the employers, mainly Labour councils have taken a very firm stand on this issue and people have fallen into line. The same cannot be said for the private sector, although I believe at Fords and a few other companies equal opportunity policies are being pursued, but I do not see the same level of commitment from the unions.

One of the areas I do know about, contracts compliance, demonstrates clearly the problems we have had with the private sector in trying to get compliance with equal opportunities policies. **Ethnic monitoring must be one of our most important demands. Because until you can quantify the scale of the problem you cannot really begin to do anything about it. Most unions have no idea about their ethnic minority membership, either its size or its needs.**

The Labour party is emarking on major policy review at the moment, what would you like to see coming out of it for trade unionists and what will you be pushing for?

We need to give the unions back their independence and the Labour party has got to get its industrial relations policy right. So compulsory laws in terms of the way trade unions operate must go. This is probably the most important and major area.

Secondly we must sort out the question of the economy and the pay situation. We have to address the problem of low pay, we have to eliminate it. I believe in a national minimum wage, I think this is a must. The Health & Safety Inspectorate needs resources and legislation to ensure that people are working and living in a healthy and safe environment.

The relationship between the party and the

trade unions needs clarification and to be brought into the twentieth century. I think in terms of membership, the unions have more power than they should have within the party. I don't see why a trade union can affiliate half a million members at £1.20 or whatever it is, and yet an ordinary member has to pay £7 or £8 a year. **If a trade union wants to affiliate 100,000 members, then it should pay the same membership fee as the ordinary party member pays, then the block vote would be alright. But I don't think you can pay less and have more rights.** So this is an area I want to see sorted out and I believe our relationship would be a lot more healthy for it. Many constituency activists get very upset that trade unionists can use the block vote to pass policies which have not even been through their own union policy making bodies. I would like to see trade unions debating some of these political issues more seriously, perhaps they can have a special political conference to deal with the party's issues.

At the same time, I want to see a closer relationship with the Labour party and the unions. It is important to have large blocks of people, like trade unionists, who are able to fight collectively against the domination of the multi-national companies and against the enormous power and influence of big business. I want to see a better balance. The Labour party is the party of the unions, and they have to be closer, but that closeness should be as democratic as possible.

Immigration in the main has not been regarded as a trade union issue, although some unions have become heavily involved in anti-deportation campaigns. How do you see this developing?

Whilst they should be supported anti-deportation campaigns are by their very nature defensive campaigns. We need to go on to the offensive against Thatcherism and the immigration issue.

The relationship between the Labour Party and the TU's needs clarification

Why, for example, don't we ask for a settlers campaign? Changing the terminology would make a difference. Lets have something positive. We're not just about defending people, we must come forward with new ideas. **Immigration as an issue has been kicking around the Labour movement for a very long time, and it has never been properly discussed, either in the Labour party or in the unions.** We have unions with a very reactionary position with regard to immigration and that needs to be thrashed out. But it is extremely difficult to get people to come to a forum to discuss it. Somehow we have to find a way of getting it on to the agenda, so that we can discuss it in our unions, otherwise, the only place people can get their information from will be from the gutter press, will be from the Sun, will be from the television. We have a duty to redress that balance by discussing it in our organisations. So we need a proper debate on immigration within the trade union movement and if you can get one going within SERTUC that will be in my view a big step forward.

BLACK WORKERS

Ethnic monitoring: the TUC's Black Workers Charter says:

"Ethnic monitoring is increasingly being accepted as an essential tool in combating racism in employment and in trade unions. In order to promote a programme of positive action to eliminate racial discrimination, it is necessary to know how many black people are employed in an organisation, or are members of a union, and at what level they operate. Once this information has been established it can be used to support the case for further steps including positive action measures.

*For these reasons the TUC supports ethnic monitoring. However, it recognises that it has to be carried out with **proper care and data protection**, as with other information about employees. A full explanation of the reasons for monitoring must be given to all employees together with an assurance that any information gained will be treated in confidence and used only for the good and not to the detriment of the workforce, or the membership."*

The South East Region of the TUC has over the last four years given priority to its Anti-Racist work. Its Race Working Party decided at the end of last year to examine the extent to which its affiliates complied with TUC policy on ethnic monitoring. The results were extremely disappointing — but they do indicate that some Unions are making a start, are taking the lead.

Unions who do monitor ethnic origin of membership:

No union which responded had initiated a regular system of ethnic monitoring.

Unions who have carried out partial monitoring or pilot exercises on a limited scale:

Fire Brigades Union

National Union of Journalists (asks for ethnic origin of all new members)

National Union of Public Employees (pilot exercise being set up in one division)

TASS (pilot exercise in one region)

Unions who are considering setting up monitoring system:

Confederation of Health Service Employees' National and Local Government Officers' Association (a decision is likely to be taken at the union's conference this year)

Unions who have not monitored and seem unlikely to do so in the near future:

Electrical Power Engineers' Association (EMA) General, Municipal, Boilermakers and Allied Trades Union

National Graphical Association

National Union of Tailors and Garment Workers

Transport and General Workers' Union

Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers

It should be noted that a number of major affiliates did not respond to the circular.

● **The Charter is available from SERTUC Office, Congress House.**

Learning Lessons – Raising Awareness

Since 1985 the Southern Region of the TGWU Region No2 have run a series of Racism awareness courses for union members. We asked Bob Purkiss, the Regional Education Officer what his experiences of these courses had been, what lessons had been learned and how he hoped to progress this work in the future. He and Carol Rowe sent us the following:

The initial one-day Race Relations seminar was not overwhelmingly supported — just a couple of shop stewards participated. This highlighted the low priority which active trade unionists placed upon this subject. However, it was not a wasted day, as one of the stewards said:

"It made me question whether I accept ethnic minorities as equals as honestly as I would believe. After only a day viewing the situation from an entirely different angle. I have questioned myself deeply upon this topic. It's been a good experience".

The lack of interest for this seminar was also due to the fact that many people in this region do not see race as an issue. Many of our communities do not have any black residents, therefore "it doesn't affect them".

Yet Portsmouth is a prime example of how incorrect this attitude is. There are very few black people who either live or work within the City. But it is one of the most racist areas on the south coast. This has a great deal to do with the "nationalistic" tradition of the Royal Navy dockyard. One of the Portsmouth stewards put it this way:

"This was the first chance I have had to mix with people of different races — socially and formally. Where I live and work there are no coloured people. However, there is a fair amount of discrimination against blacks".

Also, because of the reluctance of some employers to allow paid release for such courses, we decided to run a pilot weekend course. We hoped this would also encourage ordinary members to participate rather than exclusively shop stewards and branch officials. The other interesting thing was that this pilot course was split 50-50 between black and white participants, with a black male tutor and female white tutor. This added a great deal to the subsequent level of discussion. As one student said:

"I experienced at times a great sadness when I was made aware first hand, by course members of the problems they had encountered not only at work but in their normal daily lives. You were right in bringing home these points to someone as ignorant as myself on the subject of racism".

In subsequent courses we have endeavoured to maintain this balance, although the most recent course had all white participants. Because of this we felt some of the discussions were not as sharp as previously. In spite of this it is encouraging to see that more of our white members now recognise racism as an important issue, and wish to be informed on how to deal with it. Also because we "link" racism to dis-

crimination in any form it is easy to bring many everyday problems into context eg. women, youth, disabled, and so on.

When the course objectives are set out we stress to our students how important it is to be completely honest with each other. Not to give the "right" answers, but to speak how they feel and think. Without this level of honesty the whole course is pointless. With very few exceptions, this approach has worked extremely well.

One area which always initiates a great deal of discussion and afterwards greater awareness, is the "Myth or Reality" session. For this we use a video, followed by group discussions and report backs. Students see something of English history which they've never been exposed to before. We also look at everyday statements such as "There are too many blacks in the country", "Black people take our jobs", "Overcrowding in housing and hospitals is due to black people".

We also introduce them to the extent of media bias, which elicit responses such as:

"It opened my eyes to how misinformed I was. I believed the statements made by the media, not doubting the authenticity or correctness of the facts."

... "We think it's possibly the way we've been brought up and media brain-washing".

An important element is contained in the final session — "Future Action — The Way Forward". The first hurdle is to make trade unionists conscious of racism, both within society generally, and in particular at the workplace. So we ask our students to look, upon their return to work, at the inequality in the range of jobs done by blackworkers, which provide training and chances of promotion, the attitude of management to racial inequality and so on. Another area which needs to be examined is within our own organisations. As one branch secretary summed up:

"Trade unions need to look carefully at their policies. Our objective is to persuade them not only to argue with their employers for equality in the workplace, but also to adopt policies which will ensure full representation and participation for their black members within their branches".

Some who have been on Racism Awareness courses have gone back and have held informal discussions with their members on the subject. Others have held shop stewards meetings, whilst others have got their branch to invite outside speakers to branch meetings. Some have found that they are very aware of racist jokes

and remarks which would have passed unnoticed before. Others have explained the racist elements in these jokes to their children, in an effort to stop this type of brainwashing.

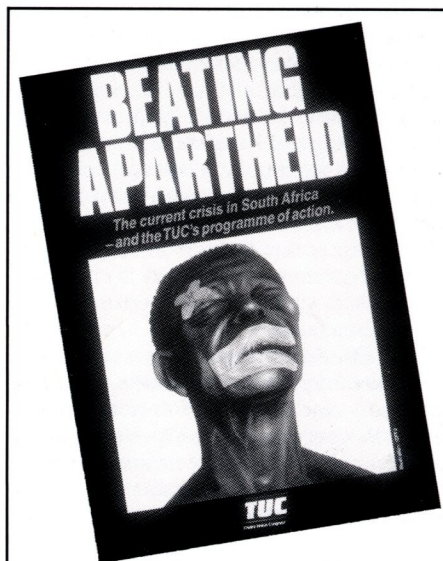
At times it all seems to be so painfully slow. On looking back to our first one-day seminar of two people, to today's over-subscribed two-day courses, we can see how much progress has been made. Yes, there is still a long way to go, but Racism is a topic of consideration and concern for many in the Southern Region of the TGWU and it is being discussed honestly and constructively.

"Before I attended this course I believed I was not at all racist but by the end of the course I wasn't so sure". Jayne.

"I have started noticing racist remarks made by friends which I probably wouldn't have noticed before the course". Caryl.

"On returning to work what we found disturbing was the lack of interest by other shop stewards ... We think it's possibly the way we've been brought up and media brainwashing".

Andy & Sally.



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The South East Region of the TUC is holding a conference on 'Black Workers & Trade Unions' on Friday 24th June. The conference will be workshop based and cover a range of issues including Ethnic Monitoring, Immigration, Recruitment and Trade Unions in the Community. For further information contact Ron Edwards, SERTUC, Congress House, Great Russell Street, WC1. Tel: 01-636 4030.