

LABOUR PARTY BLACK SECTIONS

ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS

FREQUENTLY ASKED

ABOUT BLACK SECTIONS

Printed and published by
East Lewisham Labour Party
Limes Hall,
Limes Grove,
LEWISHAM, London SE13.



PRODUCED BY RUSSELL PROFFITT
EAST LEWISHAM LABOUR PARTY

FOR LABOUR PARTY BLACK SECTIONS

1. INTRODUCTION

Most members of Britain's Black communities are disgusted, if not totally disenchanted, with the general political process of this country, and in particular that part of it under the influence and control of the Labour Party.

Our sufferings, be they at the hands of racists on the streets or in institutions of the state, such as the Police or schools, are well enough known. Our needs and demands for equality, for justice and for representation are patently obvious. Yet their realisation - despite promises - always seems a distance away.

To many of us, as Socialists, such a situation is not only totally intolerable but provides a prime reason why we now feel it essential that radical changes are made, so that a new, determined and more strategic way of operating in British political affairs is created.

We take the view that, as far as the Labour Party is concerned, the time is right for the creation of means through which Black people in the Party could come together to create the ground on which the on-going battle against racism in society, and in the Party, can be based. This, we feel, could best be done through the creation of BLACK SECTIONS.

2.

Q: SURELY BLACK SECTIONS WOULD BE A REGRESSIVE MOVE?

A: We are well aware that some see the call for Black Sections as regressive. "Black people already" they say "play their full part in my constituency". "Gradual progress", they say "is already being made".

(Neil Kinnock says: "There will be six or seven Black M.P.'s in Parliament next time round" - as if that is the be all and end all of the changes required.)

In response, three things at least need to be said. First, it is by no means necessarily true that those people 'making progress' (!) are 'representative' of Black people - although frankly, that is the way such individuals are often presented.

Secondly, and much more fundamentally, without an overall structure to 'representation', there is little chance of the overall strategic changes that are desired, ever taking place. In other words, the old colonial strategies of 'divide and rule' are likely to continue if change, geared towards greater Black involvement in Labour's affairs, isn't achieved.

Thirdly, use of such terms as 'regressive' and 'gradual' display that disturbing paternalistic tone, (some say racist) used by so many in the Labour Party when looking at the struggle for racial equality. In other words, they gloss over the demands of Black people for full and direct participation NOW as a non-negotiable right, as no more than some unrealistic aberration!

3.

Q: WHY ARE EXISTING ARRANGEMENTS INADEQUATE?

A: Let us first make clear we do not deny the integrity of a handful of Labour Party activists who have worked conscientiously for racial equality. But the Party as a whole has consistently failed to deliver positive policies to combat the racial inequalities in housing, employment, education and public services. Neither has the Party got a credible record on immigration laws and nationality. This is symptomatic of the fact that the Party

Headquarters has, over the years, neglected to hear an organised voice from the Black community either in its policy groups or on the National Executive Committee (NEC). For whilst some Black representation occurs in the Party, there is no systematic guarantee that our views will be heard at all levels of the Party hierarchy - i.e. at Parliamentary Labour Party, NEC, Executive Committee, Local Government Committee or General Management Committee levels.

4.

Q: WOULDN'T BLACK SECTIONS BE 'DIVISIVE' - THEY BREACH THE PRINCIPLE OF 'TOGETHERNESS IN THE STRUGGLE'?

A: The Labour Party since its foundation has always been a federal structure composed of interest groups, regional blocs, local campaign groups and single issue groups. Each group has been bound to the other by the common thread of Socialism. Sometimes, it is beneficial in our struggle, to examine the superficiality of the concept of 'togetherness' when, as Black activists, we feel it is the difference between us and the rest of the Labour movement which needs to be better understood. This is because so many other people often use such differences as the basis for kicking us to the bottom of the pile. In other words, we must move away from the 'colour blind' approach because it merely masks a whole series of issues which must be explored if racial equality is to be created.

It is absurd to characterise the efforts of those of us who are seeking to develop ways of challenging the complacency of the Party on race as 'divisive'. After all, it is the weakness of existing approaches and the blatantly unprincipled compromise to racist sentiments by the Party of old over such matters as immigration and nationality which

has resulted in the present crisis of confidence which has spawned Black Sections. If anything, is divisive at the moment, it is the white, middle-class male dominance of the Party leadership. They seem hell-bent on preventing us getting any closer to equal representation and power-sharing. Yet they should not feel threatened. By supporting the establishment of an organised Black voice in the Labour Party they will help strengthen Labour's political appeal, for we believe that unless concrete changes are made, come election time, in key marginals (and there are at least 37 of them) where the Black vote could make a significant difference, abstentions could well become the order of the day. Such a situation would deny Labour the victory we all wish to see.

5.

Q: BY EMPHASIZING RACE - AND NOT CLASS - SURELY BLACK SECTIONS ARE OFFENSIVE TO THE 'TRADITIONS' AND 'SPIRIT OF THE MOVEMENT'?

A: Challenging the 'traditions' and 'spirit' of the movement ought not to be seen as 'offensive'.

The reality of the 'spirit of the movement' is that it often seems to be embodied in male, middle-class, white representatives and it is this which is deeply offensive - to Black people and to women - and frankly must change.

This tradition has nothing to do with arguments about 'merit', but everything to do with historic patterns of privilege - the very thing we in the Labour movement constantly say we are against but do so little to change.

In any event, the attempt to draw attention to the reality of racism and the need for action to put matters right, ought not to be seen as detracting or minimising in any way the critical importance of class to an understanding of the force at play in society.

It is merely an attempt to highlight yet another significant dynamic which must be taken account of in the struggle for social justice.

6.

Q: HOW WOULD BLACK SECTIONS FIT INTO THE STRUCTURE OF THE PARTY?

A: Black Sections, as with Women's Sections would be an integral part of a local Party with, as at present, full participation of its members at every level of constituency affairs, but would also create space in which the dimension of race can be more fully discussed, and not ignored as so often happens in most Parties at present.

Arrangements would be made for the Constituency Black Section to be represented regionally, (on the Regional Executive) and nationally (on the National Executive Committee) within the Party.

7.

Q: MUST ALL BLACK PEOPLE JOIN THE BLACK SECTION?

A: No. We take the view, aware obviously of some of the problems involved that, as with women and their struggle against sexism in the Party, Black members of the Party, where it is desired, ought to be able to establish Black Sections, so that frank and full discussion can take place and proper programmes of action devised. These will then be taken to the Party for further discussion and implementation.

8.

Q: WOULDN'T BLACK SECTIONS PUSH BLACK PEOPLE BACK INTO 'GHETTOS' AS WELL AS ENABLING WHITE PEOPLE TO AVOID FACING UP TO THEIR RESPONSIBILITIES FOR FIGHTING AGAINST RACISM?

A: No. Let us be clear, we are not talking about creating cul-de-sacs or 'ghettos'. What we are talking about is building a clear avenue for free expression of thought, which

through continued involvement as at the moment would be channelled back into the Party. In this way, we believe real momentum, and direct experience can be added to what, at present, is a slow and depressing debate taking everyone nowhere.

We realise of course that there can never be a direct correlation between the birth of an idea and its implementation. But what cannot be denied is that in what we are proposing at least the idea has a chance of being born directly out of experience of those at a disadvantage, untainted by guilt-ridden patrimony of those already on a position of some advantage.

Through the creation of Black Sections we believe that Labour will not only have created for itself a way of enabling the real causes of racism to be aired and understood, but, more importantly, a means through which those who bear its heaviest brunt could, at least, play a direct role in its eradication - a role so long overdue - particularly in inner city areas where Labour relies so heavily on the Black vote but does so little to deserve it.

9.

Q: HOW IS 'BLACK' DEFINED?

A: "Black" is a political concept. It is used to include all racially oppressed minorities. Each geographical area, therefore, is likely to reflect its own 'Black' communities. In most areas, this will inevitably mean people of Afro-Caribbean or Asian descent. However, in Haringey, for example, Cypriots have chosen to be, and are, involved in Black Sections.

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Q: WHAT EXACTLY WOULD BLACK SECTIONS DO?

A: This would vary depending on local circumstances but a long-term programme for a Constituency Black Section could involve such matters as:

monitoring the performance of the Party and its representatives on race-related matters;

organising campaigns on:

EDUCATION

EMPLOYMENT

ANTI-DEPORTATION

MEMBERSHIP OF THE LABOUR PARTY

GETTING BLACK PEOPLE ON THE
LOCAL ELECTORAL REGISTER

THE WORK OF THE LOCAL COUNCIL

POLITICAL EDUCATION THROUGH
INVITING SPEAKERS ON LOCAL,
NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL ISSUES.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION ON BLACK SECTIONS,

CONTACT: The Secretary,
Labour Party Black
Sections Steering Committee,
39, Chippenham Road,
London W.9.

