The Lawrence Review: An Avoidable Crisis

*The Impact of COVID-19 on UNISON Black Members*

Introduction

Thank you for taking the time to read this report on this important subject, important both to me personally and to the Regional Black Members committee, but also to the Union as a whole. Tackling and challenging racism must be at the heart of everything we do.

It was clear even during the first few months of this pandemic that Black people were being far more severely impacted by the pandemic than other groups and were dying at a disproportionate rate.

Despite this risk, Black Health and care workers on the front line continued to provide high level quality care and despite the overwhelming evidence that they faced a higher risk and that their families were at a higher risk. Both because of their dedication to the public but also because a lot of those delivering direct care often are lower paid, outsourced with poor terms and conditions- they couldn’t afford not to go to work. Yet the Government failed to pay more than lip service to them or offer any real protection.

We cannot underestimate how angry, sad, scared and frustration the Black community has felt over the course of 2020 and is continuing to be expressed through the Black Lives Matter movement.

Think back to May & June earlier this year, the brutal, racially motivated, murder of George Floyd was shocking, disgusting and tragic and yet was only one incident among far too many. His murder did open up many vital, important conversations about racial injustice globally and in our communities, and it did start to feel like a moment of change and many different groups united around their condemnation and their support for the Black Lives Matter Movement.

Yet the government responded by initially delaying the release of their own report into the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on Black people, and then only released it after pressure was placed on them purely because they were worried about *‘how it looked’.*

The government’s report clearly demonstrated that Black people were dying at a much higher rate than their White equivalents, it was the government’s opportunity to prepare for exactly what is happening now- the second wave of the pandemic- and prioritise the safety of Black people. Having failed to grasp that opportunity, they still have the opportunity through their words and actions to condemn both the blatant racism and the structural racism experienced on a daily basis by Black people across the UK.

But we don’t have time for the government to wake up and act and that is why the report prepared by Baroness Doreen Lawrence, An Avoidable Crisis, is so vitally important. It sets out a clear pathway with both immediate and long- term recommendations to start challenging inequality and protecting Black people as we navigate this pandemic.

The report sets out twenty immediate and long term recommendations and as trade unionists, we must play our part, big or small, in supporting these recommendations and taking them back into our workplace.

What is the Lawrence Review: An Avoidable Crisis?

The Labour Party commissioned the report following the failure of the government to demonstrably tackle the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on Black communities. Public Health England’s initial report near the start of the pandemic was criticised widely for simply outlining the increased risk of coronavirus to Black communities instead of coming up with a plan to tackle it, a [subsequent report was published in mid-June](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/892376/COVID_stakeholder_engagement_synthesis_beyond_the_data.pdf) with several recommendations to address the disproportionality.​

These included measures such as better involving and targeting Black communities in research, education, prevention and health promotions- however, this is little evidence that any of these measures have been implemented.

The report included over 200 submissions as well as over 300 roundtable participants, including frontline workers, trade unions, voluntary organisations, community groups and others. UNISON contributed to the roundtable discussions & submitted evidence. Throughout the report it quotes both organisations as well as individual contributions​ to underline and evidence the recommendations. The report was published at the end of October

Why is the report important to UNISON and our members?

14% of population of England and Wales are Black. However, in the first wave of the pandemic, 34% of those who were critically ill were Black, at the start of the second lockdown and in the midst of the second wave, this was even high at 38%. ​

Additionally, 20% of NHS staff are black, however 68% of NHS staff that have died of COVID-19 were Black. This is beyond disproportionate.

UNISON has worked tirelessly to ensure that risk assessments are fully implemented. Yet according to UNISON research more than half of Black staff (60%) working in the NHS, care homes and schools weren’t given Covid-19 risk assessments, and (79%) reported that they hadn’t had a conversation with their manager about the workplace Covid risk, whilst more than two-thirds (67%) said they needed PPE to keep safe at work, but only half reported being issued with the correct level of kit.​

It is clear that Black UNISON members are not only at higher risk than their colleagues but that employers are continuously failing to act to recognise this and offer sufficient protection.

An Avoidable Crisis

*“Black, Asian and minority ethnic people have been overexposed, under protected, stigmatised and overlooked during this pandemic – and this has been generations in the making…. Caused by decades of structural injustice, inequality and discrimination”*

Black people are not only more likely to work in sectors, such as social care, that have been “overexposed” to Covid-19, but to have a higher chance of having other conditions that increase the risk of serious illness and face greater barriers to accessing healthcare. ​

Black workers have been put at risk by the government’s failure to enforce Covid-secure workplaces, as well as the “no recourse to public funds” rule.

The report also warned that BAME people have faced “disgraceful racism” as people have sought to “blame different communities for the spread of the virus” – fuelled in part by global leaders dubbing it the “Chinese virus”.​

Recommendations

The report includes twenty recommendations, each of which contribute to both tackling the current crisis whilst also considering the long-term structural inequalities and discrimination that have contributed heavily to the crisis.

There are six recommendations in particular that as a union and a region we can use our influence and collective voice and contribute to immediately:

***Recommendation 1: The Government must go further and set out an urgent plan for tackling the disproportionate impact of Covid on ethnic minorities this winter***

The plan has yet to be produced and the disproportionate impact is still being felt, leaving Black Communities without support from the government.

**Action:** Branches should actively reach out to members, letting them know that UNISON is here for them and will ensure that they are safe at work and all employers have appropriate plans in place.

***Recommendation 2:******A national strategy to tackle health inequalities***

**This recommendation includes reference to the Marmot review and includes nine points that should be included in the strategy.**

**Action: Health branches can seek to work with their employers to request a commitment, formal meetings, and action plans to start to tackle three key parts:**

* Improved training for all health and care staff to tackle racism, unconscious bias, understand cultural differences
* Every trust have a race equality strategy​
* Commitment to engage with staff on how lessons learnt from pandemic can be applied to NHS​

***Recommendation 4: Ensure Covid-19 cases from the workplace are properly recorded***

Employers have been advised not to register deaths during pandemic because in claims contact with public not “sufficient evidence that they could have resulted from virus”​

This makes it harder to understand and track the impact on Black workers and identify and tackle any patterns​, preventing intervention or additional safety measures.

**Action:** H&S reps and activists on employer H&S committee should urgently ask how each employer is recording COVID related deaths and put pressure on employers to report in line with RIDDOR. ​

***Recommendation 5: Strengthen Covid-19 risk assessments to ensure consistency and to give workers more confidence***

All employers with more than five staff are required to produce written risk assessments, and employers with over 50 staff are expected to publish these on their own website. However, many employers fail to do so.

**Action:** Check that all employers in the branch are complying, including private & voluntary organisations, targeting those that are not.

Ensure that all risk assessments are comprehensive and that UNISON have had the opportunity to input and that Black members have been consulted, supporting them in contributing.

Distribute UNISON guidance on risk assessments to all reps and support H&S reps in accessing UNISON training.

​***Recommendation 6: Improve access to PPE in all high-risk workplaces***

This links with a key UNISON priority and focus throughout the pandemic. This is additionally important for Black members, particularly in terms of ensuring that PPE is appropriate for all staff, for example for those who wear hijabs, turbans or have beards for religious reasons.

Action: Continue to work with employers to identify appropriate PPE and support members in raising individual concerns and requesting individual risk assessments as appropriate.

***Recommendation 15: Implement a race equality strategy***

**Whilst the report rightly calls for action from the government in addressing this as a national issue for all public bodies, there are actions that can be started at a local level in the meantime.**

**Action:** Request your employer conduct a race audits and produce a roadmap to improve the recruitment, retention and progression of Black, Asian and minority ethnic people. In doing so, Black Members should be fully involved and consulted alongside trade union representatives.

Monitor the implementation of the public sector equality duty to ensure proper compliance

***Recommendation 17: Introduce mandatory ethnicity pay gap reporting***

**UNISON has called for this previously and continues to support this, it is clear from the pandemic that high level representation of Black workers is key to understanding and addressing key structural and socio-economic inequality. 20% of the NHS workforce are Black, yet only 6.5% of senior NHS managers are Black.**

**Action:**

* Ensure that ethnicity data is appropriately captured and recorded
* Request that each employer voluntarily produce an ethnicity pay gap report and seek to work with them to produce an action plan, alongside the annual gender pay gap report.

*Other Recommendations*

The recommendations within the report are thoughtful and far reaching and cover a range of other topics that UNISON has and does campaign on, inlcuidng a number of recommendations that link with our housing campaign, including increased protection for renters, as well as other key campaigns such as ending the hostile environment.

Conclusion

Racism and inequality have never gone away, and for our Black Members it’s getting tiring and exhausting to having to keep fighting the same fights. But we will not give up and neither should you.

Everyone has a part to play, big or small and we in the South East have an especially hard fight.

A councillor in one of our own councils, Wokingham Borough Council, announced to a council meeting this summer that Black Lives Matter had “become a political organisation” and Wokingham Borough Council could not support the movement at the risk of becoming “a political football”. Ignorant remarks hurting and harming the hardworking Black staff, and this is only one incident among many.

I wanted to especially highlight a campaign and an issue that we don’t speak about a lot in UNISON but is absolutely key to our core beliefs and objectives. November was Islamophobia Awareness Month, the campaign raises awareness within society of how Muslims are continuously discriminated against, breaking down barriers and challenging stereotypes. A key aspect of the campaign in to highlight why it is so crucial for Muslims to report Islamophobic hate crimes to authorities, with a worrying year on year rise.

We cannot sit back, because it isn’t happening to us personally. We cannot ignore the problem, because our children, parents, families and relative are not victims. We as UNISON members need to work together with Muslim communities to combat Islamophobia and we need to encourage people to report every Islamophobic incident to the police.

Like many Black groups, Muslim members are significantly underrepresented in UNISON and in our structures, it’s so important that their voice is heard and that all Black Members know that UNISON is their Union.

As stewards and branch officers we must continue to do more and keep pushing ourselves to identify and acknowledge racism within our workplaces and to make all Black members our priority.

Rosita Ellis Jo Galloway

Deputy Regional Convenor Regional Manager, Head of Equalities