

Conference:	UNISON National Black Members Conference
Date:	20 – 22 January 2023
Location:	The Exchange, Edinburgh International Conference Centre, Edinburgh, EH3 8EE
Report by:	Bill Acharjee – University of Brighton Black Members Officer & Southeast Regional Black Members Committee Rep



Figure 1: The Exchange, Edinburgh International Conference Centre, Edinburgh

The 2023 UNISON National Black Members Conference was held in Scotland’s beautiful capital city, Edinburgh, and as a first-time visitor I fully agree with the critics that it is one of the most unique and memorable cities in Europe that I have visited. The city oozes charm, vibrancy and tranquillity with its narrow and cobbled streets, and majestic buildings and gardens, which wouldn’t look out of place in a Harry Potter movie. The taxi driver who drove me to my hotel also informed me that there were countless fascinating museums, which are free to visit, and assured me that the cities community are all very welcoming and accommodating to everyone. From my experience, I certainly would not dispute that either!



Figure 2: West Bow/Victoria Street, Edinburgh's Old Town

1. Southeast Regional Black Members Committee (SERBMC)

For the first in-person event since the 2020 pandemic it was evident that NBMC delegates were excited to meet with each other again face-to-face as conference proceedings began on Friday 20th January at midday to welcome all first-time delegates, which was then followed by the regional committee meetings, as the Southeast regional rep for the weekend, I was required to sit on the top table alongside Southeast Co-Chairs, Rosita Ellis, and Skip Bowa to facilitate the session and providing the group with the following updates:

- 1.1 Year of Black Workers (YOBW)** – inform members as it is the YOBW, branches are encouraged to commit to one Black Members event, with the support from the Southeast Regional Black Member's Committee, so that an overarching programme of events and activities can be published online. Branches are also encouraged to develop action plans if they intend to put on multiple events throughout the year as well as develop Black member SOGs.
- 1.2 Southeast Regional Black Members Committee (SERBMC) AGM** – advised members that the AGM will be held online on 28th of March, 12 pm – 1 pm, therefore, members are encouraged to attend and consider roles they wish to be elected for the forthcoming year.
- 1.3 NBMC Motions** – explained to members the importance of motions because they are the mechanism that union members use to democratically decide and influence union policies, strategies, aims, and objectives as well as campaign themes. Members were also informed that the region had submitted a motion (Challenging employment barriers faced by newly qualified Black social workers) and encouraged members to support it as well as move any regional motions that they felt passionate about to ensure UNISON continues to support its Black members Nationwide.
- 1.4 Southeast Black Members What's App Group** – shared with members that we have set up an informal group so that Black members can stay in touch, share relevant intel and ask for support if required.
- 1.5 Black Members to Get Active!** – encouraged members for the need to pursue and engage with UNISON training and development opportunities to become activists, and to support them to take on senior lay positions within their branches in view of the lack of representation of Black members in these positions throughout the country. It was also explained that this would be the best approach to ensure all Black members were being supported appropriately.
- 1.6 Update from SE Members** – the floor was open for members to share updates on issues or challenges within their workplaces. The reoccurring themes consisted of several branch Chairs not promoting Black member specific training and development opportunities, for the SERBMC to deliver more activities throughout the year (*recommended point 1.1*). There was also some discussion that members were not accessing Black members communications (newsletters, details of SE meetings) and for UNISON to improve this. Members were assured that this would be raised at the next SERBMC meeting.

2. Chair's Welcome - Kebba Manneh

The Chair of the National Black Members Conference, Kebba Manneh, welcomed all delegates to Edinburgh, and highlighted the importance for members to use the correct terminology of 'Black' as many local branches have attempted to change their SOG names to BEAM, BME or BAME, however, these terms are problematic because of the connotations of marginalisation in many neighbourhoods, towns and cities in Britain, and explained it is statistically inaccurate or misleading to describe Black groups as a minority.



Figure 3: Kebba Manneh

In UNISON, 'Black' is used to indicate people with a shared history. Black with a capital 'B' is used in its broad political and inclusive sense to describe people in Britain that have suffered colonialism and enslavement in the past and continue to experience racism and diminished opportunities today. This message is imperative to remind local and national delegates of the importance to consistently use the correct terminology, 'Black'.

The Chair also acknowledged the inequalities that persist in society and experienced by so many Black communities throughout the world from injustice and police brutality, and the impact of COVID, which sadly took the lives of so many Black brothers and sisters, including retired Black workers, who were working on the frontline to help support and save lives. Conference was asked to observe a two-minute silence as a tribute for all the lives lost. Even as I write this report, I note the recent news of another incident in the USA where an innocent Black man named Tyre Nichols was brutally murdered by five Black police officers.

3. Lord Provost of Edinburgh - Robert Aldridge

Robert Aldridge, the 258th Lord Lieutenant of Edinburgh, and a Councillor since 1984 (longest-serving member with over 30 years' experience), took to the podium to welcome delegates to the diverse city. Lord Aldridge explained that the City of Edinburgh has been on a long journey to investigate and recognise Edinburgh's past contribution with slavery and colonialism. As such, ten recommendations and an action plan were developed by the Independent Edinburgh Slavery and Colonialism Legacy Review Group for the Council to address and how they should be remembered in today's Edinburgh of which, the first recommendation was for the



Figure 4: Robert Aldridge

'Council publicly acknowledges the city's past role in sustaining slavery and colonialism and issues an apology to those places and people who suffered'.

The full report with recommendations can be accessed here:

<https://democracy.edinburgh.gov.uk/documents/s48188/Item%207.11%20-%20Edinburgh%20Slavery%20and%20Colonialism%20Legacy%20Review%20Report%20and%20Recommendations.pdf>

4. UNISON General Secretary - Christina McAnea



Figure 5: Christina McAnea

Next UNISON general secretary Christina McAnea took to the podium and announced:

“COVID-19 revealed the truth of institutional racism, for all to see. Black workers are more likely to be on the frontline, more likely to be low-paid, over-exposed to risks, offered less protection and more likely to suffer as a result.”

The general secretary also reinforced UNISON’s aim to win fair pay so that Black members and their families can live decent lives that they deserve, and for public services to recruit and retain staff to provide the services that everyone in the country relies on and highlighted some shocking statistics that 3 in 10 key worker households are living in poverty and dependent on using food banks. Christina McAnea also condemned the government’s anti-

strike bill to remove workers’ rights and explained that they are trying to rush this through Parliament at breakneck speed instead of negotiating with trade unions.

It was devastating to hear how a member wrote to the general secretary to explain that he had lost his job after 15 years of dedicated service and said: *“I’d done nothing wrong, I was doing a fantastic job only to be told, basically, you’re an illegal immigrant, you have no right to be in that job, and you must leave the premises. On that day, you could have pulled my heart out and chucked it on the floor. They took everything out of me my confidence, my self-esteem, who I am. It tore me apart.”* Conference was also reassured to hear how UNISON are committed to organise and fight for migrant workers and have the moral duty to stand against this Tory governments hostility.

It was also reassuring to hear Christina McAnea declare the union’s commitment to *“keep our own house in order”* through its own race protocol and to get more Black activists trained and developed to change our union to be the best and concluded: ***“The power to create that change comes from you, and from all of us”***.

5. Activism Journey - Rakiya Suleiman

The next speaker, Rakiya Suleiman who is Equality and Diversity Adviser for NHS Lothian Public Health Department and Co-Chair of UNISON’s National Black Members Committee, as well as winner of the UNISON 2021 Nelson Mandela Award for going above and beyond for the Black members of the union and the wider society and explained that she moved to Scotland from Northern Nigeria over 25 years ago as a qualified staff nurse and midwife and immediately noticed that she did not see anyone who looked like herself senior management positions across Scotland.

In addition, when she spoke to the few people who looked like her, in the organisation of 30,000 staff, they advised her to *“put your head down and get on with the job.”* Coming from an outspoken background and having not grown up accustomed to British workplace politics, she chose to do the opposite!



Figure 6: Rakiya Suleiman

It was also inspirational hearing the Co-Chair of NMBC describe her ambition to reach the top of her career and **bring others in the organisation along the journey** with her because it was important for her to bring her people to be a part of her success story and was determined to find a way to make it happen. Rakiya also explained the importance of seeking ‘white allies’ within the workplace, and the strategy that she would deploy was to find colleagues and simply ask them **“Do you want to see change happen? If so, come walk and talk with me.”** And concluded, **“Be the change you want to see! UNISON can help give you a voice and support activism, but no one can stop you apart from yourself!”**

6. Southeast Motion - Challenging Employment Barriers Faced by Newly Qualified Black Social Workers

Next up was the section that I was dreading because for my sins I had opted to move our SE motion, which was developed by two activist from the SERBMC that work in Oxfordshire County Council’s social services team, Dolcie Obhiozele and Shirley Owen. The motion explained that a disproportionate number of newly qualified Black social workers are failing their post qualification programme known as the ‘Assessed and Supported Year in Employment’ (ASYE), which is a 12-month employment-based programme aimed to consolidate the trainee’s degree learning by developing capabilities and strengthening the trainee’s professional confidence in an employment setting, whilst being assessed against the post-qualification key standards, and called upon the NBMC to support the production and roll-out of local government guidance as well as data gathering exercises, which can be reported to the British Association of Social Workers for attention.



Figure 7: Bill Acharjee moving a motion

As such, addressed the conference and announced:

“Hello, Chair and Conference. My name is Bill Acharjee from the University of Brighton UNISON branch, and I am a member of the Southeast Regional Black Members Committee as well as a first-time speaker! I would like to move the motion and urge you to support this motion! Why? Because the system is failing our Black Workers!

We are aware of the Health and Social Care crisis and know this is unacceptable, especially at the time when social workers are at breaking point due to high staff turnover and shortages because this useless government refuses to fund our NHS services adequately! When Black Social Workers decide to pursue a career in Social Care, unfortunately, many

are not aware of the hurdles of systemic racism that they will have to endure and overcome on their journey to become a newly qualified Social worker, notwithstanding the significant debts they will incur, which can be in the region of 40-60k to complete their University degree course. Once they complete their degree, they are required to complete a 12-month workplace assessment known as ‘Assessed and Supported Year in Employment’ (ASYE), and this is where they encounter institutional racism and ultimately end up failing due to hostile environments as well as mentoring practices not fit for purpose because often their white peers are in the position of acting as their mentors and their unconscious bias gives them the power to fail Black ASYE's, which results in the end of their long journey to become a Social Worker, with no chance of appeal, as well as huge University debts.

We know that a disproportionate number of Black ASYE's end up failing their final 12-month assessment after investing 4 years of their life due to intuitional racism within the Social Care environment. Not only are they failing our Black workers but also our Black community with insufficient numbers of Black Social Workers supporting Black children, families, and adults in the community.

Is this right? Is this fair? - No, it isn't! I say enough is enough it's time to change the narrative! 2023 is the 'Year of Black Workers', let us also make it the 'Year for Black Social Workers' to succeed!"

Which was also reinforced and supported by members of the SERBMC.



Figure 8: Shirley Owen

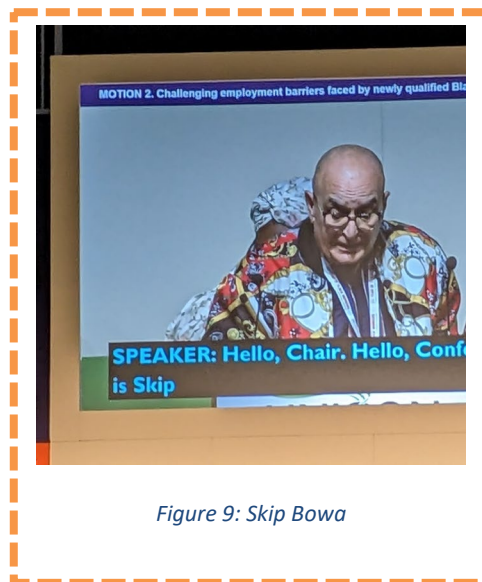


Figure 9: Skip Bowa

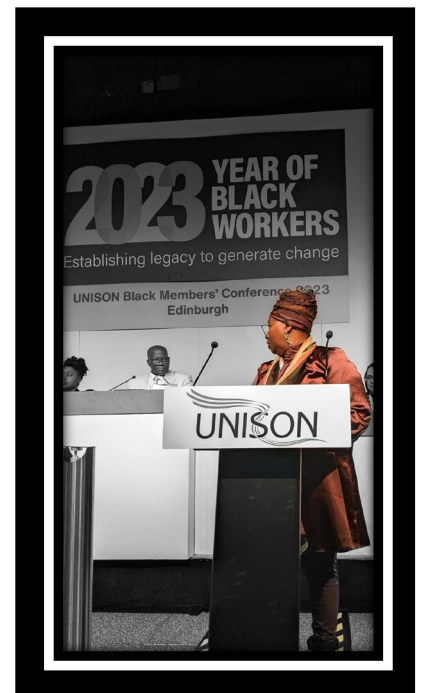


Figure 10: Dolcie Obhiozele

It was a great feeling to see the conference support the motion without any objections!

Other motions that were supported on the first day included:

- **Call me by my name** – highlighted many Black workers are suffering the indignity of having to change their names in the workplace or to adopt westernised names to make it easy for their white co-workers to address them. It was also explained how a ‘name’ can represent a deep personal and cultural connection to identity as well as offering a sense of belonging for the diaspora community who settled in the UK. The motion called to develop awareness raising campaigns and guidance documents to explain the importance of a person’s name in the fight for equality and respect.
- **Black members feeling undervalued and like they don’t belong** – explained that to achieve racial justice, equitable and inclusive workplaces organisational leaders need to understand and acknowledge challenges that Black workers experience in the workplace and to build a culture of belonging by working with employers to create an environment that empowers Black workers through appropriate action plans and policies. It was also noted that belonging is essential to all humans and that world leading psychologists rank the need to belong on par with our need for love.
- **Black members and non-apparent impairments** – described how many employers refuse to accept a worker is disabled and entitled to reasonable adjustments unless their impairment is obvious, and due to ethnicity and heritage, many Black workers suffer from lupus, type 2 diabetes, sickle cell and thalassemia, and called on the NBMC to work alongside UNISON’s National Disabled Members Committee to develop a Black members disability rights and leave bargaining guide to include policy templates that can be implemented in the workplace.
- **Young Black workers and mental health at work** – acknowledged that UNISON’s National Young Members Committee had conducted a survey in May 2022 which found that 80% of young Black workers had experienced a mental health problem within the previous 12 months as a result of bullying, harassment and racial discrimination and called upon the conference to support the development of campaigning for mentally healthy workplaces and developing guidance on the mental health impact of racism in the workplace.

7. UNISON President – Andrea Egan

UNISON President, Andrea Egan, introduced herself and highlighted how the Tory government are failing Black workers with sub-standard living conditions and failing to increase wages, as well as highlighting that pay growth is the same as it was in 1977, and that 3.2 million people in the country are in hygiene poverty and are not able to pay basic bills. The president also passionately declared that the government need to bring the ethnicity pay gap back onto the table and make it mandatory for all organisations to consider, and that UNISON need better representation of Black members within all its structures.



Figure 11: Andrea Egan

8. 2023 UNISON Nelson Mandela Award - Carol Sewell

UNISON presents the Nelson Mandela award every year to a Black member who has ‘gone above and beyond to represent its members’ which was presented to Carol Sewell who has championed race equality and racial representation within the union, sat on the TUC race relations committee and anti-racism task force, elected BAME labour representative on the national Labour forum, and was the union’s vice president in 2016.



Figure 12: Carol Sewell

Carol described how her journey to becoming an activist began after hearing former UNISON Assistant General Secretary, Roger McKenzie, delivering a passionate speech about race equality at a past conference, and then becoming the first woman – and first Black woman – to become branch secretary of the Walsall general branch in the West Midlands. The Nelson Mandela award winner made a plea to

conference and stated ***“We, as Black members, need to work with each other. If you see a brother or a sister struggling, lift them up. Do not pretend you can’t see or hear them. If we don’t look after each other, who’s going to do it?”***

9. Guest Speaker – Prof. Gus John

Augustine John (aka: Prof. Gus John) is a Grenadian-born writer, education campaigner, consultant, lecturer, and researcher, who moved to the UK in 1964. He started his session by explaining how he has been working on anti-racist strategies since 1965 when he worked with car workers in Oxford, which was due to the reaction of blackness in the workplace. As an academic his research focussed on ‘Institutional Racism’, and explained how it manifests through, structural systems, culturally, institutional outcomes and through personal behaviours.

He went on to explain after WWII the citizens of the commonwealth started to migrate to the UK to address the labour shortages, which is when legislation was enacted to minimise entry. The Home Office decided to destroy all the colonial landing cards from 1945 - 2014 causing the Windrush generation to suffer personally, emotionally, and financially demonstrating that they view Black people as inferior. He went on to share his views of how the Right-wing movement is firmly embedded into UK politics and how the movement has undergone many rebrands in recent years (NF, BNP, UKIP, EDL).



Figure 13: Prof. Gus John

Prof. John stated that legislation that should have delivered significant change, such as amendments to the Race Relations Act 2000, has not with many Public sector organisations failing to deliver under the Equality Duty and the organisation that had responsibility to police it was not funded properly and how the Tory government now state that the Equality Impact Assessment process is red tape so more organisations are foregoing this necessary activity, and the conference all agreed with Gus when he stated that ‘Race’ has been diluted by an all-encompassing phrase ‘Protected Characteristics’.

Gus John also shared a case study of a recent Black teacher (Catherine Burton-York) who was awarded £460,000 for racial discrimination after she was stripped of senior role and replaced with less-qualified white colleague. The Headteacher responsible for this should have been sacked, and not allowed to continue 'business as usual' sadly, this did not happen and is commonplace within too many public sector organisations.

He concluded his session by suggesting that the UNISON NBMC should consider working with other Black led organisations, collaborate, and form a national federation of Black staff networks which will help to eliminate racism from the workplace to which he received a well-deserved standing ovation from every conference delegate.

10. Fringe Meeting: Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities Report (CRED / Sewell)

Colleagues from the TUC and Runnymede Trust spoke of their disdain for the contents of the CRED report, highlighting the following disparities:

- Power imbalance within society
- Data that shows disproportionate adverse impacts on Black people
- Legislation is being used to silence dissent
- Voter registration will help to fight unfairness
- Voters will need identification for the next elections
- CRED report - an insult to every person that has experienced racism

10.1 Suggested Reading:

Referenced report "Dying on the Job": <https://www.tuc.org.uk/research-analysis/reports/dying-job-racism-and-risk-work>

TUC Anti-Racism Manifesto: <https://www.tuc.org.uk/sites/default/files/2022-09/ARTFManifesto2022.pdf>

Statement opposing CRED report's denial of institutional racism: <https://docs.google.com/forms>

Contrary to the Sewell report's findings, the UK still has a problem with racism: <https://www.peoplemanagement.co.uk>

CRED blog series: The Sewell report - A flawed understanding of racial inequalities in employment: <https://www.qmul.ac.uk/busman/newsandevents/general/items/cred-blog-series-the-sewell-report-a-flawed-understanding-of-racial-inequalities-in-employment-.html>

BMA (British Medical Association) Condemns Sewell Race Report: <https://www.bma.org.uk/news-and-opinion/bma-condemns-sewell-race-report>

UN Experts Condemn UK CRED Report: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2021/04/un-experts-condemn-uk-commission-race-and-ethnic-disparities-report>

Sewell: A report for neoliberal times <https://irr.org.uk/article>

Honour George Floyd - Condemn the Sewell Report to the trash bin of history:

<https://www.rota.org.uk/blog/honour-george-floyd-condemn-sewell-report-trash-bin-history>

'Reprehensible': United Nations Experts Condemn UK's Race Report 'reprehensible':

<https://www.vice.com/en/article/93y5kz/uk-racism-report-united-nations-panel>

Academics dispute involvement in Government-backed race review Jersey:

<https://www.jerseyeveningpost.com/morenews/uknews/2021/04/01/academics-dispute-involvement-in-government-backed-race-review/>

Denounce the divisive, deceitful, racist, Dr Tony Sewell report on race inequality:

<https://www.change.org>

RCPsych response to the report of the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities:

<https://www.rcpsych.ac.uk>

The Guardian - No 10 race report tries to normalise white supremacy:

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/apr/19/no-10-race-report-tries-normalise-white-supremacy-un-experts>

11. Overall Summary

Again, another successful Black Members conference packed to the brim full of useful information, advice, and guidance on how to deal with racism, prejudice and discrimination in society and the workplace. Connecting and meeting with Black members throughout the UK is always such a rewarding and empowering experience, and I would strongly urge any members who haven't attended to sign up for next year, and the key message to remind ourselves daily is that: "United we stand, divided we fall!"

12. Key Findings of Best Practice & Recommendations:

- Use the term 'Black' and try and avoid using the many acronyms. In UNISON, 'Black' is used to indicate people with a shared history. Black with a capital 'B' is used in its broad political and inclusive sense to describe people in Britain that have suffered colonialism and enslavement in the past and continue to experience racism and diminished opportunities today.
- Write to your local council to ask if your city has past associations with sustaining slavery and colonialism, and if so to issue an apology to those places and people who suffered as well as develop an action plan to recognise how the city will make amends of its past.
- Bring other Black workers in the organisation along the journey with you and support Black members who maybe experiencing challenges and issues within the workplace.
- Consider approaching new Black members by having positive / structured conversations and encourage more Black members to become activists.



Southeast Regional Black Members Committee, 2023