UNITY IN DIVERSITY

A celebration of black and ethnic minority union members
25 YEARS OF RMT BEMMAC

Foreword by RMT general secretary Mick Cash

I am proud to introduce this booklet which celebrates 25 years of our Black and Ethnic Minority Members Advisory Committee and Conference and to recognise the struggles of black pioneers of trade unionism within the transport industry.

You will see from the booklet the discrimination that our black and minority ethnic people have had and it also identifies the superb work of past and current generations of activists in promoting equality within the union and the wider community.

25 years ago I was a member of the RMT executive committee and I remember the debates at the time around the Paddington guards issue which is dealt with in this pamphlet.

I also remember that these were the same issues affecting Watford guards in which I was heavily involved as the Watford branch secretary at the time. So it is very pleasing for me to see this celebration of the creation of the structures to empower RMT BEM members in challenging discrimination.

I appreciate this booklet is by no means a complete history of the activities and struggles of our BEM members, but it is right that we recognise this important anniversary and celebrate our black and ethnic minority pioneers of trade unionism fighting for equality within the transport industry.

Cover picture: Black and white seafarers vote for strike action in Cardiff in 1911
INTRODUCTION

A 2017 TUC report conducted with a panel of 1,003 black and minority ethnic workers revealed that over a third of them had experienced racial discrimination, abuse or bullying by their employer. 37 per cent of BAME women workers had suffered verbal abuse due to both their race and gender. 4 per cent of all respondents reported having experienced physical violence on account of their race in the workplace.

As organisations established to represent the collective interests of workers in the workplace, trade unions main aim is to negotiate with governments and employers to defend and improve the terms and conditions under which their members sell their labour. Contractual terms and working conditions have traditionally taken priority over wider social justice issues including anti-discrimination on grounds of race, religion, gender or sexuality.

In practice, trade unions have had a broader social agenda and have, at times, also played significant roles in social justice issues. Occasionally, they have led political movements, for example, in South Africa over apartheid, but generally, issues of equality, cultural recognition and wider social issues have been secondary to the main focus, which is on pay and working conditions.

Historically, British trade unions have often denied, ignored or blurred the distinctions and contradictions between race and class. Whether conscious or unconscious, such oversights can leave class unity compromised and the working classes divided by racism.

This publication offers a brief overview of the role played by race in unionised labour in Great Britain with a particular focus on the part played by rail, maritime and transport unions in that story. It will also celebrate the work of the RMT’s Black and Ethnic Minority Members Advisory Committee and Conference since its establishment 25 years ago in supporting black and ethnic minority workers within the transport industry and with wider social issues.
NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

During the anti-racist and anti-fascist conflicts of the 1970s and 1980s, the term “black” was adopted by most African-Caribbean and some south Asian activists in Britain as an expression of solidarity in the face of the experience of racism and the struggles against it. But times have changed and a new generation of non-white trade unionists appear to be reconsidering who does, and who does not, currently identify with this terminology.

Although Black and Minority Ethnic or Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic are the terminology normally used in the UK to describe people of non-white descent, in the context of this publication, the term black will be employed in line with its current use by the RMT National Black & Ethnic Minority Members’ Advisory Committee: as an umbrella term.

“We’ve never had anybody who’s not Black or Asian on the committee, but we do encompass everybody who does identify as ethnic minority in the broader sense of the term.”

Jennifer Aggrey-Fynn
Former chair of B&EMMAC
HISTORY

The earliest connections between British organised labour and workers of colour were forged in the 18th century during the movement for the abolition of the slave trade. Black writers and organisers resident in Britain were among the first to link the struggles between white waged and enslaved black labour.

African activists resident in Britain like Olaudah Equiano and Ottobah Cugoano used their links with anti-slavery interests to stress that both enslaved and free people had a duty to seek liberty and self-determination. In the early 19th century the Jamaican radicals Robert Wedderburn and William Davidson went further encouraging both parties to rise up and violently overthrow their masters.

In the 1840s, the working-class sections of the Chartist movement were maligned by the government and the press which focussed on the involvement of African and Irish people in its ranks and leadership as proof that it could never represent the aspirations of British workers.

Black seamen’s labour was central to the balance of maritime trade and power in the Atlantic and Indian oceans. Throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries black seamen and their families settled in Britain’s port cities. Many of them would have been among the first significant body of non-white unionised labour. Occasionally, as in the case of the 1911 Seamen’s Strike, black and white workers in Cardiff took joint industrial action to seek better pay and conditions. More often though, the presence of minority workers would be a source of friction made worse by the National Union of Seamen’s failure to support black seamen remaining on British ships after World War One. In 1919 large scale racial violence against black sailors and their families erupted in Glasgow, Hull, Cardiff, Newport, Liverpool, Salford, London and South Shields. White crewmen, regardless of their nationality, were often employed in preference to black men who were British citizens. Unsupported by the unions, black workers formed their own organisations.
NUS activist Chris Braithwaite speaking in Trafalgar Square in 1936
The Indian Seamen’s Union was formed in response to the Special Restriction (Coloured Alien Seamen) Order of 1925, under which ‘coloured’ seamen were obliged to carry proof of British citizenship or face deportation. Headed by NUS activist and former communist Chris Braithwaite, the London-based Colonial Seamen’s Association fought against the British Assistance Act of 1935 which favoured white British workers over other British citizens. The Coloured Seamen’s Union (representing West Indians, West Africans, Somalis, Adenese, Malays and Yemenis) was formed in 1936 to fight against a similar colour bar operating on the Cardiff Docks. From 1938 onwards, the Indian Workers Association sought to protect the rights of their members on land and sea.

During World War II hundreds of thousands of volunteers from Africa and Asia served with British forces. After the war, manpower shortages led to invitations for colonial labour to help rebuild Britain’s infrastructure and essential services. Despite the heightened demand for labour, black seamen had no support from the National Union of Seamen whose assistant general secretary told the 1948 conference that British ports were to be ‘no go’ areas for black sailors.

In 1955 Wolverhampton bus workers banned overtime and West Bromwich bus workers staged one day strikes in protest against the employment of black labour on the buses. That year there were motions from transport workers to the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU) annual conference asking the union to ban black workers from the buses. An important mobilisation against the colour bar in employment took place in Bristol in 1963 when black communities boycotted bus services. The boycott was organised because of the refusal of the Bristol Omnibus Company, supported by the local Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU) branch, to employ black bus crews in Bristol. Led by youth worker Paul Stephenson and the West Indian Development Council, the boycott lasted for four months until the company backed down and overturned the colour bar.
ASQUITH XAVIER

In March 1966 Asquith Xavier, a Dominican passenger guard at Marylebone Station, applied for a transfer to Euston Station in the hope of making an additional £10 a week (from £40 to £50). A fellow Marylebone guard, an Irishman, Tony Donaghey (who later became RMT President), also applied for a similar position at Euston at the same time as Xavier (who had been his line manager). Donaghey was offered a post but Xavier was not. A colour bar was in effect at the station. Xavier received a letter from the National Union of Railwaymen Staff Committee explaining how Euston was “not prepared to accept the transfer of coloured staff”. A network of white shop stewards was running a closed shop which included a colour bar. An anonymous letter to Xavier informed him: “When we have finished with you at Euston, we’ll send you back to the jungle”. Tony Donaghey had recently faced direct discrimination himself having been refused work in certain stations because he was Irish. When the union informed Tony that Xavier had not been offered the job because of his colour and despite his seniority, Tony declined the position in solidarity.

“Asquith opened my eyes to a lot of things in terms of discrimination... comrades from the West Indies basically ran the transport and NHS in London in the 60s.”

Tony Donaghey
Former RMT president
BREAKING THE COLOUR BAR: Tony Donaghey with the family of Asquith Xavier in 2016 on the 50th anniversary of defeating the colour bar at Euston station. A plaque now marks the date at the station.
The Race Relations Act 1965 which had been passed the previous year only contained measures to combat racial discrimination in public places, not in the workplace. Xavier’s case was first taken up by NUR Marylebone branch secretary and veteran anti-fascist fighter Jimmy Pendergast, the West Indian Standing Conference and the Campaign Against Racial Discrimination amongst others. Their campaign led to British Rail overturning the ban on ‘coloured employees’ in some of their London stations in July 1966. Asquith Xavier started work at Euston the following month. A police presence was required to ensure his safety during his first week on the job. Workplace discrimination would not be addressed until the passage of the Race Relations Act, 1968.

Opposition to the Race Relations Act 1968 was most evident in the support given to Enoch Powell following his infamous “Rivers of Blood” speech and his sacking from the Conservative cabinet. Thousands of white workers responded by downing tools and staging demonstrations on the streets of London and at factories across the country.

Responses to Powell exposed the disconnection between trade unions and black communities, many of whom turned back to their traditions of collectively organising to map out strategies for exerting more influence within their trade unions.

The increasing numbers of black workers in professional sections of the public sector started to exert pressure on trade unions to face up to the racism that was being experienced by those workers. They demanded that unions recognise the right of black workers to self-organise within their formal structures and that resources should be made available to support them.

A 1976 TUC charter for black workers urged union executives to publicly declare a commitment to improve the position of black workers and to encourage the nomination and selection of black workers.
UNITY AND DIVERSITY

A celebration of black and ethnic union members

Black and white seafarers marching in Cardiff in 1966.
Motivated by the Black Trade Union Solidarity Movement and the later Labour Party Black Section inspired Black Trade Union Forum, informal or unrecognised black groups began to operate independently within the National Union of Public Employees, the Confederation of Health Service Employees, the Society of Civil and Public Servants and the Transport and General Workers’ Union.

In the early 1980’s, The National and Local Government Officers Association, the National Union of Journalists and the National Association of Probation Officers all agreed to forms of black self-organisation. The pattern was for unions to establish advisory structures to their executive committees rather than providing the space for black self-organisation.

Events at Paddington in 1989 would force the National Union of Rail Maritime and Transport Workers (RMT) to adopt a similar model to address their own ethnic minority grievances.

“**My question to white comrades was: how can we be party to an organisation that recognises the need for Black structures and not have it ourselves within our union?**”

“**Black people in the NUR were already fighting at the TUC level and at Labour party level. What happened in the TUC preceded what happened in the NUR.**”

Glenroy Watson

*Founding member of B&EMMAC*
In 1989 eight Asian guards working at Paddington sat a series of aptitude and safety tests with a view to becoming train drivers. Four of the 25 that sat the tests passed. All were white. Whilst non-white people made up more than 10 per cent of guards and station staff, they were only 2 per cent of drivers. The Asians were advised by RMT head office to address the matter to British Rail’s local management. This was to no avail. In March 1991, after the RMT failed to raise the matter with British Rail or give them legal representation, the guards contacted the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE).

British Rail subsequently admitted that the testing procedures were biased against ethnic minorities and changed the system. Ultimately, the men re-sat the test. Two failed the examination, two became senior conductors, and four passed to become train drivers. The trainee drivers were sent to Old Oak Common depot near Paddington. They were met with a ‘traditionalist, white male culture’. Racist graffiti appeared on buildings and some of the drivers refused to take them out on trial runs. An investigation carried out at the behest of the RMT blamed a culture of harassment on management attitudes.
TOWARDS THE BLACK AND ETHNIC MINORITY MEMBERS ADVISORY COMMITTEE

The following measures were developed as a result of the CRE proposals

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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>The nomination of a senior official who would be responsible for equal opportunities across the union.</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>The introduction of an Equal Opportunities Officer</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>Improvements to the union's racial discrimination complaints procedures</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>The Establishment of an Equal Rights Sub-Committee</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>Introduction of Harassment report forms</td>
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<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>The production and distribution of a handbook outlining complaints procedures, equal opportunities and compliance with the Race Relations Act</td>
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<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Training programmes for officers and representatives in handling racial discrimination cases</td>
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<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Ethnic monitoring of members, representatives, officers and applicants for employment by the union.</td>
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<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>The use of ethnic origin data to monitor under-representation in the selection of union officials.</td>
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<td>10</td>
<td>The establishment of an ethnic minority advisory committee to oversee the implementation of racial equalities policies.</td>
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It was resolved at the 1992 Annual General Meeting of the RMT to call for the establishment of a black and minority members’ advisory committee. The resolution was carried at the 1993 AGM. Committee members were elected and first sat in 1994.

From the outset some committee members were keen to engage with the new structure which included fixed officer time and financial resources. Others who had originally hoped for a full CRE inquiry into the union’s relationship with its black members approached the work more warily. Questions were also asked at the beginning about having the union’s assistant secretary also working as secretary to the committee.

Ben Mottley was there from the first meeting of B&EMM AC and is to this day the only BEM individual to sit on the National Executive. From the start, his intention was to raise the profile of the committee and to create pathways to steer black and minority members towards decision-making positions in the union.

An ongoing issue for the committee is the recruitment and retention of women members. For younger members like Jennifer Aggrey-Fynn who is the only woman chair in its history, recruiting and retaining women is central to the committee’s growth and long-term relevance.

“We need to show minority members the influence and action that the union has on their daily lives...even more so today, ethnic minorities need to get involved.”

Ben Mottley
Founding member of B&EMM
There is also an acknowledged failure to empower Asian women into the committee. So far there have been no women members of south Asian background.

One of the areas where the committee has had enormous impact is in the regions through the development of links with minority communities in the larger cities and further afield. The location of the annual conference is of particular concern.

In Leeds, B&EMMAC members Mohammed Ilyas and Mansur Khan have been particularly active in promoting diversity and new minority membership through discussions with Northern Rail and as company ambassadors. Their work takes them to schools, colleges, mosques, temples and community centres. They have provided stalls at the Bradford and Manchester Asian Mela festivals and the Leeds Carnival. Through their efforts there are now multi-faith worship facilities at Leeds station.

In Birmingham, Raja Amin has expanded RMT membership and B&EMMAC interests to encompass the large licensed taxi cab trade in that city.

“Even among the 10,000 or so BEM members there must be hundreds who don’t even know we (the committee) exist!”

“Each year, we are mindful to go to different areas and move the conference around to make members in the regions aware that the committee exists and we are there for them.”

Jennifer Aggrey-Fynn
Former chair of B&EMMAC
Victories at branch level have an impact beyond the committee and into other spheres of black unionised activities. Regular dates on the B&EMMAC calendar include an active role at the TUC Black Workers’ Conference which has increased to its full quota in recent years.

The RMT has supported yearly conferences on reparations for atrocities committed during Trans-Atlantic enslavement organised through its London Transport Region.

BEMMAC engages with Black History Month by celebrating the lives and works of black and minority ethnic icons. A particularly successful example of this was the Paul Robeson recognition event Honouring Robeson in 2016 which sought to commemorate the life of the great African-American performer and his impact on the politics and culture of his times.

"When you look at activists within their own regions and how they’ve established themselves, it’s like a training ground for us (the committee)."

Glen Hart  
Chair of the B&EMMAC committee
This is a place where we can beat the drums and something will be done...To be running successfully for 25 years, you’ve got to give it credit. It’s a marvellous thing!

Raja Amin
Founding member of B&EMM
PROVIDING SOLIDARITY

An equally significant part of the committee’s activities concern providing solidarity, support and leadership to national and international causes and campaigns affecting black and ethnic minority populations. The following are amongst their activities.

Section 9 of the Race Relations Act, 1976

The Committee worked to support the union in its move to abolish section 9 of the Race Relations Act, under which shipping companies could employ non-British seamen at lower rates than those proposed to British seamen.

Northern Rail Diversity Policy

Committee members observed that, despite a number of recruitment drives, Northern Rail in 2006 had failed to recruit any train driver, driver team leader or driver team leader from an ethnic minority background at depots in Leeds, Huddersfield and Harrogate. It was noted that recruitment drives were centred in areas with little to no visible minority communities. As a result of a letter campaign, a request from the General Secretary and the

Northern Rail were moved to draft a new diversity policy and to alter their recruitment to better reflect the populations their workforce was drawn from.

Time off for Religious Holidays

The right to celebrate religious holidays was raised in 1996 when the conference urged the Council of Executives to negotiate with all companies for time off for non-Christian religious holidays in place of or to the same amount of time as Christian festivals.

Anti-Fascism

At the first conference in 1994, the committee urged the Trade Union movement to play an active role in countering the activities of the British National Party in light of the election of a BNP councillor in Tower Hamlets. Support was also given to a proposed rule change which would make it easier to refuse or withhold union membership from known racists who were attempting to join the RMT at that time. These initiatives were followed up in 2005 by a donation in support of Searchlight, the anti-fascist publication and in recent years speakers from Hope Not Hate have been invited to address Conference.
Deaths in custody and police brutality
The deaths of Sean Rigg, Mark Duggan, Mikey Powell, Olaseni Lewis, David Emmanuel (aka Smiley Culture) and Roger Sylvester and others at the hands of the police led the 2011 Conference to call on the General Secretary and the Council of Executives to support campaigns against deaths in custody which disproportionately affected black and minority ethnic people.

Islamophobia
The rise of openly racist political entities like the British National Party and the English Defence League caused the 2013 conference to call on the union to adopt the Declaration of Global Civility, and for the union to pressure the government to take stronger action to prevent vilification of Islam.

Movement Against Xenophobia
In 2014 support was offered to the Movement Against Xenophobia in its campaigns against the Immigration Act of that year by which the right of appeal was removed, deportations would be speeded up and landlords and NHS providers would be expected to check citizenship statuses. RMT was encouraged to actively oppose the Act.

Abolition of the Slave Trade, the 2007 Bicentenary Commemorations and reparations
Members of the committee have played leading roles in creating forums for the discussion of the facts behind the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade and its continuing legacies. Educational events raising the profile of the international movement for reparations are a regular element of the committee’s activities.

Religious persecution in Saudi Arabia
The persecution of non-Wahabi Muslims in Saudi Arabia and the slavery of migrant workers was brought to light in 2014. Conference asked the union to raise these issues with the Foreign Secretary and the Saudi authorities, requesting a formal response.

Committee members have also visited, and built solidarity with, sister unions in South Africa and they have called for greater accountability and for changes in the way international charities operate in Haiti and elsewhere.
From the right to immediate acknowledgement of grievances, the provision of prayer rooms, access to legal counsel, recognition and support of original cultural initiatives, long-standing heritage concerns and general community support, the rights and privileges current black and ethnic minority RMT members may take for granted have been won through the often unrecognised yet victorious campaigns of the men and women of the Black and Ethnic Minority Members Committee. In this 25th year of their existence, they extend a welcome to join them in their work towards greater involvement of Black and Ethnic Minority Members in all aspects of RMT’s work and at all levels of the union.
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Specialising in the fields of Black British history and literature, SI Martin works with museums, archives and the education sector to bring diverse histories to wider audiences. He is a Visiting Lecturer in English at New York University (London). He has published five books of historical fiction and non-fiction for adult and teenage readers.

Nearly 20 years ago he founded the 500 Years of Black London walks nearly in response to the low profile given to the Black historical presence on the capital’s streets. He has worked on exhibitions and learning development for the Black Cultural Archives, National Maritime Museum, the V&A, Tate Britain, London Metropolitan Archives, National Portrait Gallery, Horniman Museum, The National Archives, RAF Museum, Wellcome Trust and many others.
UNITY AND DIVERSITY

A celebration of black and ethnic union members

[Image of a group of people with fists in the air, some wearing shirts that read 'KEEP THE GUARD ON THE TRAIN', 'KEEP THE GUARD SAFE']

[RMT logo]