



**The Impact of Religion on Trade
Union Relations with Black Workers**

Mary Davis and Sukhwant Dhaliwal

Working Lives Research Institute

**London Metropolitan University
31 Jewry Street
London EC3N 2EY**

m.davis@londonmet.ac.uk
s.dhaliwal@londonmet.ac.uk

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Introduction

This research project has sought to conduct a preliminary investigation of two central frameworks we have identified within the British trade union movement for the recruitment and organising of Black workers: those that fall within the remit of 'Black self-organisation' and those that ascribe to the 'community unionism' model – notably 'broad-based alliances' between secular and religious organisations initiated primarily by the Citizen Organising Foundation. This project has aimed to assess such initiatives and examine the contrasts and synergies between them. The research has also reflected three broader current issues notably: the resurgence of a religious identity at both individual and group level; the de-secularisation of public policy; and the implications of new race relations and religious discrimination regulations on the world of work.

It should be noted that the term 'Black' is used throughout this report. We believe that if correctly understood, it is a term signalling an acknowledgment of the political imperative to forge unity in the struggle against racism. We are, of course, aware that the term Black and Minority Ethnic is often used and that we are told that many who experience racial oppression during the course of their lives do not like to be referred to as 'Black' since they assume that such a term applies only to Africans and Afro-Caribbeans and hence does not validate their own sense of self, culture, origin and belonging.¹ We acknowledge the validity of such views and recognise that the term 'Black' is not a descriptively accurate term. Like the term 'white' it cannot encompass the diversity of ethnicities which are sometimes misleadingly and incorrectly termed 'race' (a phenomenon which exists only in the mindset and ideology of racists). The term Black is used in much the same way (although less accurately) as we use the term 'worker'. Not everyone who works for a wage or salary likes to be told that he or she is a worker. They might prefer to be known by their job title or by a more generic term like 'professional worker', 'academic', 'technical or supervisory staff'. However, such subdivisions mask the commonality of experience which, whatever the differences, all workers sustain. In the same way the term 'Black' expresses the commonality of the various forms of racist oppression which affects, in one way or another, the lives and livelihoods of all non-white people.²

¹ See below for a discussion of the academic debate on this question

² Davis M, Mckenzie R, Sullivan W (2006) *Working Against Racism* (TUC/WLRI)

This preliminary inquiry is based upon a review of secondary sources and an analysis of empirical data collected through three focus groups - involving a total of 29 trade unionists, anti racists and representatives of community and faith initiatives - and an additional four individual in depth interviews with 'key respondents'. Further details of the research methods and a full breakdown of research participants and Advisory Group members are provided in Appendix 1 of this paper.

Trade union decline – the debate

In common with other countries in the industrialised world, trade unions in Britain are in decline in terms of membership and collective bargaining. According to the Labour Force Survey, in the quarter ending December 2006, the rate of union membership (union density) for employees in the UK fell by 0.6 percentage points to 28.4 per cent, from 29.0 per cent in autumn 2005. This was the largest annual percentage point decline since 1998. The rate of union membership among all workers was 25.8 per cent, a decrease from 26.2 per cent in autumn 2005. Union density is higher for women than for men for the third consecutive year, and higher for older employees. More than a third of employees aged 35 and over were union members, compared with a quarter of those aged between 25 and 34. Full-time employees were more likely to be union members than part-time employees at 31.0 and 21.2 per cent respectively. This compares unfavourably to the membership density peak of over 50% in 1979, before the Thatcher years. Trade unionists are now primarily found among professionals (48 per cent) and among public sector workers (59 per cent). They are much less likely to be found among private sector workers (19 per cent) or among sales and customer services staff (13 per cent). They are also much more likely to be employees with 20 or more years' service (60 per cent) than they are to have less than one year's service (12 per cent) (Brook 2002)³.

This fact forms an important backdrop to this study because it has led to a major debate around strategies for trade union renewal. These debates can be broadly characterised as those which are founded on an optimistic prognosis of the possibility of trade union renewal from within and those more pessimistic portrayals which see union decline as permanent. The relevance of this debate to the research on this topic is not immediately obvious since it has been conducted almost solely within the discipline of Industrial Relations. However, as will be seen, an important argument

³ Brook, K., 'Trade Union Membership: an analysis of data from the Autumn 2001 Labour Force Survey,' *Labour Market Trends*, Vol 110, n. 7, 2002, pp 343-354.

used by the pessimists, is that trade unions can stave off their potential demise by resorting to a new form of organisation: namely that of 'community unionism'. One of the features of community unionism which will be explored later in this report is its link with religious organisations, in particular through the Citizen Organising Foundation (COF). Wills and Jamoul (2006) argue that:

In a city like London where membership of trade unions and political parties has declined and the traditions of association at branch meetings has declined even further, faith organisations represent one of the only opportunities for poorer citizens to associate, take on leadership roles and work with others to engage in the world.⁴

Such a view does not reject the role of trade unions although it is clear that in the view of one branch of COF, The East London Communities Organisation (TELCO), trade unions are to play a secondary role to that of faith groups. According to one of TELCO's lead organisers the COF vision is to organise 'civil society institutions into an alliance that is strong and powerful enough to be able to do the things that on their own they can't do'.⁵ This alliance includes trade unions (in particular some branches of UNITE (T&G) and UNISON), but also Catholic churches, mosques, Methodist churches and schools. Based on the US model (where the COF originated) the plan in the 1980's was, in the words of this organiser:

to build a completely novel alliance which the unions call community unionism, we call it a union of communities⁶

But the role of trade unions is seen as a supporting act, partly because they are thought to have outlived their real usefulness. In the words of this organiser:

The strategy of only ever organising around the workplace, which is an old...19th century strategy, which I understand came out of the Industrial Revolution... is flawed in the 21st century for trade unions because people's lives are split, disparate and are not focussed on the workplace. Their loyalty is probably mostly to their family or their friends or their ethnicity before it is to

⁴ Lina Jamoul and Jane Wills, *Work, identity and new forms of political mobilisation: An assessment of broad-based organising and London's living wage campaign: Civil society, faith organisations and political engagement*, The ESRC Identities Programme, Working Paper One, July 2006

⁵ Interview for RITU (1022BM) with TELCO organiser. Interview Date - 7th June 2005

⁶ *ibid*

work. So the weakest method of organising is to organise just on a workplace basis when work is now so fluid and temporary.⁷

Such views, whilst not anti-union in themselves represent an important ideological challenge to the traditionally accepted view of the importance of trade union organisation at the workplace (at the 'point of production'). Hence whether intended or not, they chime with the dominant stance perpetuated in the Thatcher era and continued under New Labour, that trade unionism, in what is termed a post-industrial society, is a spent force.

However, there is now a considerable literature challenging the pessimists' perspective and arguing for trade union renewal in which historically marginalised and excluded Black and women workers will play a key part. Thus whilst the fact of union decline is uncontested, Stirling⁸ takes issue with the community unionism prescription arguing that it 'is the least of the unions' organising priorities' and (quoting two senior TUC officials) that it is an adjunct "not a replacement or substitute for developing strong, effective workplace organisation" (pp57-8). Lowell Turner (2004) identifies six revitalisation strategies:

Organising, labour-management partnership, political action, reform of union structures, coalition building and international solidarity⁹

Fairbrother and Yeats (2002) look at trade unions in five Anglo American countries, all of which have suffered decline, and are embarking on renewal strategies of various kinds and with varying degrees of success¹⁰. Christopher Schenk (2002) argues that unions have to look beyond both the servicing and organising models and instead adopt 'social movement unionism' aimed at:

Empowering membership participation and democratic control, by allying with key community coalitions active in the struggle for change and through the

7 *ibid*

8 John Stirling *There's a new world somewhere: the rediscovery of trade unionism* Capital & Class 87

9 Lowell Turner 'Why revitalize? Labour's urgent mission in a contested global economy' in Carola Frege John Kelly (eds) *Varieties of Unionism* OUP 2004

10 P.Fairbrother & C.Yeats (eds.) *Trade Unions in Renewal: A Comparative Study* (Continuum, 2002)

development of an alternative ideological vision enabling a critical assessment of wider social issues and unifying strategies to effect them¹¹

It is not appropriate to discuss the detailed prescriptions of the 'optimists' in this paper; suffice it to say that the community unionism model, predicated as it is on the prognosis of continued decline, has not gone unchallenged.

It is also important to note that any strategy for trade union renewal will have to respond to the challenge to recruit Black workers. In a context where it is estimated that by 2009 the percentage of the white working population will fall by 1.2% while the percentage from Black communities will rise by 21.4%, the reality is that the workforce and its needs are changing. Many of these workers will be employed in the private service sector of the labour market on low wages and bad conditions. The trade union movement has seen a huge reduction in membership density within the private sector in general and has not made an impact in organising within the new private service sectors where many employers are hostile to trade unions and trade union organisation. The Private Sector accounts for 74.8% of the total number of workers employed in the labour market with 31.5% employed by large organisations and 32.1% from the small business sector. Public sector workers only make up 25.2% of workers employed in the labour market. It is essential that unions recruit and organise many of these new workers. In order to do this trade unions need to recognise that current methods of recruiting and organising workers once they are in the workplace is not necessarily appropriate to workers in low paid jobs and with employers that do not permit open trade union activity.¹²

Racism, Black workers and trade union responses

Black workers have historically been more likely than white workers to join trade unions in Britain (Wrench 2000: 134)¹³. This difference is particularly marked among Black women, and is only partially explained by the tendency of Black workers to be

11 Christopher Schenk 'Social Movement unionism: Beyond the organising model' in P.Fairbrother & C.Yeats (eds.) Trade Unions in Renewal: A Comparative Study (Continuum, 2002)

12 Davis, McKenzie, Sullivan op cit

13 Wrench, J. (2000) 'British Unions and Racism: Organisational Dilemmas in an Unsympathetic Climate', in Penninx, R. and Roosblad, J. (2000) Trade Unions, Immigration, and Immigrants in Europe, 1960-1993, Oxford, Berghahn Books

employed in highly unionised sectors (Sneade 2001: 437)¹⁴. Many such workers came to the UK from politically active communities, and continued their tradition of activism in the new country, a fact observed by one of our respondents:

It's about people who came from the colonies, from all over the world, not just Asia, and Caribbean as well, where experiences of the trade union organising was well established.... The trade union movement wasn't something that Black people learnt about in Britain, they learned it in their own countries first and brought it here¹⁵

The attitudes toward race and racism of British trade unions, trade union activists and members, and their work in representing the interests of Black members have varied considerably over the past century, ranging from an initial resistance to immigration and/or Black labour, to the exclusion of Black workers from union membership, to incorporation into the union on a 'colour blind' basis, and to the development of specific structures for Black representation and partial autonomy (Wrench and Virdee 1995: 22)¹⁶. These different attitudes and practices have not undergone a strict linear progression, but have co-existed in different unions at the same time, within the same union at different levels at the same time, as well as within the same or different unions over time.¹⁷

Despite the propensity of Black workers to join trade unions, their experience within British trade unions has been fraught with difficulties and disappointments. Unions in different sectors and over different periods have demonstrated contradictory and sometimes hostile responses to the demands of Black workers and indifference to the discrimination against them (Fletcher 1999; Mirza 1995; Wrench 1986). In the immediate post-war period, which saw the arrival of substantial numbers of immigrants from the Caribbean and the Indian Sub-Continent, the TUC did not oppose immigration on racial grounds but did express concern over the 'integration' of immigrants from the Commonwealth (Wrench 2000: 135). During this period, the unions did not actively seek to intervene to oppose the racist behaviour or attitudes of white members, and white trade unionists tended to hold the same racial prejudices

¹⁴ Sneade, A. (2001) 'Trade Union membership 1999-2000: an analysis of data from the Certification Officer and the Labour Force Survey', in *Labour Market Trends*, September 2001, 433-444.

¹⁵ Focus Group 1, 3/5/07

¹⁶ Wrench, J. and S. Virdee (1995) *Organising the Unorganised: 'Race', Poor Work and Trade Unions*, Research Paper in Ethnic Relations No. 21, Centre for Research in Ethnic Relations, Coventry.

¹⁷ Mary Davis, Umut Erel and Rebecca Gumbrell, RITU National Report on the UK

as the white population as a whole. There were several cases of white union members and low-level officials supporting quotas for Black workers in the workforce, suspending the 'last in first out' rule when it came to Black workers, and agreeing to the segregation of Black workers into specific jobs (Mirza 1995: 27; Miles, 1982: 187; Wrench 1986). In 1948, the assistant general secretary of the National Union of Seamen stated that British ports would be a 'no go' area for Black seafarers, and in 1955, white bus drivers in West Bromwich and Wolverhampton took industrial action to oppose the recruitment of Afro-Caribbean immigrants (Wrench 1986: 6). Sometimes local trade union activists adhered to such policies in opposition to the official national policy of their union. For example, in the late 1950s and early 1960s, while the national policy of the British health workers' trade union COHSE was to welcome immigrant nurses recruited from the West Indies and Nigeria, several local branches vigorously opposed such recruitment (Carpenter 1988; Bentley 1976, quoted in Wrench 2000).

From the 1960s onwards, the Black population became more settled and many of these workers began to play a larger role within the trade unions and other social organisations in the country many of them increasingly had come to see as their own. Black workers launched a number of high-profile union organising drives and strikes in the 1960s and 1970s, sometimes in opposition to white union members and even the white leadership. Among these disputes, the best known are probably those at Coneygre Foundry in 1967-8, where Indian workers were chosen for redundancy despite greater seniority than some white workers; Mansfield Hosiery in 1972, when Asian workers struck over their exclusion from the best-paying jobs at the plant; and Imperial Typewriters in 1974, when Black workers went on strike over discrimination in the payment of bonuses (Mirza 1995: 28-29; Wrench 1986: 6-8). In many of these cases, white local officials and members either failed to offer practical support to striking Black workers, or even opposed them, sometimes in collusion with employers. A more positive attitude was displayed by the solidarity of Black and white trade unionists during the Grunwick dispute of 1976-77, in which the largely Asian female workforce won the support of broad sectors of the British trade union movement in a fight for union recognition.

By the early 1970s, the TUC and many individual unions had begun to counter the racist behaviour and attitudes within their own ranks. As seen in these and other disputes, the 1970s was characterised by a 'colour blind' approach that marked the first step in opposing racism and toward recognition of the special needs of Black

workers, as seen in a 1970 statement by the TUC general secretary, Vic Feather, that 'the trade union movement is concerned with a man or woman as a worker. The colour of a man's skin has no relevance whatever to his work' (quoted in Wrench 1986: 5). The TUC and some individual unions started to develop educational and training materials on equal opportunities, and in 1979 the TUC called on its affiliates to adopt a policy on racism. However, in these early days action against racism and race discrimination was still notable by its absence. In 1974, a House of Commons Select Committee complained that '...the record of the TUC is similar to that of the CBI (the employers' organisation) in that both organisations have declared their opposition to racial discrimination, but have taken wholly inadequate steps to ensure that their members work effectively to eradicate it.' (Quoted in Wrench 1986: 9).

By the late 1970s, the increase in disputes involving Black workers, the growing awareness among white union members and officials of the discrimination faced by Black workers, the general concern on the left over the rise of racist organisations like the National Front, and other factors encouraged further evolution in the attitudes and positions of the TUC and its affiliates. The TUC abandoned its previous opposition to race relations legislation, and in 1977 the TUC Congress called for a campaign against racism within the trade union movement. In 1981, the TUC adopted its charter "Black Workers: A TUC Charter for Equality of Opportunity", calling on its affiliates to encourage greater participation of Black workers within their ranks through the creation of advisory committees, special education programmes and recruitment drives, and urging them to include discrimination issues in their collective bargaining agendas and to take vigorous action in defence of employment grievances involving racial harassment or discrimination.

As more and more white unionists began to recognise that Black members faced special problems in society and in employment, the trade union movement began to move from 'colour blind' policies towards the acceptance of special measures against discrimination and in favour of Black participation. There was strong pressure from the rank and file, as many local union branches became more involved in local anti-racist and anti-fascist groups and community organisations, which was key to the success of the Grunwick dispute. These years were also marked by the beginning of the decline of traditional unionised industries, and the propensity of Black workers to join and become active in unions became especially attractive to unions that were now in search of members and activists. The rise of the women's movement and the

creation of separate organisations for women led to a growing acceptance of similar organisations for Black workers.

Over the 1980s, more and more national unions carried out the provisions of the TUC Black Workers' Charter (which was re-issued in 1988) by creating special structures to handle race discrimination and to encourage Black participation. The National Association of Local Government Officers (NALGO, now part of UNISON) set up a National Working Party on Race Equality in 1984, partly in response to the efforts of Black members to organise in the London borough of Camden. The first national unions to designate an officer responsible for race equality issues were the National Union of Public Employees (NUPE, now part of UNISON) in 1986, and the Transport and General Workers' Union (TGWU) in 1989 (Wrench 2003). A survey of the leading unions in 1988 showed that half had set up structures to tackle the problems of racial discrimination and Black participation in the union; in 1993, a similar survey indicated that this figure had gone up to two-thirds (Wrench 2000: 139; Wrench 2003).

By the late 1990s, a major change took place in the British trade union movement as a whole in its relations with Black workers. In the wake of the racist murder of the Black teenager Stephen Lawrence in 1993, and the publication of the Macpherson Report on institutional racism, in 1999 the TUC set up the Stephen Lawrence Task Group with the aim of identifying and eradicating racism within the trade union movement. Most of the largest British unions are members of the task group, and have adopted official policies opposed to discrimination at the workplace and calling for the increased participation of Black workers within the unions. In short unions had moved, in a formal sense, at least, to an anti-racist position, to the encouragement of Black members' participation and their 'partial autonomy' within the unions. This entailed the development of special measures and structures to assure the defence of their interests and their full representation within the union movement. In 2001, the TUC modified its rules to require all affiliates to carry out a regular 'Equal Opportunities Audit', a measure that would give 'teeth' to the organisation's commitment to race equality. This is a big change and is now an accepted 'given', a fact that is reflected in the clear and unquestioned consensus among the interviewees that trade unions have an important role to play in fighting racism, as illustrated by the following response:

I think that there's obviously a very, very clear role for trade unions in fighting racism in the workplace and even beyond that. And I think that's the basic premise from where certainly our organisation comes. Going back to the 1991 report that Ruskin College did for the TUC about the involvement of black workers in trade unions those recommendations and reasons why unions should be involved are still relevant today as they were nearly 16 years ago. So I don't really think anybody would dispute the role of trade unions, it's about how successful we are and truthful in that role as trade unions. And what are the successful ingredients in making it work for our Black workers.¹⁸

Another respondent suggested that the demographics of trade union membership impelled unions to be involved in the anti-racist struggle, if only for 'bread and butter' reasons;

(In) any simple monitoring exercise you find that the Black workers are located in the lowest structures, the lowest stratas. You cannot but be engaged with an anti racist struggle. And I know many unions, ourselves included, are failing in certain areas. But for that reason alone, it has to be at the forefront of what you do, because it then ties into the pay and conditions issue which unfortunately most unions are obsessed with, to the exclusion of almost everything else.¹⁹

It is sometimes argued that the unbalanced distribution of union members and the effect of anti-union employment legislation often makes it difficult for the unions to respond to discrimination at work. This, however, could be viewed as providing the unions with an even stronger incentive to take up the issues of discrimination faced by Black workers so as to try and recruit significantly. Yet the historic pattern of higher rates of union membership among Black workers has now changed to an approximate equality for non-white and white women (28 per cent of both), and to a higher density (30 per cent) among white male workers than among non-white men (25 per cent) (Brook 2002)²⁰.

The evidence suggests that despite the presence of many racial discrimination grievances, unions rarely take an initiative in dealing with them. A survey of Scottish

¹⁸ Focus Group 3, 23/5/07

¹⁹ Focus Group 2, 3/5/07

²⁰ Op cit

employers in 2000, for example, found that while 82% of employers had an equal opportunities policy in place, this was largely the result of their desire to be considered 'forward looking' and to minimise the risks of being involved in an industrial tribunal. Only one-third reported that their policy had been influenced by trade union pressure (CRE 2000). Furthermore, the loss of resources and members has led many unions to behave 'defensively' and to reduce activities that are considered by the leadership to have a low chance of success— including the defence of individual members in race discrimination cases.

This finding was reflected by a senior trade union official who suggested that whilst unions **should** be proactive in the anti racist struggle, was critical of their **actual** role despite good intentions. He and his colleagues could

not recall a collective grievance around racism or race discrimination. They're always individual grievances, which of course is in part why they always end up as people are thinking there must be some legal way through this. Or by the time it gets to the union people are so affected by what's happened to it, they are not able to deal with the issue properly.²¹

He went on to say, to the agreement of all in the focus group that unions must move beyond what we do at the moment which is... just react to particular issues of discrimination... we never set agendas, and all the unions I've worked for in one form or another do that.... What we do is actually what most reps do is, hope that there isn't a race issue that comes my way because I don't really know how to deal with it²²

But despite the general progress over the past half century, the British trade union movement, according to our Black activist respondents, has not responded as fully as it should have to the issue of racism largely because it confuses anti-fascism with anti-racism and is more concerned with grandiose gestures at a national level rather than the more painstaking work of embedding an anti-racist culture at every level of the movement. Such sentiments were reflected very strongly in the focus group discussions:

A lot of the involvement of trade unions has been putting their names to statements, perhaps giving money to national things like the National Assembly Against Racism or whatever it might be...which is sometimes is no

²¹ Focus Group 3, 23/5/07

²² ibid

more sophisticated than simply saying racism is a bad thing ... failing to see the difference between racism and fascism²³

It has been the BNP at every single election, probably for the last 15 years and the trade union then pats itself on the back and says yeah, we're doing something around anti racism ... the problem is when is the trade union movement going to wake up and really look at the question of race in all its complexity and not just as simply a kind of sop?²⁴

In addition the dilemma persists among some trade unionists regarding their perceived obligation to represent their members' interest whatever these might be even when this might compromise their commitment to anti racism. The following trade unionist articulated a view re-iterated by many others:

...trade unions should look after the interests of their members. And the interests, the collective interests of their members first, that's the starting point.²⁵

Another respondent noted his trade union's role in representing a perpetrator of racism:

They're all taking out grievances against a racist manager and when that case first came to light two years ago, we originally were representing the racist. This has happened before in our union, with a black member of our union taking action against an institution. Again, a grievance that we were representing the racist, he took out a private case and won a six-figure sum. So we were clearly, we were backing the wrong horse a lot of the time²⁶

²³ Focus group 2

²⁴ *ibid*

²⁵ Focus group 2

²⁶ Focus group 2

Black Self Organisation

Black self-organisation within the trade union and labour movement is by now an accepted structural imperative, although its practice and level of embeddedness varies greatly from union to union. However, it has a long history and its struggle for acceptance has been fraught with difficulties. As one of our respondents put it:

I think you had Black self-organisation before it called itself Black self-organisation. So, for example, in the West Midlands foundry workers often organised themselves through Sikh organisations or through political organisations, like the Indian Workers Association. And that was Black self organisation, but it didn't call itself that, though it was being influenced by things like the civil rights movement in America, Black Panthers, and all that stuff was affecting it²⁷

Black self-organisation is firmly a part of the Black radical tradition of resisting racism both at the workplace and in wider society. It is an approach rooted in the notion that it is essential to build unity of spirit and action amongst Black workers as well as unity between Black and white workers. It is an approach borne out of necessity. This necessity has grown out of the racism experienced by Black workers. Part of the desire to adopt this approach also arises as a consequence of the way that trade unions have sometimes been guilty of colluding with employers to exclude Black workers from access to the labour market or from progression within it.²⁸

However, despite the fact that the concept of Black self-organisation is now accepted in the trade union movement, there is an academic debate which has challenged the validity of the practice on the grounds that the concept of 'Blackness' as a political term no longer reflects current realities. The argument is that in the 1970s, Afro-Caribbean, African and Asian people claimed the notion of Blackness as a unifying subject position that stressed the common experiences of colonialism and neo-colonial racism. The self-organisation of Black people under a unified banner was seen as crucial in challenging the pathologising gaze of race relations thinking and an 'exotic' multiculturalism. Instead of focusing on cultural differences and trying to explain racism through the cultural looking glass, this movement and its theorists emphasised structural inequalities, including the particular formations of race and

²⁷ Focus group 1 op cit

²⁸ See Davis, McKenzie & Sullivan op cit for the history of Black self organisation

class in post-colonial Britain. Black was claimed as a political subjectivity that restored neo-colonial migrants' agency in anti-racist and other social struggles. However, in the late 1980s theorists such as Modood claimed that the concept of political Blackness masked differences and inequalities between African, Caribbean and Asian populations; he campaigned for a notion of 'black and Asian' in order to recognize these different positionings and needs (Modood 1997)²⁹. This account was contested by Asian theorists and activists (e.g. Brah 1992)³⁰. In the academic debates, this has been superseded by an interest in fluid identities, hybrid, diasporic and new ethnicities which now include migrants and asylum seekers.

Many of our respondents recognised that the concept of political Blackness had been challenged but they disputed the basis for this, seeing it as part of a strategy to fragment a collective response to racism:

Very divisive strategies were used to break up that collective, in terms of religious groupings, in terms of linguistic groupings, and special needs funding³¹

Another respondent agreed that self organisation had 'lost its way' to some extent, but this was not due to the fallacy of the concept, but rather because:

self organisation in terms of trade union movement was always a political project ... it's lost some of the politics³²

This sentiment was echoed by others:

The role of the Black workers in the labour market certainly hasn't changed over the last 30 years. It's just that the public discourse about it has changed and very much the political discourse over the last 30 years keeps changing. One of the ways that it always tries to change is to suggest that there isn't a problem with racism any more³³

²⁹ Modood, Tariq (1997) "'Difference", Cultural Racism and Anti-Racism', in Werbner, Pnina and Tariq Modood (eds.) *Debating Cultural Hybridity*. London, Zed Books: 154-172.

³⁰ Brah, Avtar (1992) 'Difference, Diversity and Differentiation', in Donald, James and Ali Rattansi (eds.) *'Race', Culture and Difference*. London, Sage Publications: 126-145.

³¹ Focus group 1

³² Focus group 2

³³ ibid

There's pressure I think about cultural identity and religious identity or even ethnic identity ...and that's fine. I never have a problem in terms of people having whatever identity they want and organising around those. The key issue is on a political level and that's what Black self-organisation is about, it's not about a cultural space or anything else like that.³⁴

Black Workers' Forums and Community-Based Organising

Recently, Black Workers' Forums were initiated by Black trade unionists within the TUC after a resolution was passed at Congress in 2003 calling for the TUC to support regional roundtable debates between Black trade unionists and Black community organisations as part of its commitment to organising Black workers. As one respondent explained, this was a significant step for the TUC in recognising the need for a 'Black led' approach to organising Black workers:

The other thing about that resolution, which was a sea change, really, was that it talked about not having a policy determined by that Congress... ..What it really said was that the TUC ought to go away and talk with Black workers, and talk with Black community organisations through these round tables about the best way of organising Black workers³⁵

In the Midlands those involved with the one-day roundtable event decided to establish a longer-term alliance between Black activists within trade unions and community organisations. The specific objective of this alliance was to develop strategies for unionising and organising Black workers and tackling racism. The same respondent describes what has come to be known as the 'Black Workers' Forum' in the following way:

It's a continuation of that, the continuation of not just talking about organising Black workers, but keeping the group of people who wanted to have that dialogue... So you have Black workers organising Black workers, as well. I'm not saying that white workers can't, shouldn't go out and do something to organise Black workers. They clearly should. But for us the key was that Black workers had to have some primary, real up-front, leading role in all of that, and that's what it was for, and that's what the round tables led to, in the shape of the forum³⁶

³⁴ Focus group 1

³⁵ In-depth interview conducted with WS10018 on 26/07/07

³⁶ ibid

This respondent described the initiative as an example of 'Community-Based Organising'. Whilst recognising some overlap between this model and the 'Community Unionism' model in terms of establishing reciprocal relationships of collective action between workplace and non-workplace organisations, he noted two significant differences. Without denying the role that religious groups may have to play in supporting anti racism, he noted that the community unionism model privileges the place of religious organisations in the alliance. Indeed, as we see below, the key example of community unionism in Britain, the various sections of the Citizen Organising Foundation, are founded on the belief that religious groups have a central role to play in reviving civil society and were therefore initiated primarily as a way of drawing religious groups into challenging economic and social injustice. His second distinction relates to the difference in the trajectories of the two models in relation to tackling racism. These points are discussed further in the next section but here it is necessary to clarify that Community Based Organising, as intended to link Black activists and forms of Black self-organisation within and outside of trade unions, has a long history in Britain that involves organisations with a shared understanding of the position of Black workers and of the incidence of racism.

The Black Workers' Forum is a practical example of an alternative to the community unionism model. The same respondent describes it thus:

We've established the Black workers' forum, and that forum is really quite wide in the sense that it's Black trade unionists, with Black community organisational networks, as part of a forum who represent 100 different organisations. ...you've got a group of people working together on a local level to go around and organise in communities... one of our first things should be about getting people to belong to trade unions, because unless they are, then they're vulnerable in the workplace and everywhere else, for that matter....if we want people to support us as trade unionists in our workplace campaigns and our workplace struggles, then we can't just go to them when we're in trouble, when we're on strike or whatever. One of the things that we're doing with the Black workers' forum in the Midlands, is that we'll be taking part in helping to organise around a load of money that's being given to the Birmingham area by the government, a fund for workers, a fund for workers pilot scheme. They've given loads of money for the next two or three years, to run this project. Now, what we've said is that there's a real opportunity here in being able to organise what are called vulnerable workers.

It could be anything, really, for the Black workers there and one of the keys within that as well, as migrant workers. But the Black Workers' Forum said, we want to play an active role in this in two ways. One, we want to be able to go into schools and, you know, talk with young people about what we do. And a key part of that would also be about the need to join a trade union. But also, another part of what they want to get involved in is, to go and organise with a lot of these places where there are these Black workers in vulnerable work situations who actually want to go out and organise. So what the TUC has done is they've agreed, and I don't know whether they've done this before, but the TUC has actually agreed to come up with a load of money ... to pay for an organising school that will be for Black trade unionists, and Black community organisations, and to take part in this later on this year, to prepare those people to be able to go in and do this organising within the hospitality sector.

We're trying to set one up in the East Midlands as well.... the dynamic from our end is that it's driven by what we see as being our priorities as Black workers, and not necessarily being told from outside that this might be, or this should be a priority for us, or we decided.³⁷

We have quoted this extract at length because it offers an example of an alternative model of organising which takes into account the criticisms of past failures highlighted in many of the contributions in the focus groups.

Indeed a number of anti racists who participated in this study pointed to a lost history of trade unionism. The role of trade unions in tackling racism used to be much wider than workplace case-by-case involvement and used to involve strong links with other community activists. The same respondents appealed to trade unions to extend themselves as part of a wider struggle against racism. It was felt that this would in turn enable them to reach out to some of the most vulnerable non-unionised Black workers.

Importantly, several anti racist activists pointed to the existence of a wide range of community groups that could be part of local forums against racism. These also signalled a variety of places where members of Black communities might congregate

³⁷ In-depth interview conducted with WS10018 on 26/07/07

and the range of ethnic minority affiliation, certainly not limited to religious identities and groupings:

We have a database already of a thousand organisations we link up with across the UK... 2000 organisations across London... just crying out for working with trade unions and we've been able to link up with that kind of coalition politics. ... from our work, we know there's so many coalitions already ...for example Bangladesh Restaurants Association, it's not a trade union but if the unions were to link with that, I think there would be a good opportunity to try and build that relationship and they've probably got about 5000 restaurants that are affiliated to them³⁸

The question of funding was raised by some participants who argued that the possibility of creating Community Based Organisations with anti racist groups would be strengthened if trade unions were to contribute to the funding of anti racist groups as a way of recognising the difference in capacity between each of them:

But there is also I think a difference in our capacity, a huge difference in capacity. So there is sometimes an expectation that we can do more than we actually can without any kind of resources. And there is a financial implication, and if trade unions were to be able to support more anti racist organisations, obviously on some kind of criteria, but there's got to be a little bit more of a link up that we can do. But it's really difficult when you're not a cuddly organisation, you don't do cohesion stuff.... to get funding from anywhere... ... if every trade union gave us just £1,000 it would be enough for our organisation to carry on really working with them³⁹

Community Unionism

As has already been discussed above, there is a strong link between debates about community unionism and those about trade union decline and renewal.

The starting point for advocates of community unionism is that 'class' as a category of political mobilisation has lost its currency and centrality as the pivotal axis for collective action. This de-privileging of the category of 'class' has meant that organisations traditionally based on challenging class inequality such as trade unions have had to come to terms with peoples' more complex identities, multilayered

³⁸ Focus group 3, 23/05/07

³⁹ Focus group 3, 23/05/07

concerns and multiple affiliations. People negotiate a number of different affiliations, and they do not necessarily prioritise those that are workplace based or work related. This diversification in the axes of political identification has also coincided with (though not necessarily caused) a decline in trade union density and a prevalence of neo liberalism. The central case that is being made by those that use the term community unionism is that trade union activity, density and relevance to people in general lies in the ability of trade unions to develop a spatially oriented political unity with other organisations in proximity to the workplace in order to build geographically situated political communities of action. This process involves relating trade union activity to local histories and allows trade unions to benefit from a reciprocal relationship with other organisations rather than limiting their work to an introspective and institutionalised consideration of workplace issues.⁴⁰

As mentioned at the start of this paper, community unionism has a longer history in the USA, Canada and Australia. However, many respondents in our study were not yet familiar with the term 'community unionism' and those that had heard of it suggested it was woolly and vague. Additionally, one of our respondents noted that a perspective where trade union renewal depends upon localised or neighbourhood coalitions may not reap results where worker characteristics diverge from the idea that all workers live near where they work:

Where I struggle with it is, you know, if I took, you know, Nissan, in the northeast. You know, people travel in to work at Nissan from, you know, an hour and a quarter, an hour and 20 minutes away, and they come from all sorts, I suspect, predominantly white working class backgrounds. Where's the community around this? And, I mean, it's not the immediate local community setting outside the factory gates. And it's not even clear they're identified, you know, as geographic or ethnic communities. I mean, there actually isn't a community element. Because, I mean, because Nissan, I mean, I drive from an hour down the road to come into work, and the likelihood of me socialising with people outside of work, you know, it's just remote.... you've got 3,000

⁴⁰ See Lina Jamoul and Jane Wills, *Work, identity and new forms of political mobilisation: An assessment of broad-based organising and London's living wage campaign: Civil society, faith organisations and political engagement*, The ESRC Identities Programme, Working Paper One, July 2006; and Holgate, J. and J. Wills. (2007) *Organising labour in London* in Turner, L. and Cornfield, D. (eds.) *Seeking Solidarity Labor in the New Urban Battlegrounds*. Cornell: Cornell University Press; or Amanda Tattersall (2006) *Bringing the Community In: Possibilities for public sector union success through community unionism* in the *International Journal of Human Resources Management*; and Amanda Tattersall (2005) *There is Power in Coalition*, in *Labour and Industry*, 16(2), 97

people working in close proximity to each other...What do you have in common? It's this workplace.⁴¹

Following on from this, there are some sectors where staff turnover is high but mobilising on a geographical basis may not take the situation any further. Findings from the RITU⁴² project's retail sector fieldwork in London in 2005 identified a number of pertinent points. Firstly, part of the reason for low unionisation in the sector was thought to result from particularly high levels of staff turnover. Secondly, some union officials complained that high staff turnover could no longer be compensated for through neighbourhood or regional networks because workers were travelling long distances into work and usually lived in very different parts of London. Thirdly, and most importantly for this paper, the project found that Black workers were not averse to joining the union, they simply did not know that the trade union existed. In general, where branches were strong, with regular activities and discussion, membership and activism was not an issue. Moreover, where Black trade unionists had been involved in recruitment drives, membership and activism amongst Black workers had increased. In some instances, however, the argument about high turnover was used to avoid addressing the need for trade unions to be tackling racism in order to make the trade union relevant to Black workers and to avoid identifying the necessary resources required to do the legwork.⁴³

Furthermore, in other sectors, widespread casualisation of contracts does not necessarily mean that places of work or indeed time spent at work changes. Some hospital cleaners have been employed at the same location or site for many years even if the contractor employing them may have changed several times during that period.

Indeed, the question of whether workplace identity is actually in decline is a point of contention. As we see below, a significant percentage of COF activities are still about

⁴¹ Interview with WS10014, 25/07/07

⁴² RITU is an acronym for the full title of the research project which was 'Racial and ethnic minorities, immigration and the role of trade unions in combating discrimination and xenophobia, in encouraging participation and in securing social inclusion and citizenship'. In December 2005, the research project completed a three year study of trade union activity across five European countries.

⁴³ Dhaliwal, S and Thanki, A (June 2005) *The Practices of Trade Unionists and the Concerns and Apprehensions and Participation of Racial and Ethnic Minorities within Target Occupations and Workplaces: A Fieldwork Report on UK Retailing* available website www.workinglives.org

the workplace. Moreover, the strength of religious affiliation is difficult to glean. In terms of actual time commitment, comments during the fieldwork about levels of church attendance did not appear to counter or trump the amount of time workers were spending in the workplace. Also, such comments do not take account of the possibility that Black workers' recourse to religious institutions may be largely about gaining support where other sources are absent. This returns us to the need for unions to invest energy on organising within the workplace and revitalising trade union branches rather than emphasising community unionism.

Nonetheless, claims abound about the impressive record of the community unionism model in the USA in relation to the ability of this strategy to draw in ethnic minority and women workers where trade unions have failed or faced major obstacles.⁴⁴ One particular example of community unionism in the UK, the Citizen Organising Foundation, has gained a reputation for making significant gains in relation to some selected workplace issues and particularly organising some of the most vulnerable workers. The impact of this initiative on organising Black workers and tackling racism is discussed in greater detail next.

The Citizen Organising Foundation

Advocates of community unionism in the UK highlight the Citizen Organising Foundation (COF) as a key example of the scope and possibility of this approach. One of the COF's greatest strengths relates to their ability to revive activism at branch level as part of a locally based coalition politics that has effectively made workplace concerns relevant to the concerns of a wider constituency but has also engaged trade unions in non-workplace issues. The following respondent notes the benefits of forging such alliances:

... For me, one of the things about community unionism is about... developing these strategic alliances that we can get mutual benefitputting people together at a very local level, who work together, so you might be a trade unionist living in a particular community and you see that there's a crossing needed outside a local school. Well you can bring together some of the alliances within that local community together, to try and campaign for that

⁴⁴ For instance see Banks, A (1992) *The Power and Promise of Community Unionism* in Labour Research Review 18, 16-31 and Reynolds, D *Building Coalitions for Regional Power: Labor's Emerging Urban Strategy* in Dan Cornfield and Lowell Turner (eds) *Seeking Solidarity: Labor and the Politics of Urban Coalition Building* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, forthcoming)

local crossing outside of the school and that sort of community unionism... you don't stop being a community person, a community activist, because you go to work, you know. So we can bring some of our skills into the workplace and equally, we can bring some of our skills as trade unionists into communities as well.⁴⁵

The Citizen Organising Foundation (COF) was founded in 1989 by its current Director, Neil Jameson, and initially piloted in Bristol. Though the pilot did not take off, he subsequently established The East London Citizen's Organisation (better known as TELCO) in 1996 and the COF now comprises 7 sections (known as Chapters) including: TELCO; the South London Citizen's Organisation; West London Citizens; the Living Wage Campaign; Strangers into Citizens; the Migrant Workers' Association and Birmingham Citizens.

The COF developed specifically as a response to a perceived political apathy within civil society⁴⁶. Both COF and its American counterpart (the Industrial Areas Foundation or IAF) are concerned with political apathy and a perceived breakdown in the connections between the individual, family and community. Both are intended to 'reweave the fabric of society' in terms of re-introducing shared concerns and rebuilding a sense of community. Both are informed by the work of Saul Alinsky.⁴⁷ Alinsky's work and the IAF have taught the British counterpart to find ways of reviving the capacity of civil society institutions to act as critics of the state. Actions are oriented towards converting 'problems' into 'winnable issues' by linking them to achievable targets upon which to campaign.⁴⁸ It is important to note that whilst the COF appear to set themselves outside of Left politics by claiming a distinction between doing idealistic and pragmatic politics, there is clearly some kind of 'vision' at play amongst those participating in the alliance. Indeed, as is discussed further below, it is possible to argue that a lack of focus on sharpening that 'vision' is what gives rise to the numerous limitations of COF's work particularly in relation to challenging racism.

However, the success of COF's activities has delivered a strong message to trade unions about the need to refrain from atomising their work. COF chapters have

⁴⁵ Interview with WS10018, 26/07/07

⁴⁶ Interview for RITU (1022BM) with TELCO organiser, 7/06/05

⁴⁷ see Saul Alinsky (1983) *Rules for Radicals*, Vintage Books USA

⁴⁸ Interview for RITU (1022BM) with TELCO organiser, 7/06/05

proved the advantages for trade union branches of working in ongoing alliances with other civic players including on issues outside the workplace. Amongst their achievements they can list: the campaign for a Living Wage and improved terms and conditions for some of the lowest paid contracted staff in local hospitals; critical community intervention in the development of the London Olympic 2012 bid; and a series of Assemblies attended by thousands of London residents at which they have been able to hold politicians to account. At one such London-wide Assembly attended by 1800 people, Mayoral candidates were asked to respond to a 'People's Agenda' and agree to targeted demands. More recently, their newly formed Strangers into Citizens campaign lead a demonstration of over 10,000 people calling for an amnesty for undocumented workers in Britain. Moreover, the vibrancy of the organisation and innovativeness of activities are thought to set COF Chapters apart from dull and redundant branches.

One of the full time organisers for the COF's campaigns around workers rights – of which there are now two: the 'Living Wage Campaign' and 'Strangers into Citizens' – argues that the COF have managed to demonstrate the need for a revival of branch activism:

There's one particular issue that we found that trade unions were not looking at. The fact that there was no relationship between their people and their trade unions. People who build that connection. And in a way, organisations like this make people become closer and feel again, and build some sort of relation with them because they're working from that church or from that community. And that was a mistake in particular with the T&G where most of the members were feeling like numbers or members with a number, that was it and there was no particular relationship with them, in which they could address certain issues. Or when there was a case ... where the trade unions said we can't do anything about it. This was another option, a stronger option, that we all come together and we fight for that in a more effective way.⁴⁹

The thrust of her argument lies in the view that COF chapters have managed to establish localised, trusting relationships something that trade union branches have lost because they have become hierarchical and institutionalised. Moreover, on the question of tackling racism, other respondents noted that a distance between trade union branches and Black workers, migrant workers and undocumented workers had

⁴⁹ Focus group 1, 3/05/07

created a vacuum. One trade union official noted his frustration with trade union reluctance to represent undocumented workers:

One difficulty for example I've had in union x organising workers that if somebody didn't have their papers correct, if they were illegal, and I don't recognise the concept of an illegal worker, they weren't going to be represented. Now, I come in, a worker is a worker is a worker, we represent them. The reason why they don't have papers is probably because they're exploited....⁵⁰

Any analysis of the Citizen Organising Foundation can be as wide as it is deep but this section focuses specifically upon the relevance of this form of community unionism to the question of organising Black workers and challenging racism and also debates the scope for building alliances with religious groups.

i. Forging Alliances with Religious Groups

As mentioned earlier, this British version of community unionism is largely premised on the involvement of religious groups. The COF believes that religious groups are natural components of civil society alliances because they are established forms of association, with congregations, and they frequently act as catalysts for discussions and mechanisms of support for people.⁵¹ Indeed the authors of the COF's key position paper go further. They construct a case for viewing religious groups as 'first force' rather than 'third force' members of the voluntary sector that can realise their potential for offering a 'contra' politics and present a radical challenge to capitalism, power brokers and the state.⁵² Indeed, some respondents in this study wished to redirect their congregations from a concern with the after life or with charitable work towards a passion to fight for social justice in the here and now.

⁵⁰ op cit

⁵¹ See Deneulin S, Hussein D and Ritchie A (undated) 'Citizen Organising: Reweaving the Fabric of Civil Society?' and 'Faith Communities in Public Action: Community Organising as a British Case Study' both accessed from the website of the Contextual Theology Centre at www.theology-centre.org

⁵² Deneulin, Hussein and Ritchie distinguish between the 'first force' and 'third force' status of actors in the voluntary sector. Groups that constitute a 'first force' remain outside of partnership relations with the state and retain their independence and radical edge whilst groups constituting 'third force' are contracted by the state to provide services and in the process their critical perspective, their political independence and ability to challenge the state is compromised.

Moreover, a general point was made about the possibility of trade union relations with religious groups because of a shared interest in social justice – as a ‘sword of justice’ and as a united ‘moral response’ to the market. As one respondent stated:

There’s been a relationship between churches and unions right through. They’re both moral organisations ultimately concerned with protecting people within the framework of the community ... and they’re both about limiting the domination of money.... I think that there has to be an engagement with any moral resistance to markets that we can find. And the dominant one there is gonna be any form of community based faith organisation that can mobilise resistance.⁵³

Indeed, some participants pointed to a long history of links between religious groups and trade unions. In particular, it was noted that the Methodist Church had been very influential in building trade unions during their early stages particularly in the context of discrimination against Methodists and Catholics. Moreover, respondents pointed to the historical role that some religious groups had played in providing sanctuary for Black people facing deportation and campaigning against immigration rules:

I think maybe a surprise but church groups and religious groups have been involved in trade union campaigns going back tens of years. So I think the Telco is an interesting model but I can remember being on the anti deportation campaigns ... and there were church groups who were involved in those campaigns⁵⁴

In addition to this, it was pointed out that religious groups and religious leaders were useful tactical players because of their ability to provide a convincing moral argument against, for instance, low pay. Analysts of the Citizen Organising Foundation’s Living Wage Campaign have noted the credence provided by a nun who led the lobby at a meeting of the Homerton Hospital’s Trust Board in May 2002:

TELCO and UNISON successfully mobilized at least 40 contract workers along with representatives from local mosques, churches, colleges and the media to this event. After handing over a petition with 600 signatures from hospital staff, the case for a living wage was presented with quiet passion by a nun from a religious community in Hackney. The Trust was forced to

⁵³ Focus group 3

⁵⁴ Focus group 2

concede the moral case for improved pay and conditions but restated the financial limitations they faced.⁵⁵

Even if this particular direct action did not lead to immediate results, it has been a significant means of gaining currency for the campaign.

Several trade unionists also vented their frustration that trade union action on more difficult issues, particularly relating to debates about immigration and terrorism, was muted and inadequate. Meanwhile participants were able to note a number of instances where faith groups had been more vocal in challenging immigration rules. Indeed this was highlighted as one of the biggest achievements of the COF, to draw public attention to the plight of undocumented workers – particularly through their Strangers into Citizens Campaign. According to many participants including full time trade union officials, this is an area where trade unions have been slow or even reluctant to raise their heads above the parapet:

Monday (May 8th) is the demonstration (in the) centre of London. The demonstration is about giving legitimacy to possibly hundreds of thousands of workers, working here in the UK, who have been marginalised, exploited. But in fact, the leadership for Monday comes from, if you want to put it in religious groups, inter faith groups. And the unions are tagging along with this, uncertain of what's actually happening⁵⁶

In addition to the question of mobilising the weight of religious organisations to support difficult campaigns, several participants referred to the strength of religious affiliation particularly amongst more recent migrant workers and Muslims in the wake of anti Muslim racism. The argument follows that religion has become a central category of political mobilisation and that religious groups are potential vehicles for collective action. As a consequence, some respondents argued that linking with religious groups is a relevant and useful development in the struggle against racism.

Clearly, this argument relies in part on the belief that people may be more motivated to act on the basis of their religious commitments than simply their workplace identity or their opposition to racism. According to the 2001 Census, 71.74% of the

⁵⁵ Holgate, J. and J. Wills. (2007) *Organising labour in London* in Turner, L. and Cornfield, D. (eds.) *Seeking Solidarity Labor in the New Urban Battlegrounds*. Cornell: Cornell University Press.

⁵⁶ Focus group 1

population of England listed themselves as Christian and another 6% identified with other religions, the most significant religion after Christianity was Islam (3.1% in England identified as Muslim). Moreover there was some correlation between religion and ethnicity.⁵⁷

However, such statistics continue to be a difficult barometer for gaging people's motivation to get involved in campaigns for social change. This problem is most clearly highlighted by the British Humanist Society's analysis of the responses to the 2001 Census question on religion. They argue that these statistics do not provide an indication of how far religious identity relates to the strength of religious affiliation and extent of religious practice and whether this translates into church attendance and membership for instance. Moreover, given that the question on religion comes straight after a question about ethnic identity, it could reflect a range of ways in which people are classifying ethnic and cultural identities rather than the strength of religious belief itself.⁵⁸

The 2001 Census also reveals a significant population of non-believers, atheists, agnostics and those refusing to answer the question indicating perhaps that for many people religion is still a very personal matter.⁵⁹ If one adds to this, declining church attendance, a particularly cynical view of COF's activities would see these as an attempt at church renewal rather than a general renewal in activism or for that matter trade unionism.

Indeed a long list of concerns were raised about working with religious groups including some of those particularly influential in COF chapters. Whilst one participant talked about the possibility of transforming the character of right wing religious groups – namely the Muslim Council of Britain, the London Muslim Centre and the East London Mosque - by bringing them into contact with more progressive organisations, others found this view naïve and raised serious concerns about

⁵⁷ Office of National Statistics *Focus on Religion* from website <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/census2001/profiles/commentaries/ethnicity.asp>

⁵⁸ See discussion on the website of the British Humanist Society <http://www.humanism.org.uk/site/cms/contentViewArticle.asp?article=2084>

⁵⁹ Some 14.60% of people in England, 18.63% of people in Wales 18.63% and 27.55% of people in Scotland ticked the 'no religion' category. Moreover, some 390,000 respondents logged their opposition to the question of religious identity by defining themselves as 'Jedi', thought to be the central tenet behind Star Wars films and another 4 million (or 7.7 per cent of the population) did not answer the question on religion. See <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/census2001/profiles/commentaries/ethnicity.asp>

contributing to the consolidation of fundamentalist⁶⁰ forces in the UK. Indeed, as Amanda Tattersall's work has shown, one of the forms of power that is built through these coalitions is 'legitimacy'. Given the particularly sophisticated nature and reach of fundamentalist groups, it is our concern, shared by respondents, that these alliances could be part of a strategic action on the part of fundamentalist forces to consolidate their power base especially given that one of the main affiliates of the COF is the Islamic Foundation, another face of Jamaat-I Islami politics in Britain.

One particular anti racist activist explained that his group would not join the COF Chapters or support the actions because of the involvement of groups that they define as fundamentalist namely the Muslim Council of Britain, the East London Mosque and the London Muslim Centre⁶¹. His organisation has a 'no platform' approach to fundamentalist groups. As he explains, this position is akin to the anti racist position on boycotting fascist groups like the British National Party:

We don't share a platform with any fundamentalist group so we would not go and sit in a place where the East London Mosque sits ... I think all this partnerships, platforms, bodies, umbrella bodies, I think people know that we won't go there if there are people we classify as fundamentalists. We don't deal with the mosque, East London Mosque, we will not go to any event being held at the London Muslim Centre. It's just as you know, in the 70s we did not want to share a platform with NF, BNP and we see fundamentalists same as the far right, it's just the other side of the coin really.⁶²

This particular participant decried the legitimacy accorded to these groups by initiatives like the COF and also by the TUC and emphasised the opposition within South Asian communities in Britain who are refusing to work with these groups and

⁶⁰ The term fundamentalism refers here to the definition articulated by Nira Yuval-Davis as specifically modern movements which require '*strict adherence to the text and claim their version of religion to be the only true one and feel threatened by pluralist systems of thought, and so justify the use of political means to impose it on all members of their religion*' in Yuval-Davis, N (1992) 'Fundamentalism, Multiculturalism and Women in Britain' in Donald, J and Rattansi, A (eds) 'Race, Culture and Difference' (Sage Publications Limited)

⁶¹ See document produced by Awaaz-South Asia Watch (June 2006) 'The Islamic Right – key tendencies' available from the Awaaz website <http://www.awaazsaw.org> for more detailed information about the Jamaat-I Islami politics of the Muslim Council of Britain, East London Mosque, the London Muslim Centre, the YMO and indeed the Islamic Foundation (one of the key affiliates of the Citizen Organising Foundation see www.cof.org). The Jamaati-I Islami formed in 1941 and exists in parts of South Asia and in the UK and has been directly implicated in genocidal atrocities in Bangladesh as well as anti minority hatred and violence in Pakistan. The same document also acknowledges the way in which such right wing religious groups are trying to pass as 'moderate' or 'mainstream' and claim to represent Muslims in Britain.

⁶² Interview with WS10090, 9/05/07

challenging their assertion that they represent any section of Black communities here.

Moreover, respondents were particularly wary of contributing to the politicisation of a faith based agenda or religious identities. Also a number of points were raised about the particular political leaning of the other religious groups involved in the COF chapters, problems with internal accountability of religious institutions and also the long-term objective for them in being involved with COF. One trade unionist articulated suspicion amongst many others and provided a reminder that historically religious groups had also been used to undermine Left politics:

So, that's the real issue and what has happened is the church, Catholic Church or any other, they're political chameleons. Their power and influence has waned over the centuries, but they come back in many shapes and in many forms. You're not going to, for example, critically we're not going to, religion is there, it's a given... What is the long-term agenda, political agenda of the group in the states? ... Even those who are strong adherents of religion will look back to times when they may think it wasn't such a positive thing. I don't know if anyone's done a study of the role of Catholic action in union in the 1950s. The bad thing was that they sent them in to drive out all left-wingers⁶³

In similar vein, a trade union organiser pointed out that the transition of IAF work from the USA to the UK was not entirely straightforward particularly because of the very different political leaning of the Christian partners in Britain. Whilst in the USA, IAF's limited number of Christian partners were Left leaning advocates of liberation theology, the Christian partners in Britain were thought to be far removed from this position. Indeed the UK initiative is far less selective about its religious partners than its USA counterparts where partners were selected from amongst groups defined or known as 'progressive' including only 'progressive' religious groups, ethnic minority advocacy groups, civil rights groups, environmentalists and women's rights groups.⁶⁴ With the COF counterpart, however, a number of these are viewed as 'single issue' groups and excluded from the alliance. But this would likely have the effect of marginalising, if not undermining, the most progressive forces within Black communities.

⁶³ Focus group 1

⁶⁴ Banks, A (1992) *The Power and Promise of Community Unionism* in Labour Research Review 18, 16-31

Also, many potential partners, such as the Black churches in Britain currently being buoyed up by new African migrant workers, espouse a very right wing ideology based entirely upon individual advancement and financial gain. As one trade unionist explained:

Well in the US... the Latin American Catholic Church is the most left wing Catholic Church in all the world. And they come, and it's much more political organisation among Latin American Catholic churches.... talking about Africans, what they find is actually the West African churches are Protestant churches that are about individual advancement. They're about building personal power, so you can become rich and powerful and become the boss. And so that is one of element of why we cannot penetrate⁶⁵

This concern about the political leaning and intentions of the religious partners is re-enforced by additional concerns about the balance of power between religious institutions and trade unions in COF Chapters. Some respondents noted that their initial suspicion of the initiative is being realised on two levels. Firstly, the COF assertion about the building of durable and sustainable broad based alliances does not appear to extend to support for trade union recognition campaigns. This has lead to trade unionists questioning the real objectives of the COF in terms of which civil society institutions it is really attempting to consolidate and which it is moving towards doing away with:

In the city we did a whole drive to get recognition as unions. And the Telco just wouldn't support it because for them, that was not exactly about the minimum wage. And we say you cannot get living wage if you don't have ... the union recognition agreement.⁶⁶

Secondly, the COF's work around migrant workers is beginning to undermine the position of trade unions. Starting with a May Day event a few years back (that they ran at the same time as a long standing trade union lead May Day Rally), the COF has since established a specific Migrant Workers Association. At this stage this is being presented as a 'stepping stone' for migrant workers and those that are not familiar with trade unions. However, valid concerns are being raised about the real objectives of such a step, its implications for trade union work with migrant workers and indeed its implications for the protection that will be afforded to migrant workers

⁶⁵ Focus group 2

⁶⁶ Focus group 2

given that this body does not fall within limited legislation on workplace representation. Unsurprisingly, this has led to suggestions that COF are moving towards the establishment of Christian trade unions which will undermine a long history of secular trade unionism in Britain:

And then there are things that they're actually saying, that a Workers Association which can be the embryo of a Christian trade union in this country⁶⁷

ii. Tackling Racism

Importantly, there have been gains for Black workers across London as a result of some of the Citizen Organising Foundation's campaigns. The Living Wage Campaign in particular has made a significant difference to the pay, working terms and conditions of some of the lowest paid cleaners and catering workers in London, many of whom are Black and has also brought a certain vibrancy to campaigning on workplace issues.

The Living Wage Campaign started in April 2001 and effectively moved TELCO from a largely faith based organisation to one working in alliance with trade unions on workplace issues. The Campaign demands that employees are paid the living wage, higher than the minimum wage; that they are eligible for 20 days paid holiday and 10 days sick entitlement per year and free access to trade unions. The campaign has covered contracted cleaning staff in five east London Hospitals, cleaners in Canary Wharf and more recently at Queen Mary's University, as well as hotel and catering staff in West London, and cleaners at the Tate Modern. Moreover a commitment has been achieved from the Mayor of London and the GLA. The vast majority of those that have benefited from the campaign are Black workers and migrant workers from Eastern Europe. Moreover, the Living Wage Campaign has increased unionisation levels at some workplaces and created workers' forums where these didn't previously exist. At one particular site, the Royal London Hospital, cleaners have been taken back in-house to join other workers as employees of the Health Trust rather than contracted companies.⁶⁸ This is a significant step in line with UNISON's long held concerns about two tier staffing systems within UK health services.

⁶⁷ Focus group 2

⁶⁸ Holgate, J. and J. Wills. (2007) *Organising labour in London* in Turner, L. and Cornfield, D. (eds.) *Seeking Solidarity Labor in the New Urban Battlegrounds*. Cornell: Cornell University Press.

Participants in this pilot study stated they would welcome support for a more critical agenda on 'race'. However, there wasn't any suggestion that the COF would be able to provide this. Indeed it could be argued that a closer look at COF positions on issues overlapping with racism – particularly their Strangers into Citizen's campaign – are far from radical precisely because they are the result of a compromise reached between socially conservative partners.

Indeed COF publications and campaigns do not talk overtly about racism at all. 'Racism' as a word is not referred to even in the debate on migrant workers and immigration regulations, widely recognised outside of COF as a highly racialised debate. One of the COF organisers explains the logic behind this:

So the organiser's job is to gather a team on purpose which is broad so again that's our approach to racism is to say we're not having a group of Catholics in this room, we're not having a group of blacks in this room, we're having a group of membership. So part of the foundation is that Telco has to be broad, we don't, the Citizens Organising Foundation will not accredit groups that are not broad and don't look like the communities where we're working.⁶⁹

For some participants in this pilot study, that was not an issue as long as real gains were made for Black workers in relation to pay, terms and conditions. However, we would argue that not acknowledging the role of 'race' and racism in structuring the working lives of Black people is one step backwards and in fact weakens the conception of 'class' since the latter, for at least two centuries, has been mistakenly construed as white and male. Such an approach possibly even undermines the decades of work of many Black trade unionists and anti racist activists in getting the trade union movement to consider the value and necessity of Black self organisation in the face of racism against a tide of accusations that they were splitting workers' struggles. A desire to overcome 'race' (aka Paul Gilroy's (2000) *Between Two Camps*) is premature for a movement that is only just beginning to recognise the particular impact of racism on the lives of Black workers.⁷⁰ Indeed, it betrays the lack of understanding and vision within COF in relation to tackling racism and providing long-term changes to the position of Black workers.

⁶⁹ Interview for RITU (1022BM) with TELCO organiser, 7/06/05

⁷⁰ Davis M, Mckenzie R, Sullivan W (2006) *Working Against Racism* (TUC/WLI)

Moreover, there is a continued tendency within COF to preference religious over racial identities. Deneulin, Ritchie and Hussein⁷¹ comment on the low representation of Muslim groups in the UK Chapters. However, their conclusions, albeit interesting, may be flawed and reveal a limited understanding of the history and politics of ethnic minorities in Britain. They suggest a number of reasons for low participation of Muslim organisations including: recent migration; early formation of infrastructure and therefore a preoccupation with 'basic needs' (bizarrely, 'basic needs' are defined by them as the need for religious education and places of worship particularly for young people); pressure post 9/11 for Muslims to refrain from association with groups claiming 'radical' politics; ethnic and racial diversity amongst Muslims and the lack of experience of democratic participation. Whilst the point about the problems for Muslims in associating themselves with the term 'radical' is undeniably real and even more so given the recent bombings in London, the other aspects of their explanation for low take up are problematic. In particular, whilst acknowledging racial and ethnic diversity amongst Muslims, they have ignored the collective activism of Muslims within groups and social movements not organised along religious lines such as the anti racist, feminist and trade union movements in Britain. Moreover, Muslims have long since been involved in party politics in the UK and are represented within Parliament. Instead of questioning their own insistence of relating to ethnic minorities on the basis of religious rather than racial identity, Deneulin et al proceed with a latent critique of the maturity of Muslim participation in democratic processes. If nothing else this is a denial of the large scale local and national activism of British Muslims in the anti war movement.

iii. Social Conservatism, Women and LGBT Members

In Britain, there has been much discussion about the ability of secular and faith groups to form alliances and particularly to sustain such alliances given their diverse ideological frameworks. This diversity has given rise to some internal tensions or unresolved issues that have been termed by COF organisers as 'wedge issues'. These are issues on which members cannot reach agreement. Notably these relate largely to women's rights and sexual or reproductive rights.⁷²

⁷¹ Séverine Deneulin, Dilwar Hussein and Angus Ritchie (undated) in *Citizen Organising: Reweaving the fabric of civil society?* Accessed from the website of the Contextual Theology Centre at www.theology-centre.org

⁷² Interview for RITU (1022BM) with TELCO organiser, 7/06/05

Respondents in this study also made a number of points about the particular problems of working with religious groups because of their position on women's rights and sexual orientation. As one trade unionist stated:

I think as a trade union, we'd be very careful going into an alliance on a particular issue with a faith based community group with our eyes very wide open. Because you'll be standing next to a sister or brother from one of those organisations, dealing with an issue of employment rights or low pay. And then an issue occurs to do with victimisation or discrimination against gay workers and you look around and that sister or brother isn't with you any more. So you have to be very careful.⁷³

Indeed the COF model presents a direct challenge to the politics of Black feminism. On the one hand, COF appear to have been able to circumvent the anti racist critique of multiculturalism by not playing too deeply into relativism and the politics of recognition – faith groups are encouraged to move away from religious issues. However, the refusal to challenge or change the beliefs and values of member groups fits very closely with a crude model of multiculturalism based upon complete internal autonomy for all communities through a 'hands off' respect for difference. Whilst the idea of 'tension' is a pivotal principle in Saul Alinsky's work and is therefore central to COF operations, internal tensions and power relations within the broad based alliances themselves are not debated or re-aligned.

Multiculturalism operates on two levels: through representations projected by educational curricula and the media and secondly, through the implementation and interpretation of social policy and legislation. In Britain, there is now an established Black feminist critique of multiculturalism. Black women's organisations argue that, in practice, multiculturalism has permitted statutory agencies to avoid providing protection and assistance to vulnerable and abused Black women because of a 'hands off' approach to Black communities (see for instance Gita Sahgal (1990)⁷⁴ and Pragna Patel (1991)⁷⁵). Moreover, multicultural policies have lead service providers to make very narrow assumptions about the needs of Black women including by

⁷³ Focus group 2

⁷⁴ Sahgal, G (1990) *Fundamentalism and the Multicultural Fallacy* in Southall Black Sisters (ed) *Against the Grain* (published by Southall Black Sisters)

⁷⁵ Patel, P (1991) *Multiculturalism: the Myth and the Reality* in Women: a Cultural Review Vol. 2, No. 3, pages 209 – 213 (Oxford University Press)

superimposing religious over racial identities. Also, as Yasmin Ali (1992)⁷⁶ points out, multiculturalism in Britain trades on a particular characterisation of communities determined by the interaction of the state with so called 'community leaders'. The result has been the perpetuation of a system of power relations where social divisions and hierarchies within communities are ignored. Sahgal (1992)⁷⁷ argues that by acting as mediators between the state and minority communities, 'community leaders' cultivate a relationship with the state and have obstructed the right of Black women and women's groups to take action against violence and abuse on the grounds that this would destroy the culture and traditions of the community, the very fabric that COF appears keen to re-weave. By mobilising separately and creating alternative interventions, Black feminist organisations in Britain have sought to wrest control and undermine the position of community leaders and particularly religious leaders within Black communities. They have questioned the right of these individuals to posit themselves as 'leaders'. Importantly, these appear to be the same people that are being encouraged by COF's work in Britain and also in the process being given power. One of the tenets of organising adopted by COF from Alinsky's work is that of 'leadership' but the leaders in COF are largely drawn from socially conservative religious organisations.

The absence of anti racist and women's groups amongst the membership of the COF Chapters is variously attributed to the membership fees, membership rules and to the development of ethnic minority organisations. Thus one organiser states that the absence could relate to rules that restrict COF membership to groups that are broad in nature rather than 'single issue' or it could be a reflection of a lack of knowledge of these relatively new alliances. Alternatively, of course, the absence of anti racist and women's groups could more directly relate to the absence of a shared vision on tackling racism or sexism.

The Impact of the Employment Equality (Religion and Belief) Regulations 2003

Part of the debate in the focus groups related to the incidence of discrimination on the grounds of religion and belief and the ways in which this had complicated trade union responses to racism and organising Black workers. Two specific streams

⁷⁶ Ali, Y (1992) *Muslim Women and the Politics of Ethnicity and Culture in Northern England* in Sahgal, G and Yuval-Davies, N (eds) *Refusing Holy Orders* (Virago, London)

⁷⁷ Sahgal, G and Yuval-Davies, N (1992) (eds) *Refusing Holy Orders* (Virago, London)

emerged in this regard. The first related to the prevalence of discrimination specifically against Muslims post 9/11. This is discussed in the next section. The second related to the assertion of demands in the context of the new Employment Equality (Religion and Belief) Regulations which came into force on 2nd December 2003 and offer protection against direct or indirect discrimination and harassment on the grounds of religion and belief in the areas of employment, self-employment, occupation and vocational training. The protection provided by this legislation has since been extended by Part 2 of the Equality Act 2006 to cover discrimination on the grounds of religion and belief in the provision of goods, facilities and services.

Since the introduction of the UK regulations, there have been several prominent cases sparking debate about the place of religious observance and identification in the workplace. These have highlighted various dimensions to debates about working hours, the scheduling of annual leave, dress codes and religious symbols.

Trade unionists in this pilot study noted the expression of three kinds of religious demands in the workplace: the timing of holidays and access to non-Christian holidays; the wearing of religious dress and symbols; the establishment of prayer rooms and permission for prayer breaks. A number of these demands were seen as unquestionable and requiring a commonsense response. None of the participants took issue with the demand for prayer rooms for instance and some drew an analogy between accommodating prayer and accommodating smoking breaks or smoking areas:

And I think most workplaces, I know the local council, they do provide a place where you can go and pray and where you can wash yourself. And lunchtime's no problem, afternoon I guess you have to get permission from your manager/supervisor and again, most people get 10-15 minutes' break for a fag anyway so it's no big deal....⁷⁸

The same participant notes the need for prayer rooms to be inclusive by ensuring that they are open to members of all faiths and not just exclusively to Muslims. However, the view that praying during work time is a hard and fast requirement of Islam or a religious need of Muslim workers was contested:

It all depends on the different individual faith group and their requirement. It's difficult to make a general comment. I think talking in relation to specific

⁷⁸ Interview with WS10090, 9/05/07

issues, so I guess if you're talking, I don't know, Muslim faith and praying, in Islam it says that you have to pray five times a day. But then if you're in a foreign country and if your employers do not allow you or do not have the facilities then you have to make other arrangements.⁷⁹

Whilst there is no proactive injunction upon employers to meet demands around religious observance, bodies like Acas are asking employers to consider accommodating these as forms of good practice. Employers are also being reminded to consider whether existing rules such as the timing of office closure and dress codes can be tantamount to indirect discrimination.⁸⁰

Many of the trade unionists that participated in this pilot study talked about how difficult it has been to ignore claims relating to religious observance even if their idea of secular workplaces meant that they personally wanted to keep religion and religious identity out of the public sphere. In particular, two reasons were given for this. Firstly, the new Religion and Belief Regulations had lead directly to the articulation of a particular set of rights around religion and in turn potentially created a role for trade union activists to ensure that these are dispensed. As one respondent pointed out:

It's a difficult one because I come from a secularist background, even though my family is made up of Christians, Muslims, I personally am an atheist. But I know that in a society which does actually function along the lines where certain religious groups are given certain entitlements in society, if those entitlements are withdrawn, then we, as trade unionists, if we feel that they're unfairly being discriminated against, we have to mobilise. It's a difficult kind of position to be in⁸¹

Moreover, some noted that the ground had already been laid by employers who viewed their compliance with 'the duty to promote good race relations' under the Race Relations Amendment Act 2000 as being about accommodating religious beliefs and identities. One Black trade unionist explained how he felt compromised by this interpretation:

In terms of the issue of religion, when the Race Relations Amendment Act

⁷⁹ *ibid*

⁸⁰ Acas guidance (2005) *Religion or Belief in the Workplace: A guide for employers of employees*

⁸¹ Focus group 2, 3/05/07

came in, I was summoned to a meeting with my head of equalities and the head of the personnel sections. And they said look, we're going to be directing some policies towards incorporating people's religious beliefs in terms of the council, how do you feel about it? I said well look, in terms of our membership, the question of religion has always been a private matter because we have everything from Muslims, Seventh Day Adventists, Christians, born again, Hindus, Buddhists, Punjabi, it goes on. So it's never been something that has been a central focus of our work and activity⁸²

Also highlighted by this respondent is the fact that, in practice, employer responses to demands around religious observance within the workplace are highly racialised. This has in turn created a role for trade unions to intervene as part of their commitment to anti racism and to safeguarding civil liberties. He explains:

We had an issue about some Muslim brothers and sisters putting up posters to organise prayer meetings. Now, Christians had been doing the same thing for yearswithout comment. Suddenly we get a directive from the management that nobody is to put up prayer meeting posters any more. And primarily they're saying basically they don't want Muslims meeting and organising prayer meetings in their lunchtime. So we actually had to address that, and even though I might be of a non-religious persuasion, if you actually believe in people's right to assemble and having the freedom and space to discuss issues that are relevant to them, then why shouldn't people of a religious background also be able to enjoy that facility?⁸³

However, participants argued that employers were more likely to resolve disputes about religious affiliation and observance than they were to look at addressing racism in any of its forms:

Since the religious discrimination legislation, I've dealt with some cases, we took the first case and won. But I think it was the easier thing to win in a way⁸⁴

Whilst there was an unquestionable commitment amongst all participants to tackle discrimination in all its forms, the possibility that cases of religious discrimination may strengthen religious political identities was viewed by and large as divisive and

⁸² Op cit

⁸³ Focus group 2

⁸⁴ Focus group 3, 23/05/07

problematic. A number of participants raised concerns about the impact of the regulations on the development of organising strategies. The Religion and Belief Regulations occupy an anomalous position when compared to other anti discriminatory measures on race, gender, sexuality, disability and even age which relate in some way to existing self-organisation structures within trade unions and distinct equality bodies. Several trade unionists argued that it would be difficult if not impossible to create self organised structures relating to this new anti discrimination stream without in turn discriminating against one religious group or another or indeed against people that see themselves as having non religious beliefs.

Moreover, several participants articulated a preference for finding secular ways to resolve some of these cases. For instance, one anti racist activist suggested that a secular framework for trade union intervention on cases filed under the regulations could focus on whether the practice, symbol or dress at the heart of the dispute interferes in any substantive way with one's ability to do the job rather than attempting to deal with these within the framework of religious literacy and needs. He elaborated by referring to the BA cross case⁸⁵:

If the trade union says we want to take it up because it's religious discrimination, that's a different emphasis than saying this has got nothing to do with the ability of somebody to do their job. So if you're going to - if we're going to say the trade unions should take up faith issues, they would do the first, they would say this is discrimination on the basis of religion. Or, which I think is a better position, say what on earth has this got to do with the person's ability to be able to check somebody's passport before they get on the plane? And there's a completely different emphasis, and I think the position of the unions should be the latter of those two⁸⁶

Other trade unionists at the same focus group discussion (all participants at this particular session were men) argued that the case of the teacher asserting her right

⁸⁵ See BBC News coverage 'Woman loses right to wear cross' at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/london/6165368.stm>In November 2006, Nadia Eweida a 55 year old British Airways employee at Heathrow Airport went off work on unpaid leave after she refused to remove or conceal her necklace bearing a cross under her uniform. British Airways argued that they had a clear uniform policy but Mrs Eweida argued it was important for her to show the cross as a demonstration of her faith and also that people of other religious backgrounds were permitted to wear head coverings. The tribunal found in favour of BA who argued that it was impractical to insist people wore head coverings under their uniform.

⁸⁶ Focus group 2, 3/05/07

to wear nikab in her workplace (Azmi v Kirklees Metropolitan Borough Council) should be viewed in exactly the same light. However, the precise understanding of what is involved in 'doing one's job' has been thrown open to debate by the 'nikab case', which itself has raised several conflicting positions about the role of teachers.

In opposition to such a strategy - where defence against discrimination on the grounds of religion and belief is constructed on the basis of one's ability to do one's job rather than the validity of one's religious claims – a Black atheist trade unionist felt that this was an attempt to avoid acknowledging people's religious identities. He argued that people do and indeed should have the right to display their religious affiliation, irrespective of their occupation. Moreover, he stated that the role of trade unionists, irrespective of their own political and personal persuasion, should be to enforce this right:

You gave the example of the woman at Heathrow. I don't see why that couldn't have been taken up as a case of oppression; it's her right to wear her religious paraphernalia. I know you could argue it to say well how does that interfere with her job and that would be the first one. But if they come back with some kind of plausible answer, if it was, rather than just a chain or something else, item of clothing etc that may have been dangerous for her to take it off. But the issue is that, it is religious, and its people's rights to display, and I don't think the union should shy away...⁸⁷

Importantly, whilst many participants raised concerns about the particularly undemocratic, sexist or homophobic nature of some religious groups, only one focused on the subtly coercive nature of some demands around religious observance and the problems with trade unions supporting these. One participant discussed his concerns. In particular he noted the way in which teaching trade unions extended their support for arguments around Muslim dress codes within schools. He argued that such a position can and does mean that they are also contributing to an indirect but cumulative pressure upon non religious members of those communities and particularly women, to conform to more conservative practices where stereotypes, such as arguments about the essential nature of segregated activities for Muslim women, would prevail and be imposed upon others.

⁸⁷ Focus group 2, 3/05/07

Race, ethnicity, religion or class?

Historically trade union policy and campaigning material has not made a particularly strong distinction between the categories 'religion' and 'race' when it has come to organising and representing Black workers. This is evidenced in a number of trade union archival documents which reveal that, for some time, trade unions have been bargaining for access to religious holidays and recognition of religious dress or religious observance within the remit of their 'race equality' work even before the Religion and Belief Regulations came into force. For instance, the TGWU Negotiators Guide on Race Equality published in 2003, which is a step-by-step guide to dealing with complaints of race discrimination, also includes guidance on religious and cultural needs. This may not be entirely surprising given that the Race Relations Act 1976 identified Sikhs as an 'ethnic group' and led to much discussion about the racist intentions behind employers' decisions to prevent Sikh men from wearing turbans in the workplace.

However, some trade union positions in this area tend to prioritise a politics of recognition and dabble in identity politics rather than focusing on tackling substantive inequalities and addressing the structural position of Black workers. An example of how this can happen on the ground is provided within the transport sector findings of the RITU project. In this case, trade unionists had extended the bargaining agenda to include separate toilets for Muslims even though other issues like the position of Black workers at the same bus garage or indeed within the trade union branch were left untouched. Even though a white trade union official raised concerns about the possibility that such arrangements would lead to competing demands from other religious groups, the position on separate toilets was re-enforced by employers' preference to concede this rather than tackle racist behaviour amongst white staff.⁸⁸

Indeed, the conceptualisation of 'race' and 'religion' as somehow linked in the minds of trade unionists is highlighted by the fact that the remit for implementing the new Religion and Belief Regulations has been attached to the work of Race Equality Officers, some now known as Equality Officers (Race, Religion and Belief). In many ways, this is not surprising given the prevalence of a racist discourse about Muslim communities and widespread acceptance that Muslims have become victims of a

⁸⁸ See Davis, M and Jefferys, S (December 2004) UK First Sector Report: The Practices of Trade Unionists and the concerns and apprehensions and participation of racial and ethnic minorities within the UK transport sector available online at <http://www.workinglives.org/>

new form of racism.⁸⁹ Indeed a recent study by ACAS found that 66% of employment tribunal claims under the religion and belief regulations had race discrimination as a secondary jurisdiction, around half of the claimants were Muslim, and some of the ET1 forms from Muslim claimants stated that harassment or bullying had commenced after the July 2005 bombings.⁹⁰ The need to respond to the particular wave of anti Muslim racism was one of the key points discussed in all three focus groups.

In September 2006, the TUC Congress carried a motion agreeing to establish a partnership with the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB). According to a joint statement from the TUC and MCB, this newfound partnership has a twofold objective: to support workplace justice by increasing knowledge of unions and levels of unionisation amongst Muslim workers and to challenge 'Islamophobia' in the workplace and in wider society. On the part of the TUC, this was presented as a formal response to the particular disaffection of the Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities, the vilification of Muslims since 7/7 bombings, to promote better community relations and to combat 'Islamophobia'.

Clearly there is an underlying assumption that Muslim workers are under represented in trade unions. The focus on their experience within workplaces and trade unions as Muslims rather than as Black workers that experience racism in the same way as other Black workers (now documented in great detail in the RITU project publications and also reflected in TUC Equality Audits) has raised concerns about what this means in terms of the place of Black self organisation in tackling these issues. This is discussed further below.

However, there has been widespread criticism of this newfound alliance between the TUC and MCB including from within the TUC. Respondents in our study made several points about this initiative. Firstly, by formally linking with the MCB, the TUC have replicated standard British state models of multiculturalism. The claim that this one body represents Muslims in Britain and particularly a diverse range of 1.6 million Muslims affiliated to a vast array of religious AND indeed secular organisations, was seen as highly problematic and also typical of British state methods which are

⁸⁹ Fekete, L (2004) *Anti Muslim Racism and the European Security State* in *Race and Class*, Vol. 46(1): 3-29

⁹⁰ *Research Summaries: sexual orientation and religion or belief discrimination in the workplace* prepared by Ben Savage at Acas, 2007

characterised by three particular tendencies. Firstly, the tendency to prioritise religious over other identities particularly when it comes to South Asian communities.⁹¹ Secondly, the tendency to establish layers of representation and so-called 'leadership' as part of a tick box approach to Black communities where agencies can not be bothered to invest the time and resources required to establish real contacts with more progressive groups.⁹² As one respondent in this study pointed out, there are many misconceptions about the MCB and the credibility they have amongst Muslims. It is worth quoting this respondent at length:

But also I think there's an issue that the trade union movement don't do exactly what the Government's doing, which is to believe that the community is homogeneous and that certain people represent it. The MCB didn't play a role in the anti war movement. Muslim Association of Britain did, but even they, the hundreds of thousands of people who came out with the Muslim community didn't come out because of the Muslim Association of Britain. They might have helped, people came out through lots and lots of different ways, and we have very multiple levels of identity... ...you can be religious and be not, that's not your motivating factor in terms of saying I'm represented by MCB or whatever mosque, it can be a very passing relationship. So, I think the trade union movement, when it wants to speak with the Muslim community, also has to recognise that within the Muslim community there are such a multiplicity of views and perspectives from very secular ideas right through to very so called organised, what I would call fundamentalist groups. And I think sometimes people go for the easiest option and they go - oh, MCB, got it, tick, we've spoken with the Muslim community. Well actually no, you've not.⁹³

A third tendency, which has been noted in previous sections, is the space that such processes create for conservative agencies and especially fundamentalist groups with particularly dangerous views about women and sexuality to claim to represent Black communities and set the public policy agenda. The preference of these groups is to take the discussion out of the realm of more general discussions for instance about racism and move towards injunctions about what believers should and should not, can and can not do. Their objective is to lay claim to an accurate interpretation of

⁹¹ See for instance the work of Uma Narayan (1997) *Dislocating Cultures: Identities, Traditions and Third World Feminism* (Routledge, New York and London)

⁹² See Cohen, P and Bains, H (1988) *Multi-racist Britain* (Macmillan, Hampshire, England)

⁹³ Focus group 1

the text and to impose this interpretation on others. In the process they actively undermine more fluid, syncretic expressions of religious belief that are enmeshed with varying cultural and political histories and they also squeeze out secular spaces.⁹⁴ Arguments about the 'modesty' of ethnic minority women in the recent debate about religion and dress codes, is one example of how all these factors act together in order to narrow the debate and raise the credibility of conservative and patriarchal interpretations of gender within these communities.⁹⁵

A second criticism of the TUC's alliance with the MCB relates to extensive condemnation of the possibility that this effectively provides legitimacy for an organisation whose head at the time, Iqbal Sacranie, was accused of homophobia but more so, for an organisation that has been linked to fundamentalist violence in South Asia. It was also argued that this alliance therefore undermines the TUC's commitment to both equality and to challenging far right politics. As one respondent stated, again worth quoting in full:

We're obviously pissed off because for years we have been at the forefront of community activism, working with trade unions and other anti racist bodies. And we're pissed off in the sense that in order to fight unjust war, to fight Islamophobia, to fight extremism, to combat fundamentalism, it's an irony that trade union and other groups are actually working with those very fundamentalist groups that they're trying to combat in the first place. It doesn't make sense. And if they wanted to engage with the Muslim community, well there are hundreds, thousands of Muslim activists, Muslim elected Members of Parliament, councillors. There are secular Muslim groups like ourselves. In this area are mosques, more or less in every single neighbourhood, there are more than two or three mosques. Yet they decide to go and work with one mosque or one faith group and it just doesn't make sense. If you want to fight one form of extremism then you can't work with the

⁹⁴ For more on this see Southall Black Sisters (1990) *Against the Grain* (from SBS); Sahgal and Yuval Davis (1992) *Refusing Holy Orders*, (Virago London), Gupta, R (ed) (2003) *From Homebreakers to Jailbreakers* (Zed Books, London) and Bhatt, C (1997) *Liberation and Purity: Race, New Religious Movements and the Ethics of Postmodernity* (UCL Press, London) and Sahgal, G (2006) *Legislating Utopia? Violence Against Women: Identities and Interventions* in Yuval Davis, N, Kannabiran, K and Vieten, U (eds) *The Politics of Belonging* (Sage Studies in International Sociology, UK)

⁹⁵ See for instance *The Muslim Faith and School Uniform* NUT Guidelines March 2006. It should however be noted that the guidance came out before the judgement in the Shabina Begum case.

group that subscribes to that same ideology. And I really don't understand why they have not tried to engage with secular Muslim groups that exist up and down the country who have been challenging both extremism within their own community and also have a track record of fighting racism with everybody else.⁹⁶

The fundamentalist connections of the MCB are discussed in greater detail in the section 'forging alliances with religious groups' on page 26.

On the question of 'Islamophobia', whilst some participants argued any distinction between the terms 'Islamophobia' and 'anti Muslim racism' is mere semantics, several others expressed discomfort with the term and the discourse around it. This was primarily because it was seen as taking the issue out of the realm of discussions about racism and placing it more firmly within the arena of religion, as requiring a religious response dependent also upon religious literacy, rather than an anti racist solution. As the following respondent explains:

But still say that it's still racism on the whole rather than have it isolated and say this is Islamophobia, racism and then there's another racism on its own. It's racism whatever it is, it's still got the 'ism'. And that's what you need to do, and to separate it I don't think, as you say, you won't get anywhere. It's racism that's the problem and that's what we need to be battling against.⁹⁷

The term 'Islamophobia' was popularised by the Runnymede Trust after the release of their report entitled 'Islamophobia: a challenge for us all' in 1997.⁹⁸ The report argues that Muslims are experiencing discrimination in a range of sectors including work, education, housing and the media and defends the use of the term as a way of identifying the specific discrimination they face. Whilst drawing out the intersection between Islam and various different histories of migration and regional identities, the report goes on to construct an argument about a unified experience of religious discrimination. However, the authors appear to slip between the categories 'Muslim' and 'South Asian' as and when it suits them in order to draw upon the specific disadvantage of Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities to make their point about the existence of religious discrimination. Similarly, whilst the TUC and MCB

⁹⁶ Interview with WS10090

⁹⁷ Focus group 1

⁹⁸ The Runnymede Trust argue that they did not invent this term but rather that it was already being commonly used but we contend that they certainly popularised the term.

statement does not define 'Islamophobia', the following section highlights a tendency for arguments about 'Islamophobia' to rely upon the Pakistani and Bangladeshi experience and to slip between discussion of religion and discussion of ethnicity and nation rather than to deal with racism and class oppression:

The TUC report *Poverty, Exclusion and British People of Pakistani and Bangladeshi Origin* published in 2005 demonstrated that many people from substantial parts of the Muslim community suffer massive disadvantage and discrimination: 69 per cent classified as poor compared with 22 per cent of the country as a whole. Overall British Muslims are three times more likely to be unemployed than the population as a whole.⁹⁹

However, the fact that large sections of Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities happen to be Muslim does not in itself explain their position within the labour market. Several trade unionists that attended the joint TUC and MCB seminar on 12th April 2007 challenged the statistics that were presented and therefore the idea that Muslims are facing particular disadvantage in the labour market that relates to their religious identity. Those who participated in the joint seminar argued that the Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities have a very particular experience of long-term unemployment which is interlinked with the timing of their migration, their large-scale employment in declining industrial sectors and areas such as textiles and nothing at all to do with their religious identity. This point was re-iterated by one Black trade unionist at the focus groups in this study:

One of the problems I have at the moment is about the way that race and religion is being conflated in the public policy sphere so that often when people talk about for example, Islamophobia, I have people writing to me talking about well Muslims, the positions of Muslims in the labour market. Well actually, I'd think about it in terms of the position of Asians in the labour market and before 7/7 the London bombings, that was still their position in the labour market. Nobody talks about that being their position in the labour market because of their religious affiliation; it was because of their race and the way they were brought into the labour market in this country¹⁰⁰

Another respondent, from East London, argued that the Bangladeshi experience in Tower Hamlets is about the intersection of class and racism but nothing to do with

⁹⁹ From minutes of the TUC Congress September 2006

¹⁰⁰ Focus group 2

religious discrimination. He aired concerns that poverty is being ignored as an issue that affects as many white neighbourhoods as Bangladeshi neighbourhoods.

I don't really buy that to be honest. I think it's not - it's got nothing to do with your faith... it's Bangladeshi people in the East End of London. And if you want to go further then it's probably not even that, it's people in the East End, regardless whether you are Muslim or Christian, Bengali or white. I think this area is the most deprived, most disadvantaged, most kind of backward area in the whole of the country. And that affects the people who live in this area...¹⁰¹

One of the most vocal opponents of the term 'Islamophobia' is the South Asian writer, Kenan Malik. Malik complains that the debate on 'Islamophobia' and 'anti Muslim racism' has come to conceal the realities of racism which in his view are still very much about colour rather than culture and religion. He notes that African Caribbeans are still the most likely to be stopped and searched. Moreover, he raises concerns that the real impact of the discourse on Islamophobia has been censorship rather than tackling racism:

The trouble with Islamophobia is that it is an irrational concept. It confuses hatred of, and discrimination against, Muslims on the one hand with criticism of Islam on the other. The charge of 'Islamophobia' is all too often used not to highlight racism but to stifle criticism.¹⁰²

However, despite these perspectives, one trade union initiated particular work with their Muslim members in the wake of the July 2005 bombings:

A year or so ago we did make informal contacts with members, that we thought were Muslim and there were several two or three I think meetings held in London. We paid travel expenses, in order to discuss what experiences they were having in the workplace, what support they needed from the union to counteract Islamophobia that had been going on at that time. That was not in any sense part of the formal structures of the union. We have formal structures for women, black members and disabled members and lesbian and gay members. Now, my feeling about it is that that was the right thing to do at the time and that maybe I need to do it again, but it is

¹⁰¹ Interview with WS10090

¹⁰² Malik, K (February 2005) *The Islamophobia Myth* published in Prospect magazine and accessible on Malik's website www.kenanmalik.com

problematic in that when other members hear about it, they say why is this going on? This is not part of the structures. What are you setting up? Where are they feeding into? Why aren't you doing the same for other religious groups? And if you actually try to construct a self organised group on the basis of religion or belief, that's a form of discrimination, who on earth would be eligible to come to it? Because obviously it covers non-belief as well¹⁰³

Whilst there was a consensus that Black self-organisation continues to be an important and valid strategy for tackling racism, the majority of respondents simultaneously argued against anything that might contribute to the politicisation of 'religion' such as through self-organisation along faith lines.

The view that retaining a strong secular character safeguards the union and its members against any in-fighting (as highlighted by the consequences of the sop to identity politics above) and ensures a level of unity, was echoed by several others:

I think it is necessary actually to keep the concept that a trade union is essentially a secular organisation because once you go down the road of saying we're going to have lots of different religious interest groups, you're going to end up with enormous amount of conflict. But that doesn't mean that the union shouldn't be providing support to whoever's suffering discrimination or prejudice for whatever reason.¹⁰⁴

Moreover, several participants raised concerns that if trade unions were specifically organising Muslim members, this would effectively take the issue out of the remit of Black self-organisation. As one Black trade union official noted:

There is a structure that we developed over the years that helps us to establish the self-organising is, for me, the best way of being able to organise. If, for example, the example that you gave, the Muslims want to organise... are looking to on an informal basis within unions as Muslims, then I think that's something that needs to be talked about with the other self-organised structures as well, because again, you know, what is the focus of that work? Is it about a religious intolerance that they're organising against, or do they want to organise against racism. If you want to organise against racism more effectively, then I think we're stronger doing that through the sorts of structures that have developed over the years in the UK. I'm not saying

¹⁰³ Focus group 1

¹⁰⁴ Focus group 1

they're by any means perfect, at all. They're not. But they're a basis for moving forward... (religion) could turn out to be something that divides black workers, even though, as I said earlier, not all Muslims are Black, but if it's something that could divide black workers, then I've got a real problem with that, a real problem, because we should be looking for much more unity approach, if we really genuinely want self-organisation to work¹⁰⁵

There was a strong argument for bringing the 'Islamophobia' debate back into the realm of anti racism:

I think for black self-organised groups, our challenge is, it's about locating a very real experience of Islamophobia, an identity that's come out of that in terms of within the Muslim community. And putting that within an anti racist framework, rather than just seeing it as purely in isolation as if it's something that hangs by itself, isn't located in anything and therefore the only people you can make common cause with is other Muslims¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁵ Interview with WS10018, 26/07/07

¹⁰⁶ Focus group 1

Conclusion

From the foregoing it is clear that much more work needs to be done in order to present a less London-based analysis of what is clearly an important issue for Black communities and for the trade union movement as a whole throughout the UK. So far this study has highlighted some of the conceptual and practical issues relating to the anti-racist role of trade unions. It has also presented some initial research on the extent to which issues mediated through religious organisations help or hinder this work.

Our overwhelming view thus far is that the trade union movement has no need of third party intermediaries to access its Black members. However this raises the more difficult question of the best ways of recruiting and retaining Black members. It is clear that although some attention is being paid to this issue now, it has suffered from years of neglect and that even where there is a willingness to tackle the matter it is often confused or even conflated with a general anti-fascist strategy. Even when this is not the case, there was a general consensus on the lack of an overall anti-racist strategy beyond pursuing selected individual cases.

Religious discrimination was recognised as an important issue in its own right but it is quite clear that the tendency to fuse racial and religious discrimination often serves to mask the former. Religious organisations, especially those perceived as 'fundamentalist' (of whatever persuasion) were regarded with some suspicion as often aspects of their agenda did not chime with the equality commitments of many Black trade unionists. The work of the Citizen Organising Foundation, where it was known, had a mixed reception. There were some misgivings about any perceived attempt to usurp the role of trade unions (especially in its attempt to establish Workers' Associations) and grave reservations about its lack of support for union recognition agreements. In general, however, there was limited awareness or interest among Black trade unionists in the work of the COF. Further work needs to be done to assess the impact of the COF's Living Wage initiative and its campaign among migrant workers; 'Strangers into Citizens'. This assessment needs to be made alongside that of the trade union movement on similar issues.

The notion of 'community unionism' was largely unknown among our respondents and was counter posed to the concept of community-based trade unionism in which the unions themselves initiated a broad based alliance of Black community

organisations campaigning on a range of issues. This was a model clearly favoured by Black activists within the trade union and anti racist movements since it was regarded as a way in which unions could show their commitment to the anti racist struggle outside the workplace as well as inside it, thereby establishing a potentially powerful link between workplace and community which, if carefully crafted, could form the basis for a renewal of Black self organisation. The Midlands Black Workers Forum is an example of this initiative. Although TUC policy, it is as yet unclear how far and to what extent this example will be followed in other TUC regions. However, more detailed research is necessary to critically examine the community unionism concept and in addition an evaluation of the Black Workers' Forum would be useful.

Recommendations

We offer the following recommendations as a basis for discussion. They are tentative and interim, based on the research conducted thus far. It is to be hoped that further research and discussion with our partners will produce more detailed recommendations.

- It is essential that the often intertwined issues of 'race' and religion are unravelled in the interests of doing justice to both. In particular it is essential that religious issues are not privileged above the issue of racial discrimination and that:
 - The racial aspect of latter (where appropriate) is revealed
 - That caution is exercised in the choice of which religious groups are selected for joint work and that work with 'fundamentalists' is rejected.
 - That trade unions guard against the potentially divisive impact of religious groups

In the light of this we strongly urge that trade union education programmes address these issues and whilst attending to the issue of religious discrimination ensure that this is done so in a secular context.

- Greater attention should be paid to establishing additional Black Workers Forums along the lines of the Midlands initiative. This may well involve consideration of appointing more Black TUC staff at senior level in the regions.
- Consideration should be given to the role of trades councils in providing the link between workplace and community in order to ensure that non-workplace issues also form part of the trade union agenda.

- Trade unions should examine their links with anti-racist organisations in order to ensure that they are playing a full part in them and that affiliation is not a mere paper commitment.
- Trade unions should be more centrally involved in campaigns to end the exploitation of undocumented workers and should recruit such workers into British trade unions.

Appendix 1: Research Methods

The research team collected the data for this pilot project in three ways. Firstly, three focus groups were convened comprising a total of 29 participants. Secondly, an additional 4 in depth qualitative interviews were conducted with individuals recognised as key respondents who could not attend the scheduled focus group sessions. These two methods generated approximately 10.5 hours of recorded data. Thirdly, secondary data such as policy, campaigning and case information was sourced from the internet sites of the TUC, individual trade unions and the Citizen Organising Foundation as well as material from the TUC archives stored at the London Metropolitan University library.

For the focus group participants, over 120 names were compiled of invitees through a number of avenues including: existing WLRI mailing lists; those that participated in the RITU¹⁰⁷ project; those who attended the launch of the 'Working against Racism'¹⁰⁸ guide in February 2006; from established WLRI contacts within particular trade unions; with the assistance of the TUC Race Equality Officer and his database of Black trade unionists, some of whom are also involved in Black self-organisation structures; voluntary and paid organisers of the Citizen Organising Foundation; and named contacts at all the main anti racist organisations in Britain as well as a number of women's organisations.

Invitees were asked to choose from a list of three focus group times and dates. Although it was originally thought to run three separate focus groups – one for anti racist/community groups and faith group representatives; one comprising Black trade unionists only and one open to all trade unionists – it was decided that the debate between these different groups of people was far more important and would provide far richer data. Also this route would offer invitees an incentive to participate because it would give them an opportunity to network and establish contacts across the sectors. Moreover, a number of the categories overlapped – those identifying with

¹⁰⁷ RITU is an acronym for the full title of the research project which was 'Racial and ethnic minorities, immigration and the role of trade unions in combating discrimination and xenophobia, in encouraging participation and in securing social inclusion and citizenship'. In December 2005, the research project completed a three year study of trade union activity across five European countries.

¹⁰⁸ 'Working against Racism: A Guide for trade unions in Britain' was written jointly by Professor Mary Davis at the Working Lives Research Institute and Wilf Sullivan and Roger Mckenzie at the TUC. The guide was launched in February 2006 and makes a strong case for trade unions in Britain to significantly improve their response to the concerns of Black workers.

anti racist organisations also saw themselves as trade unionists or those identifying as trade unionists were also involved with anti racist or community organisations. Representatives of faith initiatives and identities overlapped with all of the other categories. Several participants who are listed formally in the tables below as trade unionists or anti racists are also linked in some way to the COF, faith initiatives or have a strong sense of religious affiliation. Others defined themselves as ‘atheist’, as having ‘no religion’ or as ‘non-believers’. People from a range of ethnic and religious identities were represented amongst those that participated including African, Caribbean, South Asian, Latin American, Irish, English, European, Christian, Jewish, Sikh, Hindu and Muslim backgrounds.

Additionally, at the outset of the project, the research team were committed to ensuring that women and Black workers were fairly represented in all the sessions. There was however just one session, the second focus group session that took place in the evening, which consisted only of men. This experience has been noted in respect of devising research methods for the larger project.

A focus group schedule was drafted in consultation with the TUC Race Equality Officer and has been attached as Appendix 1 of this paper. The following table provides a breakdown of those that participated in the project:

Breakdown of participants by gender:

	Trade Unionist	Anti- racist /community	Faith Initiative	Total
Female	7	3	2	12
Male	13	5	3	21
Total	20	8	5	33

Breakdown of participants by race:

	Trade Unionist	Anti- racist /community	Faith Initiative	Total
Black	13	6	2	21
White	7	2	3	12
Total	20	8	5	33

Members of most of the large UK trade unions participated in the study including GMB, TGWU, UNISON, UCU, NUT and NASUWT. Members of other trade unions like CWU, USDAW and PCS also expressed an interest but were not able to participate within the short timescale of this project or at the scheduled focus group times. However, PCS was represented on the Advisory Group. Respondents ranged from branch level activists and organisers to regional and national full time officials. Moreover, members of seven different anti racist groups participated in the study. In terms of faith initiative representatives, whilst the numbers in the table above seem lower than for the other categories, it is important to note that some of those listed within the other categories either expressed a religious identity or an affiliation to a religious institution and that several of the participants listed in the trade union category were also working with the Citizen Organising Foundation chapters.

We originally intended to limit focus group numbers to 9 participants in each session. However, there was an overwhelming response to the invitations we sent out to potential participants and as many as 15 registered for one session alone. Despite the fact that there was such a high response to the email invitations and two out of three focus groups included participants from outside London, a number of additional people contacted WLRI about the project and expressed regret that the scale, location and timing of the project mitigated against their participation. Overall, a high level of interest was expressed in the project confirming our initial assessment that this is an important issue for contemporary trade unionism, marking the scope for a more in depth study across a number of regions in Britain. In addition it has become clear that people from these different quarters – trade unionists, anti racists, faith groups – are keen for a space to engage with each other and discuss their divergent and convergent approaches to the role of religion in widening trade union participation and tackling racism.

In addition to assistance and independent ethical evaluation of the focus group schedule by the TUC Race Equality Officer, triangulation for the key research findings was attained through three meetings of an Advisory Group which included academics, representatives of community groups and trade union officials. Advisory Group members both echoed and questioned the debate within the focus groups and their comments have been incorporated in this report. In alphabetical order, the Advisory Group members were as follows:

- Dr Bridget Anderson, Senior Research Officer and Programme Head, Centre on Migration, Policy and Society, University of Oxford
- Professor Chetan Bhatt, Sociology Department, Goldsmiths College, University of London
- Lorna Campbell, Equality Officer, Public and Commercial Services Union
- Roger Mckenzie, Regional Secretary for the Midlands, TUC
- Jennifer Moses, National Official (Equality and Training), NASUWT
- Pragna Patel, Chair, Southall Black Sisters and member of Women Against Fundamentalism (WAF)
- Maurice Sheehan, London Regional Organiser, UNISON
- Wilf Sullivan, Race Equality Officer, TUC
- Dr Georgie Wemyss, Post-doctoral Fellow, CRONEM, University of Surrey
- Professor Nira Yuval-Davis, School of Social Sciences, Media and Cultural Studies, University of East London, also a member of WAF

We wish to thank each of the Advisory Group members for the time and energy they put into the project and their invaluable comments and advice.

Appendix 2: Focus Group Schedule

Focus Group Schedule: The Impact of Religion on Trade Union Relations with Black Workers

Introduction

- Facilitator to introduce self
- Group to introduce themselves & state which organisation
- Aim of the study, stressing its concern with racism & involvement of Black workers in trade unions
- Recording, transcribing and anonymity
- Speaking honestly and openly – aware of the problem of emerging consensus silencing some voices but we are interested in hearing all voices and views
- **IMPORTANT signing consent forms**

Questions

Section 1:

1. What role do you think trade unions have in fighting racism?
2. Do you think religion is an issue a) for Black workers and b) for white workers?
3. In what way?
4. What do you see as the similarities and differences between policies and campaigns around racism and religion?
5. Do you think there is an overlap between 'race' and religion?

Probes:

- Do you think this is about race or religion?
- How have you been involved in responding to these issues if at all?

- Do you think this has been an adequate response?
- Where trade unions are accused of failing to respond to the issue adequately, ask why the respondent thinks it is a poor response and how it could be improved
- Where trade unions are thought to have responded well, get a full picture of reasons / aspects that were thought to be positive and where additional improvements could have been made

Section 2: Secularism

1. What do you think of Black self-organisation as a response to racism?
2. What do you think Black self-organisation is?
3. Should trade unions be linking with anti racist groups?
4. What have been the problems with trade unions linking with anti racist groups? Or what might these be?
5. In your experience, what are the benefits/disadvantages of Black self-organisation especially within trade unions as responses to workplace struggles?
6. Should Black self-organisation deal with religion, religious identity and/or religious discrimination?
7. Do you think trade unions as secular organisations should be dealing with religious identity and if so, how?

Section 3 Religion/community

1. What do you think of campaigns initiated by London Citizens as a response to the issues facing Black workers?
2. In your experience, what are the benefits of community unionism initiatives like TELCO /COF work here in UK?
3. Should TU's be linking with community and/or faith groups in order to respond to the issues affecting Black workers? If so, in what way? If not, why not?
4. What have been the problems with trade union links with community groups and/or faith groups? Or what might these be?

Probes:

- Do you see these initiatives as positive or negative?
- What relevance do these initiatives have in terms of organising Black workers?
- How do each of these talk about race and racism?
- What do you think of this? Is it appropriate or lacking in some way?
- How does each of these talk about religion or religious discrimination?
- What do you think of this? Is it appropriate or lacking in some way?

Recommendations

This project will feed into a paper that we are writing for the TUC which will include some recommendations on the issue of how religion is impacting upon trade union relations with Black workers. Would you like to suggest any recommendations?