



Empowering Young Black People in Local Government Workplaces Through Mentoring in UNISON

Introduction

This guidance has been designed to help local government branches and regions to recruit and support experienced Black activists to assist new and less experienced young Black people to develop and enhance their knowledge of the union.

UNISON has a proud history of actively and effectively organising, representing and defending Black people by tackling discrimination and promoting equality within the union, the workplace and society.

Challenging racism in the workplace is also crucial to UNISON's work because no workplace where racism is allowed to flourish can ever be effectively organised.

There are many challenges that Black people face in their everyday lives. It is incumbent on us to ensure that we do everything in our power to show that activity within the union does not have to be another onerous demand on already busy branches. There are many areas of common concern, but important areas of difference:

- Many Black members are low-paid, and many have been held back from career development or promotion due to conscious or unconscious bias.
- Approaching half have experienced bullying at work, and more than half have experienced racism at work.
- Black members whose jobs have transferred from the council to a private contractor or other fragmented area are more likely to experience racism and less likely to be supported.
- While similar proportions of Black members in councils and fragmented workforces have been made to feel isolated or uncomfortable at work due to their skin colour, race or ethnic background, 33% of those in councils discussed it with UNISON, while Black members in fragmented workforces are less likely to.
- Other evidence shows that Black workers are less likely to speak up about their experience of racism and discrimination due to the fragile nature of their jobs.

- And Black workers are more likely to be on zero-hours contract and are more likely than older workers to have their hours changed at short notice.

(2018 survey Experiences of Black workers in local government).

In dealing with discrimination in local government workplaces, we support workers not just in formal procedures but by developing effective responses to deeply rooted patterns of discrimination.

There is a noticeable and worrying shortage of young Black members and activists in UNISON and in Local Government. This is especially so for young Black members in fragmented areas where organising is more difficult. It may be that a member may not meet another member during their work or daily lives. For example, personal assistants may be employed by an individual and work solely in that individual's home. This makes it particularly difficult for Black workers to meet with other members, to recruit and organise, to build a collective and a sense of community.

Of the 63,000 young members in UNISON only 8% describe themselves as Black. The lack of proportional representation has prevented young Black people from communicating their concerns with their representatives in a productive way. The problem facing young Black people is not necessarily disengagement with the union, but rather a lack of engagement with the current system and an absence of representation.

Black people who are interested in getting more involved in UNISON said they would prefer to be involved at branch level. Most Black members who are already involved in UNISON work tend to do it at branch level, particularly as part of a Black members self-organised group (2018 survey Experiences of Black workers in local government).

It's no longer enough to just be heard. Young Black people in local government need to actively create alternative spaces for driving their own agenda. They are perhaps active in other ways such as by voicing views online, in an arguably more 'comfortable' environment, or by joining debating clubs. Social media has already helped boost engagement, but in the next decade or so, young people are going to have to do more to really have an impact.

However, to facilitate more involvement by young Black people in local government, we need to focus on building on our organising work to increase meaningful participation of Black activists, particularly young Black activists who can provide a voice in the workplace for others. This provides local government branches with a great opportunity to initiate that kind of dialogue.

It's so important that young and Black members' voices are heard, so it's [time to get young and Black members active](#)

Practical ideas to encourage young Black people to become more active

Over the years, thousands of UNISON members have been supported and mentored through the three steps to becoming Trained and Active:

1. **Contact.** For many UNISON members, the first step towards being more involved with the union is developing a [Trained and Active Plan for Contacts](#).
2. **Activist.** There are all sorts of different roles that UNISON members can take on. [Trained & Active Plan for Activists](#)
3. **Rep.** Trained, active, confident reps are what holds this union together. [Trained & Active Plan for Reps](#)

Through the Trained & Active Plan, inexperienced members have gained the confidence and knowledge to speak up and become effective reps in their workplace. The plan is a flexible document that can be used to support any member into activism, and the hope is it will be a particularly useful way to support members from all the different employers where UNISON has members. It uses the method of identifying small tasks for someone to carry out and building on those tasks to increase confidence and skills.

A common complaint that young people have is they just don't know what a union is, what they do, or how they can flourish within the union.

Some young Black people may find that the step of becoming a new activist and taking everything on may seem too daunting and too much for the busy branch that it will put members off from getting involved at all.

Local Government branches are encouraged to consider some of these examples of how experienced Black activists can assist new and less experienced young Black people to come forward and get active in the union:

- Aid succession planning and help young Black members gain skills within UNISON. This may encourage more young Black workers to become involved.
- Sometimes using the metaphor of a gym can help people understand if they don't know why they should get involved and pay a membership fee. So, the gym provides the infrastructure, the equipment, the expert advice and the personal trainers, but if you don't go to the gym you won't get fit.
- Speak to young Black people who may want to become active in the union. If they don't want to, ask them to pinpoint who they think would be a good young Black activist.
- Follow up young Black people who have an interest in doing something.
- Set up evening virtual meetings to help engage young Black people who are often primary carers.

- Have a branch Self Organised Group. This can be especially helpful in getting members to discuss issues specifically affecting them, for example COVID-19.
- Build networks for support across the branch, employers and the community. Set up a WhatsApp group for new young Black activists in a group so they can support each other via their phones on similar issues and can learn from each other.
- Keep in regular contact with young Black people. For example, phone chats, catch ups, texts, emails, video conference or video chat such as Skype once a week at a set time and keep it structured. People remember this type of contact, and occasionally you hit upon that member that wants to gear up their union activity.

Support, including training, is available at both national and regional level, but the key to supporting new young Black activists is through the personal touch at branch level, in other words, mentoring.

Mentoring can be a valuable way of nurturing new young Black activists without 'throwing them in at the deep end' of trade union activity.

Some key principles for local government branches wanting to set up a mentoring scheme

Mentoring means different things to different people. Sometimes a mentor is seen as someone very experienced whose role is to teach a new person the ropes. Others see a mentor as someone who is skilled in asking questions, listening, and encouraging the person they're mentoring to work things out for themselves. In UNISON, something between the two will usually work best.

Also, different branches will have different approaches to mentoring. Here are examples of how it works in some UNISON branches:

- A small branch or a branch that is starting to get organised usually has an informal mentoring scheme and uses practical ideas to encourage and support individual members to get active
- A large branch or one that already has a good support system in place usually has a more formal mentoring scheme
- A branch with community or private sector employers or a fragmented workforce will usually keep in contact, support and develop their reps

A branch based mentoring scheme will be much more effective if all branch officers are supportive and aware of the role the mentors will play.

Mentoring can help bridge any gaps in communication. Each new young Black activist can be assigned to an experienced Black activist who can pass on their experience and knowledge and act (in a voluntary capacity) as an aide towards the organising approach promoted by UNISON.

Experienced Black activists will gain personal satisfaction and pride at giving back to the union through the sharing of their experiences to empower future leaders. The union will grow stronger through the knowledge transfer from one generation to the other.

It will be important to agree as a branch some general guidelines for mentors and mentees, including on issues such as the purpose of the mentoring scheme, confidentiality, what should be in a mentor contract, how to deal with any problems, and importantly to regularly review how the mentoring scheme is going with the rest of the branch.

Here are some practical ideas for local government branches co-ordinating the activity of mentors and mentees:

Mentors:

- Should be recruited with appropriate skills and cultural awareness to mentor new Black activists.
- Need to be committed and have the time to keep mentees engaged in the process.
- Will help allay fears about what is expected and will help new young Black activists gain an understanding of various trade union roles before taking them on.
- Consider how efforts to provide mentoring for new young Black activists can be linked to the fight for larger social justice goals for them and their communities.
- Use the 'Meetings Calendar' on page 8 of the [Trained & Active Plan for Activists](#) to book in follow up meetings with your mentee and to make a note of upcoming branch meetings. You can also mark other important dates such as training.
- Think about suggesting activity which gradually increases the confidence and experience of the mentee. Think about where the mentee is now, and the skills and knowledge they need to acquire over a given time period.

Mentees:

- Are likely to vary in their individual needs and, thus, in the specific types of mentoring support that might be most effective.

- Social/emotional development can be supported through group processes, for example: unity, trust and commitment to the process.
- Should have regular one to one catch ups with their mentor to check in and talk through any issues. These could be arranged fortnightly for half hour, but the timing of these will ultimately depend on what the mentor and mentee must discuss.
- Should be invited to branch meetings to meet other Black activists. They can then decide what their strengths are and what they want to focus on. For those who can't make meetings because of where they work, keep in touch by regular texts to check how they're getting on.

UNISON Training

- The 'Mentoring in the UNISON branch' course is designed to be used as part of branch development. There is a one-day version which can be run with anyone interested in setting up a mentoring scheme. The two-day version also focuses on developing the skills of mentors.
- There is also a UNISON mentoring course specifically for self-organised group (SOG) committee contacts. This will help local government branches agree practical steps to develop mentoring skills and reflect on personal styles of mentoring for new Black activists and how these fit with UNISON's approach to mentoring.

Branches are encouraged to visit [UNISON activist training](#) and find out more about these and other courses and speak to their [regional education officer or organiser](#) if they wish to run any of these in the branch. Alternatively, contact LearningAndOrganising@unison.co.uk for copies of materials if you or another activist wish to deliver them in your branch.

Other Online Resources

- [Challenging racism in the workplace](#) is a practical guide for UNISON branches. It can be downloaded and ordered from the online catalogue, stock number 2969. UNISON's 'Challenging Racism' course is designed to familiarise UNISON branch officers and workplace reps with the key elements of the Equality Act 2010, including the duty it places on employers to eliminate discrimination, advance equality of opportunity and foster good relations. The course will also help branch officer and workplace reps to develop a branch action plan for raising race equality issues with employers. Branches should speak to their [regional education officer or organiser](#) if they wish to run this course in the branch.
- In UNISON, Black is used to indicate people with a shared history. Black with a capital 'B' is used in its broad political and inclusive sense to describe people in Britain that have suffered colonialism and enslavement in the past

and continue to experience racism and diminished opportunities in today's society. More info can be found here [Defining Black in UNISON](#)

- Find out more about what work we do for [Black members' equality](#) and the work we do for [young members](#)
- [Sign up](#) to the UNISON Black members email network.
- Read the **Black workers on the Covid front line** [research report](#)
- The [UNISON Organising Space](#) is a dedicated microsite for UNISON activists to share and discuss the issues and strategies affecting their duties in the workplace. Find out more, get access and sign up to the Organising Space e-newsletter.
- Why not take a look at the [TUC eNote - a guide to mentoring](#) You will need to sign in or register on the website. This eNote introduces mentoring and how experienced activists can support young workers within the workplace.
- The TUC report [Missing half million](#) sets out the case for rolling out initiatives like Work Smart so that the union movement can reach a greater number of young workers and bring them into trade unionism. It proposes several ways that unions can also approach their own transformation and innovation programmes. And it underlines the need to communicate differently with young workers.