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Empowering Black Members in Community Workplaces Through Mentoring in UNISON

Contents

Introduction	2
Resources to help establish a mentor scheme	2
Practical ideas to encourage Black members to become more active	3
Some key principles for branches hoping to set up a mentoring scheme	4
Mentors:	5
Mentees:	5
Other Online Resources	5

Introduction

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](#).

UNISON Community refers to the 85,000 UNISON members who work in the not-for-profit sector, including housing associations, major charities, and those providing social care from the third sector. Our members cover a comprehensive range of services in every aspect of public service delivery, across all the devolved nations and legislative frameworks.

This guidance has been designed to help branches and regions organising Community members support experienced activists in their efforts to mentor less experienced Black members. UNISON has a proud history of effectively organising, representing and defending Black members by tackling discrimination and promoting equality within the union, the workplace and society.

Black activists in the UNISON Community Sector Group are underrepresented. At the time of writing 15% of all Stewards are Black. With Black members accounting for 20% of the Community membership, their representation in UNISON Community Rep structures is disproportionately low. This is especially true for young Black members, where at the time of writing, less than 1% of our Stewards are young Black Stewards. UNISON defines "young members" as those 30 and under.

Resources to help establish a mentor scheme

- On the 21 April 2026 UNISON will be running a training session on how to set up a branch mentor scheme: [Setting Up a Branch Mentoring Scheme | UNISON College](#)
- All of UNISON's Mentoring resources can be found here: [UNISON's Mentoring resources](#)
- Our mentor and buddy webpage also includes some additional resources: [Mentor or buddy new UNISON activists - UNISON National](#)

- More information on how to support and develop activists can be found at [Developing and supporting activists](#).
- Branches are encouraged to 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.

Practical ideas to encourage Black members to become more active

Over the years, thousands of UNISON members have been supported and mentored to become trained and active, the details of which can be found on the [UNISON's Mentoring resources Padlet](#).

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, irrespective of the sector they work in. It sets out the method of identifying small tasks for someone to carry out and building on those tasks to increase confidence and skills.

Community branches (and branches which organise community members) are encouraged to consider some of these examples of how experienced activists can assist new and less experienced Black members become active in the union:

- Succession planning: help Black members gain skills within UNISON.
- Anecdotally, using the metaphor of a gym can help people understand if they don't understand why they should get involved and pay a membership fee. 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 strong.
- Speak to Black members 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 Black activist.
- Set up evening virtual meetings to help engage Black members who may be primary carers.
- Have a branch Self Organised Group. This can be especially helpful in getting members to discuss issues specifically affecting them.
- Build networks for support across the branch, employers and the community.

- Set up a WhatsApp group for new activists so they can support and learn from each other.
- Keep in regular contact with Black members. For example, phone conversations, catch ups, texts, emails, video chats such as Teams regularly.

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

Some key principles for branches hoping 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 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 Black activist can be assigned to an experienced 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.

It will be important to agree as a branch general guidelines for mentors and mentees, including on issues such as the purpose of the mentoring scheme, confidentiality, content included in the mentor contract, problem resolution, and how to review the effectiveness of the mentoring scheme.

Here are some practical ideas for 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 Black activists gain an understanding of various trade union roles before taking them on.
- Consider how efforts to provide mentoring for new Black activists can be linked to the fight for larger social justice goals.
- Meet with your mentee and to make a note of upcoming branch meetings and 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, therefore, in the specific types of mentoring support that might be most effective.
- 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 decide.

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.

- Find out more about what work we do for [Black members' equality](#)
- [Sign up](#) to the UNISON Black members email network.
- [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.
- Find out more about [UNISON Community](#).