

UCU members discuss universities' role in addressing the history of slavery and colonialism

At the end of March this year, the government commissioned report on Race and Ethnic Disparities was released provoking criticism from opposition parties to trade unions and campaign groups.

In the Commission's 258-page Report, it advocates amongst its 24 recommendations, to teach an "inclusive curriculum" whatever that may mean to the writers of the Report. We, however, would like to have an open and inclusive, participatory process of re-writing that curriculum!

Whatever we do, and there is much to do, let us not bask in the apathy of the recommendations of the recent Report which advocates that we move the focus away from institutions and more towards "the extent [that] individuals and their communities could help themselves through their own agency, rather than wait for invisible external forces to assemble to do the job".

Let us re-write the curriculum despite, or rather because, we are the "well-intentioned young people" not "clouded by idealism" but driven by the conviction of movements like the Black Lives Matter campaign. History has shown us, as in the case of the Civil Rights Movement in the US and the mass democratic movement in South Africa supported by the anti-apartheid movement worldwide, that change must and will come.

The death of George Floyd in America, the trial of which is currently on-going, generated a wave of solidarity and protests which started in the US and spread worldwide. In Britain, the campaign gained momentum with protests on 6 June 2020 in major cities, including a gathering of 6000 in Parkers Piece Cambridge. News headlines here described "The Black Lives Matter campaign as the largest anti-racist protest seen in the UK since the slave abolition movement" (Guardian, 29 July 2020). According to Prof Hakim Adi, the first person of African heritage to become a professor of history in Britain "The current anti-racism protests are unprecedented in my lifetime and probably the largest ever since that late 18th and early 19th centuries" (ibid)

Calls were made for all areas of UK society, including universities, to confront their colonial legacy. In a statement last July by several academics that Universities across Britain should introduce positive action schemes aimed at hiring, training where relevant and valuing their staff with lived experiences, in an attempt to address their under-representation in the workforce. In the heat of the moment last summer, many universities declared boldly to address this important and neglected area. Here in ARU, when the university urged staff to volunteer for a newly created position of 'Race Equality Officer', we had an excellent opportunity to participate in reshaping and addressing the inequalities and injustices which plague society and extend into our university. What changes and bold steps taken by our institution, that can we be

genuinely proud of? What can we account for half a year later? Should the eye of a university be fixed on achieving the prize of the bronze for faithfully adopting the Race Equality Charter – or in welcoming genuine dialogue and letting those with fundamental knowledge and lived experience shape how the university proceeds with a transformation? Perhaps we need to wait for the results of the recent Survey...

In November 2020, following a government commissioned report on Tackling Racial Harassment in Higher Education, the Universities UK (UUK: representing 140 institutions in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland) called on full transparency by senior management and leaders in conceding where there are problems of racism at their institutions; and to commit to improving understanding and awareness among staff and students of racism, racial micro-aggressions, white privilege and white allyship. Only a few days ago, the Royal Society highlighted the stark figures on the extreme paucity of Black scientists at universities. Pre-pandemic numbers for science, technology, engineering, and maths, were 19.2% Asian academic staff aged 34 and under and 1.8% for black staff (2018-19). When you look at Black researchers in physics and chemistry, a shocking zero percent is the rounded result, as the actual numbers are a couple of individuals! Indeed, after the release of each report, after each survey undertaken, everyone holds their breath waiting to see what action is taken, what changes are made...and patience is frankly running out.

Representing our branch at the recent Black Worker's Conference organised by the TUC, we heard an emotional presentation by Gloria Mills (Chair of TUC Race Relations Committee and President of TUC 2005-6), highlighted the racism experienced in organisations and institutions from recruitment all the way to redundancy. Frances O'Grady (gen sec TUC since 2013) had a simple and clear message for trade union members "organise, organise..." The focus throughout the conference was on strengthening representation of black members within the trade union movement. There was an international event with inspiring speakers from many parts of the world, including South Africa, contributing shared experiences and forging links in order to build a world-wide anti-racist movement. Discussions following talks included an examination of recruitment: How can unions identify and build pathways for the recruitment and progression of Black staff in unions, including leadership positions; and on engagement: how can unions better engage members on taking forward racial justice within our structures, and spread best practice to employers. A session on Public Policy looked at how labour law could be strengthened to protect against racism. A special focus this year was on how unions needed to hold government accountable for the failings towards black workers during the Covid-19 crises, and how we may all learn lessons from this. As expected, zero hour and casualised contracts disproportionately affect women and black workers and this has become so transparent during the pandemic. Finally, there was discussion on Equality Impact Assessments and Quality Audits as it is useful to have the database, to know our numbers and the specific conditions our members face.

Within this theme of pursuing racial justice, UCU organised a pilot series of webinars aimed at generating discussion and feedback which will shape and formulate strategy for training on 'Decolonising your institution' and 'Community accountability for racial justice'. Our branch participated in this pilot and found it both useful and valuable. While the former topic looked at the history of slavery and colonialization in the UK's education sector, the latter will look at how we can come together to fight for racial justice.

At a session held on 18th March, attended by 99 UCU members, we looked at how universities could address the history of slavery and colonialism. There has been a tendency to shy away from this topic partly because of the fear that talking about the events during slavery and colonialism would depict the UK in a bad light, thereby increasing inter-ethnic tension. The failure to address the history of slavery and colonialism truthfully, however, has profound implications for marginalised black and brown communities and improving their sense of inclusion within the society, and by extension, universities.

Following the events of last summer, and increased awareness and recognition that the time for change is overdue, a number of educational establishments, mostly within HE, are asking questions on how to decolonise themselves, ranging from the curriculum all the way to staffing. In our session we discussed the following:

- What does your institution understand by decolonisation?
- What processes are required to achieve it?
- Was your institution, or the City/town it is in, a beneficiary of the slave trade and colonialism?
- What challenges do you think your institution will /might face in decolonising itself?
- How might you address these challenges?

In examining some of the questions above we realized that we needed to challenge many of our own assumptions and historical misconceptions. It is important therefore to emphasise that this is a learning experience for us all. We have understood how the history of our institutions impacts our lives unevenly. How do we reverse this process, make our institutions genuinely inclusive places? Transformation requires collective, collaborative leadership that will drive this process forward. We need to ensure that our institutions do not get away with simply carrying out tick box exercises, but are seriously committed to change, and will draw on the strengths of lived experiences.

The 'Community accountability for racial justice' webinars will be piloted on the 23 April and 29 April. If you are interested in participating in this pilot, please send an email to the UCU branch Equality Rep – [Noah Karley](#) or [Meena Singh](#)