

Trade unions and racism in London, Brussels and Paris public transport

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ABSTRACT

This article considers how trade unions respond to systemic racism at work. Based on case studies in the UK, Belgium and France, it identifies a gap between the national-level anti-racist policies of several European trade unions and local-level union workplace practices: direct racism is often denied and indirect racism rarely challenged. It describes and analyses this gap arguing that unions must more consciously champion anti-racism and recommends a leadership role for workplace representatives.

I still believe that there is this, this thing with white supremacy going on in every respect [black 40-year-old woman TGWU London bus driver].

When I entered the company I realised that the well-paid jobs are less accessible. You don't have to wonder why [North African 28-year-old man CFDT Paris bus driver].

And then right there, he [*the HR manager*] answered me like this: 'If they're not happy they can go back to . . . they can just go back to Algeria' [Moroccan 32-year-old woman CCSP Brussels bus administrative worker].

Discrimination based on ethnicity remains widespread in European labour markets. There is now a considerable body of evidence that the cumulative effects of ethnic disadvantage and ethnic penalties make visible minority ethnicity¹ a major barrier to entry into work. The Belgian Labour Force Survey, for example, found activity rates over 2002–03 averaging 73 per cent among 'native' Belgian-born males compared to 64 per cent among Turkish and Moroccan males, while unemployment among the latter was six times as high (36 per cent compared to 6 per cent) (INS, 2004; Vertommen *et al.*, 2006). In France, while male unemployment among native French aged between 18 and 40 was 10.1 per cent, it was 24.9 per cent among Turkish migrants and 29.6 per cent among Algerian migrants, and still 21.2 per cent and 23.2 per cent among the second-generation children of migrants (Meurs *et al.*, 2005). This confirms that higher unemployment risks for 'visible' minorities are passed down through families to the next generation. In stark contrast, the additional unemployment risks

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¹ The term 'visible ethnic minorities' means: for the UK, interviewees predominantly from African, Caribbean, Indian or Pakistani origins, 'non-whites' or 'blacks'; for Belgium, Moroccan and Turkish origin interviewees, '*immigrés*' or '*personnes d'origine étrangère*'; and for France, Algerian and Moroccan origin interviewees, '*immigrés*' or '*Maghrébins*'.

faced by second-generation Southern European 'invisible' migrants to France virtually disappear. In the UK, a detailed comparison of the 1991 and 2001 Census not only confirms that disadvantage persisted for all ethnic minorities (Simpson *et al.*, 2006), but Heath and Cheung (2006: 1–2) demonstrate the presence of lasting penalties for visible minority ethnic males. By comparison with British and other white men, they show that Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Black Caribbean and Black African men have both higher unemployment and, when working, are more concentrated in routine and semi-routine work with lower hourly earnings. They also demonstrate that this is not about age, education or foreign birth: 'even for the second generation, born and educated in Britain, there are significant net disadvantages (after statistical controls) for Black African, Black Caribbean, Pakistani and Bangladeshi men in the labour market with respect to unemployment, earnings and occupational attainment'.

Two linked processes are taking place. Ethnic disadvantage ensures proportionally fewer ethnic minority workers are qualified for the same employment profiles as ethnic majority workers; and, where they are equally qualified, ethnic penalties ensure that visible ethnic minority workers remain disproportionately workless or in lower-paid or lower-status employment. The forms of discrimination through which these disadvantages are reproduced are defined as 'direct' or 'indirect' by Article 2 of the 29 June 2000 EU Council Directive, implementing the principle of equal treatment between persons irrespective of racial or ethnic origin (EU, 2000). Direct discrimination against an individual minority worker or groups of minority workers is deliberately constructed and intended to harm symbolically or in practice by 'treating [the other] less favourably'. Indirect discrimination is where the implementation of supposedly 'neutral' laws, rules, regulations, procedures and customs and practice that occur in recruitment, promotion, the allocation of work, hours, pay and pensions, have the effect of disadvantaging minority individuals or groups.

Racism is thus a social construction—created through people's thoughts, words and actions—and is just one of the forms inter-ethnic relations may take. It is a social relationship like those of class and gender, embodying the power relations of both domination and subordination. It simultaneously constructs an 'inferior other' (De Rudder *et al.*, 2000). It is a form of exploitation embracing material as well as symbolic domination, and an ideological construction derived from pseudo-scientific assumptions emphasising biological, social and cultural difference. Racism appears not only within the political and social system (expressed in laws, or in institutions and power relations), but also in individual attitudes and practices and in ways of understanding or describing the world to justify or tolerate racial inequalities and stereotyping.

The cumulative effects of direct and indirect racism are the racialisation and ethnisation of many low-paid semi- or unskilled working-class occupations, particularly in Western Europe's major cities where visible minority workers tend to be found. Of real concern is Heath and Cheung's (2006) finding that the ethnic penalties for Caribbean, Pakistani and Bangladeshi men in gaining employment have not shown any sizeable decline over three decades. For although difficult to establish statistically, qualitative evidence suggests discrimination survives in 'subtle' and indirect forms within the workplace (Healy *et al.*, 2004a).

These socially unjust barriers to visible minorities getting work or securing equal treatment at work present trade unions with a problem. They have to maintain their existing memberships and influence—difficult enough in a world where they are increasingly on the defensive—and at the same time they have to learn to combat

racial injustice to extend their membership and representation among an increasingly ethnically diverse workforce.

This article explores the response of workplace trade union activists to racism in public transport in London, Brussels, Paris and the South of France. It first reviews the literature describing the evolution of national union policies on racism. Western Europe's trade unions now generally oppose direct racism and in particular racist and xenophobic political parties such as the French National Front (Bataille, 2000; Haus, 1999). As many as four out of five British Trades Union Congress (TUC) trade unions have policies on issues of concern to black, minority ethnic and migrant workers (TUC, 2005: 5). This establishes the context to explore what happens to anti-racist policies when they are articulated down to workplace level. The second part of this article describes the research design, methods used and the context of the transport sector case studies carried out. We then analyse local trade union responses to workplace racism and, finally, consider why local union representatives from all three countries react in more or less similar ways.

TRADE UNION POLICIES ON RACISM

Martens (1999) provides a useful comparative catalogue of the evolution of European trade union policies towards migrant workers, and by inference, towards racism. He suggests that European trade unions' policies have generally evolved through four stages. From the 1850s, unions emphasised 'controlling numbers', trying to limit the labour supply by supporting immigration controls. From the 1930s, they began to demand 'equal treatment', imposing equal (standard) conditions, rules and wages, so that immigrant workers would not undercut 'domestic' rates. Later, after the failure of attempts to impose immigration restrictions during Europe's economic boom years of the 1950s and 1960s, this became the dominant strategy. However, from the 1970s, as ethnic minority workers became a permanent component of the labour force, some unions began to advocate 'equal opportunities' to guarantee equal access, advancement, training and pay for all, without restrictions or limitations. Finally, during the 1990s, Martens argues that some unions have responded to globalisation by demanding 'international social clauses' to spread the 'equal treatment' imposition of rules internationally to countries exporting to Europe.

This model provides a very general description of the evolution of top-level union policy. It highlights the 'chequered history' (Healy and Oikelome, 2006: 3) of the shift in official British trade union policy from opposing the then 'new' migrants in the 1950s to attempting to secure formal equality (Holgate, 2004; Virdee, 2000a). A similar shift took place in the 1960s in Belgium and, arguably, slightly later in France (Galliso *et al.*, 1994). But within these countries, major unions have not yet successfully transformed 'formal' equality in policies to actual equality. A handful of British unions have gone further than the Belgian or French in embracing black self-organisation and giving a degree of autonomy to black sections (Colgan and Ledwith, 2002; Healy *et al.*, 2004a; Kirton and Greene, 2002; Munro, 2001). But no British union as yet has anything remotely close to proportionality of minority-origin union officials with their memberships. Kirton and Greene (2002: 162, 158) characterise UK's union race-equality strategies as 'liberal', aiming to 'level the playing field' rather than as 'radical interventionist' steps to confer 'a degree of power and influence'. More recently still, Healy and Oikelome (2006: 9) describe the continuing

frustration expressed at the 2005 TUC Black Workers' Conference of a 'lack of power resources to influence the mainstream union business'. Kirton and Greene (2002: 162) make the telling point that also applies to the TUC Black Workers' Conference, that 'women's committees are always women only, whereas race-equality committees are not black members only'. Even in the UK, 'equal opportunities' for visible ethnic minority union members are often more rhetorical than real.

A certain progressive determinism in Martens' schema thus sits somewhat uneasily with parts of the historical record. This is because his analytical framework is concerned with the formal evolution of *national* policies rather than on the way they are (or are not) implemented. Similarly, Penninx and Roosblad's (2000) seven-country collection only provides national-level accounts of trade union policies towards immigration. Wrench's (2004) comparative study of trade union reactions to immigrant workers and ethnic minorities in Denmark and the UK detects four broad policy approaches: (i) the classic colour-blind approach stressing 'equal treatment', regardless of ethnicity or colour; (ii) the 'level playing field' approach that recognises the need to remove some unfair barriers; (iii) the 'equal opportunities' approach that aims at longer-term proportional representation through ethnic monitoring and targets; and (iv) the 'equal outcome approach' that uses quotas and positive discrimination to achieve shorter-term proportional representation of minorities (*ibid.*: 10). These accounts of policy responses by unions from across Europe to migration and the challenge of racism arrive at different conclusions. Martens identifies common policy trends, Penninx and Roosblad and Wrench see a kaleidoscope of policies, and only Wrench's Danish union activists provide examples of the continuing toleration of racism by trade unions at workplace level.

A British debate about the sectional interests served by trade unions helps us understand these varied findings. Some authors like Gilroy (1987), Sivanandan (1990) and Munro (2001: 457) present the trade unions as monolithic representatives of the whole white or white skilled male working class whose interests 'have been prioritized and presented as general class interests, to the detriment of other groups of workers', and which are totally or quite unlikely to make common cause with 'other groups'. Virdee (2000b) counters that it is wrong to rule out the possibility of the unions making common interest with black workers. His advice is to examine both the complexities of the level and direction of union policy, and of the implementation, in order to develop a more subtle understanding of trade union responses to racism. This queries Munro's (2001: 457) assertion that 'the restricted trade union agenda . . . is embedded in the hierarchical nature of the labour market'. Healy and Oikelome (2006: 15) also propose a non-deterministic approach, suggesting that advancing common interests with black and minority ethnic workers can not only reflect individual commitment by key union officials, but also the extent of and capacity for collective mobilisation by minority members. 'Racist exclusionary practices' (Healy *et al.*, 2004b: 463) can still be present within a trade union that is seriously fighting racism. Holgate (2005) confirms these problems in respect of visible ethnic minority recruitment to UK unions. Some research on French and Belgian unions points to similar tensions (Bataille, 1997; 2000; Coenen, 1999; Haus, 1999; Morice, 2002; Poutignat *et al.*, 2004; Tripier, 1990; 2004). But with these partial exceptions, the processes of exclusion or inclusion of visible ethnic minorities and differences between national- and workplace-level experiences have been largely ignored. Our study therefore focused on how trade union activists mediate workplace racism.

RESEARCH DESIGN, METHODS AND CONTEXT

The role of union activists in mediating workplace racism was explored in three sectors in five European countries. We researched sectors with high proportions of ethnic minority workers, a (relatively) strong trade union presence, and, where possible, a labour process involving customer interfaces. This article reports only the transport sector findings from Belgium, France and the UK.²

We developed four semi-structured interview schedules to be used with national union officials, regional or local full-time officials with responsibilities for the sector, local rank-and-file trade union activists, and 'non-union-active' visible ethnic minorities. Among other themes, we asked the interviewees to define racism, to give examples of racist experiences and of how the local union responded. In addition, we interviewed representatives of anti-racist organisations. In London, 38 interviews were carried out, in Brussels 23, and 32 in the Paris and Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur (PACA) areas. The interviewees were mainly recruited using snowball methods, beginning with a responsible union official or former research contact, and working from them to the local garages and activists and visible minority workers. This was a difficult process and we encountered considerable resistance to allowing researchers to study this topic. Nonetheless, this method did enable us to experience first-hand the articulation between national or regional officials and local union activists. The occupations, trade union activism and ethnicity of the interviewees are shown in Table 1.³

The trade union officials and employees in all three of the public transport systems were largely men. Between one-third to two-thirds were visible minority workers, either first generation or the children or grandchildren of migrants. The occupational and ethnic breakdown of one London bus company shown in Table 2 is similar to the

Table 1: Public transport interviewees, 2003–04

Interviewees	Belgium	France	UK	Total
National trade union officials	2	2	2	6
Regional or local trade union officials	4	5	6	15
Workplace trade union activists and representatives from 'majority' backgrounds	2	3	6	11
Workplace trade union activists and representatives from 'minority' backgrounds	5	7	11	23
Non-activist 'minority' workers	6	10	9	25
National and local campaigning anti-racist organisations	4	5	4	13
National totals	23	32	37	93

² The other countries researched were Italy and Bulgaria, and the other cross-country sectors were health and retailing.

³ Besides Ouali's (23) and Jefferys' (12 in three countries), interviews for this sector were conducted by Rebecca Gumbrell-McCormick (31) and Mary Davis (4), and in France (32) by Joyce Streiff-Fénart, Philippe Poutignat, Christian Rinaudo and Philippe Poiret. All were tape-recorded, transcribed and eventually shared.

Table 2: A London bus company: Staff breakdown by ethnicity

Male	Managers	Admin	Drivers	Engineers	Supervisors	Cleaners	Total
White	92	10	1,483	160	185	72	2,002
Mixed race	1	0	57	6	4	0	68
Asian	4	1	459	6	11	18	499
Black	5	1	1,087	77	34	72	1,276
Chinese or other	1	0	205	6	8	9	229
Not recorded*	2	1	174	16	10	13	216
Totals	105	13	3,465	271	252	184	4,290
Female	Managers	Admin	Drivers	Engineers	Supervisors	Cleaners	Total
White	15	35	122	2	25	4	203
Mixed race	0	0	8	0	4	0	12
Asian	5	2	9	1	1	1	19
Black	1	9	104	0	14	4	132
Chinese or other	0	0	8	0	1	0	9
Not recorded*	0	2	23	0	2	0	27
Totals	21	48	274	3	47	9	402

Company data, September 2006.

*Staff who express a preference not to record their ethnicity. Ethnicity is self-declared in the UK.

Brussels picture in terms of the proportions of visible minority workers; Paris and the PACA areas had lower proportions.⁴

Public transport operations in Western Europe started recruiting visible ethnic minorities during the postwar boom, as white workers deserted the falling status jobs for higher-paid and less onerous working conditions elsewhere. In France, although French Caribbean (continuously) and Algerian (before Algeria's 1963 independence) nationals were recruited from the 1950s, it was only in 1986 that non-nationals could work in the national urban transport system (including PACA), and in 1991 that EU citizens could work in Paris Region Public Transport (RATP), and finally in 2002 that this right was extended to non-EU citizens. The Belgian Brussels Public Transport Company (STIB) began to recruit foreign workers as drivers from 1964, while London Transport began recruiting large numbers of black British citizens from overseas in the 1950s.

Trade unionism remains strong in public transport. In both Brussels and London, density is over 80 per cent. In France, where national union density is around 8 per cent, perhaps as many as 14 per cent of Paris RATP workers are members of one or other of the trade unions.⁵ In all three countries, union membership was at least as likely among visible ethnic minorities as among national majority white workers.

Our research occurred against a background of growing racism and xenophobia, but where the national unions had all endorsed equality policies and were campaigning actively against racism. Thus, the Brussels region of the Socialist *Fédération générale du travail de Belgique* (FGTB) union launched a 10-point campaign against exclusion in September 2003. In 2004, the Christian *Confédération des syndicats chrétiens de Belgique* (CSC) in Brussels printed a brochure also attacking recruitment discrimination. In 2000, the Transport and General Workers' Union (TGWU) in Britain established a Women, Race and Equalities Sector with its own national officers and network of committees in each of the union's regions, and from 2003 implemented a system of minimum proportionality for black members on all union committees. The two main French union confederations also conducted extensive anti-racist activities such as campaigning for the removal of nationality clauses impeding the hiring of foreign workers (*Confédération française démocratique du travail*, CFDT, and *Confédération générale du travail*, CGT); mobilising to prevent the *Front National* from expressing itself within work (CFDT and CGT) and supporting struggles of undocumented workers (CGT).

LOCAL UNION RESPONSES TO RACISM

All the unions researched were responding to racism by stressing variations of equal treatment and equal opportunities in their national policy and practices. However, when we asked interviewees to discuss their own or their trade union's responses to racist incidents or contexts at work, we found that these policies were frequently not implemented. We found four main types of responses, described as protectionist, in denial, assimilationist or equal opportunities. Denial responses were most prevalent

⁴ Ethnicity is self-selected voluntarily in the UK. In Belgium and France, estimates are much more impressionistic because the only legal statistical division is between 'nationals' and 'non-nationals'.

⁵ The RATP employs 42,000; the 11 London bus companies employ about 25,000; STIB employs 6,000. One French union official suggested that 500–600 RATP members could be defined as 'activists', proportionately about the same as the 200–300 London bus workers who regularly attend meetings outside their garage or hours of work.

followed by assimilation. The two opposite ends of the response spectrum, protectionism and equal opportunities, both presented only occasionally. We report each in turn, noting any national variations.

Protectionist responses

In public transport, where low pay and difficult shift patterns mean employers often find it difficult to recruit national majority workers, there is little room to 'reserve' better jobs for them. Nonetheless in France, the tradition of seniority leading to older (and hence) white workers being able to choose the 'better' routes has that effect. And in all three countries, local union activists sometimes expressed protectionist attitudes suggesting they excluded their minority memberships from exercising influence. A white TGWU shop steward in a bus garage with a substantial ethnic minority membership complained:

Some of the black and Asians who they [the managers] promoted are not capable of doing the job and I believe they have just been promoted because they are black and Asians.

Protectionist pressures can also operate by denying access to information. Another white London shop steward from a bus garage where English was not the majority of workers' first language, was described by his white full-time official as refusing to take up the issue of managers only putting up notices in English:

Unfortunately the rep down there is one of them who is . . . you know, 'we will treat them like mushrooms' (keeping them in the dark). I am on his back at the moment trying to straighten him out.

But 'straightening out' suspected racists is not always straightforward. Unions are highly political organisations within which there are continuous power struggles between different factions and networks. Within the London TGWU, for example, there is a whole system of political trade union power that is dependent on organised networks of ethnically homogeneous middle-aged white male garage-level activists. These activists, in return, may have support and protection both from their sponsors in the union machine and, in the interests of 'a quiet life' or 'to return a favour', from local management.

Denial responses

Among respondents in all three countries, we encountered several forms of denial of the presence of both direct and indirect racism. *Total denial* was rare, but one TGWU regional union official reported that in a lifetime on the London buses, he had not had *any* complaints of racism. However, few of our respondents were quite so evidently myopic. A 39-year-old full-time secretary of the Christian public sector trade union in Brussels felt there were two explanations for the absence of reports of racism: minority workers would not report them to a 'Belgian', or they see it as 'normal':

First, I can't be certain, I'm not sure that people from immigrant origins are going to come here and talk about it. Perhaps they talk about it among themselves. But I'm not convinced that they're going to talk about it to a Belgian. That's the first thing.

Second I think that they are . . . for them, well, I want to say that perhaps it happens to them so often, that it's only one more thing among so many others, and so it doesn't seem worth while coming here to say anything.

Racist 'background noise' was commonplace both at the workplace and within the union. This union official confirmed that 'Belgian' representatives would occasionally use derogatory expressions about 'non-Belgian' workers in union meetings and that they would not be publicly reprimanded. Many STIB minority workers also reported similar verbal harassment ranging in severity from casual to systematic bullying.⁶

A common response in all three countries was to define racism as extremist behaviour: examples offered included refusing to work with a person of a different colour or making propaganda for an extremist political party that wishes to send all visible minorities 'home'. By defining racism as outright bigotry, the problem of racism can then be redefined and denied. A white French worker reported:

I've worked for two years at the bay, I've been around the drivers every day, and frankly I haven't heard any of that, you don't hear that kind of thing.

A white British TGWU official and, until recently, a senior lay activist covering several London bus garages defined the 'big issue of racism' as:

Where there was, if you like, some sort of segregation or pure discrimination.

It's never been an issue in 30 years in my working environment. I had lots of issues you know . . . 10 years as a convenor there were lots of issues. But I can't ever remember dealing with one that was racially led. I can't think of one.

If the extreme segregationist racist is not heard, their logic goes, then racism is not present. This interviewee, for example, went on to affirm:

I mean occasionally one of the members would say he would be upset with a boss—'Oh he is only treating me like that because I am black'—but invariably that wasn't true.

Definition denial thus leads easily into *victim denial*. This occurred where minority workers would report the discrimination they had experienced but the union officials or activists then questioned the reliability of the minority workers' statements or its specific racist character. Talking about verbal abuse from passengers, one white London union representative argued:

It's part of the job. You are always being called [derogatory names] . . . You are a bus driver. What else do you expect? You know you are a bus driver: you have got to have thick skin to take that.

The same position was taken by a white French driver who was a CGT regional union representative:

A black man had been attacked, but for me it wasn't about race . . . I think it could have happened to anyone.

Of course these incidents could happen to anyone, in the same way that any capable candidate can fail to get promoted, or fail to find work and be paid commensurate with their skills. But our visible minority interviewees reported them as commonplace.

There was also the suspicion from some older visible ethnic minority trade unionists that younger workers are more likely to 'play the race card'. One French 38-year-old North African CFDT member believed:

⁶ There is not space here to present the evidence of workplace racism encountered in the research. The RITU Transport (first comparative) Sector report analysing the different experiences of racism is available at www.workingagainstracism.org.

The young generation of immigrants often victimise themselves. They see a lot of racism, everything is racism to them . . . Right away it's . . . 'Oh, they're racist', 'If he did that, it's because . . .' when most of the time the reason is not racism.

This *generational denial* reflected a quite common generation gap where older minority workers believed that second- or third-generation workers 'had things easy compared to them'. They thought the new generation was more likely to see racism as an obstacle than they had, and so were effectively failing themselves before giving the task in hand a proper effort.

The denial that existing practices create victims is still more serious when it comes to indirect discrimination. In all three cities, as shown for one London company in Table 2, few senior managers had visible ethnic minority origins while black supervisory staff were also rare. Yet many trade unionists did not see this as a problem. Rather, despite the vocal expression of their anger on this issue by the minorities themselves, these local activists denied the victim by denying their aspirations for promotion. A TGWU local official even tried to explain the lack of minority staff among bus company managers by reasoning that he thought that black workers just did not apply for those sorts of jobs:

I never knew one [black worker] that wanted to be a garage manager, to be honest. Or indeed wanted to be a supervisor.

A similar sort of denial was quite common among many white Belgian union representatives. They suggest that the reason why minorities are poorly represented in employment or in jobs with higher levels of responsibilities is because they do not have the necessary qualifications. This 'low human capital' argument is strongly challenged by several minority trade union activists in Belgium who point to the large number of highly qualified Moroccan political refugees who cannot get promoted.

Fear denial perhaps originates partly from the presentation of racism as a 'difficult' issue, involving personal attitudes or preferences, rather than as a straightforward trade union social justice issue. One Belgian public sector union official believed it could be perceived as 'indecent' to discuss racist discrimination with workplace union delegates:

I think it [the issue of racism and discrimination] does frighten people . . . I think it is as difficult to discuss that question there with the delegates, as it is difficult to raise issues of loving and sexual relations with children at school. Because people have a sort of sense of decency, of what is decent, like that.

A linked concern can arise from the fear that raising anti-racist policies in the workplace may lose the union or union activist wider worker support. In Belgium and France, for example, the proportions of votes received in workplace elections directly determine how many representatives each trade union is allowed to have, and how many delegation hours they get. Thus, the presence of voters, particularly if ethnic *majority* workers have most votes, can lead to denial through fear of electoral defeat. Two white union activists of the Paris RATP, where elections take place every two years commented:

A: It's true that when a trade union represents more than 40 per cent of the employees, there are a lot of issues at stake, because it keeps hold of the works council, and many things we don't want to lose. It [the issue of racism] threatens the means of support for the trade union.

B: There are strategic interests that make him shut up. This is the feeling I get sometimes, this is what I feel. Some of us prefer to keep our mouths shut because the interests at stake are important for them. Most of the time, there are electoral interests and it gets on my nerves.

Trade union activists thus need to make choices. A lay regional union officer in Paris, pressed to answer whether it might not be a good idea that the union take up some kind of anti-racist activity, answered 'Yes, sincerely, I think so'. Before immediately continuing:

This shouldn't be something too frequent. But why not? At least once a year we could hold a conference or a debate against racism in the company. At the training period . . . ?

At which point one of his colleagues interjected:

But, wait . . . And it must not become an obsession either.

Among our interviewees, fear denial and *priority denial* often went hand-in-hand. The reality that the issue is not raised because it is an extremely difficult and uncomfortable one with a potential for dividing rather than unifying the collective is ignored. Therefore, other issues automatically move up the agenda. A white Belgian union secretary described how other issues get in the way to prevent racism from being raised even when he knows racism is on the increase:

Yes, yes, yes. But that's to say, you know, I tell myself everyday that I would like to be able to do a heap of things on a heap of issues. In the end, I'm going to say, we've enough things today on which we've got to focus. Well, there is globalisation, there are racist phenomena, huh, there are, the—how shall I put it—the ruining, huh, of the public services, at least, of the, of the service we give the public. I am going to say what I could, what I could do and do well. But the problem is that we are always the prisoner of priorities, what?

Assimilationist responses

After various forms of denial, the second most common local activist response to visible ethnic minorities was that they should assimilate to the existing trade union structure and programme of demands. The basic tenet is the 'colour-blind' requirement that 'everyone' has to pass the same test. This can be an exclusionary instinct: consciously or unconsciously, its proponents are seeking to make it as difficult as possible for those who are already disadvantaged to fully participate. Yet there is also another, genuine inclusionary, motive. Many trade union activists who take an assimilation approach denounce the inequality that racism perpetuates in terms of its damaging consequences for trade union unity. Personally and politically opposed to any prejudice, xenophobia or direct racism, they believed strongly that it is in the interests of ethnic minority workers to identify as closely as possible with the 'majority' of trade unionists. Only through a shared agenda and demands would the unity be created that could take the whole movement forward. While present within the TGWU and the two Belgian unions, this argument was articulated most strongly by many of the French trade unionists from both ethnic majority and minority backgrounds, rhyming so closely as it does with the French 'republican' ideology of citizen rights.

With whichever underlying motive, the mechanisms through which the assimilation strategy is generally applied tend to be similar. One or more local trade union activists deliberately target the recruitment of minority workers to be activists, act as mentors and push the new recruits forward. This integration process, however, has a price. It is that the minority activist should increasingly accept the bargaining and union priorities of the group into which she/he has been accepted, rather than that she/he changes those priorities to take into account the issues of racist social injustice.

Union assimilation or integration strategies are quite common, particularly in some of the Brussels and London bus depots where significant minorities have been present for a long time. In each of the three Brussels depots, Forest, Ixelles and Molenbeek, for example, the senior FGTB–CGSP (Centrale générale des services publics) union delegates are of North African origin, as were five of the union's 12 delegates and deputies to the STIB Works Council before the 2004 elections. Of the 120 workplace representatives elected on Socialist union slates, roughly one in three is of Moroccan origin, largely representing manual workers. Among the Christian union's 135 workplace STIB representatives about one in four overall has Moroccan origins, a figure that rises to one in two among the drivers and other manual workers. Where minority workers have become a significant component in a garage or service, the trade union slate of candidates in the elections for positions as personnel or Works Council representatives are often a careful mix of language (French and Flemish), gender, nationality and age.

In the London bus depots, the presence of a black and Asian majority of operating staff and the long history of minority workers on the buses has created a long experience of integration. There are now significant numbers of minority worker union representatives at the two lowest levels of the union (branch officers and garage stewards). But the price paid is often to downplay discrimination issues. One black company convenor complained that union officials spend too much time prioritising other matters:

They spend more time in representing people for other things, in terms of being dismissed, having better wages and conditions, etc. They do not seem to spend a great deal of time looking into where people [are] at a disadvantage.

The achievements of this equal treatment approach should not be underestimated. Union branches where individuals and then groups of visible minority workers have become integrated into the union activity do appear to make a difference. In one Paris RATP depot, a 38-year-old North African driver-inspector and CFTD activist reported:

I think that trade unionism greatly helped: especially for the X [depot]. The fact that I've been involved in the union really helped. They had problems and they knew who could resolve them. So they came and talked with me, using the law to get their rights respected. That's why 40 out of 60 members are minority workers. This has helped us avoid problems.

Visible minority workers did thus lead some local unions in all three countries. But in almost all cases, the key condition permitting success was the presence of a critical mass of visible minority workers. Equal treatment was not nearly as effective when the visible minority remained a numerical minority.

Equal opportunities responses

Where white activists ran the local union organisations, we found a very low level of 'participation' of ethnic minority and migrant workers in union organisation. By 'participation' we mean attending meetings or playing a small role in the local union. Confirming Healy *et al.*'s finding (2004b: 464), we found 'a climate of fear surrounding union membership' among UK workers in particular, at least where active union participation was required. In all three countries, it was clear that there were additional 'risks' associated with union activity to the jobs and careers of visible ethnic minority workers, above and beyond those for all activists. But there were other

obstacles to involvement. Where white workers still dominated the local union, it was very rare for them to put any effort in to combat institutional racism within the workplace. In particular, these local activists put no pressure at all on the management to ensure that minority or migrant workers were equally represented among supervisory and managerial staff, who were nearly all-white. Therefore, where visible ethnic minority workers continue to experience a range of forms of discrimination at work, there is even less incentive to become active in a local organisation that perhaps may not offer them, in any case, any real protection.

A lack of confidence in the white-led local union and the often-expressed assimilation precondition of accepting the existing priorities, has tended to leave ethnic minority workers as passive members rather than activists. Informal self-organisation, however, had led to ethnic minority workers banding together to put forward election slates within the union and three of the 11 London bus companies now actually have minority-origin convenors. Yet despite the recent support by the national union for a black workers' conference, the TGWU still does not openly encourage the formation of a black workers' committee within the London buses.

In the Paris RATP, where union activists were largely operating between denial and assimilation, a few anti-racist activists (from both majority and minority backgrounds) got together in 2003 to start campaigning to address the systemic racism that exists. Their view was that by drawing attention to the issue, the trade unions would start to do something about it—although they also considered that some parts of the unions were pleased that an 'external' organisation was involved because it meant that the unions did not have to stand up to racism directly and risk losing votes.

However, having the formal right to meet and organise does not necessarily release the energy required. Thus, in Belgium where the Christian public sector union has recognised that specific interest groups, such as women, young members and migrant workers, can get together on a regional basis, women do meet but youth and migrant workers do not.

Despite a shift in formal, national-level trade union policies to equal treatment and in some cases to equal opportunities, our research in a strongly unionised sector where there are large numbers of visible minority workers, suggests that much policy is not implemented at local level. The conclusion of this article discusses why local union representatives in all three countries reacted in more or less similar ways.

CONCLUSION

Our study has shown similar forms of responses to racism by local trade unionists in the three countries despite the policy shift by the main public transport trade unions at national level. Direct racism was rare, but indirect racism was pervasive in nearly all the workplaces we investigated. This was not just because of the upturn in societal racism of recent years. It was also because white local union activists often practised or tolerated exclusionary attitudes and practices towards visible minority workers. They shared, or chose to reflect, the often negative views of their white members despite union policy.

Trade unions have always internalised degrees of ambiguity about 'different' groups of workers: traditionally they have often tried to exclude some workers to advance or protect the pay, working conditions and social privileges of their 'core' members. In a very general way, these sectional or exclusive trade union values have

been described as 'market' union ideology (Hyman, 2001). Yet in none of the three countries has trade union purpose ever been solely about the defence of the 'insider'. Trade unionism is both an organisational relationship between workers and a dynamic collective process involving mobilisation and the creation of unity between workers to attempt a restructuring of employment relations. This process involves both the defence and improvement of working conditions and the posing of alternatives to the arbitrariness of a capitalism or political system where workers' labour power is reduced to a market commodity to be bought and sold. Many unions (or members within sectional unions) have therefore always wanted to include new workers and have promoted 'social integration'. Particularly in France, and to a lesser extent in Belgium, there also has always been an important European 'class' current of trade union thought that carried the concept of inclusion still further, seeing the trade unions as including all 'others' through speaking for and representing all workers (Alaluf, 2005; Contrepois, 2003).

Analysing the four groups of responses we reported earlier, it thus appears helpful to see the local trade union mediation of racism as having two aspects. One aspect is a set of exclusionary responses. These occur where the local union priority is placed, more or less explicitly, on protecting the white workforce, and the activists often deny or cover up the presence of 'racism' towards the visible minorities. A second, more inclusionary set of responses involve the union and its activists doing things differently in order to first welcome 'new' or visible minority workers, and then to systematically try and involve them in the union and its activities, including its campaigning against indirect discrimination.

These contrasting exclusionary and inclusionary emphases reflect the first three different national policy trends identified by Martens (1999) with protectionism and denial corresponding to stronger and weaker versions of 'controlling numbers', while assimilation and integration are more associated with 'equal treatment'. The self-organising that was reported to us is close to the 'equal opportunities' policy approach. But these responses were not equally distributed. Overwhelmingly, across the three contexts, the dominant response we found by white local union activists to evidence of racism in their workplace was to deny it and/or seek to avoid dealing with it.

From their own testimonies, and those of the minority workers we interviewed, many of these local white activists remain, to some degree, ambivalent about visible ethnic minorities. On the one hand, they see them as a potential threat to white workers' customary privileges, and on the other, they view them instrumentally as a potential to be mobilised. Little wonder, then, that the 'chequered' mix of both exclusive and inclusive equal treatment policies with a small measure of equal opportunities (systematically present only in the UK) allows greater leeway at local level over race equality—already an area where 'a strategy and motivation . . . has to be created to a larger extent than for gender equality' (Kirton and Greene, 2002: 170). This lack of clarity is thus an opportunity for local activists to adapt the national-level race equality policies to suit their local contexts.

At this point, in opting for a more exclusionary or more inclusionary approach to race equality, a second ideological dichotomy arises. This concerns the legitimacy of the union activist or worker representative, the person to whom others turn when they want to know 'what the union says'. This is about the nature of democracy and goes well beyond the technicalities of how a person came to be a 'union representative'. Batstone *et al.* (1977) drew a distinction between those activists who see themselves as

'representatives' who follow their own consciences and those who see themselves as 'delegates' carrying out the wishes of the electors.

The dichotomy in the workplace is between the legitimacy attached to a trade union activist as a leader of a group, bringing their own consciences (or the race equality policies of the wider trade union) into their representative role, and the legitimacy carried by an activist who largely acts as a mouthpiece for their peers. There is no rigid separation between these two forms of legitimacy. Nonetheless, the counter-position of these two sources of trade union democracy provides a helpful analytical tool to apply to our research question as to why national-level trade union anti-racist policies either become much more ambiguous or are simply not applied at workplace level.

The different ways in which we have seen racism in the workplace mediated by white local activists can now be understood as arising from the intersection of their different understandings of union purpose and their own democratic role. While there is undoubtedly constant movement between the different positions described earlier—trade unionism is a dynamic process, not a fixed end-state—we can therefore distinguish four behavioural typologies among those local union activists who would deny being racist (those who are openly racist and yet are tolerated by the union self-evidently constitute a fifth group).

Some representatives see themselves as possessing only *delegate legitimacy*. They stick close to market issues such as wages, working hours etc. and never voluntarily raise any broader 'political' issues in the workplace. They may deny that racism is a problem. Other activists also see themselves as having delegate legitimacy, but they are also ready to raise broader 'societal unionism' questions if their fellow workers press them to do so. This happens very rarely over racist discrimination because even if some members are calling for action, these activists are afraid of the consequences for their legitimacy within the whole group. However, they are not totally in denial and might ask a 'specialist' to deal with race equality.

A third group see themselves as having been nominated or elected to *represent* their fellow workers and are ready at times to express minority views within the group. They are acting in this way as 'leaders', but because their view of trade union purpose extends only to more limited 'market' unionism issues, if they do articulate views on racism and protection, they are more likely to articulate a perspective based purely on the short-term protection of the interests of the 'insiders'. They may be inclined to elaborate an exclusionary reading of equal treatment policies.

Often, local union activists see themselves as having representative legitimacy and share a view of the dual role of trade unions, not only as defending and improving local conditions, but also, as a condition for the former, as struggling for broader social justice. Depending on the national context, these local 'leaders' may support inclusionary equal treatment, or go further to support radical interventionist equal opportunities policies within the workplace and union, such as positive discrimination and monitoring to ensure minority workers are fully involved.

Our analysis points to ways national unions can seek to improve local activist responses. Racism undoubtedly needs to be tackled with clearer race equality policies at national union levels in all three countries. Unions must evaluate the equal opportunities performance of their own organisations and practices. They must listen much more to minority members' views and demands. They must ensure that visible minority members have the confidence to challenge racism both from the employer and within the union.

But equal treatment and equal opportunities policies must be extended to workplace level. This means considerable internal training and education of activists, particularly on their understanding of direct and indirect racism. It also means asserting, or, where it has been lost, reasserting the legitimacy of trade unions having policies and politics aiming to improve society. It also means promoting or defending representative democracy at workplace level. Local activists must have the confidence themselves to challenge racism within the workplace, whether coming in from the outside, or from the management or from fellow workers.

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