



## Unions and equality: 50 years on from the fight for fair pay at Dagenham

Journal:	<i>Employee Relations</i>
Manuscript ID	ER-09-2018-0239.R1
Manuscript Type:	Research Paper
Keywords:	Trade Unions, Gender, Equality, Collective bargaining

**SCHOLARONE™**  
Manuscripts

**Unions and equality: 50 years on from the fight for fair pay at Dagenham**

**Abstract**

*Purpose*

The article aims to review historical and contemporary union driven advances in gender and race equality within the movement and the workplace in order to show how far unions have come in the last 50 years, but also to identify continuing equality deficits.

*Design/method*

As well as reviewing extant literature for historical background, the article draws upon original analysis of the series of biennial TUC Equality Audits, the latest SERTUC equality survey, and interviews with national union officers responsible for equality in large, medium and small sized unions.

*Findings*

Over the last 50 years, unions have made considerable progress in representing women both in leadership and democratic structures as well as in the workplace bargaining and consultative arena. However, BAME members remain underrepresented in both domains. A hostile socio-economic/political context threatens to hinder further progress.

*Research implications*

It is quite clear that we cannot assess unions' current record on equality by reference only to outcomes and benefits of big set-piece organisation, industry or sector negotiations. Future

research could usefully explore in more depth unions' qualitative contribution to workplace equality practices in context of challenges in the internal and external environments.

### *Practical implications*

Unions need to step up commitment to integrating equality into the bargaining agenda. They also need to continue investing in campaigning activities and identify ways of making successful outcomes more visible within the union, to members and to non-unionised workers. Workplace unions need to develop strategies to confront the fact that strong equality policies do not necessarily translate into good workplace practices.

### *Originality/value*

The article provides a long-term evaluation of union progress on equality within the movement itself and the workplace.

### **Keywords**

Trade unions; gender equality; race equality; bargaining; leadership; democracy

### **Introduction**

In her preface to Sarah Boston's (2015) updated 1980 classic *Women Workers and the Trade Unions*, Trades Union Congress (TUC) General Secretary Frances O'Grady, the first woman in that position in almost 150 years of TUC existence, identifies inequality as 'the central challenge of our time'. O'Grady goes on to state, 'we [the unions] need to look, sound and feel more like today's workforce'. When trade unionism reached its peak at the end of the 1970s, women

comprised a (substantial) minority 29 per cent of membership (Cunnison and Stageman 1995). Today, following decades of membership decline concentrated in male dominated industries and occupations, that figure is a (slim) majority 55 per cent (BEIS 2018). The Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) share of membership stands at only nine per cent (BEIS 2018) but that reflects their much lower share of the workforce. Thus, today, in terms of gender and ethnic composition of membership, the unions do look like the workforce, but whether or not they ‘sound and feel’ like the workforce is still contested. It is important to recognise that while the high female share of membership creates a strong ‘business case’ for unions to prioritise women’s equality, the opposite holds for BAME members. However, as O’Grady suggests (ibid) both women’s and BAME members’ claims for equality and inclusion within unions and the workplace should and do go beyond mere numbers to the core purpose of unions as a social justice movement pursuing the interests of socially marginalised groups as an element of advancing working-class interests (Kirton 2015; Virdee 2000a).

O’Grady writes that ‘progress towards gender justice does not always take a linear route’ (2015: viii). This reminds us to expect to find steps forwards and backwards as well as obstacles along the way over the 50-year period since the landmark fight for fair pay for women orchestrated by union women at the Ford factory in Dagenham. In concluding her preface to Boston’s book (2015: ix), O’Grady says that she is ‘optimistic that women will continue to transform trade unionism, and that this, in turn, will strengthen our Movement’s chance to change the world’. This article reviews the progress that unions have made since the Ford factory women workers’ strike on, if not changing the world, changing workplaces and unions themselves to make them more equal and inclusive spaces. The literature review considers the union movement’s historical record on equality, focusing on gender and race and key moments/events that exemplify

historical union equality action, including the pivotal Ford strike. In order to assess unions' more recent equality work (the period 2005 – present), the article discusses findings from original analysis of surveys conducted by the TUC and Southern and Eastern Region TUC (SERTUC) and interviews with unions' National Equality Officers. In conclusion, the article argues that while as class-based organisations, unions have struggled to acknowledge, understand and accommodate gender and race difference, there has been huge progress over the last decade or so.

### **The union movement's pursuit of gender and race equality in historical context**

When it comes to pursuing gender equality, it is widely recognised that as fundamentally class-based organizations, historically unions have not always acted in the interests of women workers (Boston 2015), that they have sometimes shown disinterest in them or even colluded with employers' attempts to maintain inequalities such as unequal pay (Colling and Dickens 2001). Yet despite this chequered history, it would be hard not to acknowledge that the unions have come a long way since the feminist movement within unions really took off around 50 years ago. Although women union members, activists and officers had existed since the beginnings of the movement, the 1968 Ford strike was a pivotal moment in the history of female unionism (Boston 2015). A group of women sewing machinists went on strike against Ford management's refusal to recognise their skills; the women demanded to have the same pay as men doing similarly skilled but higher graded work. The three-week strike, joined by male workers for a period, brought the Ford factory to a standstill and achieved a partial victory of around 90% of the pay rate the women had demanded although their jobs were not regraded (Boston 2015). The Ford

1  
2  
3 machinists finally achieved equal pay in 1985 after further industrial action (Cunnison and  
4  
5 Stageman 1995).  
6  
7

8  
9 Importantly, the Ford strike is widely seen to have triggered the introduction of equal pay  
10  
11 legislation in 1970, thus inadvertently this group of women workers made history. The strike  
12  
13 represented a moment after which women's union activism was far bolder than previously,  
14  
15 spurred on by second wave feminism (Cunnison and Stageman 1995; Kirton 2006). In 1979,  
16  
17 pressure and demands from women activists culminated in the TUC drawing up its *Charter for*  
18  
19 *Equality for Women within Trade Unions*, which asked unions to commit to initiatives for  
20  
21 involving women in union activity at all levels. In a departure from mere rhetorical commitment  
22  
23 to women's equality seen earlier (Kirton 2006), the Charter recommended positive action  
24  
25 initiatives such as women's committees/conferences, reserved seats for women on union  
26  
27 executive bodies, union courses for women and also that unions pay due regard to women's  
28  
29 family responsibilities when organising meeting times for example. The recommended changes  
30  
31 in policy and practice adopted by many unions went some way towards mitigating almost a  
32  
33 century of women's exclusion from and within the trade union movement's democratic  
34  
35 structures and officialdom. By extension, these changes led to a new understanding by and of  
36  
37 women workers about their role in work and society (Cunnison and Stageman 1995).  
38  
39  
40  
41  
42  
43

44  
45 Thus, overall we can say that it was the enactment of women's collective solidarity that  
46  
47 ultimately resulted in structural changes within unions and a gradual broadening of the union  
48  
49 agenda. However, by 1990, many feminist activists recognised that more action was necessary in  
50  
51 order to achieve greater involvement of women in unions, particularly in the mainstream and in  
52  
53 the negotiating arena. In response, the TUC issued an updated *Charter for Women within Trade*  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 *Unions* that included a commitment to the policy of ‘proportionality’ calling for women to be  
4 represented in all union committees in equal proportion to their membership (Cunnison and  
5 Stageman 1995). Public services union Unison was at the vanguard of efforts towards  
6 proportionality, which was regarded as a measure of not only women’s inclusion, but also of  
7 union democracy (Colgan and Ledwith 2002).  
8  
9

10  
11  
12  
13  
14  
15  
16 By the late 1990s with union membership decimated, many academics had begun to see women,  
17 now participating in employment in far greater numbers and in areas where unions remained  
18 relatively strong, as critical for any hope the unions had for renewal (Colgan and Ledwith 1996;  
19 Kirton and Healy 1999; Parker 2006). Indeed, by then, the ‘typical’ trade union member, instead  
20 of being the blue-collar male worker of formerly, was a highly qualified woman working in the  
21 public sector. Understanding of what constitutes trade union issues undoubtedly moved on as a  
22 result of women’s increased share of membership and greater involvement with sexual  
23 harassment, domestic violence, women’s health and more, all much more likely to feature in  
24 union policy and campaigns than previously. Whether or not such issues make it to the  
25 contemporary collective bargaining agenda remains a moot point discussed later.  
26  
27  
28  
29  
30  
31  
32  
33  
34  
35  
36  
37  
38  
39

40 After the Ford strike, another iconic moment in union history that highlights the struggle to  
41 address a broader range of equality issues intersecting with, but extending beyond gender is the  
42 1976 Grunwick dispute. The striking Grunwick factory workers were mostly Asian women and  
43 most commentators would now view the dispute as having had race, as well as gender, at its  
44 centre even if at the time this was not fully appreciated by the unions (Pearson et al. 2010).  
45 According to some early sanguine accounts, the Grunwick workers went on strike for union  
46 recognition with the full support of the union they had recently joined (Beale 1982). Later  
47  
48  
49  
50  
51  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

accounts are more critical of the whole affair and its race politics, bringing to light that white workers did not join the strike and that the union concerned ultimately abandoned the striking women (Pearson et al. 2010). Moreover, later accounts highlight that the women's original grievances actually related to race discrimination and racial and sexual harassment, but the action was 'hijacked by the white male union movement' as an opportunity to assert union power in a bid to fight other battles around union recognition. Meanwhile the gender and race issues at the heart of the dispute receded into the background (Cunnison and Stageman 1995: 106).

As well as being instructive for contemporary debates about intersectionality and the way that different bases of inequality may combine (Moore and Tailby 2015; Healy et al. 2004), the Grunwick strike is emblematic of the deep ambivalence of the union movement towards black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) workers. Such ambivalence is described in Lee's (1987), Phizacklea and Miles' (1992) and Virdee's (2000) historical accounts that make painful reading for anyone pro-union, but also concerned about the struggle for workplace equality. Writing about post-war Commonwealth migration, Phizacklea and Miles (1992: 33) are damning in their claim that, 'the complete lack of concern shown by leading sections of organized labour for the material disadvantage experienced by Asian and Caribbean labour implicitly condones the conditions which create a pool of subordinated labour power'. Virdee (2000: 209) is equally critical contending that in the early post-war period '[E]lements of the organised labour movement drew on the prevailing ideology of racism in society and used it to institutionalise a major division within the trade union movement between black and white labour'. Lee (1987) makes related points and argues that unions colluded with management to maintain racialized segmentation of jobs. Phizacklea and Miles' (1987; 1992) and Virdee's (2000) accounts of several 1960s-1970s industrial disputes, involving BAME workers and workplace racism that



1  
2  
3 failed to gain support of unions, show how the post-war racist practices continued well into the  
4  
5 next decades.  
6  
7

8  
9 Still, in the 1970s, just as feminist women had led the charge for more union action on gender  
10  
11 equality, BAME activists collectively organised to resist exclusionary practices within the  
12  
13 workplace and unions, attracting growing support of white anti-racist union activists, thereby  
14  
15 putting pressure on the TUC and individual unions to act (Virdee 2000). In 1976, the TUC began  
16  
17 an anti-racist campaign encouraging all affiliated unions to negotiate equal opportunity policies  
18  
19 with employers. This was a major step forward symbolising not only a change in union strategy,  
20  
21 but also growing recognition in the union movement that racism weakened it by creating divisions  
22  
23 among the working class (Virdee 2000). In 1981, the TUC launched its *Black Workers' Charter*,  
24  
25 which in a similar way to the earlier *Charter for Women* called on unions to remove barriers  
26  
27 preventing black workers from reaching union office and to ensure that their organizations acted  
28  
29 to counter racist propaganda that was circulating amid race riots in London and other UK cities  
30  
31 (Wrench 1986). The Charter gave some impetus to race issues but some felt that unions failed to  
32  
33 take its guidelines seriously (Lee 1987). By the early 1980s, in the midst of recession, mass  
34  
35 unemployment and steep decline in union membership, it is noteworthy that BAME workers  
36  
37 were more likely than were their white counterparts to join unions and to take part in union  
38  
39 action (Phizacklea and Miles 1992; Wrench 1986). Thus, it became clear that the unions could  
40  
41 no longer neglect BAME workers and their very real concerns about racism within both the  
42  
43 workplace and the unions themselves. To do so risked BAME workers turning their backs on  
44  
45 unions (Wrench 1986).  
46  
47  
48  
49  
50  
51  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

From the mid-1980s, some unions began to develop a range of practical measures towards achieving greater inclusion of BAME members in union democratic structures and among union officers as well as a more responsive union agenda for race equality. Strategies mirrored those adopted in pursuance of women's equality and included appointing national officers responsible for race equality, BAME workers' conferences, race equality committees, courses for BAME trade unionists, reserved seats on national executive committees, and BAME self-organized groups (Kirton and Greene 2002; Virdee 2000). By no means did all unions implement these: by the mid-1990s, self-organized groups, seen by some (e.g. Virdee 2000) as the most important of the measures, were not widely adopted. Available evidence also shows that only a very small number of unions held annual conferences or had reserved seats for BAME members, although several had BAME member committees (SERTUC 1994; 1997). In summary, women and BAME activists fought for equality and inclusion, but in doing so, they found allies among male and white activists and eventually formal support from the TUC and individual unions (Cunnison and Stageman 1995; Virdee 2000).

Nevertheless, we must ask whether the contemporary union movement is still a 'white men's movement'? The concluding chapter of Cunnison and Stageman's (1995) monograph is tellingly entitled: 'Feminization: new priorities, old themes'. The authors claimed that despite feminization of membership, moreover, despite the many union initiatives implemented and the many structural and policy changes that consequently occurred a wide gap still existed between what unions rhetorically claimed for women and what they actually attempted to deliver. Their explanation is that essentially the union movement remained 'a men's movement' led by and catering for male workers. When it comes to race equality, there can be little doubt that the union movement has travelled far in the post-war period (Phizacklea and Miles 1992; Virdee 2000;

Wrench 2004). Recent evidence identifies trade union representatives as an important source of support in helping BAME workers to 'speak out' and challenge racism at work, although some reps were considered to be 'indifferent' to racism (Ashe and Nazroo 2016). Can we be optimistic that the union movement has now transformed itself not just rhetorically and structurally, but also culturally, to one that is inclusive and responsive to the specific concerns of the previously marginalised women and BAME workers? The contemporary study and findings presented next attempt to address this question.

## Research methods

The article derives its findings from original analysis of data from four individual reports focusing on externally facing union action in the series of TUC Equality Audits of affiliated unions undertaken biennially since 2003 (2005, 2009, 2012, 2016). The Equality Audit initiative came out of the TUC's Stephen Lawrence Task Group<sup>1</sup> established to consider how the trade union movement could do better on racism. As such, the Task Group afforded a moment of critical self-reflection for the union movement. For the first time, the auditing exercise required unions to report and account for their equality work on race and multiple other bases of inequality including gender. The aim was to ensure that unions' commitment to equality would become more than the mere paper one that it had long been criticised as being. The article also draws on data from the most recent of the SERTUC equality surveys (2016) looking primarily at women's and BAME representation in union structures undertaken since 1987. In addition, individual semi-structured interviews with 22 national union officers responsible for equalities (called National Equality Officers here) were carried out in 2017. Interviewees were representatives of the TUC and 16 small, medium and large size unions, including the largest

three that represent over half of union members (Unite, Unison, and GMB). The unions cover a vast range of industries and occupations. Because equality work can be a sensitive and contentious topic in unions and interviewees were asked to be as frank and open in their replies, as they felt able, quotations are not attributed to individuals or to unions.

**Unions’ recent progress on gender and race equality**

*Towards equality of representation within trade unions*

How much more representative has the union movement become in terms of its internal leadership and democratic structures? As suggested earlier, progress towards proportional representation by gender and race/ethnicity is one of the ways in which unions’ overall headway on internal equality and inclusion may be measured. Table 1 shows women’s and BAME representation in five major unions. When it comes to women’s representation, only male dominated general union Unite has achieved proportional representation by gender in all the key democratic and leadership structures shown (Table 1). However, in the other unions depicted, women’s representation in these structures, while not completely in proportion with their share of membership is relatively high. Moreover, in terms of progress over a longer time-period, analysis of the SERTUC surveys 1987-2012 reveals that there has been a huge increase in women’s representation in the key union structures documented. It is particularly noteworthy that overall women’s share of national paid officials increased almost threefold between 1989 and 2012, and almost doubled in conferences and on NECs (Kirton 2015). TABLE 1

While almost all unions now collect the data to map women’s representation in key union structures, the data to carry out the same exercise on ethnicity is rather patchy. Overall, just over

three quarters of unions carry out ethnic monitoring of their membership (TUC 2014). However, two of the three large unions in Table 1 that have the data (PCS and Unite) exceed ethnic proportionality in their NECs and come close to it in their conference delegations, suggesting that there has been progress in BAME representation in leadership and democratic structures at least in some unions. Nevertheless, under-representation of BAME groups (relative to membership share) among shop stewards and health and safety reps in workplace unions is the norm (TUC 2014). Moreover, given that BAME members comprise such a tiny minority of union members, even achieving proportional representation in key structures could fail to have much impact on either union culture or the union agenda. Thus, we need to consider whether proportional representation is the correct measure of race equality and inclusion and the best strategy for giving voice to BAME members' concerns. Kirton and Greene (2002) argue that the existence of a critical mass of BAME activists and reps combined with BAME structures (e.g. race equality committee) are what make the difference in terms of the union culture and agenda and, therefore, the extent to which unions are able to tackle race issues effectively.

In summary, there remain both positive and negative aspects of the present picture of gender and race equality within unions in terms of equality of representation (for women and BAME members in decision-making structures). Overall, available data suggest that unions have made greater progress towards women's equality and inclusion compared with that of BAME members where progress has been slower. The substantive problem is that if unions remain less than fully representative, then the content of the union agenda will likely reflect lack of diversity. There is now plenty of evidence that women bring a broader range of issues to the negotiating table and to consultative forums, in particular issues related to gender equality (Colgan and Ledwith 1996; Kirton and Healy 1999). As Blackett and Sheppard (2003: 421) put it: 'in order to fulfil the

equality mandate, collective bargaining must be grounded in a demonstrable commitment on the part of the social partners to promote equality, a commitment evident not only in the provisions of agreements, but also in how “representation” itself is constructed, and how bargaining takes place’. Therefore, next we consider what the changing picture of representation and enhanced inclusion means for the externally facing union agenda.

*Unions bargaining for workplace equality*

Analysis of the Workplace Employment Relations Survey of 2004 (WERS 2004) finds that a range of equality practices of particular relevance to women and BAME workers are more prevalent in unionised than non-unionised workplaces and particularly in unionised workplaces where negotiation or consultation on equalities occur. Such practices include monitoring recruitment and selection to identify indirect discrimination by gender and race; special procedures to encourage applications from women and BAME people; flexible working (Hoque and Bacon 2014). This evidence certainly indicates a positive union effect on workplace gender and race equality. However, more worrying is that WERS 2004 also suggests that negotiation over equality issues occurs in only 15 per cent of British workplaces with a recognized union (Kersley et al., 2006: 194) while Moore et al. (2004) find that only eight per cent of voluntary collective agreements specify equality as a bargaining issue. On the other hand, the TUC Audits indicate that unions are investing considerably in resources to support equality bargaining. For example, the majority of unions produce negotiating guides on an array of equality issues including flexible working/work-life-balance, women’s pay and employment, harassment and bullying, BAME workers, lesbian and gay workers, disability issues (TUC 2016). Many also provide equality training for officers and workplace reps and the latest Audit found that just over half of the latter group had received such in the last four years (TUC 2016). Nevertheless, the

1  
2  
3 general feeling among the National Equality Officers interviewed was that there is still a long  
4 way to go before we see equalities guidance/toolkits and training influencing national officers'  
5 and workplace negotiators' work as deeply as intended. In the words of one interviewee:  
6  
7  
8  
9

10  
11 'There isn't much involvement [on the part of national negotiators] unless they have a  
12 passion for doing work on equalities ... and there is that passion amongst some of the  
13 officers, but by no means all of them ... it's not top of their agenda.'  
14  
15  
16  
17  
18

19 Furthermore, successive TUC Equality Audits in the last decade or so reveal relatively low and  
20 declining equality bargaining success rates in almost all the main equality areas listed in Table 2.  
21 That said, the unions have been relatively successful on issues of specific concern to women  
22 (flexible work/work-life-balance; women's pay and employment; harassment and bullying;  
23 working parents and carers). A more critical reading would question whether the greater  
24 bargaining success on 'women's issues' compared with BAME issues (and others) merely  
25 reflects the unions' instrumental approach to bargaining on issues that benefit the greatest  
26 number of members and/or the easy wins (issues that employers are most receptive to).  
27  
28  
29  
30  
31  
32  
33  
34  
35  
36  
37  
38

## 39 ■ TABLE 2

40  
41  
42 The Audits cannot provide definitive answers as to why such disparity in bargaining success  
43 among different equality issues exists. From the perspective of National Equality Officers, the  
44 bargaining agenda itself is still often too narrow to encompass equality issues and sometimes  
45 disconnected from the priorities of members, especially in the scenario where membership is  
46 female dominated but decision-making structures are male dominated:  
47  
48  
49  
50  
51  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 ‘We [the union] only really want to talk about pay. I think to some extent possibly  
4  
5 ourselves and other unions, maybe have gone along with that perception that you can’t  
6  
7 really talk about equality at a time when the economy is in recession and austerity bites,  
8  
9 etc. I think our focus ... in terms of collective bargaining, it’s been pay, pay, pay, pay,  
10  
11 pay ... if you talk to women members about the issues that most concern them day to  
12  
13 day, it’s not pay, it’s hours of work and juggling family.’  
14  
15  
16  
17

18 Moreover, many interviewees perceived that there was still a fear identified by previous research  
19  
20 (e.g. Tailby and Moore 2014) that as a bargaining issue, equality may be divisive and this fear was  
21  
22 borne out by regular member/rep reactions to equality-related debates or initiatives:  
23  
24  
25

26 ‘...whenever somebody talks about domestic violence, the first hand that goes up is ‘what  
27  
28 about men’ or when we organise our annual black members weekend event, within days of  
29  
30 it being advertised, there will be a phone call or an email saying ‘this is racist, what about  
31  
32 white people’. Those things don’t happen all the time but they’re very much there.’  
33  
34  
35

36 These criticisms of unions themselves notwithstanding, the wider economic and political context  
37  
38 must surely be part of the explanation for declining equality bargaining success. Despite some  
39  
40 positive changes in the legal environment for equality (e.g. introduction of regulations covering  
41  
42 age; public sector equality duty), which created a stronger platform for equality bargaining for  
43  
44 some unions, there can be little doubt that the context unions have faced over the last decade or  
45  
46 so has generally proved hugely challenging and particularly so from an equality perspective. The  
47  
48 TUC Audits reveal an equality bargaining climate that became increasingly difficult due to  
49  
50 among other factors the global financial crisis; switch from a (relatively) union friendly and pro-  
51  
52 equality Labour government to Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition and then to  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60



1  
2  
3 Conservative government; public sector austerity measures affecting swathes of workers  
4  
5 (disproportionately women and BAME). In 2009, only 16 per cent (7) of unions said the climate  
6  
7 for equality bargaining had become *more* difficult, while by the 2012 Audit, nearly half (46%,  
8  
9 17) responded to that effect. In 2016, despite the economic climate having improved somewhat,  
10  
11 44 per cent (18) of unions stated that it was harder to get employers to address equality issues  
12  
13 and only 12 per cent (5) said it was easier. This suggests that once equality slips off, it can be  
14  
15 difficult to get it back on the agenda even if the economic climate improves. In addition, forty  
16  
17 per cent of unions cited examples of equality policies diluted because of economic pressures,  
18  
19 reinforcing the view that equality may be seen as a 'luxury' or a 'fair weather' priority for both  
20  
21 bargaining parties, employers and unions.  
22  
23  
24

25  
26  
27 Some interviewees also raised the problem of policy implementation commenting that while  
28  
29 employers might have progressive equality policies, managers in individual workplaces often  
30  
31 failed to implement either the letter or spirit of such:  
32  
33  
34

35 '...not surprisingly employers often have great policies and procedures, but when it  
36  
37 comes down to the shop floor and individual sites, it's the approach of that individual site  
38  
39 manager that matters and that's often miles away from what the actual formal agreed  
40  
41 policy is.'  
42  
43  
44

45  
46 Even in the relatively successful bargaining area of flexible work arrangements (which  
47  
48 employers may be more receptive to than equal pay, for example), the 2016 TUC Equality Audit  
49  
50 notes that despite the negotiation of strong *policies*, the experience of many local union reps was  
51  
52 that it had become harder *in practice* to get employers to accept flexible working requests. Thus,  
53  
54 the gap between policy and practice may be widening despite unions' bargaining efforts and  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

relative success, which speaks to the need for strong workplace union organization and skilful workplace reps at a time when unions are arguably under siege.

Thus, by 2016 the general picture had built to a very challenging context indeed for equality bargaining, which is unlikely to improve in the near future under the Conservative government and with Brexit and potential consequent economic downturn looming (at time of writing).

*Beyond collective bargaining*

While collective bargaining is perhaps the mainstay of unions’ objectives and the most tangible and visible measure of union impact, the rates of equality bargaining success do not tell the whole story about the effect unions have on workplace equality. Their equality work outside of formal negotiations can also make a huge difference. Hoque and Bacon (2014) found that the union effect is possibly stronger where unions are able to exercise voice effects *via consultation* than in the minority of workplaces where *negotiation* over equality occurs. Building on this finding, many National Equality Officers reported that they had productive dialogues on equality and diversity with their counterpart specialists in many employer organisations outside of both formal bargaining and consultation machinery. This was especially important in industries where bargaining and consultation are highly institutionalised and where formal procedures place boundaries around what can be discussed, and what cannot in which forums, thereby circumscribing the bargaining scope. One National Equality Officer explained how their role could circumvent these strictures:

‘Where we engage with employers that are putting investment into equality and diversity, we’re talking to the change agents within their own organisations, which is a huge opportunity... There are other ways to influence the conversation that happens at the

1  
2  
3 bargaining table ... working with diversity and inclusion teams and pushing those  
4  
5 boundaries of what we can achieve collaboratively ... and I think we're not making the  
6  
7 most of that kind of opportunity at the moment.'  
8  
9

10  
11 In line with the above remarks, many interviewees were keen on working in partnership with  
12  
13 employers on for example such initiatives as equality and diversity training programmes for  
14  
15 managers or fair implementation of flexible work arrangements.  
16  
17

18  
19 Equality campaigns directed at specific employers or workplaces were also an important  
20  
21 strategic resource for unions. To begin with, such campaigns can reach out directly to members  
22  
23 on the ground in ways that formal bargaining activity may not, signalling that the union, in the  
24  
25 words of one interviewee, 'gets what life is like' for members. Campaigning on current equality  
26  
27 issues was also a way of 'creating a buzz about the union' that often led to new members joining  
28  
29 thus enabling the union's equality work to contribute to core objectives including member  
30  
31 organizing, recruitment and retention. One interviewee who stated that about 70 per cent of her  
32  
33 time as National Equality Officer was spent supporting workplace campaigning and  
34  
35 organizing/recruitment stated:  
36  
37  
38  
39

40  
41 'We are trying to sharpen the appeal of the union. We are trying to use equality as a way  
42  
43 of building union organization and we're trying to make it more difficult for employers to  
44  
45 behave badly when they're coming to make decisions about time-off work [etc.].'  
46  
47  
48

49 One important strategy that the TUC can claim credit for, that seeks to achieve better workplace  
50  
51 union organization around equality issues is a workplace union equality representatives training  
52  
53 programme originally funded by an award from the Union Modernisation Fund<sup>ii</sup>, which  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 contributed to the establishment of the equality rep role across many unions and workplaces.  
4  
5 Workplace equality reps are widely seen as a critical resource and previous research has  
6  
7 indicated that they have a positive influence on employer equality practices (Bacon and Hoque  
8  
9 2012; Bennett 2010). Moore et al (2012) envisage potential in the equality rep role insofar as it  
10  
11 links to concerns around multiple discrimination and intersectionality rather than focusing on a  
12  
13 singular category such as women. However, Bennett’s (2010) study predicted that the role of  
14  
15 equality rep would only reach its full potential if embedded into branch structures and processes,  
16  
17 and if accorded the same statutory recognition as other types of workplace reps.  
18  
19  
20  
21

22  
23 Several years on from Bennett’s study, the National Equality Officers interviewed were clear that  
24  
25 the lack of statutory rights for training and facility time for equality reps had impeded their  
26  
27 impact. Nevertheless, some interviewees knew of workplaces where unions had managed to  
28  
29 negotiate some paid release time for equality reps or where the union could use the agreed  
30  
31 facility time flexibly as it saw fit. These few exemplary branches showed what could be possible,  
32  
33 but in National Equality Officers’ experience equality was seldom a priority for workplace reps:  
34  
35  
36

37  
38 “Senior [workplace] reps might say [to equality reps] ‘we can’t get you released for that  
39  
40 because we’ve got a pensions consultation’ and that whole thing of priorities where  
41  
42 equality slips off the agenda, I think that’s quite often a problem.”  
43  
44

45  
46 Some interviewees were also concerned that perversely, instead of increasing the profile of  
47  
48 equality, having dedicated equality reps might provide a licence for straight, white union men  
49  
50 (often in the majority in workplace unions) to abdicate engagement with equalities issues and  
51  
52 consign them to the periphery of union activity to be carried out by non-resourced individuals.  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 As the National Equality Officers saw it, this potential pitfall was only exacerbated by the lack of  
4  
5 statutory recognition for the equality rep role:  
6  
7

8  
9 ‘...one of the dangers about equality reps is everybody says off you go, there’s an  
10  
11 equality issue ... the equality rep deals with it, who has no power, no time off, very little  
12  
13 influence or power within the union branch structures ...’  
14  
15

16  
17 Nevertheless, most interviewees were of the view that the equality rep role was on balance a  
18  
19 significant step forwards for workplace unions in terms of embedding equality into processes and  
20  
21 practices including organising and recruitment as well as collective bargaining.  
22  
23

24  
25 National Equality Officers also gave examples of recent workplace campaigns that gave hope  
26  
27 that workplace unions are becoming more equality aware and more sensitive to the exploitative  
28  
29 circumstances of minorities. One story that stood out was the case of a union branch that  
30  
31 mounted a campaign to unionise hospital workers, predominantly Asian women employed by a  
32  
33 well-known outsourcing contractor after it found out that in order to get a job, workers had to  
34  
35 pay a £500 bribe to a local manager. Once employed pay and conditions in the low skill work on  
36  
37 offer were very poor. During the recruitment campaign, the union branch had a visible presence  
38  
39 outside the hospital and within one week had recruited over 170 workers. This is just one  
40  
41 example among the many that National Equality Officers related about how local unions had  
42  
43 acted to create a route towards ending any blatantly unfair, discriminatory and even corrupt  
44  
45 practices to which non-unionised workers, and sometimes even unionised, were exposed.  
46  
47  
48  
49  
50

## 51 **Conclusion and final reflections**

52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

The 1968 Ford women workers’ strike is a useful starting point for the discussion on unions’ action on equality because it marked the point at which the women’s movement within the trade union movement ‘took off’ and put women’s inequality firmly on the union agenda (Boston 2015: 279) alongside class-based notions of inequality. Shortly afterwards amid growing BAME activism, the unions were also forced to confront race/ethnic inequality within the movement as well as the workplace (Phizacklea and Miles 1992; Virdee 2000).

The above critique of union equality work over the last 50 years needs to put in context of the manifold challenges that unions have faced during the period that have prevented the path to gender and race justice from being linear as O’Grady observed. As Virdee (2000a) argues, union strategies are dependent on a number of economic, political and ideological factors at work in the outer context. The political challenges for unions really began in earnest in 1979 and intensified during the long period of Conservative administration (1979-97) with the Thatcher government’s political, legal and economic policies that constrained many aspects of union activity, power and influence and had a profoundly negative effect on membership numbers and collective bargaining coverage. The political climate for unions and equality bargaining improved under the Labour government (1997-2010) and enhanced equality legislation in that period provided a stronger platform for union demands (Colling and Dickens 2001). The Coalition and Conservative governments of late have once again implemented political and economic policies inimical to unions and to equality, including austerity measures in the public sector, that is now the unions’ heartland and where so many women and BAME people work. In addition, with regard to the question of race equality, many commentators believe that Brexit has unleashed a heightened level of xenophobia and racism and emboldened far right activists creating fear and uncertainty for BAME and migrant workers. At the same time, the pro-Brexit narrative is

1  
2  
3 seemingly leading some white workers to question once again whether the availability of migrant  
4 labour lowers wages and increases economic insecurity of the white working class (Phizacklea  
5 and Miles 1987). However, all this is not to say that unions are incapable of what Virdee (2000:  
6 549) terms 'inter-racial' class action and there is no evidence that they are reverting to an anti-  
7 migrant stance, quite the opposite with the TUC articulating a pro-EU and anti-racist position.  
8  
9 The same holds for the future prospects of gender solidarity.  
10  
11  
12  
13  
14  
15  
16  
17

18 Yet, it is, of course, very concerning that according to available evidence from the TUC Audits  
19 equality bargaining successes have apparently declined in the last decade or so. However, it is  
20 clear from interviews with National Equality Officers that a lot of what is occurring on the  
21 equality front is not bargaining in the strict sense of negotiation, but rather formal and informal  
22 consultation between unions and employers at different levels and with different  
23 individuals/organisational members, as well as industry/employer/workplace campaigns. The  
24 outcomes and benefits of these rather hidden consultation and engagement processes are difficult  
25 to capture unlike the outcomes and benefits of big set-piece industry or sector negotiations. The  
26 processes themselves are also fragile as they often depend on constructive relationships between  
27 individuals within unions and employers. Similarly, the outcomes of union campaigns are not  
28 always entirely clear-cut, their benefits might not always be measurable or even tangible and  
29 what is more campaigns are resource intensive at a time when unions face considerable and  
30 multiple operational pressures. However, equality consultation and campaigns feature among the  
31 activities and achievements of unions today and they need to be visible to union members and  
32 non-members alike in order to strengthen the outcomes of recruitment and organising efforts.  
33  
34 The TUC and some individual unions are doing quite a good job in this regard, but sustained and  
35 even increased effort is necessary so that working people can see the positive results of broader  
36  
37  
38  
39  
40  
41  
42  
43  
44  
45  
46  
47  
48  
49  
50  
51  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

union voice effects, rather than only those of negotiations, as important as the latter obviously are.

It is clear that further progress along the path to gender and racial justice both within the unions themselves and in the workplace will only be achieved through continued and concerted efforts on the part of all unions and trade unionists to integrate equality into the mainstream of union business. It is also clear that despite much progress, particularly on gender, there is no room for complacency. There is still much work to do to mainstream equality beyond the narrative around the purpose of the union movement into the culture and everyday business of unions. The TUC's O'Grady stated that the unions 'need to look, sound and feel more like today's workforce' (Boston 2015). This viewpoint was reinforced repeatedly in the interviews with National Equality Officers who all agreed that equality is most likely to reach the negotiating arena where there are women and BAME officers and reps (c.f. Dickens 1997). Moreover, extant literature tells us that workers' gender and race identities are salient for union activism and could enable unions to project a more inclusive and therefore more attractive image to socially marginalised groups who have sustained and remained loyal to the movement through history, especially through recent turbulent times (Kirton 2015; Parker 2006; Virdee 2000). The article has argued that as class-based organisations, unions have struggled to acknowledge, understand and accommodate gender and race difference, but the evidence shows that they are not inherently incapable of doing so (also see Virdee 2000a). Confronting such does not mean abandoning class as a central organising and mobilising principle, but it requires an expanded, multi-faceted concept of class. It is time to listen to the experiences of marginalised groups and to re-write the union script from the old slogan 'in unity is strength' to 'in diversity is strength'.



## References

- Ashe, S. and J. Nazroo (2016). Equality, Diversity and Racism in the Workplace: Qualitative Analysis of the 2015 Race at Work Survey. London, Business in the Community.
- Bacon, N. and K. Hoque (2012). "The Role and Impact of Trade Union Equality Representatives in Britain." *British Journal of Industrial Relations* **50**(2): 239-262.
- Beale, J. (1982). *Getting it Together*. London, Pluto.
- Bennett, T. (2010). "Exploring the potential of the union equality representative." *Employee Relations* **32**(5): 509-525.
- BEIS (2018) 'Trade Union Membership 2017. Statistical Bulletin.' London: Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy.
- Blackett, A. and C. Sheppard (2003). "Collective bargaining and equality: Making connections." *International Labour Review* **142**(4): 419-457.
- Boston (2015) *Women Workers and the Trade Unions*. Lawrence & Wishart.
- Colgan, F. and S. Ledwith (1996). Sisters Organising - Women and their Trade Unions. *Women in Organizations*. S. Ledwith and F. Colgan. Basingstoke, Macmillan: 152-185.
- Colgan, F. and S. Ledwith (2002). "Gender and diversity. Reshaping union democracy." *Employee Relations* **24**(2): 167-189.

Colling, T. and L. Dickens (2001). 'Gender Equality and Trade Unions: a new Basis for Mobilisation?' *Equality, Diversity and Disadvantage in Employment*. M. Noon and E. Ogbonna. Basingstoke, Palgrave.

Cunnison, S. and J. Stageman (1995). *Feminising the Unions*. Aldershot, Avebury.

Dickens, L. (1997). "Gender, Race and Employment Equality in Britain: inadequate strategies and the role of industrial relations actors." *Industrial Relations Journal* **28**(4): 282-289.

Healy, G., H. Bradley and N. Mukherjee (2004). "Individualism and collectivism revisited: a study of black and minority ethnic women." *Industrial Relations Journal* **35**(5): 451-466.

Hoque, K. and N. Bacon (2014). "Unions, joint regulation and workplace equality policy and practice in Britain: evidence from the 2004 Workplace Employment Relations Survey." *Work, Employment and Society* **28**(2): 265-284.

Kersley, B., et al. (2006). *Inside the Workplace: Findings from the 2004 Workplace Employment Relations Survey*. Abingdon, Routledge.

Kirton, G. (2006). *The Making of Women Trade Unionists*. Aldershot, Ashgate.

Kirton, G. (2015). "Progress Towards Gender Democracy in UK Unions 1987–2012." *British Journal of Industrial Relations*. **53**(3): 484-507

Kirton, G. and A. Greene (2002). "The dynamics of positive action in UK trade unions: the case of women and black members." *Industrial Relations Journal* **33**(2): 157-172.

Kirton, G. and G. Healy (1999). "Transforming Union Women: the Role of Women Trade Union Officials in Union Renewal." *Industrial Relations Journal* **30**(1): 31-45.

Lee, G. (1987). Black Members and their Unions. *The Manufacture of Disadvantage*. G. Lee and R. Loveridge: 144-158. Milton Keynes, Open University Press.

Moore, S. (2004). The content of new voluntary trade union recognition agreements 1998-2002: Volume One - an analysis of new agreements and case studies. *DTI Employment Relations Research Series*. London, DTI.

Moore, S. and S. Tailby (2015). "The changing face of employment relations: equality and diversity." *Employee Relations* **37**(6): 705-719.

Moore, S., T. Wright and H. Conley (2012). Addressing discrimination in the workplace on multiple grounds - the experience of trade union Equality Reps. London, Acas.

Parker, J. (2006). "Towards Equality and Renewal: Women's Groups, Diversity and Democracy in British Unions " *Economic and Industrial Democracy* **27**(3): 425-462.

Pearson, R., S. Anitha and L. McDowell (2010). "Striking issues: from labour process to industrial dispute at Grunwick and Gate Gourmet." *Industrial Relations Journal* **41**(5): 408-428.

Phizacklea, A. and R. Miles (1987). The British Trade Union Movement and Racism. *The Manufacture of Disadvantage*. G. Lee and R. Loveridge: 112-123. Milton Keynes, Open University Press.

- Phizacklea, A. and R. Miles (1992). 'The British trade union movement and racism.' In P. Braham, A. Rattansi and R Skellington (eds.) *Racism and Antiracism: Inequalities, opportunities and policies*. Sage: 30-45.
- SERTUC (1994). *Struggling for Equality: A Survey of Women and their Unions*. London, Women's Rights Committee, Southern and Eastern TUC.
- SERTUC (1997). *Inching Towards Equality*. London, South East Region TUC.
- Tailby, S. and S. Moore (2014). "Collective bargaining: building solidarity through the fight against inequalities and discrimination." *Cuadernos de Relaciones Laborales* **32**(2): 361-384.
- TUC (2014). *TUC Equality Audit 2014*. London, Trades Union Congress.
- TUC (2016). *TUC Equality Audit 2016*. London, Trades Union Congress.
- Virdee, S. (2000). "A Marxist Critique of Black Radical Theories of Trade Union Racism." *Sociology* **34**(3): 545-565.
- Virdee, S. (2000a). *Organised Labour and the Black Worker in England: A Critical Analysis of Postwar Trends. Cultural Diversity in Trade Unions: a Challenge to Class Identity?* J. Wets. London, Sage: 207-225.
- Wrench, J. (2004). "Trade union responses to immigrants and ethnic inequality in Denmark and the UK: the context of consensus and conflict." *European Journal of Industrial Relations* **10**(1): 7-30.

1  
2  
3  
4  
5  
6  
7  
8  
9  
10  
11  
12  
13  
14  
15  
16  
17  
18  
19  
20  
21  
22  
23  
24  
25  
26  
27  
28  
29  
30  
31  
32  
33  
34  
35  
36  
37  
38  
39  
40  
41  
42  
43  
44  
45  
46  
47  
48  
49  
50  
51  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

Employee Relations

1  
2  
3  
4  
5  
6  
7  
8  
9  
10  
11  
12  
13  
14  
15  
16  
17  
18  
19  
20  
21  
22  
23  
24  
25  
26  
27  
28  
29  
30  
31  
32  
33  
34  
35  
36  
37  
38  
39  
40  
41  
42  
43  
44  
45  
46  
47  
48  
49  
50  
51  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

---

<sup>i</sup> Stephen Lawrence was a black teenager murdered in 1993 in a racist attack in London. The police investigation into the murder was found to be deeply flawed and there ensued a major government enquiry led by Sir William MacPherson. In his 1999 report, MacPherson referred to ‘institutional racism’, which ultimately caused many organisations to review their own structures, policies and practices.

<sup>ii</sup> The Union Modernisation Fund was established in 2005 by the Labour Government to fund projects aimed at increasing the organisational effectiveness of trade unions. It was abolished in 2010 by the Coalition Government.

Employee Relations

**Table 1: Female and BAME representation in five large unions**

<b>Union</b>	<b>Total membership</b>	<b>% Women</b>	<b>% BAME</b>	<b>% Women NEC members</b>	<b>% BAME NEC members</b>	<b>% Women conference delegates</b>	<b>% BAME conference delegates</b>	<b>% Women paid officials</b>	<b>% BAME paid officials</b>
GMB	638,675	51	Not known	38	Not known	Not known	Not known	57	Not known
PCS	196,111	60	10	44	11	33	8	Not known	Not known
Unison	1,374,500	77	17	63	12	65	12	51	10
Unite	1,286,820	26	10	29	11	26	9	29	5
USDAW	440,164	55	Not known	50	Not known	49	7	50	Not known

Source: SERTUC (2016)

Key to unions: GMB – general trade union covering most industries; PCS – civil service union; Unison – public services union; Unite – general union; USDAW – retail and distribution union

1  
2  
3  
4  
5  
6  
7  
8  
9  
10  
11  
12  
13  
14  
15  
16  
17  
18  
19  
20  
21  
22  
23  
24  
25  
26  
27  
28  
29  
30  
31  
32  
33  
34  
35  
36  
37  
38  
39  
40  
41  
42  
43  
44  
45  
46  
47

**Table 2: Equality bargaining success 2005 – 2016**

Equality bargaining issue	% Unions reporting negotiating success			
	2005	2009	2012	2016
Flexible working/work-life balance	67	44	44	41
Women’s pay and employment	54	30	50	46
Harassment and bullying	50	33	39	39
Working parents and carers	67	51	43	39
Black and minority ethnic workers	50	35	40	24
Lesbian, gay and bisexual workers	46	33	28	17
Disability	52	35	47	37
Age	35	37	47	10
Religion and belief	33	23	22	15
Migrant workers	n/a	23	22	22
Transgender workers	n/a	16	14	22

Source: TUC Equality Audits