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**Racism and resistance, from Windrush to recession:  
*What were the responses by Black workers and  
Trade Unions to racism at work in the key industrial  
disputes that occurred in England between 1948-  
1981, and what was the impact of these responses?***

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***YXM830 Advance your Independent Learning***

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As we approach the first half of 2023, hardly a week goes by without reference to union strikes over pay, amid double-digit inflation. The legacy of the Grunwick strikers was evoked by the Mirror newspaper in response to the latest attack on the right to strike, which along with the curbs on protest contained in the Public Order bill, are the Sunak led government's response to strikes and protests. This legislation follows 2022's Policing Act, a direct response to the Bristol Black Lives Matter's protest where slave trader, Edward Colston's statue was unceremoniously dumped in the harbour. The Home Office continues its failure to compensate people, five years after the Windrush scandal (Gentleman 2023). Racism and strikes, therefore, remain contemporary issues.

### Black as a political term

"Black" has been used as an umbrella term for all migrant workers in this paper and the TUC use it in a political context in reference to workers who have suffered from colonialism and enslavement in the past. Tariq Ali refers to the influence of US civil rights [Martin Luther King and Malcolm X had visited Britain in 1965] and how "everyone was black".(2019 The Strike at Imperial Typewriters interviews).

This paper aims to provide an overarching understanding of key elements that underpin the correlation of race and industrial action by black workers. It considers a number of key industrial disputes that these workers instigated and what relationship race played in this. The role of trade unions are also examined in the context of the industrial relations climate of the period. This investigation began by assessing seminal works on the experience of Black workers by Fryer (1984) and Sivanandan (1982), and then considered against more recent research by academics.

Traditionally, racism at work has been viewed as a struggle against both employers and unions supporting discriminatory practice and racial harassment. This paper seeks to show a more nuanced assessment, arguing that a holistic approach is required, which places these disputes in a wider political and industrial context, during a period of significant change. It will also examine whether trade unions were complicit in condoning racist work practices and failed to represent their Black members at the same level of their white colleagues.

### Early expressions of resistance

Post war colonial immigration did not happen in a vacuum; it had precedence in the migration of Irish, Jewish, and other European settlers from the 1850s, who had also endured negative stereotyping and racism (Shirin 2018 p32, Lunn 1985 p9 Davis 1997 p7-8). Whilst a British Black presence is known from the Roman occupation, the Elizabethan era, and beyond, settled communities developed around UK ports such as Liverpool, Cardiff and Hull in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Migrants from Britain's empire began to arrive from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, with many employed in the armed services during both World Wars and some remained to support the post World War II recovery.

Following the end of 1<sup>st</sup> World War, Black workers found themselves being denied work on ships, refineries, and mills. Riots broke out in Liverpool and Cardiff. Whilst acknowledging the racist abuse and violence that occurred, Fryer places this in the context of industrial unrest in UK due to unemployment and recession and also the influence of anti-colonial struggles across the globe (Fryer p312, Davis 2004). We can see this tradition of resistance in the colonies, continuing in the experience of post war migrants.

Racism and negative portrayal of Black people was commonplace by the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Fryer (1984 p137) cites many writings of the period equating them with animals and used to justify slavery. By the 19<sup>th</sup> century, race superiority had been codified as scientific thought and justification for imperialism. This narrative was transferred upon working class people from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century onward. (Virdee 2000a p34)

### The nature of early disputes

The first recorded post war dispute occurred in 1955. Before this it is possible newly arrived migrants were acclimatising themselves to the predominantly unskilled, manual work they entered. Despite many being skilled workers, (Fryer p 380), if confronted with racist abuse or discrimination, a new job could be found among the many vacancies. Early forms of collective action began as appeals to employers and petitions but when these failed, incipient community groups were formed to collectivise grievances (Sivanandan, 1982, p5-6). It is notable these were outside union structures.

Initially it was existing white workers who engaged in industrial action over the issue of race, as they attempted to retain higher paid roles. The employment “colour bar” that had been used against Black seamen in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, now became the focus of white bus workers in West Bromwich, who went on strike over the employment of an Indian bus conductor in 1955. (Fryer,1984,p 382) The Transport and General union (TGWU) branch wanted to restrict levels of Black labour by agreeing quotas. Neighbouring crews also refused to cover for West Bromwich crews in solidarity.

The same colour bar was found in Bristol, where TGWU members had voted for a ban on “coloured” bus crews in the same year. In an initial attempt to break the ban around 1961, Black workers applied for roles, but applications were rejected, despite staff shortages. In contrast, the maintenance section opposed the ban, allowing Black workers employment, as mechanics. (Dresser,2013, p12). TGWU national policy opposed race discrimination, but Ron Nethercott, Regional Secretary had done nothing to challenge the branch position. Following the subsequent public bus boycott, white bus crews threatened to walk out, and their racist attitudes were amplified in media interviews. (Dresser,p25) Dresser identifies a fear of economic decline amongst white workers, and beliefs rooted in the racial stereotypes propagated centuries earlier. (Dresser, p 36-38)

### Black workers on strike

The 60s and 70s saw a range of strike activity by Black workers. The reasons for striking invariably fell into one of the following categories, or a combination of these:

- I. Fighting for union recognition
- II. Low pay
- III. Overtime
- IV. Lack of promotion
- V. Lack of meal /rest breaks
- VI. Washing and toilet facilities
- VII. Redundancy

In addition, there were health and safety concerns around chemicals, smoke, dirt, and machinery, a significant issue for the heavy industry settings they found themselves in. Health and safety legislation was only introduced in 1976. Workers

also expressed concerns over racist name calling, different treatment by management/supervisor compared to white colleagues such as harsher criticism of their productivity. (Patel 2007, McGowan 2008 p385)

### Resistance to racism

Both Hepworth (2020) and Collinson (2022) question the designation of “race” or “migrant” strikes to the ’63 Courtaulds’ Red Scar and ’72 Mansfield Hosiery disputes, respectively. The former strike of 900 migrant workers, was due to an increased productivity drive by Courtaulds which impacted on these workers, solely based in the tyre cord spinning department. The TGWU Regional official had agreed this with Courtaulds, over the heads of local union representatives. When this was exposed, Courtaulds imposed the changes unilaterally, leading to the strike. The same Regional Officer, along with Branch Chairman, then refused to support the strikers. (Ramdin 1987 p270)

Hepworth (2018 p4) identifies a contradictory picture, where strikers saw it as an industrial dispute, but both the union and external Black community activists framed the strike as a “race” issue. This is further complicated by some activists advocating a separate union for Blacks but others urging them to engage with the union and stand as shop stewards.

At Mansfield Hosiery strike action over increased productivity drives had already taken place in 1963, two years before Red Scar (Collinson 2022 p84). This indicates that increasing productivity demands were a response to the industrial challenges facing the textile industry. Collinson argues the necessity to consider the ’72 strike referring to “deindustrialisation” and “automation” as part of the industrial landscape. Wages were already in decline in the textile sector during the 1960s (Baker in Turner 1995)

### Barriers to union participation

Jouhl (2019) and Stevenson (2020), who played active roles in TGWU, and were also Communist party (CP) members, shed light on the barriers encountered by Black workers who tried to engage with union activity. It was impossible to join a union without a proposer and seconder from the existing union membership, so this prevented migrants from joining unions. Becoming a union rep required “sufficient”

knowledge of English, though this remained undefined, and members had to have had two years membership before standing. Union officials were hostile to members who rarely attended branch meetings (Hepworth p4), despite union jargon and rules being difficult to understand. The process to make strikes “official” and thus be able to pay members strike pay was longwinded and bureaucratic. It also prevented members of other unions take sympathetic action i.e. not cross picket lines. Lack of strike pay could end a strike with a matter of weeks. The adoption of the principle on redundancies, “last in, first out” meant newer migrant workers were more likely to lose their jobs than their more experienced white colleagues. These rules could be used to undermine any form collective action however.

### Unions and immigration

Lunn warns of generalising labour responses to migrants. (1985 p2) TUC responses to immigration were negative due to the potential for migrants to be used as cheap labour and for strike breaking. This view was sustained for decades and was particularly resurgent in periods of economic decline as seen in support for:

- 1905 Aliens Act
- 1968 Commonwealth Immigrants act
- 1971 Immigration Act

Contrary to TUC policy, opposition to the Aliens Act came from the TUC President and both Manchester and Leeds Trades councils, as early as 1905. (Cohen 1985)

1948’s British Nationality Act was the exception as they recognised the labour shortage. TUC policy was to change following immigration changes in the 1981 Act. (Sullivan 2012)

### The nature of trade union organisation

Virdee criticises the fundamental misapprehension of radical academics, Paul Gilroy and Sivanandan, on the nature of the unions, whose role they consider to be “defenders of the whole working class” (2000b p547) He points out that their historical role has been to simply defend and improve the economic position of its members. Virdee references Kelly’s (1988) identification of a “sectional consciousness”, which was restricted to the local workplace where workers have a common interest. This would explain the lack of support at Courtaulds from white workers outside the tyre cord spinning department. The sectional nature of unions



can be traced back to its origins in the medieval craft guilds. Wrench (1999) also identifies racism, particularly among craft-based unions.

As outlined earlier, common themes were articulated by union officials in opposition to the demands of black workers. It should be noted that union responses were not always homogeneous. The disputes display a continual power dynamic that shifts between full time paid officials, local elected shop stewards and union members in dispute. Union bureaucracy functioned as a brake or barrier to spontaneous outbursts of action, either by design or default. These shifts in power, however, reflect the changing nature of the industrial landscape which brought out a deep seated, latent racism, part of a union response to changing employer demands, as economic decline began to take shape.

Post 1945, collective bargaining had successfully delivered wage rises and industry wide agreements for unions. Despite the image of unions as democratic, member led organisations, Michel (1911, quoted in Hyman, 1971 p.15) argued that unions required the organisational capacity led by experienced workers, to be effective in both bargaining and organising action. Union leaders were likely to see the enduring support of the “rank and file” members, leading to a passivity amongst members and an acceptance that union officials were acting in their interests. This passivity began to decline when the financial gains began to reduce and laid the path toward militancy. (Virdee 2000b p557)

As outlined earlier, strikes by black workers occurred around fundamental issues such as pay, working conditions etc. It is unlikely these occurred in a vacuum, during the same period that witnessed a rise in localised shop floor bargaining, with spontaneous action to support this, eschewing the need to call in officials or formal ballots. Virdee argues this led to the basis of the union/employer/state, “tripartite” role in industrial relations (2000b p557), that was heralded in the Labour government’s White Paper, “In Place of Strife”; the state’s attempt to curb “wildcat” i.e., uncontrolled action by unions. Further examples of the unions entwined relationship with Labour were later to be found in the Social Contract (1975), Grunwick (1976–8), and TUC/Labour initiative of the ‘winter of discontent’. (Darlington and Mustchin 2019 p627)

Militant responses by shop stewards such as strikes and occupations, increased pressure on the TUC. (Mcilroy 1999 p12) Virdee also points to a leftward shift among union leaders (2000b p35 and 2014 p213). State attempts to control union power via the 1971 Industrial Relations bill led to unprecedented strikes and occupations. Virdee states there is no evidence to demonstrate the connection made between this strike wave and that of the action of Black workers. He cites the TUC's poor response to racism inherent in the '71 Immigration Act as evidence.

However as stated earlier, it is a mistake to consider trades unions as homogeneous and the TUC to be representative of the movement. The TUC acts as an umbrella organisation, constrained "by the underlying autonomy of affiliated unions", affinity with Labour and reluctance to defying the law and challenging the state. (Darlington and Mustchin p643) Despite passing resolutions against race discrimination from 1955 onward, this had no practical outcomes (Wrench 1995)

Virdee goes on however to recognise the convergence of "the rank-and-file worker and socialist activists" as part of a "heightened class consciousness" (2014 p 214). This investigation shows it is possible to trace a heightened consciousness amongst Black workers as far back as Courtaulds, where the strikers rejected a separatist path to engage *within* the TGWU. Jouhl's account of numerous strikes from the late 60s onwards, describe the role of the Indian Workers Association and their methods of shop floor organising, mirroring the same tactics as other white shop stewards. The CP influence in the IWA is generally accepted but its significance is that the IWA organised both within unions and amongst communities.

One demand of Imperial Typewriters strikers was to call for the free election of shop stewards without interference from existing ones (TGWU applied the two-year rule for stewards). They also made clear "the Black workers struggle is part of the general struggle of all workers in Britain." Strike bulletins of the day testify to a significant class consciousness (Myers 2022).

This suggests that a broad political consciousness was developing amongst Black workers, what Virdee refers to as "corporate trade union consciousness", in parallel to the shop stewards' movement. Therefore, despite the strikes by Black workers being unsupported by both trade union officialdom and rank and file workers, it is

arguable that their actions informed and influenced the rising militancy among predominantly white trade unionists. (Virdee 2000b p558)

### Grunwick: a catalyst for change?

The Grunwick strike, a struggle over low pay, union recognition and sweatshop style managers, produced a striking show of solidarity between mainly white male trade unionists and a small, mainly female, Asian workforce. It reflected a growing understanding of how racism had divided workers in previous strikes, undermined solidarity amongst workers and allowed employers the upper hand. Virdee (2014 p221) calls this coalescing “uneven” and “contradictory” but in essence this was the start of an undulating path, with trade unions moving toward an openly anti-racist and equal opportunity agenda.

### Conclusion

This investigation set out to explore racism in unions and critically examine their role. Was the failure of unions to support struggles of low pay and restrictive practices solely due to race? Whilst undoubtedly true, an all-encompassing study must place this answer in the context of economic, industrial, and social change.

### The investigation's key messages

1. Racism's roots are deeply embedded in Britain, pre-dating slavery and colonialism but became indistinguishably connected to slavery, empire, and the rise of capitalism.
2. Working class expressions of racism were informed by this process and came to the fore when they believed their economic stability was threatened.
3. Struggles of Black workers reflect a high degree of class consciousness clashing with an innate conservative orthodoxy with union structures. This orthodoxy was deeply embedded as unions had failed to develop a class wide consciousness.
4. Union actions against racism did occur but were in a minority.
5. Strikes by Black workers should not be considered solely through the prism of race but as part of a class-conscious radicalisation taking place during industrial decline, technological and market change.
6. Failure to challenge racism allowed employers to exploit divisions and weaken unions' bargaining power.

### What are the consequences for unions?

If Grunwick was symbolic of a newfound unity, it was soon followed by a 25-year decline in union membership. In the same period, unions developed anti-racist policies and increased participation of Black workers in their unions and membership density remains highest amongst Black British (TUC 2022). The TUC launched an anti-racism taskforce in 2020.

However, anti-union laws from the 1980s remain in place, with further restrictions in 2016 and today. The battle between neo-liberal ideas, employment rights and the role of the state in industrial relations continues. This power imbalance between worker and employer, has today's migrant communities feature disproportionately in the low paid "gig" economy and outsourced sector, though some successful campaigns have improved employment conditions. (IWBG 2022) Inequality in the labour market remains an issue. (TUC 2022a)

A key strength of this study was the ability to study a range of resources, though it could be argued the inability to scrutinise primary sources limits its findings. Researching union archives in future may deepen our understanding of these issues.

2999 words

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