

## Racism and xenophobia in the workplace: what is the role of trade unions?



(18 September 2018) The ETUC/ETUI workshop, held on 10 September, was attended by 30 delegates and chaired by ETUC Deputy Secretary General, Peter Scherrer, ETUC Confederal Secretary, Thiébaud Weber, and ETUI Director of the Research Department, Maria Jepsen.

The workshop is meant to be the first in a series to provide a space for debate among trade unionists about their practices in dealing with racism and xenophobia, with a view to define a new strategy for the European trade union movement.

It was structured in three sessions: First, a diagnosis of the situation and dynamics of racism and xenophobia, second, how it translates at the workplaces, what are the challenges shop-stewards have to face, and, third, examples of trade union campaigns.

All speakers from **Belgium, France, Germany, Italy and the UK**, academics and trade unionists, emphasized that racism and xenophobia are real, present in everyday lives of workers, impairing their ability to perform their tasks and affecting their mental health. Racism is deeply embedded within the structures of society, its institutions, as well as in trade unions. It limits the ability of blacks and ethnic minority groups to climb up the professional ladder, and have their voices adequately represented within trade unions. Racism is about economic exploitation that feeds upon unfair and exploitative structures in labour markets. The point was also made that equality is different from diversity, the former is about rights, the latter about a sociological reality which does not lead to or imply that a change needs to occur. Individualisation and weaker collective bargaining mechanism also contribute to racism, it is important for trade unions to “recollectivise” the workplace.

In the **UK**, racism, including institutional racism, never disappeared. Aaron Winter, East London University, and Wilf Sullivan, Equality officer at the TUC, said that what has changed is the radicalisation of mainstream political parties and the impact of austerity. Following the Brexit referendum, there has been a sharp increase in hate and racist crimes. Far-right parties attempt to divide workers along ethnic, skin colour or religious lines. They disseminate the myth of a homogenous past of a white working class which never existed. It is the duty of trade unions to fight against “divide and rule” rhetoric, challenge the racialisation of class and ensure that blacks and ethnic minorities are represented in trade unions including in leadership.

Regular surveys by the TUC of workers about their experiences of racism, reveal that racism cuts through all social categories of workers. Following the terrorist attacks, the security agenda has had a strong negative impact on black and ethnic minorities by requesting employers to carry out checks on workforce, consumers and public service users. These led to a differentiation, stigmatization and in some cases criminalization of workers and citizens. Despite 80% of displaced persons worldwide being outside Europe, the so-called refugee crisis and its political instrumentalisation has also had a very negative impact.

In **France**, Jean-Louis Malys reported on CFDT surveys which identified three main forms of racism: overt racism, which must be challenged head on; prejudice due to intellectual laziness, that is best tackled through educational materials and

awareness-raising campaigns, and discrimination that has more to do with a socially disadvantaged background than racial or ethnic one. As in the UK, the lack of a clear positive political discourse on refugees played a negative role. A recent poll carried out by CFDT has shown active trade union members are much less likely to vote for the far right National Front. Following a recent court ruling, CFDT has now the right to expel racist members. Mr Malys said that there are three reasons for voting for the far-right, a feeling of “déclassement” (declining status), of losing respect, fear of globalisation and lack of control over it, and doubts about the effectiveness of public and collective action.

**In Germany,** Mario Jelic from the University of Bonn said that the recent riots in Chemnitz did not come out of the blue, but followed many years of negative political discourse against migration and Islam, including an overtly racist discourse. The far-right AfD and PEGIDA have been successful in “normalizing” hate-speech against refugees and migrants. Today, half of the population is prejudiced against asylum seekers and, like in the UK, this cuts through all classes of society. Mr Jelic reminded that AfD was initially an anti-EU/Euro party that later became an anti-migrant party. At the last elections, 15% of trade union members voted for AfD. Insecurity, lack of control and negative perceptions of reality regarding migrants drive votes for the AfD. However, like in France, active trade union members are less likely to vote for the far-right. In his view, the best tool against racism is a twin-track approach of promoting diversity/equal treatment, on the one hand, and fighting for social justice, on the other, and to continue pressing for more social security, more collective bargaining and co-decision rights at work.

**In Italy,** Lamine Sow, CGIL Piemonte, emphasized, like the previous speakers, that the absence of a positive political discourse on welcoming migrants has contributed to the resurgence of racism. There is a prevailing perception that people who are of certain origin have to perform certain types of work in certain areas and job categories, which prevents moving up the social ladder. Mr Sow gave the example of the hotel industry where access to managerial positions was literally barred to black workers even for experienced workers, in touristic areas, a black worker will be less likely to be a receptionist to be “hidden” from the public. The union estimates a pay gap of 30% to 40% between local workers and non-nationals or ethnic minorities. Diplomas from Africa are often not accepted even if they have been certified in another EU member state. In general there is little follow-up to racist insults at the workplace. As underlined by other speakers, trade union

membership and collective bargaining are effective shields against racism. However, a third of CGIL members voted for the Lega Norte. Mr Sow said that trade unions must avoid excessive ethnicization of workplaces and support their members with empathy and sensitivity, in addition to legal instruments and training, especially for the shop-stewards who are in the front line. The long-term negative impact of xenophobia on migrants should not be underestimated.

An extremely disturbing account of repetitive racist insults was reported by a shop-steward who works as a nurse in a **elderly care home in Belgium** run by French multinational **Korian**. She was repeatedly insulted and verbally harassed by a white co-worker, who could not accept a black person in a higher position. After reporting to management, the worker received a warning, but the harassment continued, due to the lack of mechanisms in place to monitor the situation after a warning has been issued. She also presented the case of a black worker who was not only verbally insulted, but also received letters with threats and pictures from colonial times of blacks being wiped and sold as slaves. The shop-steward explained that workers who report acts of racism mostly fall on deaf ears of management, leaving them with the choice of either accepting the situation, or resigning and going to a different workplace, where it is likely to be the same.

Ongoing campaigns in Belgium and Germany were presented.

In **Belgium**, the ACV-CSC launched an awareness-raising campaign entitled “Stop au racismisme au boulot!” (“Stop racism at work!”) including a video which was widely shared on social media platforms, training for trade unionists, and a toolkit including use of anonymous CVs, quotas, assistance to victims of racism. Another campaign by the three Belgian unions called “Racism game over” also surveyed regularly trade union members on racism and on the appropriate response at the workplace. The unions have been particularly sensitive to the need to create a space for shop stewards to discuss, make problems visible, avoid fragmented labour movement, and respond to racist abuse. Awareness raising tools can sometimes be insufficient, and, like in France, unions have had to resort to expel racist shop stewards. Legislation needs to be constantly reminded, a key challenge is to develop further tools on an intersectional approach towards multiple discriminations (ethnic, gender, religion). International Day against racism on 21 March has often been used by the unions for targeted actions at the workplace.

In **Germany**, the “Gelbe Hand” (“Yellow Hand”) initiative was presented as a

successful case of trade union engagement against racism, xenophobia and far-right extremism. It was recalled that more than half of IG metal membership has a migrant background. The initiative is fighting for equal treatment and equality of opportunity at the workplace through national contests, demonstrations, workshops. Another example is the “Start in den Beruf” (“Start in the job”) for refugees carried out at the company Evonik, which employed young people for one year, before they had finished their professional education. Through individual mentoring and support, 80% of the participants in the scheme were successful and were able to start their apprenticeship with Evonik. Furthermore, during the peak of the so-called refugee crisis in Germany, the industry created additional workplaces to meet additional demand. Trade unions have an important role to play in negotiating labour agreements for refugees.

In the conclusions, it was reminded that we share a European common legal framework to fight racism at work including the 2000/43 race equality directive, pushed for by the ETUC at the time. This directive prohibits discrimination on grounds of race and ethnic origin covering employment, occupation, training, membership of employer and trade union organisations, and access to public services. The Commission is currently carrying out a survey of trade union practices against racism (ETUC, EPSU and other federations are on the survey’s steering group). It would be very timely to look at the implementation of the Directive including in public services, and what can be done to promote its enforcement.

The meeting was useful to remind, if need be, that racism is real with deep, long-lasting impact on workers, working and living conditions, and that its normalization in mainstream political parties needs to be challenged. The lack of blacks and ethnic/visible minorities in the European labour structures and leadership positions was also underlined and needs to be tackled. While racism goes beyond issues of migration, the very hostile climate against migrants, not the least from Africa or Muslim backgrounds in many member states, and worrying EU developments towards a security-based and racialized approach to migration and asylum policy also need to be challenged (see EPSU briefings [here](#)).

The next event was announced for January 2019.

International Day for the elimination of Racial discrimination on 21 March could be a rallying point for trade union action at European level.

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