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THE IMPORTANCE OF UNIONS IN REDUCING RACIAL INEQUALITY:

New Data and Best Practices

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This research paper is published by PowerShare, a project to investigate workers' collective voice and agency in the future of work. Work is changing due to many forces: technology, business models, labour regulations and policies, and social attitudes. Will workers have a real say in what work becomes? Will they have the voice and power to meaningfully shape the future of work, and protect their interests?

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Dedication

This report is dedicated to the memory of Carol Wall, a sister, a co-conspirator, a devoted trade unionist and advocate for racial equality, who made enormous contributions to Canada's trade union movement and is very sadly missed.

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Summary

CANADA'S WORKING CLASS IS CHANGING, due to ageing, demographic change, and immigration. Black, Indigenous, and racialized workers constitute a growing share of the total labour force, and the majority of new entrants to the labour force. Racialized workers face particularly intense exploitation and discrimination in Canada's 'colour-coded' labour market. On top of the challenges faced by all workers to attain decent work and fair wages and benefits, racialized workers experience intensified forms of exploitation, additional barriers to job security and promotion, multiple forms of ongoing discrimination, and systemic violence — both in their workplaces, and in broader society. These realities continue to shape their outlook and experiences in their work, relationships, communities, and political participation.

Unfortunately, racialized workers continue to be under-represented in the union movement that strives to win better jobs, wages, and security for workers. This report analyzes new Statistics Canada data, which disaggregates statistics on employment, wages, and union status according to a set of racialized categories. This research confirms that racialized workers are significantly less likely to be represented by a union or covered by a union contract. This lack of collective power contributes to the persistent gaps in job quality, wages, and employment benefits that further undermine the quality of life for racialized workers. In 2022, racialized workers in aggregate earned hourly wages almost 10 percent lower than non-racialized workers — and they were 8 percentage points less likely to be covered by a union contract. Only one-quarter of racialized workers are covered by a union contract, compared to one-third of non-racialized workers. The gap is even worse for racialized women, reflecting the intersectional barriers they face in accessing decent work — and in achieving collective representation to fight for improvements. The correlation between lower union

coverage and lower wages confirms that unions need to become more effective at organizing with racialized workers, and engaging with them in collective action for better jobs and better pay. For that to occur, however, unions need to become more visible and more consistent in fighting for racial equality in everything they do: from organizing campaigns, to collective bargaining, to union education, to leadership development, and grassroots community engagement.

This report also shares insights obtained from interviews with fifteen experienced racialized trade unionists, that shed important light on the experiences of racialized workers organizing within unions. These key informant interviews reveal a mixture of hope and frustration: hope that unions can and must be vehicles for racial equality and overall economic justice, but frustration that negative attitudes, inertia, and systemic racism within unions continue to hold back the labour movement's engagement with anti-racism struggles. They also convey the immense personal challenges facing racialized union activists and leaders, as they seek to build their unions in the workplace, while also struggling to win needed changes within their unions.

The simple math of Canada's labour force cannot be denied: if unions cannot become more representative of the growing racialized segment of the Canadian working class, their power will inevitably shrink in future years. But to succeed in organizing among racialized workers, and lifting their wages, job quality, and living standards, unions must act as vehicles of racial justice at the same time as they fight for better jobs and wages. From key informant interviews, and a survey of research and documents on previous union anti-racist initiatives, this report identifies several best practices which can strengthen unions' racial justice work — and enhance their visibility and credibility among racialized workers.

The report concludes with several recommendations for specific initiatives and reforms so that Canadian unions can rise to the challenge of organizing and mobilizing with racialized workers in the struggle for both better jobs and a racially inclusive and equitable society. The fundamental conclusion of this report is that those two struggles are inseparable.

Introduction: Unions and the Fight for Racial Equality

The Canadian Labour Congress is Canada's central labour body, representing over 3 million unionized workers nationally. In 1997 it released a historic report, *Challenging Racism: Going Beyond Recommendations* (Canadian Labour Congress 1997), following a vigorous three-year cross-country consultation led by a National Anti-Racism Task Force. It urged its affiliated unions to go beyond tinkering, and seriously prioritize the issue of systemic racism as a top priority for the whole union movement.

Despite this clarion call to action, the labour movement's progress since then in strengthening union membership among Black, Indigenous, and workers of colour, and advancing their struggles for full economic and social equality, has been incomplete and inadequate. After years of passing policy statements and resolutions, writing reports, and giving speeches about the need to fight racism, there is still a large gap between union principles and outcomes. That gap is visible in many ways: in continuing economic inequality between racialized and non-racialized workers, in the underrepresentation of racialized workers in unions, and in union structures themselves – which, like the structures of many other organizations in society, harbour systemic racism (CLC 1997, p. 8).

It has been over 25 years since the release of that task force report in 1997. What has the labour movement achieved in advancing anti-racism and a broader equity agenda? What will it take for labour to step up its game and make union representation a reality for the growing presence of Black and racialized workers in Canada's labour market? What will it take for the labour movement to harness the untapped expertise, talents and resources of racialized members among their ranks? What are

the conditions necessary for racialized workers to be seen as agents of change for the labour movement?

These are existential challenges for the union movement, if it is to fulfil its historic mission in building collective voice and bargaining power among all workers in Canada — including the growing share of Black, Indigenous, and racialized workers in our labour force and our society.

The Moment

In the tumultuous years since the COVID pandemic, the complexity of systemic oppressions of race, class, gender and other intersectional inequities has been manifested in many ways, including through increasing incidents of racist violence and hate crimes. White supremacy and racism in various forms are a growing, frightening reality in Canada, and the hardship experienced since the pandemic has intensified the problem. Statistics Canada (2024) reported an 83% increase in police-reported hate crimes between 2019 and 2022. Hate crimes motivated by race or ethnicity now constitute over half of those reported crimes; they increased 121% in the same three-year period.

White supremacy and racism take many forms in Canada. The discovery of remains of Indigenous children in unmarked graves in former residential school sites across the country in the summer of 2021 was a chilling reminder of the horror of Canada's history of legislated racism and colonialism. Yet evidence mounts attesting to the continuing discrimination faced by Indigenous people in all areas of life, including the labour market (Bleakney et al 2022), health care (Addressing Racism Review 2020), and policing (McKay 2021). The global Black Lives Matter protests in the summer of 2020 catapulted Anti-Black Racism into the forefront of public discourse. And while those protests began in the U.S., abundant evidence confirms that systemic anti-Black racism is a painful reality in all aspects of Canadian life, too, including policing, education, and employment (Canadian Civil Liberties Association 2021; Foster et al 2023; Ontario Human Rights Commission 2023). Asian-Canadians experienced a dramatic increase in incidents of anti-Asian racism in the wake of the pandemic (Sakamoto et al 2023; Chinese Canadian National Council Toronto Chapter and Project 1907 2022). The ongoing rise in Islamophobia in Canada further confirms the rise of racism: a Senate report released in 2023 found that one in four Canadians say they 'do not trust Muslims' (Standing Senate Committee on Human Rights 2023), and Canada leads the G7 nations in targeted killings of Muslims motivated by Islamophobia. At the same time, there has been an upsurge in anti-Semitic incidents and attacks; recorded anti-Semitic incidents more than doubled in 2023 (Zimonjic 2024). Other racialized, ethnic, and religious groups also face systemic and often violent barriers to their economic and social opportunity, their health, and their personal safety.

It is within the context of a racially organized settler-colonial state, where groups of people are systematically and hierarchically demarcated along lines of race, culture and identity, that the rising incidence of all these forms of racism must be under-

stood. Even among unionized workers, racism manifests itself — for example, in disturbing 'noose' incidents reported at Ontario construction sites in 2020 (Knope 2020). Unions moved quickly to denounce such acts of hate crime, but there is much more the labour movement must do to strengthen anti-racist education and mobilizing, and fully engage with racialized workers in its membership and structures at all levels.

As Canada's economy continues to adjust to the aftershocks of the COVID-19 pandemic (including economic uncertainty, accelerating inflation, and falling real incomes), it is clear that racialized inequality remains a central feature of the economy — and that powerful interventions to promote racial equality (including from trade unions) are required to ameliorate it (Block and Galabuzi 2023). For example, studies conducted by national and local food banks reveal the distressingly unequal pattern of economic hardship in Canada. According to the *Who's Hungry 2023* report released by the Daily Bread Food Bank and the North York Harvest Food Bank (2023), three-quarters of food bank clients were racialized. Blacks and Latin Americans are among the most affected. Previous research showed that of those who reported child hunger, four out of five (81%) were racialized, compared to one out of five (19%) children from white households (Daily Bread Food Bank and North York Harvest Food Bank 2022).

These and other statistics confirm the persistent and devastating consequences of racialized economic inequality. A key cause of this inequality is Canada's "colour-coded labour market" (Block and Galabuzi 2011), in which access to secure, well-paid employment is systematically limited for racialized workers. Given the growing frequency and visibility of racism, and the upsurge in protests and resistance against it from oppressed communities and their allies, this is a historic moment to review and strengthen the union movement's role in combatting racism and racialized inequality.

The Labour Movement We Need

Against this backdrop of colour-coded poverty and inequality, unions strive to strengthen workers' voice, representation, and bargaining power. The struggle of unions for equality and dignity at work must consider and address the impact of systemic racism on employment, income, and power in the labour market. For most workers, signing a union card is often much more than just about fighting for a wage increase. Rather, it is also motivated by fundamental values of respect, fairness, dignity, and knowing there is strength in numbers. It is about building a collective voice to express views and priorities, and win change (Stanford and Poon 2021). Racialized workers in precarious, low-wage jobs who endure the daily experiences of exploitation and systemic racism feel the absence of these rights especially acutely. Unions have a social justice responsibility to prioritize racialized inequality in all their activity — and with much more than declarations of principle, signing petitions, or showing up at rallies. The movement needs to reimagine organizing and activist strategies that centre anti-racist priorities.

The benefits of union representation as an effective anti-poverty strategy have been well documented in numerous research studies. However, even within unionized workplaces, and despite the impact of unionization in narrowing racial wage gaps, significant gendered, racialized and ethnic disparities persist (Carew and Wilson 2021). Justice will not 'trickle down' to the most vulnerable groups, who face overlapping and systemic oppressions, even within unionized workplaces (Lee and Tapia 2021).

Union density in Canada has been relatively stable compared to many other industrial countries, hovering at around 30% for the overall labour market. More alarming, however, is that the unionization rate among private sector workers has fallen slowly but steadily: from 19.0% in 1997 to 13.7% in 2023.[1] Unionization in public sector workplaces is much higher, at 74% in 2023, and has grown in recent years – masking the decline in private sector union representation. But the erosion of union power in the private sector poses a fundamental threat to the economic and political power of the union movement. What kind of overhaul would it take to reverse the trend? Unions fight hard for legislative and legal changes to support union organizing and bargaining (including recent reforms such as single-step or card-check certification procedures, sectoral bargaining arrangements, and anti-scab laws). But at the same time, unions need to improve their own organizing, representation, and bargaining strategies. And this must centrally include improving their organizing and representation of Black, Indigenous, and racialized workers in their workplaces, their communities, and society as a whole.

In short, there is no doubt that the union movement's future success, even its survival, depends centrally on improving its record in organizing and advocating for racialized workers. Looking ahead at Canadian demographic trends, Statistics Canada projects that by 2041, the racialized population could reach 16.4 to 22.3 million people, by then accounting for 38 to 43% of the Canadian population (Statistics Canada 2022a). This will represent a significant growth in the relative importance of racialized communities (up from 22.2% in 2016). Most growth in the labour force in coming decades will consist of racialized workers, including new immigrants to Canada. Canada's population will definitely be larger, more diverse, and more racialized in coming years, and the union movement needs to both reflect and respond to that reality.

These demographic shifts, combined with declining private sector unionization, provide a challenging context for organized labour to reflect on its structures and practices, and forge new strategies to ensure the labour movement builds a stronger, growing presence among racialized workers. Unions need to strengthen their capacity for reaching out and listening to Canada's diverse population, to ensure the continued relevance of unions among racialized workers — who often fill the jobs most in need of union representation and bargaining power. Unions can carry on the process

[1] The union coverage rate, including workers covered by a union collective agreement but not members of the union, is slightly higher, at 15.4% for the private sector in 2023. Data from Statistics Canada Table 14-10-0132-01.

of improving inclusion at a snail's pace, or seize this critical historic moment to make extraordinary, transformative changes.

The Experiences of Black, Indigenous and Racialized Workers in the Labour Movement

In the context of these existential challenges facing Canadian unions, there has been little research into the tangible benefits of unions for Black, Indigenous, and racialized workers. How does joining the ranks of the union movement make a difference in the lives of racialized workers, in their workplaces, their unions, and within their communities? What are the specific lived experiences of racialized union members and activists? Equally, what are the barriers and challenges to their own participation and activism within their unions? Finally, what are some best practices in new organizing, internal activism, collective bargaining, and leadership development that the labour movement could embrace to more fully engage and mobilize racialized union members, and all racialized workers?

While Black, Indigenous, and racialized workers all experience and confront deeply entrenched, systemic racism within the workplace and in broader society, it is necessary to recognize the unique historical context and specificities of colonization, racism, and inequality faced by Indigenous communities. Because of the nature of Statistics Canada data on employment and wage outcomes for racialized and Indigenous workers (in which Indigenous people are measured and reported in separate sources and categories from other racialized people), it is not possible to simultaneously analyze the experiences of both Indigenous and racialized workers in one profile. Furthermore, in recognition of nation-to-nation sovereignty relations between Canada and Indigenous Peoples, it would be inappropriate to describe the experiences of Indigenous workers merely as one of several equity-seeking groups all defined under the current Federal Employment Equity Act. Rather, separate research focusing on Indigenous workers and their experience in the labour market (including their participation in and experience with trade unions) is needed.[2]

Summary of the Paper

The rest of this paper is divided into four main sections. The first section will summarize previous published research regarding racialized inequality in Canada's labour market, the impact of trade union representation and collective bargaining on wages and other job characteristics, and the importance of strengthening trade unions' organizing and representation among racialized workers.

The second section summarizes original analysis of new data from Statistics Canada regarding wage gaps between different racialized categories of workers, the current extent of union representation among those groups, and the success of unions in lift-

[2] The Centre for Future Work is preparing a parallel report to this one, *The Union Advantage for Indigenous Workers*, forthcoming in 2024, that will provide new data and analysis on union representation among Indigenous workers in Canada.

ing wages for racialized workers. This evidence indicates that while unions are an important vehicle for improving equality and security for racialized workers, they are not fulfilling their ultimate potential: racialized workers are underrepresented among Canadian unions today, and they need unions to play a bigger, more powerful role in improving their wages and working conditions. This section of the report provides a summary of the main conclusions of our quantitative analysis. An Appendix to the report then provides further details on data sources, methodology, and findings.

The third section of the paper reviews the insights and experiences of racialized trade unionists regarding both the positive outcomes and challenges they have faced in their union activism. This section is based on two distinct sources of data. First, we report the results of semi-structured interviews conducted with fifteen key informants (between May 2022 and October 2023). These interviews generated rich qualitative data on how racialized trade unionists are building a more representative and effective movement — but where their efforts confront barriers and limitations. To facilitate full and frank conversations, the identities of these key informants are kept confidential. Second, we also gather and summarize several examples of innovative and effective "best practices" implemented by specific Canadian unions, in their efforts to strengthen membership, activism, and progress among racialized workers. Through the myriad of reflections and visioning represented by both the key informant interviews and this catalogue of best practices, a collective sense of urgency becomes clear. These activists and leaders, like so many others, are motivated by a desire for transformative change, and an unwavering commitment to building a strong and anti-racist working class movement. To fulfil this hope, the union movement needs to lift its game in organizing with, representing, and engaging racialized workers in Canada.

The final section provides several conclusions and recommendations arising from both the quantitative and qualitative results reported in the paper. These recommendations hope to inform improvements in the Canadian trade union movement's efforts to build stronger membership, collective power, and unity among all workers.

Previous Evidence on Unionism and Wages for Racialized Workers

Racial Capitalism and the Colour-Coded Labour Market

Forty years ago, the late African American political theorist Cedric Robinson coined the term "racial capitalism" to describe the way in which the global economic system is organized along lines of racial domination.[3] The working class under this system of racial capitalism is not homogenous, harmonized through shared conditions, but rather is organized and differentiated along multiple hierarchies and gradations of power, influence and privilege. Racial hierarchies are a crucial source of these gradations and segmentations.

In the Canadian context, this understanding of the organization of productive activity along lines of racial exploitation is supported by evidence suggesting the more intense racialization of class formation under modern neoliberal capitalism. Key indicators framing the racial organization of class in the Canadian labour market include structural patterns in wage discrimination, barriers faced by racialized workers (including racialized immigrants) in obtaining more secure and full-time employment, occupational segregation along racial and gendered lines, and systematic differences in job retention and financial well-being.

For example, census data from 2016 showed that racialized men earned 78 cents for every dollar that non-racialized men earned, while racialized women earned only 59 cents for every dollar earned by non-racialized men (Block et al 2019). The same

[3] See Robinson (2021), for example.

study noted that in 2016 the racialized population had an unemployment rate of 9.2%, compared to 7.3% for the non-racialized population. At the time of the 2016 census, Black Canadians recorded an unemployment rate of 12.5%; Black Canadians then experienced a 5.3-percentage-point increase in unemployment during the pandemic years of 2020-2021 (compared to a 3.7-percentage-point increase for non-racialized Canadians during the same time; Statistics Canada 2021a). Consistent with previous recessions and shocks, Black workers started from a position of disadvantage, and then were disproportionately displaced by the pandemic — worsening racial inequality even further.

Growing deregulation of the labor market, the restructuring of the global economy, and the rise of precarious employment conditions have intensified inequalities in the Canadian workforce for all workers. However, current and historical forms of systemic racial discrimination in employment mean that racialized groups continue to face barriers to more secure and better-paying professions and trades, and remain disproportionately represented in sectors of the economy dominated by contract work, temporary work arrangements, limited job security and the absence of benefits. These conditions became more extreme during the COVID-19 pandemic: the overrepresentation of racialized workers in precarious jobs put them on the front lines of the pandemic, lacking the job protections, benefits and paid sick days available to more of their non-racialized counterparts.

Variations exist, however, in the experiences of distinct racialized groups, between racialized men and racialized women, and between immigrant/newcomer, first-generation and second-generation racialized workers. For example, though racialized men are 24% more likely to be unemployed than non-racialized men, and racialized women 48% more likely than non-racialized men, workers who identified as Filipino have lower unemployment rates than non-racialized workers. Nevertheless, Filipino men continue to record on average one of the largest income disparities relative to their non-racialized counterparts. Despite these variations, the data points to a general pattern of racialized economic inequality in Canada for racialized workers, relative to the experiences of non-racialized workers. It is within this context of a colour-coded labour market, amidst the predominating system of racial capitalism, that an analysis of the potential benefits of unionization and collective bargaining for racialized workers is important and relevant — in addition to reviewing both the challenges and the opportunities facing unions operating within this hierarchically organized, racially unequal labour market.

The Union Advantage for Racialized Workers

Empirical evidence suggests that unions can and do play a role in improving conditions for racialized workers. For example, Bucknor (2016) finds that Black union workers in the U.S. recorded higher wages, and better access to health insurance and retirement benefits, than non-unionized Black workers (Bucknor 2016). Black union

workers earned average wages that were 36% higher than non-union Black workers; 71.4% had access to health insurance compared to 47.7% of non-unionized Black workers; and 61.6% had employer-sponsored retirement plans compared to 38.2% of non-union Black workers. These benefits were even more pronounced for unionized Black workers working in low wage sectors.

Such benefits and protections for unionized compared to non-unionized workers are also relevant for other communities of racialized workers, who are also overrepresented in low wage and precarious sectors. For example, unionized Latin American workers in the U.S. had average wages about 30% higher than their non-unionized counterparts, and their union wage premium was higher than for other racialized categories, including non-racialized workers (González and Galdámez 2021). The impact of unionization is also evident for workers from other marginalized or equity seeking groups — such as Latin American women who also earned over 30% more if they belonged to a union than their non-union counterparts.

Other than wages, union representation also offers racialized workers (and other underpaid groups, such as women) more resources and tools with which to fight for equality and against workplace discrimination. Without union representation, these fights otherwise involve costly, time-consuming, and intimidating burdens on individual workers (such as private legal costs), particularly prohibitive for workers in low-wage sectors. Trade unions also enhance the well-being of racialized people, whether members or not, through educating and training non-racialized members and other workers away from xenophobic and racist sentiments. For example, a recent U.S. paper concluded, through cross-sectional analysis, that white union members express lower racial resentment and greater support for policies that support African Americans than non-union white workers (Frymer and Grumbach 2021). Union membership in America has also been shown to influence political positions and to encourage voting in elections (Becher and Stegmueller 2020; McElwee 2015; Feigenbaum et al. 2018).

The collective leverage of unions also offers racialized workers who are concentrated at the low end of the wage spectrum a means for 'upward mobility' and access to the 'middle class' — access which they would not otherwise have given the racial and gendered organization of the labour market. However, this contribution to closing the wage gap between white and racialized workers is constrained by ways in which systemic racism in the labour market limits access to better jobs and promotions, including through the barriers facing workers in precarious or temporary jobs as they try to land permanent and more promising positions. For example, one longitudinal study of immigrants to Canada found that unionization did not reduce the long-term wage inequality faced by racialized immigrants, who did not have access to the same permanent jobs and career paths as either native born Canadians or non-racialized immigrants (Verma et al. 2016).

The impacts of unionization for workers of colour are complicated by the fact that racialized workers who belong to unions may disproportionately hold employment statuses that do not translate into them receiving the full benefits of membership.

CUPE, for example, reported that its racialized members are less likely to hold full-time work compared to the rest of its membership, and are also twice as likely to hold casual, part-time, or 'on call' positions (Canadian Union of Public Employees 2014). The overrepresentation of racialized union members in part-time or casual positions, and the consequences of that for income and job security, can undermine the extent to which unionization benefits racialized workers who are disproportionately represented in those roles. For example, one report quoted a part-time worker in a unionized banquet server job stating that while she feels lucky to be represented by a union, "the full time get all the benefits and the part-timers only have medicine at eighty-percent and dental once every six months." (Canadian Union of Public Employees 2014, p. 58) In the same report, another unionized part-time worker in the food service industry at a local hospital shared that a part-time employee "doesn't get any benefits…You don't get nothing. Zero." (Canadian Union of Public Employees 2014, p.58). Despite belonging to unions, both these part-time workers reported a lack of stability with respect to work schedules and opportunities for promotion to full-time positions. Efforts by larger employers (including in the public sector) to contract out jobs to lower-cost, more precarious suppliers also contribute to the insecurity and exploitation of the disproportionately racialized workers who fill these precarious, contract and casual positions. These same workers often do not have the same degree of seniority and hence access to better positions compared to other, more senior union members (who tend to be disproportionately white).

There are other issues shaping the experience of racialized workers in unions, despite the labour movement's rejection of former explicit racist policies from the 19th and early 20th Centuries (such as historical colour bars on certain jobs and union membership),[4] and more recent commitments to better engage racialized members in their ranks and internal structures. The replication of racialized and systemic barriers within unions means that racialized members have been less likely to fill leadership positions within unions, have not been sufficiently included within union bodies and program activities, and have not had their demands and concerns for racial equality accepted on equal footing with the 'more traditional' concerns of unions.

Confronting Systemic Racism in and Through the Labour Movement

Given the existing racialized inequities within both the broader labour market and the union movement, unions have responded in many ways to issues of racial injustice both within their ranks and in society at large. The third part of this report presents an in-depth catalogue of current 'best practices' adopted by unions to better organize with racialized workers, engage racialized union members more fully in union activity, and maximize the role of unions in fighting racialized inequality. To set the stage for that discussion, this section briefly reviews published documentation and research regarding previous anti-racist initiatives undertaken by various Canadian unions.

[4] Some of this history is reviewed by das Gupta (2007).

Many unions have emphasized raising awareness among union members about the unjust and disunifying impacts of racism, and produced educational materials aimed at challenging preconceived racist biases and stressing the responsibility and potential of unions for confronting racism. For example, in 2019 the Toronto & York Region Labour Council launched its "Yes, It Matters!" campaign to explore and engage with issues of systemic racism impacting union members and broader society. Materials prepared for the campaign included clear statements condemning racism and discrimination in workplaces and communities, a tool kit, and a "plan of engagement" for how to tackle systemic racism within unions (Toronto & York Region Labour Council 2019). Some key commitments include:

- requesting union executives to adopt the Council's *Charter of Inclusive Workplaces and Communities* (Toronto & York Region Labour Council n.d.);
- creating an internal working team to reach out to union membership with Charter materials on equity;
- posting the Charter in union offices, and in union newsletters;
- finding opportunities to "celebrate and honour the diversity of your membership."

As a key strategy to put the principles of the Charter into practice, TYRLC published *A Leader's Guide to Strengthen Unions: Moving Beyond Diversity and Towards Inclusion and Equity* (Geronimo 2014). It has served as a foundational document in supporting affiliated unions in building more inclusive workplaces and unions. The TYRLC also hosts an annual conference of racialized and Indigenous workers (starting in 2005), as well as making other efforts to ensure diverse representation in its board and staff membership.

The Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU) has made similar efforts through its Member Education Unit which has, for example, produced online education materials to raise awareness of issues related to racism (Ontario Public Service Employees Union n.d.). Materials include presentations on running inclusive meetings, building more inclusive locals, notes and recommendations on addressing racial disparity in leadership elections, and combating anti-Black racism in unions, workplaces and the community.

The United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) has also developed anti-racism resources which include introductory information cards intended to educate members on the realities of: xenophobia, white privilege, allyship, intersectionality, settler colonialism, micro-aggressions, and how to support Black, Indigenous, and workers of colour union members at work (United Food and Commercial Workers n.d.). In 2022 UFCW Canada also released a "UFCW Canada Anti-Racism Collective Bargaining Guide" to help support union negotiators and activists in implementing collective bargaining language aimed at addressing racism in workplaces (United Food and Commercial Workers 2022).

In similar fashion, the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) launched an Anti-Racist Strategy, with an emphasis on anti-racist political education of CUPE members, delegates, and leaders (Pouliot 2021). The union's Ontario division has launched a parallel campaign to "Recognize and Resist White Supremacy," featuring a guide for local unions which includes definitions of white supremacy, examples of how it may manifest in unions and in the community, statistics on inequities faced by women and racialized members, and suggestions for how union members can challenge white supremacy (CUPE Ontario 2020). The guide includes suggestions for how local unions can challenge white supremacy: including creating safe spaces and committees for racialized members, adequately resourcing these groups and spaces, developing better accountability mechanisms and health and support systems for members experiencing racism, designing anti-racism policies within the union, and making sure members feel represented in events and workshops.

The Public Service Alliance of Canada has also placed emphasis on education and raising awareness through instituting mandatory training for all federal public service workers on equity, diversity and inclusion and the history of Indigenous peoples. In addition to educational activities, PSAC has also supported a 'Black Class Action' lawsuit that aims to challenge systemic racism in hiring and promotional practices within the federal government. In 2021 PSAC launched its Anti-Racism Action Plan (Public Service Alliance of Canada 2021), with the intention of reviewing how the union can better service, mobilize and represent its Black, Indigenous, and racialized members.

The Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) has also developed an educational and outreach strategy around issues of racial justice, including campaigns and advocacy to challenge both employers and governments on the problems of systemic racism. The CLC has advocated the creation of an intersectional national anti-Black racism strategy, ensuring reform and modernization of the Employment Equity Act, designating Black workers as an equity-seeking group under the Employment Equity Act, investing in public social infrastructure and care work as part of an equitable pandemic recovery plan, and launching an investigation of the overrepresentation of Black children and youth in the care of child protective services (Canadian Labour Congress 2018). The CLC has also produced an "immigrant toolkit" to help educate its membership about the challenges faced by new immigrants to Canada, and has been active in promoting better access to full status for migrant workers (including a new joint initiative with the federal government to support migrant workers in achieving full status; Canadian Labour Congress 2023).

Unifor has also undertaken numerous initiatives to strengthen its engagement with issues of racism in the labour market, workplaces, and broader society. In 2016 the union tasked two equity-audit coordinators to criss-cross the country to survey and interview leaders and members in 470 local unions on equity and anti-racism. The audit's report, "Building Solidarity in Diversity," outlined more than 40 action items as part of a union-wide anti-racism and equity strategy — including member education, outreach activities, raising equity and anti-racism initiatives in collective bargaining,

political advocacy, and the formation of an Equity Advisory Panel at the union's national executive (Unifor 2017). The union has created standing equity committees in its various regional councils, and many of its locals, to ensure issues of racism are regularly addressed in union policy and activity. It has negotiated innovative anti-racist measures at various workplaces — such as workplace racial justice advocates (discussed further in the third section of this paper; Unifor 2020).

Moving Beyond Good Intentions

These examples indicate that Canadian unions are working to make anti-racism a more central item on their education, advocacy, and bargaining agenda. This effort is now decades old, dating back to the CLC's 1997 task force and before (Hunt 2007). Issues of racism, equity and diversity have been increasingly central to Canadian unions as they respond to the changing demographic composition of the workforce, the general threat of declining union density, and the demands of their own racialized members to become more engaged in all aspects of the struggle against racism and white supremacy.

However, despite these numerous initiatives aimed at lifting awareness and attention regarding racism within unions, it is not apparent that unions have met the critical challenge of building their profile, their legitimacy, and their membership among racialized workers in Canada — who, as described below, are underrepresented among Canadian union members. And on some issues, unions face challenges in enunciating policy positions and organizing strategies that simultaneously address the priorities of their existing members, while advocating on behalf of racialized workers who are not (yet) union members. For example, on the issue of Canada's temporary foreign worker program (which has been dramatically expanded since the COVID-19 pandemic), union responses have alternated between expressions of solidarity with mostly racialized temporary migrants and an emphasis on protecting job opportunities for Canadian workers (Foster 2014). Union approaches to other issues (such as contrasting strategies for lifting standards for digital platform workers, another mostly racialized segment of the labour market; Mojtehedzadeh 2022) reflect similar challenges in negotiating issues of race, precarity, and protections for existing union members.

The imperative question then is whether existing union positions on racism and other equity-related issues are effective in changing the hierarchical and exploitative conditions that racialized workers face under racial capitalism. As well, are the above-noted union policy statements against racism, and educational programs on issues of equity and diversity, adequate to root out the racially-informed systemic barriers that racialized workers encounter — both in the workforce, and within their unions? These questions are relevant to many issues: such as how unions address the needs of the largely racialized workforce in the platform or gig economy, or whether unions have negotiated equivalent benefits and representation for part-time, casual and contract workers (who have low seniority and are overwhelmingly racialized workers and women).

Though most unions have taken steps toward fostering greater inclusion and challenging racism within their ranks and in society at large, they will need to go further to fully address the needs and experiences of racialized workers in the context of racial capitalism and its numerous, intersecting dimensions of exploitation and inequality. Justice for Workers in Ontario published a primer, titled *Justice for Workers Means Racial Justice*, that usefully connects the struggle against racism to numerous bread-and-butter labour struggles that would carry particular importance to racialized workers (Justice for Workers 2022). In this context, access to decent work is clearly a racial justice issue, and a movement for decent work cannot succeed without speaking to the experiences of racialized workers, fully engaging them in struggle, and taking firmly anti-racist positions on all policy and strategic issues facing the union movement. Core labour issues with obvious connections to anti-racist priorities include:

- fighting for a higher minimum wage (including removing exclusions which disproportionately affect racialized workers, such as for farm workers and in-home care workers);
- instituting equal pay and benefits for part-time workers, who are more likely to be racialized, women and immigrants;
- advocating for paid sick days for all workers, again of particular importance to racialized workers given their disproportionate concentration in jobs which currently lack that benefit;
- challenging labour laws and policies that negatively impact temporary or agency workers;
- challenging misclassification practices that undermine wages and job security for workers in non-standard jobs (such as digital platform workers), who are wrongly classified as "self employed" or "independent contractors" and so denied employment protections — another workforce that is highly racialized;
- advocating for full immigration status for all migrant and undocumented workers.

By engaging fully in these struggles that are so important to racialized workers, unions can enhance their visibility and credibility with racialized communities, which in turn can enhance union recruitment, retention, and mobilization. For example, the Justice for Workers primer recounts how advocating for equal pay and benefits for part-time workers in the Ontario college sector led to employers hiring more full-time and permanent staff. This increased access to unions for the disproportionately racialized workers who previously worked in contract roles. Another example concerns the racial justice dimension of challenging unjust dismissals, of which Black, Indigenous and other racialized workers are at greater risk. Successfully fighting dismissals makes it harder for employers to fire other workers, which enhances the confidence of all workers to take action for fairness in their workplaces (including by forming unions); once again, a fightback integrated with a racial justice struggle results in

both better fairness and a stronger union. In another account, organizing for equal pay for temporary agency workers in a Toronto warehouse led to the company directly hiring 700 former agency workers — resulting in the workers not only getting permanent full-time jobs, but also becoming union members.

Making the issues that affect marginalized groups (including racialized workers) central to union activity requires not only a reallocation of resources and attention toward those struggles, but also a shift in unions' understanding of their role in challenging the broader inequalities in society, well beyond the boundaries of particular workplaces or collective bargaining tables. Most Canadian unions understand and endorse the idea of 'social unionism' — typically counterposed to more traditional 'business unionism' (Ross 2007). The core idea is that unions must serve as an organized voice for workers to fight for improvements in all areas of their lives: including public services, fair tax and income programs, a sustainable environment, and more. Foregrounding anti-racist struggles in union education, advocacy, and organizing is consistent with this vision of unions' broader role as a progressive force for social change — not to mention being a vital precondition for future viability of unions, given the changing composition of the Canadian working class. Similarly, an emphasis on greater participation at all levels of union activity (including local and national leadership) by racialized members dovetails fully with the need for activist social unions to strengthen democratic participation and representation within their own structures (Nicolson-Hurtig 2022).

In sum, this review of recent anti-racism initiatives by Canadian unions confirms that most unions understand the importance of anti-racism in broader union activity and strategy, and are committed to advancing an anti-racist agenda in their education, advocacy, organizing, bargaining, and internal processes. That commitment has not adequately translated, however, into new membership and mobilizing among communities of racialized workers. This needs to change, if unions are to keep up with the changing demographics of the labour force, and build membership and collective power among racialized workers. In the next section, this report presents new data on the presence and impact of unions among racialized workers; after that, the report considers insights from key informant interviews and a review of current best practices of Canadian unions, to document and evaluate how unions can improve their mission as a vehicle for economic justice for workers of all backgrounds and identities.

New Data on Racialized Workers, Wages, and Unions

Previous Data on Racial Wage Gaps and Unionization

CANADA HAS BEEN RELATIVELY SLOW, compared to many other industrial countries, in collecting official data regarding the employment, income, and living standards of Canadians from different ethnic and racialized communities. Until recently, core labour market surveys have not collected information on racial identity. More detailed census surveys (conducted every five years) gathered information on racial identity, and this provided a basis for some analysis of racial income inequality (such as conducted by Block, Galabuzi and Tranjan 2019, for example). However, in addition to their infrequency, census surveys also do not collect as detailed or consistent data on specific employment outcomes (including union membership or coverage) that would allow investigation of the differential impacts of unionization on workers from different racialized categories.

Some researchers have used custom survey methods to gather unique and original data on employment status, job quality and security, incomes, and union status — research that in some cases provided insight into correlations between union status, job quality, and racial identity. For example, the Poverty and Employment Precarity in Southern Ontario project (PEPSO) commissioned large original surveys of workers in southern Ontario over several years to investigate the incidence and consequences of precarious employment (see Procyk, Lewchuk, and Shields 2017 and references therein). Analysis of unpublished data from those surveys reveals important insights into the relationship between unions and job quality, for both racialized and non-racialized workers. Note that the PEPSO survey collected data on total personal income (not just employment income), and gathered responses by broad income

ranges (not specific income levels); for both reasons, this data is not a precise portrayal of the impact of unionization on wages for different groups of workers, and the impact of low or irregular hours of work on incomes is subsumed within the overall income totals. Nevertheless, the general direction of the survey findings seems robust. The data confirms a large racial income gap, with the aggregate population of racialized respondents reporting personal income averaging 20% lower than for non-racialized respondents. Racialized workers had a slightly lower unionization rate than non-racialized workers (a difference of just one percentage point). Union members reported slightly higher average incomes (about 2% higher than non-union workers). That union advantage was larger for racialized workers (4.5%). A unique attribute of this data set is it also reports benefit coverage by union status. Consistent with previous findings, the impact of unions on provision of core supplementary benefits (including drugs, dental, and vision coverage) is much stronger than their impact on wages. Union members are much more likely to receive these benefits: 79% versus 58% for non-union workers. That union advantage in benefit provision is similar for racialized workers, although racialized respondents were slightly less likely than non-racialized workers to receive benefits whether they were in a union (75%) or not (55%).

A similar project in British Columbia, called Understanding Precarity in BC (UP-BC), also commissioned original survey research investigating job security, income, and union coverage, across different racialized and immigrant categories (see Ivanova and Strauss 2023). The UP-BC survey asked whether respondents were from one of several racialized categories; Indigenous; or 'white'.[5] Analysis of unpublished data from this survey provides another unique perspective on correlations between employment, union coverage, income, and racialized or Indigenous status. Like the PEPSO project, income data was collected according to ranges (not explicit numbers), and hence cannot identify the impact of different hours of work on income. However, the UP-BC survey did distinguish between employment income (where unionization is most relevant) and total family income. The UP-BC survey found that unionization is lower for racialized (28%) and Indigenous (29%) workers, than for non-racialized non-Indigenous workers (33%). Average employment income (estimated on the basis of midpoints in specified income ranges) appeared to be roughly equal between racialized and white workers; however, Indigenous workers earned 11% less than white and racialized workers. There are large employment income benefits from union membership for white (18%) and racialized (14%) workers, but no apparent union wage advantage for Indigenous workers.

The particular features of these various surveys and samples prevent the drawing of robust general conclusions. However, this previous research certainly confirms that racialized workers are underrepresented in Canadian unions, and hence racialized workers are not experiencing the same benefits of collective representation and bargaining power as non-racialized workers. Given that most data confirms the existence

[5] The survey received over 3000 responses, of which 121 identified as Indigenous; hence results for that group should be interpreted with caution given the small size of the Indigenous sample.

of a large and persistent racial income gap, the need for unions to strengthen their presence among racialized workers and take on reducing that racial wage gap as a top priority is clear.

Statistics Canada's New Survey Questions

The absence of systematic and robust official data on labour market outcomes for Canadians from different racialized categories is finally being addressed by the federal government and Statistics Canada. Beginning in 2021, Statistics Canada began to include a new set of questions regarding respondents' ethnic and racial identity in its monthly Labour Force Survey. This survey, based on questionnaires completed by over 50,000 households per month (and hence involving about 100,000 individuals), is a comprehensive and timely source of data on labour force participation, employment, industry and occupation, and wages. The new questions on racial identity provide valuable new insight into racial inequality in Canada's labour market — including regarding the role of unions in lifting wages for racialized workers. This section of the report summarizes findings from analysis of this new Statistics Canada data for 2022. More details regarding Statistics Canada's approach to collection of this data, and the methodology of our analysis of it, are provided in the Appendix.

Participation and Employment Among Racialized Workers

Racialized workers constitute a growing and important segment of Canada's labour market. In 2023, racialized workers accounted for 29.6% of Canada's total labour force, and a slightly smaller share of total employment (29.1%).[6] Racialized workers' share of employment is slightly smaller than their share of the labour force, because they experience a higher average unemployment rate. As indicated in Table 1, racialized workers are significantly more likely to participate in the labour force (meaning they are either employed, or actively seeking employment) than non-racialized workers. The average labour force participation rate for racialized workers was 71.1% in 2022, almost eight percentage points higher than for non-racialized workers.

Thus, despite a significantly higher unemployment rate (6.9% for racialized workers versus 4.8% for non-racialized), a higher proportion of the racialized population is

Table 1.

Participation and Employment Indicators, 2023

	Racialized Workers	Non-Racialized Workers
Participation Rate	71.1%	63.4%
Unemployment Rate	6.9%	4.8%
Employment Rate	66.2%	60.4%

Source: Statistics Canada Table 14-10-0373-01.

[6] Authors' calculations from Statistics Canada Table 14-10-0373-01.

employed (66.2%, versus 60.4% for non-racialized working age Canadians). Racialized workers are also slightly more likely to hold full-time jobs: 82.5% of employed racialized Canadians worked full-time in 2023, versus 81.8% of non-racialized employed workers.

Racialized Workers and Wage Inequality

There can be no doubt, therefore, about the participation and work effort of racialized workers in Canada. But that work translates into systematically less income and security, by virtue of the disproportionate concentration of racialized workers in lower-wage, less secure jobs, and the substantial racial wage gap facing racialized workers. The new Statistics Canada data accessed for this report permits a more detailed and comprehensive portrayal of this wage gap, across gender, industry, and other characteristics.

Table 2 provides summary data for 2022 on the extent of the racial wage gap, across the 8 categories of visible minority for which Statistics Canada's data allows for sufficient sample size. These include 7 specific identified groups: South Asian, Chinese, Black, Filipino, Arab, Latin American, and Southeast Asian (in order of decreasing size). The eighth category is defined as "other visible minority," and includes 3 smaller categories for which sample sizes are too small to be reliable (West Asian, Korean, and Japanese), a category for "visible minority not included elsewhere" (for which respondents can select more specialized categories separate from those listed above, such as Polynesian, Mauritian, or West Indian), and individuals who reported multiple

Table 2.

The Racial Wage Gap, 2022

	Average Hourly Wage ($/hr)	Racial Wage Gap[1]
Filipino	$25.02	-23.8%
Black	$27.36	-16.7%
Latin American	$28.97	-11.8%
Southeast Asian	$29.39	-10.5%
Arab	$30.29	-7.8%
South Asian	$30.37	-7.5%
Other racialized categories	$30.57	-6.9%
Chinese	$33.72	2.7%
All racialized workers	**$29.64**	**-9.8%**
Non-racialized	$32.85	
Total population	$31.95	

Source: Authors' calculations from Statistics Canada unpublished Labour Force Survey data.

[1] Relative to non-racialized category.

ethnic or racial statuses. Respondents not belonging to any of those categories are termed "not visible minority" (or non-racialized in our presentation below).[7]

For all but one of these categories of racialized workers, average hourly wages (counting both workers paid by the hour, and the estimated normal hourly wage of salaried workers[8]) are significantly lower than the average wages received by non-racialized workers. On average across all the racialized categories, average hourly wages were more than $3 lower than for non-racialized workers: a disadvantage of almost 10%. Filipino and Black workers experienced the largest wage gaps — earning 24% and 17% less than non-racialized workers, respectively. The one exception to this pattern is Chinese workers, who earned slightly more (2.7%) than non-racialized workers. Of course, within any of these racialized categories there is tremendous variation in employment earnings and conditions, and many racialized workers experience much larger wage gaps relative to their non-racialized counterparts.

Intersectional Analysis: Race and Gender

The experience of racism is shaped by other dimensions of inequality in the labour market. In particular, racial wage gaps vary strongly with gender. Table 3 summarizes wage inequality across racialized categories, disaggregated by gender. The general array of racial wage gaps across racialized categories is largely similar for both genders: the gap is largest for Filipino and Black women, while Chinese women earn slightly more on average than non-racialized women. The racial wage gap is notably wider for Arab women than men (more than twice as large, relative to their non-racialized counterparts), and hence for Arab women the racial wage gap is larger than for Southeast Asian women — whereas the reverse is true for men.

In general, the racialized wage gap is wider for women than for men, across most but not all of the racialized categories reported in the Statistics Canada data. On average, racialized women earn 10.9% less than non-racialized women, compared to an 8.4% racial disadvantage for men. In two categories — Filipino and Black women — the racial wage gap is smaller for women than for men. As discussed further below, this partly reflects the concentration of female employment in these two racialized categories in the highly unionized health care sector. In those same two racialized categories, therefore, the pure gender wage gap (between men and women within the same racialized category) is relatively smaller than for other racialized categories, and indeed than non-racialized workers. Filipino women earn, on average, 4.3% less than Filipino men, while Black women earn 8.4% less than Black men. Non-racialized women earn 12.5% less than non-racialized men. The gender wage gap equals 13.2% across the whole population, but is larger (14.9%) for racialized women. This interaction between gender and racialized inequality highlights the importance of considering both these dimensions in order to understand the structures that cause these wage gaps.

[7] For reasons explained in the Appendix, that non-racialized category includes Indigenous workers.

[8] The estimated hourly wage of salaried workers is calculated by dividing weekly or monthly salary by normal hours of work in the job.

Table 3.

The Intersectional Wage Gap, 2022

	Male Average Wage ($/hr)	Male Racial Wage Gap[1]	Female Average Wage ($/hr)	Gender Wage Gap[2]	Female Racial Wage Gap[3]	Female Intersectional Wage Gap[1]
Filipino	$25.64	-26.7%	$24.53	-4.3%	-19.9%	-29.9%
Black	$28.62	-18.2%	$26.22	-8.4%	-14.3%	-25.1%
Latin American	$31.66	-9.5%	$26.22	-17.2%	-14.3%	-25.0%
Southeast Asian	$31.79	-9.1%	$27.12	-14.7%	-11.4%	-22.5%
Arab	$33.09	-5.4%	$26.76	-19.1%	-12.6%	-23.5%
South Asian	$33.21	-5.1%	$27.17	-18.2%	-11.2%	-22.3%
Other racialized categories	$33.64	-3.8%	$27.51	-18.2%	-10.1%	-21.4%
Chinese	$36.49	4.3%	$31.09	-14.8%	1.6%	-11.1%
All racialized workers	**$32.04**	**-8.4%**	**$27.26**	**-14.9%**	**-10.9%**	**-22.1%**
Non-racialized	$34.98		$30.61	-12.5%		-12.5%
Total population	$34.17		$29.65	-13.2%		-15.2%

Source: Authors' calculations from Statistics Canada unpublished Labour Force Survey data.

[1] Relative to non-racialized men.
[2] Relative to men in same racialized category.
[3] Relative to non-racialized women.

The final column of Table 3 also lists what we term an 'intersectional wage gap': calculating for each category of racialized women workers their relative disadvantage compared to non-racialized men. The relatively smaller pure gender wage gap for Filipino and Black women is more than offset by the larger racial wage gap experienced by both populations, and hence these women nevertheless experience the largest intersectional wage gap relative to non-racialized men. And for almost all racialized categories, the intersectional wage gap is very large: between 20 and 30% for all racialized women. The exception is Chinese women, who on average experience a smaller intersectional wage gap: 11.1% compared to non-racialized men. For them, the very small wage advantage they experience relative to non-racialized women is overwhelmed by the more substantial gender wage gap (14.8%) they experience relative to Chinese men.

Unionization Among Racialized Workers

In aggregate, racialized workers experience substantial pay disadvantages compared to non-racialized workers. This overwhelms their stronger labour force participation and employment rates, resulting in lower and less secure average incomes for racialized workers and their families. Trade unions play a vital role in Canada's labour market in raising wages, improving benefits, and enhancing job security. The impact of unions on the earnings of racialized workers is strong and positive. However, that im-

pact is experienced differentially across various racialized categories, genders, and industries.

Below we analyze unpublished data from Statistics Canada's Labour Force Survey regarding the share of workers in each racialized category who are covered by a union contract. Union coverage refers to workers whose compensation and working conditions are determined according to a collective agreement. Union coverage is slightly higher than the proportion of workers who are dues-paying members of unions, because in some workplaces collective agreement provisions are extended to some workers beyond those in the certified dues-paying bargaining unit.[9]

Table 4 reports aggregate union coverage rates for the eight categories of racialized workers reported in Statistics Canada's Labour Force Survey data. For most categories, racialized workers are significantly less likely to be covered by a union contract than non-racialized workers: about one-quarter of all racialized workers are union-covered, compared to nearly one-third of non-racialized workers, resulting in an average gap in union coverage of over 8 percentage points. However, there are significant differences in union coverage across racialized categories, reflecting numerous factors including the sectoral composition of employment for each group. Black workers are most likely to be covered by a union contract, at 33.6%. In fact,

Table 4.

Union Coverage by Racialized Category, 2022

	Union Covered Workers (thousand)	Total Employment (thousand)	Union Coverage Rate
Black	242.1	719.5	33.6%
Filipino	187.3	629.1	29.8%
Arab	75.6	287.3	26.3%
Latin American	87.0	343.5	25.3%
Other racialized categories	102.9	462.4	22.3%
Southeast Asian	56.3	262.7	21.4%
Chinese	172.4	808.0	21.3%
South Asian	244.4	1261.8	19.4%
All racialized workers	**1168.0**	**4774.3**	**24.5%**
Non-racialized	3994.6	12248.5	32.6%
Total population	5162.6	17022.8	30.3%

Source: Authors' calculations from Statistics Canada unpublished Labour Force Survey data.

[9] In 2023, 2.1% of Canadian employees were covered by a collective agreement but not members of a trade union (Statistics Canada Table 14-10-0132-01), and that proportion has been stable in recent years.

Black workers are the only racialized category more likely to be covered by a union than non-racialized workers (32.8%). South Asian workers are the least likely to be union-covered, with just 19.4% coverage (less than one worker in five). The interaction between sectoral and occupational employment patterns, gender, and union coverage is explored in more detail in the Appendix. In addition to Black workers, Filipino, Arab, and Latin American workers are also more likely than other racialized workers to be covered by a union contract — though nevertheless with lower coverage than for non-racialized workers. South Asian, Chinese, Southeast Asian, and other racialized workers are the least likely to be union-covered among these categories of racialized workers.

Once again, the presence of unions in the working lives of racialized workers is shaped by gender and other labour market dimensions. Table 5 reports union coverage rates for men and women, for both racialized and non-racialized workers. Women are more likely to be covered by a union contract than men, and this is true for both racialized and non-racialized women. This gender gap in union coverage is 3.5 percentage points for racialized women, versus 4.3 percentage points for non-racialized

Table 5.

Union Coverage by Racialized Category and Gender, 2022

	Union Covered (million)	Total Employment (million)	Union Coverage Rate
Men			
Non-racialized	1.91	6.27	30.5%
Racialized	0.54	2.38	22.7%
Total	2.45	8.64	28.4%
Racial Gap[1]			-7.8%
Women			
Non-racialized	2.08	5.98	34.8%
Racialized	0.63	2.40	26.2%
Total	2.71	8.38	32.3%
Racial Gap[1]			-8.6
Total			
Non-racialized	3.99	12.25	32.6%
Racialized	1.17	4.77	24.5%
Total	5.16	17.02	30.3%
Racial Gap[1]			-8.1%

Source: Authors' calculations from Statistics Canada unpublished Labour Force Survey data.

[1]Compares racialized to non-racialized categories.

women. As a result, the racialized gap in union coverage is slightly larger for women than for men. Racialized women are 8.6 percentage points less likely to be covered by a union contract than non-racialized women, whereas racialized men are 7.8 percentage points less likely to be union covered than non-racialized men. Across both genders, the racialized gap in union coverage is 8.1 percentage points.

This data makes it clear that racialized workers are underrepresented in Canada's trade union movement. On top of their lower wages, less secure jobs, and lack of full access to the same economic opportunities as non-racialized workers, they are less likely to benefit from the representation, voice, and bargaining power that comes from trade union membership. This hurts their incomes and working conditions. It also indicates that the union movement is not capturing the full potential strength that could be offered by proportionately organized racialized workers.

Union Coverage and Wages for Racialized Workers

Being covered by a union contract, and winning the right to collectively bargain wages and conditions, leads to significant improvements in wages for any group of workers. As explained in the Appendix, a common indicator of the benefit of union coverage is the 'union wage premium': that is, the difference between average hourly wages for union-covered and non-covered workers. It is important to note that there are many other factors that influence wages for different workers, other than unionization — including education, experience, sector, and gender. In some cases, unions are better able to organize workers in industries or workplaces that would pay higher wages anyway (thanks to productivity, competitive conditions, or management attitudes), in which case not all of the simple unadjusted wage premium can be attributed to the influence of the union and collective bargaining. As explained in the Appendix, therefore, data on the union wage advantage must be interpreted with caution.

Our analysis of unpublished Statistics Canada Labour Force Survey data indicates that across Canada's labour market as a whole in 2022, average hourly wages for workers covered by a union contract were 11.7% higher than for those without a union contract. This union wage advantage is much larger for women (20.0%) than for men (6.0%). More than half of union members in Canada are women, and most of them work in the broader public sector (including health care and social services, education, and public administration). For various reasons (including a higher average level of education and qualifications, different management practices, and widespread sector-wide bargaining structures), average wages in public sector jobs are somewhat higher than in the private sector. This is one of the factors explaining the relatively stronger impact of union coverage on wages for women.[10]

Union coverage also has a marked positive impact on average wages for racialized workers, although the size of this advantage is smaller than for the labour market as a

[10] This is consistent with the findings of other research summarized in the Appendix, including Card et al. (2020) for Canada and Kerrissey and Meyers (2022) for the U.S.

whole. Table 6 reports the unadjusted union wage premium for racialized workers, including a breakdown by gender.

Table 6.

Union Coverage and Average Wages for Racialized Workers

Racialized Men	
Non-Union Covered	$31.90
Union Covered	$32.51
Union Advantage	1.9%
Racialized Women	
Non-Union Covered	$26.28
Union Covered	$30.01
Union Advantage	14.2%
All Racialized Workers	
Non-Union Covered	$29.14
Union Covered	$31.16
Union Advantage	6.9%

Source: Authors' calculations from Statistics Canada unpublished Labour Force Survey data.

[1] Compares racialized to non-racialized categories.

Across both genders, average hourly wages are $2.02 higher for racialized workers covered by a union contract, than for racialized workers without a union contract. That represents a union wage advantage of just under 7%. The union wage advantage is much larger for racialized women, than for racialized men — mirroring the similar gender differential evident in the labour market as a whole. Again, this amplified impact of union coverage on wages for racialized women is closely associated with public sector employment. Of the 628,000 racialized women workers covered by a union agreement in 2022, almost three-quarters worked in the three major public sector industries: health care, education, and public administration. That is similar to the share of non-racialized union-covered women who worked in the same sectors (79%). For union-covered racialized men (540,000 in 2022), 40% worked in those same three largely public sector industries (again, about the same proportion as union-covered non-racialized men). For both racialized and non-racialized women, therefore, jobs in public service industries are vitally important to opportunities for unionization, collective bargaining, better jobs, and better wages.

Because of the relatively larger impact of union coverage on wages for racialized women workers, the gender wage gap is much smaller for union-covered racialized women than for non-union racialized women. Table 7 reports the gender wage gap for racialized and non-racialized women, for both union-covered and non-covered workers.

Table 7.

Unions and the Gender Wage Gap

	Non-Union			Union			All Workers		
	Male Wage	**Female Wage**	**Gender Gap**	**Male Wage**	**Female Wage**	**Gender Gap**	**Male Wage**	**Female Wage**	**Gender Gap**
Non-racialized	$34.31	$28.57	-16.8%	$36.50	$34.44	-5.6%	$34.98	$30.61	-12.5%
Racialized Workers	$31.90	$26.28	-17.6%	$32.51	$30.01	-7.7%	$32.04	$27.26	-14.9%
Total	$33.60	$27.85	-17.1%	$35.62	$33.41	-6.2%	$34.17	$29.65	-13.2%

Source: Authors' calculations from Statistics Canada unpublished Labour Force Survey data.

For racialized women, union coverage reduces the gender wage gap by 10 percentage points: from 17.6% for non-union-covered racialized women, to 7.7% for those with a union contract. That is similar in scale to the effect of union coverage in reducing the gender pay gap for non-racialized women workers — although both for non-union-covered and union-covered non-racialized women, the gender pay gap is slightly smaller than for racialized women.

Sector Employment Patterns and Union Coverage for Racialized Workers

There are many factors affecting the success of unions in lifting wages for racialized workers (and other workers) that complicate interpretation of these union wage effects (as discussed further in the Appendix). For example, public sector occupations are the most heavily unionized. Other sectors with relatively strong union power include transportation, utilities, manufacturing, wholesale trade, and construction. Most private sector services industries (including retail trade, hospitality, and financial services) have relatively less union representation. Therefore, one factor influencing differences in the impact of unions for racialized workers is the sectoral composition of employment for different racialized categories of workers. If racialized workers are disproportionately concentrated in industries with relatively low unionization, then estimated union wage premia for these workers might be lower (due to a lack of union presence and bargaining power).

On the other hand, it is also possible that racialized workers might experience different rates of union coverage even within a given sector. This could be the case for several reasons. For example, it may be that within a certain industry, racialized workers are disproportionately employed in workplaces or jobs which are harder to unionize. As noted above, racialized workers are disproportionately employed in outsourced, insecure, or gig-type jobs in any given sector; that concentration in less secure, less unionized jobs will pull down the overall unionization rate for racialized workers in

any sector. Or, it may be that unions have not built sufficient presence and support among racialized workers, to lift union coverage rates for those populations, even though unions are more present among non-racialized workers in the same industries.

Finally, for any given rate of union coverage, there may be differences in the extent to which that coverage translates into concrete improvements, including higher wages. This could reflect economic conditions within the sector (such as the intensity of competition among firms, constraining union leverage), the degree of coordination in collective bargaining (such as the presence of pattern or sectoral bargaining arrangements), a failure of unions to achieve a critical mass of bargaining power to achieve higher wages, or the degree of solidarity and militance among union members.

The Appendix of this report provides further analysis of differences across racialized categories in all three of these dimensions: differences in sectoral employment shares, differences in union coverage within sectors, and differences in union wage premia. As explained in more detail in the Appendix, it turns out that all three factors contribute to lower union coverage, and a smaller union wage premium, for racialized workers.

The Aggregate Union Wage Advantage for Racialized Workers

Clearly, there is a complex and nuanced set of factors explaining different union representation and union wage effects across different categories of racialized workers in Canada. Even taking into account these differential impacts across racialized, gender, and sectoral categories, however, it is clear that trade unions — by providing workers with collective voice, bargaining power, and legal protections — have a strong and positive impact on the lives of racialized workers and their families. These benefits are summarized in Table 8.

Table 8.

The Union Advantage for Racialized Workers, 2022

Racialized Union Members	1.2 million
As Share Racialized Employment	24.5%
Average Union Wage	$31.16
Hourly Wage Advantage	+$2.02
Average per Year per Worker[1]	$3,270
For All Racialized Union Members	$3.8 billion

Source: Authors' calculations from Statistics Canada unpublished Labour Force Survey data (2022 annual average).

[1]Assumes economy-wide average working hours of 31.1 hours per week (Statistics Canada Table 14-10-0255-01).

There are about 1.2 million racialized workers in Canada covered by union contracts – and the vast majority of these are union members. About one in four racialized workers are covered by the terms of a union contract, and consequently experience better

wages, benefits, conditions, and job security. Their average hourly wage is more than $2 higher than the average for racialized workers who do not have union coverage.[11] On average, that works out to $3,270 additional annual income for each racialized worker covered by a union agreement (based on average hours worked in the broader labour market). This translates into an aggregate total of $3.8 billion in additional income for those union members per year.

Of course, higher wages are just one of many benefits for racialized workers arising from union representation. Protection from discrimination and arbitrary treatment at work; better job security; access to representation and grievance procedures; and entitlement to non-wage benefits (like pensions and supplemental health benefits) amplify the benefits for racialized workers of union representation. Indeed, for many workers these broader benefits — including a general desire to win more respect and voice at work — are more important than wages alone in motivating union membership and activism.[12]

Despite these benefits, it is also clear that racialized workers in Canada need more union representation, more collective agreement coverage, and more bargaining power. The proportion of racialized workers represented by unions is too low — significantly lower than for non-racialized workers. To some extent this reflects the disproportionate presence of racialized workers in some hard-to-organize sectors of the economy. But even within more heavily unionized industries (including public services like education and health care), union representation for racialized workers is lower than for other workers. Lower union representation and other structural factors, in turn, limit the extent to which union contracts can deliver better wages and other benefits for racialized workers.

In sum, these findings confirm that Canada's union movement needs to improve its presence, effectiveness, and bargaining power among racialized workers. To that end, the next section of this paper considers evidence from qualitative interviews with trade unionists who have been working to strengthen the movement's presence among racialized workers, and also catalogues some successful best practices that have been implemented by Canadian unions in their effort to strengthen their organization, engagement, and mobilization of racialized workers.

[11] As explained in the Appendix, the union wage premium is much larger when measured by comparing median (rather than average) wages, to better reflect the typical circumstances of a worker in the mid-point of the wage distribution, without being skewed by the very high incomes of a small group at the top. So this number underestimates the impact of union coverage on wages for typical racialized workers.

[12] Rosenfeld and Kleykamp (2012) stress a desire for protection from arbitrary management actions and racist discrimination as key reasons for the greater interest in unionization shown by Black workers in the U.S.

Building Stronger Unions for Racialized Workers

THIS SECTION OF THE REPORT CONTAINS FINDINGS from a two-pronged investigation of current efforts by Canadian unions to grow and mobilize their base of racialized members, advance their anti-racist advocacy and education efforts, and support greater participation and advancement within unions by racialized activists and leaders. First, we recount key findings from semi-structured interviews with fifteen racialized union activists and leaders, who shared with us their experiences in their respective unions (which covered a range of private and public-sector unions and workplaces). These interviews identified numerous constraints, challenges, and opportunities that have shaped their experiences as union activists, and which can inform and improve future practices by unions striving to better meet the needs of racialized workers. Second, we provide a summary catalogue of promising practices that have been implemented by several Canadian unions, that seem to hold great potential for strengthening unions' organizing and mobilizing among racialized workers.

Experiences of Racialized Union Activists and Leaders

Below we summarize the key findings from semi-structured interviews conducted with fifteen key informants (between May 2022 and October 2023). These interviews generated rich qualitative data on how racialized trade unionists are working to build a more representative and effective movement — but also where they have confronted barriers and limitations. To facilitate full and frank conversations, the identities of these key informants are kept confidential. Our identification of key themes from the interviews is supplemented by selected quotes from transcripts from the interviews.[13]

[13] Throughout the following pages, quotations indicated in italics represent quotes from transcripts of interviews or other verbal presentations.

The conversations identified several common themes, organized in the discussion below into two broad categories: “advantages” and “challenges”.

Advantages

1. Unions are a venue for justice work.

Most racialized trade unionists are motivated to get involved in their union by their own frustration and/or complaints about their workplaces. Whether it is management prioritizing productivity over health and safety, or a school which marginalizes pupils with special needs, racialized union members expressed repeated concerns over favouritism, harassment and other discriminatory practices in their workplaces. Union representation and grievance procedures provide an alternative potential recourse for redress. Through witnessing how their complaints are handled, and through direct contact with their local leadership, some members get ‘hooked’ and become more curious about the union — and in many cases this opens the door to ongoing union activism.

> *“I always know the values of union, with my father being a postal office worker; I know the security that we had because of the union.”*

> *“I started getting involved with the union as a result of a complaint and became part of the Gay and Straight Alliance. It has been very soulful work!”*

> *“It’s such a powerful act to form union with your co-workers. Racism, mental health, health and safety issues when they are employer driven, nothing changes. When it is union-driven, 100% change by organizing. How powerful and transformative it can be! It is most rewarding.”*

Some of our racialized informants became union activists through initial organizing drives in their workplaces. Those drives were born from a sense of rage and determination to address discriminatory workplace practices. A shared desire for fairness and respect often fuels workers to stand up to threats and intimidation from employers and supervisors. In some instances, even after a failed union drive, some workers continued with their activism in the labour movement, finding other avenues for engagement (in some cases through a new job).

2. Unions are a place to connect with activist mentors and role models.

In unionized workplaces, the importance of having someone who recognizes your interest, ratifies your potential, and encourages you to get involved can be critical and transformative in helping shape a rank-and-file member into an activist and leader. The support extended by these mentors opens invaluable opportunities for younger racialized members searching for a sense of belonging within their union.

> *“Having a local president who is a person of colour made such a difference, to get that welcome was so rare. He saw me and encouraged me to get involved. I consider myself lucky. Someone tapped you and gave you opportunities. I have to pay it forward.”*

"My leader was willing to be vulnerable with me. She reached out and wanted me there! The system needs to have a level of mentorship that is willing to say more ahead of me is a good thing. We hold people down until it's their time!"

This orientation and mentoring for up-and-coming racialized union activists is dependent on the presence of a diverse and representative union leadership within a unionized workplace. The presence of role models, such as more experienced racialized activists who are stewards or unit chairs, can make a great difference in encouraging racialized members to become more involved in their unions. Unions would benefit from deliberate mentorship and bridging programs that are culturally sensitive and equitable to ensure that potential racialized activists are not overlooked.

3. A space for leadership development and change-makers.

The sense of pride felt by members from marginalized backgrounds as a result of getting elected to top leadership positions, and thus making history in their unions, can be transformative for both workers and the union.

"My election is a testament to empowering racialized workers and women like myself. I want to create more opportunities to bring others up! This is not about conquering and dividing, but about how we can build a stronger labour movement to fight the austerity agenda!"

"My father used to describe the union as a pond filled with sharks and warned me not to be the bleeding fish. If you're the bleeding fish, you have to fight hard. No matter how unwell, you have to take your space and own it. In 2017, I became the first Black woman elected as the 1st VP of my local, the first in 81 years."

"After the training, the participants felt so empowered, assertive and wanting to do more. We just need to keep lifting them up. It doesn't have to be the selected few all the time."

The elation of reaching a milestone such as election to a union position is intertwined with pressure and expectations coming from all sides. Being the first can be a double-edged sword, since one now has to manage expectations from racialized members who assume you now have the power to make all the systemic barriers disappear. There is also constant monitoring by white executive and members who may be questioning your every move.

As a result, some racialized activists have opted to make their contribution from behind top elected leaders, by taking up a specialty area such as health and safety, human rights, etc.

"There are different ways of becoming a leader. There are those who take the staircase approach by moving up the rank; but for me as a human right activist, I prefer the spider-web networking to get the necessary support for change. The best way is to identify allies with the same values and advise them from behind. The recognition doesn't come to me, but there is change. As long as it's good for the movement, that's good enough for me!"

Within this 'spider-web' approach, the impact of these activists in shaping the policies of their respective unions cannot be underestimated. It stems from their expertise and the trust built over the years from standing behind the elected leadership. As a result, they are seen as loyal advisors rather than as potential adversaries.

4. For future generations.

The sense of purpose and the determination to "pay it forward", to open up more space within the labour movement for future generations of activists, is poignantly demonstrated in the following quotes:

> *"I'm breaking the mold; I'm raising two young women leaders. They can see it. They can feel the toil. People may not want us to be here… but we are going to take up space in front of the kids."*

> *"I'm not here to be the flavour of the month. We want lasting impact. Oppression is like a wall. At some point, it'll collapse… we need the sledgehammer to strike, to chip away… We need to challenge white privilege… make the pathway for those who are coming behind me, call out the bad behaviour so the young ones shouldn't have to deal with what we have gone through."*

Undeterred by the challenges of racism and other forms of oppression, there is a collective mission shared by these activists and leaders to continue resistance against systemic racism and white supremacy.

Challenges

1. Working doubly or triply hard and still not being seen.

The sense of not being seen, heard or acknowledged despite extra efforts is a constant and common refrain shared by interview participants, regardless of their position within their unions. Whether elected leaders, organizers, or rank and file activists, frustration over the invisibility of their work within their respective unions is palpable.

> *"I'm held back/blocked because of my race and who I am. I've worked really hard and watched white men moving up… what about me? I don't understand. What's the excuse?"*

> *"Why aren't we there? We've less of an opportunity to be recognized? How to bring things to the forefront?"*

> *"I want them to see me as equal, as a whole person. How did you exclude me in the first place? What if you're the ones who are invisible, imagine that. What can you tell me when you always have privilege at your fingertips? The system is working [because] it has been propped up."*

At the same time, racialized unionists are conditioned to accept this 'norm' as part of the necessary trade-off that comes with the position.

2. Qualified enough, deserving enough, or 'white' enough?

For Black and racialized workers elected into leadership positions, their experiences, ideas and recommendations for change are often taken to task, meticulously reviewed, and challenged. The line of questioning is often carried out under the guise of legality and/or budgetary constraints, with the ultimate purpose to undermine the authority and ability of an elected racialized leader.

> *"Every day is a struggle… I'm being undermined on a daily basis. It is as if they are questioning whether I'm qualified enough, knowing enough to make such a motion! It is as if we can't think for ourselves. There is so much resentment that I'm here. The white folks feel humiliated as I remind them of their own failure."*

> *"So many young people of colour are getting active in the union, but they are never seen as qualified enough, articulate enough. Our labour movement is stagnant…we're afraid of change. Puppetry is happening."*

> *The hostility and resentment towards newly elected racialized leaders is reflected in the above quotes from two key informants in recounting their daily experiences in confronting systemic racism.*

> *"I'd make the room uncomfortable. I'm not allowed to say certain things. I'm not allowed to be angry. It really takes a lot to restrain myself. I have to know my audience and be mindful with certain things I say... I'm here to be white…the code switching!"*

For some Black and racialized activists in either elected or staff positions, the notion of 'fitting in' becomes the 'ticket'. 'Fitting in' is the code word for acting white or white-passing, in order to 'get up there'. The necessity for masking and code switching is deemed as a survival game.

3. 'Divide and rule' and internalized racism.

It is commonly known that elected leadership, union staff representatives, and organizers are in highly stressful positions, need to be available 24/7. For racialized staff who came up as rank-and-file activists, an additional stressor is potential resentment and jealousy from fellow members who have also endured systemic racism in workplaces and in broader society. In workplaces with racially diverse membership and union staff, it is not uncommon for management and/or white union staff colleagues to conveniently use internalized racism to further divide members into opposing camps. Questions pertaining to the competency and even the accents of racialized staff representatives are raised to create doubt among membership and reinforce racist stereotypes that only white staff who are English native speakers are the most qualified.

> *"As trade unionists, we can't fight in front of management. You never know whom you are talking to. There is 'the white circle of love'. 'Are you okay?' They protect each other. They are way more forgiving towards a white brother or sister."*

> *"Even though you've been bullied [since] when you first came to Canada, …this is different, there is the whole group of them so concentrated, so intensive, so much gas lighting that it affects your mental health and you can't let them see you're hurting. I never complain; you have to be mindful as to who you are talking to. There are days that you just want to quit. You have to hold it together. You can't let them see that they are winning."*

In some cases, such tension and divisiveness within a local have led to unfortunate events such as decertification. Regardless of the final outcome of a decertification campaign in a particular workplace, the painful divisions caused by a decertification campaign drain unions' limited resources and, at times, impose detrimental health consequences for racialized leadership.

4. Alone at the top, and "running out of emotional bandwidth."

The emotional toll of having to cope with systemic racism and micro-aggression in both the workplace and in the union can be overwhelming. The anguish and pain that many of these elected leaders and staff carry was, at times, unbearable to listen to.

> *"My very fire was being quenched, being cornered in a box; I don't feel valued with what I can bring… We become 'collateral damage' as the person out in front. You get destroyed! You forget about the good things that you should be proud of when people are trying to tear you down."*

> *"We've been too polite; we're supposed to feel grateful that we're allowed to live in this 'superior' society. We are not into identity or oppression Olympics!"*

For some elected leaders, aside from working in a toxic environment, there is also the unrelenting pressure of having to prove that you are the 'right' choice for the position, to navigate through the 'roadblocks', and last but not least, having to be composed and hold it all together.

> *"Once I get elected, it's stressful to stay afloat like ducks, making sure people don't notice that you're kicking like crazy under the water. An elected position can be a privilege and a curse. It is tokenism and I refuse to be a yes person."*

> *"Sometimes we play respectability politics perpetuating the practices out of fear and lack of support… it's so complicated. There is nuance in everything when people come from all different perspectives. The power struggle comes at an incredible personal cost. At what point is the cost too great? What am I sacrificing for?"*

> *"It's really lonely at the top. I think that there should be some type of regenerating group to fill up your cup and be grateful again… having someone who has gone through similar experiences to cry and laugh with, someone who doesn't think that you're crazy or being paranoid!"*

There is great urgency to provide immediate protection for elected Black, Indigenous and worker of colour leaders who are striving to advance an equity agenda within

their unions. Many have expressed the importance of having both organizational support and informal networking.

5. "Allyship is not a gym membership!"

This powerful quote by a sister in a private sector union, encapsulates the commitment that Black and racialized workers are asking of their white comrades within the labour movement. Confronting white supremacy and systemic racism is not like a gym membership – that one can choose to 'join or drop' at a whim.

> *"Allyship is such a buzzword, so sexy. People are climbing over each other to speak for equity seeking people. White folks can't speak for me. I'm choosing to center my Black and Asian colleagues, their voices and presence. We need to stop handling white people with white gloves. They need to educate themselves."*

It has been primarily racialized activists doing the heavy lifting in organizing and advancing the equity agenda. The quotes below underscore their frustration – and their desire for white comrades to step up and work as true allies in dismantling systemic barriers of racism and white supremacy.

> *"Nobody says anything. They are scared and don't want to be the targets. You can take the hit. The white fragility is too much to handle. You need to stop… the biggest thing is to stop the bystanders, they need to step up and that will make such a difference. It doesn't have to be a big gesture. People can figure it out."*

> *"We need people to be comfortable enough to speak up at the moment when they see injustices and not just giving backroom and hallway support… to see others speaking up and speaking out when it is actually happening… That is empowering. Someone is doing it with ME!"*

Best Practices in Building Stronger Anti-racist Unions

Despite systemic barriers and obstacles, Black and racialized elected leaders have made significant strides in shifting union structures and workplace culture by centering anti-racism and equity at the core of their work. Their leadership and commitment in using their relative positional power and influence to challenge the status quo have resulted in transformative change within their unions. Their actions are intentional and impactful in making unions more welcoming and inclusive spaces for both their members and non-unionized workers in the broader community.

Our key informant interviews, and a review of published research and documentation from many union struggles and campaigns, has helped to identify several best practices and priorities that racialized union activists and leaders have successfully wielded in their work. Below we list five such best practices, illustrated with specific examples from particular Canadian unions which used them. Together, these best practices reflect the scope and seriousness of the commitment to systemic change that racialized leaders, by centering an anti-racism and equity agenda, have brought to their unions.

1. Building authentic and deeper labour-community relations.

The presence of Black and racialized leaders and activists has served as a bridge for organized labour to build more authentic connections with various communities by virtue of their own family ties and affinity with the group. The goodwill generated from these initiatives then has a lasting positive impact in the communities, heightening the profile and credibility of the unions with racialized populations. Unions should embrace this labour-community partnership model as an essential pre-organizing strategy to deepen access and trust among non-unionized workers. Examples of this best practice in action include the following:

CUPW: Celebrating Albert Jackson (2019)

As a former child slave who escaped the Southern states via the Underground Railroad, Albert Jackson withstood insurmountable challenges to become the first Black letter carrier in Canada. When his co-workers refused to train him, Jackson fought back with the strong support of the Black community and kept his job delivering mail for 36 years. The CUPW's National Human Rights Committee, upon learning of his story in 2013, created a poster honouring Jackson as an early pioneer and Black unionist.

This union initiative led to subsequent recognition from Canada Post. This included issuing a stamp honouring Albert Jackson in February 2019, and the official opening of the Albert Jackson Processing Centre in Scarborough on September 20, 2023. Jan Simpson, now the National President of CUPW, was involved in the Albert Jackson project from the very beginning: as chair of the union's Human Rights Committee, she played a key role bringing this project to fruition. Writing in her weekly President's Blog to CUPW members (Simpson 2023), she noted:

> *"Since 2013, we have shared Jackson's important story of struggle for dignity, respect, health and safety, and fairness in the workplace – things we continue to fight for every day. This facility offers Canada Post an opportunity to preserve Jackson's legacy and the importance of equality and respect in the workplace. It was also wonderful to share the day CUPW members and with members of Albert Jackson's family, two of which currently work at the post office."*

In excavating and celebrating the history of early pioneers like Albert Jackson, CUPW has not only generated goodwill and connections for future collaboration, it has also enabled labour and the broader community to recognize those who have been missed and omitted from the recorded history of the working class in Canada.

OSSTF District 16: Black York Region Youth Network (2020)

Black York Region Youth (BYR Youth) was founded in 2020 by four youth, plus a teacher and member of District 16 of OSSTF, Vanessa Stoby, who acted as their adult mentor. The network came together with the purpose of combating anti-Black racism, systemic racism, anti-Indigenous hate, and discrimination in all of its forms

within York Region and surrounding communities. The pride and enthusiasm unleashed by this project is evident in Stoby's words (by this time the 1st Vice-President of OSSTF District 16) in an interview with Labour Community Services, on occasion of receiving the Bromley Armstrong Leadership Award in 2022:

> *"As educators, we recognize that there is a void within the community organizing of youth and civic engagement. Youth feel oppressed. They don't know where to turn and they don't know their own power. As union activists, we kept talking to the youth and organized a panel to challenge the York Board. We're energizing young leaders to come together, learn from each other; and lean on each other. This is community organizing with a strategic synergy. That's how unionism works… building the US!"*

BYR Youth has now received support from the Trillium Foundation to host a Black youth leadership forum, and continues to push the York Region school board for tangible change in fighting racism within the school system. The racialized leadership of OSSTF District 16 recognized the need, connected the dots, and initiated this intentional community outreach that is making a real impact in the community.

PSAC Ontario: The Black Workers Resource Hub (2022)

During the COVID pandemic, the Jamaican Canadian Centre set up a vaccine clinic. But the clinic was flooded with inquiries from Black workers who were struggling to cope with layoffs, terminations or unsafe work conditions. Andria Babbington, President of the Toronto & York Region Labour Council, Tanya Ferguson, PSAC Ontario Region Organizing Director, and Adaoma Patterson, President of the Jamaican Canadian Association, shared the sense of urgency behind this initiative (Babbington, Ferguson, and Patterson, 2022):

> *"We heard from those who worked under the table and found themselves with no income or supports overnight. We heard from migrant workers who were told by their employers that they were not permitted to leave their bunkhouses at any time, even though forcible confinement was never a part of the COVID response...people who were sick with COVID and other illnesses who did not qualify for the temporary COVID protections afforded to others…we saw that Black workers are at the core of the most essential sectors of the economy and that racism continues to be an additional factor when Black workers seek crucial supports."*

As a result, labour and community came together in May 2022 to host a Workers' Rights Clinic offering a free and safe space for Black workers. PSAC Ontario played a key role in bringing community partners and labour activists into the same room to set up display tables and share practical information and advocacy advice on workplace concerns.

The Black Workers Resource Hub, with its impressive list of participating unions and community agencies, also received high profile media coverage. The event has now become an annual collaborative showcase for organized labour and the community.

The template has also been taken up by the Chinese Workers Network of the Toronto & York Region Labour Council, in partnership with the Workers Action Centre, to reach out to newcomers from Hong Kong in recent years. This type of labour-initiated community outreach has proven to be an effective pre-organizing strategy: not only providing practical labour rights information, but also offering union organizing as a direct solution to address workplace concerns.

USW Local 1998 and Toronto Area Council: Anti-Racism as a Trade Union Fight (2020)[14]

Mark Austin, a United Steelworkers health and safety officer at the University of Toronto, and Candace Zinkweg, also a USW member, are a biracial couple. On June 25, 2020, they were assaulted by three white assailants as they walked their dog in Dentonia Park in east Toronto. Candace had her cell phone stolen, was knocked to the ground, and then kicked in the head. Mark was also violently assaulted and repeatedly subjected to racist abuse.

The police were slow to arrive on the scene, did not seek a statement from the victims, and when questioned about why they had not laid charges against the assailants replied, "It's he said, she said." This was despite Candace having been taken to hospital on a stretcher after the assault.

Upon hearing of the assault, fellow Steelworkers who are active in Toronto East Anti-hate Mobilization (TEAM) contacted Mark and Candace to organize a response. TEAM, along with USW Local 1998, the Steelworkers Toronto Area Council, and other supporting organizations, organized a rally on July 6, 2020 at local police headquarters to demand the police immediately lay charges against the assailants, and publicly apologize for their inaction in the face of a clear violent assault and racist abuse.

At the July rally (attended by hundreds of people), Mark described their experience of both the assault and racist treatment at the hands of the police. Speakers from a broad section of community and labour organizations addressed the crowd, including the Black Action Defense Committee, TEAM, #Beachers for Black Lives, the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists, the Caribbean Solidarity Network, the national and district directors of USW, and the local member of provincial parliament.

The rally generated significant media coverage. As well, the Steelworker Ontario Director sent a letter to the Police Services Board and then-mayor John Tory. Under growing pressure, arrests were eventually made. The mobilizing ignited ongoing energy and concern, and more local groups got involved. On August 29, 2020, a second rally was held under the banner of Reclaim Dentonia Park. The cricket pitch was decorated with anti-hate banners and placards painted by children in the park. A USW news release (United Steelworkers 2020) issued to publicize the second rally identi-

[14] This sub-section is based on a brief report prepared by Michelle Robideaux and Carolyn Egan in October 2023, in response to interview questions regarding USW Toronto Area Council's mobilizing strategies.

fied racism in the community as a problem that trade unions have a responsibility to confront:

> "An injury to one is an injury to all, and that includes when it comes to systemic racism. We must, as trade unionists, take on systemic racism with the same vigour that we take on health and safety concerns and so many other issues that we tackle every day for workers. Racism is toxic — it is damaging to our solidarity, to our health and to the well being of all workers. Anti-racism is a trade union fight."

Mark and Candace are not only trade unionists: they are also members of their neighbourhood and community. Their union and its leaders recognized the shared responsibility of tackling white supremacy in the community, beyond the workplace. The joint labour-community mobilizing and advocacy efforts sustained over a period of months made a tangible difference in holding the police accountable, and lifting the community's spirit.

These examples show that unions that are willing to take on anti-racism as a core priority, outside of the workplace as well as within it, can successfully build strong networks and credibility in communities, which in turn can only enhance their efforts to organize workers and advance their interests in the workplace.

2. Internal organizing and constitutional change.

In recognizing that equity work needs concrete outcomes and accountability, not just well-crafted statements adopted at conventions, several unions under elected racialized leadership have taken up the challenge of internal organizing around racism and the need for systemic change. Here we consider groundbreaking best practices achieved at CUPE Ontario and two OSSTF Districts:

CUPE Ontario: Anti-Racism Organizational Action Plan (AROAP)

CUPE Ontario, representing over 250,000 members, made a bold and serious move in adopting an Anti-Racism Organizational Action Plan (AROAP) at its Convention in 2019. The groundwork for this deliberate and planned process to create organizational change within the union began a year earlier, at the 2018 Convention. In an interview, Yolanda McClean, President of the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists (CBTU) for Canada, Secretary Treasurer of CUPE Ontario, and CUPE National Vice President on Equity, recalled the motivation behind this mobilizing effort for constitutional change:

> *"There were 50 Black and racialized delegates at the Convention in 2018. 50 people are a critical mass. What can we do in the middle of the convention to change the culture of our organization? We discussed it in our caucus, leaned on elected local leaders and allies, and organized. After the convention, we engaged two external facilitators – Carol Wall and Jojo Geronimo – to guide us through the process, and came up with an action plan for adoption in 2019."*

The Action Plan (CUPE Ontario 2019) established three priorities:

- to increase the participation and representation of racialized and indigenous members, with a focus on racialized and indigenous women at CUPE Ontario conventions, and in conferences, schools, and leadership meetings;
- to provide a leadership training program for Black, Indigenous, and worker of colour members;
- to conduct a review of CUPE Ontario polices through an anti-racism lens.

The approach adopted by the AROAP Subcommittee proposed a "4 A's" methodology: Assess, Aim, Act, and Audit. This was intended to be a systematic approach to increase the number of racialized union representatives, and thus better reflect the diversity of the union's membership. The presence of committed leadership in moving this agenda forward impressed Carol Wall, one of the external facilitators supporting the process, as expressed in an interview:

> *"I saw the type of Leadership this moment calls for when Fred Hahn, the President of CUPE Ontario, supported and took the lead from Yolanda McLean, Equity Vice President, attending every meeting to develop their Anti-Racism Organizational Action Plan (AROAP). He was fully engaged, didn't dominate the spaces, set his phone aside, participated in workshop breakout groups, was open to being challenged, acknowledged his learning and privilege, and shared his concerns about barriers the committee may face."*

Wall's reflection speaks to the importance of having white allies and co-conspirators who share a deep desire to get it right, to maintain transparency, and to build ownership among members from the ground up.

OSSTF Districts 16 & 12: Constitutional Amendments

In the education sector, the normalcy of everyday racism and in particular, anti-Black racism, has had devastating and lasting impacts on the lives and well-being of Black students, parents, administrators, staff and teachers. According to the TDSB Annual Human Rights Report (2021), race-related complaints made up 69 per cent of all reported hate incidents in the 2019-2020 school year, with anti-Black racism constituting the biggest share.

Building on the momentum created by the global Black Lives Matter movement, a number of Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation (OSSTF) Districts took up the issue of anti-Black racism seriously, and undertook some historic and transformative changes within their union. Two outstanding examples are provided by initiatives from District 16 and District 12 of the union.

District 16 (representing teachers in York Region) amended its constitution to include a full-time Dismantling Anti-Black Racism, Equity, Anti-Racism and Anti-Oppression Officer, and also to establish a Black Caucus Committee.

In her own words, Vanessa Stoby, 1st VP of OSSTF District 16, recounted the genesis of this initiative, in remarks to the 2021 Labour Community Services Black History Month event (Stoby 2021):

> *"There was a moment in June 2020 that we all couldn't breathe. My 16-year old niece even came to me asking what she could do to make a difference. That's when I knew that I needed to step up, to be accountable. What can I do within my own union with 4000 members? We needed to make the change we want to see.*
>
> *"Along with three co-conspirators, we looked at our union constitution. We wanted our union to name, acknowledge and address anti-Black racism. We need to make real change, system change. We thought of three things. One of them was to actually enshrine a position in the Constitution that would pro-actively and actively dismantle ABR in many different ways. That is to have an ABR Officer who is time-released, who has the ability to have a mandate, to have the power and I say, always to have the teeth to break down those doors to support Black voice and Black Identity."*

It is inspiring to note that Stoby referred to her allies as "co-conspirators." This implies a deeper sense of comradeship, having each other's backs and sharing the goals of collective struggle. The group was also successful in winning the inclusion of a Black Caucus committee in District 16's constitution, where Black teachers in York Region can be heard and support each other.

Influenced by this change, another OSSTF District, District 12 in Toronto, also amended its Constitution in June 2021 to enshrine fighting anti-Black racism as a core function of the union. The amendment included four additional Dismantling ABR and Intersectional Oppression Executives on the District's executive board. Delegates also adopted a related motion to apply a new member levy dedicated to funding these four Executive positions for up to 30 days' time release during each school year, in order to complete their new responsibilities.

These groundbreaking actions challenged the internal working of the respective unions, confirming the boldness and creativity that racialized activists take in ensuring their unions make the struggle against racism a top priority. Moving forward, it will be critical to review the progress of these and other initiatives within OSSTF, and the impact the new anti-Black racism executives are having within the union, within schools, and within the broader community.

3. Centering equity in representation and collective bargaining.

Within the labour movement, discussions of race, gender and other equity issues are often dismissed as 'identity politics', portrayed as a distraction from the supposedly more pertinent 'bread-and-butter' issues of unions. Equity demands are often the first

to be dropped from the bargaining table. Traditional union leadership has been reluctant to acknowledge the complexity of race, gender and class in an intersectional framework, as Kelley (2021) so clearly states:

> *"Race is not primarily an identity but a structure of power, or a means of structuring power thru difference… [It] not only produces deep race, class and gender inequalities but continues to keep a segment of the white working class in a state of precarity while convincing them Black and Brown people are to blame."*

For a racialized member who is experiencing discrimination at work and contemplating filing a grievance, the need to be heard and to be taken seriously by a shop steward and/or elected executive is paramount. Furthermore, the catchall phrase that is written in every grievance form filed as part of the redress is to demand to 'be made whole'.

Members of union grievance handling and bargaining committees need to recognize that 'being made whole' for Black and racialized workers means seeing these members from the intersectional perspectives of race, class and gender. The following best practice examples illustrate that economic justice and racial justice are inseparable in the collective pursuit to be treated as 'whole'.

Unifor: Racial Justice Advocates in Workplaces

In response to the global Black Lives Matter protest movement in 2020, some unions seized this rare moment when racism was made visible to advance an equity agenda in their bargaining. Unifor was successful in negotiating with the Detroit Three automakers — Ford, Chrysler and General Motors — new language to create a Racial Justice Advocate (RJA) position in each facility. Mirroring the union's longstanding women's advocate model, each president of local unions covered by the master agreement is responsible for selecting the RJA in their facility, with input from self-identifying Black, Indigenous and racialized union members.

The responsibilities of the RJA are to co-develop a workplace-based Anti-Racism Action Plan, and provide support to fellow union members on matters related to racial discrimination and racial violence. They are also charged with networking with allied organizations and community partners. In addition, the new collective agreement language also recognizes March 21, the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, whereby "each facility covered by the agreement will observe one minute of reflection in recognition to re-affirm the joint commitment to end racism" (Unifor n.d.).

This unprecedented bargaining win on racial equity places a bigger onus on employers to engage in more meaningful and long-term anti-racism efforts in these unionized workplaces. It also mobilizes resources (funded by the employer) to provide ongoing union outreach, education, and support for its racialized members. Winning similar equity-seeking contract language and outcomes across other workplaces and

sectors holds great potential to cement the priority and visibility of anti-racism work as a core function of unions.

OSSTF District 12 Professional Student Services Personnel (PSSP) Unit: Equity Hiring

Collective bargaining has the potential to take steps to tear down some of the structural problems that disadvantage equity-seeking members within their workplaces. Some of these incremental gains may not seem grandiose from the outside, but nevertheless constitute significant changes that benefit the most marginalized of the local membership. In bargaining with the Toronto school board, the District 12 PSSP Unit of OSSTF achieved a very concrete example of this potential.

80% of the Toronto PSSP Unit is comprised of Child and Youth (C&Y) workers who are predominately racialized women. Another 10% of members are in the professional category (such as social workers), and are mainly non-racialized. Traditionally, there were few opportunities for C&Y workers to successfully apply and move into the professional category. Under the leadership of Solange Scott, President of the Toronto PSSP Unit, and her Vice President, Daniela Melo, positive and tangible results are taking place. In an interview, Solange Scott summarized this bargaining progress as follows:

> *"Bargaining for equity hiring is intentional and purposeful. With the last round of bargaining, we have successfully added 60 new jobs. We facilitated the hiring from inside first where staff can apply for social work positions without losing their seniority. As a result, 15 social workers were hired internally… For the next round, we're going to push for new ground on equity. Within the Board, there is an eligibility-hiring list for C&Y counselors. Why do we need a separate list? Why are we gatekeeping 80% of my racialized members, many of whom are holding three jobs to make ends meet? It's a systemic problem. I want that list gone! I want my racialized members to access jobs with higher pay and security."*

By fighting for more equitable hiring practices through collective bargaining, the union can not only advance the interests of its racialized members seeking opportunities for better-paying jobs. It also positions the union as a powerful agent of anti-racist change, using its institutional power to create more equitable and inclusive workplaces. Again, that can only enhance the union's credibility and visibility among racialized workers, in and beyond the particular unionized workplace.

PSAC and Canadian Union of Labour Employees: Bargaining for Employment Equity

Unions themselves need to have more diverse staff, given the scope and depth of their work in collective bargaining, representation, organizing, and social justice campaigns. Very few unions have taken up the serious work of designing and implementing an employment equity plan for their own staff, even while their own memberships become increasingly diverse. Moreover, when staff are hired from different equity groups, they are often concentrated at the bottom of the organizational structure.

One union that has tackled this issue in its internal hiring and labour relations is the Public Service Alliance of Canada, which established an internal employment equity plan with its staff unions in 1995. In compliance with the Federal Employment Equity Act, PSAC and its staff union, the Canadian Union of Labour Employees (CULE), made a long-term commitment to achieve key employment equity goals.

In its latest round of bargaining for the 2023 -2025 collective agreement, CULE successfully negotiated cutting-edge language to strengthen both parties' acknowledgment of systemic discrimination, and provide new strategies to address these structural barriers. Features of the new agreement include the following:

- A new clause on systemic discrimination.
- A new enshrined commitment to advance anti-oppression work within the organization.
- A new clause of accountability for mandatory anti-oppression training for staff.
- New mandatory Duty to Accommodate training.
- A new mandatory training module related to Call to Action #57 of the National Truth and Reconciliation Commission.
- New mandatory Employment Equity training.

The intent of CULE is to strengthen language in the collective agreement to further advance these employment equity and training demands. It is worthy to note that the notion of accountability is emphasized repeatedly in the new contract clauses. Unions as employers can lead by example in centering and integrating equity in their internal collective bargaining. From grievance handling to health and safety protection, the differential treatment and impacts experienced by members of the equity groups can be addressed and prevented.

Toronto Community Benefits Network: Political Bargaining for Equity Hiring

The experience of the Toronto Community Benefits Network (TCBN) provides an outstanding example of two of the best practices we have identified: a strong labour-community partnership, and effective bargaining for employment equity (although in this case, the bargaining occurs at a political level, negotiating with governments over employment equity conditions attached to major infrastructure projects). The achievements of TCBN in increasing the participation of Black, Indigenous and racialized youth in the regional construction industry over the past decade demonstrates the possibility and potential of political bargaining for equity, when labour and community work together.

TCBN was founded in 2013 with the support of the Toronto & York Region Labour Council, several construction unions, and numerous community and advocacy organizations. It advances the principle that major public infrastructure and economic development projects should directly benefit members of immediate communities in

tangible and lasting ways, including through access to decent jobs in the project's construction and operation, and training opportunities for young workers.

The TCBN board is composed 50% of representatives from community organizations and 50% from organized labour. An initial Framework Agreement was signed in 2014 between the provincial transit agency Metrolinx and the TCBN committing to employment equity, training and apprenticeship, and other targets in the Eglinton Crosstown LRT project (Community Benefits Ontario 2017). This agreement represented a major step forward in employment equity — a goal largely ignored by provincial and municipal governments since the Harris Conservatives scrapped equity legislation in 1995. Since then, TCBN has signed other community benefit framework agreements with major project sponsors, including the City of Toronto and Woodbine Casino.

TCBN's advocacy on equity hiring for these major projects has been effective in challenging anti-Black racism and other forms of racism in the construction industry. In 2020, when several racist incidents occurred on Ontario construction sites, unions and employers jointly issued statements to condemn such acts, and the relationships and anti-racist education that had been undertaken through the community benefits movement helped lay a foundation for those responses. As Rosemarie Powell, the Executive director of TCBN, acknowledged (Powell 2021):

> *"The racially-motivated incidents are an indication that structural racism exists in the organizational structures, such as recruitment and retention that creates barriers for under-represented groups to access. The construction industry is not immune. Under the Community Benefits Framework agreement, hundreds of underrepresented youths have been hired in projects such as the Eglinton-Crosstown project, the Finch West LRT, the West Park Community Health Centre, and there are more to come… We need to build on the momentum to create an action plan that will root out the vestiges of systemic racism."*

The TCBN framework agreement model is not singularly driven by any one particular union or workplace. Indeed, the engagement of multiple stakeholders to bargain and achieve equity hiring goals within the construction industry is strategic and significant. The feasibility of adapting the TCBN template for other sectors where there is an under-representation of equity seeking group members hired as staff members should be further explored and examined. For example, the B.C. government has adopted a similar approach to negotiating community benefits attached to major infrastructure projects in that province (British Columbia Office of the Premier 2018).

4. Leadership development, mentoring, and support

Concretely and consistently supporting racialized union leaders is another best practice through which unions can demonstrate to their own members, and to the broader community, their commitment to anti-racism as core union business. Here are some examples of unions that are effectively and systematically supporting and training a new generation of racialized leaders:

SEIU Local One: Becoming an Anti-Racism Union

In 2016, responding to the call from its international union to prioritize inclusion, anti-racism and equity as foundations of the union's work, SEIU Local One (representing over 60,000 frontline healthcare members in Ontario) took up the challenge and never looked back. In the eight years since then, the local has systematically approached the task of building an anti-racism union. Tyler Downey, Secretary Treasurer of the local, has reviewed several key outcomes of this effort to shift the local's policies and practices (Downey 2023).

The local revamped its Executive Board to include seven seats specifically allocated to equity seeking groups: Indigenous workers, women, workers with disabilities, workers of colour, LGBTQ2+, young workers, and retirees. It encourages members to apply for various positions within the union; 50% of new hires in field staff and administration positions in the last six years were rank-and-file members of the union, not external hires. Today approximately half of the local's leadership and management team are Black and racialized workers. This reflects an intentional effort to ensure workers of colour are in positions of authority and influence in order to effect change in the union.

The local also established an internal Social Justice Commission, composed of officers and other members of the senior leadership team. They meet regularly to map out organizational plans for advancing the anti-racism and equity agenda. A social justice capacity building program has also been put in place to bolster this equity work. The local prepared a tool kit for stewards and staff representatives on how to confront employers and handle human rights and race-related complaints. And beginning in 2024, SEIU Healthcare will ask its vendors (including their legal team and other contractor firms) about their respective organizational practices to advance equity and inclusion within their own workplaces.

Downey shared this advice based on his own union's journey to becoming an anti-racism union:

> *"One thing I want to highlight is the mindset that has to be in place for union leaders to really do the work in a more effective manner across the union. It's the mindset of being open and being honest about the assessment of where you're at in the cycle of becoming an anti-racist organization, because the work is extremely difficult. It's not work that you're going to get done in one day or overnight. It's work that has to be ongoing. There has to be a true commitment to doing the work, making sure that, one, people feel welcome, but two, you're including people in a meaningful way, making sure people across race lines, cultural lines, across genders in different roles and positions, not tokenism… feel like their voices are being heard and that they are a true part of the union." (Downey 2023)*

Knowing that such work is carried out daily by racialized workers in elected leadership positions today, and knowing that another generation of emerging Black and

racialized leaders is right behind them (thanks in part to deliberate leadership development efforts by the union), inspires great hope that the union will advance its anti-racism work even further.

CUPE Ontario: Women in Leadership Development Program

As one of its Anti-Racism Organizational Action Plan priorities, CUPE Ontario developed a new training program, Women in Leadership Development (WILD), tailored for Black, Indigenous and racialized women. It is a leadership capacity-building initiative that not only opens doors in the union for Black women, Indigenous women, and women of colour, but also challenges traditional leaders to seek out and identify a wider pool of potential racialized activists.

The first call for registration in the WILD program was met with great enthusiasm. From 80 women applicants, 15 were selected for a two-week intensive training program. One unique feature of the WILD approach to leadership training is the creation of a mentoring or 'femtorship' support system, lasting one year after the completion of the training. A group of seasoned labour activists and leaders was recruited; each will be matched with a WILD 'graduate' to provide strategic advice and support over the following year.

This mentoring support is often a missing link when newly-trained participants return to the workplace fully energized, ready to change the world, only to be met by familiar roadblocks and/or indifference. The presence of a mentor to support emerging leaders, and help them navigate these minefields, is a key component for helping new graduates stay the course. It will be important to monitor the progress of this mentoring arrangement, and learn how it can be further strengthened, and applied in other settings.

Unifor: Racial Justice Advocate Network

Following the bargaining success with the Detroit Three automakers to implement a racial justice advocate in every auto plant, Unifor was able to secure funding from Heritage Canada under its Anti-Racism Action Plan Program to hire five racial justice liaisons: one for each of the union's regions. This infusion of new resources, and the consistent presence of these liaisons, have supported the formation of a racial justice advocate network in the union, across the country.

The number of racial justice advocates has expanded, to include many industries beyond the initial auto industry contract; the union now has 180 advocates appointed and making a difference in their workplaces. These RJA positions have created new exciting opportunities within their locals for Indigenous and racialized members, who otherwise might have been overlooked for official union roles. The network creates space and opportunity for RJAs to talk and learn from each other. As part of the capacity-building for a wider pool of potential RJAs, Unifor has also developed a two-week leadership-training program for Indigenous and racialized workers to hone their organizing and bargaining skills.

5. Race to unions: integrating anti-racism into union organizing.

One motive for unions to advance their anti-racism education, advocacy, and bargaining activities, is to enhance their capacity and credibility in efforts to organize racialized workers into unions. As noted above, racialized workers constitute a large and growing segment of the overall Canadian working class, and they are under-represented in unions today. Organizing more racialized workers into unions is vital to the future viability of the union movement. And in order to do that successfully, unions must have more racialized activists, staff, and leaders; they must be seen to be on the front lines of anti-racism campaigning; and they must integrate racial equality as core union business into all their activities (including education, bargaining, and political advocacy).

In our key informant interviews, many respondents from both public and private sector unions shared their insights on union organizing, in the context of current economic uncertainty and widening inequalities in Canada's colour-coded labour market. In general, they judged that more union organizing among young workers is taking place, inspired by high-profile union campaigns, and further motivated by the common feeling that workers in low-wage insecure jobs have little to lose from participating in union drives. Young women, Black and racialized workers are seeing union organizing as a viable way to assert some control over their own precarity of work and life:

> *"Young workers generally don't resonate with pension, job security. But now these workers are choosing a union to resolve things and that's really encouraging!"*

> *"Who most needs the union? It's time for the labour movement to get out of their comfort zone and realize that the traditional workplace organizing approach is not going to bring young workers. The big unions have a high level of analysis, but don't practice it on the ground. Unions want quick fix, quick numbers to show the return."*

Informants shared their experiences in reaching out to the growing number of young racialized workers and newcomers, concentrated in low-wage sectors with little protection and unionization. In the burgeoning gig economy, they also make up most of the new "just-in-time" service delivery workforce, experiencing the daily realities of low wages, job insecurity, health and safety concerns, and unpredictable scheduling.

Another group of marginalized workers are those subject to the constant pressure of contract flipping: the practice whereby employers regularly switch the contractors engaged for various outsourced support functions, in part to prevent unionization and higher wages. This practice is common in sectors like building cleaning, security, food services, housekeeping, and long-term care facilities — where racialized workers often constitute the majority of staff. These workers are always at risk of losing their jobs if the contracting company that hired them loses its bid to another competitor, who can perform the service at a lower cost. One racialized organizer in a private sector union aptly describes it as follows:

"These bids are a race to the bottom. Every time the contract flips, workers are forced to re-apply to the new company for the same jobs."

Many unions are experimenting with new strategies for organizing the largely racialized workforce in these hyper-precarious employment settings. Here is one example in this realm, based on a new type of organizing partnership:

CUPW: Gig Workers United (GWU)

In 2018, a group of food delivery couriers for Foodora in Toronto, predominantly young workers from diverse backgrounds, began discussing the need for a union. They were motivated by the employer's exploitation and disregard for the health and safety of the couriers. They formed an organizing group, called Gig Workers United, and approached CUPW for support for their organizing campaign. CUPW described the common cause between food delivery workers and postal workers as follows (CUPW 2019):

> "Like postal workers, Foodora couriers perform dangerous work, navigating busy streets in all weather conditions. Their injury rates are high too. With little in the way of protection, an accident can leave them devastated, unable to work, and without adequate compensation to make ends meet. When companies like Foodora are allowed to get away with treating workers like numbers and not like human beings, we all suffer. To fight back we have to be bold, challenging the bosses' attempts to drive down wages and working conditions."

Other labour and community partners, including the Toronto & York Region Labour Council and the Workers Action Centre, supported the Foodora organizing drive. They built a community-driven unionization drive across Toronto and Mississauga; eventually 89% of Foodora workers voted to unionize their 'workplace'. After losing several court challenges to stop unionization, in May 2020 Foodora then declared bankruptcy in Canada and left its couriers unemployed – right at the peak of the pandemic. The collaboration between an established union, an inside group of union supporters, and community partners proved very effective in generating public awareness of the exploitive reality faced by gig workers, and the profile of union organizing as a solution. Despite Foodora's departure from the market, the campaign resulted in a number of precedent-setting victories with lasting impact for gig workers. First, the Ontario Labour Relations Board confirmed that gig workers have the right to unionize as dependent contractors. Second, the workers received a historic $3.46-million settlement for Canadian couriers displaced by the company's bankruptcy decision (Gig Workers United, n.d.).

Gig Workers United prides itself as a community union in partnership with CUPW with a clear mission to build power for change:

> "We seek to build power by organizing a community for couriers that is democratically led by couriers; we have each other's backs and we make

> the decisions! ...Whether we're building power to unionize and collectively bargain with one of the app employers, or scaling-up our organizing to challenge the economic, housing, food and immigration injustice that gig workers live under, it is about building the power to win real and tangible gains for workers." (Gig Workers United n.d.)

Another unique feature of GWU's organizing is its intentional practice of having gig workers as leaders of the campaign, making it truly a union of and for gig workers. The highly racialized platform workforce makes it essential that these campaigns highlight issues of racial justice in encouraging gig workers to organize.

Lessons from Other Organizing Victories

The events of the pandemic — including the initial shutdowns, intense health and safety risks, and then the take-off of inflation after the lockdowns ended — have sparked a tremendous upsurge in union militance and organizing in many countries, including Canada. Workers have recognized they need collective power to protect themselves against the many challenges they face, including the erosion of real living standards and employer efforts to evade normal labour standards. Moreover, public opinion polls suggest that a majority of the population supports unions in their efforts to defend workers.[15] A highly visible labour movement upsurge in the U.S., featuring worker-driven campaigns to unionize workplaces such as Amazon, Starbucks, Apple, the New York Times, and Volkswagen, has generated particularly strong media attention and inspired workers everywhere to fight for their rights.

Many observers, following the U.S. experience, naturally wonder about organizing among Starbucks and Amazon workers in Canada. Canadian unions have been working to organize Starbucks cafes (and other food service chains) for many years; some Starbucks locations were unionized as far back as the 1990s, although the company has been very adept at breaking and decertifying unions, or closing unionized locations. A more recent campaign to organize Starbucks outlets in Canada was launched by the United Steelworkers (USW), with dozens of locations in B.C., Alberta, and Ontario now certified, some of which have implemented first collective agreements (Cook 2023). And equally ambitious efforts to organize new unions in other Canadian workplaces are underway (in sectors such as health care, manufacturing, transportation, gaming, and Amazon), although often garnering less media profile than the U.S. campaigns. In proportional terms, Canadian unions are organizing more new members than their U.S. counterparts — not surprisingly given their much stronger starting point, stronger labour rights, and more abundant resources for organizing drives.[16]

[15] For example, in an annual poll of Americans regarding their attitudes to unions, Gallup opinion researchers found two-thirds of respondents now support unions – significantly higher than in previous years (Saad 2023).

[16] Overall union density in Canada, at close to 30% of workers, is about three times higher than in the U.S., where density has declined to 10% (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2024), and hence Canadian unions have proportionately more resources to support ongoing organizing efforts.

The upsurge in union organizing in the U.S., Canada, and elsewhere is inspiring workers in all parts of the labour market to fight for collective voice, representation, and power. In many cases, recent U.S. union drives have followed a 'bottom-up' organizing model, explicitly grounded in principles of equity and intersectionality (Hanaway 2023; Lee and Tapia 2023; McAlevey 2020). These organizing campaigns reconfirm that the essence of building worker power must involve building deep bonds, commitment and solidarity among workers to fight for what is fair and just. Canadian organizing efforts, especially in sectors and workplaces with large numbers of racialized workers, can learn from these strategies.

For example, the U.S. Amazon and Starbucks campaigns relied heavily on an autonomous worker organizing model, building membership from the ground up — with less reliance on external organizers. The core organizing team members are co-workers who experience the same intolerable working conditions, and the same challenges of juggling to make ends meet, as other workers — and hence who have gained the respect and trust of their co-workers. In the words of Christian Smalls, President of Amazon Workers United (the group which won the first U.S. union certification at Amazon, at a warehouse in Staten Island N.Y.):

> *"My lead organizers and Executive members including myself are Amazon veterans who have worked there for over 4 years… We connect and know what they are going through. We've got to meet the workers where they're at. Availability is the best accountability."*[17]

Through the intensive period of the Amazon organizing drive, workers stepped up and took ownership of their own campaign. The visibility and courage of the worker organizers became the key ingredients for the open organizing model, as Smalls further elaborated:

> *"The best way to protect ourselves is being outspoken, militant inside and outside work, bridging our relationship with co-workers… Can't do it in secrecy. There is strength in numbers. We talk about the union openly; we show them that the union is not a third party. The Union is US!"*

The open organizing campaign model instills confidence and empowerment among workers. During the Amazon campaign, the bus stop across from the plant became an organizing hub where stories were shared, tears shed, and hard conversations held. Food and music were key ingredients in bringing people together. Even after the initial certification, however, the battle to unionize the Staten Island facility continues: more than two years after the union was certified, the company still refuses to negotiate, hoping to outlast the new union. In Canada, meanwhile, union drives are underway at multiple Amazon facilities – including an effort by Unifor to unionize two large facilities in the Vancouver area, and a drive by the CSN at an Amazon warehouse in Laval, Québec, which resulted in the first-ever certification of a union at

[17] Quotations based on notes from Chris Smalls' speeches at the Labour Notes Conference (April 2022) and the Enough is Enough Toronto Forum (organized by the OFL, TYRLC and York Federation of Students, March 10, 2023).

Amazon in Canada (Morris 2024). Canada's more favourable labour laws (regarding union certification, recognition, first contracts, and union security) may ultimately make those efforts more successful than those south of the border, enabling workers to resist the aggressive union avoidance and suppression tactics of these fiercely anti-union companies. Union organizers in both countries can thus learn from each other about the strategies and preconditions for successful organizing campaigns.

Intersectional Organizing: Taking Workers as a Whole

Union organizing drives at low-wage non-union employers must directly address the particular nature of exploitation faced by the disproportionately racialized workforces employed at those companies. In this light, Erica Smiley, Executive Director of the U.S.-based Jobs with Justice campaign, and Sarita Gupta, Director of the Ford Foundation's Future of Work(ers) Program, argue that unions have an obligation to organize workers as whole citizens, whose subordination in the broader social and political world must be understood and addressed in fights for economic justice. This requires an intersectional approach to union work, in which understanding of, and resistance to, all dimensions of exploitation in society is central to the union movement's messages and organizing strategies.

> "Organizing people as workers is not enough… What happens to workers on the job is intimately connected to what happens in their communities, in their schools, and in their lived environments. It is also connected to their gender, race, ethnicity, ability, and citizenship status… In reality, intersectionality is a straightforward description of the complex challenges real-life people are facing every day." (Smiley and Gupta 2022: 61-62)

The recent upsurge in union organizing speaks to the genuine connections that worker-to-worker organizing can make, beyond immediate workplace issues. This intersectional vision of organizing recognizes that a worker is more than just a worker: each person carries multiple identities and complexities, intersecting as a whole. An intersectional organizing framework enables more diverse and deeper connections to be made among workers through their different identities as parents, neighbours, volunteers, members of faith communities, and more.

Furthermore, when workers see themselves reflected in a union drive's leadership team, when they can communicate directly with their co-worker/organizer(s), when they feel they are heard, when their issues are being acknowledged and taken seriously, then they are more likely to feel empowered to join.

The principles of intersectional organizing and equity in the Amazon organizing campaign are aptly summed up by Smalls:

> *"Your issues are not going to change unless we change them together! I'm not always right, but I'll take time to reflect and listen. We're willing to make sacrifices to make sure that collective action is the right way forward. There is the feeling of building a community."*

The community-based organizing approaches represented in the drives at Amazon, Gig Workers United, and other campaigns hearken back to the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) organizing experience in the 1930 and early 1940s. That effort, which changed the U.S. labour movement (with spillovers into Canada) for a generation, centered on organizing African American workers, and attained significant support from within the Black community. Fletcher and Agard argue as follows:

> "It is the creation of something on the lines of a mass movement by which entire industries were confronted with organizing campaigns. Pulling such campaigns together were talented organizers, many of whom were Black, leftists or both. Their commitment and skill, along with a vision of a socially just society, helped to inspire hundreds of thousands of workers across the U.S. to organize into industrial unions. This inspired view placed labour, not into the camp of what later would be called a 'special interest', but rather as a centrepiece for progressive change." (Fletcher and Agard, 2000)

In embracing union organizing as an integral part of broader social justice movement building, the CIO came to represent more than just the economic interests of its members — but rather advanced a shared vision of a broader, more equitable community and society.

In sum, in Canada and elsewhere, this is clearly a historic moment with both immense challenges (including worsening inequality, rising racism, and aggressive right-wing populism) and huge potential. The opportunities to connect the vibrant spirit of anti-racist awareness and mobilizing that has been so influential in recent years, with a new surge of trade union organizing and bargaining, are profound.

The challenge for organized labour is how to sustain organizing momentum from winning a certification to obtaining the first contract and beyond. Making continuous organizing part of the unionized workplace culture will require a thorough commitment by unions and their leaders to fully engage the union movement in anti-racist struggles. Unionists must show racialized workers that joining a union is not just a way to win better jobs — it's a path to building a fairer, more equal society.

Priorities and Recommendations

THIS PAPER HAS REVIEWED THE EXISTENTIAL CHALLENGE facing Canadian unions. Union density continues to erode in Canada's private sector. Racialized workers constitute a growing share of the Canadian working class. They are underrepresented in Canadian unions. Unions must organize those workers, and help them win tangible economic and social progress, to retain their power and their credibility as the voice of workers. To do that, they need to integrate anti-racist education, advocacy, and bargaining as core priorities in all their work; systematically nurture and promote racialized activists and leaders; and engage fully with other forces in society in a joint struggle to combat racism and win racial equality.

This is a tall order, but our survey of the personal experiences of racialized trade unionists, and best practices already used by Canadian unions, confirms that it is both necessary and possible. Flowing from our qualitative and quantitative analysis, we have identified the following recommendations to assist the Canadian union movement in living up to its full potential as a force for racial equality — and in so doing, enhance its long-run power and viability.

Make Anti-racism an Overarching Priority in Building Union Power

We have surveyed best practices in anti-racist unionism applied in every facet of union work: organizing, collective bargaining, leadership development, and community outreach and alliance-building. All offer inspiring insights and innovative strategies in how to advance an anti-racism and equity agenda within organized labour. Collectively, the following core elements are shared across all of these best practices:

- They reflect a more visible commitment to advance unions beyond adopting aspirational anti-racist policy statements, to taking concrete actions to shift institutional culture and practices.
- Courageous Black and racialized leaders are refusing to settle for 'crumbs', and instead are using their relative position and power to push for stronger initiatives grounded in an intersectional understanding of equity.
- There is a growing presence of non-racialized co-conspirators and allies within the membership and leadership of unions, who share the same dream of transforming their unions into a welcoming and equitable space for all, and a powerful force for racial justice.
- Last but not the least, the growing number of Black, Indigenous and racialized members within the ranks of unions are becoming a critical mass that elected leaders cannot ignore, and that will be a fertile ground for nurturing future activists and leaders.

It is clear that Black and racialized workers, and their co-conspirators, have made tremendous progress in advancing an anti-racism and equity agenda within the Canadian labour movement. However, as demonstrated in the best practice examples and key informant interviews cited above, many Black and racialized leaders and activists are paying a heavy personal toll for their efforts. And labour market statistics confirm that unions have not yet succeeded in organizing racialized workers in the same proportion as non-racialized workers, to the detriment of both non-unionized racialized workers and their families, and the union movement.

Unions need to understand the relationships between racism and class exploitation; acknowledge that organizing racialized workers is essential to the long-run survival of unions; and position the struggle for racial equality as a central component of core union business in every facet of union activity (including organizing, bargaining, education, political advocacy, and community engagement).

Recommendation: In their founding documents, constitutions, statements of principle, and other fundamental expressions of basic purpose, unions should identify the struggle for racial equality as one of their core missions, to be pursued in all aspects of union activity (including organizing, bargaining, education, advocacy, and community engagement). It should be highlighted for all members and the public at large that only by becoming actively engaged in fighting for racial equality in workplaces and communities, can unions successfully represent the present and future Canadian working class.

Launch an Intensive and Massive Intersectional Union Organizing Strategy

Union representation and collective bargaining deliver significant wage gains, and much better access to benefits (like supplementary health benefits and pensions), for racialized workers. This confirms that strengthening unionization among racialized

workers is an effective and concrete poverty reduction strategy for them and their families. However, the data above also indicates that if the underrepresentation of racialized workers in unions is not addressed and reversed, the wage gap and other inequities between unionized and non-unionized workers will persist and widen.

From the early CIO experience of organizing Black American workers into industrial unions, to recent experiences such as the Amazon, Starbucks, and Gig Workers United campaigns, there is a recognition that union organizing is more effective when the experiences and priorities of racialized workers are put front and centre. As non-unionized, precariously employed workers (most of whom are racialized) express more support for unions, and more interest in unionizing, this is the time to show that union organizing and fighting racism go hand in hand.

Now is a critical moment for trade unions to step up their organizing efforts, expand the resources directed to organizing, and integrate an equity perspective into all their campaigns — to ensure that this movement-building moment can be properly re-sourced and sustained. It is time for organized labour to heed the impassioned plea from Terry Melvin, President of the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists, at the CUPE Ontario Convention in 2023:

> *"The new generation of workers knows that companies are not loyal… we have seen some real grassroots organizing. The question is, can the institution of labour keep up with the working class and turn the movement into a real labour movement? They are no longer waiting for the leaders. They are charging ahead, more than just for labour, but also speaking out for social justice and equity. We know from history, it was the social justice movement that brought us the labour movement!"*[18]

The urgency for the labour movement to "keep up with the working class" will require organized labour to demonstrate the political will and commitment to launch massive and strategic intersectional organizing campaigns, to reach non-unionized workers across all sectors. In some cases this will require new strategies, including those that reach beyond the constraints of the workplace-by-workplace approach stipulated by existing labour law, to encompass sector-wide or community-based organizing techniques.

Recommendation: Central labour bodies at both the national and provincial levels should hold Intersectional Organizing Conferences, to focus on promoting the union advantage among racialized communities, and develop bold and coordinated organizing strategies to target Black and racialized workers across low-wage sectors.

Recommendation: District labour councils and/or provincial federations of labour should host regular organizing institutes or training schools for Black and racialized workers, enlisting allied community-based organizations (such as the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists, the Asian Canadian Labour Alliance, and the Latin American

[18] Transcript of Terry Melvin's keynote speech at CUPE Ontario convention on June 1, 2023 in Toronto.

Trade Unionists Coalition) as partners. These forums will be invaluable in sharing information, resources, and experiences on how union organizing among racialized communities can be accelerated and sustained.

Recommendation: Organized labour should allocate resources, and prioritize educational outreach and alliance-building with diverse newcomer communities, as a viable pre-organizing strategy and a common front against the austerity agenda.

Support Organizing with Intersectional Anti-racism Union Education

> *"Solidarity is like a muscle; it must be developed and trained. We develop it through shared experiences and hardships: on picket lines, through collective struggles against the unjust practices of our employers, and through our own commitment and journeys of learning."*
>
> *Craig Reynolds, Ontario Regional Executive VP, PSAC (PSAC Ontario n.d.)*

Given the current political climate of rising right-wing populism and austerity, organized labour should prioritize labour education as a core component of movement-building. This involves unpacking for union members, activists, and staff the deep inequalities structured through power and capital, including the colour-coding of work and inequality. Trade union education can help new activists find clarity and experience solidarity, and imbue in them a deep and lasting sense of the importance of the fight for racial equality in all aspects of union activity.

Integrating the theoretical framework of racial capitalism into the core curriculum in labour education will help to deepen the intersectional class, race and gender analysis of future union activists, stewards, and leaders. In that sense, through an infusion of anti-white supremacy in courses (ranging from shop steward training to health and safety, leadership development to collective bargaining), the politics of division and fear can be overcome. With such an ongoing and integrative educational approach, learning about white supremacy will not be taken personally by trade unionists as "white bashing", but rather will be understood as part and parcel of unpacking class analysis.

By linking strong union education with the surge in activism (in both anti-racism struggles and new union organizing), unions can explain that they are working to liberate all workers (racialized, Indigenous, and white) from the exploitation and divisions fostered by racial capitalism. Grounded in a shared political-economy analysis, unionists can then understand the system of privileges through their own lived experiences, and engage in honest conversations about building unity in the fight against exploitation and white supremacy – rather than being trapped in a vicious cycle of "divide and rule". This is where rank and file members become activists, and courageous allies become co-conspirators.

We take inspiration from the above words of Craig Reynolds, that encapsulate the optimism and comradeship required for transformative change arising from within the labour movement. Through a collective journey of learning, unlearning, and build-

ing our ‘solidarity muscle’, unions’ efforts to build a truly multi-racial and informed working class movement can be strengthened.

Recommendation: Unions should allocate adequate resources to prioritize labour education as a core investment in current and future generations of labour activists.

Recommendation: Using popular education approaches, training modules and resources explaining racial capitalism, the links between racism and class exploitation, and intersectional organizing strategies should be developed and offered within union education programs.

Support Elected Racialized Leaders

While encouraging strides have been made to advance an anti-racism and equity agenda within unions, our interviews have confirmed the personal challenges and sacrifices that Black and racialized leaders and activists have experienced in claiming their space at the trade union table. It is critical to heed to the call for support from Black and racialized leaders, to support them to continue their work, and ensure they do not end up walking away the movement because of criticism, targeting or abuse they encounter in their union activism.

Many of our informants stressed the importance of informal networks of support in nurturing their ongoing work. It is vital to have someone who shares similar experiences – as one of our key informants put it, someone to “cry and laugh with, someone who doesn’t think that you’re crazy or being paranoid”.

Being heard and supported is necessary for these activists and leaders to recharge and keep going. Currently, the work of networks like the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists (CBTU), the Asian Canadian Labour Alliance (ACLA), and the Latin American Trade Unionists Coalition (LATUC) fills some of this void. However, a challenge remains to sustain and expand these informal support networks, while taking into account the confidentiality, alliances, and political context and nuances that racialized trade unionists face in their work.

Recommendation: Organized labour at the federation and local levels should initiate ongoing consultation with organizations like CBTU, ACLA, and LATUC on organizational strategies for supporting and retaining Black and racialized union leaders.

Setting Term Limits for Standing Committees to Advance Equity Representation

While it is critical to recruit and train union leaders from diverse backgrounds, it is equally important to ensure that these emerging activists have full opportunities to participate and/or be mentored at decision-making tables, and to apply their newly-acquired skills and knowledge in meaningful ways.

Unions should consider setting term limits on their major bodies (including bargaining committees and other standing committees) as a way of facilitating more opportunities for participation by racialized members and activists on those bodies. In some cases, composition of those committees is dominated by stable groups of established local leaders who are predictably reelected, and this limits opportunities for racialized members and activists (especially younger racialized workers who have been inspired by recent events to become more active) to take on more significant leadership roles.

Expanding these committees to ensure representation from equity-seeking groups within the union can also help achieve more representative structures (as noted in some of the best practice examples cited above). But term limits for committee members would help to further facilitate more participation and representation of bargaining committees and other union bodies, and help ensure greater support for their work from all segments of the union's membership.

Unions can also implement mentoring programs through which seasoned committee members can continue to serve (perhaps as alternates), and support newly elected members as they fill their new roles. This is one structural change, in addition to other reforms (such as the creation of targeted spaces for equity-seeking groups within union bodies at all levels), to broader spaces for engagement, learning, and leadership for Black, Indigenous, and racialized members in their unions.

Promote Employment Equity Hiring in Target Sectors and Occupations

Our analysis of the underrepresentation of racialized workers in Canadian unions identified two distinct components contributing to lower unionization and bargaining coverage among most racialized communities. First, many racialized workers are less likely to find jobs in sectors or occupations with higher union coverage. Second, even within some of those sectors, unionization rates for racialized workers are often lower — reflecting either the concentration of racialized workers in harder-to-organize roles or occupations (such as in outsourced services or temporary jobs), and/or inadequate effort by unions to reach racialized workers in those sectors with their organizing efforts.[19]

Redressing this underrepresentation requires unions to be sensitive to the importance of strengthening their presence among racialized workers, and thus undertaking efforts to support the hiring of racialized workers into industries, and jobs within industries that offer better prospects for unionization. This can include specific strategies such as the following:

Recommendation: Unions should support affirmative action and employment equity strategies to improve hiring of underrepresented groups of workers in key industries

[19] The analysis above also noted that, in addition to these dual contributors to lower union representation, in some cases the union wage advantage is smaller for unionized racialized workers than unionized non-racialized workers.

where unions have a strong presence. Sectors where this strategy seems particularly important include construction, education, and public administration.

Recommendation: Unions should identify groups of unorganized racialized workers within sectors with relatively strong union presence, and develop and implement measures to enhance union representation for those workers. This can include fighting to ensure that functions and services disproportionately provided by racialized workers (such as security, cleaning, food service, and other jobs), which are often outsourced by larger employers, are kept in-house or brought back into recognized bargaining units, so that those workers have access to the same representation, protection, and benefits as other workers in these industries. Sectors where this strategy seems particularly important include construction, manufacturing, education, health care, natural resources, and utilities — all industries with relatively strong unionization, but significantly lower unionization rates for racialized workers.

These strategies can be informed and motivated by a recognition among unions of the broader necessity of strengthening both their membership and their credibility among racialized workers, as an essential part of an overarching effort to build the union movement's base among this rapidly-growing segment of Canada's working class.

Conclusion

Ng and Wall (2021) have challenged unions to sharpen their focus on building a powerful, unified, multi-racial working class movement: moving beyond the language of equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI), to tackle both white supremacy and capitalist exploitation as a unified, overarching mission. The union movement needs much more than just ensuring that more racialized workers get to sit at its decision-making tables. We need to strengthen how that table is constructed and maintained in the first place. We need to imagine new processes to maximize workers' collective power and voices in lasting, equitable and meaningful ways — with racialized workers right at the centre.

If Black, Indigenous, and workers of colour must carry the sole weight of dismantling a system of colour-coded inequality that they did not create and have never benefitted from, then the union movement will not succeed in organizing and representing those workers — to the detriment of both racialized workers and unions. The labour movement must be prepared to wrestle this elephant in the room: by naming it, rolling up our sleeves, and working to dismantle racism in society, at work, and in our unions. Otherwise, the consequences will include the slow but steady demise of the movement itself. Instead of shallow and symbolic EDI initiatives, perhaps this trajectory could more fittingly be described by a re-arranged acronym: DIE (referring to the union movement's prospects if racialized workers are not fully organized and mobilized within its ranks).

The ideology of white supremacy has been used to distract white workers from seeing global capitalism as the source of their problems, instead redirecting their fear and anger at the wrong people — including Black workers, immigrants, refugees and Muslims who themselves suffer the same oppressive economic policies. Using historic examples such as the successful organizing of Black workers into the UAW and the Chicago Teachers Union, Smiley (2017: 236) argues that to confront global capitalism and reverse the dramatic trends of inequality, the struggle against white supremacy must be a central element of any strategy to build working class power.

Understanding how racism and white supremacy undermine the unity and power of all workers, and making the struggle for racial justice a central element of the union movement's vision and mission, will position unions to build their power as Canada's working class continues to evolve. As racialized workers grow in number, and as their consciousness and militance to combat racism become stronger, they will bring vital energy, leadership, and solidarity to the union movement. Accepting the responsibility to build a multi-racial union movement, that fights for racial equality in all its activities, will position Canadian unions — and workers of all racialized identities — for a more powerful and hopeful future.

Appendix: Methodology and Detailed Analysis of New Data on Employment Outcomes by Racialized Category

Statistics Canada's Racial and Ethnic Categories

Since 2021, Statistics Canada has been asking new questions about what it terms the "visible minority" status of respondents as part of its regular monthly labour force survey.[20] These questions are phrased to be consistent with federal government employment equity policies and guidelines (Statistics Canada 2021). The Employment Equity Act defines visible minorities as "persons, other than Aboriginal peoples, who are non-Caucasian in race or non-white in colour." Explicit visible minority categories are defined by Statistics Canada for the following groups: South Asian, Chinese, Black, Filipino, Arab, Latin American, Southeast Asian, West Asian, Korean and Japanese. Additional categories are created for other visible minorities (including smaller populations such as West Indian, Mauritian, or Guyanese respondents; and other groups who are invited to write in their specific ethnic or racial identity), and for those indicating they belong to more than one visible minority population. Sample sizes for the smaller racialized categories are insufficient to allow for full disaggregation in most Statistics Canada publications, and hence those groups are often merged into a single "other visible minority" category. In the Labour Force Survey data analyzed in this report, the "other visible minority" category includes Japanese, Korean, and West Asian respondents, along with those who self-identified (by write-in) another identity, and those who belong to more than one racialized category.

One important feature of Statistics Canada's approach to collecting information on racialized economic inequality (and which is reflected in the Labour Force Survey

[20] The language of "visible minority" is criticized by many scholars and activists; we use the phrase here solely to refer to the corresponding Statistics Canada categorization.

data considered in this report) is its treatment of Indigenous Canadians. Indigeneity is considered as a separate dimension of inequality for purposes of federal employment equity policy (parallel to visible minority, gender, and disability). In this context, Indigenous Canadians are considered a population group, not a visible minority; workers who indicate they are Indigenous on the Labour Force Survey are placed in the "not a visible minority" category. This categorization also means that the categories "not visible minority" (in Statistics Canada's parlance) or "non-racialized" (our preferred terminology) include Indigenous Canadians, which complicates interpretation of our findings in this report. This methodological choice by the federal government (and operationalized by Statistics Canada) necessitates that a separate analysis be conducted to measure and understand labour market outcomes (including trade union coverage and wages) for Indigenous workers.[21] The non-racialized category reported in this report, therefore, includes Indigenous Canadians, who themselves also experience systematic inequality and exploitation in the world of work. For this reason, the measures of racial wage gaps provided in this report understate the true size of income gaps between racialized workers and non-racialized non-Indigenous workers (a group which cannot be directly portrayed within these data sets).

A separate group of questions in the Labour Force Survey considers respondents' Indigenous status. In that data set, the category "non-Indigenous" includes racialized workers. So once again, even in that data, estimates of the wage gap experienced by Indigenous Canadians in comparison to non-Indigenous Canadians will not fully portray the extent of intersectional wage inequality — since average wages for the whole set of non-Indigenous workers in aggregate are pulled down by the inclusion of lower-paid racialized, non-Indigenous workers. The complexity of these overlapping definition and measurement issues clearly requires further research to bring out the various overlapping dimensions of inequality facing Canadians on the basis of their racial identity and Indigenous status.

Methodological Issues in Measuring Union Wage Premia

Another methodological issue with relevance for this report is how to measure and interpret the impact of unionization on wages. A common approach, replicated here, is to compare wages for union members (or those represented by unions[22]) to wages for workers who do not have a union. The difference between the two is termed the "union wage premium", and typically held to reflect the impact of collective bargaining power on wages and other compensation. In Canada in 2023, average hourly earnings for workers who are union members (including both hourly and salaried workers) were $3.11 per hour (or 9.5%) higher for workers covered by a collective

[21] See Statistics Canada (2022) and Qiu and Schellenberg (2022) for further discussion of this issue. As noted above, a parallel report from the Centre for Future Work, *The Union Advantage for Indigenous Workers*, is forthcoming in 2024.

[22] The data presented below consider workers covered by a collective agreement, whether they are union members or not; a small proportion of Canadian workers (less than 2%) have wages determined by the terms of a collective agreement even though they are not union members.

agreement than those who are not.[23] Because unions tend to compress wage grids (lifting the bottom and reducing the top), the union wage advantage is much larger when measured using median (rather than average wages).[24] The median union-covered worker (that is, the person at exactly the mid-point of the wage distribution) earned almost $7 per hour (or 27%) more than the median non-union worker. By either method, the union wage premium is slightly smaller for average weekly earnings than for hourly earnings; this reflects various factors, including differences in hours of work and slightly lower union coverage among salaried workers.

However, there are several nuances to be kept in mind in measuring and interpreting this simple, "unadjusted" union wage premium. First, it is possible that higher wages earned by union members are partly the result of other characteristics (of the worker, their employer, or their industry) not directly related to unionization. For example, union members on average are better educated than other workers, and so the higher wages of union members could be ascribed in part to their education (Blackburn 2008). This insight is stressed by conventional neoclassical economic theories, which expect wages to be automatically correlated with workers' "human capital", but even in alternative, non-neoclassical theoretical approaches it is expected that higher education is generally associated with higher wages for other reasons. Similarly, union membership is stronger in larger firms (which also tend to pay higher wages for other reasons), and in industries (including the public sector[25]) where wages are higher on average for other reasons in addition to the impact of collective bargaining. Additionally, it is possible that wages and unionization could be jointly or simultaneously determined, with wages influencing unionization as well as the other way around. Unions may be more interested in organizing workers in higher-wage jobs, and workers in those jobs may feel more confident and secure in pursuing unionization than workers in more precarious and poorly paid roles (who may be less able to take on the risks of union organizing, since they have less secure jobs and more precarious personal financial circumstances).

Many studies have attempted to control for these other potential determinants of wages, in hopes of identifying an "adjusted" or "pure" union wage premium – which could then be interpreted to reflect the separate specific impact of collective representation and bargaining (distinguished from other factors, which may be correlated with unionization but not directly reflective of union power). In general, these estimates of "adjusted" union wage premia find that the more narrowly defined wage premium is smaller (often just half as large; Fang and Hartley 2022) as unadjusted wage premia attained from a simple comparison of union and non-union wages. For example, Gomez and Lamb (2016) estimate an adjusted union wage premium of 6.9%

[23] Calculations from Statistics Canada Table 14-10-0065-01.

[24] Outlier incomes enjoyed by very highly-paid employees (such as managers and executives), who are not usually members of unions, exert a disproportionate influence on overall averages. Considering median rather than average incomes corrects for this skewing effect of very high incomes.

[25] See Blanchflower and Bryson (2004) and Kerrissey and Meyers (2022) for discussion of the interaction between public sector employment and management practices and union wage outcomes.

for Canadian workers in 2012, and note (similar to other research) that the union wage premium has shrunk in recent decades (likely due to the effects of changes in labour laws, employer opposition to unions, falling union density, and perhaps globalization and technological change). Zhang and Gunderson (2020) estimate a smaller adjusted union wage premium, equal to 5% based on 2018 data. Methodological choices in estimating union wage effects are shown to have major impacts on estimates of adjusted premia (Hirsch 2004; Campolieti 2018).

For all these reasons, the simple comparison of wages between union members and non-members does not provide a fully reliable indicator of the impact of unions on wages. Making things still more complicated are the nuances that must be considered in interpreting any estimate of the union wage premium. It is tempting to interpret a large union wage premium as evidence of union power: the union is able to lift wages well above levels paid in non-union workplaces. This is not necessarily the case, however. If union coverage in a very hostile legal or political environment is limited to a small subset of industries with unique conditions that permit unions to gain a toehold, then the wage differential between those sectors and the broader labour market (where few workers have access to union representation) could be relatively large. In these circumstances (which resemble the U.S. labour market), a large union wage premium is a sign of union weakness, not strength. Conversely, if unions are very strong and cover a critical mass of workers in a particular region or industry, even non-union employers may feel compelled to offer wages similar to those in unionized workplaces, perhaps to ward off unionization — thus reducing the apparent union wage premium.[26] Moreover, very strong union movements are typically able to influence broader labour and social policies (through strong minimum wage laws, for example) that serve to lift wages and conditions for all workers – not just union members. In these circumstances, the union wage premium may be small, but because unions are very strong, not because they are weak. Bryson (2007) identifies five heavily-unionized European countries where the union wage premium is approximately zero (France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, and Sweden), largely because unions are able (through various broader policies and practices, including industry-wide collective bargaining systems) to lift wages for non-union workers. The same research indicates the U.S. has one of the largest union wage premia, even though it is the least-unionized major industrial country.

Another mechanism through which strong unionization could produce a smaller union wage premium, is via the occupational structure within an industry. Highly-paid managers and executives are not usually covered by union contracts. If strong unions are successful in organizing most non-managerial staff, then average non-union wages could actually be higher than average union wages: not because unions failed to lift wages, but because most workers not covered by the union are paid well because of their location in the hierarchy of the firm. For all these reasons, the relationship between union power and the apparent union wage premium must be interpreted with great caution.

[26] This hypothesis is supported by evidence from Addison et al (2022) and Fang and Hartley (2022).

Some published research has attempted to consider differences in estimated union wage premia according to race, gender, and other dimensions of inequality in the labour market, with differing results. Rosenfeld and Kleykamp (2012) found no difference in the union wage premium for Black versus white workers in the U.S. private sector; despite this, unionization was found to have a significant impact in reducing wage inequality in the U.S. (in part because Black workers are more likely to belong to unions there). In contrast, Kerrissey and Meyers (2022) find a different result for U.S. public sector workers: the union wage premium is higher for Black workers of either gender, and higher for women than for men. The authors attribute this outcome to different managerial policies and practices in public sector workplaces (including greater pay transparency, more openness to pay equity policies, and less hostility to unions). In Canada, Card et al. (2020) also find that the union wage premium is much stronger in the public sector than the private sector, and that this sectoral effect largely accounts for the apparently larger union wage premium enjoyed by women in Canada. They conclude the larger union wage advantage for women mostly reflects the fact that women are much more likely to work in the public sector. Gomez and Lamb (2016, 2019) find that union wage effects are stronger for workers in relatively disadvantaged positions in the labour market (including youth, women, immigrants, Indigenous workers, and those in non-standard jobs[27]); they also find stronger union wage effects for lower-wage members of the same groups, and this amplifies the positive impact of unions in reducing wage inequality. Research on the impact of unionization on wages of racialized workers in Canada is in its infancy, since (as noted above) labour force data disaggregated according to racial category has only recently begun to be published. The analysis of union wage effects for racialized workers presented in this report thus represents only an initial contribution to filling this gap, certainly not the final word.

Disaggregating Union Wage Effects by Sector and Racial Category

As summarized in the second part of this paper, racialized workers are under-represented in unions, and the simple union wage premium for racialized workers – while still significant, lifting average earnings by 7% — is smaller than the apparent union wage advantage in the overall labour market. That discussion also noted several factors which could contribute to both lower union density and a smaller union wage premium. These include:

- A different sectoral composition of employment (with more racialized workers employed in low-density sectors, and/or fewer employed in high-density sectors).
- Lower union coverage for racialized workers than non-racialized workers within any given sector.

[27] At the time of that research Statistics Canada had not yet begun collecting labour force data by ethnic or racial category, and hence Gomez and Lamb could not consider this dimension in their analysis of variable union wage effects.

- A smaller union wage premium, even for racialized workers covered by a union contract in a given sector.

Table 9.

Sectoral Analysis of the Union Advantage for Racialized Workers

	Difference in Racialized Workers' Share of Total Employment[1]	Difference in Union Density for Racialized Workers[2]	Difference in Union Wage Premium for Racialized Workers[3]
Low-Wage Industries[4]			
Agriculture			✗
Retail Trade			
Business & Building Services			
Hospitality	✓		
Medium-Wage Industries			
Construction	✗	✗	
Manufacturing		✗	
Wholesale Trade			
Transportation			
Information & Communication		✗	✗
Education	✗	✗	✓
Health Care & Social Services		✗	
Other Services			✗
High-Wage Industries[5]			
Mining & Forestry		✗	✓
Utilities		✗	✓
Finance & Insurance	✓		
Professional & Scientific	✓		
Public Administration	✗		✓

Source: Authors' calculations from unpublished Statistics Canada Labour Force Survey data (2022 annual average).

[1] Differences greater than 1.5 percentage points.
[2] Differences greater than 3 percentage points.
[3] Differences greater than 5 percentage points.
[4] Wages less than 80% economy-wide average.
[5] Wages more than 120% economy-wide average.

It turns out that each of these factors contributes to the underrepresentation of racialized workers in unions, and the persistence of racial wage gaps (even among unionized workers), but in different ways for different industries and racialized categories. Table 9 explores the contrasting impact of these three factors across sectors in the economy.

Table 9 considers 17 broad industrial sectors reported by Statistics Canada. Those sectors are grouped into three categories: low-wage (with average wages less than 80% of the economy-wide average), medium-wage, and high-wage (with average wages more than 120% of the economy-wide average). Table 9 indicates whether racialized workers in any particular sector exhibit a relatively low (red X) or relatively high (green check) outcome, compared to non-racialized workers, along each of the three dimensions noted above: sectoral composition of employment, union coverage, and union wage premium. The thresholds according to which relatively "low" or "high" outcomes are defined are specified differently for each of the three criteria, according to the overall variance of observations within each category; criteria which are more widely variable, must indicate a relatively larger difference in order to be marked on Table 9.[28]

It turns out that all three of those factors contribute to the general findings that racialized workers are less likely to be covered by a union contract, and experience smaller wage premia when they are covered by a union contract. As indicated in the first column of Table 8, racialized workers are overrepresented in three very low-union-coverage industries: hospitality, financial services, and professional and scientific services. The latter two of those sectors pay higher-than-average wages (although racialized workers within those sectors do not share equally in those higher wages).[29] Meanwhile, racialized workers are significantly underrepresented in three sectors with relatively strong union coverage: construction, education, and public administration. The combined effect of these differences in employment composition, therefore, is to reduce average union coverage for racialized workers.

Even within given industries, however, racialized workers in several sectors experience significantly lower union coverage (as indicated in the second column of Table 8). This suggests that racialized workers are filling roles in harder-to-unionize jobs,[30] workplaces, or occupations, and/or that union organizing efforts have not adequately reached racialized workers and provided them with a path to union representation. In seven broad sectors of the economy, union coverage rates are more than 3 percent-

[28] Variances from mean in employment share greater than 1.5 percentage points are marked on Table 8, as are variances in union coverage rate greater than 3 percentage points, and variances in union wage premium greater than 5 percentage points.

[29] Perhaps counter-intuitively, the fact that racialized workers are overrepresented in finance and professional/scientific services serves to reduce both the overall racial wage gap and the average union wage premium for racialized workers (since most of those higher-wage finance and professional/scientific jobs are not union-covered).

[30] The disproportionate concentration of racialized employment in temporary, non-standard, and gig employment, discussed in the first part of this paper, is relevant here.

age points lower for racialized than for non-racialized workers. This includes both health care and education, two broad public sector industries which are very important to union representation for all workers. It also includes two sectors (construction and education) where racialized workers were underrepresented in employment. This leads to a doubly powerful impact on union coverage in those two sectors: not only are racialized workers significantly less likely to be employed in those sectors, but those who are, are significantly less likely to be covered by a union contract. Unfortunately, there are no industries in the economy in which racialized workers are significantly more likely to be covered by a union contract than non-racialized workers.

Finally, the last column of Table 9 reports mixed results regarding differences in the apparent union wage premium received by racialized workers who are covered by a union contract. In four sectors (education, mining, utilities, and public administration) the apparent unadjusted union wage premium for racialized workers is significantly greater than for non-racialized workers. In each of those four cases, this relatively strong union wage premium helps to offset some of the wage-suppressing impact of racialized workers' significantly smaller share of employment and/or lower union coverage in those same sectors. In contrast, in three sectors (agriculture, information and communications, and other services), unionized racialized workers receive a significantly smaller union wage premium than non-racialized union-covered workers. This may reflect a relatively stronger racialized segregation of employment within those sectors (whereby racialized workers, even if covered by a union contract, are more likely to be assigned to lower-wage jobs in which the ability of unions to lift wages is constrained by competitive or structural factors).

This analysis attests to the complexity of factors influencing the relative success of unions in organizing racialized workers and winning better wages and conditions for them. More detailed analysis of racialized workers' experience with union representation across sectors, genders, and occupations could shed further light on how these factors shape the outcomes of trade unionism among racialized workers.

Polar Cases: Black and South Asian Workers

To provide a hint of this complexity and variability of experience, let us consider in more detail the range of factors influencing union coverage in the racialized categories that demonstrated the highest union coverage (Black workers) and the lowest union coverage (South Asian workers) among the categories defined in the Statistics Canada data.

Black women are more likely to work in the health care sector than women in other racialized categories: 33% of employed Black women work in that industry, compared to 23% of all employed women. Black women also have a slightly higher union coverage rate in health care than other women, amplifying the boost to unionization resulting from their presence in this sector. In contrast, Black women are less likely than other women to work in the highly unionized education sector, and also have lower union coverage there. Black men are also more likely to work in health care than

other men (with a sectoral employment share of 9%, double the share for all employed men). Black men are also more likely to work in transportation and business and building services, but significantly less likely to work in construction, than other men. Union coverage is higher for Black men than for other men in transportation, business and building services, and professional and scientific services, but lower in education and information and communication services. The net impact of these patterns of sectoral employment and union density is an overall union coverage rate for Black workers (33%) that is higher than for any other category (even higher than for non-racialized workers), and a smaller gender wage gap. Nevertheless, Black workers face the second-largest racialized wage gap of any population, because of their concentration in some lower-wage industries and exclusion from some higher-wage industries. Thus past success in organizing Black workers into unions has not translated into adequate improvement in reducing the racial wage gap Black workers face.

South Asian workers experience very different patterns of sectoral employment and union coverage,[31] which have the combined result of low union representation — but ironically a somewhat smaller-than-average racial wage gap. In the construction sector, South Asian men face both a much smaller employment share and a much lower union coverage rate (likely resulting from the more precarious and non-standard roles often filled by South Asian men in this sector). They also experience smaller employment shares than other men in education and public administration — amplified in the case of education by a much lower union coverage rate (union coverage for South Asian men in the education sector is just 54%, compared to 72% for all men). South Asian men are more likely to be employed in transportation (4.5 percentage points higher than other men), but less likely to be union-covered (5 percentage points lower). South Asian women, meanwhile, face the amplified impact of both lower employment shares and lower union coverage in all three of the major public sector industries that are so important to union membership in Canada: health care, education, and public administration. The combined impact of these differences is the lowest union coverage rate for South Asian workers (19%) of any racialized or non-racialized category of population. Offsetting factors, however, include a larger employment share for both South Asian men and women in the higher-wage but relatively non-unionized financial and professional services sectors. High incomes for non-union professionals in finance and professional services pull up average wages for the South Asian category, such that the racial wage gap faced by South Asan workers is smaller than for most other racialized categories (including the more strongly union-represented Black population). These sector and occupational composition effects reduce the apparent racial wage gap faced by South Asian workers below what would be expected given their low unionization rate.

These polar examples — relatively unionized Black workers, and relatively non-unionized South Asian workers — illustrate the complexities of the overlapping factors af-

[31] The impact of these sectoral differences on wage inequality between different racialized categories of workers has been explored elsewhere, for example by Statistics Canada (2021c).

fecting job quality, unionization, and incomes for racialized workers. The collection of new data on employment outcomes by racialized category by Statistics Canada will provide valuable raw material for study of these intricate effects in the years to come.

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