



Racist laws – a trade union issue

Muhammad Idrish told CARF that protecting workers' rights means protecting black members faced with deportation.

I came as a student in 1976 from Bangladesh and married a British citizen in 1977. I was given 12 months' leave to remain on the basis of my marriage. I applied to stay permanently but my marriage broke up and my application was refused. A five-year campaign was finally won in 1986 when the Home Office gave me permanent leave to remain in the UK. Though this was a community based campaign operating from the Handsworth district of Birmingham, my trade union Nalگو (now Unison) played a very positive role to make it a nationwide issue.

Initially it took me two years to get the union to take it up because I could not argue that the deportation was directly a trade union issue. Everybody I talked to felt it was an immigration issue that should be dealt with by immigration experts such as the JCWI, CRE, etc, until some activists in our campaign started to argue that 'If a trade union member gets deported then s/he loses his/her job, therefore loses a basic right to work. If wages and conditions of service are important to the trade union movement then they have a duty to protect members jobs in the first place.'

This was accepted by my branch of Nalگو which put a motion to its annual conference in 1983. I was elected as an observer to the conference and my branch paid all my expenses to attend. I spoke about my case at many fringe meetings. None of these meetings had anything to do with immigration, race relations or racial discrimination at all, but I said what I had to say, constantly arguing the same point again and again. There were a

good number of black delegates at the conference who helped make it into an issue. Lots of technical obstruction was brought in against our motion by the leadership, but on the last day of the conference the motion was debated and passed. From that point on Nalگو played a leading role in the campaign against my deportation. They produced thousands of leaflets and posters which were distributed to almost every local government workplace in the country, they organised speaking tours and held three major national demonstrations in my support, including one on a weekday for which members were authorised to take strike action in order to attend.

These things did not come easily. Very many activists and members of the campaign had to argue with the leadership to get things moving. The success of the campaign convinced members and leaders of Nalگو that it had been needed. And Nalگو gained its respect from the black community. The immigration issue has become a mainstream trade union issue within the union, so much so that headquarters now has an officer part of whose job is to support anti-deportation campaigns and campaigns against immigration control. It is now Nalگو's policy to 'oppose all immigration controls' and refuse to cooperate with jobs which relate to the implementation of immigration controls. A lot is still to be done in Unison but it is now well established that 'issues which concern ordinary men and women' include fighting racism. ■

Muhammad Idrish, chair of Birmingham Unison, is a member of W Midlands anti-deportation campaign

New initiative

The Labour and Trade Union Campaign Against Racism and Fascism writes: 'We were set up by rank and file trade unionists and members of the Labour party, who recognised that the labour and trade union movement needed to play a more central role in the fight against racism and fascism. The original conference was jointly organised by the three trades councils of Bexley, Greenwich and Bromley, the boroughs bordering and containing the BNP's national headquarters.

'The aims of the campaign are twofold – to put pressure from below on the TUC and Labour party leadership to take positive action against racism and fascism and to take the fight against racism and fascism down to where it matters – the workplace, the dole queues and the housing estates. Most of all the workplace, where black and white workers can most obviously be united by their common struggle for job security, pay and conditions of employment. Our campaign has not been set up in opposition to existing anti-racist and anti-fascist organisations. The LTUCARF aims to underpin their work by taking the message through union branches, trades councils and local Labour parties to working class people who may not take much notice of high profile "political campaigns", but who are directly in the firing line for fascist organisations like the BNP.

'We appeal to all Labour and trade union activists to join the campaign.' ■

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