

UNISON Black and Migrant Worker (B&MW) members in Northern Ireland

UNISON Northern Ireland has a membership of almost 4000 Black Migrant Worker members. This makes us the single largest organisation of Black and Migrant Workers in the region.

We have a small but growing group of activists in our B&MW committee who produce a constant flow of activities, campaigns and information going to all Black and Migrant worker members in our region.

The makeup of Black Members in Northern Ireland has been traditionally quite different from most regions in the UK. About 95% of our Black members would be first generation migrant workers, coming mostly from the Philippines, India (Kerala) and increasingly Africa.

This translates into a strong focus on issues affecting Black migrant workers: such as racism and racist discrimination, but also access to immigration advice and representation, or challenging the lack of protection for newly arrived migrants who are locked into a sponsorship visa and particularly vulnerable to exploitation and abusive practices.

Our group has been involved in all union activities (marches, conferences, general campaigns) and would also have occasional information stalls, seminars and social events, but the main focus has always been our campaigning work.





Issues facing Black and Migrant Worker in Northern Ireland

Black and Migrant Worker members in our region face the same issues as their white local colleagues: rising costs of living; poor terms and conditions in some sectors; long hours; deteriorating services; staff shortages; etc.

They also face issues that would be more specific to first generation migrants: lack of childcare facilities for people working irregular shifts and lack of extended family network to compensate; isolation; difficulties understanding local accents; or challenges booking Annual Leave for longer than two weeks when need to travel to countries such as the Philippines or India to visit family and friends.

On top of all these, B&MW members also face many forms of racism – from attacks on homes (particularly prominent during times of raised local tensions in Northern Ireland); or verbal abuse from residents / patients and their families, through to racist discrimination at work. Many report feeling that there is a disproportionate scrutiny on their work; that they get the longest shifts; most difficult wards or residents; and that they get targeted the second something goes wrong.

Mental health issues

Last year our group also focussed on mental health issues. To mark UNISON of Year of Black Workers, Black History month and International Day for Mental Health, a member of our group led on a conference shining a light on access to mental health provisions in Black communities (lack of culturally competent services; access to information; stigma; etc).

The conference was chaired by the NI Regional Secretary, and was addressed by Professor Siobhan O'Neill, the Northern Ireland Mental Health Champion. The conference included a panel discussion on experiences of accessing help and support with those from ethnic minority backgrounds in Northern Ireland. The event was covered by BBC NI.

We also provided access to virtual drop-in sessions with a registered counsellor from our B&MW group, for members who might feel isolated over the Christmas period.

English language

Our region continues to provide preparation classes for members trying to pass their OET or IELTS exams. These have been in place for many years and have always been a great way of engaging with newly arrived migrant workers. The classes have been invaluable and allowed many Care assistants who were initially nurses in their home country, to get on the NMC register.

This work is also linked with a lot of referrals regarding issues with proof of English and supporting members who can find themselves in difficulties over these issues. Because the classes are also open to refugees and asylum seekers, it has also given us a greater connection with the wider anti racism / migrant / refugee support community sector, putting us firmly on the map as a union for Black and Migrant Worker communities.

Sponsorship visas / repayment clauses / immigration

The bulk of our work in the last couple of years has centred around members on sponsorship visa. Post Brexit, all the HSC Trusts and Independent Health Care providers in our region have been heavily reliant on overseas recruitment (from India and Africa predominantly in the last few years).

This has meant that our newly arrived members are on sponsorship visas and are extremely vulnerable to exploitation. This has been stark in the care home sector where migrant workers have experienced the combination of systemic racism and being trapped by the immigration system.

Migrant workers who came to work in care homes often experienced what was described as modern slavery. People were made to feel like they were “property of the home”. They often felt they were working in unsafe conditions (understaffed, with little proper induction and adequate training, etc) and were expected to work ‘as an when’ required, regardless of rota, leave or breaks.

“These employers, they always say that you should be grateful that we brought you from Africa into this country. You should put the interest of the Home first before your own interest. It appears that I belong to them, I don’t have any rights at all.” (*member of our group interview on BBC*)

When members felt so unhappy and so unsafe that they could see no other option but leave, they were then hit with ‘**repayment clauses**’ with members facing bills ranging between £3000 and £10 850.

This was claimed by the employer to “compensate” for the cost of having brought people over.

Our group worked closely with the UNISON centre team and our regional team to challenge the use of these clauses. Some of our members shared their experience in interviews with UNISON magazine, the guardian and on our local BBC news reports. We also commissioned research and worked with the Department of Health locally.

All these elements as well as the threat of Tribunal cases, put the “Code of Practice for the Recruitment of International Health and Social Care Personnel” firmly on the map.

Although the Code does not prohibit the use of repayment clauses, it frames what can and can't be recouped by an employer.

This has been extremely useful, and we no longer come across employers who insist that the Code does not apply to them. Many members and branch activists have been able to challenge repayments as a result and, in some cases, get money back for members.

The new **immigration bill** brings new sets of challenges for members on the lowest pay bands and the issue of **access to immigration advice and representation** remains one of our main campaigns.

While members can access legal advice on employment, personal injury, non-work-related accidents, or free wills... they are stuck when immigration and employment collide. UNISON solicitors do not cover immigration.

Members must rely on a weekly phone helpline -an excellent service in its own right-provided by an external organisation.

Our region has organised face to face immigration advice monthly in our office for years. These have been a great recruitment tool and have helped many members and their families. Similarly to the UNISON JCWI helpline, they work well for citizenship application queries, family reunion questions, visa information etc... but they are not a solution when there is a crossover between employment and immigration issues and when you need a solicitor to step in with a timely legal challenge.

As the issue of immigration advice through our legal services remains unresolved, the cases of exploitation of migrant workers on sponsorship have been very difficult for branches to deal with and has led to members affected not being able to get the level of support that they need and deserve to get.

Our group will continue to seek that members have access to immigration advice and representation through our legal services.

We hope that our little committee will grow with the ever-increasing number of Black and Migrant Worker members joining our region.