

Black History Month

Questions and answers - Alisha Kang, National President, Union of National Employees

What does it mean to lead a federal union as a Black woman and what unique challenges and opportunities come with this role?

The most important I can think of is that young Black women activist now know that it is possible. It also means that my community, holds me to higher standard; is she just another Black token? Has she sold out? Is she here to make white people feel good? Many will say, we aren't racist we have a Black President. Yet, at the end of day systemic change never materialize for them. It means that Black members and community groups come to me with questions about why at their level they still see obstacles to representation and funding requests for their issues. One example of this is how much money unions were willing to give to Ukraine but how little they are perceived to give to the Black Class Actions which includes their members. The disproportionality speaks volumes to them. I must answer for why that is still the case with me as President. I am left to explain it. It means that my continued involvement with Black causes is scrutinized, whispered about and seen as bad thing. It is weaponised against me. It means that often I must say no to my community and yes to those seen as more important to people that do not look like me even when their disparity in conditions is clear in the data. It means that I must triple, and quadruple think through in what way will my involvement with my own community be perceived by non-Black union members. Even though this is the first time my community has had a woman at this level of leadership they cannot turn to a national union. It means I get subjected to racially inappropriate situations that target Blacks with no expectation of my safety being of concern. It means I get pulled off the shelf and dusted off every Black history month on Feb 1st to Feb 28th to show that there is Black leadership. It means that often I am expected to have lived experienced that reflects all Black union leadership. The reality is that those types of stories gain traction but when I attend a woman event and share of my other intersectionality I am overlooked as having nothing to contribute. Leading a union as a Black woman also means I get in spaces such as the United Nations to speak on labour issues for Black labourers. I get to improve all my members working conditions. I get to be the one that paves a less heavy route to this summit for others that look like me. I get to be part of a movement I believe in at my core and I have platform. It has opened doors to show a different types and style of leading. That people that may never have seen leadership in this way are interested in pursuing its value in their organization.

How do we convince Black women to run for union positions or volunteer on committees and what barriers can unions remove to encourage their participation?

This is a hard question because I do not think most people realize the depth of all the realities I outlined previously in the last questions and the reality of many union spaces. They are not yet ready to face how dehumanizing listening to debates about why people that do not look like us do not support Black members issues when we know how much money goes out for other causes such as women aid, floods, or fires, which are all important causes, but when it comes to Black people's causes it always becomes a debate. You can imagine how challenging it can be to navigate these spaces; it makes you not want to be around people that do not see the value of investing in ending the cycle of pain you have been experiences for many generations. While you also must demand and seek for justice with the employer to support larger causes. Most unions donate from their unrestricted surplus, but I think all members would be better served if we set up a funding pot for labour intertwined causes such as climate changes, social and racial justice and other worthy causes and that it be proportionate so that all feel seen in the causes we support to advance workers rights, so Black members feel seen too. Zero tolerance of Anti-Black racism in our spaces and stop telling us how such and such racist is a really a nice person when they cause us harm. When that happens, what you are doing is to invalidate our reality. Please listen to hear our pain not to defend how we describe the harms we are subjected to in union spaces. Show up as an ally, but do not expect anything for it. Our earnings are lower, than most others in the union spaces. We continue to hold other side jobs. Paying for members time in union spaces, per diems and kilometres, do not make union spaces elitist. Mentor people in these spaces as there are so many rules and it is intimidating when you show up. Welcome people that are new into your friend groups and share different experiences with them.

How can Black women in leadership positions drive meaningful change within their unions and beyond?

I do not claim to have all the answer on how or what it requires to be excellent. No matter what, as Black people, we must always be excellent. We must be without errors. We must not fall into traps laid out for us to be embarrassed or ruin our reputation. We need to be ten times better. We need to work so hard to even have chance to be considered of value. We cannot bring up our reality in these spaces or it is used against us. We are seen as trying to play the sympathy card or using the race card. Despite everything, as I outlined in the previous questions, we must elevate the platform for Black women's issues and our community. We must think in terms of being good Ancestors for our future generations. Head down means we hand down the same working conditions to another generation. We cannot tolerate the conditions that those that came before us had just to be in these spaces. We must say no more harm to us all in these spaces. We must do our own internal work so that our traumas do not turn into harms we commit upon others. We need to be healthy. We must hold the gains we have made when people want to role back du to others fears and a mindset of scarcity. We need to look at how far we have come. We must not let people tell us it is an either or a but. Let us make it and continue to emancipate and progress. Let us make it clear that we understand that your issues are important, and so are ours.

