

Black History Month

Questions and answers- Christopher Wilson

What are the risks of staying on the sidelines? What happens when Black workers don't get involved in their unions, and how does inaction impact workplace rights, representation, and broader policy change?

I respond to this question as a member of the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists who has been active in the labour movement for 25 years.

When Black workers stay on the sidelines by not becoming active in their unions (either by choice or as a result of exclusionary practices), there are harmful implications for unions, our community and Black workers ourselves which I will detail as follows:

Unions derive their strength from the active participation of their membership. When Black workers are not active in our unions and workplaces, our voices are not heard in decision-making processes (such as resolution debates), individual grievances are not filed in response to workplace discrimination and our presence is lacking at demonstrations where unions fight back. The result is that systemically racist workplace practices continue, become normalized and are reinforced by employers either intentionally or unintentionally with the same impact upon Black workers. We face a continued racial income gap, barriers to advancement, job insecurity, precarious work, racial micro and macro aggressions as well as various other forms of workplace discrimination. The labour movement needs the active engagement of Black workers to effectively confront anti-black racism in the workplace. Unions must be intentional about breaking down barriers to facilitate our active participation including access to leadership positions at all levels of the Union.

Our community is also impacted when Black unionized workers are not active. Black workers have a long tradition of advocating for our community through our unions. In fact, this was one of the main reasons the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists was formed (www.cbtu.ca). When Black workers withdraw from union activity, the community loses a voice within the movement and access to the collective strength. Unions can bring to issues that matter to us. Our concerns include policy changes to advance employment equity; decent work; public services; a resolution to the Black Class Action lawsuit and much more. As an example, CBTU recently created a workshop titled "*Let My People Vote*" for the purpose of supporting the Black community in these policy discussions within the movement and the broader political landscape.

Black workers ourselves are also harmed when we are not active in our unions. Some Black workers choose not to become active from a place of self-preservation, i.e. “I am just trying to keep on keeping on” and there should be no judgement attached to that perspective. However, we face psychological harm which manifests into physical harm when we endure racism in the workplace without any meaningful recourse. Becoming active can take many forms including: choosing to speak up, casting a secret ballot in union or political elections or assuming a leadership role in one of the multiple roles available within a union, from the shop floor steward to senior leadership. Knowing that we do not need to walk alone can be empowering and help us to carry forward.

We are meeting during Black History or African Liberation month so let’s honour our ancestors and continue along this long road to justice through ongoing advocacy within our unions, our community and broader society.