

The Making of Britain's Black Working Class

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To mark Black History Month, Ron Ramdin explores the labour struggles that forged Britain's Black working class - battles fought against the state, business and within the trade union movement itself.

"That England that was wont to conquer others,
Hath made a shameful conquest of itself"
- William Shakespeare, 'Richard II'

The making of the Black working class in Britain was a long process reflecting essential changes in Britain's labour needs over time, both at home and abroad.

Difference has always been a feature of humankind. Difference was present and integral to human civilisation long before Britain became a growing empire in the sixteenth century. Crucial to the making of this empire was the element of difference in the intra-British Isles relationship between England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland, whose histories were intertwined.

With the passage of time, as the empire expanded further, differences in colour, race, religion and culture became central to the images and imagery in the story of Black workers' struggles in Britain. Contrary to the popular view that "Black" people first came to Britain after the Second World War, there was a Black presence in Britain since Roman times, and some argue even before that.

After the abolitions of African slavery and Indian indentureship in the British Empire, by the turn of the twentieth century, to protect workers' rights and improve pay and working conditions, Working Men's Associations and trade unions were exported from Britain to the colonies.

Before the First World War, the small Black and Asian communities did all they could not merely to survive, but to add uniquely, in their various ways, to British life. Militant, educated Black and Indian students formed and promoted radical ideologies like Pan-Africanism and Indian nationalism. They were responding to discrimination on the grounds of race and colour. Although in some cases important contributions were recognised by British officials, racial prejudice was rampant.

Overcoming it was not so much the concern of British officials and employers who forced certain adjustments upon Black workers that were not of their own making, but very much to do with the economic, social, political and cultural stresses and strains within Imperial Britain and in her relations with the colonial world. As overseas trade expanded, the discipline and control of labour (both Black and White) was imperative to Britain's economic and cultural well-being.

To ensure the continued exploitation of colonial labour, an ideology based on racial difference, which bred an inferior-superior nexus both in interpersonal relations and in international trade, was constructed to keep Black people in subjection. Education was crucial. Through books and the British education system, the cultural transmission of racist ideas was passed on over generations.

Twentieth Century

By the turn of the twentieth century, and throughout, one thing had become unmistakably clear. As the Black American scholar W.E.B du Bois put it, “the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the colour line.”

This is an apt description for colour and was integral to the questions of “race” and racism, particularly before the [1919 Race Riots](#) in Britain. By this time, Black workers from Africa, the West Indies, India, the Middle East and China had become part of the populations in British seaports, including Cardiff and Liverpool.

By 1919, the Black presence in Cardiff had grown; and in the immediate post-war period, thousands of demobilised soldiers and sailors had returned to Cardiff to find that their jobs were taken by Black men. Unemployment and housing problems increased tension between Black and White workers. “Race” and “colour” prejudice were reflected in Black workers being paid less than White workers; something which the Seamen’s Trade Union did nothing to redress.

One significant feature of this confrontation is that while crowds of White men attacked Black workers, the police presence in Cardiff did not protect the Black workers, but acted as a buffer between the Black-White divide. This law and order “presence” in relation to Black people in Britain was a portent of things to come! Black men faced a bleak future, in terms of finding jobs, never mind harbouring higher aspirations.

Elsewhere, in Liverpool, during the inter-war period, Black workers were faced with high unemployment, the severe effect of the economic depressions of the 1920s and 1930s. And after the Second World War, to fill the labour shortage in Britain, at the invitation of the British government, hundreds of thousands of Commonwealth migrants came to Britain in search of jobs and a better life. Thus, once more, the British economy demanded, and received, a large supply of cheap black labour. Immigration transformed the face of Britain.

By the last quarter of the twentieth century, growing Black communities were to be found, not only in the port areas, but in the cities and industrial areas. These migrants faced many challenges; and ten years after the S.S. Empire Windrush had arrived with post-war immigrants, once again, riots broke out.

This time, the affected communities were in Nottingham and Notting Hill in London. It was a wake-up call for the people of Britain; a reminder of the country’s ‘colour problem’ which had roused heated parliamentary and national debates on race, colour and immigration in 1958.

Predictably, politicians called for immigration control; in 1962, the first Immigration Act was passed. More Immigration Acts followed; and within the Black communities, the struggle for jobs and housing led to much ongoing protest.

Racial discrimination and disadvantage were deeply contentious issues. Faced with many grievances, Black workers sought membership of trade unions, but all too often union support was not forthcoming. They had no choice but act unilaterally.

Historic Strikes

Following the large post-war influx of migrants between 1962 and the late 1980s, Black and Asian workers were still doing lower-paid jobs with little or no prospect of promotion. And even though there were instances of upward mobility, in the main the concentration of Black workers in poorly-paid, ‘dead-end’ jobs was a hint of things to come.

Race and colour discrimination were widespread. To address their workplace grievances, Black workers in British industry during the 1960s, '70s and early '80s, resorted to strike action. They struck at [Courtaulds Red Scar Mill in Preston](#) over management's decision to force Asian workers to operate more machines for proportionately less pay. This first skirmish was a landmark in Black labour history in Britain.

In the Red Scar Mill dispute, Black workers sought trade union membership and protection. They needed redress to grievances of certain work practices, but the employers would not budge. After a three-day stoppage, the Transport and General Workers' Union chairman, Richard Roberts, began to campaign to get strikers back to work. What this strike revealed was not only the solidarity between Black and Asian migrant workers, but also their failure to have other grievances redressed (namely low pay and unacceptable working conditions) because of the lack of official union support.

For the first time in the Black and Asian workers' struggle, the Black Power Movement in Britain made a well-publicised intervention. When the strike had ended there was no shortage of views from the press and public. Almost a decade later, Asian workers again took strike action against their employer, Imperial Typewriters in Leicester; and importantly, they questioned the practices of the Transport and General Workers Union chief, George Bromley, who was also a Justice of the Peace, stalwart of the Leicester Labour Party and one of the "Lieutenants of capital."

Other strikes followed in the 1970s: notably, the [celebrated Grunwick Strike](#) in Willesden London in 1976. In this strike too, apart from grievances with employers, Asian workers sought trade union membership. The strike was a *cause célèbre*; a watershed in the Black workers' struggle and Industrial Relations in the history of the British labour movement. The strike demonstrated the assertiveness and courage of Asian migrant workers to confront both the union and management so that they could have legitimate workers' rights.

These workers did not take action against the company, Grunwick Processing, because they wanted to belong to a Union. They voted with their feet, because they were no longer prepared to tolerate the abuse, exploitation, low wages and unbearable conditions in the factory. Led by the diminutive Jayaben Desai, they were determined to fight the "slavery of it all." And when Desai said the treatment she and her co-workers received was "worse than the slaves in *Roots*," she was echoing a common historical experience with other migrant workers.

Apart from employers' lack of recognition of racial discrimination in terms of recruitment, pay and promotion, Black workers who had joined trade unions became increasingly dissatisfied with their leaderships. Disenchanted, they formed "autonomous" organisations to combat racism at the workplace. Historically, until the end of the twentieth century, the Annual Reports of consecutive TUC Congresses reflect this.

Without widespread grievances, one cannot agitate successfully. For Black and Asian workers in British industry the decades from the 1960s to the 1970s were years of rapid changes in industrial organisation. The growing size and complexity of production units, their greater inter-dependence (though multinational corporations) and the rate of technological change demanded planning and co-ordination from the centre.

Winning Recognition

The strong feelings generated by strikes – be they 'unofficial' or 'unconstitutional' – though essentially a managerial problem, were very much a concern of government. Within this context, while some firms openly practiced discrimination against Black workers, other, more 'enlightened' managements adopted a 'soft glove' technique, a less confrontational, though no less mean-spirited

approach.

Nevertheless, both types of employers, faced with the problem of increasing productivity and profit-making, were drawn into questionable schemes and practices to achieve shifting objectives. Thus prolonged exploitation predictably led to strong workers' reaction.

While the strikes prior to the 1980s demonstrated the coverage and determination of militant Asian women in the private sector, simultaneously, their Black sisters largely from the Caribbean, were waging a hard struggle mainly in the public sector.

Another first for Black workers came in the early 1970s, when Black and Asian nurses and ancillary workers came out on strike in support of their demands for more pay. Their necessary action was widely interpreted as being contrary to the myth that women administering to the sick, the young and the old should not behave in this confrontational manner.

Seen in historical perspective, this strike was the manifestation of a long struggle. Black women were predominantly employed in the lower grades serving not only doctors, but also 'professional' nurses and, of course, patients. Promotion chances were few – and with low pay, bad working conditions and unsociable hours of work, the dissatisfied Black nurses sought improvements.

If in the closing years of the 1970s, the power and significance of Black women had grown, by the early 1980s, with a new Conservative government, their circumstances changed for the worse. Norman Fowler, Secretary of State for Social Services, announced the government's proposals that ancillary work in the National Health Service should be taken over by private companies. This directly impacted an estimated 70,000 Black workers (mainly women), a third of the workforce, in catering, portering, washing up, laundry and other cleaning jobs.

For nine months, they were on strike, picketing and fighting back, as they waged a tenacious struggle which won them support from thousands of workers both Black and White. Some powerful unions showed concern and even the Trades Union Congress gave its backing. At last, others had recognised their plight. They all believed that they would win the pay rise they demanded; a belief that sustained them in their prolonged strikes.

Of crucial importance at the time was the militant support they received from miners and print workers. On September 22nd, 1982, when over 120,000 workers took to the streets of London, the common interests of the nurses and ancillary workers were clear. Alas, such overwhelming support was not enough; and eventually, a two-year pay settlement was reached after which the strike was called off.

The TUC had withdrawn its leadership in the dispute and the ever-hopeful Black women workers felt betrayed. Yet again, Black workers vented their anger over the leadership of the TUC and the union. With the implementation of the Conservative government's policy of the privatisation in the NHS, the number of nurses and ancillary workers dwindled; and became a subject of heated debate.

Into the 1980s, and the years to come, the continued exploitation of Caribbean and other Black women generated a rising militancy and solidarity with other sections of Britain's Black and Asian workforce, caught up in disputes in the motor and textile industries.

Overall, as the confidence of Black and Asian workers' grew, the organic link of struggles at work and in their communities was strengthened and many groups moved towards independent, autonomous trade union and cultural organisation.

[In 1983, the Black Trade Unionists Solidarity Movement was formed.](#) As the final decade of the

century approached, unions were hard-pressed by dramatic technological changes and practices. On the issue of low pay, one union said: "it is in the interests of all our members that Black workers in our trades and industries should be members of, and active in, our union. Without that input, challenges on low pay, equal treatment and rights at work will never be successfully met."

Well said, and well intentioned. But, in spite of the slogan "White labour can't be free while Black labour is in chains," the vast majority of black working people in twentieth century Britain remained firmly shackled under the pressure exacted from all sides within the British business and economic system - which had led to them being here in the first place.

Politics of Difference

Since the last third of the twentieth century, there has been a steady shift in the base of the British economy; a movement away from heavy manufacturing to hi-tech industries and businesses, and a growing service sector.

Changing work practices posed new challenges for Black and Asian workers, especially in re-skilling, retraining and the need for higher education. In turn, such changes were reflected in the migrant children's visions of the future. Black youth aspirations were diverse, well beyond their parents' opportunities and ambitions.

Born and bred in Britain (and living between two cultures) as they evolved they freed their minds through various pursuits, reflecting a wide range of talent and creativity. They demonstrated a strong sense of belonging to Britain and were engaged in a massive cultural process of reimagining Britain.

Though relations between the police and Black people have been problematic, the Stop and Search charges were particularly troublesome for young Black people. Elites, in making decisions on Britain's future, have tended to overlook the groundswell of feeling emanating from young Black people and their communities as they proclaim their collective and individual actions.

But young Black people signal that they too are integral to the historical flux by inscribing correctives to racist versions of their histories, their own roles as workers and participants in the act of cultural renewal; of making and re-making themselves, as well as enforcing the crucial connection between anti-racism and culture.

And so they give meaning to life as lived and creatively expressed in their own hybridised art-forms which defy, redefine and transform Englishness and Britishness through a regenerative and liberating accommodation of multiple British cultural identities. By so doing, they pose fundamental societal questions: Whose culture? Whose Britain? Whose identity?

Black workers had struggled bravely, courageously throughout the twentieth century for the ever-elusive "equal opportunities for all" - the oft-repeated, even hollow-sounding, political mantra so beloved of politicians.

Given that difference is the DNA of social relations, in my essay, [*On Respect for Difference*](#), I concluded:

"Historically, in times of economic necessity (for example, during wars, famine and the spread of disease) and religious persecution, humankind has always sought and found ways of moving on; mass migrations were inevitable and, in today's globalised world, like Britain, few countries can claim to have an 'indigenous' population. But, wherever human beings congregate in civilised communities and societies, the insistent calls for

freedom and human rights would indeed remain elusive, meaningless slogans, unless people genuinely relate to each other with respect for difference.”

Ron Ramdin is a novelist, historian and biographer. He is the author of numerous books including *The Making of the Black Working Class in Britain* and *Reimagining Britain*. His latest novel is *Or Not to Be: The True Story of William Shakespeare*.

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