

RACE, EQUALITY AND TRADE UNIONS

TUC SEMINAR 12 June, 1989

The Involvement of Black Workers in British Trade Unions

The Importance of History

Serious consideration of the position of black workers in Britain necessarily begins with some understanding of history. History is not simply something recorded in books, documents and memory and concerning relatively distant times past. History includes the lived experience and situation of people in the recent past, and over their own lifetimes. In common with other people, trade unionists are not simply the victims of past history, they are also the agents of living history, with a capacity to understand and act upon the world in which their history unfolds. In this brief discussion paper, we hope to indicate some of the ways in which the histories of white and black impinge upon contemporary British trade unions, especially in considering the scope for union action over race equality in Britain today.

In particular, it is important to grasp the historical and changing relationships between Britain and colonialism, embracing trade, military conquest and occupation, violent oppression, appropriation of local produce and raw materials, slavery and forced labour and the widespread imposition of colonial rule in court, schoolroom, plantation and factory. In many different and complex ways, each of these aspects of historical development impinge directly and indirectly upon both black and white people in Britain today. Whatever its policies and however sincere its objectives, the British trade union movement cannot ignore or hope easily to escape the consequences of that history for its own membership, organisation, structures and priorities. Indeed, in some part, British unions themselves have been involved in those historical processes, including the recent history of Britain since the end of the second world war.