

order if you're going to deal with anything else. For example, one of the security guards attacked a Black housekeeper, and one of the ways we dealt with it was to publicize it in the union newspaper. We took a stand that the security guard should be tried. There was a whole disciplinary process in the union, including a trial by the executive board. And the progressives didn't win that one." The security guard was not punished. Nevertheless, says Lui, "It makes the point that other people are noticing and don't think it's a good thing."

Another way that unions must deal with the race question, says Lui, is simply by responding to initiatives that come from different groups. "We've had for years a reasonably large Puerto Rican population in the membership. One of the first steps of getting them more involved was doing some translation, but being involved in the union still wasn't comfortable to them, so people weren't coming to meetings. Plus, there was a Puerto Rican on the Board of Trustees who was very anti-union and he was the one who had gotten them the jobs in the first place.

"One of the things that broke the ice was that some of them decided they wanted a softball team, and they approached the local to be a sponsor. We did, and that went a long way. We ended up buying their uniforms. So here they were in a Puerto Rican softball league out on the field with these AFSCME Local 1489 shirts, and it was very good in promoting the union in the community in an informal kind of way. It gave them some pride in the union, and they really liked having us go to the games. So sometimes things you can do are not strictly union, but just showing support for ideas and initiatives that people have."

Getting White Workers Involved

The fight against racism is not solely the responsibility of minority workers. If the union cause is going to be advanced, then white workers must also play a central role in fighting racism. Jeff Perry, Treasurer of Local 300 of the National Postal Mail Handlers Union, tells how a multiracial caucus at his workplace took the question of racism seriously, made it a touchstone of their work, and was elected to union office. The group fought racism on the shop floor and challenged a racist all-white organization that was allied with management.

"There are about 1,300 mailhandlers at the Bulk Mail Center in northern New Jersey and about 4,000 workers there total," says Perry. "Our facility is about one-third Black and Hispanic and two-thirds white, and the female percentage is about 20 percent."

Perry, who is white, began working at the center in 1974. He talks first about challenging the daily racism he encountered on the shop floor.

"My own experience working on the floor was that if you work eight hours in the night with a white worker, in the course of that time a race question would come up. Some little comment here, you're talking about sports or something else. Some little prob-

ing to get the affirmation, 'Yeah, we're both white.' And if you don't go with it, it changes things. I'm talking about jumping up and saying, 'Wait a minute, that's not right!' and challenging it. If it goes unchallenged, the group tends to be monolithic in its understanding. But if it is challenged, the thing can fracture a little bit, and the racism doesn't have such a pervasive hold.

"Or merely sitting at an all-white table in the lunchroom. What kind of message is that sending to other people about how welcome they are?"

"Some people argue that you really don't want to bring up this race question too much because you're going to alienate some white workers. They don't want to talk about it, you're going to turn them off. But what we learned from our experience has been the exact opposite—that by exposing racist practices and ideas, and calling upon people to oppose them, we've gotten stronger, not weaker."

The group, made up of both Black and white workers, was putting out a regular newsletter, "on payday," says Perry, "because that's when we had the most people there." The newsletter took an editorial stand against racism. "Every issue of our paper we looked at issues not only from the perspective of how our workers were being affected, but we would also ask, Was there a racist edge to it? Was there a sexist edge?"

"For example, we had a thing called 'light duty assignments.' In the Postal Service, if you are injured off the job, there is a contract provision where they're supposed to find you work.

"But we found that a lot of people were being denied light duty assignments, and the people who were being denied were essentially Blacks and Hispanics and women—particularly pregnant women. And we wound up waging a major struggle over that, several hundred people outside a Congressman's office, and we got that overturned overnight.

"When I got elected to union office in 1984, one of the first issues we were faced with was 'temporary details.' Ordinarily, a worker gets a bid assignment through seniority, but there is a provision where you can change your schedule, and get a 'detail'—if there was someone sick in your house, for instance.

"There's very good reasons why this might happen for a short period of time, but if it happens for a long time it tends to violate the seniority rights of others. If you're a junior employee and all of a sudden you're getting weekends off and people with ten and fifteen years can't get that, you're violating their rights.

"When I came into office I found 20, 30, 40 cases of people who had these details, some without even the paperwork that is supposed to accompany them, and some for years. And virtually everyone who had these long-term details was white.

"We took the position that this had to be challenged, on the basis of it being a racist and discriminatory practice and not in the interest of our group as a whole, our mailhandlers who had seniority rights in the contract."



Coal miners show their support for civil rights during the NAACP Silent March on Washington. The miners took time off from the Pittston picket lines in southwest Virginia to journey to the August 26, 1989 march.

The reformers in Local 300 also used the steward system to insure that all workers got fair representation.

"When we came into office, we didn't yet have the practice of election of shop stewards," Perry says. "It wasn't in our constitution. What we did, though, we started a practice where, rather than just appointing people, we'd have group discussions and get input from people on the floor. We tried to consciously look at the racial make-up of our steward apparatus. We tried to make sure that the percentage of Black workers was reflective of how key our Black membership was to the struggle we were waging. And of our five chief stewards, four were Black."

A Racist Organization Behind the Discrimination

As it turned out, racist patterns in the assignment of temporary details and light duty were no accident.

"I had been a night worker and far removed from the labor-management meetings between our union and the Postal Service people," Perry remembers. "We had been divorced from the union leadership and never kept informed. But after being elected to office, I and some of the chief stewards and

stewards went to one of these labor-management meetings.

"My jaw dropped, because I found the management running our facility were seven white Italian males. That was not reflective of the ethnic or sexual make-up of the community in which I live or the place I work.

"So we did a little digging and we quickly found that all seven of them were members of a thing called the Columbia Association. Their constitution said it was for Italian-Americans only. High-level officials in the other major facilities in north Jersey and New York were in it too—and so were high-level union people from the Mail Handlers and reportedly from the other two postal unions. The former head of the Mail Handlers at our facility was also the former president of the Columbia Association, and its address was our postal facility."

As Jeff Perry makes clear, this was not an innocent social club, but a labor-management clique which was giving special privileges to some white workers.

"We quickly seized on the existence of the Columbia Association, its ties between union and management, as a racist and segregatory organization.

We just hit that theme repeatedly, not only in our newsletter, but we took it to the local newspapers and other media." The group also filed an Equal Employment Opportunity case with the federal government.

"When we would sit down with management, and they wanted to lecture us about management's rights," says Perry, "we took the position they couldn't teach us anything about anything as long as they were allowing this racist segregatory organization to exist. We had one string on our guitar. They didn't utter a peep as we started blasting and blasting, and we really backed them into a wall.

"Here was this all-white Italian male group denying light duty to pregnant women! We had apple pie and motherhood on our side on this one. And we just blasted them and we made them look like the horrible ogres that they were, because they were denying pregnant women a fair chance. And the majority of the pregnant women were Black or Hispanic or Asian.

"At first a lot of people thought it was very bold, because everyone thought they were so powerful. But by assuming the moral upper hand in this we really isolated them, and effectively limited their power to struggle against us."

The Columbia Association didn't disappear when challenged by the reformers. They counterattacked, arguing that the reformers were anti-white racists.

Perry believes that at this point it was very important that there were some white workers involved in opposing the discrimination against Blacks. "The fact that we had some whites who actively spoke against racism on the work floor was crucial to winning and neutralizing whites who had opposed the unity we were trying to build. That was part of the task we had to accomplish: to get whites not to look the other way when there are instances of racism."

How would Perry talk to an Italian-American worker about why he should oppose the Columbia Association clique and support the reformers?

"If they're denying light duty to a Black pregnant woman," says Perry, "we just talk about it. The issues we're talking about are basic human issues, basic workers' issues. Workers know that people shouldn't be denied light duty, not in our post office anyway.

"If we can win people to be incensed at injustice—and racism and sexism are the real live ones we face very day—they're going to be more class conscious too. They'll be able to see the importance of solidarity and other struggles.

"People have to make some sacrifices sometimes in struggles. Like when you go on the picket line, when you strike, you're giving up that dollars and cents. Your appeal cannot be simply dollars and cents, not if you're trying to build unity. Our struggle was never solely about economics."

Teachers Confront Racism In Schools

Our next two stories deal with teachers and students. Just as for other workers, teachers' working conditions are directly affected by racism, because racist

schools become difficult, unpleasant and dangerous places to work. Michael Charney, an executive board member of AFT Local 279 in Cleveland, says, "If there's a lot of racial tension, and if the kids feel alienated from one another, it's going to be real hard to teach.

"Unions haven't pushed far enough on getting the kind of emotional satisfaction a teacher needs, which is really the fundamental reason most teachers enter teaching. Teachers want to educate kids. And most unions only deal with salaries and those types of things and not with the satisfaction that you get when kids actually learn. Kids aren't going to learn in an atmosphere of racism."

Bob Peterson, an executive board member of the Milwaukee Teachers Education Association, an independent union, says, "A growing number of the children that we're ostensibly serving are children of color, and teachers have a responsibility to address the question of race." In Milwaukee, 70 percent of the students are Black or Hispanic, but only 20 percent of the teachers are.

"We should stop miseducating children of color," says Peterson. "Historically this has been done through a variety of segregation tracking: low resources, low expectations, just blatant racism. In order to do a good job of teaching, one not only has to have an anti-racist attitude, but one also has to be involved in broader school issues on the city, state, and national level, in politics and legislation, and in union politics in order to address the very issues which are causing the miseducation in the first place.

"Our society should have a social policy within the schools that is anti-racist, and children should learn that racism is scientifically incorrect, morally and socially corrupt.

"It's so important in the education industry, because the unions are so overwhelmingly white, the teaching force is so overwhelmingly white, and we're dealing with children in urban areas that are predominantly minority. I mean talk about teacher empowerment when 80 percent of the teachers are white and 70 percent of the kids are Black? What are you saying, that these white teachers should have more and more power over children of color?"

Milwaukee Teachers Honor Martin Luther King

In the late 1970s the Milwaukee school system was segregated and the teachers were racially divided. Court-ordered desegregation looked like it might tear the schools apart. But a small group of anti-racist union activists was able to bring about better race relations in the community and greater cooperation among Black and white teachers in the union.

The Milwaukee Teachers Education Association was led by a conservative leadership. There was a legacy of racial antagonism within the union as a result of a strike in 1975. During that strike, 50 percent of the Black teachers had scabbed. Peterson believes that many did not honor the picket line at least in part because of the disrespect shown to Black