

Racism at Work

A report into the experiences
of Usdaw members



Usdaw
*Union of Shop, Distributive
and Allied Workers*
www.usdaw.org.uk



Introduction

Usdaw has led the way in campaigning against violence and abuse at work. Our Freedom From Fear Campaign continues to be a phenomenal success and has led to some real changes in the way abuse of staff is handled by employers and the police.

It is important that our work on abuse and violence at work carries on. One of the ways we can develop this work is by finding out more about the issues facing particular groups of members. Violence and abuse is not the same for all our groups of members and Usdaw wants to develop a better understanding of this. We can always learn more about what life is like for members at the sharp end.

One group of members whose experiences we still know very little about is our Black and Asian members. They face violence and abuse at work just the same as any other members but with the added burden of racism. So we wanted to find out more about what life is like for Black and Asian staff working in Usdaw organised workplaces. How are they treated by customers? Is racism a problem and if so where is it coming from? What can Usdaw do to make a difference?

During 2006 Usdaw ran a survey of members to try and find answers to these questions. We had responses from both Black and white members who took the time to tell us about their experiences of abuse at work. What was clear from this was that for our Black and Asian members, the abuse they get at work is intimately tied up with the colour of their skin.

The following report is an attempt to shed light on what is going on at work for our Black and Asian members. Theirs is a voice that sometimes struggles to be heard, at work and in the Union, especially where Black and Asian staff are in a minority.

Some of the stories in this report are truly shocking.

The fact that we have uncovered such abuse shows that Usdaw was absolutely right to ask the question of our Black and Asian members – tell us what work is like for you.

Our challenge now is to translate words into action. At the end of this report you will find an Usdaw action plan. This sets out what we are going to do to try and make Usdaw organised workplaces racist free, as well as violence free, zones. This is work for all of us whether we are Black, Asian or white. It is in all our interests to challenge racism – we cannot create zero tolerance workplaces unless we stop abuse in all its forms.

Finally can I thank all the members and reps who together helped distribute and respond to the Working Against Racism Survey which informed this report.

John Hannett
General Secretary



Summary of Main Findings

- One in six of our members feels isolated at work because of the colour of their skin.
- Over half our Black and Asian members have experienced racist abuse at work.
- One in five of our Black and Asian members has been racially abused by their manager.
- More than half of our Black and Asian members did not come to the Union for help about racism at work.

Isolated at work

We asked members if they ever felt isolated or uncomfortable at work because of their skin colour, race or ethnic background.

Nearly 60% of our members told us that they had.

Over half of our Asian members and more than a third (38%) of our Black members said that they **often** felt isolated or uncomfortable at work because of their colour, race or ethnic background.

This is a staggering statistic. It means that six out of ten of our Black and Asian members are regularly being made to feel that the colour of their skin is an issue when they go to work.

“I have been called a terrorist by customers and on one occasion by a colleague simply because I’m Asian. This is really upsetting – it’s difficult to know how to respond.”

“It really gets me down. I am tired of being the butt of jokes about Black people. I just want to get on with my job. I’m sick of having to explain why I don’t find jokes about Black people funny.”

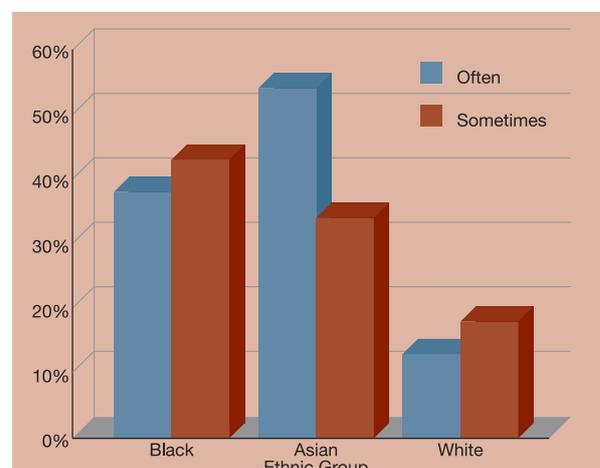
White members were the least likely of all groups to report feeling isolated or uncomfortable at work because of their colour, race or ethnic background.

These findings mirror existing research. The Office for National Statistics found that in 1999 the risk of being the victim of a racially motivated incident was considerably higher for members of ethnic minority groups than for white people.

The highest risk was for Pakistani and Bangladeshi people at 4.2% followed by 3.6% for Indian people and 2.2% for Black people. This compared to 0.3% for white people.

Racially motivated incidents represented 12% of all crime against ethnic minorities compared with 2% for white people.

Percentage of members feeling isolated or uncomfortable at work because of their colour, race or ethnic background





Racist abuse

We asked members if they had ever experienced racist abuse and if so who it came from – colleague, customer or manager?

The majority of our members (over half – 51%) told us that they had experienced racist abuse at work.

Between one and three incidents

More than three quarters (86%) of our Black and Asian members reported experiencing between one and three incidents of racist abuse in the last 12 months.

Members most likely to experience racist abuse were our Black members at nearly 40% followed by our Asian members at 29%.

Between four and six incidents

Of those that had experienced between four and six incidents of racist abuse, over 80% of these were Black or Asian. This statistic clearly reveals that on the whole it is our Black and Asian members that are the most likely to bear the brunt of racist abuse.

More than six incidents

Just over 5% of our members had experienced more than six incidents of racist abuse in the last 12 months.

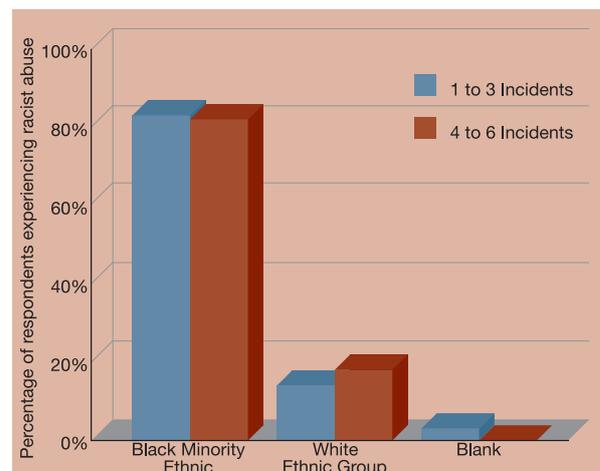
This is a relatively small number of members. Nonetheless, we now know that some of our members are experiencing racist abuse on a regular basis.

Udswa’s research is backed up by figures from the Home Office which show that all ethnic minority groups are more likely than white people to be victims of crime; this is true of crimes against the person such as assault and robbery as well as crimes against property.

“Racism is really bad around here, the police drag their feet and don’t try to stop it and the managers don’t take it seriously at all. I’m ready to join the fight against it.”

Home Office figures state that about half of those who report racist attacks and harassment to the police are dissatisfied by their response, feeling that they either lacked interest in the case or were themselves racist or sympathetic to the person committing the alleged crime.

Incidents of racist abuse



Racial Harassment

We asked members if they had ever experienced racial harassment at work.

Racial harassment includes banter, so called jokes, offensive or aggressive language, being treated differently, being excluded or ignored.

Over a third of our Black and Asian members said that they had experienced racial harassment at work.



The two groups most likely to experience racial harassment were Black and Asian members.

“Being constantly harassed because of the colour of your skin hurts, you feel left out and frustrated.”

Racial harassment can have a devastating effect on someone’s life. Research from the Office of National Statistics found that emotional reactions to racially motivated incidents were generally more severe than for non-racially motivated incidents. In 1999 42% of victims of racially motivated crime said they had been ‘very much’ affected by the incident compared to 19% of victims of other sorts of crime.

Where does abuse come from?

We asked members who the abuse came from – colleague, customer or manager.

Customer

A third of our members told us that the abuse they were experiencing at work was directed at them from customers. This confirms our previous findings. Our report *Life on the Frontline* found that shopworkers experienced high levels of verbal abuse, threats and violence on a regular basis from customers.

This report also found that although both white and Black and Asian members were equally open to abuse from customers, the abuse targeted at Black and Asian members was racist in nature. Racist insults ranged from our members being told to go back to their own country to being called a n****r or a p**i on a regular basis.

“The customers don’t always say something but I can tell by the way they act – they don’t like being served by a Black person.”

Racial abuse from customers is an ongoing problem.

“We suffer a lot of verbal abuse from the public – it is becoming more racist and more violent.”

“I had one customer who used to always come to my checkout and make comments about how slow I was – one day he said “I suppose you are going slow because Blacks are lazy”. I didn’t make any eye contact with him and he complained about me to management. I was disciplined for being rude to a customer but I took it up with the Union and got the warning withdrawn and the customer is now banned from the store.”

Manager

Almost a fifth (16%) of Black and Asian members reported that their manager had been racially abusive towards them. A third said their manager had racially harassed them. Managers have a legal duty to ensure they look after the health and wellbeing of their staff. Employers who allow their managers to behave in a racist way risk being taken to tribunal.

Allowing discrimination to go unchecked can cost the employer dear. The average award in 2005/2006 for race discrimination cases was £30,361.

Racism is not always overt. Black and Asian employees can also face indirect discrimination. Recent research by the TUC found that many Black and Asian workers complained of being refused references, not being informed properly about training or promotion opportunities and being unfairly monitored. If they complained some said they were deliberately isolated at work, ignored, victimised or sacked.



“I was moved from the customer service desk as the manager said I wasn’t coping with the work. One of the other managers said do you know the real reason why you’ve been moved – it’s because he (the manager) didn’t like it that customers saw a Black face as soon as they came into the store.”

“It’s my word against his. If I report him and nothing happens I will still have to carry on working with him.”

Colleague

More than half of our members who had experienced racist abuse said that it came from a colleague. This statistic adds a new dimension to our efforts to tackle abuse at work.

“There is banter and I am the butt of racist jokes. I am told that it’s not malicious but sometimes I can’t tell.”

Members told us appalling stories of being treated badly by their colleagues. This included colleagues leaving racist literature lying around at work, Black members having their accents mimicked, being deliberately excluded from conversations and having their food or personal effects tampered with.

“My colleagues joke about getting me kicked out of my job.”

Union Action

We asked members if they told their Union rep they were being racially abused.

More than half of our Black and Asian members had never raised incidents of racist abuse with anyone in the Union. Over a third had raised it only sometimes and only 7% raised it every time.

Our survey found that the group most likely to report incidents of racist abuse every time were our white members.

The fact that Black and Asian members are far less likely to raise racist abuse with the Union is very worrying, not least because they are the group most likely to suffer it.

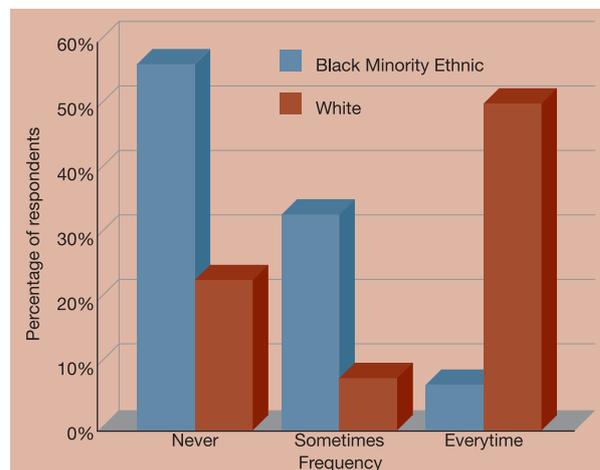
Some of the comments in the survey give us a clue as to why this might be the case.

“Black and Asian members are often afraid to approach the Union because they feel they are not represented. We need more Black and Asian Shop Stewards but in the meantime we need to train the ones we do have.”

“We need to encourage more Black and Asian members to become active in the Union.”

Some members told us they find it difficult to raise the issue of racism because they feel that their complaint will not be taken seriously. This perception may be wrong, but it is something we need to take seriously otherwise we are failing our Black and Asian members at a time when they need us most.

Reporting incidents of racist abuse to the Union





Employer Action

We asked members if they had raised any incidents of racist abuse with their manager or senior manager.

Almost half (45%) of our Black and Asian members did not report incidents of racist abuse to their manager.

Less than a third (30%) of our Black and Asian members sometimes raised incidents of racist abuse with their managers.

Less than a fifth (16%) of our Black and Asian members raised incidents of racist abuse with their manager every time it happened.

Some of the comments we received tell us that our members do not always feel able to report incidents of racist abuse as they believe their manager may be complicit or share the same attitudes as those responsible for the abuse.

Others believed their managers lacked the training to deal with racist incidents.

“Managers need training to deal with incidents of racism.”

“Racism is a big problem ... managers do not have to say it in words but they act it in their behaviour.”

“Employers and the Union need to acknowledge that racism happens in the workplace.”

Union Action

We asked members what more they wanted the Union to do to help stamp out racist abuse and racial harassment in the workplace.

Our survey helps to highlight the fantastic work reps are already doing to support Black and Asian members. Several members told us

about how helpful and supportive their Union rep had been when they were facing racism at work.

Our members felt that Usdaw could do a number of things to improve work for our Black and Asian members.

The most common suggestion made by our members was that Usdaw should display zero tolerance posters in the workplace. Posters like this can help to get the message out to everyone at work that racist abuse and harassment will not be tolerated. They also help to give our Black and Asian members confidence that the Union takes tackling racism seriously.

The second most common suggestion was that Usdaw reps could use these materials to run workplace anti-racist campaigns.

“Zero tolerance posters should be put up in the workplace.”

“Racism is a big problem from customers, managers and colleagues. Usdaw needs to run a campaign making it clear that it is wrong.”

“Keep up the good work – our representative here, David, is a very nice guy. Only by Black and white reps and members uniting will we be able to tackle racism.”

“I’m really delighted to be given the opportunity to fill out this form and I’m glad that there is someone out there to listen to me in times of racism.”

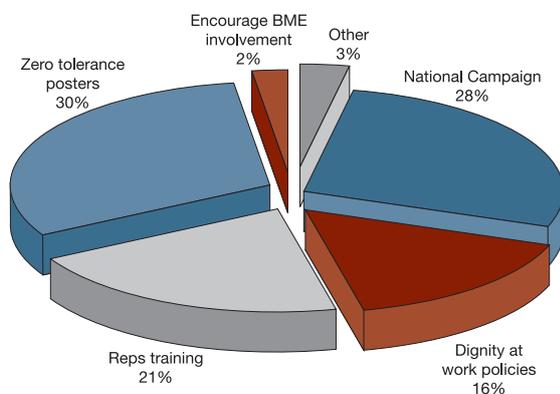
“I’m glad the Union is looking at further action to stop it because racism is a big problem.”



“I would very much like the Union to do more in terms of training courses for reps, so that they are in a position to help.”

Lots of members mentioned training – not just for reps but for managers too.

Recommended action for Usdaw



Racism is No Joke

Usdaw has produced a DVD – *Racism is No Joke*. The DVD attempts to answer the question What does it mean to be the target of racism and exclusion?

The video features 20 Black and Asian members talking about their experiences of racism. Members talk about how they were repeatedly passed over for promotion, verbally abused by customers, and spat at on the streets.

However the DVD does more than simply show how Black members are the victims of racism. It also features cases of where reps, both Black and white, have taken a stand and made a difference in tackling racism.

The DVD gives a voice to our Black and Asian members. It is there to raise awareness of racism and challenges the views of those who think that racism is now a thing of the past. Our reps have told us that they find it a useful tool in their fight against racism at work. *Racism is No Joke* is a powerful reminder of the fact that racism is a daily reality for thousands of Black and Asian trade union members.

The DVD costs £12.95 including post and packaging and it can be ordered by contacting the Stationery Department at Usdaw’s Central Office.

What can we learn from the survey?

There are a number of grounds for optimism in the report:

- Although Black and Asian members are sometimes reluctant to come forward and tell the Union about racist abuse and harassment, we know from survey responses that where members do speak to the Union they are, on the whole, happy with the way the Union responds. This is encouraging. If we are going to tackle racism at work, our starting point has to be to give those members who experience it the confidence to know that they will be believed.
- There is clear evidence that the vast majority of Usdaw reps see tackling racism as an important part of their role. Many reps have told us what they have done to stamp out racism in their workplaces. Reps are not just sitting back waiting for problems to happen but taking positive steps to create racist free workplaces.



There are however serious grounds for concern in the report:

- The numbers of Black and Asian members experiencing isolation and racist abuse at work is very high. This in itself gives us serious cause for concern but it's even more worrying when coupled with low levels of Black and Asian members coming forward to report incidents to the Union.
- The survey told us that we can't assume that just because a person is a trade union member or activist they will welcome Black and Asian members into the workplace or the Union. We can't and shouldn't pretend that racism doesn't exist within our own ranks – ignoring racism is even more dangerous as it undermines our collective strength and creates even deeper divisions in our workplaces. We need to come up with practical ways that help reps and members challenge racism.

Usdaw Action Plan

Usdaw is addressing these concerns by taking the following action:

- We are looking at how we can encourage more Black and Asian members to become active in our Tesco consultative structures and in the forum process. There is clear evidence to show that our Black and Asian members are under involved in these structures which is contributing to gaps in our network of reps. The more active members we have the stronger we are.

Increasing the numbers of Black and Asian reps we have helps us to grow the union and shows we have something to offer Black and Asian members. We also know that many Black and Asian members find it easier to report an incident of racist abuse

to a Black or Asian rep in the same way that women experiencing sexual harassment find it easier to report it to women reps. Encouraging more Black and Asian members to stand as reps helps us to tackle the problem of under-reporting.

- We've updated our anti-racism materials so that reps who would like to run a zero tolerance to racism campaign in their workplace have the literature they need to do so. Posters and leaflets are available free of charge from either your local office or the Stationery Department at Central Office. Usdaw has also produced an excellent DVD *Racism is No Joke* (more details on page 7 of this report) which can be ordered from central office at a cost of £12.95 including post and packing. Reps might want to use this to run joint Union/Company sessions on tackling racism and promoting equality or show it at a branch meeting. With the DVD is a list of questions that people can think about whilst watching it and a race equality quiz that reps can use to form the basis of a discussion afterwards.
- We will continue to work with employers to spread practice and tackle the problems we have found.
- We will continue to make sure that tackling racism remains a key feature of the training all Shop Stewards and Branch Officers receive.

Improving workers' lives – Winning for members