RACE, RESISTANCE AND CO-OPTATION IN THE CANADIAN LABOUR MOVEMENT:
EFFECTING AN EQUITY AGENDA LIKE RACE MATTERS

by

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Abstract

The purpose of this research project was to analyze the dialectic of co-optation/domestication and resistance as manifested in the experience of racialized Canadian trade unionists. The seven research participants are racialized rank-and-file members, elected or appointed leaders, retired trade unionists, as well as staff of trade unions and other labour organizations. In spite of the struggle of racialized peoples for racial justice or firm anti-racism policies and programmes in their labour unions, there is a dearth of research on the racialized trade union members against racism, the actual condition under which they struggle, the particular ways that union institutional structures domesticate these struggles, and/or the countervailing actions by racialized members to realize anti-racist organizational goals. While the overt and vulgar forms of racism is no longer the dominant mode of expression in today’s labour movement, its systemic and institutional presence is just as debilitating for racial trade union members.

This research has uncovered the manner in which the electoral process and machinery, elected and appointed political positions, staff jobs and formal constituency groups, and affirmative action or equity representational structures in labour unions and other labour organizations are used as sites of domestication or co-optation of some racialized trade unionists by the White-led labour bureaucratic structures and the forces in defense of
whiteness. However, racialized trade union members also participate in struggles to resist racist domination. Among some of tools used to advance anti-racism are the creation of support networks, transgressive challenges to the entrenched leadership through elections, formation of constituency advocacy outside of the structure of the union and discrete forms of resistance. The participants in the research shared their stories of the way that race and gender condition the experiences of racialized women in the labour movement. The racialized interviewees were critical of the inadequacy of labour education programmes in dealing effectively with racism and offer solutions to make them relevant to the racial justice agenda.

This study of race, resistance and co-optation in the labour movement has made contributions to the fields of critical race theory, labour and critical race feminism and labour studies.
Acknowledgements

I would like to express my eternal gratitude to my thesis supervisor Dr. Jack Quarter for his guidance, patience, encouragement, gentle reminders, thoughtful feedback and comments and for being the best supervisor with whom a doctoral student would want to work. The presence of Dr. Quarter in my corner was critical to the completion of this dissertation in the time that I did it, given my family, employment and community and trade union activism obligations and responsibilities. Jack, I would like to thank you for being a consistent and helpful partner along this doctoral thesis journey.

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The research participants who consented to share their knowledge, insights, stories and perspectives on race, resistance and co-optation in the Canadian labour movement were critical and invaluable partners in this investigation. I am grateful for your contribution and would like to say thank you for your commitment, solidarity and participation in this research project.

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Dedication

I dedicate this work to my father, Isaac Needham, who was the first trade union member in my network, and to racialized members of the non-unionized working-class and organized labour who have/are resisting systemic racism and cannot be bossed or bought by the White labour bureaucrats who have no commitment to class solidarity and class struggle trade unionism.
Chapter 1:  
Racial Subordination, Unions and Research as an act of Activism

Each generation must out of relative obscurity discover its mission, fulfill it, or betray it.

- Frantz Fanon
“The Wretched of the Earth,” 1963

Introducing the Research

The general area of inquiry of this study is the struggle of racialized trade unionists to achieve racial justice and centre anti-racism ideas and practices in the activities of trade unions and other labour organizations in Canada. This research project explores the organizational resistance experiences and actions of racialized trade unionists, their views on the efficacy of their anti-racism work as well as how racial (and gender) co-optation is manifested in the Canadian labour movement. For racialized women and men who are trade union members, they expect these labour organizations, as social justice and member-based entities, to be instruments in the fight against racism and the promotion of an inclusive equity agenda. In the text, Rivers Have Sources, Trees Have Roots: Speaking of Racism, the authors echo this sentiment:

Despite their imperfections, unions are the most democratic structures in this country. An anti-racism clause in a contract [collective agreement] is more valuable than all the human rights commissions in the country. Non-white workers may

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1 According to Leslie Cheung in a report on the status of racialized people in the labour market, “The term “racialized” is preferable in that it signals that race is not an objective fact, but rather a social and cultural construct” (2005, p. 12). The term “racialized” is used throughout this research to denote people identified as not enjoying white skinned privilege within the racial hierarchy in Canada as well as on a world-wide basis. Hence, the terms “racialized people,” “racialized trade unionists,” “racialized members” is used instead of politically neutral or problematic names such as “visible minorities,” “people of colour,” or “non-whites” and “racial minorities.” According to the Ontario Human Rights Commission “[...] these other terms treat ‘White’ as the norm to which racialized persons are to be compared and have a tendency to group all racialized persons in one category, as if they are all the same” (cited Lopes & Thomas, 2006, p. 270).
make an entry here and, as union members, be accorded full citizenship (Brand & Bhaggyadatta, 1986, p. 109).

Labour unions have had and still have a problematic experience in dealing with racism and whiteness within their ranks and the workplace. A groundbreaking anti-racism report\(^2\) from the Canadian Labour Congress (1997) acknowledges the continued scourge of racism by exclaiming to its constituency that “We can stand by and allow racism to destroy unions, wipe out all the gains we’ve made, and weaken our solidarity with each other and with oppressed people everywhere” (p. 2). The more virulent expressions of white-supremacy have more or less been expunged from the labour movement in favour of a more subtle form that has “become more sophisticated in… [its] usage of anti-racism and equity terms” (Leah, 1993; Ng, 1995, p. 60; Slamet, 2007). Racialized and Aboriginal trade unionists have given voice to the position that very little substantive change has been made on racial justice by the labour movement in spite of “years of passing policy statements and resolutions, writing reports, and giving speeches about the need to fight racism” (Canadian Labour Congress, 1997, p. 4).

The purpose of this research project was to analyze the dialectic of co-optation/domestication and resistance as manifested in the experience of racialized Canadian trade unionists. The research participants are racialized rank-and-file members, elected or appointed leaders, retired trade unionists, as well as staff of trade unions and other labour organizations. In spite of the struggle of racialized peoples for racial justice or firm anti-racism policies and programmes in their labour unions, there is a dearth of research on the “struggles of workers of colour against racism” (Ng, 1995, p. 95), the

\(^2\) The 1994 convention of the Canadian Labour Congress voted for a resolution that authorized it to establish a national anti-racism task to deal with racism in the house of labour and the wider society (Gordon, 2000).
actual condition under which they struggle, the particular ways that union institutional
structures domesticate these struggles, and/or the countervailing actions by racialized
members to realize anti-racist organizational goals.

The status and context of racialized trade unionists’ struggle are ably captured by
Judy Darcy, National President of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE)
from 1991-2003:

Our gains were certainly uneven and remain so. In some unions and sectors
the gains we’ve achieved on the equity front are far greater than they are in
others. And there is no question that there have been more significant
advances in some areas, for some equity-seeking groups compared to others. I
think [White] women’s equality and gay and lesbian rights have been the
areas where we’ve made the most significant advances. The advances for
people of colour, for [A]boriginal workers and for people with disabilities
have not been nearly as great, both in the union, as well as in our workplaces.

Notwithstanding the stalling or even reversal of the equity agenda for racialized trade
union members, they have continued to resist racial otherness. It is important to
document this experience and its efficacy and consequences. Co-optation and pacification
are tools used by dominant societal interests to neutralize the democratizing thrust of the
subalterns’ demands. In the context of this research, the superordinate group is white
trade unionists as a collective and subordinate group is racialized members of the labour
movement. However, the dominated are not simply passive recipients of oppression, but
find ways to resist domination and advance or put forth their agenda for change.

**Rationale and implication of the research project**

One of the effects of social domination of subaltern social groups is their
institutionalized invisibility and silencing in the written discourse (Brand, 1991; Collins,
nullification of marginalized voice with respect to African women in the United States:

This invisibility, which goes beyond anything that either Black men or white women experience and tell about in their writing, is one reason it is so difficult for me to know where to start. It seems overwhelming to break such a massive silence. Even more numbing, however, is the realization that many of the women who will read this have not yet noticed us missing either from their reading matter, their politics, or their lives. It is galling that ostensible feminists and acknowledged lesbians have been so blinded to the implications of any womanhood that is not white womanhood and that they have yet to struggle with the deep racism in themselves that is at the source of this blindness (p. 157-158).

This point is relevant to the experiential reality of racialized people within the equity struggle of the labour movement. Racialized union members’ scattered and fragmentary appearance in the literature on equity struggles within the labour movement simply reflects their marginalization both within the labour movement and the research agenda of academic and non-academic researchers. The invisibility of racialized peoples in the written accounts of the equity agenda struggle is one rationale for this research project. Further, it is essential that the perspectives of racialized trade unionists on racism, co-optation/domestication and resistance are documented in the written literature (Ng, 1995).

Another rationale for doing this research project is to provide racialized trade unionists and allies\(^3\) with accounts of strategies used to advance or retard the equity agenda inside the labour movement. If we are aware of best practices that facilitate the equity agenda in locals and other structures of the labour movement as well as the extant schemes and tactics used to neuter and domesticate the equity agenda for racialized trade unionists, we will have a better understanding of the terrain on which the racial justice

\(^3\) Lopes and Thomas offer an accessible definition which states that “An ally is a member of the dominant group who acts against oppression out of a belief that eliminating oppression will benefit the targets of oppression and the group members. In the struggle against racism, White people are allies who take leadership from activists who people of colour and Aboriginal people” (2006, p. 263).
campaign may be waged. Therefore, my research has relevance to institutional policy-making and practice for equity-seeking groups. There is a folk saying in Jamaica that asserts, “The knife that sticks the goat is the same one that sticks the sheep.” The socially dominant groups use similar approaches in the maintenance of the infrastructure of oppression; therefore, the different subaltern groups may find it productive to look across their differences for relevant lessons in the quest for freedom and self-determination.

Another rationale for the study of co-optation, resistance and racism within labour unions is that the findings will make a contribution to critical organizational studies and critical race theory. Critical race theory research is particularly silent on race in membership-based organizations such as trade unions and the application of its interrogative anti-racism concepts would be a notable contribution to the expanding literature in critical race research.

**Research questions**

The following questions will guide this research project on the existential reality of racialized trade unionists in the Canadian labour movement and the discourse of resistance and accommodation that is generated by their subordinated status:

1. In what ways does racism shape the experience of racialized trade union members in the Canadian labour movement?

2. How do leaders and the structures within labour organizations render harmless the racial justice challenges of racialized trade unionists?

3. What countervailing resistance actions do racialized trade unionists use to promote racial justice in the Canadian labour movement?
4. In what ways are racialized trade union women’s experiences affected by gender and race oppression?

5. How are racialized trade union members experiencing labour education and what types of educational initiatives and programmes are needed to promote racial justice/anti-racism?

**Situating myself in the research project**

My identity as a researcher is very much defined by my political outlook and life experiences. The major institutions through which people interact on a regular basis are the instruments through which the forces of oppression maintain the existing social order. Since there are many sites from which the experience of alienation occurs and we are positioned differently within them, we will find a group or individual who shares in the fruit of oppression in one instance, being the victim in another. As a researcher, I believe that the subject matter of my research must have relevance to the lives and struggles of the people or the research participants. Therefore, the types of research project that I favour are those that will bring clarity to the means through which social domination is facilitated and the alternative institutions or actions that can be engendered to give participants greater control over their lives.

My lived experience as an African who is rooted in a group of people whose enslaved labour built the economic basis for the wealth that is the Americas today and my identification with their radical or revolutionary political tradition of resistance have also shaped my orientation toward research. Davies (2008) in her political biography/study of Claudia Jones captures the essence of what it means to be a “radical black subject”:

In my view, a “radical black subject” is one that constitutes itself as resisting the particular dominating disciplines, systems and logics of a given context. The radical
black subject, male or female, challenges the normalizing state of oppression, constructs an alternative discourse, and articulates these both theoretically and in practice. This is a resisting black subject...resisting dominating systems organized and enforced by states, organizations, and institutions in order to produce a complicit passive people and to maintain exploitative systems. The revolutionary subject works in a movement geared toward dismantling that oppressive status (p. 5).

Davies’s definition of the radical black subject appeals to me, because it does not essentializes the state of being an African and it acknowledges “dominating systems” and “exploitative systems” that impact the lived of Africans, other racialized subjects and other subaltern groups. As an African who embraces the radical tradition of resistance, my worldview peers at the social world through multiple oppression lenses.

A central part of my ideological outlook is predicated on the belief that the way forward out of systems of domination and control is for the people to build the road to freedom as we travel. It is therefore incumbent on those of us who are advocates of a free and just society to build the embryonic structures, which would allow the socially marginalized and advocates of freedom and justice to become habituated to organizational practices and a way of life that mirrors counterhegemonic principles and values. A part of my role as a researcher is to put the knowledge and skills gained in institutions of learning at the disposal of the social movements or social movement organizations that are seeking to bring the subaltern to voice. The researcher cannot be neutral in the fight for freedom for the simple fact that whatever she/he does is likely to privilege one of the parties in the contestation for power.

My approach to research in the eyes of the positivist research tradition is the equivalent of ‘going native’...getting too close to the “subject”, and running the risk of contaminating the result. The expression of solidarity with the interests of the participants
does not necessarily translate into research findings that are an inaccurate rendering of reality. Friedrich Engels’ investigation of working class England in the 1840s, *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, can withstand conservative positivistic interrogation in spite of his closeness to the subject and his overt political commitments. Many research projects (especially those in the social or human sciences) that are grounded in questionable notions of objectivity and distance from the participants are unaware of the latent biases and vested interests that they are privileging. Stoecker argues similarly:

> What practitioners, particularly feminist researchers, showed was that the creation of emotional distance in fact often made the research less accurate. Because the researcher refused to build trust with the research subjects, the research subjects withheld information from the researcher, essentially spoiling the results (2005, p. 6).

Cole and Knowles (2001) highlight some elements that may build the trust alluded to by Stoecker such as “mutual care and friendship; revelation of respect for personal vulnerabilities; and attention to issues of relational reflexivity, relational ethics, power-in-relation, and the temporary nature of understandings” (p. 27).

It may not seem curious to some social scientists who use positivist methods that they often reached conclusions on or about the socially marginalized that are generally consistent with the ruling classes’ outlook and interests. Progressive and revolutionary researchers have used positivistic research approaches in privileging the experiences and advancing the interests of the socially marginalized. My comments on positivism are directed at researchers who believe that exercising a preferential option for the oppressed from the outset of a research project may “taint” the result. Even when there seem to be disagreement between these two parties, it is within the agreed ideological consensus that
does not threaten the stability of the hegemony. All research projects dealing with people should follow high ethical standards and ought to strive to make the community or participants better as a result of their intervention. This approach ought to be used in both qualitative and quantitative research endeavours. The idea of scientific objectivity and distancing of the researcher from the participants does not necessarily lead to value-free research outcomes.

My views on research and the role of the researcher were shaped by my working-class origins and coming to political consciousness during the heady days of democratic socialism in Jamaica of the 1970s. Growing up in the urban working-class with a clear awareness of economic, social, and educational disparities between our lives and that of non-working class elements inculcated an oppositional outlook in me. It was not difficult to see that being working class was synonymous with being African, and that women experienced gender oppression from the dominated as well as the dominant members of society. The socialist rhetoric and the development of social and economic programmes in the 1970s privileged some of the needs and interests of the “sufferers”, and impressed upon me the idea that the use of power was not a neutral affair. By exercising social and political power, it could be used to better the condition of the socially marginalized and create the condition for the emergence of a better society.

I believe that I have a moral obligation as an intellectual to use the knowledge, skills and privilege that I have acquired in academia and through informal and non-formal education to advance the cause of the working-class, the racially-oppressed and

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4 Sufferer is a term that is used in Jamaica to categorize the working class, especially those that live in urban, marginalized working class communities. The social democratic administration expanded public education and adult literacy programme, instituted a land reform, established a minimum wage and a number of other progressive measures,
other oppressed groups. There is no doubt in my mind as to the tremendous benefits that I have acquired from publicly-provided education. As such, I see the preceding reality as the basis for me to give back to the collective in the spirit of reciprocity. Further, the late scholar, activist, politician, socialist and pan-Africanist Walter Rodney (1969) implores African intellectuals “within his [or her] discipline…to attack those distortions which white imperialism, white cultural imperialism have produced in all branches of scholarship” (p. 62). Rodney (1969) further exhorts the African intellectual “to attach himself [or herself] to the activity of the black masses” (p. 63). Rodney’s call to arms for the intellectual to be a practitioner and to integrate herself into the political struggles for social emancipation appeals to every fibre in my body and reverberates throughout my consciousness. Walter Rodney was an actual example to me of the socially-engaged scholar who was not merely satisfied with writing about the world, but paid for his revolutionary political activism with his life or through “martyrdom” (Davies, 2008, p. 9).

The contestation for power between those of us who wanted the sufferers to come to voice and those who wanted to maintain the status quo inspired my desire to use any professional/vocational location in which I am embedded to fight the structures of racism, capitalism and sexism. From the age of eleven I identified electoral politics as the realm in which I would work to promote social justice. Although my current libertarian socialist outlook inclines me towards non-participation in electoral contests in the wider society, I am still committed to an oppositional politics in that sphere. My libertarian political

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5 My participation in union elections, in spite of my antipathy toward electoral contests in the political system, may appear selective or contradictory. I do acknowledge a tension between the two positions. However, I am able to resolve that challenge because within the context of union democracy it is much easier to bring about a reform programme behind an agenda of participatory democracy. Both union democracy and the liberal capitalist democratic have conforming tendencies within them.
outlook is predicated on the creation a participatory democratic process that favours economic institutions and deliberative community assemblies that will serve as the laboratory for the liberatory practices of the free society of the future. When I consider the extent to which my ideological standpoint and my working class experiences have shaped my sensitivities as a researcher, qualitative research approaches “naturally” suit me.

I have taken on this labour movement research topic because of my active involvement in the politics of my union, the Canada Union of Public Employees (CUPE), and as an elected officer in my local (CUPE local 3907), CUPE Toronto District Council and CUPE Ontario, and an activist in the national union. When I entered the doctoral programme in Adult Education and Community Development, my research intentions were on theme of labour unions serving as catalysts or enablers of a strong worker co-operative presence in Ontario. Equity research, as a central preoccupation, was not something that I wanted to do. Interestingly, a day before I became a member of CUPE, a CUPE staff member tried to convince me to throw my activist experience behind the equity agenda for the racialized. In the judgment of this person, nothing was happening, from an equity agenda perspective, for the advancement of racialized members in CUPE.

I embraced the equity agenda in November 2006, a full year after being elected to the executive committee of my local, and that was inspired by events surrounding CUPE’s First National Human Rights Conference in Vancouver. It became clear that a stronger and energetic type of advocacy, organizing and activism was needed to advance the racial justice/anti-racism agenda. My organizing and leadership role in member-driven grassroots action during the Vancouver conference forced the leadership into
issuing the *Vancouver Declaration* on human rights. As my continued involvement in labour activism grew, the issue of co-optation of racialized leaders and activists by the institutional structure of the labour started to preoccupy my attention. I also became interested in the myriad forms of resistance in which racialized trade unionists may be engaged in advancing the anti-racism/racial justice agenda in their locals or other structures of the union. A colleague and fellow executive member of Local 3907 suggested to me that I ought to do my research on the labour movement since so much of my time was dedicated to labour activism. After about a week of pondering this suggestion, I embraced the proposition because it made sense on a number of fronts.

I should highlight the fact that as a trade unionist from the university sector and particularly from the academic sub-sector, I am comparatively privileged when one examines the composition of the working class. There are knowledge, skills and attitude that I bring to activism that are the result of being a graduate student. In the labour movement, there is a degree of ambivalence about the “eggheads” or academic workers who parachute into the movement during their relatively short time tenure and try to exert influence on the course of the debate or policy direction. I was elected as the 3rd Vice-President of CUPE Ontario after less than three years in the organization and in December 2009, I moved to the position of 2nd Vice-President when the incumbent was elected as the Secretary-Treasurer by the executive board. In October 2007, I came up short by less than thirty votes for a seat on the National Executive Board (NEB) of CUPE National. I was just two votes short of unseating a longstanding CUPE member for the presidency of the CUPE Toronto District Council, but was elected Vice-President, Equity, in January 2008.
My forays into the political arena were probably helped by my status as an academic worker. My long years of community activism were also helpful, but I was able to draw on my reservoir of social and human capital, which included a network of experienced and committed racialized trade unionists. I have gone up against established or longer-tenured White leaders or activists for political office and those “presumptuous” and “uppity” challenges revealed to me some of the ways in which union troublemakers or dissidents are sometimes brought back into line. There is a sense of entitlement to elected positions by many privileged trade union incumbents, as documented by Davidson (1998), a former trade union activist and current union staff:

When Ethel ran against a man for a position he held for a long time, people told her that they agreed with her platform but they were unwilling to push him out of “his job”. The assumption was that he had some ownership over this position (p. 96).

Equity-seeking groups feel particularly vulnerable to challenging “conventions” or the unwritten rules around election on or about leadership succession as was revealed in the report of a national union (CUPE, 2007a):

Many women said that they face pressure not to challenge male leaders for election. They referred to what they regard as unwritten rules about not challenging incumbents. One group said, “Elections are acclamations. There is an unwritten rule against challenging incumbents” Backroom deals decide who’s running”….”Things are predetermined before going to the National [Convention] so why even vote”.

…One group said that it can be risky, “running or speaking against a long-term president/leadership. If you run, you are then a target and there is a backlash towards you…. (p. 16).

I can identify with the sentiments expressed above by some women in CUPE. In October 2009, I made an electoral bid for the position of General Vice-President (GVP)
on the NEB of CUPE National. This political act was transgressive of the unwritten rule of who should occupy the five GVP seats. I garnered 40% of the votes in a six-person race for the five seats and this was the reaction from one of the candidates, who was most threatened by my disregard for the unwritten electoral rules:

So, we can safely assume its democratic so long as Ajamu wins and gets his way, and we are a bunch of "autocratic" union leaders running the union" for our own benefit" when Ajamu loses. The membership have seen through your rhetoric and hypocrisy in Montreal and solidly rejected it.

I believe that at our convention in Windsor, the membership will have something to say about the difference between a "democratic vote" and "a mere opinion poll" (Personal communication by email on October 14, 2009).

As a candidate who ran on a leftwing platform and received 40% of the votes from CUPE delegates from all across Canada does not constitute a rejection. The old in CUPE did everything possible to ensure that there were no electoral surprises in the GVP elections. The old guard in CUPE Ontario resorted to the staff distributing handouts “reminding” the delegates to vote for the caucus choice.

I sent a response to the comments made by that senior leader in CUPE on his interpretation of events at the Montreal convention:

It may not be obvious to you that the introduction of an election caucus for the General Vice-Presidents was a self-serving and democracy-distorting mechanism by the entrenched leadership as represented in the divisional presidents. This
political farce is used to maintain the divisional in a position of power and influence at the national level. That blatant power move was/is very much akin to that of members of the community, who would not count among the most outstanding part of the citizenry, creating syndicates of a nefarious nature to divide up a territory to advance ends of a peculiar kind.

The surprise for me in CUPE with this slick political arrangement, which is not sanctioned by the Constitution, is that progressive trade unionists have honoured it for so long. The culture of silence is a powerful tool that has maintained the domination of the entrenched leadership in the labour movement and other hierarchical organizations. But I couldn't agree more with the message on the button that CUPE Ontario distributed at the 2007 National Convention: "Time for change in CUPE / SCFP C'est le temps du changement." There were hundreds of members at the 2009 National Convention who shared that view.

The GVP campaign should be credited with getting delegates acquainted with the National Constitution. It is painful for many to be told the unvarnished truth that certain actions are a waste of time because it will not produce the intended result. But you could tell them the same thing. I have never scored points for being diplomatic...not that I do not have the skills but the prophetic traditions to which I am committed get the better of me (Personal communication by email on October 14, 2009).
As a GVP candidate, I received 658 of the 1,667 votes that were casted. The level of support for my candidacy ought to be taken as an indication of the desire for change within the rank-and-file of national the membership. A White delegate came up to me while I was campaigning and wished me well and exclaimed, “You are brave in taking on the establishment.” Another member expressed appreciation to me for offering for a GVP seat and said, “I am tired of them telling how to vote and thanks for giving us a choice.” A few racialized delegates hammered out on the common theme of the whiteness of the membership of the NEB and it is time to bring some diversity to that body. It ought to be clear from the comments above by a ranking member of the old guard that my defiance of the unwritten electoral rule was something to which some people took exception.

I did not seek the blessing of the entrenched leadership in my bid for political office or putting forward an agenda for substantive change within my union. However, I was approached by an organizational leadership and encouraged to abandon my bid for First Vice-President. In exchange, I would get unspecified support for a bid for Fourth Vice-President or Executive Board Member (member-at-large). I rejected that overture, because I trusted the grassroots of the union to support me. Further, I did not want to be beholden to the entrenched leadership or the labour bureaucracy.

A racialized staff member spoke to me by phone for close to one hour in an unsuccessful attempt to dissuade me from committing political suicide. This person argued that even if I won the position, how would I survive and function in the post-election political context of carrying out a transgressive act against an incumbent. The pressure can be great and may come from a number of sources. The instructive thing about allies trying to encourage one to conform to the political expectations of the
entrenched leadership is that the intervention may be coming out of concern for one’s political survival and well-being. Yet, if trade unionists’ continue to adhere to the unwritten rules about political office, the basis for union renewal and transformation may wither and die. I find myself in the position of being a dissident or union troublemaker and having seats at the decision-making table. This experience of union politics assisted me during the course of my research.
Chapter 2: 

The Problematic of Race and Racism within the Labour Movement

Keep always in mind that the people are not [merely] fighting for ideas, for the things in anyone's head. They are fighting to win material benefits, to live better and in peace, to see their lives go forward, to guarantee the future of their children....Practise revolutionary democracy....Hold frequent meetings....Hide nothing from the masses of our people. Tell no lies....Claim no easy victories. 

-Amilcar Cabral

“No Fist is Big Enough to Hide the Sky,” Basil Davidson, 1981

This chapter provides a contextual background of the role of race, racism and whiteness in shaping the relationship and posturing of the labour movement towards racialized workers and trade unionists since 1870. It will facilitate an understanding and appreciation of the struggle and challenge of racialized workers in a movement that is dedicated to the empowerment of the working class. Further, the past has a way of informing contemporary practices and can be a guide towards the possible efficacy of strategies and tactics used to remedy structural social challenges.

The social construction, meaning and utility of race

Racism in the Canadian labour movement dates back to its emergence in the 1870s as an oppositional force to emergent industrial capitalism in this country. Canada is a settler-colonialist project that built its foundation on the subjugation of the indigenous populations and their lands and other resources (Galabuzi, 2006). The extreme action of extermination was also used, for example, against the “Beothuk people of Newfoundland” and many Aboriginal peoples had their children taken away from them and placed in residential schools (White 1993, p. 208). Enslaved Africans were

6 I will use “Africans” “African Canadian” or “African American” instead of the relatively more “Black” or “Blacks.” The term Black doesn’t capture or tie the people to the land of their origin and tie them to the skin colour identifier complex of the system of white domination.
incorporated into Canada’s domestic (household) and agricultural labour force in the 1600s (Cooper, 2006; Lukas & Persad, 2004). In New France most of the enslaved Africans were used in the household and “local records reveal 3,604 separate slaves by 1759; of these 1,132 were [enslaved Africans]” (Winks, 1971, p. 7). The indigenous peoples made up the rest of the enslaved population. However, Pentland (1981) made the claim that the figures for enslaved Africans in New France were six and twenty-five in 1716 and 1744, respectively. Pentland’s numbers do not stand up well against the meticulous coming of the records that was relied on to get the number of enslaved Africans presented by Winks (1971). On the eve of British conquest of New France in 1760 the settlers had imported over 1,500 enslaved Africans into the colony (Cooper, 2006). The new British overlord of Canada increased the use of enslaved African labour after 1763 (Cooper, 2006; Petland, 1981; Wink, 1971).

Race is a socially constructed phenomenon, which has no biological basis (Kim, 2004) for its existence, and is deployed by the dominant forces in society to perpetuate their hegemony (Fletcher, Jr., & Gaspasin; Galabuzi, 2006). Often-times when it is asserted that race is “socially constructed”, it leaves the impression in the minds of some observers that the protagonist is claiming that race does not exist or it is not real. That understanding is far from what is being claimed by activists or scholars who make the claim that race is not a fixed, biological category, but a product of self-conscious construction by self-interested social actors. Marable (2002), a progressive university professor and commentator on American politics and society, views race and power in the following terms:
Millions of Americans [and Canadians] still think of and talk about race in terms of fixed biological or genetic categories. A strikingly different way to view the concept of “race” is as an unequal relationship between social groups based on the privileged access to power and resources by one group over another. Race is historically and socially constructed, created (and recreated) by how people are perceived and treated in the normal actions of everyday life. As such, “race” is never fixed. It is a dynamic, constantly changing relationship. Some groups defined as an “inferior race” within American [and Canadian] society at a certain historical moment may successfully escape racialization and become part of the privileged majority, the “whites,” at a later time. Other groups, especially those of African, Latino, American Indian, Pacific Islander, and Asian descent, have found the path for group socioeconomic mobility far more difficult to navigate. (p. 22)

There was a period in Canada when Ukrainians and other Eastern Europeans were seen as people from an inferior race and were treated as such. In contemporary Canadian life, these former inferior “races” are now firmly integrated into whiteness, the privileged racial other. After the conclusion of the America’s conquest of about half of Mexico in the US-Mexican War of 1846-1848, Mexicans living in the United States were designated as Whites with full civil and political rights (Kim, 2004).

Backhouse (1999) offers an explanation of the forces behind the construction of race:

The meaning of the word ‘race’ has changed substantially over the past several centuries. A concept with roots extending as far back as the Enlightenment, it was originally intended to mark differences of class within
European society. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when empires stretched to far corners of the globe, Europeans began to exploit the idea of ‘race’ as a convenient justification for their right to rule over ‘uncivilized’ peoples, a rationale for colonial hierarchies. With the rise of ‘science’ on the heels of the Industrial Revolution, newly emerging disciplines such as ethnology, anthropology, eugenics, psychology, and sociology began to offer ‘professional’ help in this task (p. 5).

The debate on race as an objective biological reality is starting to crumble within some academic disciplines which once proponents of the notion. A resolution was passed at a 1994 conference of the American Anthropological Association (1994) and it assertively proclaimed that “all human beings are members of one species, Homo sapiens,…and differentiating species into biologically defined “races” has proven meaningless and unscientific as a way of explaining variation (whether in intelligence or other traits)”.

The most visible features among the people with whom Europe came into contact were phenotypical: skin colour, shape of nose, hair texture, size of the cranium, colour of the eyes and other physical features (Backhouse, 1999; Galabuzi, 2006). However, the material imperative of accumulating the national resources and the labour of “non-white” populations was the driving force behind the racial ideology of difference (Canadian Labour Congress, 1997; Dei, 1996). This reality was evident in the designation of Africans as the only people who were most suitable for the regimented labour needed for plantation slavery in the Americas. Even though during the early days of the enslavement, white indentured Europeans worked alongside enslaved Africans, only the

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7 The indigenous peoples in the Americas were used to extract wealth for the settlers but they were decimated by overwork, diseases and the disruption of their way of life.
latter were declared as being physically, racially and culturally suited to the rigours of plantation life (Williams, 1944). It is difficult for any group to perpetuate unspeakable act of oppression against others who are like them. Therefore, the targeted group must be made to be different to create the basis for oppressive treatment. Ideological justification was found and disseminated throughout society to justify the manner in which racialized labour was exploited. A few of the ideological rationales used to give moral legitimacy to the exclusionary order were “orientalism, anti-Black racism, and other forms of racism that had developed in the context of colonialism, neo-colonialism and slavery” (Gupta, 1998, p. 316).

The system of racism was created on the basis of the socially fictitious concept of race. This system of exploitation is used to justify the racially differential and grossly uneven access to power, resources, collective self-determination and opportunities to the peoples who are deemed biologically-cum-racially superior in comparison to the racially dominated groups over whom control and domination is maintained (Carmichael & Hamilton, 1967; Galabuzi, 2006; Kivel, 2002). Racism is about power and its exercise over another group of people as well as the construction and ordering of objective reality to give the impression that the role or position of the racially dominated in society or the world system results their “natural” ability. Objectively, the functional form of racism in Western societies and at a global level is White racism. Racism and white supremacy are interchangeable terms and I find the following definition of white supremacy to be very useful for the purpose of this research project:

White Supremacy is an historically based, institutionally perpetuated system of exploitation and oppression of continents, nations, and peoples of color by white
peoples and nations of the European continent, for the purpose of maintaining and
defending a system of wealth, power, and privilege (School of the America
Watch, n.d.).

White supremacy is the only type of racism based on the discredited biological idea of
race that has the power to define the racialized other as being outside of humanity and
gather the resources to place the racially victimized in socially, economically, culturally,
and politically disadvantageous positions. In Canada, the United States, New Zealand,
Australia or Europe one may readily see the materially subjugated position of racialized
and/or indigenous peoples as a group.

On the global level, we bear witness to the exercise of White (and capitalist)
power through institutions such as the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, World
Trade Organization, North Atlantic Treaty Organization and the United Nations. These
preceding institutions are used to perpetuate the system of racial domination over the
resources and people of the global South who are overwhelmingly racialized. It should be
noted that the imperative for the racialization of the peoples living outside of Europe was
rooted in the needed for their natural resources and labour power to aid the accumulation
of capital. The material basis for racist domination and racism remains unaltered.

There are different ways to categorize the manifestation of racism in society.
Western societies are guided by the ideas of philosophical liberalism so there is a
tendency to see racist thoughts and actions as the products of individual behaviour.
Individual racism facilitates the perpetuation of racist ideology and practices and the
perpetrator may knowingly or unknowingly or actively or passively engage in acts of
white supremacy (Carmichael & Hamilton, 1967; Henry, Tator, Mattis & Rees, 2000,
Lopes & Thomas, 2006). The invisibility of White privilege and power at the individual level is a source of its resilience and “places the oppressor outside of the racial sphere, vested with a power and social advantage which they themselves need not consider – ‘That’s just the way it is.’” (Dei, Karumanchery & Karumanchery-Luik, 2004, p. 84). It is the individual racism of the white supremacist hate groups such as the Ku Klux Klan and neo-Nazi formations that society readily sees as dangerous and despicable. The School of the Americas Watch (n.d.) critique the preceding tendency this:

The most common mistake people make when they talk about racism is to think it is a collection of prejudices and individual acts of discrimination. They do not see that it is a system, a web of interlocking, reinforcing institutions: economic, military, legal, educational, religious, and cultural. As a system, racism affects every aspect of life in a country.

However, the systemic and institutional forms of racism are the ones that have the most serious material impacts and consequences for racialized and indigenous peoples, but are likely to be oblivious to most people because they are embedded in the fabric of society. Carmichael & Hamilton (1967) are credited with the coining of the term “institutional racism” and they assert that this type of racism is subtle, not easily identified and is operationalized through the economic, social, educational, political and social institutions of society. The pervasiveness and obliviousness of institutional racism makes it less open to critique than the overt expression of individual racism such as someone being beaten up or chased out of a neighbourhood on account of his or her racial identity. But the denial of employment or the underrepresentation of racialized people in certain jobs or their over-representation in the ranks of the incarcerated, school dropouts
and expulsion from school may not, on the surface, have nothing to so with White racism. Yet institutional racism may be the driving force behind such social, educational or economic outcomes. According to Lopes & Thomas (2006), institutional racism is facilitated through “The network of institutional structures, policies, and practices that create advantages for White people and discrimination, oppression and disadvantage for racialized people” (p. 270). Institutional racism is the form that will be most relevant to my investigation of racism, resistance and co-optation in the Canadian labour movement, because it interrogates organizational practices as subsets of a wider system of racial privileging.

Systemic racism is another term that is used to name racism beyond merely individual acts of racial animus. Systemic racism and institutional racism are used as synonyms by lay people and activists in organizations and the wider society and it may be attributed to certain similarities that they share. According to Henry, Tator, Mattis & Rees (2000) systemic racism “refers more broadly to the laws, rules, and norms woven into the social system that results in an unequal distribution of economic, political, and social resources and rewards among various racial groups” (p. 56). Systemic racism shapes the relationship, terms of engagement and access of racialized and indigenous peoples to the services or resources within the judicial system, law enforcement system, the educational system, the housing market, the labour market and the system of political representation and policy articulation and priorities. With respect to systemic and institutional racism, the perpetrators of racist exploitation do not need to intentionally discriminate. The processes, policies and structures were designed to give unequal treatment to the racially oppressed.
Although race is a socially constructed category, it has material consequences for both parties to the relationship. Whites, particularly the owners, were offered unearned economic, social and political benefits within the system of racial domination (Galabuzi, 2006). These social and economic differences are used as justification for the inherent superiority or inferiority of the beings that are racialized. Racialized people have used the imposed social identities as grounds on which they name their oppression and create the basis for building solidarity and the execution of collective action (Galabuzi, 2006). It might seem curious for a people to embrace and use a negative identity as a way to positively and affirmatively challenge their status in the hegemonic system. However, the collective consciousness of a common condition of oppression produces its dialectical counterpart of a consciousness of freedom rooted in that very group identity and identification.

**Labour’s attitude and behaviour toward the racialized other**

Institutional racism was a reality in the structures and policies of the main labour unions in the late 19th and early twentieth century. The Canadian railroad sector of the latter 19th century and the early 20th century provides telling evidence of the extent to which race

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**Footnote:** According to the Canadian Labour Congress’s anti-racism report systemic racism is still a difficult phenomenon in the contemporary labour movement:

There was strong feeling that the term “systemic racism” is a remote concept for many Aboriginal Peoples and People of Colour union members. They now what system racism means. They experience its impact on their lives daily. But they also feel left out of meaningful discussions about it because in many ways systemic racism has become captured and “professionalized” by the policy makers, lawyers, and researchers who deal with its structural impact on a broader level, and more removed level. For majority race union members, it’s even more difficult to relate with the concept of systemic racism.

Systemic racism is also a term that can polarize unions because of the differences about its prevalence and the strategies that should be used to deal with it. The experience of aboriginal activists and activists of colour is that many union members and leaders simply deny that systemic racism exists. Those who acknowledge its existence often feel overwhelmed by the magnitude of the problem. Most union leaders, staff and members resist discussions about systemic discrimination because they wrongly interpret proposed solutions as forms of special treatment, reverse discrimination and quotas (1997: p. 5).
and racism were factors in the employment experience of indentured Chinese labour and African workers. Canada’s railroad interests saw these racialized men as an exploitable pool of workers for the least desirable and dangerous jobs (laying of tracks, portering, and clearing dead hogs and cattle from the tracks), and they were seen as a useful bulwark against union organizing efforts of White workers (Mathieu 2001, pars 1-3). The railway companies in the United States had also engaged in racial exploitation as well as the exploitation of women (Carson, 2002). A few women secured jobs in the gendered job classifications of Pullman “maids, porterettes and cleaners” (Carson 2002, p. 277, p. 281).

White railway trade unions instituted constitutional barriers to the membership of African and other racialized railroad workers in the early years of the 20th century (Gupta, 1998; Lukas & Persad, 2004). In 1908, the Canadian Brotherhood of Railway Employees (CBRE) inserted into its charter that only White men could join the labour organization (Mathieu, 2001). Racial discriminatory employment practices in the railroad sector were the equivalent of an economic assault on African Canadian communities.

Nevertheless, sleeping car porters enjoyed stable and relatively high income, which had significant multiplier effects within the community and were, as such, referred to as “labour aristocrats” (Carson, 2002, p. 277; Grizzle 1998, p. 63-64). The African porters organized a labour union in 1918 called the Order of Sleeping Car Porters (OSCP). The OSCP sought membership in the Canadian Brotherhood of Railway Employees and it was duly rejected because the latter’s “constitution restricted membership to whites” (Winks 1971, p. 423). Their efforts to join the Trades and Labour Congress of Canada (TLC), the national apex group of craft and trade unions, were
similarly denied on the grounds that they were not “part of a larger (white) union” (Carson 2002, p. 279; Mathieu 2001, pars. 88-91).

When it came to the matter of race privileging, the convergence of interests between White capital and White labour was evident in the treatment of racialized African labour in both Canada and the United States. In Canada, the Canadian Brotherhood of Railway Employees and the employers signed pacts that restricted African railroad workers almost exclusively to the job classification of porters and track layers and maintained racially exclusive seniority systems (Calliste, 1995; Carson 2002). The railway interests were able to maintain a low wage ghetto from which higher levels of profits could be procured and White workers were able to immune themselves from competition by racialized workers for higher paying jobs with “status.” This state of affairs may be gleaned from the relative earnings of African porters and White conductors. A Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) porter had a gross monthly earning of $75 to $85 per month with over three years of experience, but White conductors earned a monthly income of $268.57 \(^9\) (Carson, 2002). This type of exclusionary compensation was also experience by Chinese workers in other job categories. Gupta (1997) points to the reality of “Chinese workers earn[ing] one-half to one-quarter less than their unskilled White counterparts and such differential wages were written into union agreements” (p. 318). Racism in railroad employment benefited White workers and also resulted in common cause between White labour and White capital, groups that might be adversaries under other circumstances (Carson, 2002).

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\(^9\) The comparison of the wage difference was done to highlight the economic basis for white railway workers fight to keep the African Canadian porters in their segregated job and wage ghetto. Whites did not work as porters.
In the United States, railroad companies, trade unions and various state
governments collaborated in the maintenance of racial segregatory employment hiring
patterns and practices. The enactment of *full-crew laws* by states resulted in the major
White railroad unions with exclusionary membership policy insisting on all crew
members being members of unions\(^\text{10}\) (Bernstein, 2000). Bernstein claimed that “Overall,
no fundamental change occurred in the relatively favorable position of African American
workers in the railroad industry until World War I brought massive federal intervention
in the railroad labour market” (2000, p. 239). The unions’ commitment to significantly
reducing the employment of Africans in the railway sector was facilitated by National
Mediation Board (NMB) and the National Railroad Adjustment Board (NRAB)
(Bernstein 2000).

However, the African railroad workers in both the United States and Canada
engaged in acts of resistance such as forming independent unions as well as working with
their communities and labour organizations to effect legislative changes around
discriminatory employment practices (Calliste, 1995; Grizzle, 1998). Separate or
independent organizing along gendered racialized lines (African American men) was
utilized by some African railroad workers even when the opportunity was presented to
join predominantly White labour bodies. These African American autonomous trade
unions refused membership in the Confederation of Industrial Organization (CIO) up to
the 1940s, because this approach was seen as a way to build leadership capacity,

\(^{10}\) According to Bernstein “*Full-crew laws proved useful. These laws provided that a train crew must
consist of an engineer, a fireman, a conductor, a brakeman, and a flagman. Full-crew laws
were ostensibly passed for safety reasons, but they enjoyed much of their popularity
because they served the interests of the railroad unions. Not only did full-crew laws
force railroads to hire unnecessary workers, but railroad unions used them to ensure
that the railroads hire union members*” (2000, p. 3).
formulate plans around expressed needs and to negotiate with management without the intermediary and hostile voice of the conventional union brass (Carson, 2002).

However, the much larger and resourced Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters (BSCP) in America joined the American Federation of Labour (AFL) as an affiliate. The Canadian Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters struggled for five years to gain membership in the General Conference Committee (GCC) of railway unions that engaged in co-coordinated bargaining with the employers on the behalf of porters, conductors, electricians and other job categories (Grizzle, 1998). The Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters’ membership in General Conference Committee was achieved in 1952. This struggle for integration into labour bodies in Canada inspired A. Phillip Randolph, the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters’ American founder, to comment in the November 1949 edition *The Black Worker* (the organization’s newspaper):

> Apparently, the railway unions in Canada want to give the colored workers everything but membership in their organizations or to permit organizations under Negro leadership to participate in their various movements (cited in Grizzle, 1998, p. 81).

The exclusion of the racialized other from railway unions also included Asian Canadian workers. The oppositional narrative of race and racism tends to privilege the binary construction of African-White protagonists. However, Asian workers also exercised agency in the labour movement through the development of independent labour unions and support organizations. The Chinese Labour Union, Chinese Shingles Workers Union, Chinese Cooks’ Unions and the Chinese Restaurant Workers’ Unions were created in the first two decades of the 20th century to advance the needs and interests of
these racialized workers (Lukas & Persad, 2004). Asian workers resisted the differential
treatment meted out to them in the labour market and from labour unions by using the
ultimate weapon of labour, strike action, to press their demand for better wages, working
conditions and the elimination of discriminatory practices (Gupta, 1998).

In the period 1880-1914, there were virulent strains of anti-Chinese sentiments
expressed in labour circles and publications about the “impending flood,” “hordes,”
“swarms,” “menace” or “flocks” (Goutor, 2005, p. 65) poised to take the jobs of White
workers or depressed wages. The fear of Chinese immigrant workers by labour unions
and other organizations was out of proportion to their actual numbers in British Columbia
and the rest of Canada. In the 1880s, Chinese immigration amounted to about 15,000
annually. According to Goutor (2005), Canadians of Chinese origin accounted for only
“3.5 percent of total immigration in those years…all Asian groups accounted for less than
2 percent of total immigration from 1900 to the Great War” (p. 66.). The agitation of
labour about the number or presence of Chinese workers in Canada may have been
influenced by the need of this new movement to win and engender the support of the
white majority working class for unionization (Bolari & Li, 1988). Fear of Chinese
Canadians was used as a mobilizing tool (Goutor, 2005; Ireland, 1960).

By 1899, it was the standing policy of the Trades and Labour Congress of Canada
to bar membership to Chinese (Bolari & Li, 1988). The Congress incorporated into its
Platform of Principles a ninth principle, which enshrined the “Exclusion of all Chinese
from Canada” as a goal; it was amended in 1909 to “Exclusion of all Asiatics” so as to
encompass Japanese and South Asians (Ireland, 1960, p. 217-218). This overtly racist
organizing principle served its purpose until 1931 when it was eliminated from the
platform of the Trades and Labour Congress of Canada (Hunt & Rayside, 2000) but replaced by a tenth principle that was even more racist and called for the “Exclusion of all races that cannot be properly assimilated into the national life of Canada” (Ireland, 1960, p. 220.)

Hunt and Rayside (2000) argue that a contributory factor to the Trades and Labour Congress of Canada’s “pull away from the most obviously racist positions” was the formation of the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) and its strong commitment to “civil liberties” (p. 410). The wording of the tenth principle of the Trades and Labour Congress of Canada was a clear indication that it had no problem with maintaining employment and immigration barriers that were centred in race and whiteness. This overt form of racial discrimination converged with that of the federal government that viewed immigrants within the categories of “preferred,” “non-preferred,” or “other” and those deemed not suitable for the “cold climate” (Ireland 1960, p. 220; Grizzle 1998, p. 99; Winks, 1971, p. 426). These were coded words for the limiting or exclusion of the racialized immigrants. Prospective White Jewish immigrants were also virtually kept out of Canada because they were seen as not being culturally compatible with the Canadian way of life (Abella & Troper, 1982). Prime Minister Mackenzie King and his successive Liberal governments were steadfast supporters of restricting Jewish immigration to Canada. The “racialization” of White Jews demonstrates the extent to which race is socially constructed and shifts over time.

The Trades and Labour Congress of Canada was influenced in part by its US affiliates. The American Federation of Labour (AFL) had Canadian affiliates inside the Trades and Labour Congress of Canada and the former organization used segregated all-
African American locals to maintain racial exclusion. In 1927, the Trades and Labour Congress of Canada accepted an all-Japanese local as an affiliate (Ireland, 1960). It is also likely that the unions from the rival All-Canadian Congress of Labour (ACCL) with its support for industrial unionism and a nationalist stance on the control and direction of labour organizations in Canada (Lukas & Persad, 2004) may have indirectly pressured or influenced the Trades and Labour Congress of Canada on the race question. Any pressure from the All-Canadian Congress of Labour, the industrial union formation, was likely pragmatic. The All-Canadian Congress of Labour, and its later incarnation through a merger as the Canadian Congress of Labour (ACL), gave attention to organizing semi-skilled and unskilled workers, as well as racialized workers and that was a key factor in the “general assimilation of Orientals by organized labour” (Ireland, 1960, p. 220).

Trade unions and other labour organizations were quite vocal in the advocacy and support for restrictive immigration policies against Asian immigrants and whipped up “racist hysteria within communities at large” (Gupta, 1998, p. 317). In 1923, the government of Canada passed the Chinese Immigration Act, which restricted the flow of Chinese immigrants to a trickle, and this was buttressed by pacts that it reached with the Britain and Japan that facilitated the “virtual exclusion of Japanese and Hindus [South Asian]” (Ireland, 1960, p. 219). The labour movement played a significant role in the promulgation of this racially restrictive immigration statute and country-to-country agreements. Organized labour in both Canada and the United States during this period was largely White male (Goutor, 2005) and utilized a racially-segregated existential worldview on masculinity and whiteness (Mathieu, 2001). But the post-World War II period ushered in a greater commitment to human rights issues by the labour movement.
Shifting perspective on race and human rights in the house of labour

The Canadian labour movement does not exist in isolation of domestic and international events and by necessity is influenced by some of the social currents around it. Lukas and Persad (2004) highlight some of the facilitative events behind the more enlightened position of labour on the race question:

The development of human rights benefited from post-World War II economic prosperity, anti-communism, the anti-colonial struggles carried out by people in the Third world after World War II, and the introduction of both the Charter of the United Nations and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. With the economy booming and the Holocaust fresh in people’s minds, the world began to embrace human rights. Canadian white workers no longer felt threatened by “foreign” competition, as they had during the Depression. (p.15)

The double standard of Canada’s dominant political and economic groups in critiquing bureaucratic state socialism for denying fundamental rights, yet being oblivious of a similar situation in their backyard - “Canada’s Achilles’ heels” - (Bromley, 2000, p. 74) was a contradiction that could not be ignored. During the 1950s’ anti-discrimination campaigns in Ontario Premier Frost’s support for legislative changes were partly rooted in his need to create the condition for the accumulation of capital (maintain the flow of immigrant labour and removal of “competitive edge” to businesses that did not serve racialized people) as well as to legitimize liberal capitalist democracy in the “ideological warfare” against communism (Lambertson 2001, pars. 42-44). In the United States, the federal government was similarly
influenced to improve the condition of its racialized peoples so as to be in accordance with its rhetoric of capitalist economic and political freedoms (Bell, 1980).

Within the literature of critical race theory the concept of *interest convergence* is advanced to explain the support behind majority groups’ effort to remove discriminatory practices (Bell, 1980). It holds that in the case of racism, “civil rights gains for communities of colour coincide with the dictates of white self-interest. Little happens out of altruism” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 18). The following statement from the Attorney General in the United States in 1952 on the landmark *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education* school desegregation case before the Supreme Court attests to interest convergence:

“It is in the context of the present world struggle between freedom and tyranny that the problem of racial discrimination must be viewed….Racial discrimination furnishes grist for the Communist propaganda mills, and it raises doubt even among friendly nations as to the intensity of our devotion to the democratic faith” (cited in McAdam, 1982, p. 83).

Before going on to highlight some of the activities of labour unions in combating racism, it would be helpful to touch on the role of self-interest in the push by some within labour’s leadership to tackle this very vexing challenge. The “steadfast support” of the labour movement in the mid-1940s against racism (Patrias & Frager 2001, p. 7) could be read as one of self-interest. The labour-supported *Canadian Labour Reports* clearly highlighted the deleterious effect of racism on the solidarity of organized labour in an educational pamphlet in 1949:

Unionists know that race hatred and discrimination is used as a weapon to smash unions. Those who promote race are invariably the loudest opponents of unionism.
Divide and rule is their method in destroying unions by setting one racial group against the other. (Lambertson, 2001, endnote # 23)

Working class solidarity is a cardinal value of the labour movement and it was cognizant of the possibility of racial discrimination “sow[ing] the seeds which might lead to its own destruction” (Ireland, 1960, p. 221) if it continued to aid overt racism within its ranks and the wider society.

While this commitment to removing the overt vestiges of racial oppression was emerging within the labour movement, it was influenced by the struggle of racialized people, during this period, to challenge their second-class status (Patrias & Frager 2001). Organizations of racialized workers were also civil rights-oriented in their general work and campaigned for anti-discriminatory legislations and other initiatives (Carson, 2002; Grizzle 1998; Winks, 1971). Community organizations were a central part of the effort to promote civil rights and to challenge the colour bar in employment and other facets of life (Lopes & Thomas, 2006).

However, progressive and enlightened leadership of trade unions and other labour organizations in the fight against racial discrimination in employment, housing and accommodation and services in public places (hotels, theatres, and restaurants) bolstered the civil rights activism of the racialized subalterns. The creation of Joint Labour Committees to Combat Racial Discrimination through the organizing effort of Kalmen Kaplansky, the leader of the Jewish Labour Committee (JLC) of Canada, were the principal organizational vehicles through which the labour movement carried out its anti-racism work. These committees operated in Toronto, Windsor, Vancouver, Montreal and Winnipeg and were able to draw members from the rival national labour apex groups of the Trade and Labour Congress and the Canadian Congress of Labour (Lambertson 2001; Patrias & Frager 2001). These labour
committees were charged with the task of effecting anti-discriminatory initiatives through such means as resolutions at conventions, the advocacy of elected labour municipal and provincial politicians, negotiating racial justice language into the collective agreement, and involvement of the “rank-and-file members in the campaigns” (Patrias & Frager 2001, p. 20).

A number of provincial and federal human rights legislations were passed and labour could rightly take credit for its contribution to these legislative developments (Grizzle, 1998). In 1944, Ontario’s legislature passed the Racial Discrimination Act, which prohibited the “display of symbol, sign, or notice” and which promoted racial or religious discriminatory behavior (Winks, 1971, p. 427). It became the first province to have such a statute in Canada, but it came in the context of a minority Conservative government that did so “under pressure from the CCF and the L[abour] P[rogessive] P[arty]” (Lambertson 2001, par. 28). The Jewish Labour Committee’s locally-affiliated labour committees realized that the education of trade unionists and the public educational campaigns would only go so far and that there was a compelling need to change discriminatory behaviour in employment and other areas through legislations (Lambertson, 2001; Patrias & Frager 2000). Securing the passage of a Fair Employment Practices (FEP) Act in Ontario became the objective of the Jewish Labour Committee, Joint Public Relations Committee (a Jewish organization) and the Joint Labour Committees to Combat Racial Intolerance. Labour bodies such as the Ontario Federation of Labour and labour councils and municipal councils in Oshawa and Windsor threw their support behind this campaign in Ontario (Patrias & Frager, 2001). In 1951, the Fair Employment Practices Act was passed by the Ontario legislature and similar legislations were approved subsequently in other provinces (Lopes & Thomas, 2006; Winks, 1971).
The southwestern Ontario town of Dresden provided the canvas on which the labour movement painted its commitment to the removal of racial barriers to services in restaurants, hotels, taverns, theatres and residential housing. Africans and other racialized people were for a long time subjected to racist exclusion from certain businesses that served the public and this was buttressed by law and social custom (Armstrong, 2000; Grizzle 1998; Thornhill, 2008.) In the 1921 theatre segregation case, *Lowe’s Theatres Ltd. V. Reynolds*, in Quebec, the court ruled:

The management of a theatre may impose restrictions and make rules as to the place which each person should occupy during a presentation. Therefore, when a coloured man bearer of a ticket of general admission wants to take a seat in a part of the House which he knows is by the rule of a manager prohibited to a coloured person, he cannot complain if he is refused admission (italic added). (cited in Thornhill, 2008, p. 330)

In other words, the court told racialized people to know their place and act accordingly.

The discriminatory treatment of African people in Dresden came onto labour’s radar in early in 1949. Vivian Mahood, executive secretary of the Joint Labour Committee on Racial Intolerance and the chair of the coalition called the Toronto Association for Civil Liberties (ACL), made an investigatory visit to the town in July 1949 (Lamberton, 2001). Mahood’s subsequent outreach to Pierre Burton of *MacLean’s* magazine resulted in an article that gave national coverage of the racist denial of service in Dresden and its main protagonist, Morley McKay of Kay’s Café. Undaunted by the national attention, the residents of this town voted 518 to 108 in December 1949 to not terminate the business license of firms that discriminate, and this community became the symbol for a fight against racism in public accommodation.
(Lambertson, 2001). The Association for Civil Liberties and a delegation representing civil libertarian, church, labour, ethnic, and social welfare organizations, including the NUA [National Unity Association]\(^{11}\) got a meeting with the premier of Ontario in January 1950 (Lambertson 2001, par. 38). Nothing came out of this meeting but the collaborative work of the Joint Labour Committee and the Canadian Jewish Congress’s Joint Public Relations Committee (JPRC) in preparing a brief on this matter led to another delegation in March 1954. This meeting set in motion the process that led to the April 6, 1954, proclamation of the *Fair Accommodation Practices Act* (Lambertson, 2001; Lukas & Persad, 2004).

The legislation was immediately tested by the Joint Labour Committee on Human Rights (dropped “Racial Intolerance” from its name and added “Human Rights”). The committee sent two representatives to test the legislation’s effectiveness: NUA’s Burnette, Bromley Armstrong (an African Canadian) of the United Autoworkers of America and Chinese Canadian Ruth Lor of the University of Toronto’s Student Christian Movement. On October 29, 1954, they attempted, without success, to be served at Kay’s Café (Armstrong, 2000; Lukas & Persad, 2004). When the Ministry of Labour refused to intervene, Syd Blum, the executive secretary of the Joint Labour Committee “orchestrate[d] a large-scale operation which involved both a maximum of publicity and further testing” (Lambertson, 2001, par. 57). The Toronto Labour Committee’s action encompassed lobbying the Ministry of Labour, getting Toronto’s two labour councils to pressure the Ministry, gave strategic advice to Burnette through the Windsor labour committees, and cultivated relationships in the news media to inform the public about the campaign. In October 1954, the province of Ontario finally relented and charges were laid against the owners of McKay’s Café and Emerson’s restaurants and this matter brought to

\(^{11}\) The National unity Association, a Dresden area African Canadian organization, and its leader Hugh Burnette was responsible for bringing the situation in Dresden to the labour movement and human rights community.
trial. Kalmen Kaplansky of Jewish Labour Committee gave invaluable assistance in his perusal of the defense counsels’ arguments (Armstrong, 2000). This Dresden case was successfully resolved in May 1956 after obtaining conviction, having it overturned on appeal and new charges being levied.

The contributions of labour unions, labour organizations and “minority human rights activists” to the fight against racism was important in creating more a tolerant space for racialized, ethnic and religious minorities and “initiated a fundamental reconsideration of the concepts of democracy and equality that guided postwar reconstruction” (Patrias & Frager, 2001, p. 35). Armstrong had this to say about the magnitude or impact of human rights activism of the period:

When Ottawa enacted the Canadian Bill of Rights in the early 1960s, during the John Diefenbaker era, such unprecedented legislation came about because of a budding human and civil rights agenda that we helped to foster at the grassroots level. I believe that changes like these occurred because by that date the climate had been altered sufficiently by those of us, who joined forces, established alliances, worked with labour, religious groups and other vested interests to help make Canada a more just and tolerant society (2001, p. 90).

“Trans-class consensus that the interests of other workers and employers trumped racial division” (Lambertson 2001, par. 79) played a role in the push towards overturning the vulgar forms of racial discrimination, but the legislative changes opened the space for the affected populations to exercise the right to self-actualization. In spite of labour’s important role in advancing the anti-racism agenda in Dresden, it still clung to discriminatory practices within its own locals. There was a different attitude within unions “when it came to bread-and-butter
issues of hiring and promotion than in situations such as Dresden” (Lambertson, 2001, par. 83). Nevertheless, these grassroots human rights activists set the stage for the fight that took place inside the labour movement during the last few decades of the twentieth century for White women, racialized women and men and other equity-seeking trade unionists.

**Nuanced contextual participation of the racialized other in locals**

In spite of the exclusion of racialized workers in the leadership of the labour movement’s apex organizations or labour federations, I came across accounts of the former’s participation in leadership roles within the executive of their predominantly White locals. Bromley Armstrong, an African Canadian man, was “overwhelmingly elected” as the assistant chief steward of local 439 of the United Autoworkers Union (UAW), circa 1947, at the Massey Ferguson in Toronto, and later defeated an established leader for the position of chief steward (Armstrong, 2000, p. 59). In 1972, Grace Fowler (an African woman) was elected as the chief steward of local 210 of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) and served in this capacity until 1984 (Brand, 1991).

A common trait shared by Armstrong and Fowler was a strong fighting spirit and a sense of justice. Fowler asserted that “I always fight for the underdog, and I think that started because I was the only scrapper in our family outside of my brother Harold” (cited in Brand, 1991, p. 191). Armstrong’s self-assertion of his right to break the colour bar that barred him from becoming a welder won the respect of the rank-and-file “Because I spoke up, they saw me as being brave, and soon thereafter, I was encouraged by some of my fellow workers to seek office as union steward” (Armstrong, 2000, p. 58). Fowler’s and Armstrong’s White union sisters and brothers probably saw their tenacity as an asset to advancing the interest of their local and that was of greater importance than their racial identity. Moreover, if they had
problematized the racial status quo in the union and argued for remedial actions, their White colleagues would have likely taken a different approach to their political ambitions within the union. Armstrong did not talk about any fight by him against racially discriminatory practices inside his local or the United Auto Workers. He wrote about his work with the UAW in fighting for fair employment and accommodation laws in Ontario; all externally focused equity initiatives.

The United Auto Workers of the 1940s provides an instructive, if not perplexing, example of African men being active in their locals’ governance. Sugiman (2001) carried out a research project on the construction and experience of race and gender by African men who worked in the auto industry in southern Ontario. Of twelve research participants, nine had occupied leadership position in the running of their locals as well as served as delegates to affiliated UAW councils. The leadership of UAW in Canada did not forcefully challenged the colour line that placed African men in the dirty, hot, physically strenuous and undesirable areas of “the heat treat, the powerhouse, or the foundry” (Sugiman, 2001, par. 18). Yet these men did not present a problem in being a part of the political process in their locals. A credible explanation for some of these racialized men’s ability to participate in their union was offered by Sugiman:

Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, many [B]lack autoworkers in Canada adamantly denied difference on the basis of race, and this clearly impeded efforts to mobilize in protest of racial discrimination. This denial of racial difference was most likely a means of coping with the hegemony of whiteness. Within a predominantly white setting, it represented an attempt to shield oneself from racist attacks, to avoid exacerbating racial tensions, and to
assimilate (and thereby become invisible), or at least escape further marginalization in the plant and the union\textsuperscript{12}. (Sugiman, 2001, par. 37)

These men knew the “operational code” of the context in which they operated and as long as they adhered to the code of silence on race, they would be able to participate, to a certain extent, within the structures of the local and the larger arena of the United Auto Workers in Canada. Davidson (1998) was right in asserting that “The strength of the ideology of solidarity prohibits women and other marginalized groups from challenging their union” on questions of equity (p. 48).

**Racialized trade unionists asserting voice, 1970 to today**

Immigration reform bolstered the number of racialized people that entered Canada in the late 1960s and onward. In 1967, spurred on by the need for an expanded, cheap and skilled labour force (Brand, 1994a) and the insufficient number of White immigrants from Europe, the federal government moved away from its racially discriminatory immigration system to one that was facilitative of the entry of racialized immigrants. It developed a “points system” that assigned a numerical value to prospective immigrants’ suitability based on their education, training occupational skills, and prospect for immediate employment in Canada, and not the race criteria of prior legislations (Armstrong, 2000, Tulloch, 1975). As an indication of the growth of the racialized population, the numbers of people of African origin jumped from 32,127 in 1961 to 62,470 in 1971 and ballooned to 144,500 in 1981 (Bolari & Li, 1988, p. 192). Chinese

\textsuperscript{12} The following comment by a research participant, Richard Nicholson, gives an indication of the fear of appearing to indulge in all-African racial solidarity: “The blacks never all gathered together ‘cause we used to say to one another, “We’re not gonna all sit in a huddle – all of us together.” Like, it looks like you’re discriminating yourself. Like you’re all together. You know what I mean? I would talk to more white people than I did black people, really because I worked with white people and my boss was white (Sugiman, 2001, par.37).
immigrants came to Canada in large numbers after 1967. In the years 1963 to 1967, 18,716 Chinese immigrants were admitted into the country. But the numbers exploded to 30,417 between 1968 and 1972 and for the period 1977-1984 Chinese immigration figures stood at 79,230 (Bolari & Li, 1988). Many of these racialized workers were concentrated in lower job classifications occupations or secondary labour markets and this was a reality for them in unionized workplaces (Kholsa, 1989; Leah, 1989, 1989; Lukas & Persad, 2004; 2004).

The value of strength in numbers in the workplace or employment arena came to the fore with the increasing presence of racialized workers in the labour force in the 1970s and 1980s. In the 1971 Labour Day Parade in Toronto, a contingent of African Canadian carpenters and allies protested the “hiring practices of the U.S. building trades unions and the construction companies which excluded black workers from jobs” (Tolluch, 1975, p. 177). This type of direct action in one of the labour movement’s most institutionalized and public events captured the attention of the relevant parties about racist hiring practices in the trades (Luckas & Persad, 2004). This act of political assertion took place in a context of the North American civil rights/Black Power social movement consciousness-raising and activism. Canada was very much caught up in that social ferment and “nothing has been the same since” (Brand, 1994; Tulloch, 1975, p.

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13 Clinton Joseph, (2001) a Toronto cultural worker gives a retrospective rendition of the period: The philosophy and politics of “Black Power,” still so powerful even in its wane, impacted our consciousness and our views of the world and what our political aspirations and commitment were about. We set up study groups on Black and radical history and politics (reading walter rodney, clr james, angela davis, black panthers, the revolutionary struggles in africa, amilcar cabral, frantz fanon, communism, socialism, pan-africanism…); we set up a committee that went to school/clubs to spread R[eunited] A[frican] P[eople]’s message ; a cultural group that produced plays, poems, and dances that toured schools and community centres; a track clubs that nurtured athletic talent and took part in competitions; took trips out of town; and hold lots of parties (p. 17).
184). The phenomenon of work is critical to our survival and this is especially so for
groups without control over the means of production.

Racialized groups in Canada had no option but to problematize the condition under
which their labour was procured and utilized in the labour market. It was the need for
labour to facilitate capital accumulation as well as the embarrassing situation that Canada
found itself in challenging South African apartheid while using racial precepts in its
immigration regime that brought racialized labour, in increasing numbers, to this country
in the 1960s and onward. Hunt and Rayside (2000) noted that “economic disadvantages”
has always placed workplace questions on the agenda of African Americans (p. 430), and
it was the same for Africans and other racialized peoples in Canada. Racism in the
workplace and in unions had to be brought to the fore as was evident in Nurses and
Friends Against Discrimination, (a community support and advocacy group for racialized
nurses – mostly African Canadians - in the early 1990s):

We demand that O\[ntario\] N\[urses\] A\[ssociation\] and other unions cease
their collaboration with the employers in these grievances: that insulting,
demeaning and hazardous settlements not be urged on the grievers in the
interest of having a “good working relationship” with the employer and to
save expense to the union...that the unions make it unequivocally clear to the
employers that the grievers’ human rights are not negotiable: that the unions
cease making settlements which require withdrawal of grievers’ human rights

It was community solidarity and intervention and not the initiative of the nurses’ union
that brought this case the Ontario Human Rights Commission and made it a public
campaign that resulted in a victory for the racialized nurses (Calliste, 1996, Lukas & Persad, 2004; Modibo, 2004).

The close link between the struggle for civil rights and full integration in the workplace and labour unions helped place anti-racism on the agenda of labour in Ontario in the 1980s (Lukas & Persad, 2004). Racialized people created organizations or support groups in their communities (Leah, 1989; Lukas & Persad, 2004) to assist each other on workplace issues that were informed by race and racism. The latter years of the 1970s witnessed open conflicts between racialized communities and mainstream institutions such as the police and the media (Ng, 1995). Charges of police brutality were frequently leveled against the Toronto police and this policing experience resulted in the killing of an African man in 1979. Given the federal state’s role of maintaining the legitimacy of Canada’s socio-economic arrangements, and in the context of the recently enacted Charter of Rights and Freedoms, it provided funding to the Ontario Federation of Labour to effect an anti-racism campaign in 1981 (Ng, 1995).

The above-mentioned funding from the federal government bank-rolled the Ontario Federation of Labour’s much celebrated Racism Hurts Everyone campaign. This anti-racism campaign developed written educational materials and produced television advertisements on societal racism and trained many labour activists as anti-racism workshops facilitators (White, 1993). Many of these activists were from the ranks of racialized trade unionists and this training and experience of facilitating anti-racism workshops created the space for their emergence as a “catalyst for anti-racism work in the Ontario labour movement” (Leah, 1989, p. 177).
However, the *Racism Hurts Everyone* campaign was not a substantive interrogation of and corrective to racism within the ranks of labour. Its educational activities did not do the following: specifically targeted union staff and leadership; disseminate the anti-racism awareness or consciousness-raising training to the rank-and-file; centred anti-racism in the Ontario Federation of Labour’s work (“appendaged to regular labour education programme”); fully utilize knowledge and skills of the facilitators; pose a threat to the power and control of the entrenched and conventional leadership (Ng, 1995). A key unintended effect of this campaign was the opportunity that it gave to racialized trade unionists to network with each other and engage in collective action to challenge racist exclusion (Leah, 1989; Ng 1995.) A significant development of the campaign was the creation of the Ontario Coalition of Black Trade Unionists (OCBTU), which included African, South Asian, Caribbean, East Asian and Latin American trade unionists with its members. The formative event that gave rise to the Ontario Coalition of Black Trade Unionists was the OFL-sponsored conference *Building the Power of Workers of Colour in our Unions* in April 1986 (Leah, 1989). The funding for the OFL’s campaign was one-off project funding and the initiative came from the federal government. Leah (1989) gives the impression that the catalyst for this campaign came from the leadership, but Ng (1995) attributes it to the “funding opportunity instead of the more honourable intent on the part of labour to bring about change” (p. 41).

The Ontario Coalition of Black Trade Unionists was critical to the attainment of affirmative action seats for racialized workers at the Ontario Federation of Labour and later at the Canadian Congress of Labour. As a result of the advocacy, agitation and rank-and-file organizing of this labour organization and the support of allies, the Ontario
Federation of Labour elected its first racialized vice-president to its executive board. In 1987, Herman Stewart, an African Canadian and the President of the International Ladies’ Garment Workers Union (ILGWU), made this leadership breakthrough at this Ontario labour central (Gordon, 2000; Lukas & Persad, 2004). The opening for the preceding advance came from the creation of two seats to the executive board of this Ontario labour federation and it was established that a racialized person had to occupy one of them (White, 1993). This provincial labour central became the innovator and leader in the Canadian labour movement in establishing an affirmative action seat for the province’s racialized trade unionists (White, 1993). The Steelworkers Union placed a racialized woman into its affirmative action woman vice-president seat on the executive board of the Ontario Federation of Labour and that came about as a result of the general equity activism of the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists (Rebick, 2006).

This racialized activist organization focused on the absence of racialized workers on the executive board of the Canadian Labour Congress. At the 1990 Montreal convention, the racialized union activists put forward Dory Smith, an African Canadian and a member of a carpenter’s union, for a vice-president seat and this electoral bid against the slate of the entrenched was supported by White allies from a number of major unions (Lopes & Thomas, 2006). Dory ended up with about one thousand votes, which was just two hundred shy of causing a major upset, but it sent a strong message to the leadership that racialized workers and their allies did not find the status quo agreeable (Gordon, 2000; Lopes & Thomas, 2006; Lukas & Persad). At the 1992 convention, racialized workers won two affirmative action seats (Gordon, 2000, Lopes & Thomas, 2006). It was open and vigorous struggles that won the incremental progress for
racialized trade unionists in these leadership positions. A former member of the Coalition stated that “I think there are now quite a few people of colour in high profile-positions…And even though we weren’t recognized as a coalition at the time, this change certainly came from the work the coalition has done – the pressure we put on” (cited in Gordon, 2000, p. 26).

The meagre presence of racialized people among trade union staff is an ongoing concern among equity activists (Canadian Labour Congress, 1997; Eng, 1995; Gupta, 1998). From the inception of the Coalition, it has exposed the virtual exclusion of its constituency from employment opportunities within trade unions and other labour organizations and it carried out survey of trade unions in 1987 to determine the number of racialized people in their employ as well as in the leadership. It found in 1987 that although the Ontario Federation of Labour had been around for twenty-six years, it had only employed a total of nine racialized workers, and while the United Steelworkers were listed as having thirty-five racialized local presidents, it had only one staff from this group and the person was in a temporary position (Ontario Coalition of Black Trade Unionists, 1987/88). The survey result listed the Canadian Auto Workers has having three racialized staff during its “certification history”, since this investigation was done in 1987 and one of the three workers was identified as being retired, the Coalition probably included the years before the split from United Auto Workers.

It is still a struggle to get racialized people hired as staff in labour organizations. When they are hired it appears that they are not in the prized job classifications such as grievance, arbitration, legal work, health and safety, research and organization, which is described by a retired Ontario Public Service Employees Union human rights officer and
activist as the ‘meat and potatoes of the union’ (cited in Gupta, 1998, p. 329). On the political side of union activities the exclusion or underrepresentation of equity-seeking groups in the key areas of grievance, health and safety, and bargaining is a reality. A 1989 Quebec Federation of Labour survey found that women averaged less than 30 percent of the membership on the grievance, health and safety and bargaining or negotiation committees (White, 1993). A national union’s task force on the organizational reality of its women members revealed that the grievance and bargaining committees were still male preserves, while being a recording secretary or a member of the education committee are a ghettoized locations for union sisters (Canadian Union of Public Employees, 2007a). This type of gendered (and racial) exclusion is quite problematic because equity-seekers are missing out on getting the knowledge, experience and skills in these privileged functional areas in a context where trade unions largely hire their staff from within the membership (White, 1993).

Gupta (1998) states that there is some evidence of racialized trade unionists being concentrated in equity-related staff position. Equity job classifications are not the surefire route to advancement within the union bureaucracy, because they do not represent the critical competencies that are deemed necessary for top leadership position. In an interview with a stakeholder from the Canadian Auto Workers Union White (1993) was told that “The key to all the structural things are the bargaining committees. That’s where people develop authority and credibility in the union” (p. 112). Human resources roles in the corporate world are similarly perceived as equity ones in the unions as spaces that do not produce organizational leaders. Yet, if an equity-seeker is not in equity-related jobs
functions, it may be perceived that a non-equity-seeker will not have the commitment, interests, lived experience and knowledge to be a relentless advocate.

However, in the 1990s, the Coalition pushed the envelope on getting unions to hire racialized workers. It issued a report on the number of racialized people who were on the staff of major trade unions and that forced unions to start employing from this non-traditional source (Rebick, 2006). June Veecock, a former president of the Coalition of Black Trade Unionist (Ontario) and recently retired Human Rights Director at the Ontario Federation of Labour shared an incident at a public forum that demonstrated the effectiveness of the report card. The Coalition was just about ready to issue its report card when a member educator of a large Canadian union asked her to hold off on putting out the report because his organization was on the verge of hiring a racialized staff. The union did not have anyone on staff and it would have been embarrassing for this to become a public fact.

Public shaming was a tool that the organization utilized to send the message that there was a need for change. The Coalition report entitled *Who Makes the Grade: 1993 Report Card on Hiring Practices of Unions and Labour Organization* painted a damning picture of the tenuous presence and absence in some cases of racialized workers on staff. For example, the Canadian Labour Congress and the Ontario Federation of Labour each had one racialized staff member and were assessed a failing grade. Of a total of thirteen unions and labour organization less than fifty percent (5) were given a “PASS”, and only two (Workers Health and Safety Centre and the Ontario Public Service Employees Union) were evaluated as being “EXCELLENT” in their hiring practices (Coalition of Black Trade Unionists, 1993). The struggle for equitable employment practices in the
hiring and promotion of racialized workers is a topical one in the labour unions and organizations.

In the labour movement of today racial exclusion is not expressed in racist charters or overtly bigoted language. In fact, steps have been taken by central labour organizations such as the CLC, OFL and other provincial labour federations and national unions such as CUPE, Canadian Auto Workers (CAW), and Canadian Union of Postal Workers (CUPW) to create human rights committees and diversity positions for racialized members. In the current economic, social and demographic context, the labour movement is not moving substantively toward an equity agenda that addresses the needs of racialized workers. Racialized workers, for the most part, are not asking for inclusion into unchanged union structures and organizational culture. Tokenistic representation and symbolic gestures represent the dominant approach to dealing with the racialized other and their otherness is affirmed by them not getting access to the necessary resources to do their work and to meet the needs of their constituency and the membership (Gupta, 1998). It is apparently not working. Darcy (2006) made an instructive observation about representation for the most marginalized in unions:

Let me also speak from personal experience here. If [White] women who have been elected at the highest levels of the trade union movement are marginalized, are not consulted before a consensus is declared on a major issue of the day, imagine the marginalization that occurs for people who come not with a wide elected base, with an entire union behind them or an entire convention, but who come there chosen from an equity caucus at a
convention. They have a voice, but it has not necessarily meant a change in
the fundamental power relationships in our movement. (p. 61)

The equity initiatives in many unions may be justly regarded as formalistic
pronouncements expressed in convention resolutions and policy projections in strategic
policy documents as well as “writing reports and giving speeches” (Walker, 2006, p. 94).
In some cases, it is at the national or provincial structures of labour unions that the
appearance of progressive intent and action are often-times evident. It is generally
difficult to penetrate the locals with forward thinking initiatives. Therefore, the concerns
of racialized workers are effectively not on the agenda within the house of labour.

In colloquial terms, it looks like the labour movement is spinning its wheel on the
equity agenda. Many racialized members and allies in labour organizations do not believe
that adequate attention is given to issues of racism and the equity agenda (Pollack, 2006;
Walker, 2006). As an activist and leader in my labour union, I can attest to the smoke-
and-mirrors approach that is taken to equity for the racialized other and the cynicism that
this experience breeds among racialized workers. In the Canadian Labour Congress
report, *Challenging Racism: Going Beyond Recommendations*, the national apex labour
body lauded CUPE and the Public Sector Alliance of Canadian (PSAC) for being the
only unions that had employment equity language in their collective agreement with the
staff unions (Canadian Labour Congress, 1997). However, by 2003, this union had
dropped the employment equity language from the collective agreement. In its recently
negotiated collective agreements with its staff unions employment equity language of
questionable value was inserted. CUPE has two Diversity Vice-President seats on its
National Executive Board (NEB), but these functions do not have a budgetary line item
to carry out their national duties. Yet this position has been in existence since 1999.

Marie Clarke Walker, an African woman and CLC Executive Vice-President, gives voice to the possible perception of equity cynicism in the labour movement:

The worst thing that can happen to the labour movement is for the [equity] committee structures and equality rights positions to be merely seen as part of the ongoing, prevalent tokenism. It took years to organize around these structures as a way of dealing with existing power imbalances, and to strengthen solidarity within our movement (2006, p. 97).

Ogmundson and Doyle (2002) examine the labour elite from 1960-1999 (defined as the top four officers in the thirty largest unions in Canada) and found that they were largely (88 percent in 1999) from the so-called charter groups (British and French). However, if they had used the racial category of “white” rather than British and French, the exclusion of racialized and Aboriginal peoples from the labour elite would have been more pronounced. In these researchers’ investigation of the gendering of the labour elite during this period they found that women had made significant strides with their representation standing at 33 percent in 1999, which was a marked improvement over 4.1 percent in 1960 (Ogmundson & Doyle, 2002). This gendered gain in representation was almost all White women. Nonetheless, the 33 percent figure cited by Ogmundson and Doyle may be lower today than during the late 1990s when this study was done. At that time the two national full-time officers in CUPE were women and, currently, women make up less than 25 percent of the members of the National Executive Board. If it was not for the existence of an affirmative action seat, all of the women on the executive board would be White.
Race and the politics of gender

The 1970s was not a period wherein labour’s leadership and rank-and-file were ready to address the subject of racism (Darcy, 2006; Ng, 1995), as suggested by Hill and Schiff (1990):

The labour movement continued throughout the 1950s and into the 1960s to play a prominent role in the drive for human rights legislation, particularly against discrimination on the grounds of race, colour, creed and nationality. But towards the end of the Sixties, after legislation had been passed and administrations established in all jurisdictions of Canada, some labour human rights committees ceased to be active… Other social issues seem to preoccupy the labour movement, and so far as it did focus on human rights concerns, they were most often the rights of women, the elderly or the disabled (cited in Ng, 1995, p. 37-38).

Labour unions were barely receptive to gender in spite of the fact that the prospective beneficiaries and the people clamouring for gender justice were White women. Labour responded defensively to charges of race and gender discrimination by seeing women and racialized workers as threats to union solidarity and the earnings of White male workers (Hunt & Rayside, 2000). The accusation of fostering division within the ranks of labour or breaking solidarity is one of the ways to stifle open dissent within labour unions or organizations.

Nonetheless, it was White women who made the breakthrough in equity representation on the agenda and in the structures of the labour movement in the 1970s and had firmly established their presence in the 1980s (Leah, 1989; Rebick, 2005; White, 1993). Internationally, Canada’s labour movement made a couple of groundbreaking
firsts with respect to women in major leadership positions. Its national labour federation (the CLC) was the first to elect a woman, Shirley Carr, in its top leadership position, and Grace Hartman as the national president of its largest union, CUPE (Darcy, 2006; Ogmundson & Doyle, 2002). The establishment of women’s committees and affirmative action seats in labour centrals at the provincial and national levels were used to give voice to the concerns of women. For example the Ontario Federation of Labour\textsuperscript{14} (OFL) re-established a women’s committee in 1971 and created five affirmative action seats for women in 1985 (White, 1993). However, within organized labour, White heterosexual, able-bodied women embodied what it meant to be a woman. A 1982 OFL convention report, \textit{Statement on Women and Affirmative Action}, highlighted the fact that women comprised 17% of executive boards’ members in spite of making up 30% of the labour force’s membership (OFL, 1982). But the report made no acknowledgement of the race of the women who constituted the leadership of executive boards and those who were more represented “at intermediate and local leadership levels” (OFL, 1982).

Ng (1995) draws similar attention to another OFL report, \textit{A Woman’s Place is in her Union}, which did not deconstruct and problematize the complexity of the social category of woman. Brand (1994b) challenges a similar discourse on the way that researchers frame the issue of “women” picking up manufacturing jobs during the 1940s while the men were away fighting. They ignored the reality of the hitherto “steel door” barriers to African Canadian and other racialized women accessing industrial jobs that became available with the departure of men (mostly White) to fight Nazi aggression abroad. Yet some of the dirtiest and least desirable factory jobs went to African Canadian

\textsuperscript{14} Ontario labour movement has been a catalyst and trendsetter on human rights questions in this province and the way that it frames and operationalizes issues will likely have impact beyond its borders. It was the first on affirmative action seats for women and racialized trade unionists.
women, although they were welcome relief from the pre-war domestic work in which these women were largely employed (Brand, 1994b).

Unions are still having problem today with intersecting race and gender in understanding the oppression of women in their diversity. The report of CUPE’s National Women’s Committee at its 2007 National Convention in Toronto highlighted pay equity and a number of other issues as bargaining priorities for women (CUPE, 2007c). However, employment equity was nowhere present in this report, but pay equity was mentioned more than once in this document. While White women are faced with the “glass ceiling” in some job classifications and senior management roles, racialized women are confronted with the steel door to certain job categories. Pay equity would benefit many working women. However, employment equity will get more equity-seeking women into jobs in which they are currently underrepresented by “break[ing] through the barriers of systemic discrimination” (OFL, 1986, p. 2). Many White women may fear that the effects of employment equity would be a competitive threat from the excluded other, primarily racialized women. I had to “publicly” point out the interest-protecting imperatives behind the absence of employment equity among the priorities of the then all-white CUPE’s National Women’s Committee. In other words, employment equity was seen as a race issue and one that would increase the competition for jobs White women and their subaltern counterparts, that is, racialized and Aboriginal women. Turrittin, Hagey, Guruge, Collins and Mitchell (2002) cite a research participants who comment give credence to the preceding assertion of White entitlement: “I do realize that…white people have to protect their territory….it is like turf protection…because if you come too far they think you will soon take over, but sometimes I say…they are too
punitive in the protection of their turf” (p. 662). Modibo (2004) found a similar assessment by African Canadian nurses who held the position that their White female counterparts benefitted from a “gendered-racism” that defended the latter’s economic interests in a context of state funding retrenchment and health sector restructuring (p. 114).

The above-mentioned Ontario Federation of Labour’s affirmative action seats were all occupied by White women when they were established, and that is still the situation today. Racialized women had to fight to get White labour feminists, the women’s movement, anti-racist formations and the general labour movement to integrate race into their construction of the category of woman and the policies that flowed from the gender question (Leah, 1989, 1993; Rebick, 2005). The exclusion of racialized women in the union movement will need to be approached from a standpoint of intersectionality where all relevant structural forces (gender, sexual identity, class and ability/disability), which intermingle in defining their lived experiences in labour unions are taken into consideration. If race is explored as the only explanatory category in the exclusion of racialized trade unionists, it would likely fail to capture the way immigration status, sexuality and/or class mediates their experience. Leah captures the intersection of race and gender in the lives of women of colour in the labour movement:

Generally, union struggles against racism and sexism have proceeded in separate spheres: women committees have organized against sexism, focusing on women’s rights; race relations or human rights committees have organized against racism, focusing on minority workers’ rights. This division has been especially harmful to

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15 The women’s committee seats at the OFL are apportioned to the affiliates by pre-determined formula and they are the ones who appoint the women to this equity body. It just happens that the affiliates continue to send white women to this committee.
women of colour: their particular concerns may not be taken up by either group. Women of colour and immigrant women experience racism and sexism in their daily lives, and both forms of oppression need to be challenged simultaneously by the labour movement (1989, p. 166).

At the 2005 National Convention of CUPE, a constitutional amendment seeking the creation of five affirmative action vice-president seats for women on the National Executive Board was presented to the delegates. However, this constitutional amendment did not include a provision for a number of the seats being reserved for Aboriginal and racialized women. This point of exclusion was voiced in the ensuing debate from the floor (Shanahan, 2006). Given the presence of systemic race barriers in the union, those seats would have likely gone to White women, if the constitutional amendment had gotten the required two-thirds vote. An intersectional approach to oppression would have led to racialized and other excluded categories of women being centred in the discourse of gender equity and justice. All of the women on the 2005-2007 edition of the National Executive Board were White with two of the twenty men being from the Aboriginal and racialized communities. This struggle is ongoing in many labour unions when it comes to representation and the specific issues that adversely affect the lives of racialized women. The mere presence of White women in top leadership positions, as was the case when Judy Darcy and Geraldine McGuire were the National President and National Secretary-Treasurer, respectively, of the Canadian Union of Public Employees, did not

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16 These two seats are affirmative action Diversity Vice-President positions for a racialized and an Aboriginal member. It seems like it was the existence of these two seats that prevented an all-white national board.
lead racialized trade union women to see their level of activism or issues being impacted (Davidson, 1998).

**Material issues that makes racial justice a strategic necessity**

The push by racialized workers to remove racist barriers to their involvement in the labour movement is not merely about getting elected or appointed to leadership positions within the existing structures. Racialized workers are equally concerned about the manner in which issues that impinge on their material interests and needs are being addressed (Gupta, 1997; Ng, 1995; Walker, 2006). Racism frames the employment experience of many racialized workers in the labour market and not just inside the trade unions. Recently there was a telling case of a systemic incident in the Ontario Public Service. It was a form of anti-African working class racism, which stigmatized a young, university-educated African man seeking employment with the provincial government as a ‘ghetto dude’. Nangwaya (2007) had the following to say in a letter to the editor of the *Toronto Star* on the direction of anti-racism initiatives in the workplace:

> The media’s tendency has been to individualize this racist employment drama. It is essential that we examine the structural employment barriers that inform the labour-market experience of racialized women and men.

The province should implement three things to address racism within the labour market. Firstly, it needs to introduce and pass comprehensive employment legislation. Secondly, it should restore the Anti-Racism Secretariat and give it the power and resources to investigate, monitor and enforce legislation that affects all areas of the experience of racialized people.
Lastly, Ontario's occupational health and safety legislation should be amended to include racial, sexual and psychological harassment as legitimate grounds on which workers may withdraw their labour until an appropriate official has intervened. Further, the legislation should be amended to require that employers have an obligation to enact policies and transparent complaints systems to deal with these types of harassment (p. AA5).

There are a number of developments in Canada that make a credible commitment to anti-racism by the labour movement central to its renewal as a force for defending and promoting the rights of the working class. In the 1990s, 70 percent of the growth in the national labour force came from immigration, and by 2011, 100 percent of the net increase will come from immigration (Dugale, 2007). By 2017, an estimated 20 percent of Canada’s population will be made up of racialized people (Belanger & Melafant, 2005). A majority of current immigrants entering Canada are racialized and they are increasingly going into sectors of the economy with jobs with the following features: non-unionized, governed by contract, precarious, self-employment and part-time (Cranford et al., 2006; Galabuzi, 2006). Since racialized workers are increasingly populating the non-unionized sectors of the labour force while making up a greater proportion of the national labour, this state of affairs will only weaken the already precarious economic and political clout of organized labour. Labour will have to undertake bold initiatives so as to send a strong signal to racialized and indigenous workers as well to the White working-class that it is committed to being an ally in the fight against systemic racism.
Employment equity is an issue that the labour movement needs to push at the bargaining table, because it could leave the employer with arbitrary power that affects job security and promotion of racialized workers. It could also affect the level of member activism in the affairs of the union. A report from a union’s task force on the status of women revealed that “For women with disabilities, Aboriginal women, and women of colour the employer tactics of division and retaliation were particularly acute” (CUPE, 2007b, p. 5). Racialized trade unionists are vulnerable to employer punishment because they are concentrated at the bottom of the job classifications system which is compounded by the power of the employer to decide the latter’s economic security and advancement (Allison, 1998; CUPE, 2007b).

However, trade unions have the opportunity to prioritize and bargain employment equity plans into the collective agreement. Employment equity legislation would help facilitate the reduction or removal of many undue employment barriers to racialized people and other equity-seeking groups access to certain categories of employment. Yet the bargaining table may be used as a route to cultivate an employment equity workplace culture. The employer and the union are the ones who ultimately decide the content of the employment contract, outside things that are enshrined in law. Recently there have been stories in the newspapers about the impending retirement of workers in jobs classifications in which racialized workers are underrepresented, as well as their limited presence in the boardrooms of public, private and non-profit organizations (Hamilton, 2008; Javed, 2008; Maloney, 2008). This state of affairs simply amplifies the potential role of the union as a catalyst and a force for change. For example, the City of Toronto is likely to lose 25 percent of its workforce to retirement in the next seven years and “about
40 per cent of firefighter and tradespeople, and 55 per cent of senior managers have retirement dates coming up by 2015” (Moloney, 2008, p. A8). The City’s workforce is heavily unionized and this departure of some many White workers is an excellent opportunity for the unions and the “City’s leadership to develop and implement a credible employment equity plan” (Nangwaya, 2008, p. AA7).

In 2003, 31 percent of White workers enjoyed the benefits of a collective agreement, but only 22 percent of their racialized sisters and brothers were so covered (Chung 2005). This huge racial unionization gap is problematic for the labour movement because racialized (and Aboriginal) workers are driving the growth in the labour force. Jackson (2002) found that 40 percent of non-unionized racialized workers as opposed to 25 percent of other workers favoured joining a union (2002). In 2003, a Vector Poll found that 54 percent of non-union racialized workers would “very or somewhat likely” join a union “if there were no grounds for fear of employer reprisals” and this was higher than the figures for their counterparts among young workers, women and men (Jackson, 2006, p. 65). However, if the house of labour targets workplace with significant racialized and Aboriginal workers, integrate a string anti-racism and anti-sexism components into its organizing plans, collaborate with community organizations, integrate Aboriginal and racialized communities in “all stages of development and implementation” of the organizing plans, employ organizers from the targeted communities, and involve racialized and aboriginal youth in training initiatives for labour organizers, the labour would likely increase the unionization rate of these two groups (Canadian Labour Congress, 1997, p. 16).
Racialized workers are very much aware of the benefits of unionization and want the labour movement to place this issue higher on its agenda. All things being equal, unionized workers are three and two times more likely to receive pension coverage from an employer-provided plan and medical or dental plan at work, respectively, than workers in non-unionized workplaces (Jackson, 2006). In 2003, unionized workers earned an average of $4.36 or 26.2 percent more in hourly wages than non-unionized workers (Jackson, 2006). Poverty is increasingly becoming a racialized phenomenon in Canada and particularly in its major metropolitan areas (Galabuzi, 2006). Racialized workers would be able to reduce the rate of poverty if they are able to access unionized jobs. In spite of the positive boost to the employment income of racialized workers in unions, there exists a wage gap between their earnings and that of non-racialized unionized workers (Cheung, 2005; Jackson, 2002, 2006).

A Canadian Labour Congress’s poll found that it is labour unions’ championing of social issues such as racial profiling, skyrocketing fees for university students, poverty, homelessness, public insurance and equity that would most inspire workers to join a union (Kidd, 2005). It appears that labour unions need to be pushed to embrace unionization of racialized workers as an equity and organizational survival imperative. Labour unions can be a positive force in advancing the material interests of racialized workers and their energy, experiential knowledge and commitment could contribute to union renewal.

**Concluding thoughts**

Race and racism have continued as organizing principles in the way that racialized trade unionists and Whites as the superordinate other experience life and
opportunities in the Canadian labour movement. Racialized members in labour organizations still contend with racism, albeit one a bit more sophisticated than the type faced from the 1870s to the 1960s. That state of affairs had much to do with the winds of change domestically and internationally. Racialized workers’ presence rapidly expanded with Canada’s movement away from a racist immigration system to one with the objective point system. The house of labour had to contend with the challenge to its exclusionary practices. It responded with policy statements, affirmative seats, equity committees, and other measures.

Racialized workers are no longer segregated in their own locals or unions. They are physically and, to a lesser extent, politically integrated into the structures of their unions. Unions segregated along the colour line have become relics of the past. However, a few racialized trade unionists have proposed the formation of such unions to maximize their increased presence in the labour market and to force the White entrenched leadership to concede an equal space at the table. Armstrong (2000) gives a sobering, state of equity in the union assessment that is worth citing at length:

Admittedly, in the 1990s, I was becoming impatient with the pace of change in my adopted country Canada. Even within my beloved trade union movement change was occurring at a snail’s pace. For Whites remained tight fisted about their control of Canada’s unions. Although we have made it to the shop floor, few of us graduated to the union office. Sadly, I had to publicly admit that, “within the union movement there’s no place for people like us.” This criticism transcended my friendships with Dennis McDermott, Buzz Hargrove, Gord Wilson and Bob White. Each in his own right had remained union stalwarts, and I could not remember a
time when having called on any of them for support that it was not given. But the reality is that I am moving on in years. And I wondered if the next generation of Black leaders would be able to pick up the phone when the need arose and call the successors to McDermott, Hargrove, Wilson and White. Had our efforts amounted to the perpetual forging of linkages and alliances that would ensure the future progress and protection of Canada’s working class, its poor and subjugated peoples? I remained unconvinced in the 1990s. Though many political and community leaders acknowledged that the time for healing of the wounds had come, few seemed ready to walk their talk. (p. 232-233)

The struggle for equity persists. However, when an optimist such as Bromley Armstrong can make the above comment on the status of the racial justice agenda in the labour movement, the equity agenda is in bad shape. Grizzle (1998) expresses his admiration for labour as the “most integrated” and racially and ethnically diverse institution in Canada, but he also highlights the need to include more “minorities into the leadership (p.109-110). However, Ng (1995) rightly points to the fact the mere presence of a few racialized union members in staff and leadership positions and the “acknowledgement” of racism is not indicative expressions of labour’s commitment to employment equity and the removal of the fundamental barriers that buttress white privilege and racial exclusion.
Chapter 3:  
Review of Literature on Critical Organizational Perspectives

In a milieu where the clear expression of ideas is not valued and terms are inappropriately used, where argumentation is disparaged as "aggressive" and, worse, "divisive," it becomes difficult to formulate ideas in the crucible of debate. Ideas grow and nurture best, in fact, not in the silence and controlled humidity of an ideological nursery, but in the tumult of dispute and mutual criticism.

-Murray Bookchin  

This chapter discusses equity and diversity discourse within critical organizational studies literature. I will be using the critical paradigm, a perspective that legitimizes my belief that research should be directed at aiding the struggle for freedom and engendering transformative possibilities (Schram, 2003). There are many perspectives located within this paradigm, but they would be in consensus on exercising the preferential option for the oppressed, and those seeking to create a just and free society. Knowing the world is just not enough for this philosophical outlook. The critical paradigm (or tendencies within it) advocates deep collaboration with participants in the research process, and negating or transforming the traditional researcher/research participant power relations.

Critical perspectives have provided theoretical perspectives on workplace or organizational diversity. Critical standpoints interrogate organizational power relations because they hold them to be facilitative of systems of inequity and subordination of subaltern groups (Allison, 1999). Emancipation and enlightenment are essential components of critical theory traditions (Nielsen, 1992). These perspectives work at revealing the machinations of societal as well as workplace alienation and privilege the activism of the subordinated other who seeks the negation of systems of domination
through organizational transformation (Allison, 1999.; Alvesson & Willmott, 1992). The development and deployment of knowledge is not an abstract or detached exercise for some researchers who integrate critical theoretical perspectives into their examination of life in organizations and the broader society. Critical theories’ advocates view the social sciences as tools for the “liberation of people from unnecessarily restrictive traditions, ideologies, assumptions, power relations, identity formations” which negate humanity’s need for self-actualization and self-determination (Alvesson & Willmott, 1992, p. 435).

The unmasking of the source of and interest behind the ideas (enlightenment) held by the marginalized as well as the superordinate agents in a society or organizations are vital to creating the facilitative condition for freedom. This task of “undressing” the infrastructure of unfreedom is not an easy or unproblematic task because the ideas, values and assumptions of the hegemony are embedded and have become naturalized within the being of the oppressed. According to Guess (1981):

They [the subalterns or those experiencing false consciousness] can’t be freed from their coercive social institutions as long as they retain the ideological world-picture which legitimizes them nor can they get rid of their ideological world-picture as long as their basic coercive social institutions render it immune to free discussion and criticism... (cited in Nielsen, 1992, p. 270)

Some racialized trade unionists have consciously or unconsciously bought into the system of workplace privileging or hierarchies and this approach serves to reinforce the structures of organizational (union and workplace) domination and weaken solidarity between the oppressed (Slamet, 2007). However, Ng (1995) cited a research participant’s observation of a change in the behaviour of racialized trade unionists:
Maybe that’s the biggest achievement of the anti-racism work in the unions so thus far. People who have been victimized, people who didn’t want to make waves, who didn’t want to accept that they were treated differently because they were black. Now they are fighting back. They are breaking the silence” (pp. 63-64).

However, an oppressed group’s recognition of a particular form of oppression and its deleterious effects on it does not necessarily amounts to a repudiation of the ‘ideological world-picture’ for others who are affected by a different system of injustice. Excluded groups within social justice organizations such as trade unions and other non-governmental organizations often display the tendency of not seeing the interconnectedness of domination, and its foundation in the idea of power-over others. An example of this failure to take an inclusive approach in integrating lesbians into the leadership of racialized women’s organization resulted in its decline or “killed the congress” in the words of a former organizational leader (Rebick, 2006, p. 139).

Racialized women trade unionists push for inclusion into the gender justice agenda have been met with statements such as “your time hasn’t come yet” by White trade union women (Leah, 1993, p. 158). An example of White women using the same power plays as their white male counterparts is reflected in an Ontario Public Service Employees Union racialized activist’s statement that “I was in a committee with left-wing women but got harassed, told I would be isolated, and was threatened when I decided to run for executive positions” (cited in Lukas & Persad, 2004, p. 45). She related her experience elsewhere of being unsuccessful in a bid for elected office on account of her push for employment equity and a general commitment to anti-racism in the union (Gupta, 1998).
Asserting voice, silencing and organizational co-optation

Arguing that “free discussion and criticism” are absent in liberal capitalist democracy and its attendant institutions might strike some observers as odd. The absence of overt coercive force may mask the reality that certain bodies are effectively denied voice. Organizational or societal silencing or the erasure of voice serves to militate against critical consciousness of the social, economic and political imperatives that produce social alienation around race, gender, class, Aboriginal status or other grounds for marginalization. hooks (1988) states:

Speaking out is not a simple gesture of freedom in a culture of domination. We are often deceived (yes, even those of us who have experienced domination) by the illusion of free speech, falsely believing that we can say whatever we wish in an atmosphere of openness. There would be no need to speak of the oppressed and exploited coming to voice, articulating and redefining reality, if there were not oppressive mechanisms of silencing, suppressing and censoring. Thinking we speak in a climate where freedom is valued, we are often shocked to find ourselves assaulted, our words devalued. It should be understood that the liberatory voice will necessarily confront, disturb, [and] demand that listeners even alter ways of hearing and being (p. 16).

The late poet, feminist and educator Audre Lorde points to the motive force behind the will to silence when she asserts that “In the cause of silence, each of us draws the face of her own fear – fear of contempt, of censure, or some judgment, or recognition, of challenge, of annihilation. But most of all, I think we fear the visibility without which we truly cannot live” (1984, p. 42). Lorde and hooks, as writers from critical traditions,
clearly point to the cost of being self-conscious of oppression and the possibility of freedom and publicly giving voice to that awareness. People from superordinate groups, especially those who consider themselves allies, have a responsibility to “speak” truth to power, because their vulnerability is not as great as those who are already marginalized (Walker, 2006).

To “speak” truth also embodies actions in favour of justice. A South Asian member from a Canadian Auto Workers Union’s local experienced political machinations such as isolation on a human rights committee to the abolition of a vice-president executive position after he successfully contested it. He singled out the tremendous support that he received from some White members and a White union sister in particular who returned from maternity leave to assist with his campaign for a member-at-large seat on the executive in the next election (Lukas & Persad, 2004). Acts of solidarity as evidenced in the preceding sentence are ways to speak truth to power by those who are relatively privileged. Solidarity by allies is meaningless if they are not willing to suffer or experience discomfort in order to do the morally and politically right thing. In the organizational context, the “risk and consequences are not the same for taking up the issue of racial oppression” for the racialized and White allies (Dei, 2008, p. 11). Further, it is necessary for allies, in this case White progressives to speak out and speak up when racism is implicated in a discourse or action in the union. A nurse shared her experience of nursing colleagues and union members supporting her claim in private of evidently “unfair treatment”, but shied away from solidaristic action out of concern for their economic livelihood (Modibo, 2004, p. 114). By being silent and refusing to make a
principled intervention White allies are affirming the “public myth that…the “special interest” groups are again carrying the chips on their shoulders” (Ng, 1995, p. 86).

However, although equity advocates need and call for the principled support of allies in the fight against systemic discrimination, they do not want their voice or initiative to be erased in the process. White allies may actively and openly advocate for the removal of overt structures of racist domination, but still remain infected, albeit unconsciously, with the social viewpoint that the racialized is just a darker reflection of them but drink from a common well of socio-cultural values and outlooks (Dei, 2008; hooks, 1988; Pence, 1982). The accusation of being dominated by allies may be very painful as well as challenging to continued collaborative work between the subordinate and superordinate parties. However, a just alliance is not possible without the acknowledgement of power differentials and the players taking the steps to create an egalitarian relationship.

The emancipatory ethic within critical theory privileges reason as a tool with which members of an organization or society may utilize in developing an awareness or pursuit of their interests, as well as to forge a path to emancipation (Alvesson & Willmott, 1992; Nielsen, 1992; Omanovic, 2006). The intervention of reason in the struggle for freedom is not sufficient, by itself. Organizational members’ process of socialization and cultural attributes may limit their receptivity to the emancipatory message and the requisite acts of social engagement (Alvesson & Willmott, 1992). hooks (1988) finds it difficult to engage privileged students in the university setting into being open to pedagogies aimed at education for critical consciousness and to reject their complicity in privileging the existing social order. hooks (1988) thinks that the
“oppressed or colonized” may be more responsive to an education for liberation approach than privileged students (p. 102). This assertion may be intuitively appealing, but may not be borne out by empirical evidence. Many members of the working-class as well as other subaltern people are exposed to critical information about the hegemony and that does not inspire mass oppositional commitment on their part.

The labour movement has an educational infrastructure through which it provides education in the practical business of operating locals and serving the needs of the membership (Davidson, 1998). Many union activists did not have the opportunity to access postsecondary education and, not unlike a participant in the research carried out by Davidson (1998), view the union and the labour as their “house of education” (p. 108). Most union educational programmes are not facilitative of an emancipatory ethic or critical thinking and essentially focus on pragmatic or “technical” matters such as grievances, bargaining, organizing or health and safety (Fletcher, Jr. & Gaspasin, 2008, p. 2006). It ought to be puzzling that a movement whose reason for existence is the defense of the working class does not integrate notions of alienation of labour and the irreconcilable nature of the interest of capital and labour throughout all of its educational courses. That is not the state of affairs in the house of labour and a number of labour educators see it as a challenge of “how to turn the raw experience of “classism” [in the workplace] into an analysis of class oppression” (Burke, et al., 2002, p. 20). Fletcher, Jr., & Gaspasin (2008) argue for a conceptual approach to basic labour education that emphasizes broad macro themes of the nature of capitalism, gender and race in workplace and society, globalization and its impact on workers, and the function of a labour
organization, among other issues. Emancipatory labour education would aid the
development of the conceptual or rational capacity of members.

Critical theory asserts that moral rationality “ought” to lead the subalterns to a
politics of self and societal transformation once they have attained critical consciousness
of oppression (Nielsen, 1992). Critical theory is in no way asserting or predicting that the
informed rational moral agent is going to act in any particular way (Nielsen, 1992). A
consciousness of oppression may not be sufficient for the moral being or the self-
conscious oppressed to overcome the oppressive material strictures of existing societies
(Nielsen, 1992). A consciousness of freedom or emancipation that offers a programme of
action on “how the oppressive power that dominates us can be broken and how a
different, more humane society and just world [can be brought into] into being and be
sustained” is essential to the potentiality of social transformation (Nielsen, 1992, p. 283).

Alvesson and Willmott (1992) also advance “critical self-reflection and associated
self-transformation” in the organizational and societal change project, but they go beyond
this to assert:

From this perspective [critical theory], emancipation is not to be equated with, or
reduced to piecemeal social engineering by a somewhat benevolent management.
Rather, its conception of the emancipatory project encompasses a much broader set
of issues that include the transformation gender relations, environmental husbandry,
the development of workplace democracy, and so forth (p. 434).

The call for emancipation in critical theories of organizational and societal systems of
domination cannot avoid the broad structural questions which will of necessity utilize the
personal and the non-macro spaces and experiences (hooks, 1984; Omanovic, 2006).
Critical labour education should “provide a framework for members to sort out their ideas and contribute to a consistent message while struggling to win over workers to the theory and practice of social justice unionism” (Fletcher, Jr., & Gaspasin, 2008, p. 207).

There are powerful forces at work in organizations or society that discourage people from going outside of or embracing thoughts and behaviour contrary to the dominant political consensus. Turrittin et al. (2002) point out the personal consequences (emotional, psychological, physical and financial stress or ill-health) suffered by racialized nurses who resisted organizational racism through the filing of grievances. Calliste (1996) notes the manner in which organizational reprisals are meted out in the hospital context: “In targeting and excessive monitoring, outspoken nurses of colour are singled out and subjected to differential treatment compared to white nurses (p. 370). Although the law may protect against retaliatory attacks from the employer or the organizational leaders when an employee or member files a grievance against racism, it did not detered the employer from doing so against a group of racialized nurses (Hagey, Choudhry, Guruge, Turrittin, Collins & Lee, 2001). Marie Clarke Walker (2006), Executive Vice-President of the Canadian labour Congress, asserts:

All of us can be part of the barriers – I know that at times I am part of the barriers. Silence, and the pressures that create that silence, contributes to the barrier and lack of representation that marginalized workers face…. We need to make sure that we all continue to act and speak up regardless of the cost of doing so…(p. 97).

Organizations, like the society of which they are a part, have their own ways to encourage or foster conformity to organizational norms. Assimilation is the time
honoured way of getting organizational members to “think and act alike” (Norton & Fox, 1997, p. 67).

Racialized members or others of subaltern status within organizations may feel compelled to adhere to the process of “cultural homogenization” or cultural imperialism that is in existence (Marable, 2002; Mills & Simmons, 1995, p. 210). As advocacy groups frame their message and work in ways that are acceptable to the institutional norms of governmental structure, the political class and media the process of co-optation starts to take effect as was/is the case with many women’s organizations in Canada. (Rebick & Roach, 1996) White (1993) also problematizes the challenge of institutionalization of women’s committees and conferences into the structural apparatus of unions that may temper or compromise their “capacity to raise questions and demand answers”. (p. 238) Within the labour movement it is quite revealing when one witnesses the divergent views that are expressed by some racialized trade unionists in their private and public deliberations on race. Privately, they will give a damning critique of racism and offer strong prescriptive solutions, but publicly they adhere as close as possible to the dominant anti-racism discourse.

This bi-polar rendering of racial trade union reality is also present in the way that race is dealt with by the racialized in the wider society. Literacy critic Nurse (2003) observes a similar occurrence in the manner in which African people speak on and about race in in-group context and when they are saying things for public consumption. The above state of affairs may be attributed to the structural imperative of cultural and political homogenization of equity-seeking groups or the organizationally marginalized.
Allison (1999) classifies as discriminatory organizations which promote a monocultural worldview, facilitate and promote racism, sexism and other systems of exclusion, and exclude differences. A labour movement researcher and activist highlights the price that is exacted for speaking and acting contrary to the ‘monocultural worldview’:

The issue of containment used by institutions as a tool to resist change is alive, raw and is at times expressed with outright nastiness. People have been labelled as radicals, “militants, or “trouble-makers” for simply voicing opposing views. The whispering campaign or mobilization to ostracize or exclude a “dissident’ is efficient and effective when the establishment feels threatened (Ng, 1995, p. 76).

The policing of dissent facilitates internalized oppression or subordination\textsuperscript{17} within the marginalized within an organization and it plays a critical part in maintaining the status quo. Kirchmeyer and McLellan (1991) made the following observation on organizational conformity and self-policing:

Members of ethnic and racial minorities may be the most vulnerable to organizational pressures to conform because they tend to have the least status […] For these minorities, conforming to corporate values can also mean denying their own culture, and even turning against others of their own category (cited in Mills & Simmons, 1995, p. 210).

The self-policing outcome of assimilation weakens solidarity between racialized organizational members and can be of material consequences in the requisite group action that is needed to deal with their inequitable access to resources and opportunities. A

\textsuperscript{17} Lopes and Thomas (2006) assert internalized subordination” Occurs when members of an oppressed social groups accepts the superior status of the dominant group and their own subordinate status as deserved, natural, and inevitable (p. 268).
recent study of workplace inequity and its impact on the prospect for unity and shared goals between racialized women in social justice organizations was revealing of the personal and political impact of the self-policing phenomenon. Slamet (2007) captures the following illuminating statement from Rosa, a research participant in her research on unionized social justice organizations: “some days even now, they’re so painful, especially the piece about women of colour and how sometimes we self-destruct, and how we’re handing it over, we’re making the oppressive thing happen” (p. 94). Yet Calliste (1996) documents a tremendous degree of workplace solidarity and resistance by a group of African Canadian nurses who were targeted, harassed and/or punished for defying the white and patriarchal constructs of racialized women submitting to unjust managerial authority.

I suspect that some cases of self-policing by organizational equity-seekers may come from a genuine belief and commitment that a pragmatic approach will bring more benefits than an open, confrontational assault on racial alienation in labour and other types of organizations. A number of equity-seeking trade unionists have expressed the view that to be perceived as someone who focuses exclusively on equity issues is likely to result in being treated as provincial or sectional labour activists. They engage in endeavours so as not to be “seen as a one issue-guy” (Moran, 2006, p. 70), or “linked anti-racism work with others such as health and safety” (cited in Lukas & Persad, 2004, p. 46), or in my case to link equity with the theme of union renewal or social(ist) trade

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18 Kumar & Schenk (2006) provide the flowing definition of union renewal: In general union renewal is seen as organizational change within unions in response to a fundamentally different external or internal; environment. It entails developing a culture of learning and change to undertake innovations and modifications in organizational structures, leadership, policies and practices, with a view to becoming a more effective organization for advancing membership interests (p. 30).
unionism. Unions are political organizations and political aspirants, especially equity-seekers, need to have a broad electoral platform so as to appeal to a wide constituency. However, I believe that many equity seekers who censure group members who have not taken a strong position on equity have fallen for the politically seductive but ultimately conservative axiom of “fake it ‘til you make it.” In other words, do not rock the proverbial boat until you are in a position of power. Yet it is vigorous grassroots activism and organizing of opinion and a programme of that will push forward an agenda change; not acquiescence to the mono-cultural and political worldview of the entrenched leadership (Brenner, 2005; Parker & Gruelle, 1999).

The expected norm on political discourse and behaviour may shape the equity-seekers’ position on organizational issues. While some of the power-holders in organizations may not be conscious of their practices that divide and rule or domesticate equity-seeking groups within their midst, the effect still serves to “legitimate and produce a raced, classed and[or] gendered hierarchy” (Slamet, 2007, p. 97). Often-times when a subaltern or a number of them raises questions about organizational inequity, it is almost always the case that some members within the excluded will become the public defenders of the status quo by enumerating its virtues (Lopes & Thomas, 2006; Slamet, 2007). In spite of the evidence of gendered structural barriers to women’s participation in union leadership and activism (Davidson, 1998; White, 1993), a trade union woman had this to say on the matter:

As a woman, I feel that we [women] have the power and tools at hand to utilize advancement in CUPE and all have the opportunity to use them. We are a “union”,
doesn’t that mean we are all equal? ...No one group should be singled out for any special treatment (CUPE, 2007a, p. 17).

This statement may have reflected the belief and understanding of the trade unionists. But it could be a part of the politically unhelpful posturing of not making the dominant forces being “privy to what we [the subalterns] really think” (Nurse, 2003, p. 19).

Kirchmeyer and McLellan (1991) problematize the situation of racialized people “denying their own culture” as a part of the deal in accepting majority values. This stress on culture here and elsewhere may mask the source of organizational conflict and may be pandering to a narrow notion of multiculturalism which is about music, dance, dress and food. (These elements are important in the proper context.) However, cultural difference is not so much the issue as the power differentials between the subordinate and the superordinate groups and the ways in which inequities are systemically ingrained within the structures of the organization and society (Lopes & Thomas, 2006). The problem with the “accepting diversity” approach to organizational inclusion is the obliviousness of these organizations to structural inequality while promoting a politics of difference or a “feel good”, non-critical multiculturalism, which still requires conformity to the existing organizational culture (Allison, 1999). The subalterns are symbolically, but not substantively represented. Labour unions have created racialized equity representative structures (the result of pressure from the equity-seekers), so as to address their erasure from visible positions of leadership and representation (Leah, 1993). However, these initiatives have not transformed the organizational culture. June Veecock, former Human Rights Director at the OFL, asserts that “there are a lot of rhetorical statements about
policies, but these are policies are not translated into action on the shop-floor” (cited in Leah, 1993, p. 163).

A number of racialized union activists in a research project (Leah, 1993) point to the challenges faced by their own in representing their interests once they are elected or appointed to responsible positions. Yvonne Bobb, an activist with the Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU), paints a clear picture of co-optation of racialized leaders by stating that “You can’t get on the floor and organize the rank and file. You are stopped dead… they become a part of the system….They may be very good people, but once they are up there, they’re isolated, they take on the strategies of the institution” (cited in Leah, 1993, p. 167-168). There is an unbelievable degree of pressure to be in accordance with the positions of the leadership by racialized trade unionists, as well as others who experience the “outsider-within” phenomenon (Lorde, 1984). A labour leader recently challenged my open critique of the hierarchical and anti-democratic leadership structure as a “hypocritical” one since I offered and was elected into that very structure. His argument was that I cannot “run with the hare and hunt with the hound.” I took his assertion as one that calls for conformity to the leadership process and to desist from not acting like I am not a member of the “team.”

The behaviour of the above-mentioned union leader is reflective of the defensive posturing of organizations when extant practices are called into question on grounds of fairness and organizational accountability to the stakeholders or membership. This denial of not living up to trade union justice ideals is particularly existentially troubling for social justice organizations whose raison d’être is the elimination of unfair and discriminatory practices in the wider society (Canadian Labour Congress, 1997; Slamet,
Ignorance of how to or fear about engaging in a critical discourse on equity and diversity is identified as a barrier to organizational change (Allison, 1999). The fear of backlash for championing equity issues is a barrier to participation in leadership because equity-seekers are “silenced and marginalized by these behaviours and attitude” (CUPE, 2007a, p. 14). Pollack (2006) highlights a classic example of silencing in a human rights case initiated by Boni Prokopetz, a firefighter, who experienced harassment and sexism on the job, while other trade unionists have shied away from public solidarity with the complainant out of fear that it could harm the interest of the fire fighters union. In equity struggles, it is much too easy for the leadership and many rank-and-file members to forget one of the cardinal trade union principles: “An injury to one is an injury to all.”

However, ignorance by dominant organizational stakeholders may simply be a case of unwitting “concealment” of an ideological device that maintains their existing power relations and material interests. Slamet (2007) categorizes this state of affairs as a position of innocence wherein the “European colonizer [or other dominant bodies] views him or herself as the bearer of universal truth and good, and thereby judges others by this “universal” standard, failing to recognize these as acts of domination” (p. 38). Trade unionists who defend the existing inequitable organizational arrangement of power and privilege share in this position of innocence.

Organizational (in)justice

Academic researchers have investigated the ineffectiveness of organizations to serve disenfranchised stakeholders such as racialized peoples, women, people with disabilities, Aboriginals, and members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, transgendered and queer (LGBTTQ) community. A case in point is nurses’ unions that
have participated in the racist exclusion and oppression of racialized members by ignoring the attitude and behaviour of members and the employer (Calliste, 1996; Turrittin et al., 2002). Yet the research results do not seem to have influenced decision-makers to affirmatively address existing barriers. Ben Johnson, an anti-racist labour activist, raised a similar critique in his submission to the CLC’s anti-racism task force by asserting that many unions have been “ignoring the many critical issues and recommendations which have been brought forward by Aboriginal Peoples and People of Colour with the support of union members, but have been sitting on the shelf for years…” (Canadian Labour Congress, 1997, p. 8). The principles behind the “Challenging Racism” task force report were explicit in declaring that it was not likely to gather dust on the shelves in union offices, because it “has always been conceived of as one very important piece in the process of building grassroots activism so that real change can happen (Canadian Labour Congress, 1997, p. 1). Yet if many unions’ performance on the implementation of the report’s recommendations was issued in a report card format, many of them would achieve indifferent or underwhelming outcomes.

A leisure and organizational change researcher, David Scott, asserts that the lack of efficacy of research endeavours in this area “stem from the fact that it [research] fails to effectively frame barriers and constraints in terms of everyday practices of how leisure service agencies [and other organizations] do business and practitioners’ beliefs about constituents” (2000, p. 133). The systems of domination in Western liberal-capitalist democracies have removed the overt and more easily indentified manifestations of racist oppression. It practises what is termed democratic racism, which is able to operate in a social and political environment that is ideologically committed to freedom equality and
justice but simultaneously display discriminatory and hostile attitude and action toward racialized minorities (Turrittin et al., 2002). Therefore, it is the hidden, subtle or “systemic properties of injustice that are embedded in everyday interaction” in organizations or workplaces that may be insidious and facilitative of alienation (Allison, 2000, p. 2-3). Many organizations have institutional barriers, which were unknowingly constructed, but there are others that are conscious of what they are doing (Allison, 1999; CUPE, 2007a; Davidson, 1998; Scott, 2000).

Many leaders in trade unions are quite conscious or ought to be aware of the role that unwritten electoral rules, oral transmission of critical information, and bylaws that enshrine automatic attendance at conventions and conference to the president and vice-presidents or members of the executive play in the perpetuation of their leadership (Davidson, 1998; CLC, 1997; CUPE, 2007a). At a minimum, it is a known fact that an endorsement by a departing labour leader makes a political aspirant’s path to the “throne” more likely than not (Fletcher, Jr., & Gaspasin, 2008). The unopposed accession of Ken Lewenza as the National President of the Canadian Auto Workers on September 6, 2008 was apparently secured by the backing of then National President Buzz Hargrove, the National Secretary-Treasurer Jim O’Neil, and the National Executive Board of the union. There were a number of other prospective candidates but when a person gets the proverbial tap on the shoulder by powerful organizational stakeholders, it tends to discourage other mainstream candidates.

Discourses on justice within capitalist societies tend to be embedded in a distributive framework that emphasizes access, acquisition and enjoyment of material symbols (Allison, 2000). A more expansive notion of societal or organizational justice
according to Young (1990) would include “learning and using satisfying and expansive skills in socially recognized settings; participating in forming and running institutions, and receiving recognition for such participation; playing and communicating with others, and expressing our experience, feelings and perspective on social life in contexts where others can listen” (cited in Allison, 2000, p. 2). This broad, inclusive and self-actualizing approach to doing the morally right thing is called the social justice paradigm and it aims at exploring, understanding and uncovering domination in organizational and other societal relations (Allison, 2000). Fletcher, Jr., & Gaspasin’s (2008) formulation of the idea of a social justice unionism for the labour movement in the United States is consistent with the organizational justice framework being advanced above. However, an explicit class struggle component is embedded in the heart of the social justice unionism proposition.

There are three analytical categories that constitute organizational justice (distributive justice, procedural justice and interactional justice), which are useful in delineating the contours and existence of fairness and impartiality in organizations. Anderson and Shinew (2003) identify distributive justice as being preoccupied with fairness in the allocation of organizational benefits or costs; procedural justice problematizes the process or procedure used in dispensing organizational outcomes or benefits; and interactional justice deals with how people view their treatment by the decision-makers. These forms of organizational justice work in concert with each other and are linked to desirable “attitudes and behaviours” in the workplace or organization (Anderson & Shinew, 2003, p. 230). When the preceding condition is operational, organizational members are more likely to contribute to organizational goals without
experiencing dissonance between professed fairness claims and actual behaviour, and as such will feel a greater degree of moral identification with organizational aims and objectives.

Racialized members expect their unions’ leadership to financial resources and decision-making power to fight racism and to take concrete measures that will remove systemic barriers and engender full participation in all areas of organizational life (Canadian Labour Congress, 1997). Some racialized and other equity-seeking trade unionists simply abstain from activism within the labour movement when words and deeds on equality for all are not in congruence. Yet the absence of a strong commitment to equity inspires other equity-seeking trade unionists to become active in the affairs of their unions (Davidson, 1998; Gordon, 2000; Leah, 1993; Lukas & Persad, 2004; Rebick, 2005). I decided to centre equity in my trade union work after attending an October 2006 national conference for CUPE’s university sector workers in Montreal, where less than ten of the over two hundred participants were racialized. However, one ought to raise caution about the extent to which organizational justice can be attained in most organizations that exist to promote dominant interests.

Members who are from subaltern groups may not expect ideal treatment from most organizations, but merely the best that can be expected in the current societal context. This assertion may find support in what is considered as an anti-discriminatory organization. Allison (1999) makes the claim that anti-discriminatory organizations are robustly committed to equity, inclusiveness, the removal of structural barriers and behaviour, and holds the community as a critical stakeholder in decision-making. It may
be difficult to find many organizations that would meet this ideal type, which promote and practice organizational justice and equity toward socially marginalized groups.

There are a number of features that are attendant with the experience of oppressed groups in organizations and the wider society. Under the rubric of the social justice paradigm, there are five conditions which are offered as being common to the superordinate: exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence (Allison, 2000). Exploitation is principally about economic relations, control and use of economic resources. The labour of the subaltern is a commodity that is usually assigned lower compensatory values, sequestered in secondary labour markets or impinged by structural inequalities that maintain the labour process. (Allison, 2000) The subalterns in organizations are quite cognizant of their economic precariousness. Their self-realization of economic vulnerability tends to shape their behaviour and propensity for compliance with the organizational rules as was found in a study on racialized nurses. (Calliste, 1996) This state of affairs was made clear by a young academic who declared to his activist-oriented students: “Listen young men and women, always remember that I have a mortgage to pay” (cited in Dei, 2008, p. 47) The students of this racialized faculty member were pushing him to take politically challenging positions within the academy. I remember being told by co-workers to not challenge the anti-democratic practices and unsound organizational direction of an employer in the United States. My colleagues kindly reminded me of my need to feed my children as well as the fact that I worked under a work permit that was renewed annually and with the consent of the employer.

The existence of an entity such as the good old boys’ network is an institutional tool that is deployed to maintain organizational inequity in the employment or promotion
of the exploited or to block needed institutional change (Anderson & Shinew, 2003; Davidson, 1998). In Canadian labour organizations, the current pattern of raced and gendered employment is, in part, maintained by a white and male network of those who have long been at the helm of organizational power. The lived experience and political commitments of most organizational leaders are factors that work against them getting “it” on the equity question (Allison, 1999, p. 91). In labour unions and other organizations, the perpetuation of exclusionary institutional policies and behaviours may be amplified by the absence of a diverse staff. This mono-cultural workforce has the effect of normalizing the “dominant groups’ perspectives and make invisible the viewpoints of the subordinate groups” (Scott, 2000, p. 135). Trade unions’ weak support for employment equity in the areas of hiring, promotion, training and retention counts among the institutional barriers (Slamet, 2007).

Marginalization and powerlessness tend to remove the oppressed from meaningful say in organizational decisions that affect them, as well as limiting access to opportunities that would positively impact their lives and scope for empowerment. Even in workplaces where the racialized are given responsible positions, they experience efforts to undermine their authority. A racialized immigrant nurse relates her story of being othered thus, “I found that when I worked as a staff nurse that I was okay, there was no problem. The minute I was put in charge…then I started to have problems. People wouldn’t listen to my orders. They would always find a way to criticize me” (cited in Turrittin, et al, 2002, p. 662). The continued struggle for voice by indigenous, women and racialized trade unionists for political leadership positions, staff employment
opportunities and to centre issues that are of concern on the agenda of labour is a reflection of their desire to eliminate their marginal status.

A “glass house” analogy may vividly capture the experience of marginalization in the organizational context. Bembry and Osborne (1992) state that a glass house:

…allow[s] us to look into the many compartments of the federal bureaucracy. Our glass house has glass ceilings, floors, and walls and a limited number of stairways – not always open – to each level. The extent to which entrances and stairways into and within this house are open, and to which career stairways are free of obstacles, determines the extent to which employees have access to the opportunities that exist. (p. 29).

Yet the marginalized and powerless within the organizational context are not mere passive receptacles of managerial or leaders’ control and domination. Some of them do find ways to push back and to resist their otherness, even in a profession such a nursing with its professional labour organizations, racialized women have to actively fight racist treatment from the employer and fellow union members (Calliste 1996; Hagey, et al., 2001; Turrittin, et al, 2002).

**Resistance in the organizational context**

It may be safe to say that as long as people are oppressed and exploited they will engage in acts of resistance to that state of affairs. The resistance of organizational actors is usually characterized as being directed at dominant, exploiting entities (Ashcraft, 2005). Some of the acts of resistance may not even appear as such to observers who may need to be more discerning of what the dominated are actually doing behind or outside of the glare of institutional power. However, many within the ranks of the dominated do
accommodate themselves to the prevailing oppressive order and eked out a space within the prevailing organizational or societal order. Resistance may appear foolhardy and risky so consent and domestication are seen as better pragmatic options within the hegemony. In the labour movement, as in other spaces, the racialized subalterns are confronted with the choice of resistance and co-optation. The examination of the materials below will assist us in illuminating the social drama that is organizational or societal resistance and consent.

There are four assumptions that undergird the idea of resistance: usually directed at forces of domination by the social other; marginalized peoples are distinct social fractions that do not wield hegemonic power; collective consciousness of group identity is essential to the subordinate group’s ability to resist; and “control and resistance are usually conceived as deeply entwined yet also relatively distinct practices” (Ashcraft, 2005, p. 70). By highlighting the proposition that hegemonic power is not wielded by dominated groups Ashcraft is not implying that some members within a specific dominated group do not share in or exercised hegemonic power in other social spaces. Actually, a social actor may execute social power over someone, while resisting it being exercised against her in another structural context (Ashcraft, 2005). It is only in her relations as a worker, woman or racialized person with the superordinate opposite that she does not exercise influence or control over the dominant levers of power.

Generally, the types of resistance that get most of the attention in workplace organizations and organization studies are work-to-rule, strikes, plant occupation, human rights complaints, lawsuits or class action suits, and grievances (Prasad & Prasad, 2000), because they “concentrated on the conscious, collective and observable behaviour of
workers” (Thomas & Davies, 2005). Traditionally, the activities that count as resistance are overt in nature and are assertion of power or agency aimed at challenging the legally-sanctioned of the bourgeoisie (Drummond, 1998). In workplaces where labour unions are present, the collective agreement between labour and capital recognizes the power of the latter’s hegemony over the labour process in that section that deals with “management rights.” When workers resist the control and power of the managers, management rights is really what the contestation is all about. In a membership-based organization such as a trade union open resistance may manifest itself in forms such as the formation of action caucuses, open letters to the leadership, public embarrassment of the organization, fight on the convention floor, convention resolutions and constitutional amendments, threat of decertification, the offering of oppositional electoral slates or candidates, by-law amendments and campaigns.

Overt resistance that involves the amassing of collective resources by the dominated is the type of action that is typically aimed at structural changes. In a context of open resistance, protagonists to the conflict are usually aware of their interests being at variance, and a zero-sum logic may come to define the relationship. The notion of resistance in organization has, in the past, been dominated by a managerialist orientation in the organizational change literature and a pro-worker tendency within labour process theory (Thomas & Davies, 2005). With the idea of resistance to change, employees are seen as the culprits who display behaviour that undermine the corporate or organizational attempt to retool or transform processes or objectives. Management tends to anticipate and characterize the supposed workers’ opposition to change as an unnatural and regressive state of affairs that must be overcome (Dent & Goldberg, 1999; Thomas &
Davies, 2005). Deng and Goldberg (1999) have argued that their research have found that people may resist “loss of status, loss of pay, or loss lost of comfort” or “the unknown, being dictated to, or management ideas that do not seem feasible from the employees’ standpoint”, but not change per se (p. 26). The problem usually exists with the manner in which change is executed or in the very structures of the organization (Dent & Goldberg, 1999). Further, the managerial discourse on resistance to change makes the unstated assumption that the interest of the enterprise or corporate machinery is consistent with that of the workers.

Given that the balance of power is on the side of the employer or capital, and full-blown resistance does not occur on a daily basis, workers or socially marginalized people may use other ways to register their displeasure with their subjugated condition. If the subalterns’ response is not outright rebellion or forms of dramatic confrontation, their push back may be lost on some observers or may appear inconsequential in the grand scheme of things (Prasad & Prasad, 2000; Zoller & Fairhurst, 2007). However, these more subterranean or “under-the-radar” initiatives may be the source or “trigger” behind the classical confrontational opposition to domination (Prasad & Prasad, 2000; Thomas & Davies, 2005). Employees or organizational actors’ response to managerial control over their work-life is not necessarily expressed in overt acts of rebellion and this condition has led some researchers to an “overtotalizing view of managerial power”, which loses sight of the myriad ways in which resistance occur (Fleming, 2005, p. 46). This type of resistance may be used to shield the workers against the devastating effects of the power at the disposal of the manager or the people with the power (Collinson, 2005). It is the fear of retaliation that has led the oppressed groups to say one thing in private about the
existential condition of their lived reality and a completely different discourse in their public utterances.

The examination of localized, covert acts of resistance and the meaning that the relevant actors ascribe to them is necessary, because the phenomenon of domination is experienced through feelings, perceptions and senses, which are bounded by specific historical and moment (Ashcraft, 2005). There have been developments in resistance discourse that make the claim that everyone who participates in “discursive activity engages control and resistance” (Ashcraft, 2005, p. 72). This state of affairs may be operational in the same organizational context. Covert forms of resistance are more individualized and hidden and are embedded in notions of subjectivities, identity politics and individually determined meaning (Collinson, 2005; Thomas & Davies, 2005). This individualized approach to resistance is problematic because structural transformation is the result of collective action and is not merely idiosyncratic. The preoccupation with covert, routinized resistance may be more reflective of the contemporary period where oppositional social movements are barely visible or active.

The subjectivity of the subalterns is necessary but not sufficient to wage struggle against the structures of domination. An emancipatory politics of engagement needs the more traditional forms of resistance. It is visible or overt instruments of struggles such as strikes, mass boycott, demonstrations and rallies, direct action and direct-nonviolent confrontation, open mobilization in communities and the streets, critical public education, alternative oppositional spaces, open political education classes and study groups and the preparation of cadre or organizers that are going to push the social emancipation agenda.
However, both overt and covert forms of resistance in member-based organizations are the focus of this research project. In the past, researchers from various Marxist traditions would privilege the class struggle at the point of production and the resultant labour alienation as the dominant focus of their interrogation of workplace domination and conflict (Putnam et al., 2005; Thomas & Davies, 2005). The identity of the agent of change (the worker) and the primary feature that distinguishes him was his class feature. This class identity and all resultant behaviour sensibilities were universalized and the appropriate or desirable ones for all groups who were not a part of the bourgeoisie. The struggle against capitalist hegemony and facilitating the requisite class consciousness within a working class, whose being was apparently not complicated by gender, race, sexual orientation or disability, held sway among leftist researchers before the advent of identity-based social movements in the 1960s and 1970s (Thomas & Davies, 2005).

Feminist researchers and activists gave voice to “the exploitative, power-laden processes that women are subject to in organizations. Identity surfaces as a discursive, masculine construct or means of discriminating against women and undermining their ability to resist” (Putnam et al., 2005, p. 8). Yet the nature of the framing of gender in its intervention into the discourse on organizational resistance was not an uncontested or non-controversial occurrence in the predominantly White societies of North America and Europe. Racialized women had to struggle (and still continue to do so) to get race included into how the oppression of women is framed and who are included within the category of women in the workplace and other organizations (Collins, 1991; Lorde, 1984; Sharpley-Whiting, 1998). I particularly highlight the continued struggle of racialized
women to have their interests and needs integrated into the analysis and plan of action for workplace resistance, because that is a part of the ongoing saga for an inclusive feminist’s or woman’s movement agenda.

The Canadian Union Public Employees had a national bargaining, women’s equality conference in February 2009, and it prioritized five key bargaining issues. Interestingly, employment equity was not among the privileged bargaining issues. Lopes and Thomas (2006) reflect on the reason for this type of omission:

In this situation, the White women raising questions about “equity” want to advance women’s influence in the union movement. They believe a focus on “equity” will distract from building that influence. But for them, “women in the union” are, by default, White women. In this way, White women challenge the “maleness” of the “default to White male,” but not its whiteness (p. 146).

Racist employment barriers are among the biggest impediments to racialized women breaking through the “steel door” to work in higher job classifications. White women have to deal with the less onerous glass ceiling, relatively speaking, which has slowed their movements in jobs that were once almost exclusively the preserves of White males. Rather than viewing these as companion issues, they are treated as different, with overcoming racial barriers as very secondary. In the above case employment equity for racialized and indigenous women was included in two of the priority areas after I sent two letters of protest to the National President and the Equality Branch of CUPE.

Resistance is a strong motif within the liberation discourse of the racialized other in the both the Global South and the Global North. The discourse of resistance has been situated at the level of national liberation as well as within the organizational context. For
national liberation, resistance may include the use of revolutionary violence to displace
colonial or neo-colonial rule and the “proof of success lies in the whole social structure
being changed from the bottom up” (Fanon, 1963, p. 35). Other subaltern leadership
voices, guided by material condition or the context of colonialism or philosophical
orientation, took a constitutional path (Nkrumah, 1957) or an approach to decolonization
that was sanctioned by the colonizer or imperial force. The condition of African people in
America has been likened to colonialism, because they represent a distinct people whose
economic, political, educational and social destiny is controlled by a White-controlled
hegemony (Carmichael & Hamilton, 1967; Mann, 1972). Since the focus of this research
is resistance and co-optation at the level of the organization, that will be my focus.

The multiplicity of organizations through which people negotiate, arrange or
pursue the fulfillment of their needs makes it inevitable that the resistance of the
racialized would take place over a broad front. Their struggle for justice occurs in
economic, social, political, administrative-governmental and cultural organizations.
Education is an instrument through which a society attempts to perpetuate itself by
inculcating into learners extant values which legitimate the current socio-economic and
political structures. In Canada, African Canadians have been presented an educational
experience that has served to devalue them in the curriculum, block academic attainment,
limit employment opportunities in the school system, and reproduce the racial/class
hierarchy (Brathwaite & James, 1996).

Cultural institutions have also played their part in maintaining the subject status of
the racialized. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, cultural racism in Canada was openly
challenged by racialized communities when cultural instruments such as the Barnes
Collection at the Art Gallery of Ontario, Into the Heart of Africa exhibit at the Royal Ontario Museum, the Miss Saigon and Show Boat mega-musical productions, The Writing Thru Race Conference and the struggle to win a Black music station in Toronto reflected the continued reality of racial exclusion (Butler, 2008; Philip, 1993; Tator et al., 1998). The struggle by racialized workers and communities was highlighted above and does not need to be addressed here. However, racialized people have actively asserted their right to self-determination and the affirmation of their humanity in a context of racial domination.

The organizational site that is privileged for the study of resistance is that of the workplace. Member-based organizations such as trade unions, which are sites of power, domination and control, barely show up on the organizational studies radar as location for the study of resistance. The economy and work are central to the functioning of society and the survival of individuals. The groups that strive for the preservation of capitalism and those that seek its demise or reform privilege activities or power relations in economic organizations such as the firm. For sure one may find partisans of social justice who interrogate life, power, voice and opportunities in member-based organization around gender (Rebick & Roach, 1996; Rebick, 2005) and race (Brand & Bhaggiyadatta, 1986; Collins, 1990).

Ferguson (1994) offers a material basis for the primacy of the workplace and the managerial outlook in organizational studies and its failure to shift or share its focus with subaltern constituencies within and outside the place of work:

Of course, knowledge gained from organizational theory itself explains why this shift in constituency is unlikely: organizations survive and flourish by becoming
resources for other organizations, and above the groups don’t have much to offer in the way of resources and opportunities. No revolving door to lucrative consulting positions; no research grants or postdoctoral funding; no cushy jobs in think tanks or policy institutes; no prestigious connexions to the wealthy and powerful (pp. 97-98).

The constituencies without the material wherewithal would “benefit from theoretical and empirical work on how to democratize an organization, how to equalize power and rewards, how to interact with bureaucracies without becoming one, and so forth” (Ferguson, 1994, p. 97). An organizational studies approach that centres people within all types of organizations would share the investigatory spotlight with subaltern stakeholders in member-based organizations. Union activist, Deirdre Gallagher, clearly gave voice to the power challenges within a member-based organizational context:

I kept working in the labour movement, though, because, fuck them, it was my movement as well as theirs. I wish we’d stood up to them more. Women talked about it among themselves and found ways to protect each other. We could rarely get jobs on staff, and if we did, we were treated like shit. There were some men, who were allies, but some of the stuff was just awful, and you couldn’t talk about it because you’d have to talk against the labour movement (cited in Rebick, 2005, p. 95).

The subalterns and their academic allies need to become the actors who document and disseminate their experiences, challenges and needs within organizations. In taking this approach, they will craft a research agenda that is geared toward emancipation and the privileging of their needs and interests. A subaltern-directed and/or executed research
agenda would constitute a form of resistance and the latter is not something that was overtly problematized in Ferguson’s articulation of voice for the oppressed along race, gender and class lines.

**Critical Race Theory and the Interrogation of Otherness**

Critical race theory is an oppositional discourse that problematizes race, racism and power in its interrogation of the location of racialized people in North America and other white dominated society (Aylward, 1999; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Critical Race Theory emerged out of the recognition of the race blind-spot by racialized legal scholars in the United States in Legal Liberalism with its notion of a law that is equally applicable to all, and Critical Legal Studies (CLS) that challenges the normative view of law and posits that it is a mere instrument that serves to maintain the current socio-economic and political arrangement in society (Aylward, 1999). Most proponents of Critical Race Theory credit a 1989 conference as the moment when this academic current became a self-conscious movement. However, Critical Race Theory traces its lineage to a number of sources which includes the civil rights movement, radical feminism, African American leadership icons such as W.E.B. Du Bois, Martin Luther King, Sojourner Truth, Fredrick Douglass and radical progressive theorists from Europe (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Critical Race Theory advocates’ scholastic work is guided by notions of “concern for redressing historic wrongs, as well as the insistence that legal and social theory have practical consequence” and bettering the social and economic condition of racialized people (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000, p. 5).

Critical Race Theory had spread beyond its birthplace in the law and spread in disciplines or sub-categories such as education, criminology, economics, women’s
studies, international relations, sociology and politics, among others. The impact of Critical Race Theory is manifested in legal studies, the courtroom, and critiques of policies on employment, welfare or social assistance, poverty and crime (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). However, one of the critiques made of Critical Race Theory is that it does not give sufficient attention to questions around material struggles:

Another internal critique raises the question of whether critical race theory takes adequate account of economic democracy. If the emerging issues of the new century are world trade, globalism, workers’ rights, and who shares in the new wealth created by the technology revolution, a movement that has no theory of race and class is apt to be seen as increasingly irrelevant (Delagado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 94-95).

It is rather instructive that Critical Race Theory is seen as increasingly preoccupied with matters that are largely ideational or ideological and not the materialist issues that are the focus of the civil rights and Black Liberation Movement that inspired it at its inception. There are two concepts within critical race theory and its off-shoot of critical racism feminism that will be examined because of their relevance to this research on organizational resistance and co-optation. These concepts are differential racialization and intersectionality and interest convergence.

**Differential racialization**

Racial hierarchy is a fundamental component of racism and was attendant with the colonization of the Americas and other areas of the Global South. The main differentiation is between Whites and the racialized others. However, since it is within the power of whiteness to define the other. One also finds a hierarchical ranking or
measurement of the racialized other’s based on their perceived closeness to whiteness. (Kim, 2004). A racial colour-code is well known within the African community in North America and it speaks to the racial hierarchy: if you’re white you’re alright; if you’re yellow, you’re mellow; if you’re brown, stick around, but if you are black, get back; and if you’re red, you’re already dead.

Kim (2004) categorizes the preceding racial construct as “complex positionality” with its ordered placement of the superordinate and subordinates (p. 345). There are variations in the number of colours that are listed in the color/racial schema, but the hierarchization and relative privileging of the racialized actors ought to be clear. The racial hierarchy is also at work in unionized workplace environment and labour organizations. An interviewee (an African Canadian woman) noted to Slamet (2007) that her Chinese colleagues are given greater courtesy, respect and opportunity for professional development than that accorded to her. In the racist experience of African Canadian nurses at North Western hospital in Toronto, the racial hierarchy was pronounced in the assignment of duties, pattern of disciplinary measures and professional development opportunities (Modibo, 2004).

The Canadian Labour Congress (1993) gives voice to the existence of differential racialization within the ranks of the racialized:

Those who believe that hierarchies have caused oppression that affect some groups more severely than others are often accused by other equality seeking groups of “ranking oppression.” But the fact remains that the victims of discrimination did not create the hierarchies; the existing power structure did.
That different groups experienced racism in different ways is a reality that
should be acknowledged (p. 3).

There is evident reluctance and discomfort by racialized trade unionists to speak about
the racial hierarchy and how it is used by the white hegemony to apportion material
benefits, divide and rule, and the way that some racialized bodies ‘collaborate’ in this
construct (Calliste, 1996; Leah, 1993; Modibo, 2004; Slamet, 2007). The assignment of
nurses to and their composition of the Chronic and Acute Units (least desired) and the
Intensive Care Units (most desired) in a hospital followed the colour-coded
hierarchization or racialized pecking order with a greater proportion of Whites nurses (55
percent) in the latter unit followed by the non-African racialized nurses (32 percent) and
Africans nurses (15 percent) following up the rear (Modibo, 2004). The preceding
workplace was one in which racialized nurses made up 56 percent of the work force, and
Africans constituted 30 percent of that demographic, but the latter group was the majority
in the Chronic and Acute Care Unit. (Modibo, 2004) The management was largely White
in this workplace (Calliste, 1996).

The colour code constructs aids the maintenance of white domination, because
potential allies within the oppressed may see their strategic association with each other as
being detrimental to their interests. In the Toronto of the 1980s and 1990s, the African
community and especially its men were the targets of the police and were
disproportionately killed by police bullets (Brand, 1994a; Clarke, 1992). Many other
racialized communities’ organizations did not stand in solidarity with the African
community. However, later on police improprieties in the form of questionable shootings
and racial and religious profiling visited the doorsteps of other racialized groups.
Racialized “biological” or social traits are constructed and ascribed differently so as to produce “good” and “bad” racialized people as is found in the United States with the notion of the “model minority” that is applied to Asian Americans (Kim, 2004, p. 347). Asian workers find themselves being classified as being “intelligent, diligent, family-oriented [...] more interested in economic mobility than political protest”, team-oriented, non-aggressive, co-operative, “sweet and compliant” (Kim, 2004, p. 348; Slamet, 2007, p. 98).

Conversely, African workers and people in general are negatively labelled as being lazy, aggressive, uncooperative, infantile, disagreeable and emotional (Calliste, 1996). These values that are assigned to the bodies of racialized labour are all designed to maintain its exploitation and prevent solidarity. It is the injurious impact of racial differentiation on the prospects for alliance or coalition building between racial below that detains my interest in this workplace or societal occurrence. Accommodation and resistance are implicated in racial differentiation based on my observation of events and activist posturing within the labour movement. Racial differentiation affects the manner in which affirmative action or employment equity programme may be implemented in the workplace. A critical understanding of how different groups are impacted by racism would facilitate a nuanced approach to designing employment equity plans, so as to create a level playing field within the ranks of the racialized (Leah, 1993; Modibo, 2004).

A racist incident took place within the Ontario provincial government which highlighted the complex positionality of the racialized within the political economy of the workplace. A contract employee, Aileen Siu, who happened to be an East Asian, inadvertently sent an email to an African prospective employee instead of to a co-worker
and she derisively referred to him as a “ghetto dude.” It was much too easy for many people to view that event as a conflict between racialized peoples and individualized the source of the racist comment. However, Ramsaroop and Nangwaya (2007) advise a different approach that examines the “employment structures and institutional practices and spotlighted the larger systemic and structural barriers that racialized peoples face” in the workplace or in accessing jobs (p. 11). An African Canadian community organization also highlighted the systemic forces at work:

No member of the Government of Ontario or cabinet has acknowledged the wide swath of anti-black racist bias that is deeply ingrained in the fabric of the public service. It is so ingrained that even a newly recruited staff to the Cabinet Office feel free and comfortable in sending e-mails describing black job applicants as ‘ghetto dudes’. …There are black people who are fighting from within the system today and many have paid a big price by not getting promotions, being isolated, dehumanized and spied upon. (Global Afrikan Congress, 2007, p. 14).

Yet there was no getting around the possibility that racial differentiation or complex positionality was a factor in the location of Aileen Sui in this position as a gate-keeper. Although she was racialized and a very junior staff, she still felt comfortable playing the role of a buffer and judged Evon Reid on the basis of his race, gender and class; a very potent mix for an African man is a racist, patriarchal capitalist society. However, it is the structure or the workplace environment that ought to be indicted for what transpired. This position in no way absolved her of individual responsibility, but a junior, contract staff would not likely have written what she did if the context was not permissive of anti-Black racism. Stan Goff (2000) shared his observation of a form of
anti-Black racism in the United States Special Forces that serves as a touchstone of bonding between different races and ethnic groups:

   In the world of Military Special Operations, I have seen Anti-Africanism functions as the litmus test for assimilation of non-WASP soldiers. Asians, Europeans, Jews, American Indians, Polynesians, Latinos, all can be legitimized in the eyes of their peers by sharing in the Special Ops contempt for African Americans. This is my experience. Black people have a special place in special operations – the bottom (p. 32).

Intersectionality

   This study is focused on the examination of racialized trade unionists’ resistance and accommodation to white hegemonic power within the labour movement. It is difficult to study race in the context of the labour movement and its constituent labour organizations without implicating gender, because all racial beings are deemed to have a gender (Leah 1989 & 1993). One’s gender location informs and affects one’s experience of social life. Racialized women in the United States and African American women in particular, have been the earliest proponents of the need to integrate race and/or class in the attempting to understand the condition of women in society (Davis, 1981; Giddings, 1984; Lemert & Bhan, 1998; Hull, Scott & Smith, 1982).

   Intersectionality directs our attention to the specific ways in which the interplay of different forms of oppression or social categories such as race gender ethnicity, age, immigrant status, sexual identity or orientation, aboriginal status, colour, disability/ability, and/or family status intersect or combine to uniquely situate an individual or group within a given political economy (Collins, 1991; Crenshaw, 1991;
Harris, 1989; Lorde, 1984; The Combahee River Collective, 1982). If woman is just a “woman” in a labour organization or elsewhere in Canadian society, she is likely to be White, able-bodied, heterosexual, native-born, class-privileged, at a minimum, and her gender would be the only thing that places her at a disadvantage in White, patriarchal, heterosexist and capitalist society. When affirmative action seats, staff training programmes, leadership development initiatives or conference are established for women and in the absences of a self-conscious attempt to negotiate the social terrain of difference or diversity, multiple-identity women may find that they have become outsiders-within; there but not really there.

Unfortunately in the labour movement and the wider society, white women’s experience becomes the model for understanding the exclusion of all women (Harris, 1990). In the 2008 federal election in Canada there was public discussion of the low representation of women in Parliament and gender was the only issue that was problematized. Nangwaya (2008) commended the newspaper columnist for exposing the “unacceptably low number of women in the recent federal cabinet and Parliament, as well as those being nominated for the upcoming election. However, along with the gender gap, there is also a racial gap” (p. AA5). The critical problem with discourses that look at women in politics, women in management, women in tenured faculty possession, women in the trades or women in elected union leadership positions is that the default position is to “think of the women under discussion as white” (Nangwaya, 2008, p. AA5). With the application of an intersectionality analysis, one would be able to look at all of the relevant issues that determine the experience of a particular woman or racialized person and more accurately determine the lived experience of the subject. Brand (1991) in her oral history
research project on working class African Canadian women highlights the application of an intersectionality framework:

Taking Black people’s history in Canada as a genderless group conflates all of Black history into the history of men doing things. Yet one may even go further and that because the ideology of masculinity also differs for Black men and white men, black history is defeminised as well to a lesser extent, extent demasculinised, but the outcome nevertheless subordinates the experiences of Black women in Canadian history to Black men. The sexual division of labour is subsumed into the racial division of labour and the “race” is conflated into and narrowed to its male members (p. 12).

Race and gender are the categories that were applied above but when sexual orientation, class and/or disability/ability is applied to a particular one may see the complexity that develops in reading a person’s social location or positionality in the social pecking order. It is for this reason that intersectionality will be critical to reading the resistance and co-optation drama within the labour movement.

**Concluding thoughts**

The work of resisting domination is a very complicated, nuanced and challenging one. It is usually the case that most of the leaders among the people who benefit from a particular form of oppression will use all available means to maintain the status quo. It is the duty of the oppressed, especially the politically advanced activists and organizers among them, as well as allies from within the dominant group, to lead the charge against the edifice of social alienation and exploitation. However, co-optation is a time-honoured way of blunting the resistance effort of those who are fighting for freedom and justice, as
is evident in the review of organizational resistance and silencing/accommodation above. Longer-tenured activists have told me that the offer of a union staff position (pays well and have great benefits) to the leading activists among equity-seekers is one of the instruments in the toolkit of the entrenched leadership. If they accept the job it neutralizes their influence within the membership and weakens the capacity of the equity-seekers to challenge the system. While people talk about job offer as a co-opting tactic, it is not something that is put in writing or communicated in an accessible way as a warning or heads-up to activists committed to organizational anti-racism activism.

The organizational resistance literature has a glaring weakness in its documentation and analysis on the state or nature of resistance in membership based organizations, such as trade unions. As was highlighted above, researchers in this area of scholarship tend to privilege the myriad of ways that workers push back overtly and covertly against the domination of capital in the workplace. In my search of the literature, there was no systematic or focused study on the resistance of racialized trade unionists and the manner in which they are co-opted by the entrenched White leadership. Fragmentary and suggestive pieces of narratives are scattered in a few articles, but nothing that constitute a major addition to the literature or an understanding of the phenomenon. At best the documentation exists in the vaunted oral culture of the labour movement, which one may be fortunate in being selected as a recipient to drink from this fount of knowledge.

Sometimes one may receive the equivalent of an “activist’s curveball” on the rendering or reflection on resistance efforts from the past. A longstanding racialized activist from the Ontario Public Service Employees Union once told me that the militant
way in which they approached the anti-racism struggle may have hurt the cause with the labour movement. This person claimed that they did not know how the process worked in order to get things done through it and that was a mistake. I was taken aback by the comment because the breakthroughs made in the hiring of racialized staff, the creation of affirmative action leadership seats, and forcing racism on the agenda came about as a result of an assertive form of activism. I do admit that once you are at the decision-making table, one does realize how to push initiatives through and the different players that need to be on board to get a project through the decision-making process. However, some of the existing organizational structures and processes are central to the mechanism through which exclusion occurs. A strict adherence to them may end up being a part of the process of accommodation. The comment by the previously-mentioned activist made it clear to me that the efficacy and what constitute resistance to racist domination ought to play a big role in this research project.

The following questions will guide this research project on the existential reality of racialized trade unionists in the Canadian labour movement and the discourse of resistance and accommodation that is generated by their subordinated status:

1) In what ways does racism shape the experience of racialized trade union members in the Canadian labour movement?

2) How do leaders and the structures within labour organizations render harmless the racial justice challenges of racialized trade unionists?

3) What countervailing resistance actions do racialized trade unionists use to promote racial justice in the Canadian labour movement?
4) In what ways are racialized trade union women’s experiences affected by gender and race oppression?

5) How are racialized trade union members experiencing labour education and what types of educational initiatives and programmes are needed to promote racial justice/anti-racism?
Chapter 4:
Methodological Approach

The most potent weapon in the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed.
-Steve Bantu Biko

“Steve Biko, I Write What I Like: A Selection of his Writings”, 1978

I used qualitative research tools to carry out this research project. Qualitative research has a particularly strong appeal to me because it does not pretend that the researcher is politically neutral and not invested in the research and its outcome (Peirce, 1995). I want this work and its results to be a weapon of struggle for human rights activists and others who view the labour movement as a potential instrument for social emancipation. Furthermore, a qualitative research approach allows for the research to be conducted in or as close to the natural settings of the phenomenon that is being studied, and as a critical researcher, I wanted to uncover how the research participants “make sense of their own experience” (Pierce, 1995, p. 571). Marshall’s and Rossman’s (1995) comment is quite instructive to the aim and sensibility that I bring to researching racialized women and men in the Canadian labour movement:

[Qualitative research] entails immersion in the everyday life of the setting chosen for study, values and seeks to discover participants’ perspectives on their worlds, views inquiry as an interactive process between the researcher and the participants, is both descriptive and analytic, and relies on people’s words and observable behavior as the primary data (p. 4).
Participants and Procedures

I employed a snowball technique to arrive at a purposive sample. I sought research participants through and from among existing contacts and colleagues within the labour movement. I also asked trade unionists and labour activists that I know to share the call for research participants with racialized trade unionists within their networks. The purpose of this outreach was to get prospective participants from labour organizations with which I have limited or no contact. I recruited seven interviewees from six trade unions and/or labour organizations. It is my belief that this approach enhanced the quality and depth of the perspectives on race, racism, resistance and co-optation.

I interviewed women and men trade unionists and included racialized trade unionists from African, South Asian and East Asian background. Given the small size of the sample, I am not able to make generalized conclusions or statements, but the findings may suggest the possibility for a more focused emphasis in certain areas of trade union resistance and accommodation. Research participants were selected from both private and public sector unions, with the latter generating most of the interviewees My sample included racialized trade unionists who are retired, members of union staff, as well as current and former members. I believe staff members, former members (non-retirees) and retirees have important insights to offer on race, racism and organizational resistance and co-optation.

The research participants are from the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), because over 54% of racialized people in Canada live in the province of Ontario and about 80% dwell in the Census Metropolitan Area (CMA) of Toronto (Ontario Ministry of Finance, 2008). Racialized trade unionists have strength in numbers in Ontario and that may affect the
manner in which they engage in organizational resistance or experience co-optation. Often-times racialized trade unionists have told me how lucky we (racialized people) are to be engaging in labour activism in Toronto, where there is a critical mass.

I entered this project with the intent of getting the research participants’ accounts, understanding, experiential knowledge and interpretation of racial exclusion, co-optation and resistance. The preceding expectations provided the grounds on which to access a rich account of their perspective and have efficaciously reflected the objectives of this research project. I emphasized the message that their experience and perspective was paramount to attaining the goals of the interview and the research project. This point was articulated while soliciting participation in this research project as well as at the onset of the interview and during its unfolding. I also offered the opportunity to research participants to review my interpretation and discussion of the data in my final draft of the thesis. This approach would allow for their feedback or commentary on my handling of the data. It is possible that my reading of “what was really going on” and “what was really being said” (Palys, 1997, p. 162) may be at variance with the interviewees.

The participants had the opportunity to ask me questions about the research and my perspective on the relevant issues. I believe that this approach was facilitative of “openness, engagement, intimacy, self-disclosure” (Palys, 1997) and comradeship between the participants and myself, as a researcher. I responded to the participants’ questions at the end of the interview, because I had a concern about the possibility of my opinion framing the information that they would share with me. Fortunately, I was able to share my outlook after the completion of each interview.
Data Collection

My primary data collection tool was effected through in-depth interviews supplemented by a questionnaire that solicits basic demographic information. As noted, the interview and the completion of questionnaire were conducted with seven racialized trade unionists. The face-to-face open-ended, semi-structured interviews allowed for a more personalized interaction with the participants, and provided me the opportunity to probe more deeply into responses that serve to uncover unanticipated revelation or move in unexpected direction (Palys, 1997). Some of the major themes that were explored in my interview schedule are: emergence as trade unionist and formative influence; outlook and understanding of racism; union solidarity; resistance experiences; and co-optation experiences or observations and the role of allies. The interview schedule contains the questions that guided my conversation with the participants and is represented as Appendix A. The nature of my research lends itself to direct, face-to-face interaction with the research participants. I administered a questionnaire, the details of which are found in Appendix B, and it supplied me with background information on the participants. I sought information on the participants’ social location because it could play a role in the way that they view race, racism, resistance and co-optation in the labour movement.

The small sample size allowed for speculation and not generalized conclusions on how participants’ early upbringing shaped the way that they engage in organizational resistance or their propensity for co-optation. In order for racialized trade unionists to speak to the way that power based on racial hegemony is used to control or co-opt their quest for racial justice, this type of interview accompanied by largely open-ended questions inspired a seemingly uninhibited account of their experiences. Further, the
greater likelihood of political identification with me as a researcher and a political leader and activist in the labour movement created a high level of participants’ comfort in “telling it like it is.” In my activist work, I have found that many trade unionists were willing to speak to me about their dissatisfaction with the agenda or political direction of the labour movement and what must be done. However, a number of them were more willing to do so if the conversation is off-the-record.

The examination of secondary and primary sources acquainted me with the discourse around equity for racialized men and women in the labour movement and the organizations that are being studied. An awareness and examination of historical events and processes allowed me to “verify the accuracy of statements about the past, to establish relationships, and to determine the direction of cause-effect relationships” (Marshall & Rossman, 1995, p. 90). Further, by examining reports and documents from official equity structures that represent racialized workers as well as texts (policy statements, speeches, convention resolutions and other written artifacts) issued by the labour organizations and/or activists, I was able to probe the phenomenon of resistance and co-optation or labour organizations’ double-speak on racial justice or anti-racism. I believe unpublished advocacy documents from dissidents or advocates may hold useful information on the discourse of resistance or control, and I was able to access these sources of information.

**Data Analysis**

I thoroughly familiarized myself with the contents of the transcribed interviews by doing multiple readings of them. This intense and prolonged engagement with the material facilitated the identification of the relevant categories and themes from which I
was able to make sense of the data at my disposal. I used the categories that emerged from the way that the participants framed the issues that they articulated. This “indigenous typologies” (Marshall & Rossman, 1995, p. 114) was quite useful in categorizing participants’ experiences or selection of themes. Since the participants came from different unions, the similarity of language used to describe the phenomenon of resistance and co-optation was an indication of the universality of experience within the labour movement.

I also generated categories that came from my reading and analysis of the data. Marshall and Rossman (1995) describe this approach as the “analyst-constructed typologies”, with the warning that the researcher could impose or infuse his meaning onto the ideas expressed by the interviewees (pp. 114-115). As a member of this movement, I have a sense of some of the things that goes on it so I do not believe that I misread the categories that emerged from the data.

**Ethical Considerations**

This research project sought to engender a liberatory discourse and is first and foremost aimed at enhancing the racialized trade unionists’ capacity to resist and shape the world in their own image and interest. Therefore, I deployed the highest level of ethics and ethical behaviour so as to prevent the commission of harm to the research participants. I am addressing the subject of power, domination and resistance in the labour movement and the identification of some participants could cause disagreeable outcomes. Further, I did not record the names of participants on the transcripts or on the recording of the interviews.
The participants were provided with a Consent Form (Appendix C) and were informed that they would not receive compensation for their participation in the research project. However, I highlighted the potential benefits that may be derived from their involvement such as contributing to the expansion of the labour studies literature on racialized trade unionists and organizational resistance, the documentation of anti-racism activism, and the development of a greater appreciation of the issues that are involved in workplace resistance and co-optation in the workplace. Further, the participants received an electronic copy of the finished thesis, so it may become a tool in their struggle to advance equity within their labour organizations. I made it clear that participation was on a voluntary basis and that they may refuse to answer any question as well as end the interview and discontinue their involvement in the study.

This study was not directed at a specific labour organization. I interviewed individuals in trade unions and other labour organizations. Therefore, I did not need the consent of a trade union or labour organization to carry out the interviews with their members or other stakeholders. No trade union (except when I am sharing my personal experience or observation) or other labour organizations (except for the labour federations and district councils) are identified by name in the information that is inserted into or referred to in the text. In cases where an interviewee referred to a union by name it was deleted or given a different name.

In interpreting the findings, it was difficult for me to not be a presence in this work. It comes from being invested in the outcome of the research and sharing my experience in the data provided by the interviewees. However, I questioned and maintained a stance of critical doubt about the explanations that came from my “reading” of the selected
categories. I utilized this approach until I was convinced that there is no other plausible way of explaining the data (Marshall & Rossman, 1995). Further, I relied on the concepts within critical theory, critical race theory and critical organizational studies to guide my interpretation of the data.

**Portraits of the Research Participants**

Abeje grew up in a union household and spent time as a child attending union meetings and other labour movement events. She works as a staffer in a labour organization and is of African racial background. Abeje has been a trade unionist for over five years and defined her political orientation as radical.

Singh is a trade unionist with over 20 years of experience in political roles in the labour movement and currently works full-time as a staff member in a labour union. He is a trade unionist of South Asian background and identifies his political orientation as a liberal/radical one. Singh came from a non-union household.

Kojo is from a trade union household and currently works in the public sector. He is a teacher and is a member of a teachers’ union. Kojo came from a household wherein there were members of the household who participated in progressive political organizations. He is of African ancestry and has been a trade union member for over four years. Kojo’s political orientation is socialist and he serves on the political action committee within his union.

Ling has been a trade unionist for over 25 years and is of East Asian background. She has worked on the staff side of the union divide during her tenure in the labour movement. Ling did not grow up in a trade union household. She identifies her political
orientation as a radical/socialist one, which includes a Marxist feminist approach to
gender oppression.

Dennis is of South Asian background and has been in the labour movement for
over nine years. He serves as the president of his local and is employed full-time in the
public sector. His involvement in political roles in the union spans over eight years.
Dennis was a member of a union household while growing up and aligned his political
orientation somewhere along the continuum between liberal and radical.

Ming is a young worker of East Asian background and has been in the labour
movement for over eight years, three of which were served in political positions in her
university local. She served on the bargaining committee and volunteered as a steward.
At the time of the interview, she had just completed a stint in a private sector-based trade
union and then employed as a staffer in a labour organization. None of the adult members
in her household held a union membership during her childhood years.

Modupe was a trade union member for twenty-five years and is of African racial
background. His tenure in the labour movement includes political roles as a member and
a union staffer. Modupe characterized his political orientation as both Pan-Africanist and
socialist. He did not grow up in a union household.
Chapter 5: 
Results: Part 1

The State of the Union on Race, Co-optation and Business as Usual

Sadly, proximity to power has an unsurprising ability to mutate a politician’s spinal cord into bright yellow jelly.

- Tariq Ali

Overview

This chapter focuses on the mechanism or machinery of racial oppression and co-optation of racial trade unionists. The findings within the chapter respond to the following questions:

- In what ways does racism shape the experience of racialized trade union members in the Canadian labour movement?
- How do leaders of labour organizations render harmless the racial justice challenges of racialized trade unionists?

The chapter presents the views of the research participants and researcher on how we see race in the union and society; what motivates our activism; elections and domestication; the problematic of staff jobs; convention and racial politics; and politics of racialized constituency groups.

Perspectives on Race and Racism

The participants in this research project made some instructive comments on race and racism in the labour movement and the wider society. I liberally use their words to give voice to their perspectives on this issue. Modupe, a trade unionist and community
activist of longstanding, speaks to the existence of racism as a social construct or a ‘legal fiction’:

Racism for sure is a legal fiction, just as a business is a legal fiction, but when we think in terms of our own social reality, we can never stop fighting against racists. And we have to understand that the fact that somebody, or we shouldn’t say somebody, but basically if I have a disagreement with somebody I can defend myself against that particular person. But the fact of the matter is that here comes this institutionalized phenomenon that basically from the day I was born trying to box me into a particular situation, a particular neighbourhood, particular vocation and my association. Those kinds of things. That is what this particular legal fiction does to us.

Modupe asserts that racism is a system of oppression that intersects with capitalism, but the former has an ideological dimension, which may manifest itself in insidious forms in the body and mind of the oppressed:

And suddenly some of us can, of course, escape, but a whole lot of us, and when we think in terms of a whole lot of us, we think, for example, of something that happened recently, the passing of this young, vibrant Michael Jackson, the man disfigured himself to become what? An American. Because they’re telling him that he is an American. But he understood something: “They may say that I’m an American, but I don’t have those rights like those other Americans”. So they may say “I was afflicted with a particular disease and what I’m doing basically is lightening out myself and what have you so that I don’t look like whatever… but the very thing that he’s frightened against is the very thing he becomes.
Racism has a way of warping the self-consciousness of some racialized people in a way that is akin to the “Stockholm Syndrome”, whereby a hostage starts sympathizing with his or her kidnapper. Modupe asserts that the racializing system must be challenged:

Because who was it that said “If you don’t defeat it, then you’re going to become like it”. So you have to constantly struggle against it. You can’t stop struggling against racism. There are no such things as post-race. It’s an absolute… not only is it an absolute fiction, but it is an absolute lie and, of course, it is there to further and buttress capitalism. That’s basically what it is. It’s basically to buttress capitalism.

When Modupe speaks of being “American” he is inferring that that particular identity is synonymous with being White and all the social considerations or advantages that come with that form of privileging.

Lang, a trade unionist with experience on the membership and staff sides of the labour movement, is quite clear on the structural nature of racism:

I guess the way I talk about it is obviously there’s racism on the individual level, personal belief, but more importantly, the need to situate racism in terms of structures, how organizations are run, how things are neutral or quote-unquote fair in how they are run and what decisions are made actually have disproportionately negative impact on some groups as opposed to others. So racism again, individual, yes, individual behaviours need to be challenged, but always important to link that to the structural issues.

Racism or instances of it in concrete situations may be baffling or ambiguous to the people who experience this type of oppressive behaviour. Singh, who is a trade unionist
with over two decades of labour movement experience, had this to say about being conscious of racist discriminatory action:

Well within the trade union movement, I think if you want to deal with racial discrimination, first of all, the understanding of what racial discrimination is really crucial. But often you don’t even understand, you don’t even know that discrimination is happening. You have to identify it. And you may be a victim of discrimination or racism, or you may not be, and it may be a very frivolous case where you might claim that you are being discriminated or you’re being racially harassed or you are being victimized. So the understanding of what exactly racial discrimination or discrimination or racism means is very important.

Singh highlights a serious problem with the ability of some people to identify racism. Workers or racialized trade unionists who are victimized by racism may feel that they were wronged on account of their ethnicity or race, but may find it hard to name it or to prove what is taking place. It is quite possible that some racialized trade unionists who are victimized by racism may be using a strategy of feigning ignorance as a coping mechanism to deal with personal and structural racism. In my interactions with racialized trade unionists, many of them have a clear analysis of racism when they are dealing with me in private. Yet some of them being cognizant of white power in the labour movement act like they are oblivious to its existential and operational manifestations or pretend to be in agreement with the pace of change or the nature of the declaration of support by the White leadership.

Kojo also frames racism as a systemic or structural issue:
Well, for me racism, systemic racism continues to be the most detrimental problem that’s affecting children from many ethnic communities here in Canada and around the world. And for me racism extends right back from the slave trade that created this, and the church said that people from Africa had no souls so we were chattel, we were less than human, and I believe that that has metamorphosized itself into current society so that although people acknowledge that yes, Black people are human beings, they still don’t quite see us as their equal. And so I believe that racism must actually… because people are born not acknowledging that we are equal, we have to put in place rules, regulations and laws to balance that off.

Kojo also acknowledges that personal aspect of racism: [people] “don’t see us as their equal”. Often-times when some anti-racists interrogate structural racism, little acknowledgement is given to personal racist beliefs and actions.

Dennis had to handle a workplace conflict where the accusation of racism was apparent in a dispute, but was nevertheless difficult to address:

So for me, even listening and understanding her and I asked people…am I missing what racism is, because this would kill me? I fought for race, I know what racism is. I experience racism. And then for me to say to somebody “That’s not racism” who am I? And that’s why we put all of this to an investigator to say have the investigator decide that. And the investigator came back and said “No, none of these examples are racialized”. So when you’re asking what is racism, I mean I can tell you clearly racism is when someone writes KKK on your house, that’s racism, no doubt about it. But if I’m a person of colour and my supervisor is telling me
about my work performance and I can look at my white workers and say “They don’t get the same” I can perceive that in a number of ways.

The subtleness of everyday racism or its normalcy may be lost on the victimized, the perpetrator and the general observer. From Dennis’s comments below, many people have a difficult time coming to terms with institutional racism:

A person coming from the outside can say “Well, the difference is that those white workers get all their case notes done 24 hours after they’re done” just as an example, but “You’re missing case notes”. This is why the supervisor is talking with you. This is why they’re putting forward a plan. But sometimes people don’t see that, and I think sometimes we look at other avenues… “You know what, maybe there’s racism”. I’m not saying… it’s not always that, I’m not saying it shouldn’t be that.

Dennis recalls his high-school experience of racially differential treatment or expectations from his teacher and the challenge in identifying instances of structural or personal racism:

I mean I remember in my elementary school when my teachers used to go, the white students, and I wasn’t a very good student until I went to university, but they told me to go to basic and general streams in high school, and for the white students who had similar marks to me they said “You need to try harder. You can do better…”, you know what I mean….I wanted the advanced stream, but even to say something like that, could that be racism [on the part of the teacher]?

The expression of overt racism such as “someone writes KKK on your house” is not difficult to understand. However, as Dennis indicates, racism can be subtle and
embedded in institutional systems, and therefore more challenging to identify and remedy. It can be difficult to determine whether racist precepts singly or in association with other factors account for differential treatment experienced as a racialized trade unionist.

Singh shares a personal story of not being initially aware of racist barriers to his advancement through the job classifications in his workplace:

But yes, there were certain barriers, even when there were training opportunities; I was the last person who was asked, although I may have been the most senior person. I found that people who just started recently were seeing more promotions than I was getting within my local at City Hall. I was Planner 1 for the longest time. There were drafting technicians or planning technicians who were coming in and going into Planner 2 positions. And it never dawned on me that this was all, because of racism. I was totally blind before I really got involved in union activism and got involved with the affirmative action program and began to understand what my rights were.

Singh interrogates the awareness and consciousness of some racialized trade unionists’ in understanding and acting on racism:

Quite often we people – I hate to say that – our communities, we do not know what our rights are. And I have quite often talked to people that “You know, basic rights, human rights, you need to understand that”. And people have told me “You’re full of sh*t”. This is our own people telling me “You’re full of sh*t.” I am the one who has faced racism, I see racism, I live racism, I sleep racism, and you are asking me
what racism is? I’m not asking you that. I’m just asking you to understand what your rights are and learn to fight for your rights”.

The failure to recognize racism may have a lot to do with it not being explicit and having morphed into a phenomenon that is covert as result of governmental anti-discrimination statutes and policies. As mentioned above, some racialized trade unionists may also be avoiding a direct confrontation with racism by acting like they are not aware of the issue that stands before them. The situation of some racialized trade unionists not being aware of their rights may be the result of labour education that does not integrate anti-racism components throughout all relevant courses offered by trade union organizations.

Ling believes that anti-racism advocacy and activism in the labour movement have resulted in quantitative changes but not necessarily a qualitative transformation:

I think we’ve gone through… if I’m sort of looking back on where we’ve been and where we’re now, I would say yes there is progression, but that the progress has also been a bit… the more it changed, the more it stayed the same. There’s progress in terms of numbers, in terms of representation, but then it was also created forcefully, it created a bit of an illusion that people, particularly workers of colour, are seeing through as well. The reason I’m saying it is I think back in the early ‘80s, or in the late ‘70s the racism was so blatant and so visible that you can name it.

People know it, and it became a rallying point.

The blatant form that racism took in the 1970s made it easier to mobilize and organize people opposition. Ling’s assertion that “there is progression” is a factor in tempering militancy, because some racialized trade unionists hope that by “playing the game” through the use of the conventional structures and processes they are more likely to attain
substantive anti-racist outcome. The “illusion” to which Ling alluded is something that some racialized activists are indeed “seeing through,” but that realization is not inspiring an anti-racism organizational “insurgency”.

Abeje, a trade unionist who grew up in a union household and literally in the labour movement, concurs that equity is not a not a priority for organized labour’s leadership:

…So talking about equity and anti-oppression and anything along those lines, social justice, was not a priority for the leadership of the labour movement, and specifically coming from the CLC, and the OFL, nationally and here in Ontario, there is basically next to no leadership in terms of guiding the labour movement in a direction. It was really frustrating that affiliates worked in silos, and the leadership all looked the same, and they basically agreed with each other in terms of how the CLC would run itself and not too much push from the affiliates to the CLC to take leadership and be that national organization that could put Canada on the map and start to build solidarity with other international trade unions and really create a social justice movement of worker’s rights and human rights. It’s just not there. It doesn’t do that.

Abeje attributes to racism the labour movement’s conformity to bread-and-butter trade unionism:

And I always question why affiliates do what they do with an organization that really doesn’t lead the labour movement the way that it should. So I would say that the major roadblock was racism….not accepting anything other than the norm and the norm being people [with the] that belief that the labour movement would
protect bread and butter collective bargaining rights, not so much equity or social justice or anything outside of that realm.

Labour unions certainly speak out on issues beyond bargaining, health and safety, grievances, worker compensation and wages, but they are not central to the leadership’s and many members’ understanding of the reason for the existence of the union. Yet the non-bread and butter issues such as racism, social justice, and solidarity with other international trade unions are central issues to large sections of the membership. The absence of a working-class-informed multi-oppression ideology and a defined anti-imperialist consciousness prevent what Abeje deems as “next to no leadership in terms of guiding the labour movement in a [socially transformative] direction.”

There is a sense of frustration by racialized trade unionists and racialized people in the community on not being able to count on organized labour on substantive remedies to racist exclusion in the labour market. Ling had this to say on employment equity and the positioning of organized labour during the early years of the 1990s in Ontario:

And I think it’s through that process you also recognize that despite all the good intentions that labour movements have on the notion that an injury to one is injury to all…but when it comes down to [the] implementation [of employment equity programs], when it comes down to the fact that it's going to be law, then the issue of seniority becomes…the most sacred piece that you can’t touch. So in that sense how do you implement employment equity in that narrow context and interpretation? Seniority became a real challenge. So that was a period… it was a compromise. And I think part of the delay was in the NDP government implementing or pushing forward the Employment Equity legislation was the
pushback from organized labour…. It was quite revealing then, recognizing that when push comes to shove, as members of racialized groups, you can’t count on organized labour to go to the very end with you because at the end of the day, we were using the argument that “All these years there’s always been an affirmative action program for white males. If we have employment equity, it would benefit your daughters as well. Why can’t you see that?”

The current state of affairs with respect to organized labour tepid commitment to anti-racist measures breeds a sort of resignation to the “inevitability” of business as usual or the permanency of the status quo. Ling’s long tenure in the labour movement has given her the platform from an experiential standpoint to measure organized labour reliability and track record on fighting institutional racism:

Part of the reason why I’m saying the more things change the more things stay the same, you see the same type of resistance towards recognizing migrant labour as workers. That’s their status, right because we only talk about health and safety: Don’t talk to me about status when we’re trying to get our own young people to get apprenticeship programs. There are some things that are much more entrenched than having awareness programs, having leadership programs would change people’s mindset.

Ling’s critique of the “good intentions” suggests that organized labour lacks commitment to racial justice.

The need to create the semblance of unity or solidarity within the ranks of organized labour may cause some unions to sweep racist allegations or complaints or at least to deal with the accused in a less than satisfactory manner in the eyes of the
Modupe raised a concern that may resonate with many racialized trade unionists on the question of the handling of allegations of racism:

The trade union’s organization because they a) take no position, or, in fact make a backdoor deal. You say to them backdoor deals don’t work. All it does is reinforce the position of these bigots. That’s what it does. And sooner or later you just escalate the problem. And they feel they had a grip. They get away with it. So they just escalate the situation. Like bring garbage to your home and what have you and all these kinds of things. Dropping off threats at your home and all those kind of things. I mean a lot of people can’t take it. They go berserk over it.

Modupe’s reference to some racialized trade unionists going “berserk” may account for some of them being turned off from union activism after experience behaviour that contradicts the trade unions’ mantra that “An injury to one is an injury to all.”

The process used to elect the leadership may be another moment for racialized members to witness the inconsistency of ideals and actions. The behaviour of the labour movement’s leaders is motivated by perpetuating themselves in power, as Abeje asserts:

So I think some of the major roadblocks and how it’s manifested is that the labour movement is grasping for power right now because we all know that membership is on decline and so they are taking advantage of opportunities without thinking about who they’re negatively impacting and a lot of times it seems to be community groups of colour, young people, women, etc. and it’s also manifested itself in just plain, old racism when you look at the leadership at the top of the labour movement, very little has changed from when we first started. It’s all middle-aged, white male faces. Maybe you’ll get a token woman here or there
Ming provides an instructive perspective on how some trade union activists approach struggles within their own movement’s structures:

If we’re dealing with labour movement in terms of our own union structures, again with those elected positions, I think activists always have the struggle in terms of trying to be… we try to be very abrupt. We can be very abrupt….I think we often become trade unionists because we get angry very quickly, and so it’s easy for us to get involved, not easy, but we get involved with trade movements because we’re like “F*ck this. F*ck my boss. My boss is an arrogant, racist piece of sh*t”. And then there’s a spark and we can mobilize people around that anger. Then that type of behavior, when you put it into the labour movement context, exact same behavior that got you quote-unquote into the movement, is the exact same behavior that will get you kicked out of the movement. Right! Because whatever you want to call it, there are strengths and weaknesses, but maybe we react.

The activist temperament, Ming believes, makes it challenging to work within the trade union framework:

We’re not good at placating people; otherwise we would have placated our bosses. We’re now in the labour movement and we’re supposed to play a different game, and I don’t think everybody can play that game. Nothing is good or bad, but I think it’s very difficult to do that. So dealing with racism or whatever, I think it’s very hard for activists to work within that structure. It’s important to do it, but it’s very difficult because we’re all supposed to be in solidarity together. Very difficult!

Dennis’s approach differs from Lang’s and emphasizes compromise to a greater extent:
And the last thing is to remain focused. So if I have an agenda for change and my agenda is A, B and C, and that’s what I’m focused on getting, at the end of the day when it comes out, when you identify your allies, when you’re working with your allies, your allies might say “Ah, we don’t agree with B, maybe just A and C,” and then those that resist you, to say “You know what? I’m not agreeing with C. Maybe if we put a C.23 I would agree with it” and you have to change it. Otherwise if you are resistant in your own standards, again, this is just me personally in my experience, you are resistant in your own stand, then you’re no different from those resistant people. And not that I believe change needs to be compromise, but change is a slow process if you want it to be sustainable change. And it must come with all people together, or at least… not all, but the majority of people. It needs to shift a mindset in order for it to be real, you know what I mean?

The idea or reality that “change is a slow process” can be unbearable for many activists and incongruent with their desire for immediate and substantive remedies to age-old problems. Dennis adds: “Not that I believe change needs to be compromise”. For many of the participants, the best strategy is not always clear; therefore, it may be difficult for them to determine when they are compromising or playing old guard politics.

**Elections do not ensure democracy and inclusion**

Abeje shares her perspective on the issues that contribute to the union space being open to control by the entrenched leaders:

You either have those that really do want to move up and see where the control or power lies, and so they go with what those people say, the Old Boys Club. They’ll do what they’re told to move up and then you have the rank and file
members that want to be part of a union but don’t necessarily want to move up, and so they’re almost apathetic. So they’ll be just kind of “Oh, how are you voting?” and they just go with the majority and don’t really have a political analysis to what it means to vote and don’t really do a lot of research or check out people’s political campaigns or platforms when they’re running for an elected position, but just rather vote for the name that they know.

According to Abeje, the leaders are supreme pragmatists with an acute understanding of the members’ political consciousness and expectations:

And so I think the leadership knows that, unfortunately, a lot of the membership is pretty apathetic and they use that to their benefit. I mean basically they feel like all they have to do is make a platform that either sounds exciting or resonates to the majority of members, and usually that has to do with collective bargaining like wages or getting more support for a specific training that people are interested in that year and they know that they can secure votes and so they do that. And they don’t start talking about radical issues that the general membership may not be talking about or thinking about every day, issues like equity and oppression and globalization and all those kinds of things. Unfortunately, [for] the average member it’s just not on their radar and I think that it’s a powerful tool that elected leaders know that they can use apathy to secure votes.

The representative political structures in the labour movement include political spaces for resistance by racialized trade members. These political spaces are used for articulating political demands around social exclusion. However, these political spaces are anomalous in the labour structure, as Abeje suggests:
…[W]hen I actually started working for the labour movement, I realized that it, unfortunately, followed suit of the playground school bullies, that there was, again, a “normal” look and perspective and beliefs of a trade unionist and that maybe those beliefs didn’t necessarily fit in line with mine, because when I started working formally for the labour movement I realized that there was not a lot of space for young people, for people of colour, for people with disabilities, for people from different sexual orientations, etc., and it was a pretty closed club. So sure, on paper, everybody’s welcome and there’s power in numbers and there’s strength in solidarity, but you need to look a certain way, be a certain age, believe in a certain politics, not rock the boat too much, and there wasn’t a lot of space for some of what I believe is a real political analysis of what’s going on in the economy and basically screwing over workers. And it was really frustrating to me that even after being in the labour movement for a few years, seeing it replicate itself so then even when there was a few strides made here and there, the people that filled those token spots, even though they may look like me, which wasn’t the normal look of the labour movement, they spoke just like the folks I was so frustrated with. And in a lot of cases what I saw was even when there was specific spots made available, say, for you [as a young worker], you would have young, white men who would fill those spots and talk the same crap that the leaders were talking and not making any political gains around issues that weren’t really clear bread and butter issues.

Abeje’s comment about the “normal look and perspective and beliefs” and equity-seekers in elected or appointed positions speaking the “same crap” as the established leaders is a good example of how the political system reproduces itself. From Abeje’s perspective,
elected representatives of equity-seekers need to fit an organizational or personality mould to become acceptable. Based on my experience and observation, many elected racialized people or other equity-seekers who read from the script of the old guard are merely tolerated and not held in high esteem by their patrons. I recall a vice-president of a national union telling me about the case of a racialized woman who is seen as “toady” of that leader. This elected racialized woman read “verbatim” from a note that the White leader gave her to report on her activities as a representative of racialized workers. In private, he was very disdainful of her perceived shallowness, lack of independent thought and tendency to end up on the winning side, but in public was very effusive with his praises of her “contribution.” Other white leaders, and some racialized members see this racialized woman as an automatic vote for any side of the issue that is favoured by this provincial leader.

There are certain factors within the political environment that lead to conformity by racialized political actors, as Ling, with her many years of participation in the labour movement, indicates:

It’s not different from a provincial or municipal election… you’re beholden to so many people for delivering this vote you have to toe a certain line to garner support. You have to speak a different way to seem to be a builder, right. So in that sense you lose some of the essence of why you want to do it. And once you get into those positions, you are so insulated that you actually have a… I think for all leaders they have a false sense of reality. So part of it is it’s me against you, or if you’re not with me you’re against me. That type of mentality.
The need to build a broad base and to not alienate a broad swath of the membership tends to inspire a conservative and middling take on critical issues. That sense of being “beholden to so many people” is something that racialized candidates have to take into consideration when they run for office. They are already a numerical minority in many locals and definitely at national and provincial conventions. But that “false sense of reality” that Ling attributes to being “insulated” (and here she is most likely referring to elections in provincial or national leadership structures) comes from elected leaders not interacting regularly with the membership. The absence of regular interaction and collaboration with racialized elected or appointed leaders and their racialized constituency makes it much easier for them to be vulnerable to the influence of the old guard.

Ling elaborates on the dilemma facing racialized trade unionists who get elected to office, especially in affirmative action seats, and the challenge when the constituency groups’ attempt to impose accountability on these leaders:

It's also a very lonely position…. [you] turn around, who can you trust? Who can you count on, right? And it’s in those positions then that’s why… pragmatism might be a bad word for you, but sometimes it’s also pragmatism to also count your troops. Unless we can out-organize them, you end up having to take some compromise position to maintain your presence. So the compromising becomes how much and whether you sold your own integrity. If you’ve done that, then I don’t think anyone should be there.
Political isolation and the absence of the requisite resources of power seem to fuel the default position of pragmatism to which Ling referred. The need for compromise may find its origin, in part, in the relative powerlessness of racialized leaders and activists.

Ling also suggests that racialized trade union members may need to be a bit more exacting with respect to the criteria for leadership or questioning of the motivation for political office by aspirants for elected positions:

And I think sometimes we don’t ask our own [racialized] leaders enough hard questions and why did they want that position in the first place? Why are they attempting to represent us? What do they have to show, rather than we say “This is a women of colour, that’s great, or a man of colour, that’s great” without seeing [that]… people are people and there are other ulterior motives or self-interest, and if those self-interests get in the way of lifting everyone up, then we should say “No”. And we haven’t… and instead of maybe, that’s how that whole sense that there’s so few of us up there, so why are we being so high? So it becomes [laughs] a compassion issue. And at times that can be a trap too, a trap of compassion. When you’re trying to build a bigger tent, then how low do you go for the lowest common denominator? So do you lift the bar higher and then people start saying “Why I’m not letting them in?” “Why I’m not part of the club?”

The need to “take some compromise position” is likely to be a permanent state of being if one is a progressive or radical trade unionist. In organizational situations where an agenda of change is not a major directive force behind the leadership, racialized or progressive trade unionists may sell their integrity to give the impression that they have
some semblance of influence or power. I walked away from an activist training project for which I developed the proposal and stick-handled it through the decision-making process on the CUPE Ontario executive board. It was approved by the board. Yet when it came time to work out the details within the context of a working group of different organizational stakeholders, the word “pragmatic” and not being too “ideological” started to permeate the approach to this educational project. I had no desire to be a part of a business as usual approach to labour education. It was probably for that same reason that my application to deliver CUPE’s labour education courses as a member-facilitator was rejected. If one doesn’t compromise with the system, there are gate-keeping mechanisms in the labour bureaucracy to remove the incongruous weeds from the garden of conformity.

There are organization-related cultural imperatives that block or socialize racialized members as well as other equity-seekers into the norms of the labour movement’s political culture. Modupe has a high degree of familiarity with the way that power is exercised so as to induce conformity, social isolation or marginalization:

We are always, racialized people, some of us are always looking for validation. And we’re not looking to the organization per se, for validation; we’re looking to the European members for validation. We’re looking to a European member, in fact, to direct our participation in leadership and all these kinds of things and what have you. And, of course, when you tell people that the reason why…when they ask “Why you go to every meeting? Why you stay for the whole meeting, and why are you putting in more time?” And you say the reason why you do it is you’re representing a group of people that are catching hell at the particular location, and
you, in fact, want those people to see that you are a) giving them the benefit of
sending you to represent them and you’re also making the kinds of connections that
we can grow the kind of solidarity, as opposed to have, some particular person or
persons validating or writing memos or having some side retreat or barbecue or
what have you.

Modupe interrogates the practice of some racialized people seeking validation
from White leaders. Based on my experience and observation, the affirmation that is
sought from the people with power has a lot to do with the material rewards that come
with such servile and accommodating behaviour. These dominant White actors are
conduits to staff jobs, committee memberships, foreign travels, attendance at convention
and conferences and intervention in conflicts with the employer or others. Recently, a
racialized sister that represents racialized people in an affirmative action seat voted in
favour of a motion at an executive board meeting to support a White male candidate from
the old guard against a radical, left-wing and anti-racist racialized brother. She represents
that racialized brother and is not in need of the votes of White members to get elected.

However, it is quite possible that if this racialized woman had voted to support the
person that is a part of her constituency, she would be punished in her local through a
campaign to defeat her in the next election. The validation that she sought through her
less than courageous action had a lot to do with who holds power. There is a racialized
brother in her local who put himself forward for the Treasurer position, when it was
understood that it was a White brother’s turn to get it. He was defeated for that seat, but
he was punished through the loss of the health and safety executive position that he held.
Apparently, he was doing a good job in that portfolio, but there are unwritten rules on electoral politics that must not be violated.

There is a tendency in union or community activist circles to joke that the meeting before the meeting is the real space in which decisions are made. It is very much a part of the culture of the labour movement to use the bar and other White (male) dominated spaces to conduct organizational business. Modupe interrogates this practice and exposes its role in the infrastructure of exclusion as well as the tendency for some racialized members to do the electoral calculus and determine the members to whom they should ingratiate themselves, if they want to get elected:

Basically most of those decisions too are made in the bars. So if you’re not into going to the bars, you get left out. And if you’re not into going to barbecues, you get left out. If you’re not into skipping meetings and they go do things at the legion, you get left out. …so that’s basically what they do. So basically after a while after you get validated by these groups or groups of people, you forget solidarity. “Why should I depend on my racialized group? They’re not here anyway. Most of the membership here are non-racialized, so they’re the ones voting for me, and Brother Ajamu, thank you, but no thanks, because basically you can’t get me elected”….

Usually the workers sit there and are extremely disgruntled, but don’t know how to speak up either. So here comes Brother Ajamu who says “Sisters and Brothers, you might not be used to this particular type of union participation, but I think that we, in fact, should dedicate ourselves to our membership, especially those on the floor. The electoral calculus of who will vote for whom is a powerful, conforming force. The same thing goes for the socializing role of the bar culture in indicating appropriate
political behaviour for racialized union members who want to be a part of powerful blocs or influential networks.

The expectation within the labour movement culture for activists or aspirants to leadership positions to work their way up through the ranks serves to socialize and inculcate would-be dissidents into the culture of the union. Singh reveals the process for getting into senior leadership; it is a slow process, and not one designed for new members or activists to quickly move up the ladder:

You have to pass certain stages. You have to be a leader at your local level and then you become a leader at your division level. That’s how the progression of national leadership works if you want to get to that. Because if you see, that’s where our leaders at the national level have come from the local to the division, from the division to the national. If you don’t even get elected at the local level, forget about going to division level. And absolutely there’s no hope at the national level. You’re not just going to run at the national convention, because you’re not even going to be a delegate at the national convention for that matter, unless you have some standing at the local or the division level. So I keep telling people that you need to make sure that you get involved at the local, the local division, and once you get to the division level, don’t forget that your roots are at the local level.

Women have experienced, more so in the past than today, gendered elected positions. The Recording Secretary or Membership Secretary is still likely to be occupied by women. Singh experienced the racialization of leadership notion at the level of expectation and actual placement in seemingly lower-ranked executive seats:
As a member, initially when I wasn’t involved in the union as actively, even when I started to hold some positions I still saw barriers because the mindset was to maintain a white leadership at all times and “Give him a token position. Give him a social secretary’s position so he can look after organizing this or organizing that”. But to me I never took any position as a token position. I wanted to do something good in that and create credibility in that also and not keep on putting myself down all the time thinking that this was a token position that they gave me. So I always excelled in everything, but there were barriers. People were not happy. Even when elections used to take place they were not happy that I’m running for these positions. They always tried to kind of have people run against me or whatever. But I defeated them at their game. Maybe that’s why I was successful.

Modupe referred above to the validation that some racialized people seek from their White trade union sisters and brothers. But the self-interrogation by racialized members over why they are being politically validated and the meaning behind it is a reality for many office-seekers or holders. Dennis shared his thoughts on this state of affairs:

…I never fought for me; it was always to change the world for others and for people that come behind us, if you will. It’s always like we have to let people know the agenda is not you. It’s also when you’re pushing certain issues and wonder how your white colleagues will take this. Will they be onboard? Will they not be onboard? Will they see me as the ‘other’? Will I still be having drinks with them? I kind of stopped doing that, because of the type of colleagues that I kept close. I know where they stand and I know what they support. The closer people I know
and then their acquaintances are the ones who I kind of go “I wonder how they’re going to vote?” That’s one piece.

Further, a sort of political existential questioning takes place at a deeper level on the question of participation in executive leadership. Dennis shares an additional consideration or dilemma in this regard:

The other piece is every time I’m elected I always keep in the back of my mind “Am I elected because of, or am I supported because of, or am I respected because of who I am and what I say and what I stand for? Or does that also have to do with my skin colour and filling a quota, as you will?" As a racialized person in a position of leadership I hope it’s because of who I am and because… I always wonder. Is it that, or is it because it would be good to have a person of colour on the board?

A non-racialized person may be puzzled by Dennis’s comments, but he recognizes the hesitation by racialized trade unionists when advancing problematic issues:

And again, the other piece is that coming from a racialized forefront where… you know this thing is that before when I’d be the only person of colour and the youngest person, I’d always kind of watched what I say, and kind of how I say it – who’s shoes am I stepping on? Making sure what I say is framed in a way that the point comes across in a way that doesn’t offend or make people defensive. And I guess because the majority of the committee, in fact, almost all of the committees that I’ve sat on and have been a leader on, I’ve always been one of the only, if not the only person of colour, and I’d say 9 times out of 10, always the youngest person on that. So it’s now, if you will, it’s coming to my norm of how to do things.
The pressure of being a racialized minority in an at-large elected seat also contributes to elected leaders who think twice about being identified with racial justice issues, as Ming suggests:

….obviously if you’re put into an equity position, I think that we would assume you would also be constantly pushing an anti-racist notion of everything. Whereas what if you were just elected as a racialized person in a general seat, but you have racialized people support you, what accountability is there to have an anti-racism analysis all the time? I think it also depends on the position the person is filling, although hopefully we would want someone to push an anti-racism analysis all the time. That’s a hard one.

White leaders’ and members’ comfort level with certain racialized archetypes can determine the type of racialized people who are supported for elected or appointed positions. Dennis compares the styles of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X, to illustrate the point:

I mean obviously if you have those affirmative action positions you’re going to hire the Martin Luther King guy over the Malcolm X guy. You don’t want the guy that’s always in your face always saying “You need to change, change, change”. You’d rather have the Martin Luther King guy that says “You know that things need to change, but how about us working together?” And they’re very different personalities. And so when I see leadership positions and people approaching me for leadership positions, they’ll vote for a Martin Luther King kind of personality over a Malcolm X personality for a number of reasons. Fear, they’re afraid of that change. Exposure, they’re afraid of the Malcolm X exposing what’s really
happening out there. And obviously the Martin Luther King guy is easier swayed, easier changed, easier to work with, won’t be in your face, more diplomatic, if you will. That’s what I’ve seen over the years.

It is more than just the Malcolm X personality that it is at stake here. I have always found it instructive in CUPE that the racialized activists who do international solidarity activism are among some of the most politically informed and radical members in the union. However, while they can publicly denounce racism against indigenous peoples in Canada, Palestine and Latin America, they are invariably silent on racist exclusion inside the union or openly challenging the leadership. One activist said that he does not do so because it may cause him to lose support from the president who took a progressive position on Palestine. Their silence on racism in the union was also motivated by the application of the “stick” against their pet international solidarity projects.

Even the Martin Luther King personality may not save a racialized person who occupies a powerful office, for example, as Modupe states in reference to Fred Upshaw, an African labour leader who led a major union in Ontario:

I admired Fred Upshaw because he was born in Nova Scotia, one of his parents was white too, so he probably had an understanding of how to be better at playing the game than I did. So he wasn’t as impatient as I was. But in the end the same patience did him in. What I learned from that is there was no need for any union member to have a liberal attitude towards working for the membership or working for your organization. It’s better to be radical every time because, trust me, if you creep, they will stomp over you some more, so it’s better if you basically go out fighting.
Although unions have system of democracy, it can also be used to buttress the power of the longer tenured White members and exclude and punish outsiders. Modupe shares his assessment of how Fred Upshaw was done in through the political apparatus:

The reason why Fred died [politically]...He had basically the temerity or the fortitude to wait out [James] Clancy ...and became the president of the Ontario Public Service [Employees] Union. Of course, he didn’t last very long, because of basically what I said, he filled a particular vacuum, and once they saw the opportunity to get rid of Fred they seized it and viciously and get rid of him.

Modupe highlights the norm of aspirants to political office waiting for their turn to succeed incumbents. Fred benefited from being next in line to succeed Clancy. The latter was elected as president of National Union of Public and General Employees, before the end of his term in his Ontario-based union. Being elected is not enough. One of the supreme goals of political longevity seems to be the building of a base so as to stay elected and avoid a short tenure at the helm of organizational leadership, power and influence.

There is a racialized brother that I thought of as an ally, because of his understanding of how racism structures the experience of racialized power in the union and the political prescriptions that he offers in private conversations. But he is politically cautious and actually ingratiates himself to the people in power in his union and a provincial labour federation. He was recently in a fight for his political life or to maintain his position as the president in a local that is largely racialized. According to him a White union leader that he nominated for an officer position in the provincial political arm of his union was orchestrating an attempt by a White woman to defeat him in an election.
The lesson for him and others is to maintain their integrity and fight the principled war for the values that they believe are right and just.

Kojo raised the troublesome issue of the requisite level of resources possessed by racialized trade unionists to participate in electoral campaigns:

And you need to have resources, right. So although they say there’s only X amount you’re allowed to spend on electoral campaigns, there are those that have the money already, and then there are those who don’t have the money. So their electoral campaigns are going to be different. It comes down to having a network of people... people of colour don’t necessarily have the same type of networks that their European counterparts have to help them do the campaign to get into the positions of power.

While money is important to the financing of electoral campaigns for racialized candidates, it is the “networks that their European counterparts have” that are critical to mounting successful or highly competitive bids for political office. In fact, it is the networks that will bring forth the financial wherewithal. It is important for dissidents or equity-seekers to have a network of supporters and allies, because they will provide advice, perspective, insight, resources and even encourage others with their network to politically support you. I have benefited from the people who have thrown their support behind my electoral bids and that comes from within and outside of the labour movement.

Yet limited availability of money and access to personal or organizational networks of prospective delegates may compromise a racialized member’s access to senior or midlevel leadership roles in labour movement political organizations. In 2008, a
racialized member of a very large trade union local asked for its endorsement and a
donation of $500. This member wanted to make a run for a seat on the executive board of
the provincial political wing of her union. Although the vote was relatively close, the
defeat of the motion was quite instructive. This same local had earlier approved a
$10,000 donation for the election campaigns of three White leaders as well as endorsed
their electoral bids. These men were not members of the local. These men were
competing for re-election to different seats at the same convention. The local’s executive
committee could have submitted an executive motion to support the racialized member’s
request for a donation and an endorsement. But it chose to have it come from the floor.
That course of action was an indication of the executive committee’s position on the
motion. The motion for a $10,000 donation came to the general membership as an
executive motion.

The racialized candidate lost her bid to get onto the board of her provincial labour
organization. There were thirteen candidates who competed for six seats and the person
in question got the ninth most votes. She probably would have won a seat if her local had
gotten behind her. It probably had the largest delegation at the convention; over twenty
delegates. This racialized woman was very vocal on anti-racism issues in her local. Some
people in her local also perceived her as being more “community-oriented” than “labour-
oriented.” This local had the resources, but it made no pretense about how it felt about
racialized candidates who do not toe the organizational line.

**Staff and elected positions in unions as sites of co-optation**

Union staff members and officer positions are well-paid members of the working-
class (veritable labour aristocrats). Some union positions have starting salaries in the mid-
$70,000 to the mid-$80,000 and come with excellent benefits packages. Given the exclusionary employment barriers for racialized people in the Canadian labour market, a staff job in a trade union is an excellent option. In the financial year that ended in 2009, the gross salary of the president of CUPE Ontario was over $100,000 with over $15,000 in expenses. That type of pay may encourage a lot of trade unionists to “behave” and await their turn in the leadership queue. A racialized trade unionist once told me that a staff job was offered to this person on being elected to the executive board of her national union. She believed that it had to do with the leadership not wanting her at the table. But the employment security was too much to turn down and working at the level of the staff was another arena in which to fight for racial justice.

These lucrative jobs are carrots that may have conformity-inducing effects, as Ling asserts:

…the fact that we [racialized trade unionists] now have the top ranking leaders… they also know that with the demographic shift they need to be seen as making the right move and part of that making the right move is having enough leaders that are represented at the right spots enough, but never out of control: quote-unquote. So you have two [racialized persons] at the top-ranking CLC, one at the OFL level….. But much as these folks are in these positions, they are also reined in. They are not accorded with the same scope or the same discretionary power as previously elected white men. So if you take a look at how Marie has been treated, basically being banished from the CLC head office [in Ottawa] and having an office in Toronto and with a very limited portfolio, and we all know it, as workers of colour
activists, but Marie hasn’t raised it publicly, and we haven’t shaken the tree. We haven’t taken it on and said “You’re doing it to one of us and it can’t be tolerated”.

Ling has raised an important point about the lack of relative power and prestige that accompanies the “top ranking” seats or offices that are now occupied by racialized trade unionists in labour federations or centrals. As these officers positions become accessible to racialized people and women, the power may have shifted elsewhere. For example, if we look at the high participation of women in the parliaments of the Nordic countries (Sweden, Denmark, Norway and Finland) as signs of progress, we could be “off-side” in that interpretation. We would get a more balanced view of those societies by examining the gender composition of the tripartite political bodies that are comprised of the state, organized labour and capitalist businesses. The real power is likely located at the helm of the national or provincial unions where the leaders have access to a greater level of financial resources and even public recognition.

The positions at the helm of national or provincial labour federations or racialized constituency groups are still too financially lucrative and status-laden for many racialized or other working-class staffers and elected leaders to simply walk away from them when their dignity or political beliefs are under attack. According to Ling:

I think for the ones that are in the leadership in these coalitions or the groups… people are in safe positions quote-unquote. Safe and secure financially and there’s too much at stake. And to me I think parts of the lessons learned are the leadership of these positions should never be held by staffers. It’s too complicated and you get implicated for the wrong reasons. And so they also end up more compromised…had Marie [Clarke Walker, CLC’s Executive Vice-President]
come forward… it’s a bit of a… if there’s groundswell support, maybe it would have emboldened Marie to take on a stronger position, or if Marie initiate the call, maybe there would be more stuff happening to confront Ken [president of the CLC] or Judy and say “No, you can’t do this [exile Marie to Toronto from Ottawa, seat of governance of the CLC]”

I was a member of an African trade union constituency group that had members from various unions. A trade union had the unusual situation of having two African women running for a “reserved” Executive Vice-President seat on the executive board of a provincial labour federation. However, what was most unusual was that one of the sisters was asked by the White president, who happened to be a man, to run for the seat in which the other African sister was the incumbent. I argued that that cynical manipulation of race and gender should be opposed and I executed an action that brought this matter out into the open in a very public way. One of the objections raised by others on the executive was that a fellow executive member’s attempt to get a permanent staff job in that union could be jeopardized by the constituency group’s opposition to the unprincipled use of race and gender to punish a political opponent. These union staff jobs have caused a lot of racialized trade unionists to become domesticated and fearful of their economic livelihood. Another objection to intervention was raised by this African Canadian labour constituency group, whose executive had a majority of current or retired union staffers. They were afraid of losing the support of unions who purchase tables to the organization’s annual dinner-dance fundraiser.

Abeje presents the case of an independent and dissident campaign by Carol Wall to wrest control of the CLC’s presidency from old guard president Ken Georgetti and the
very telling manner in which many racialized trade unionists behaved toward that audacious electoral challenge:

I think just really blatantly speaking…staff within the labour movement make good money. So I know with a campaign of the first Black woman to ever challenge the presidency of the CLC, that working on her campaign we were shocked to see who outwardly supported her and who didn’t and some of the sisters and brothers that we had always talked to and strategized with around issues of oppression and racism within the labour movement, were the same folks that would not support her, outwardly at least. We don’t know what happens when people check their ballots, but wouldn’t wear buttons, wouldn’t help with campaigning, and not only walked straight past her at conventions, but literally put their head down. And in debates wouldn’t say anything, just remained completely silent.

Abeje presents her views on why racialized activists, especially those elected to political positions or on the staff of unions, would go against their belief that speaks to the need for more racialized trade unionists within the leadership of the Canadian labour movement:

And it was really disheartening and shocking and the only reason that I could come up with was they were trying to maintain the status that they had achieved, the position, the income, they were quite comfortable with the lives that they had created for themselves making the money that they did and having the kind of schedule that they did and car allowance and all these other things, and if they started to shake the boat around that by supporting the other candidate, that could be taken away from them and then what would they do? So it’s unfortunate that
greed, the same bread and butter issues that the Old Boys’ Club fights so strong for can also be a source of betrayal for folks of colour within the movement. Some people are easily swayed by those kinds of incentives. So that was really frustrating and depressing and sad.

It is clearly understood in some unions that if you want to get into the lucrative ranks of union staff members, one should not be too political. A racialized staff member advised that if I wanted to become a CUPE staffer, I should “tone it down” and not get so involved in oppositional politics. There is a White woman who is now on staff, who it was alleged took a long time to get that position because of her heavy involvement in gender-related union activism. People are quite aware of the need to play it safe and racialized trade unionists are very much aware of the unwritten rules. One may be active in the local union and union politics, but the message is clear that avoiding the status of “union trouble-maker” improves the likelihood of becoming a staff member.

Staff jobs are also used to settle conflicts, settle uncomfortable situations or to reward compliant behaviours. I know of a particular case where the possibility of a staff job with a major national union in Canada was enough for a racialized person to drop an allegation of harassment leveled against a national officer. This person was already working as staff in one of the provincial divisions of the union, but was not on the payroll of the national union. A weak letter of apology was issued, which didn’t mention a future interview for a staff job.

In spite of the financial and status appeal of employment opportunities within unions, there are systemic barriers to many racialized trade unionists getting these jobs. Singh outlines the process used to recruit union staff as well as the process of exclusion:
…And for the longest period of time it has been white staff all across the country. And people who are already in these positions would have a pretty good handle on the pulse of their members. And mostly it would be the leadership of the locals who deal directly with the staff reps. And if the leadership at a local level is all white, again, it is, in many cases, all white because of a certain barriers that people have in their locals because of their race. So the staff member is going to push for those leaders and those leaders are only white leaders. So he’s not going to pick somebody who’s not a leader unless there is a local that has all racialized workers and he has some liking for that individual and he may push for it. And it has always been the staff members already in existence pointing out that yeah, this member or this president from this local or this treasurer from this local can become a good staff rep. So they get, what’s the word I’m looking for, they get… they are seen more favourable, right, so they get the chance. And people who are racialized, when they do not get into the leadership positions within their locals, this causes a barrier for them to get into the staffing positions.

Being seen in a “favourable” light or getting tapped on the shoulder by an existing staff member is a sure-fire way to ensure that the staff stays, demographically-speaking, predominantly White. Singh is interrogating a systemic recruitment process that is used by the old guard to select “safe” racialized trade union members as union employees. The current staff members in Singh’s union (as well as other unions) have a lot of power in keeping the racial status quo intact.
There has emerged a culture within the labour movement wherein members expect the leaders to take care of the union’s business without their active involvement. Ming sees this state of affairs as a challenge:

…I think if you just go back to the idea of the [iron law of] oligarchy, the members almost expect the leader to do all this stuff as if they have some special talent or you have special wisdom that allows them to do it. So some of that responsibility falls back on the membership for allowing that to happen, the kind of attitude that we want the leadership just to take care of these everyday things, which in the end is obviously disempowering. It’s not like the leaders have magical powers. “Well, they know stuff because they’ve been there 20 years. You would know stuff too if you were there 20 years”. But yeah, I definitely do think we internalize some of that.

The above state of affairs identified by Ming facilitates a culture of entitlement. It is pervasive and insidious and may be lost on political actors within the labour movement. Being entrenched in leadership position and knowing that accountability to the membership is weak, the leadership has development a sense of entitlement to leadership roles and the organizational resources. Recently, a racialized executive vice-president at a provincial labour federation had a dispute about a travel reimbursement claim with the president of that organization. The president argued that her rental of a junior hotel suite was extravagant, given the weakened state of the organization’s treasury and that the central should not reimbursed that expense. She claimed in true Marie Antoinette fashion that she was not being excessive and irresponsible because she normally uses a full suite. However, in this case the administrative person mistakenly booked a junior suite. It is the
system of entitlement that contributes to the labour bureaucrats’ expectation that living high off of the members’ dues is a “natural” right of being at the top of the organization’s food chain.

In addition to the culture of entitlement and how that may affect the behaviour of racialized trade unionists, the co-optive approach of including them inside the “in-group” of the forces in power, could also be at work. Abeje points to this possibility as a way to generate compliance and replication of the existing order:

The structure of the labour movement wherein you have locals and then you have affiliates and you have labour councils and so forth, it really does create cliques and it determines who’s in the in-crowd and who’s not, and so when people start to, when people become attracted to the labour movement and getting involved in their union and then start to be given opportunities to go to this training and go to that training and then there’s talk about… a few special thoughts for people to go to conventions and be able to have voting rights and privileges, it feels and sounds powerful to people. So I feel like people try to maintain that status and that power and be in the in crowd.

As Abeje illustrates, compliant behaviour increases the likelihood that they will keep on going to conventions and conferences and have access to all the perquisites of being on the inside. Compliance is likely to lead to being appointed or elected to bodies representing racialized people and being supported by leadership. Unionists with a passion for addressing racial equity believe that they can “fake it ‘til they make it.”

I remember attending my first executive board meeting of CUPE Ontario in my capacity as 3rd Vice-President, where I was arguing for democratizing the decision-making process
to allow for the involvement of rank-and-file members. A member with over twenty years on the board who is generally seen as a progressive trade unionist “reminded” me that we were elected to make decisions, and we do not need to go to the members when we need to make a decision. He obviously missed my point, but it revealed the “father-know-best” leadership mindset.

Ming was correct in asserting that “we [have] internalized some of that”, because I have observed that type of behaviour among racialized people in affirmative action positions and on equity-seekers’ committees. In early 2007, a group of racialized trade unionists called an organizing meeting of rank-and-file racialized members so as to participate in the work of the anti-racism committee of a provincial labour organization in Ontario. The elected members of the anti-racism committee resisted the organizing efforts behind this meeting, but reluctantly showed up. These elected members opposed adopting a plan of action that was presented as a discussion document for organizing racialized people in that labour organization. Most of the elected members expressed the sentiment that they were elected to lead and “non-members” wanted to direct them. They were also influenced by this line of thinking by White actors within the political leadership and staff, who knew that the rank-and-file would push an agenda that would be more strident, robust and “disruptive”. The elected members on the committee dealing with racism ignored the action plan, which was recommended for consideration to the former through a majority vote of the rank-and-file racialized base. The preceding example demonstrates the extent to which the culture of entitlement to unfettered power or authority has penetrated the consciousness of some of the racialized other in the labour movement.
Racialized constituency groups inside the box of conformity

The organizing pressure from equity-seeking trade unionists such as women, racialized peoples and LGBT members has forced unions to create constituency groups, whose mission is centered upon advocacy work for and with their respective equity-seekers. Singh raised questions about the selection process for putting racialized members on the committee that represents that group in his national union. He is an advocate for changing the power relations at the local, because without that it is not likely that the dominant social actors are going to say:

“…Let me put you on a committee at a national level”. That ain’t going to happen. Because of things that we have been doing as the [Anti-Racism] Committee and the other committees, the selection process for the National Committee changes slightly. It’s a little step, but it’s not showing the kind of progress that I would like to see. Although you have the right to kind of apply, at the end of the day the big leader decides who those folks are going to be [selected].

This particular union has changed the process for getting onto its national committees from an election at national conventions to one that the selection is done by the national president. Singh characterized it as a form of progress because it now opens up opportunity to racialized people who do not make it to national convention.

However, Singh seems to have a certain level of reservation about the efficacy of this approach when he asserts that the “big leader decides who those folks are going to be”. In my judgment, racial justice activists and racialized trade unionist should be skeptical about a selection process that is controlled by the paramount leader. The members of the national committees and working groups in the structures of CUPE
National are hand-picked by the national president. Elections were used at conventions to place members on these bodies, but this practice was changed at the 2005 national convention. It was ostensibly done on the basis of equity arguments, which were that not all members could attend conventions and would therefore not be able to run in elections for the committees. Furthermore, with the national president selecting the members on the committees, he or she would ensure that all equity-seeking groups are fairly represented across the committees and working groups.

The preceding point was exposed as patently untrue with respect to racial representation in 2007-2009 appointments to the national committees and working groups. The following relevant national committee or working group will have a figure beside it that represents the percentage of Whites members on it, which will give an indication of racial exclusiveness: Young Workers (100%); Pink Triangle (LGBT) (100%); Childcare (100%); Health Issues (92%); Contracting Out (91%); Health and Safety (92%); Literacy (92%); Political Action (91%); Global Justice (88%); Women (87.5%); Pensions (82%) Disabilities (80%); Environment (73%); National Rainbow (racialized members) (0%) and Aboriginal Council (0%). It is quite likely that elections at the national convention would have brought about better representation for racialized and Aboriginal members. There were two things that were amazing about this expression of systemic racism: the conspicuous silence from the National Rainbow Committee and a very instructive comment from the racialized person who occupied the affirmative action seat that represents racialized people. In the latter case, this racialized leader had this to say:
You will note that there are 190 members serving on our National Committees and working groups. Leaving gender aside, 105 are from the other equality seeking groups. That is, 105 are Aboriginal Workers, Workers of Colour, Workers with Disabilities and gay, Lesbian, Bi-sexual or Transgender workers. Of the 190 members serving on these national bodies, 123 are women and 67 are men. The attached chart of the Equity Screen is a useful illustration of the improvements that have been made in equity representation on our national Committees and Working Groups since the last round of appointments. The progress that is being achieved may seem slow, however, I do feel that progress has been made and I also feel that we need to do a lot more on other fronts as well. I urge you all to join hands with the leaders elected to carry out this task in order to move our equity agenda forward, let us work together with our grassroots members in their local to help them make the much needed progress in their locals (Email correspondence, July 10, 2008).

It was instructive that the above comments came from a racialized leader given that she was commenting on a situation involving the underrepresented constituency that she was elected to serve. It is for that reason that some racialized members have seen the affirmative action positions and recognized constituency representational structures as co-opted entities in the labour movement.

When White leaders are allowed to select racialized members to represent racialized equity-seekers, they are likely to appoint people who are seen as being “cooperative” or “team players”. I have been one of the most vocal persons in all of CUPE on racial equity issues and one who has proposed remedies or solutions through
resolutions, email messages, papers and presentations. Further, I am a prolific letter-
writer on race, gender, international solidarity issues, politics and social and economic
policies, and have demonstrated inside CUPE that I have strong skills and am an
advocate for just causes. Yet they were not sufficient to earn me an appointment in
February 2010 on one of the five national committees or working groups (National
Rainbow Committee, Global Justice Committee, Political Action Committee, Childcare
Working Group and Health and Safety Committee) to which I applied.

In the past, I have avoided applying for or running for a spot on the committees
inside CUPE. My reasoning was that I should leave those spaces for members, especially
the racialized ones who believe that they needed the organizational seasoning before
offering for the “white” seats that are elected by the whole convention and not a caucus
of less than one hundred members. But this time I wanted to test the degree of openness
of the leadership to oppositional racialized voices with the organizational and advocacy
skills to match. These committees are also spaces from which racialized people may be
noticed by the national leadership for consideration as prospective staff members.
Racialized members have indicated to me that they would like to get on staff and the
equity-seekers’ committees are their instruments to attain this goal. They have no desire
or cannot afford to be union troublemakers. Given the future personal financial goals of
some of these racialized trade unionists, they are not in a position to vigorously advocate
for principled and just racial justice measures.

The ideological or diversity of approaches to fighting racism within these labour
movement anti-racism committees contributes to certain level of operational and activism
paralysis, as Dennis states in reference to racialized trade unionists in his union:
And again, I think the other battle is not just making change and fighting against the system that maintains white privileges, it’s also fighting within our own racial, colour group, if you will, because I think that even within our group there’s differing thoughts on how change can be brought. And like I said to you, some of our own people are fearful of that strong voice and say “Oh, you’re going to give us a bad name. We’ve been working so hard to kind of bring this with everybody on board. You're going to push people away and we’re going to be back, like 3, 4 steps back”. Although they’ll agree with you about the message, they won’t agree with you about the process of how to bring that? So in these groups where it is, our groups, what I’ve tended to find is that there is different ways of doing things and we get stuck up on the process, and then there’s camps that become developed and these camps then become entrenched and then I find sometimes in these committees we’re more adversarial with each other, confrontational with each other than we are fighting the system.

The “strong voice” that Dennis referred to usually represents the principled and radical forces of anti-racism in unions. These voices are normally not the ones that find favour with the established leadership. The “adversarial” and “confrontational” relations in the racialized committees or in constituency groups are often-times caused by the presence of racialized people who share the vision and approach to equity of the old guard in the labour bureaucracy, and those who advocate for a robust and politically assertive equity agenda.

Dennis had referred earlier to the Malcolm X and Martin Luther King approaches to anti-racist activism, or put differently, one attracts flies with honey and not vinegar.
Similarly, union leaders seeking to pacify concerns about racism may use a tactic of “congenial engagement, as Singh states:

That could be a resistance too where the person says “OK, why don’t you come and talk to me?” and “Why send e-mails to so many people and we can resolve it”. That could be resistance, or that could be a genuine effort on this individual’s part where he wants to understand and have a better understanding and maybe collectively he wants to resolve the issue. Like I said earlier how I became from militant to a liberal person, because I came across different styles of management where people were willing to talk and there were people who were hard nuts to crack. There are people who would continue to do that where they would give you this kind of sweet lip service and they may think that “I’ll haul him into my office and I’ll have a chat with him and satisfy him”.

Singh indicates further that the seeming reasonableness displayed above is a mere ruse to disarm and pacify some of the “malcontents”:

And 2 days later it’s forgotten. “Don’t even know who Ajamu is. Came and talked to me about this issue. To hell with him”. And then he comes back: “Oh yeah, no problem. Come into my office” and Ajamu thinks “Yeah, he seems very receptive to my issues”. Deep down he has a different way of resisting, which he uses his style to keep you back, at the same time, not making waves. He is succeeding in a way, maybe, that you’re not telling everybody else about it because he doesn’t want everybody to know about it. So that is a form of
resistance. And there are people who would do that to you. You find all kinds of folks…

Pacification is a time-honoured way to resist. It is very distracting when racialized groups get caught up in conflicts over what tactics to use when the seemingly accommodating and reasonable approach of the leadership is really another path to co-optation. Confrontational measures will leave the racialized members put in the cold shut off from contact with the people who make the decisions.

I have witnessed and participated in organizing and agitational actions to pressure formally-recognized constituency committees representing racialized members to be a political voice for the people that they were elected to represent. During the recent recession, the different levels of governments in Canada were supporting infrastructure spending bandwagon as a way to stimulate the Canadian economy. I immediately recognized this approach as having inherent structural barriers for racialized people and women, and I made the call for unions to raise questions about this matter. Under my leadership, my local sent an action plan to the Toronto and York Region Labour Council to which my local union is affiliated. We outlined some steps that this labour body should take in calling for employment equity in government-financed infrastructure projects. This document was also sent to the members of the equity committee, which is comprised of racialized trade unionists from a number of different unions. I heard that they were more concerned about how I got their email addresses than immediately pushing for this document to be debated and adopted. Some people within the leadership were wondering whether I hold CUPE to the same standards on employment equity. These racialized
members are representatives of their unions in this multi-union labour body and may be easily replaced if they become “disruptive” around anti-racism initiatives.

Constituency groups may emerge outside of the formal structures of labour unions. But that does not make them immune to the co-opting effects of the labour union’s structures and its reward/incentive imperatives, as Modupe points out:

Let’s take the CBTU or what did they used to call it? Ontario Coalition Black Trade Unionists, before they joined the CBTU. That was a kind of solidarity because all of us felt the same pain and all of us felt the same kind of barrier and what have you. So yes, that’s how that came about, and that particular solidarity is excellent. The problem is even though… what the national leadership does, and I know in the case of Ontario Coalition of Black Trade Unionists, they tried to buy off that militancy and they bought off that militancy. I remember the first sister, I won’t call her name on record, but that sister, they brought the sister to the CLC and of course they massaged her….. And that sister wreaked havoc….. But even though you have those particular type of hiccups on the way, anywhere the CBTU is today is because of the solidarity between Black trade unionists or racialized trade unionists, and unfortunately here we have an organization that’s born out of such a struggle and the only thing it can do right now is to go to conventions and have parties.

Modupe highlights the role that mainstream structures such as the CLC play in picking off racialized leaders and getting them elected or placing them within the ranks of the staff. CBTU’s main activities – “conventions and have parties” – represent a degeneration of anti-racism activism. One of the highlights of CBTU’s yearly programme
is a “pilgrimage” for its members and allies to the international convention of this organization in a US city.

Ling raises the matter of racialized constituency groups, which is the result of copying the organizational culture and mores of the mainline leadership as it pertains to sharing power:

I do think mentoring is important. This is where CBTU and ACLA should be doing more and we are not... and then part of the problem is we copy and replicate the worst habits of some of the male leaders. We hold on to the seats and we don’t let go. We replicate in not giving the space for our younger, newer activists to make mistakes. And I think a lot of us do it with the best intentions. “We made our mistakes. We’re here to protect and guide you”. But I think people learn by making mistakes and by taking the risk and making the mistakes or else we would never get up again and we have to keep going.

The problem of younger and newer activists not getting access to leadership in constituency groups is a serious problem. Ling highlighted “taking the risk” and the importance of new blood to activism in constituency groups. But the tendency to “replicate the worst habits of some of the male leaders” facilitates co-optation and tends to rob newer activists of mentoring support and opportunity.

Ling threw out the idea of the lack of courage of racialized leaders and, by extension, the constituency committees, as a critical factor in co-optation:

The co-optation becomes much more insidious. The co-optations become more invisible in the sense that it’s internalized too. This is how you should operate. And yes, I’m probably not as radical as you are, there’s a certain level of pragmatism,
but at the end of the day it needs to be balanced with a sense of integrity and self-respect. And to me I think we are losing some of that integrity or willingness to take risk because the courage is gone. And, for me, I think, someone as a leader, you need to have the courage to challenge the status quo. You need to have the will to follow through and to be able to inspire people. And unfortunately our own workers of colour leadership has internalized some of that dominant leadership culture that we… or maybe we also view that we are all doing our part already. And I think there’s also that sense that you don’t know whom you can trust. So the trust factor, not only with people who don’t look like you, but it’s also people within your own community. There’s so much… the different layers that complicate the matter even more.

The “trust factor” becomes a barrier to collective resistance to labour movement racism when some activists believe that the leaders lack courage and that could lead the latter to compromise on a robust racial justice agenda. It ought to be noted that the trust factor is also relevant within the rank-and-file. The entrenched leadership can offer more material rewards or block access to resources to racialized members and that will be a part of the calculus that leads to radical racialized leaders being betrayed by their racialized constituency. Any absence of trust between racialized elected leaders and racialized union members is exacerbated by their relative powerlessness in a system of racial subordination.

Entrenched leaders symbolically include members of equity constituency groups so as to give the impression that conferences and conventions are more racially diverse
that they actually are in reality. It is all about image or impression management, according to Abeje:

I think that the leaders at the top are very strategic, so even though their priority is around wages and somewhat health and safety, but mostly around wages and so forth, you see that when you have a group that will form within the membership to start talking about equity issues that they’re very easily silenced or made to look like the complainers or the crazy group or the radical group or the young group of colour that argues when it looks good. So if there’s going to be a conference and we want to have youth representation, well, maybe they can do some street theatre in the opening. Almost in the same sense of when there’s conferences and we ask our Aboriginal brothers and sisters to do the opening or the closing, but then during the conference we hear nothing from them.

As Abeje implies, the entrenched leadership in the labour movement is cognizant of the need to communicate the idea that the house of the labour is inclusive of its racially diverse membership:

There’s no space for our Aboriginal brothers and sisters to talk about what’s going on in their communities or how they want the labour movement to support issues of importance to them, etc: right? So it’s like people get used and abused and silenced when it’s good for the leadership and then when we want to see their face and it looks pretty on paper that we have a diverse membership and everyone participated, then we’ll call on them, but in terms of treating real partnerships and hearing people, truly hearing people, it’s very limited. It’s really limited.
In order to access leadership position in national and provincial unions or labour federations in Canada one must get elected by the membership or selected by the executive committee. One of the glaring things at union conventions is the limited number of racialized and Aboriginal peoples in attendance. If you are not at a convention, one cannot get elected to provincial or national leadership positions. Abeje points to the power of the old guard to determine who attends convention as a source of colonization and control:

And they also can basically hand-pick people. I mean the top leadership of the movement can basically hand-pick people to come to conventions, which is almost in a way, skewing the votes because you know how people are going to vote. And you know that unless there is a radical group that organizes and organizes really well, that you can pretty much guarantee that you will be elected.

In addition to hand picking the racialized people who attend convention, the entrenched local leaders may also police them during elections at the convention in order to ensure that they vote for the “right” candidates. At the May 2010 CUPE Ontario convention, one such case was brought to my attention. I was a candidate for the presidency of the provincial union and the White leaders of a social service local ordered two racialized members to visibly mark their ballot in the former’s presence. They felt that the racialized people would have marked their ballots for my candidacy and not for my White labour bureaucrat opponent. The racialized members took the path of least resistance and complied.
Singh sees an improvement in the number of racialized people in attendance at the conventions in his union and also acknowledges that being there is a prerequisite for making it into the leadership ranks outside of the local union:

Unless that structure changes and our members from the racialized communities become more active and they start to get into the leadership positions, this practice [selecting staff from the ranks of locals’ leadership] will continue. Similarly when you see at the national conventions, who are the people who get elected to go to the conventions? It’s not a free call for anybody. First chance goes mostly to the leaders. If other people are not in leadership positions they are not going to be seen at the national conventions, although over the years this has been changing. You are seeing some improvement where other people are getting into leadership positions and they are making it to the national conventions.

The optics is certainly not impressive with respect to racial representation at conventions or conference of labour unions and labour organizations such as the various provincial labour federations and the Canadian Labour Congress. I went to CUPE’s national human rights conference in Vancouver in 2006 and there were very few racialized people in attendance at a gathering that attracted about four hundred participants. The number of racial people at this national conference was so few that White attendees had to step into the spots of racialized members in role simulation exercises. It is very expensive to send members to conferences, because the union has to pay for lost wages, accommodation, per diem, transportation, registration fees and other related costs. Therefore, if you are not a part of the leadership or popular within the local union, you are not likely to go to conferences and conventions.
Another related area through which labour unions’ old guard is able to control access to leadership and to influence the degree to which racialized leaders or activists exercise political independence on racial justices are the affirmative action seats at labour centrals such as the OFL and the CLC. A candidate for an affirmative action position must be at the convention of the labour central and have a letter of endorsement from her/his union. Ling expresses her frustration with this arrangement:

…you’re impotent in making real change. And to me I think that’s the same problem, systemic problem that we have with these affirmative action seats, be it at the national level or provincial level because they… even folks like the VPs representing workers of colour. You have to first get an approval letter from your own home union leadership, because your travel to Ottawa will be covered by your home union, not CLC. And that’s the same at the provincial level. So it becomes part of the contributions of the affiliates to CLC and having them do these active positions….. The contradiction is you’re voted into office from the caucus, workers of colour caucus, but at the end of the day you are not free to represent the viewpoints of the workers of colour… you’re not accountable to workers of colour who elected you, you’re accountable to the ones who pay your bills. And so you become virtually another vote for your union at those tables, be it executive council or executive committee.

Established leaders have no intention of signing the letter of approval of dissident racialized candidates to run for the executive board of a provincial or national labour central. Not being “accountable to workers of colour who elected” the racialized leaders
to the affirmative action seats cannot inspire trust in the political efficacy of the labour movement’s democratic structures.

The “approval letter” to which Ling referred to is a prerequisite for a trade unionist to stand for election to labour federations at the provincial or national level is a compelling factor in some activists being compliant with the expectations of the president or leadership of her or his union. The latter pays for the accommodation, lost wages, per diem and transportation cost to meetings of the provincial or national apex labour organizations such as the Canadian Labour Congress, Saskatchewan Federation of Labour or the Quebec Federation of Labour. The preceding state of affairs may have accounted for the behaviour of a racialized person who I encouraged to offer for an affirmative action seat at a labour federation and pushed allies to support him. He later threw his public support for the candidacy of a long-tenured White leader in an electoral race in which I was a candidate. He would have to get his “approval letter” from this same leader, if he wanted to be re-elected to the affirmative action seat that he held. In spite of his action, we had similar views in our assessment of the weak commitment of this leader and other White leaders in bringing racialized people into the leadership and in vigorously initiating programmes to integrate anti-racist remedies throughout the union.

But, some racialized activists do the political calculation and make the decision that making peace with members of the old guard will put them in a position to make greater contribution for racialized trade unionists. A racialized elected leader in an affirmative action seat once told me at a trade union convention that it is hard to “look powerful White leaders in the eye and say, No to their request” for a particular course of
action. It is problematic for anyone representing racialized people to acknowledge that she may not be able to robustly represent her constituency.

The largely White male leadership at the provincial labour federation believes that it “owns” the votes of the affirmative action vice-presidents who were elected in their respective equity-seekers’ caucuses. The Aboriginal, racialized, lesbian, gay bisexual and trans (LGBT) and disability vice-presidents on the executive board are from the union of the leader of one of the two factions. The vice-president has been given the green light from his union to vote for issues supported by the president of that labour central. These equity-seekers are seen as captured votes of this leader, which give him a solid and subservient voting bloc on issues. His opponents have argued that these affirmative action seats should be able to vote on critical matters that come before the board. It is clear to the entrenched Whites leaders that these affirmative action seats are mere pawns in their political calculations and not independent voices for their respective constituencies.

**Concluding thoughts**

The above insights and comments to the questions, “What are your views on racism as a phenomenon in the context of society and the labour movement?” and “How do leaders and the structures within labour organizations render harmless the racial justice challenges of racialized trade unionists?” are instructive and speak to many of the challenges to a robust and principled anti-racist agenda in the Canadian labour movement. Racial subordination and exclusion creates the context for the co-optation of racialized trade union members. It is not so much that people are predisposed to being compliant with the condition of their superordinate status, but it is also that the cost of
resisting and being transgressive is much too high. Kojo shares his insights on the structural and organizational constraints of relative powerlessness:

The way I see it is just that white people don’t want to talk about racism, it makes them uncomfortable so if you want to get something put on the table, there’s the deal-making that goes on, so you support me if I really want the support here, and you support me here, which is what we see. People…start off with really good intentions and end up being co-opted, because they feel like something is better than nothing. So if they end up starting with a whole big piece of the log and it gets whittled down to little pieces, they come back and say “At least I got this”.

The privileging of whiteness and racialized activists acceptance of the accompanying terms of engagement will automatically make them liable to being co-opted. Whether co-optation takes place through the electoral process in locals or at conventions or the offer of union staff jobs, the structural nature of organizational power expressed through white privilege leads to racial domination in labour organizations. The comments in the chapter from racialized people suggest that co-optation is systemic and thoroughly embedded in the organizational structures and culture of labour unions and other labour organizations. That in itself is not a surprise because all systems of power have evolved mechanism to perpetuate their existence. It is the tools that are deployed are significant, because their visibility or knowledge of how they work creates the basis for resistance or countervailing actions.

Even from a pragmatic standpoint, the entrenched labour leaders ought to be able to see that a racially divided working-class does not serve the long-term interest of the labour movement. It should be clear to them that racialized workers are fueling the net
growth of the national labour force and particularly the growing service sector of the economy. They must be organized just to maintain the current union density of a growing labour force. However, racialized people are not waiting for labour unions to foster racial justice. They are forcing the issue through various forms of resistance.
Chapter 6:  
Results: Part 2 - The complexity and contour of resistance:  
Race, gender, and education

The responsibility of an artist representing an oppressed people is to make revolution irresistible.  
- Toni Cade Bambara

Overview

In a context of racial subordination or social oppression, resistance ought to be seen as a choice. However, the cost of resisting structural oppression may be high and that causes many people to be cautious. This chapter will use the findings from the participants’ response to the interview questions to explore the following questions:

- What countervailing resistance actions do racialized trade unionists use to advance racial justice in the labour movement?
- In what ways are racialized trade union women’s experiences affected by gender and race oppression?
- How are racialized trade union members experiencing labour education and what types of educational initiatives and programmes are needed to promote racial justice/anti-racism?

Under conditions of structural exploitation there is a tendency for a conscientized minority to come forward to politically advocate for those who are silenced by their social situation. The narratives of resistance from the research participants are varied and reflect the different approaches and sensibilities toward forms of political activism. Resistance to structural racism and exclusion maybe manifested through participation in elections, the act of speaking or writing oppositional discourse, covert and discrete forms of resistance, and self-organization in an officially-sanctioned constituency or
independent labour group or caucus. This chapter will also explore the complexities and challenges inherent in the labour movement context with regard to resistance to racism. It is important to centre women and gender in the investigation of racialized trade unionists’ experience of the labour movement. Lastly, the experience of structural exclusion must be addressed and labour education as a tool that may be used a transformation the current state of affairs.

**Resistance through elections and political structures**

It is hard for racialized people in the labour movement to not see or be aware of their absence from the ranks of the leadership in the local, district, regional or national structures of power. Modupe is one such trade unionist who became aware of this reality in the 1970s during his sojourn in Quebec:

So yeah, you were always cognizant and I remember asking my brothers and sisters in Hull: “How come I don’t sit at the head table”? So they’re trying to say to me there’s a way to get to the head table. “Well, how did you get to the head table?” “Well you have to go in for elections”. “Well, what’s that?” …But it was like the order of the day. It was second nature to have no female and no Africans, like I said, no First Nations were there. But the political reality at the time wouldn’t afford you not to think of your nation.

The assertion that if Modupe wanted to be at the “head table” or the leadership of the union he has “to go in for elections” was true then and is very much so today. As a progressive racialized person, Modupe was also conscious of other forms of exclusion based on Aboriginal status and gender. The thing that was critical for Modupe was the awareness of the instrument (election) through which power and influence was realizable.
The presence of other racialized peoples in responsible roles encourages other members of these groups to believe that they have a chance to serve in similar roles, as Dennis suggests:

I was one of the first on the executive. When I did come out and join the executive I got a lot of support from the people of colour saying “It’s good to see.” Even when I sit at the front [the stage] at [the Union’s convention] whether it’s on the resolutions committee or as a social service representative… whether they’re older people of colour who’ve been in the union for years finally saying “Finally we see us there”, or younger people of colour saying “Holy Mac, you know what, I used to be nervous about joining this until I see you and know if you can do it, I know I can do it”. I don’t see that as aggressive, I see that as boosting the cause.

Even racialized people who are politically moderate in their approach to resistance view their act of serving in leadership roles as challenging stereotypes about their group’s leadership abilities. It is their way of “boosting the cause” of organizational racial justice. Even in cases where the racialized occupant of an elected or appointed position is an ally of the entrenched leadership, some members see the symbolic importance of such as a move. I do see some value in such a situation. It was for that reason I encouraged a racialized sister to offer for the 2nd Vice-President seat that I occupied in spite of she not being a politically assertive activist. I knew that the old guard would be very comfortable with her. The 2nd Vice-President seat was the only acclaimed position at the 2010 CUPE Ontario convention and the racialized sister won the seat without opposition. After serving two terms in an affirmative action seat, she moved on
up the leadership food chain. It is not likely that she would be seen as a candidate for a future senior leadership position, if she was sequestered in the equity or affirmative action seat.

CUPE, as the largest union in Canada and with about two-thirds of its members being women, is an example of inequity in gender and racial representation. It has a national executive board that is comprised of twenty-three members, of which 26% are women and less than 5% are racialized. The executive board has only one racialized person in an affirmative action seat, who also happens to be a woman.

There is one Aboriginal person on the national board and he is also in an affirmative action seat. For that reason, many members at the 2009 National Convention thought that I was courageous for taking on the unwritten rules and electorally challenging a long-tenured leader from the province of Ontario. It was an act of resistance at the level of race, as well as a rank-and-file resistance to offer for a seat that is allowed for by the constitution, but in the latter case was restricted to presidents of the provincial CUPE bodies through the unwritten rules of the old guard. Some racialized women and other equity-seekers would like to offer for seats on the national board of CUPE, but they are concerned about committing political suicide.

Election campaigns allow candidates to bring issues to the table that other mainstream candidates would not have included in their platform, in the absence of a bid by racialized or dissident members. The candidates’ forum and campaign for votes allow for interaction with members about critical issues. But the psychological effect of having racialized candidates running on a principled and inclusive platform and attracting strong support from White members opens up racialized members’ to the political possibilities.
If racialized candidates offer a conventional platform, they would not be doing anything to distinguish themselves from a business-as-usual politics. I believe that my strong showing in all the elections in which I have participated has a lot to do with me saying things that are on members’ minds, but are not openly articulated. Some members also just love to root for the underdog in any race.

While the high profiled elected offices in national and provincial unions and labour federations are perceived as prestigious, it is in the union locals where equity advances for racialized trade unionists are most pronounced. Modupe points to issues that are mostly settled at the bargaining table in union locals:

They [racialized members] can’t participate. They can’t be represented because who’s... a part of bargaining [committee], that is affecting them, whose grievances get traded off at the negotiating table? Racialized people are the one because we’re the ones grieving some problems....“Where’s the grievance? What happened to my grievance?” “Oh, we lost it at negotiations”. So what happened?...What do you think the member feels?.... Those guys, these people, what have you, they don’t represent us.

The bargaining committee is normally elected by the members and it is important for racialized members to organize and mobilize to place members there who will not trade away grievance issues that are important to them. Bargaining is the ultimate bread-and-butter issue for union members, and they usually want the most experienced members there. Two ways that racialized members without bargaining experience may bridge the knowledge gap is to take the labour education courses on bargaining and to request spending a day or two at bargaining sessions. But they must get on the bargaining
committee and create a base in the union to ensure that their issues do not become pawns in the “game” called negotiation.

As pointed out above by Singh, racialized people have to get elected into the leadership of their locals to have influence on the issues that are strategically important to them. He reiterates this position:

Unless that structure changes and our members from the racialized communities become more active and they start to get into the leadership positions, this practice [selecting union staff from the existing leaders in the local] will continue. Similarly when you see at the national conventions, who are the people who get elected to go to the conventions? It’s not a free call for anybody.

The demographic make-up of the staff and their lived experiences of structural oppression are critical to the equity agenda. As a source of expert knowledge and trade union experience, the staff has influence on issues that are bargained with the employer. In addition, racialized trade unionists who seek elected leadership at the local level may succeed in being effective advocates for equity issues. Modupe refers to his experience as the President of his local:

…when I worked for the Ministry of Correctional Services and I dared to say that I’m running for the President of the local…all the KKKs and the Heritage Fronts came out. They put signs. Painted my locker and what have you and they used the “N–word”, that they don’t want any (“N-word”) to represent them. But you know, struggle is a hell of a thing, man. The best representation they ever had was from me. The best representation they ever had was from the leadership of our organization. Not only did we get the Ministry of Correctional Service to fix the
air quality, we got them to close up some of the places. And we got them to basically get some benefits that seemed like Cadillac benefits. As a matter of fact, the only people who had those benefits were the auto workers. [They] got those benefits under my leadership.

The performance of racialized members as good and effective trade unionists may help break down the racial animus that some Whites harbour. Recently, a trade unionist who is openly gay said that he believed that the willingness of some members to elect him in to increasingly senior roles in his union had a lot to do with his commitment to advancing the interests of all the members. It also helps that he enjoys a certain level of White male privilege and he is not a leader with ideas that would cause the members of the old guard to feel threatened.

Audre Lorde’s (1984, p. 112) caution against using the “master’s tool” to destroy his “house” seemed have been turned on its head in a trade unionist’s bid to win elections in a predominantly White local in Western Canada, as Singh indicates:

It’s quite interesting because the leaders, the White leaders gave me a few tips in terms of how to make sure that you get elected. They said that “If you want to run for a position, this is what we have been doing, what you do is you set up somebody else to run against you”. And I could never understand that. And they said “That is how the thing works, and you will find that you will just slide right through. Do only this if you can be good at number-crunching games. If you know that you’ll have a dicey time winning this position, then the only way out is to split the votes. Split the votes against your candidates and then you can just get through”. And I tried that many times. And to be very honest with you, I
succeeded. I do not remember a single time I lost an election whether it was for a school, whether it was for a national convention. It wasn’t because I was a person of colour; it was just the way the white man used to play the election game.

Singh shares a case that is instructive of the wily, crafty and sneaky moves that may be deployed in the game of trade union electoral politics:

I also remember at one point where I had a few people who were running against me in the bar. And I told the bartender “Make sure that you keep serving them the beer”. This wasn’t the Union Centre. Beer was key, got them drunk. They even forgot the elections were going on, and then you just make an excuse, I have to go to the washroom, and that’s when the elections are taking place inside. So that has happened too. And this was the advice that came to me from my so-called mentors.

Singh felt he had to “play the election game” as a way to ensure that he won leadership roles in his local. I experienced a similar style of politics in my bid to become a Regional Vice-President to the National Executive Board at the 2007 National Convention of CUPE. After that election, in which I lost by about 30 votes, a racialized sister from British Columbia congratulated me on my strong showing in the election as well as for the “big job” that I will be taking up outside of the union. I told her that I had no idea of what she was talking about and she patted me on my shoulders in a knowing way and told me “good luck”. It was only months later that an ally came up to me and told me that she was surprised that I was still in the union because she heard that I received a university appointment and would not have served out my term, if I had won the vice-president position. I did not know, at the time, that a time-honoured charge is
leveled against academic workers who seek leadership positions is we tend to have a short tenure in the union before moving on to “bigger and brighter” pursuits.

Modupe also believes that union electoral practices can be problematic:

I ran for the chairperson of the Scarborough [operation]… Well, they took about 4 months to count the ballots. When the ballots came back they said I lost by 121 votes. Well, whoever knows… I’m like “Come on man, I want my scrutineers and all these people to be there”. “Oh no”. So there’s no solidarity here brother.

By challenging the established political order, Modupe was able to expose the lack of solidarity in his local and the near impossibility of using its electoral process to change the face of its leadership.

My own experience has been similar to Modupe’s. In September 2009, I received a teaching assistantship appointment which gained a membership in another CUPE local with about six thousand members and an all-White executive committee. I asked the executive committee for a donation and endorsement for my bid to win a seat on CUPE’s national executive board as a General Vice-President. The executive members decided to let the members make the decision at the general membership meeting in September 2009, but I was given the heads-up that the executive member in control of the external portfolio was opposed to me going after a national seat. I had a conversation with her about her stance: her argument was that it would be better for me to work at the district council, local or labour council level and not take a spot from a member who is not an academic worker.

The mere fact of racialized trade unionists competitively challenging for positions that are seen as “white seats” or non-affirmative positions provides a psychological boost,
a model for emulation or expanding the realm of political possibilities. Dennis sees
successful or strong bids for elected office by racialized trade unionists inspiring people
to dream of the possible of cracking the glass ceiling of exclusion:

I don’t even know if we’re going to have a person of colour to be CUPE Ontario’s
president in our lifetime. And that’s the message that we get. We have to fight and
push, and not that we don’t, but it should be like a different message from those
mentors to say “It’s tough, but we have achieved so much. Like be proud of our
past, what we’ve accomplished, the brothers and sisters before us, but we need to
continue to fight for the future”. The message is totally… and I do get that, and I
get that from the white people, to say “You know what, there are changes. We
never had an Ajamu before pushing us and some people may not like him. But you
know what? I like him because I may not agree with him, but I like that he’s
pushing us”. And they’re saying that. And they’re giving me the hope that you
know what, because there’s this guy, I can see people being more motivated.

The demonstrative value of having a few racialized members offering for major
leadership positions serves as a form of mentoring in the eyes of Dennis:

More workers of colour are asking those questions because before they used to be
stifled and quiet. So they’re the ones. That’s the mentorship that I see in CUPE. It’s
not a structure thing, it’s a very informal thing and it’s a very how you know thing.
I know people, people have seen my face. People have seen my qualities and have
see the potential within me, if you will, so they come and they try to encourage me,
and try to push me in the hopes that I will run, I will do more and stuff like that.
But it’s not structured and it’s quite a different message depending on who you ask.
Some people may start to think “transgressively” once an advance has been made politically, especially when they can identify with the person who has blazed the trail. Mentoring is normally informal in the labour movement and the sparse presence of principled racialized trade unionists in senior leadership does not offer the opportunity for mentorship to racialized activists who are interested in leadership roles.

**Covert, discrete forms of resistance**

Opposition to racial oppression and exclusion in the labour movement seems to be complemented by more subtle and covert approaches to resistance. Abeje articulates the need for a dual approach that is both covert and overt in the fight for racial justice:

- So yes, it was very necessary that we had those covert people so that we could suss out who it was that we could trust internally from whom we couldn’t, and like I said, there was folks that we thought we could trust and then realized we couldn’t. And unfortunately they weren’t just the leadership. They were not only rank and file members, they were also people of colour, which as I was saying before, sometimes the leadership can be really strategic in finding people that are from communities of colour but talk the same rhetoric and the same politics as the Old School. That’s not just cutting it in 2010. Even in 2006 it wasn’t cutting it. So it can be really frustrating. But really important that you have both covert and overt when you’re trying to internally achieve successes around exposing some of the oppression and discrimination that has been happening, specifically for workers, members of staff of colour within the movement.

As much as covert resistance may seem relatively safe, there are moments when anti-racist activists are unsure of the appropriateness of intervening in support of another
racialized person. Ming elaborates upon this point in reference to the person discussed above by Abeje:

   After we organized [Gloria] was very active and it was great and I knew she kind of wanted to become an organizer with [the union], at least as an intern. And I remember feeling… not trapped but in a lose-lose situation because I wanted to tell her, look, some of these trade unionists are racist assh*les, they’ll treat you really badly, but also wanting to encourage her to become a trade union activist, but not feeling like it was my place to be honest with her, to be like “Look, these guys are racist assh*les on the staff”, so I always felt really torn about that. So [Gloria] and I eventually did become close and she ran into her own problems, so later on we did have a more honest conversation…

   Sometimes being covert means that one might have to be circumspect about whom in which to confide. While Ming did not mention the preceding concern to Gloria, she nonetheless opened up on the problematic issue of self-disclosure:

   I should have had more of a responsibility to be more upfront with her about some of the challenges I face. But when you’re an organizer, sometimes you self-censor yourself. You know what I mean, right.

   The sharing of strategic and tactical information is critical to anti-racism resistance; Lang not being “upfront with her some of the challenges” robbed Gloria of an essential tool in her organizational toolkit. However, the advice could have been seen as discouraging the person from seeking an opportunity as an organizer on the union’s staff.

   Ling points out that when information is gleaned through covert means, the labour movement may not be willing to act upon it:
I taught ESL in the workplace as a part-time instructor and then through the Immigrant Women Health Centre program we actually set up a mobile health unit for immigrant women. So we went around to the different... trailer homes. Went around to the different factories and encouraged women to come down to the unit to do a health screening. And a part of the whole hidden agenda then was to say you know, maybe we can unearth and uncover some of the occupational health and safety violations through the health screening. But then the labour movement then didn’t pick it up as much.

Racist and sexist practices could be uncovered through “occupational health and safety violations”, but when racialized women are the victims it is much too easy for organized labour to look the other way. It is quite normal to present a project to the leadership in sync with overarching goals of the union, goals that are also used to advance the place of racialized members in the union. If some of the leaders are aware that race may be implicated, they would not be supportive.

Trade union staff members and especially those from equity-seeking groups may have a desire to push anti-racism, gender equity or other laudable social justice objectives. Yet they are in politically neutral spaces and must refrain from acting like members. Singh shares some advice that was given to him from a White colleague when he took an assignment at the headquarters of his national union:

“You’re going to Toronto. It’s going to be a very different kind of culture there. It’s going to be very different than what you have observed in Alberta at the division level or at the local level. It would be like living in water, but staying dry”.

I said “What the f*ck did you mean by that? Living in water and staying dry?” And
he says “Think about it” and I said “Living in water and staying dry. Are you trying
to tell me that I shouldn’t be influenced by people around me, I should make up my
own mind and plan on things?” “Yeah, yeah, exactly”. He says “There will be
people who are trying to pull you this way, or pull you that way, but you are going
to be in a non-political situation, but highly politically charged environment. That’s
what I mean living in water and staying dry. In other words, you go there, stay
totally non-political. Don’t get politically influenced, stay dry, just keep your nose
to the ground and do what you’re hired to do, you’ll be OK!”

According to Singh, the above advice has served him well as he navigates the politically-
charged environment of being a labour union staff member:

   And I found a lot of wisdom in that, to be honest, because I have done that at the
   national office because you get politically involved in things and it can be political
   suicide for you. And I have always maintained that I can do political work, which is
   needed, but with discretion. I cannot do it openly. Staff isn’t supposed to be
   political, right. So that’s precisely what he was trying to tell me, that there are
   formal ways of doing things, and always use discretion in terms of whatever you
   do.

   Singh was quite clear in his assertion that he has “always maintained that I can do
   political work”, which is the mindset that is needed if racialized trade union staffers are
   going to play a helpful role in the resistance to racism (and other forms of oppression) in
   the labour movement.

   Ming argues for both covert and overt forms of resistance, which must be linked
to collective action:
Even the president or the leader won’t be scared by one person even if they’ve cc’d 2,000 people unless they know that that one person actually represents 2,000 people. Do you know what I mean? I think what we sometimes get out of these is sparks and I think the leadership knows they can ignore those sparks. It’s really about if that person has a base…. And again, there’s still a place for the quote-unquote radicals, and the quote-unquote people who work on the inside. You need both of those, I think.

The “sparks” to which Ming referred may raise issues, but she states that it will take an organized campaign that works covertly and overtly to be sustainable around the relevant issues. Activists without a significant power base are vulnerable. I know how helpful it can be when an insider discreetly sends you a document or shares vital information about the things that are being planned by the leadership.

However, there exists a certain degree of apprehension by some racialized trade unionists to openly call their unions on their racism or to engage in open, overt resistance, as Singh states:

If you asked me this question about 10 years ago, I would have said yes. But I think, more and more now people are realizing that “No, we need to talk about it, we need to be more open about it”. And we still come across people who would say “No. We don’t want to rock the boat. We don’t want to explode the situation. It’s fine. It will be OK”. These are racialized people. Not the white people. Because these kinds of discussions that have happened within the trade union movement it’s mostly amongst, well, it’s always amongst our people. Maybe by the time my grandchildren are in the workforce people are more vocal and they fight back.
Singh points to some of the ill-effects of being actively engaged in equity struggles and that may cause greater caution:

I was bitter about it [being passed over to lead a department] for a while then I said “That’s OK. I have another few years. I don’t need this bullsh*t”. This position has already given me a lot of health issues because fighting for equality rights or doing any kind of equality work, particularly anti-racism comes with a lot of hurt, pain, sickness. It’s an uphill battle. It gives you a lot of high blood pressure, which leads to other stress problems, which leads to other medical problems. It is very common.

It is not only with [my union]. Anyone you can talk to, whether it be a labour movement or non-labour movement where there is this kind of work being done, particularly equality work being done, it comes with a very high price. And you take it or leave it. When I took on this position I knew it’s not going to be easy, and I said “Well, I’ll fight it as much as I can. I’ll do as much as I can, and when I give up I give up”. And that’s the way it has been.

Union activism is a demanding type of organizational engagement, and it is doubly so on anti-racism issues. However, Ling implores racialized trade unionists to not walk away from the resistance:

My last point is you need to be here for the long haul. Just because things don’t go right doesn’t mean you walk away. Sometimes, yeah. Sometimes you take a break for self-preservation, but you always come back because at the end of the day, this is your movement too. We have all these workers of colour that have invested so much… we pay the dues too like everybody else and the history of
our movement is not just written by the Whites, then why should you walk away just because it’s not going your way?

It may be understandable why some activists would just “walk away” when their efforts do not produce the desired results or are blocked by the leaders. I was a part of an informal group of African members who developed an anti-racism action and submitted it to the person who represented racialized people on CUPE’s national executive board. This person made the attempt to present the group’s anti-racist recommendations, but it was rejected by the board, who claimed the group was not a recognized organizational body so it cannot make a presentation to the national leadership. The board wanted any matter dealing with race to go through the National Rainbow Committee. Some members of the informal caucus thought the racialized person in the affirmative action seat should have integrated the group’s recommendations into his report. By presenting it as separate report, this elected racialized leader implicitly distanced himself from the call for action.

**Speaking or communicating truth to power**

As much as there may be a price to pay for openly speaking out, some racialized members have done so. Singh declared his discomfort with how the racial justice element of the equity agenda was being executed in his Union:

No, I don’t have any other choice. I don’t keep things to myself, meaning if I see something is not right, I blurt it out, and sometimes I pay the price for it. You have to. If you don’t, you don’t. I mean there are a few things that are happening. I just told the Director the other day that I’m not happy with the way things are happening in the equality plans.
My own view is similar to Singh’s. In September 2010, I sent an email message to the members of CUPE National Executive Board about the fact that the national leadership has once again underrepresented racialized members in its selection to the national committees and working groups. One Regional Vice-President accused me of causing harm to anti-racism activism, because I openly pointed out the racially differential treatment and outcomes with respect to the appointment of racialized members to the national committees and working groups by the leadership of CUPE National. The number and percentage of racialized members actually fell from the 2007/2009 selection cycle.

Trade unions are quite similar to other organizations that do not take kindly to members speaking frankly and openly about their shortcomings on equity and important others issues to which they have expressed commitment or lack thereof. The instinctive tendency is to engage in character assassination or to punish the person(s) for his or her “transgressive” behaviour. Prophetic voices are not the most welcomed in organizations and the wider society. It is the apprehension about organizational retaliation that keeps the poor anti-racism record of most unions out of the public spotlight. Whistle blowers are not admired or loved by the organizations with which they are affiliated.

**Self-organization as a critical component of resistance**

Some people who share a common condition of oppression are cognizant that collective consciousness of social exclusion could be the basis for collective consciousness for doing something about the disagreeable situation. One of the resources that the oppressed have access to is bonding together in their own organization so as to carry out collective action, as Ming notes:
I think the networks [informal groups and caucuses] that are built amongst racialized trade unionists are used to challenge something so overt [obvious cases of racial exclusion]. These “support networks” are usually informal and may not be on the organizational radar. But they can be effective in mobilizing resources and being sources of strategic and tactical advice. Racialized activists from the 1980s and 1990s have shared stories with me about using their network to support each other making it to conventions of their union and labour federations. If someone was not able to get elected as a delegate, the others who were would put up the non-elected people in their hotel rooms and used their per diems from their local union to produce literature. They formed ad hoc groups to lobby for specific resolutions and policy initiatives and even plan actions at the conventions such as running people for office and threatening protest action to embarrass labour organizations.

Modupe emphasizes the importance of organizing to fight racism within unions, albeit by using community-based organizations as a part of the overall strategy:

That’s why you must have organization all over. Attach yourself to organization because maybe your own union won’t fight against it, but the CBTU will, or B[lack] A[ction] D[efence] C[ommittee] will, or the Ontario Black History Society will, or what have you. You must come here to make sure that you’re not scared to come to work. And the way to do that is to…take on the bosses on the management side, and also on your representative side.

It ought to be noted that the groups identified by Modupe have are community-based or have a strong community-orientation. Among racialized trade unionists, their
communities are part of the infrastructure of resistance in the labour movement. In military terms, they are critical supply lines in their engagement with the forces of exclusion in the labour movement.

As important as it is for racialized trade unionists to have a base of support in the wider community, it is equally valuable for them to have structures inside the labour movement. Ming makes the case for the development of constituency groups or base:

So if you are going to be a quote-unquote radical, I think what often happens is you get discredited, the leadership will purposely try to discredit you, but that’s why it’s even all the more important that these quote-unquote radicals always make sure they do have a base. They’re not just one shot. But overall I think we forget, us trade unionists that the bosses never gave us anything. Obviously there are people who would work with the bosses to get basic worker rights, but at the end of the day, there was always the threat. And so this idea of quote-unquote guilting leadership to end racist practices, or to work with leadership sometimes doesn’t always make sense to me.

Further, Ming emphasizes the indispensable need for organized action and relentless struggle in making anti-racist advances:

…when we look at our history, we know that we weren’t given anything, but then we get so frustrated when quote-unquote leadership don’t get it. But it shouldn’t be that they get it, it should be that we just get what we want. I think it’s very strange. Sometimes, I don’t know how many times we say this: “Why doesn’t the leadership get it?” If we could only release just one more study that proves there was racism in the labour movement”. I just think it’s very easy for us to be like “They’re such
hypocrites, I hate leadership”, but at the end of the day, you always need to fight for it. The boss never gives you anything really, in a way. Leadership doesn’t willingly give you anything. So I think you really do need to always push.

I agree with Ming about the need for a show of force by the racialized in their union when it comes to their exclusion. Modupe shares an instance of collective action by racialized workers in a General Motors’ workplace that hired three hundred employees without including an African person:

And we went to the superintendant and he said oh well he couldn't find anybody. So this brother from Trinidad says “Excuse me, but I gave you my brother-in-law’s application. I know that for a fact”. Oh well…” Anyways he said “What should we do?”. I said “What do you mean what should we do? Here are 15 of us. If we stand up then no production”. And lo and behold, 15 of us stood up, shut down 2 shifts. And, of course, who’s coming there to intimidate us, the very same committee man. But the contradiction played in our favour because we said “You’re not representing us”. So we told the supervisor, “This committee man can’t talk for us. They don’t represent us. So you don’t even have to worry about your UCC contracts, saying these guys are bound by a particular agreement, and tell your members to go back to work. They don’t have to do that. They don’t represent us. This is a human rights situation right here”.

Sometimes cross-union caucuses of trade unionist may serve as the base from which progressive or radical racialized people may engage in anti-racism activities in their unions or in the wider labour movement, as Abeje states:
I guess one of the most powerful groups that I can think of that has done that is the Solidarity Circle, which is made up of people whose history comes from all over. It was really powerful to be a part of this group at the first gathering in Canada. We met and talked about what’s going on in the labour movement and our community was shaped by aboriginal teachings, which I think not only to me but other people that were a part of that that weekend have told me was the first time they had ever done anything like that. And so it really built a strong solidarity with our Aboriginal sisters and brothers within, not only the movement, but generally the community around how issues that are affecting their community and also at work are completely not being addressed and how powerful their lifestyle is and how they treat each other and thinking about human rights and environment rights and political rights; and it was really powerful.

Abeje adds:

…if it wasn’t for that weekend and the way that that weekend was shaped, the solidarity circle wouldn’t be as strong as it is today. And maybe we wouldn’t have worked on as many campaigns as acts of resistance that we have up until today if we hadn’t had that weekend; the way it was led and the way it was shaped and the framework of the weekend. I think it really created a strong bond between the whole group and was perfect that the group’s name was the Solidarity Circle because I really do feel like each member of the groups knows that they have a circle that is surrounding them of folks that maybe not from their specific community, but that support them and are willing to fight for the rights of workers of colour within the movement and within the community.
The effectiveness of informal constituency groups may be affected by the lack of requisite resources needed to advance racial justice, a concern raised by Ling:

Ineffectualness has everything to do with the lack of financial independence and the autonomy of being able to stand and represent workers of colour and be directly accountable. So to me I think it’s with each worker of colour putting in $10 or whatever. My sense is maybe it’s time to look at organizing differently all these caucus or through CBTU, ACLA and other constituency groups it’s saying “This is our person to represent us. We will sponsor so they’ll be free to take a position that is acceptable to us” rather then beholding to the politics of the different unions.

The informal caucuses or unrecognized constituency groups do not have access to staff support, financial resources from the union or payment for lost wages. These caucuses can play an important role in energizing the formal groups and push them to be stronger advocates for the members of their constituencies. It should be noted, based on my experience, that the activists in the caucuses are already busy with other union work, in addition to their paid employment obligations.

Modupe recognizes these problems, but argues that the fight must go on:

Sometimes we have to do an end-run around the so-called organized process. Maybe going to the just once a month meeting. Just can’t do it, won’t do it. I think basically what we have to do is all of us have to take some leadership and work from outside and around these elected folks. That’s the only way I think we can do this. And we can translate that same thing with voting, whether voting locally or nationally or what have you, but I don’t know. I don’t see any signs saying that these organized entities are in fact enhancing solidarity.
Resistance through autonomous organizing

Union members sometimes seek out or form autonomous community-based labour oriented organization to push for the rights of racialized workers. One area in which this has been done is migrant workers’ rights. Abeje recounts her organization’s struggle to create an independent space in the labour movement to advance the interests of racialized migrant workers:

I’m also part of a group called [Migrant Workers Solidarity Committee], and the labour movement has jumped all over in the last little while, not only precarious work, but specifically looking at migrant worker rights and what’s happening. I am constantly questioning whether it’s sincere or here’s another group of unorganized workers that the labour movement can try and organize and get members and dues and all of those things because called Justice for Migrant Workers has been doing this work for almost 10 years now where we honestly partner with migrant workers and help with their cases and getting media attention for what’s going on in the fields, and demand coroner’s inquests and raise money for people that are sent back home or are sick or whatever.

Abeje points to the insincere or exclusionary nature of the solidarity expressed by established labour organizations around issues that are energized by racialized-led and autonomous labour groups:

And we will hear about meetings that the labour movement is having around this issue [migrant workers-related ones] with no invitations. And we’ll organize vigils for workers that have passed away and all of a sudden nine different [trade union] affiliates will come with their members and the president of the Ontario
Federation of Labour and the local labour council want to speak, but have the nerve to send out the flyer of our vigil and take off who it was organized by so it looked like they did it. And then because they’re a larger organization with more funding when the media comes, they’re the first people that get interviewed. Abeje adds that the mainstream unions downplay race:

And on top of that, the issue for them doesn’t include immigration, doesn’t include race, but is mostly about health and safety, which for them is a safe way of tackling this issue. And it’s so infuriating and it happens time and time and time again. And so when there’s some yells from the crowd about the labour movement not partnering equally with community they’ll put on a show and “OK, we’re going to have a meeting with one of the Ministers, so maybe we should ask for representation, somebody from this local community group to come to the meeting, but we won’t let them talk. What they get to say is limited, and maybe we’ll even give them some speaking notes”. What is that? That’s not how you create equal partnerships and not how you sincerely fight for worker’s rights without having an agenda that means numbers for you and money for you. That’s not social justice. That’s not human rights or worker’s rights, which to me is all the thing, but not how it’s looked at from the movement.

**Racialized trade union women at the intersection of race and gender**

This section will respond to the following question, “In what ways are racialized trade union women’s experiences affected by gender and race oppression?” Racism and sexism are structural categories used in Canadian society to order the experience of racialized people and women, respectively.
When viewed separately racialized women could be left out of the definition of who are raced and gendered in a racist patriarchy, all else being equal. Racialized women may be told that they should bring up questions of racism among the racialized because the discussion of racism could cause division with the ranks of “women.” A similar argument is made among the racialized because they also fear that the any attention to sexism could weaken solidarity in the fight for racial justice. In this case, racialized would be directed to bring up sexism within the organizing work of women. We will now take a look at how this race and gender discourse is experienced by racialized women in trade union settings.

Singh is quite emphatic in his observation about the status of racialized women in leadership and staff positions in trade union organizations:

I think the proof is in the pudding. Do you see racialized women in staffing positions? Many? Hardly any? Do you see them in appointed positions? On boards? I don’t. So obviously there are barriers.

Within labour organizations, women as a group are placed in a structurally subordinated position relative to men. Ming shares the challenge that racialized women experience within trade unions:

I think racialized women, I think, always walk the line… I think all people do, but racialized women in particular always walk the line of trying to figure out: “Is this worth a fight?” I think often times we have to ask ourselves when incidents happen “Am I going to fight this incident?” At least that’s the way I always feel. Sometimes I’m like “Well, will I let this specific incident slide or will I kind of kick up a fuss?” And I think often times what racialized women will do, not all
the time, is we often second-guess ourselves. “Did he really need to say it like that?” or a constant self-censoring. I think we almost have to develop networks, because within our trade unions, when we have quote-unquote people beneath us who are white men, they don’t always do the work we assign them, or we’ve got to ask twice as many times to get something done. So I think we often create these internal support systems because otherwise we wouldn’t be able to last.

Kojo, an elementary teacher, shares his perspective on the standing of issues that affect racialized women in his union:

Because the majority of people in our trade union are White and are women, the issues of racialized women don’t necessarily go to the top of the list for sure. The types of action that are enacted and the level of resource mobilization undertaken are good indication of the extent to which an issue is at “the top of the list”. Kojo elaborated:

There are other types of actions that we could have taken up with this [the cutting of educational assistants who were largely racialized women]. We could have done some type of Work to Rule, we could have done some strike action, we could have come up with some strong positions publicly to educate people, but …other women didn’t see that as a cause that they were going to push forward on the agenda because they aren’t part of our particular union. So then going back to the sort of solidarity question… So how is it there was no solidarity when all of these women of colour from those types of positions are being let go?

Kojo argues that issues that mainly affect racialized women did not figure highly on the radar of the union. White union sisters in that teachers’ union with the power of the majority vote did not give the most robust forms of support to racialized women.
Modupe presents the complex ways that gender and race politics is played out in the union movement:

So here it is, racialized sisters, probably they want to just sit on the board [of trade unions and other labour organizations]. Because we have to understand that those brothers, even though we are racialized in the labour movement have more affinity with our European brothers than we do with our African sisters because of sexism. And what happens is that unfortunately most racialized people in the labour movement come to mimic their European sisters and in some cases act as barriers to their own, to their own membership [and] own brothers in leadership. And I think it’s endemic of the movement.

The message of gender advancement that is pushed by white women leaders and activists appears to exclude racialized women, as Singh observes:

It is becoming more White and more White sisters only. There are some temporary assignments that have been given to some individuals, which, in my opinion, are not qualified, and when we are talking about employment equity in this organization, we have vacancies where we can bring individuals on temporary basis to go into these positions. And I can give you wonderful examples in every province where there have been white sisters hired. We could have hired an Aboriginal sister or a sister of colour to take on those temporary assignments.

Singh is referring to the structural racism in the hiring process in the union and the way that whiteness is privileged when it comes to getting more “women” onto trade unions’
staff. Among White women activists, there appear to be a muted response to these practices.

Singh provides an explanation for the near exclusion of racialized women from the higher job classifications within the staff of trade unions:

When issues to promote women come from days of affirmative action, employment equity, the major party that has benefited from those measures has been White women. Racialized women haven’t really gained that much. Maybe to begin with they were not in the higher level positions within the organization, and when employment equity or the affirmative action programs looked at improving the situation for women to go into managerial positions, it would be the White women who gained because White women would be the next in line for women [going in]to managerial positions. So in that regard racialized women haven’t really succeeded. And also we did not have many racialized women in our workplaces. I mean you being in Toronto may have a very different view because in Ontario you see a lot of racialized women in [unionized] workplaces – in our nursing homes and our university sector. Whereas in other provinces, municipal level, very few racialized women you will see. Now with greater immigration going into some of the other provinces, you may see some women in municipal positions, particularly in BC you would see that. If I went back to Saskatoon today, I still will not find racialized women in City Hall.

However, bringing racialized women into a union’s staff and not having them start at entry level is not unprecedented. However, the evidence suggests that the White
leadership lacks the political will to ensure that the staff looks like the membership that it serves or the community in which the union is located.

Dennis highlights the challenges for racialized women within unions:

…from what I can understand even in the women’s committee there are issues of differing discrimination and harassment and barriers that are faced by women of colour than of white Caucasian women. And I don’t think that the women of colour in the women’s committee feel like they’re being heard, or they’re on an equal playing field. But in our union, you see a lot of racialized men as presidents or on committees or as leaders, but you don’t see that with women of colour. There’s a huge void, and by no means am I down upon my sisters. I think that there are a number of reasons for that and some of them are barriers too. And then some of them are just regular social barriers that people listen to a man first, the voice of a strong man over the woman.

If the gendered organizational or structural barriers block women in general, they would be expected to have a more insidious impact on racialized women.

Dennis adds some questions about barriers that pertain to some racialized women:

But I think there’s a lack of strong labour sisters of colour that are coming up in the forefront. I haven't met many of them, and they’re all very strong and in terms of when we’re working on the committee and stuff like that, but they’re quiet, of the ones that I’ve been on. I’m not trying to generalize because I have met strong ones, but I’m saying of the ones that I met the majority have been quiet…on the committee. Good insight when you’re meeting within the committee, but as a group, as you’re presenting on the front, they may not have been exposed to a
number of public speaking initiatives to have that confidence. It may be their personality that they’re quiet, very, very insightful mindset, very helpful in terms of the focus when you’re planning things….

It would seem like Dennis is contradicting himself about the institutional racist barriers that excludes racialized women by appealing to individualized, personality-informed reasons for the absence for this group of women from leadership. However, this meekness and quiet behaviour may be observed among some racialized men when they are in the presence of White men, especially those with the organizational power. Yet the same men who demonstrate this type of compliant behaviour in certain contexts will indict some racialized women for doing the same in most organizational situations.

Further, to build upon Dennis’s argument, even many racialized men do not take on senior executive positions out of fear that they are not fully prepared or they have to wait their turn. It is my observation that many members of equity-seeking groups overestimate the level of knowledge and skills that they need for senior leadership positions.

In any system of domination, the entrenched actors self-interestedly favour aspirants for elected office who are deemed as conciliatory, as Kojo indicates:

Both at the provincial level, although she’s not from Toronto, and at the local level, at my particular local office there are Black women in two significant positions. But when you hear them talk and watch them carry themselves, it’s very much in a conciliatory way, how am I going to get everyone together type of thing? Some people might say they’re having to walk white to be able to be
accepted, versus someone who will take a much more “lioness” approach and then will be dubbed “Oh, she’s unreasonable or she’s this and she’s that” type.

Kojo’s “lioness” versus conciliatory characterization is quite similar to Dennis’s characterization of the Malcolm X vs. Martin Luther King personalities. The need “to walk White” could be deployed to avoid fulfilling the stereotype of the angry Black or racialized woman syndrome. Conversely, following the expected behavioural norm could be a way for some categories of racialized to affirm the standards of the model minority person. Yet it has the effect of neutralizing indignation and vigorous activism to change systemic behaviour around race and gender or gendered racism.

A form of stereotyping may be at work in labour organizations with respect to the ease with which racialized women or certain categories of racialized women may be controlled by the White power structure in the union, Ling suggests:

You know we should do a study because it’s my sense that within the labour movement they actually hire more racialized women in positions on the basis of their own racist and sexist perceptions that women of colour are easier to contain and control and manipulate. So it’s a safer choice than men of colour. It takes away some of that confrontation edge. But I mean that’s my perception. I don’t have numbers to back up my… it’s more my observation. But then when you are hired, when you are not… when you’re not deemed as loyal, then the retaliation is harsher. They will buy off men of colour. Like in my personal case they terminated me. I probably was one of the, for the last 15 years, the only termination by this labour organization.
Under patriarchal stereotypes, women are seen as passive and pliable to organizational control and not a mortal threat to White patriarchal domination. But racialized women may be seen as being “easier to contain and control and manipulate”. According to the Ling, the issue is complex, because the behaviour towards the recalcitrant racialized women can be vicious:

When they see that you’re not being grateful for the opportunities that they have accorded you and that you actually try to resist and not be quote-unquote loyal, then I think it’s… and this is my own theory too… the retaliation is more vicious … it’s almost like an abusive relationship. You have to be dependent on them for a livelihood so one is expected to walk the line. And if you deviate, then that’s when the repercussion is harsher and it’s also a lesson for others to say “Hey, you’re off”… So then it creates two effects: it’s the silencing of the other potential allies that you might have. Secondly, and then excluding you and ridicule you as someone who’s undeserving or, by being terminated, you are not good enough. Right! I mean they can’t do it to me, but they do it to a whole lot of others too.

The condition of racialized women in trade unions is impacted by the dual reality of gender and racial subordination. On the surface racialized women may appear to be making more progress than racialized men, but it may be that the power hierarchy in the labour movement does not see the former as a material threat. I have observed that racialized women are more likely to be in elected to positions in labour federations, especially in the affirmative action seats. But co-optation or the use of the organizational
stick still make for an untenable existence. There is much to be learned on this issue as well as constructing strategies to overcome the relevant barriers.

**The state of education on race, resistance and change in the labour movement**

This section of the research project will attend to the following question: “How are racialized trade union members experiencing labour education and what types of educational initiatives and programmes are needed to promote racial justice/anti-racism?” The Canadian labour movement has its own educational infrastructure that is used to prepare its members for the assumption of leadership and other functional roles in the execution of its stated goals. Educational initiatives may be carried out at the level of the individual local right up to that of the Canadian Labour Congress. There are trade union activists who have not had the benefits of a formal postsecondary education, but have used union education to achieve the equivalent of such an educational milestone.

Unions may use their educational programmes or courses to help root out ideas and behaviours that contribute to systemic oppression based on race, gender, sexual orientation, Aboriginal status and disabilities. Singh sums up the essential role of labour education in challenging structural exclusion:

Education plays a key role in terms of breaking the barriers and creating better understanding of the issues, not just amongst our community, but also the mainstream who eventually end up being the decision makers to a certain extent. But if our people from our communities are not part of those educationals [in a planning, designing and executing capacity] then you cannot see any results.
An important source of union education takes place through mentorship and other informal means. The labour movement uses mentorship, which is largely unstructured and informal, to socialize and prepare some of its members for leadership as well as to understand the written and unwritten organizational rules and means to access power and resources. On the question of mentorship by white allies, Ling states:

…I think we have enough capacity to mentor our own activists. …I think this is where I find it really patronizing that we have to rely on white leadership to mentor workers of colour because… [that] makes them so self-righteous and so pure. It just drives me crazy because …I have a lot of good friends who are white allies, and I also maintain a bit of healthy skepticism… I can count my trusted white allies on one hand after all these years. Because I know at the end of the day they can’t help but exert that sense of white privilege. That’s where the games of… it’s not a game… as I said earlier, as an optimist, I see people, the goodness that they have, and that’s how I can maintain a genuine friendship and not being phony here. Each person has her own good qualities. I just don’t need them to… I guess part of it is maybe it’s a self-protection or maybe it’s also I’m being much wiser in not expecting that much from white allies. If they can deliver us this far, I’m happy, but I would never count on them to take us to the shore, or to help us get to there. So it’s recognizing that yeah, we can be allies, I will work with anyone, but also being quite cautious on when they want to be the champion on my issues.

The lack of trust is an issue when it comes when comes to being mentored by white allies. As indicated by Ling, “white privilege” and the sense of superiority may get implicated even during an act of comradeship.
There is another factor that works against some racialized trade union members not having any appreciable degree of faith and trust in even white allies. The White leadership and allies, for the most part, do not attend the courses on racism and Singh sees such a state of affairs as being problematic:

If the leaders or their opponents were also there, so their battle with them [racialized anti-racist activists] becomes easier because they are also on the same page [with respect to an understanding of racism]. They [racialized activists] are well-equipped whereas the leadership doesn’t know anything about what racism is, so you start talking to them about racism, it becomes very difficult. They don’t understand. They don’t want to understand because it’s too easy not to understand: “I don’t have to deal with it, it’s not my issue. It’s their issue. Let them deal with it”.

While Ling has her doubts about the reliability of White allies and Singh is perturbed by White leaders not exposing themselves to learning situations that would help in changing their attitudes and behaviours, Modupe does not have any faith in the educational structures of the labour movement:

I think what they’re trying to do is copy from bourgeois society…. I think what we have now is a group of people trying to teach us statistics, how to outwit the boss at the bargaining table. I mean you can’t outwit him in the first place, it’s his system. So I don’t know. I don’t have much faith in the labour education that is here right now. We have to clean house and adopt a principle in terms… it’s naturally the local union or the national union or what have you, has to be for the benefit of society…. We have to clean house.
Modupe is calling for a labour education that is not guided by the same fundamental ideological assumptions as those found within the dominant capitalist and racist society. Below he calls for grassroots, self-organized educational initiatives that represent a radical departure from the existing state of affairs:

You know in labour organizations membership can form their own [educational] cooperative. And they can develop, they can get support to go to conventions, get your own 6% dues just like how you do for a defense fund, we could have a cooperative fund. And that can build real education. That’s how we have to do it. Whether they think we’re treasurers or not we have to do that because it’s not anything radical. It can’t follow the lead of what’s been going on in the past. It will get us nowhere. But the fact of the matter is once we get those things going the others will see. They will come or the ones who were kicking and screaming will come around. They will come around.

Singh offers a number of ways for the leadership and staff members in unions to create the space for racialized trade unionists to have an impact on the contents of labour education courses:

Our people have to be part of the education, not only as participants, part of education in terms of developing those courses, not just the racialized courses which we are doing a fine job, I think in terms of having them as a sounding board or a reference group and having input form them in terms of what the course should look like and what the course should be, but that happens only with courses like racial justice or people of colour committee, you know they’ll have
folks from the anti-racism committee etc. But it should be part and parcel of each and every course that we have in [the Union.]

Singh points to pertinent issue of that of the ghettoization of teaching and learning around anti-racist education:

Each educational that we have should work through an equity lens. It should have the input and the perspective of our communities in terms of how it impacts that. If we have case studies, for example, in any kind of a course, whether it be grievance handling or a stewarding course, then those cases or case studies should reflect our communities. There should be a case study on racism, or it should be a case study on discrimination, or it should be a case study on employment equity. It should be integrated. Anti-racism perspective should be integrated into every educational that we have if we want to see any progress.

Ming critiques the absence of a comprehensive integration of racialized trade unionists and their struggle for justice into labour educational programmes:

But I think in terms of education, I think looking at historic history in terms of what racialized people have been able to accomplish both inside and outside official labour union structures. I think that’s really key. I think we don’t know much about our history in terms of, again, being marginalized and how we were able to overcome a lot of that. I think understanding a little bit of that story in terms of education is really important. It’s not just important for us, but it’s also pretty important for White trade unionists, both allies and not, to know that history because I think that history is glossed over.
The lack of recognition of structural exclusion is a source of irritation or barrier to the development of true solidarity between racialized and white trade unionists, but Ming sees a curriculum that teaches about the multiple and intersecting oppressions as the way to affect a person’s experience of organizational life and as a necessary element of union anti-oppression education:

They don’t know in what way racialized people are marginalized and when they talk about bringing in racialized people to the labour movement, again, it’s a very patronizing Big Brother attitude. “I’ll bring you in”, same thing with the organizers, “I’ll bring you in” as opposed to understanding the historical barriers that have actually kept people out. But education, I do believe in anti-oppression training and education. I think that’s just one part of an overall strategy in terms of dealing with racism in the labour movement. But I, by no means, have a plan in my head in terms of how to get from here to there.

In a similar vein, Singh points to a particular challenge that contributes to an anti-oppression or intersectionality approach losing steam or falling from the agenda of the education department or function with a union:

…but what’s been happening is a new Director comes, he was at a different level, different person comes in, she has to take over from where the other guy left, and things keep falling through the cracks. And quite often we are busy with some other stuff, and we let things fall through the cracks. And then it’s forgotten. And all of a sudden “Oh my God, how comes it doesn’t reflect this thing”. Then you start back again. I think there has to be this constant monitoring or constant board that kind of looks and reviews and sends feedback. I think this is a very tall order,
but it has to be done. If we want to make sure that the educationals that we have are doing justice in terms of educating our members and educating our members at large from other communities to have a better understanding on our issues, then that kind of monitoring has to be there because we don’t really know what’s going on there unless we watch it.

The above problem is likely the result of the absence of a buy-in from the top leaders as well as an anti-oppression approach to teaching human rights is not institutionalized within the operation of the trade union or labour organization.

Equity courses usually experience under-subscription challenges when they are placed on the schedule of available workshops, as Ming states:

Leaving aside the issue of intersectionality, just like these one off workshops, I think, are very limited, obviously. I also find… first of all, half our [human rights or equity] courses are often canceled, which obviously shows there’s not a demand for them, which either shows we’re not getting the word out there, and/or people aren’t interested. And obviously you’ll often find that you might be preaching to the converted, do you know what I mean? So it’s really tough.

By comparison, courses such as bargaining, health and safety, workers compensation, labour law, pensions, facing management and stewarding are generally oversubscribed.

On Ming’s point about “preaching to the converted” wherein the anti-racism or human rights courses are largely attended by the relevant equity-seekers, it may be facilitated by the attitude or action of the White leadership, according to Singh:

The educational that we have can prepare our members to get into leadership positions, can prepare our members to get into other activist roles within the
organization. But the problem remains, are our members in those courses or are they taking those courses? Sadly the perception of our white leadership is if there is an anti-racism course being offered “Oh, Ajamu is there, [Singh] is there, [Latoya] is there. They should be going to those courses”. That mindset has to be changed. And they’re not going to say “Ajamu would be good for an Occupational Health & Safety course”, or [Singh] should be good for the Environmental Committee course or Privatization course”, or “[Latoya] should do excellent on Women’s Issues.” So we have to not only educate our people, we have to educate our leadership also that these courses are not meant for our [racialized] community. You don’t convert the converted. And we had a training in New Brunswick not too long ago where I was shocked. The seventeen members [course participants] were all racialized in this racial justice course.

Informal learning is a basic component of our educational experience in organizations and the wider society. Ming argues for informal learning in the labour movement to break barriers and to empower racialized and other excluded groups:

You don’t always learn everything in the classroom. I think it’s just from trade unionists, racialized trade unionists, trade unionist women, day in and day out, just kind of breaking those barriers, but you can’t teach that. That just happens. People learn to change their behaviours when they interact with someone else who breaks their stereotype. I think education is important, but I think it’s just a part of an overall strategy. And I think it’s coming into contact with people who break those stereotypes who challenge you, maybe who you build relationships with over time. That will actually alter your mindset. But I think it’s very naïve to think that
a one-off weekend workshop will undo an entire lifetime of stereotyping that someone has built up over time. But it’s important, but I know it’s not the cure-all. Ming identifies behaviour modeling as a motive force of change. Too often people from socially dominant groups have mastered the human rights or equity language, but their discriminatory behaviour or organizational practices have not changed.

**Concluding thoughts**

Resistance to structural oppression is a challenging task even under the most favourable of conditions, and it is particularly difficult when the groups doing so are from the ethnically or racially dominant group in society. As is evident from the racialized trade unionists’ accounts of elections, constituency groups, the act of speaking truth to power and the deployment of covert tactics as forms of resistance, they are fraught with danger. Systems of power were not designed to accommodate opposition that is likely to shift control and authority from the principal political actors who traditionally benefit from the existing organizational arrangement. It should not come as a surprise that many of the interviewees who are activists, in their own rights, do not necessarily use overt forms of resistance tactics. That state of affairs has nothing to do with their courage and commitment to fundamental change. It has a lot to do with racialized trade unionists’ understanding and keen awareness of the organizational balance of power in their locals and other trade union political structures informed by institutional racism.

Labour education can be a critical area through which members maybe become aware of racism, sexism and other forms of oppression. Equally important to this project of education for critical consciousness is the role that an anti-oppression and class informed labour education can play in the realm of action. It is with justification that
Modupe dismisses labour education as being useless and irrelevant. The current education is quite pragmatic and bread-and-butter focused with very little attention to issues of structural relevance, which would inform ideas of members and their political/ideological commitment.

However, other racialized trade unionists offered ideas on how labour education may be used as an ally in the fight against structural and personal racism. The unfortunate thing about the advanced propositions is that they are not new and many anti-racist activists have suggested them in the past. It is a matter of political will as well as having anti-racist forces being sufficiently mobilized and organized to force a principled commitment to racial justice from the leadership and rank-and-file members.

The labour movement has much more work to do in removing the barriers that force racialized members and racialized women in particular to expend energy and resources fighting their own labour organizations. They would rather spend their time struggling against the employers or use these vital resources to seek structural change in the Canadian political economy. But as long as they are faced with exclusion, resistance will continue. The challenge for racialized trade unionists is whether they are seeking to be integrated into an unchanged structure or the strategic goal being to transform these exclusionary processes and structures so as to unleash organized labour’s potentiality as a movement for social emancipation.
Chapter 7:  
Discussion and Implications of the Findings

On some positions, Cowardice asks the question, "Is it safe?" Expediency asks the question, "Is it politic?" And Vanity comes along and asks the question, "Is it popular?" But Conscience asks the question "Is it right?" And there comes a time when one must take a position that is neither safe, nor politic, nor popular, but he must do it because Conscience tells him it is right. – Martin Luther King, Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution (31 March, 1968)

This section of the thesis engages or discusses the results of the two preceding chapters. The imperative that inspired or animated this research project was the observed marginalized condition of racialized people in the Canadian labour movement and my desire to understand what they are doing to change the status quo. It should be noted that I am very much a part of this research project, as a trade unionist and activist in the labour movement. My voice and experience are very much privileged and centred in this research project that explores the issues of race, resistance and co-optation in the Canadian labour movement.

Of equal importance to this research is the ways in which the organizational structures and processes in the labour movement are deployed against threat to it from racialized members. The mere presence of a racialized trade union member in a responsible position at work could be deemed a violation of the norms of subordination, as in the case of Cassandra Charlton who anonymously received death threats from colleagues in the correctional services in Ontario (Powell, 2007). The cost of opposition to instances of racism may be life altering, which dictate or temper the form of resistance that is undertaken by the victimized racialized trade union member.

In an example of the latter case, two African-Canadian staffers with the Montreal office of the Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC) union shared with the Montreal
Gazette their experience of racism from anonymous, but suspected colleagues, in the form of hate mail. But according to the reporter, ‘Both men, who are francophone, requested that their names not be used for fear of consequences for their future careers’ (Scott, 2011). The newspaper was so moved by this expression of racist animus that it asserts in an editorial:

Unfortunately, this particular case goes beyond mere insensitivity. Hostile work environments require strong measures, including firings and fines. If that's what is needed to pull the recalcitrant members of the PSAC into the new age of equal rights, that's what should be done (Montreal Gazette, 2011).

But an indication of the hostile work environment that is likely to produce silence and conformity by racialized people may be taken from the denial of involvement by PSAC’s Montreal staff (Jérôme Turcq, Quebec regional executive vice-president); not a word of solidarity and support from colleagues at the Montreal office; and condemnation of and discouraging of attendance at a workplace sensitivity meeting by Mathieu Dumont, a regional organizer (Scott, 2011).

The reality of racialized union members being a minority in their unions with their majoritarian basis for power and the setting of priorities facilitates their structured exploitation based on race and at the intersection of race and gender. Given the systemic nature of racial oppression and exclusion, individuals feel vulnerable in mounting overt opposition. Yet some people find ways to resist their assigned social role and others may select the path or option that will not cause disruption in their lives.

I will return to the five research questions that underpin the research project by engaging in a discourse of the main findings. This engagement will use the themes that
emerged in the research to frame the discussion. The preceding element will give rise to an exploration of the limitations of the study and its contribution to the labour studies, critical theory and organizational resistance literature. I will end the chapter with suggestions for future research.

**Discussion of the research questions**

1. In what ways does racism shape the experience of racialized trade union members in the Canadian labour movement?

   We live in a political space (Canada) that likes to think of itself as being different from the United States with its well documented experience of plantation enslavement of Africans, Jim Crow apartheid and continued racial oppression. In the cultural mythology of this nation, Canada presents itself as being different from its neighbour. However, Backhouse (1999) attempts to disabuse White Canadians of this self-interested take on its history of racial oppression:

   Canadian history is rooted in racial distinctions, assumptions, laws, and activities, however fictional the concept of ‘race’ may be. To fail to scrutinize the records of our past to identify the deeply implanted tenets of racist ideology and practice is to acquiesce in the popular misapprehension that depicts our country as largely innocent of systemic racial exploitation. Nothing could be more patently erroneous (p. 7).

The research participants were quite clear in their understanding of racism as a structural force in society as well as manifesting itself at a personal level with respect to individual racist behaviour. However, the subtleness and ambiguity of racism may cause participants to wonder about the ultimate cause that inspired a particular action.
Notwithstanding, any confusion about the expression of racist intent or behaviour in certain interaction, they, as a group, have racial innocence about racism in their unions, workplaces and the broader Canadian society.

Yet while innocence persists in not recognizing the systemic or structural basis of racist oppression, Dei, Karumanchery and Karumanchery-Luik (2004) characterize the preceding state of affairs as whiteness, which is “defined by a privilege that goes unseen: an invisibility that in many ways places our oppressor outside of the racial sphere, vested with a power and social advantage which they themselves need not consider – ‘that’s just the way it is’” (p. 84).

However, to many of the people who live the reality of race-informed social marginalization, its structural nature is quite obvious. This consciousness was evident among the participants in this research project. For the most part, they saw the mediating force of race and its ability to block their access to opportunities and resources in the labour movement and the wider society. In spite of some of the initiatives that organized labour has taken to address racism such as the creation of affirmative action seats and officially sanctioned constituency groups to represent the voice of the racialized as well as producing policy papers, taskforces and resolutions, it feels like those measures haven’t gone to the core of rooting out racism.

The above situation smacks of tokenistic gesture towards anti-racism practice and seems more directed at containment of the unsettling possibilities that robust activism could bring about in trade unions. Kivel (2002) indentifies ways in which co-optation takes place in organizations and society and they aptly frames the lived experience of racialized trade unionists:
The first and simplest stage of tokenism occurs when a small and insignificant number of people of color are allowed to integrate a school or workplace. Or we add a few names and pictures of people of color to a textbook or a wall. We treat people of color and their contributions as exceptions. People of color are extremely isolated in these situations and acutely vulnerable to personal abuse. They do not have much support and usually succeed only if they assimilate by thoroughly internalizing the values of the institution (p. 235).

Beverley Johnson, a former member and staffer of the Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU) believes that the presence of racism compared to earlier times “is both the same and different” (Edelson, 2009, p. 67). Such an observation and declaration by Beverley Johnson may come as a shock to many Whites in the house of labour, because of the visible signs of progress (Edelson, 2009).

The above divergence of understanding between many Whites and racialized trade union members who feel comfortable in offering a counter-narrative that asserts that racial justice is being advanced are rooted in an awareness of the continued pernicious nature of structural racism. The research participants identified differential access to elected office, the lack of efficacy of the officially-sanctioned elected or appointed committees representing racialized workers, underrepresentation on union staff, delegations going abroad and prioritizing issues of relevance to them at the bargaining tables, among other issues as evidence of structural racism influencing opportunities for racial minorities in the labour movement.

Marie Clarke Walker (2009), an executive vice-president, racialized woman and one of four full-time officers at the Canadian Labour Congress, concurs with the sobering
assessment of the interviewees on the effectiveness of the representational structures, especially at the provincial and national labour federations:

In terms of other equity groups, there are many at both provincial and national levels who believe that designated seat holders, although elected by their equity constituencies, merely give unions they represent an extra vote on the executive, rather than their constituents a stronger voice. The prevailing view is that these members do not really have constituencies, that their purpose is to simply say their “piece” at the executive board level, and that they have no real power to create change or, for that matter, make decisions that would effect change for the workers who elected them. Moreover, very few of the equity committees, working groups, or designated positions created have budgets or action plans and therefore have no real ability to bring necessary change to encourage equity in unions…. Consequently, regardless of the existence of new equity structures, the people in charge are still mostly middle-aged white men, and although they talk about equity and equality on a regular basis, in most cases they are not willing to give up, or share, power (p. 88).

The participants were very cognizant of the above scenario and it breeds a certain degree of cynicism about the usefulness of participation. Yet all of the interviewed trade union members are still engaged in labour activism, and I would assert that it is the hope for a better future that inspires continued organizational involvement. Based on my observation and experience in the labour movement some racialized members who were highly involved in the local trade unions have essentially “retired” from this type of activism. They are disillusioned by the widening gap between trade union rhetoric about
equity and extant practice as well as the general “disconnect between them [the leaders] and their members” (Wall, 2009, p. 81).

2) How do leaders and the structures within labour organizations render harmless the racial justice challenges of racialized trade unionists?

Organizational or societal systems were created to perpetuate themselves and execute their stated mission or serve the interests of their creators or the existing leadership cliques. Trade union structures are not different from other organizations in the wider society that mimic and affirm the different forms of privilege and hierarchy, which emanate from the different systems of oppression. The carrot and the stick are two instruments that are attendant with the exercise of power in trade union movement organizations. Racialized and other members who demonstrated the expected or sanctioned behaviour are likely to be rewarded with the carrot, while those become uppity and deviate from the script will get the stick or harassment and other disagreeable “treats” (Das Gupta, 2007). The participants in this research project shared their observations of the manner in which staff jobs, elected positions, election as delegates to conferences, convention and other external activities, affirmative action seats and constituency representational equity structures are used as sites of cooptation.

With respect to staff jobs in trade unions, they could significantly boost a person’s annual income by $10,000 to $40,000 (depending on the level of income on being hired) and this pay increase would lead to access to a generous benefits package. The level of income that can be earned will cause racialized members to adopt the “Martin Luther King personality” as coined by an interviewee, Dennis, because one is not likely to be deemed as threatening to the status quo. It was not an accident that a racialized staff
member in my union cautioned me about my oppositional politics and it being a barrier to me getting a staff job. Further, when I look at the racialized members in CUPE who have been hired in Ontario in the last ten years, none of them could be considered a “union troublemaker”, that is, people who are very political and challenge the union bureaucrats to undertake union renewal and a strong equity agenda. This fear of challenging the union bureaucrats over race-related matters extends even into erstwhile autonomous, self-organized groups of racialized people.

A concern of the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists (CBTU – Ontario Chapter) in raising objection to OPSEU’s president running an African woman member against another African woman incumbent officer in the 2007 OFL elections revolved around not upsetting the chance of a CBTU executive member not getting a permanent appointment on that union’s staff. It is the economic vulnerability and powerlessness of many racialized members that give weight to staff jobs being used a carrots or its denial as a stick of correction. One of the research participants pointed to the role of the comfortable wage level serving as a silencing force in preventing racialized staffers and full-time officers being too assertive on matters of race and equity. The potential loss of the income is too high a price to pay for taking on the union bureaucracy on racial justice questions, or any other substantive conflictual. In the words of Lang, one of the interviewees, these staff or officer positions make people “safe and secure financially and there’s too much at stake” to get involved in “disruptive” behaviour. Yet staff positions are important sites in the struggle for equity, because they are arenas in which leadership over bread and butter issues such bargaining, health and safety compliance, member education and research is exercised (White, 1993).
The participants in this research were aware of the fact that the anti-racism committees in the unions are not spaces from which vigorous anti-racism activism is executed. With respect to the appointed national committees and working groups in my union, a national officer indicated to me in a conversation that these are advisory bodies and not advocacy/activist in their orientation. Even in unions where the equity committees are elected, the representatives may still temper the tenor of their anti-racist political assertion. Since they need the endorsement of their local to go to conventions as delegates and in some cases the union would have to sign off on their book-off request to attend to their the business of representing their constituency, there is still a considerable degree of leverage in the hands of the White leadership or even their racialized allies who hold decision-making power in locals.

It is a part of the approach of the union culture to reproduce itself. The structures of domination try to create “black/brown/red/yellow skin, white mask” replica of itself as way to “change” while remaining the same:

Another early stage of token integration occurs when white people include only those people of colour who fit a certain mold or support the traditional values of the institution. Any who might challenge traditional patterns are screened out, isolated, fired, or otherwise neutralized. People of colour are accepted for their decorative role and to deflect concerns about discrimination or diversity, not to be full participants (Kivel, 2002, p. 235).

When the above situation of co-optation plays out in unions it may be confusing to some members about the true state of anti-racism measures, while demoralizing to those in the know, because of the seeming futility of advancing the equity agenda when racialized
people are at the table doing nothing to justify their political existence. At least two
participants in this research project talked about the need to set criteria for the people
who seek to represent racialized members in affirmative action seats or on equity
committees and other organizational structures. The radical activists will seek ways to
resist co-optation regardless of whether they are in autonomous caucuses or official
structures of labour organizations.

3) What countervailing resistance actions do racialized trade unionists use to
promote racial justice in the Canadian labour movement?

It is rare for socially marginalized groups to not engage in acts of resistance to the
particular oppression that is imposed upon them. This state of affairs also applies to
racialized trade union members in the Canadian labour movement. The assertion of
agency against a dehumanizing system may not appear overt, but covert, everyday acts of
self-defining and fight-back may still be going on. The interviewees in this research
project used both overt and covert ways to advance the racial justice agenda. They
participate in elections, self-organized constituency groups, networking circles, officially
sanctioned racial-justice groups, informal and unstructured mentoring, educational
initiatives and discreet activities.

With respect to the kinds of countervailing actions that racialized trade unionists
use to challenge or eliminate their exclusion in the labour movement, most of their
initiatives are within the realm of sanctioned, legitimate behaviour. The overt acts of
resistance by some of the research participants centre upon involvement in election
campaigns in their local union organizations and in other union structures, wildcat strike
action and self-organizing in constituency groups that are autonomous of the official
union structures. It is quite instructive that none of the trade unionist interviewed indicated an involvement in overt oppositional acts such as writing critical statements about racism in their union or the need for union renewal. Except for some African Canadian workers who staged a work stoppage, as told by Modupe, open and militant defiance of the powers-that-be in the leadership of the union was not a part of the activist toolkit of the interviewees. Modupe was a part of the auto sector and these workers are quite aware of the extent to which they can cripple production by withdrawing their labour.

Resistance for these autoworker workers was likely shaped by the environment in which they have found themselves; minority status and potentially devastating political backlash. An excellent example is the case of the two racialized sisters who intended to vote for me at the 2010 CUPE Ontario convention, but changed their voting intention under pressure from the White leadership in their local. One of the sisters told me that in essence, sometimes one has to retreat in order to advance. A quick or studied assessment of the organizational context may lead some racialized trade unionists to advocate for racial justice through the prescribed, official way.

But the interviewees were clear that elected office provide the potential to affect things such as the contents of the bargaining proposal, access to staff jobs and its implication for employment equity and just the general place of anti-racist questions when they are at the table. There is some validity to the preceding assertion. Based on my experience at different leadership tables in the union movement, my presence and forthright advocacy will get certain issues on the agenda, but one may lose the substantive thrust of the initiative once it goes to the implementation stage. This state of
affairs is very similar to winning progressive legislations in the policy-making process only to lose it to the rules and regulations at the administrative/implementation level. But there is no doubt that being at the leadership table is a part of the process.

However, it is the mobilized base in continuous motion or state of activism that will push the anti-racist agenda forward. It was this level of mobilization that pushed the national leadership of CUPE to craft the *Vancouver Declaration* on human rights. This initiative followed African rank-and-file members seizing the microphones and momentarily controlling the conference, and then reading their demands for serious anti-racism measures into the proceedings. It was only the promise by the national President to address the conference on the next morning that gave back control of the human rights gathering to the leadership. Now the *Vancouver Declaration* is used as a document that legitimizes equity-seekers’ equity agenda claims. A racialized staff person attributed her hiring and that of a few other people to the overt act of resistance at the Vancouver conference.

4) In what ways are racialized trade union women’s experiences affected by gender and race oppression?

The interviewees all made the connection between race and gender and the way in which the confluence of these social categories determine the organizational possibilities for racialized women. Racialized women are claimed in the category of women when White women and men in the labour movement are making the case for gender equity. However, when the affirmative measures that address the manifestation of patriarchal exclusion are implemented, racialized women are either tokenistically included or outright excluded from the gender justice initiatives.
From the perspective of the interviewee and as articulated by Singh “they [racialized women] were not in the higher level positions within the organization” when employment equity measures are implemented in the union and the workplace. Singh is using employment equity in an expansive sense here. He includes involvement in the political leadership of union organizations and a racially representative workforce throughout the job classifications in the union and the employers’ staff. One interviewee asserts that only by taking into consideration the overlapping, crossing-cutting and intersecting nature of the different forms of oppression will the White leadership and even some racialized men be able to understand the condition of racialized women in the union. The fact that a male interviewee was sort of attributing the limited involvement of women in the leadership of the labour movement to personal characteristic may be taken as evidence of the extent to which educational work around intersecting multiple oppressions is needed.

Based on my observation of events in the labour federations and locals it appears that racialized women are making relatively greater progress in accessing leadership positions than racialized men. However, I would like to make it very clear that racialized women are underrepresented in organizational leadership roles throughout the labour movement. While the literature that I have surveyed is silent on this issue, it was broached by two of the research participants and occasionally comes up in conversation that I have had with racialized trade union members, both males and females. One interviewee speculated on the reason for this turn of events. She wondered about the extent to which patriarchal ideas are being relied on in the sense that racialized women are not seen as a threat in the way that racialized men would be. This based on the
assumption that men are more likely to be confrontational and that would be a matter of concern to White women and men in the leadership of the union organizations. But based on my observation, there is no shortage of racialized men who are willing to play the power game of “fake it ‘til you make it” so the explanation may draw upon multiple sources. Women are the majority of workers in the public sector and public sector union representation makes up the much greater portion of union membership. But the objective situation is that racialized women are underrepresented in women’s committees, women affirmative action leadership seats in labour federations, conventions committees, overseas delegations, the unions’ staff and their respective affiliated unions’ leadership.

5) How are racialized trade union members experiencing labour education and what types of educational initiatives and programmes are needed to promote racial justice/anti-racism?

The interviewees generally do not hold labour education in its current manifestation has been helpful in forging and advancing the anti-racism agenda. Too often it is the “choir” that shows up at the race-related or human rights courses. Labour education becomes another site for the perpetuation of the exclusion and domination of the racialized. In essence, this process of minimal participation in anti-racism and other human rights courses are also manifested at the level of the local union. It is racialized members who are targeted for registration in the anti-racist courses, because matters of race are seen as within their purview or they are merely seen as the natural constituents. Further, most white members in unions tend to believe they are not racists and do not engage in Ku Klux Klan type of racist rhetoric and action so these courses are irrelevant. Based on conversation that I have had with a number of white trade unionists, they
believe that anti-racist courses may cause them discomfort as result of the anticipated “blame whitey” tenor of the course’s contents.

Yet the people who need to take these anti-racist educationals are not the ones who register and participate. The White leaders, stewards and staffers should be lining up to take these courses. A racialized staffer in an anti-racist position in a public sector union asserted that staff members should be taking these courses because of the knowledge, skills and attitude that they will acquire to meet the needs of racialized members (Das Gupta, 2007). Therefore, many staffers do not have the analytical tools to effectively intervene in health and safety, bargaining, arbitration, and workers compensation situation where race is implicated but not in an obvious, self-evident way.

One interviewee sees the need for racialized members and especially their self-organized groups to carry out education among their racialized constituency. This is a necessary step in developing the capacity and capability to challenge the status. The question of the resources of money, space and time to do this type of work would come to the fore. Of the three aforementioned resources, getting the finances to do these independent educational initiatives would be the most challenging. But that could be creatively through self-funding and seeking resources from progressive locals.

Beyond the question of merely providing skill-building and organizing education is the issue of the ideological and political contents of the education that will be provided. One interviewee critiqued labour education for its tendency to “copy from bourgeois society” the fundamental economic leadership and political assumptions that maintain a capitalist and racist society. The preceding view is consistent with my observation and
experience in the labour movement, which was reflected in a letter to the editor of the 

*Toronto Star*:

The monumental failure of the labour movement in making ideological, material or political gains has much to do with the fact that the leadership of organized labour has thoroughly bought the bill of goods that capitalism is the only option for the working-class in Canada.

The only difference of opinion that that the labour bureaucrats have with the captains of industry and commerce is whether the Hobbesian or Anglo-American version of capitalism, where life is “nasty, brutish and short”, or the benign one found in Nordic countries such as Sweden, Norway and Denmark is the preferred way of exploiting labour. Rank-and-file trade union members are not in favour of choosing between the lesser of two evils.

Further, one of the ideological shackles on the minds of labour leaders is the fact that they have bought into the idea that Canada is a largely middle-class society. Yet, they are in the contradictory position of representing the working-class. I am sick and tired of being sick and tired of hearing the top labour leaders and social democratic politicians arguing about their objective mission being that of protecting the declining middle-class (Nangwaya, 2010, A18).

Labour education would have to take an anti-oppression approach as was identified by an interviewee to get to the core of oppression in its intersection, crosscutting and overlapping features.
Interpreting the results

The central purpose of this research project was to explore the nature of the organizational resistance experience of racialized trade unionists with respect to racism in the Canadian labour movement. The exploratory findings highlight the pernicious and enduring character of racism, overt forms of resistance not being the dominant form of resistance and challenges of officially-sanctioned labour education and the possibilities and challenges of self-organizing and constituency groups.

Racism and white skin privilege have proven to be enduring features of the Canadian labour movement. It may be reasonably assumed that with the labour movement being about defending the rights of the working-class and the recognition as articulated by a racialized that “we are divided by race but united by class” (Lopes & Thomas, 2006, p. 204), organized labour’s leadership would have clued into the necessity for a substantive effort to end white supremacy within its structures. The fight against racism in the labour movement is almost as old as its emergence with industrialization in Canada in the 1870s and has certainly continued to today (Das Gupta, 2007). It is quite clear that the overt racist exclusion of the past no longer obtains within the house of labour (Das Gupta, 2007; Edelson, 2009; Walker, 2009) However, the presence of union equity statements, policy on anti-racism, the creation of affirmative action seats, public pronouncements on racism in society, courses on racism; task forces and reports on racism, regular or ritualistic anti-racism conferences and racial justice resolutions, and appointments to standing committees have serve to make labour organizations oblivious to the systemic nature of racism within its ranks mask the more subtle expression of white privilege (Walker 2009).
The participants in this research all recognized that the interests and needs of racialized trade union members are not strategically placed at the centre of the labour movement’s agenda. They have to merely look at the race of the people who are largely given the opportunity to ascend the ladder of trade union employees or staffer, participate in conventions, conferences, labour education classes or overseas delegations, serve on labour unions’ standing committees, serve on executive committees and boards of labour organizations, access union book-offs (reimbursement of wages and benefits to the employer for member time-off to do union work) as well as the low resonance of issues of interest to racialized members at the bargaining table and in the grievance process. It is not a question of the ignorance of the White leadership about the way that racism maintains the subordination of racialized members. It is fundamentally a matter of political will on the part of the people with the power to use it to vigorously wage war on racism within the labour movement.

Racialized members and organizations in their community have highlighted the need for employment equity, equitable participation in leadership opportunities throughout the structures of the labour movement as well as for an integrated anti-racism analysis and application to all relevant issues. Further, the comprehensive, seminal 1997 report by the CLC, Challenging *Racism: Going Beyond Recommendations*, documented the problems of racism in society and the labour movement and offered solutions (Briskin, 2007). According to Wall (2009), a labour movement veteran and former CLC presidential candidate:

When the report was released, great hope existed that its findings would be a catalyst for change. But although some changes have been made, the labour
movement appears to have gone as far as it intends to go on the issue of equity. Without adequate funding, resources, and authority to reach out to their constituencies, the various equity positions that have been created within affiliate unions and labour centrals are virtually ineffective, viewed only as tokens (2009, p. 81).

In the course of my work within the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) as an anti-racist and union renewal activist and leader, I have heard racialized people put forward the call for the creation of an anti-racism taskforce. I have consistently asserted that the proposition is unwarranted given the recommendations of the *Challenging Racism* report remain unimplemented and valid. In my considered judgment, and as someone who has completely read the document, the labour movement simply needs to take it off the shelf, blow off the accumulated dust, and simply put into effect its recommendations. Investigative taskforces in the house of labour have become like Royal Commissions in Canadian politics. They are simply a way to take an issue off the political radar by appearing to be seriously attending to the problem. The final report is greeted with great fanfare and quietly shelved after the least troubling of the recommendations are implemented.

A number of the research participants pointed to the mastery of the language of equity and inclusiveness by the leaders at the top of the union hierarchy and other whites who are now able to “speak the rhetoric of anti-racist discourse” (Leah, 1999, p. 116). This turn of event is the “result of workshops on harassment, racism and oppression that promoted greater understanding and respect” (Wall, 2009, p. 78). Unfortunately, substantive anti-racist action was not a part of the equity awareness and political
correctness at the level of appropriate language. Invariably these leaders are generally aware of more than must be done in concrete ways in moving forward the anti-racist agenda.

Even when anti-racist action actions are attempted such as the case of the Toronto and York Region Labour Council and its current president as documented in a case study (Lopes & Thomas, 2006), this White leader was apparently reticent about touching employment equity when it may upset his power base within the construction sector. During the Great Recession of 2008, the federal and provincial governments responded with physical infrastructure projects. My former local, CUPE 3907, sent an action plan to the labour council on employment equity, and we did not receive a reply from this body to which the local was affiliated. However, in a private conversation with me the president of the labour council suggested that I and my local were singling out the construction trades and whether we held CUPE to the same standard. I assured him that Local 3907 had been assertive on this issue within our CUPE. Personally, this issue of the employment of racialized workers and women was one that I took up in the *Toronto Star* as reflected in the letter below:

I support Ontario's $27.5 billion infrastructure investment aimed at stimulating the economy and creating jobs.

However, one glaring omission from the infrastructure proposal was the call for equity in the employment opportunities that would come from this type of government spending. Visible minorities and female workers are poorly represented in the various trades within the construction sector.

Infrastructure dollars should not aid and abet systemic exclusionary employment
practices. That will be the outcome if steps are not taken to set employment equity targets and timelines, establish trades-preparing bridging programs and other measures to get the under-represented groups into the construction trades.

Infrastructure investment should not be an unwitting scheme to provide jobs for white men. As we say in the labour movement, "An injury to one is an injury to all." We must walk the talk on employment equity for all workers in the construction trades (Nangwaya, 2009, A22).

The above letter was quoted in its entirety because I wanted to provide an example of a call to action that would address anti-racism. As I stated earlier, ignorance is not the problem with labour leaders because there are usually voices that refused to be silent or co-opted on the relevant racial justice questions.

Das Gupta (2007) makes the claim that the labour movement is presently “a strong and vibrant force for anti-racism”, which this academic researcher has attributed its “greatest success has been achieved in the areas of policy development, education, and advocacy in society” (p. 205, 206). However, the areas that are of critical importance for “people of colour to move from the margins of the labour movement to integration into all mainstream labour activities, such as leadership, staffing, servicing, bargaining, collective agreements, education, and organizing” (p. 206) have remained elusive and problematic for the research participants as well as for active racialized members. It is quite easy for White labour leaders to challenge private and public sector employers on racism or racial injustice. But that same vigour or commitment is virtually absent in their own backyard.

Based my experience of activism within my union and other labour movement spaces as well as based on the interviews with the participants in this research endeavour,
transgressively, overt resistance does not appear to be the dominant way that racialized activists oppose racism and White privilege. If overt acts of resistance within the labour movement are identified as ones such as open letters of critique, oppositional policy documents, threat of or attempt at decertification, attempts to run a reform slate of candidates or single candidate reform platform against established White union bureaucrats, publicly embarrassing or shaming the union and its leadership, picketing union conventions or conferences, occupation of union hall or offices or taking oppositional, “disruptive” actions on convention or conference floors, campaigning for constitutional changes that are subversive to the status quo, or creation of radical caucuses or other self-organizing groups, this approach to fighting the powers-that-be is not the preferred method of making organizational advances. It is very instructive that the most dramatic act of resistance in this study came from a participant who was involved in a shutdown action in a car plant over racist hiring patterns.

The other strident push came from an interviewee who was a part of Carol Wall’s 2005 campaign for the presidency of the CLC. Carol Wall is an African woman who served in various roles in her union and the labour movement before challenging Ken Georgetti, CLC president, of Canada’s national labour federation. Her bid was historic and bold because she is an African woman and the Georgetti’s fellow union bureaucrats had taken her campaign seriously. However, with her vigorous grassroots campaign, support from with public sector unions and an endorsement from the Canadian Union of Postal Workers, she was able to garner 37% of the vote on the convention floor, in spite of 300 delegates to the gathering being absent during the voting exercise (Weisleder, n.d.). Judy Pocock (2005), delegate to the convention from CUPE had the following to
say on Wall’s candidacy, “The strength of her vote surprised many and was seen as a victory by progressive delegates and a “slap in the face” for Georgetti who is widely perceived as arrogant and slow to support rank and file workers” (p. 8).

Bickerton (2005) saw Wall’s campaign as one aimed at union renewal:

Although the result of the election was never in doubt, Wall’s campaign made a huge difference at the convention. She forced delegates and the leadership to acknowledge problems that would otherwise been ignored. Wall also challenged the Left to recognize that it is not enough to pass progressive policies and address the institutional problems that face our movement. We also need a new style of leadership. We need leaders that take chances. We need leaders that will stand up and name our problems as well as recognizing our successes. We need leaders who see it as their responsibility to open up political space for debate and dissent. We need leaders who welcome electoral challenges as an opportunity to strengthen our movement.

We need gutsy and smart leaders like Carol Wall.

It takes personal and political courage for anyone with a desire to stay relevant in the labour movement to go up against Georgetti and other White union leaders. Wall did that and was able to secure a progressive coalition of leftists, equity-seekers and trade unionists who genuinely wanted union renewal.

Wall’s bid exposed the fact that many racialized trade unionists who have been put in place by a status quo leadership will not be disloyal to their political benefactors by supporting reform candidacies, even if the challengers are racialized. In this instance,
Yusuf Hassan of the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) and CLC’s Secretary-Treasurer and Marie Clarke Walker of CUPE, both of who are racialized, ran on a slate with Ken Georgetti (Bickerton, 2005). They made the choice to stick with the old guard. Yet they present themselves as agents for change or union reformers, but are seen as trade unionist who once had radical *bona fides* (Das Gupta, 2007, 1998; Walker, 2006, 2007; Weisleder, 2005). One of the research participants was dismayed by the lack of public support for Wall’s campaign by a few key racialized trade unionists at the convention.

The limited presence of overt acts of resistance by racialized trade unionists are the result of their relative powerlessness and the fear of retaliation from the White-controlled leadership structures within labour organizations. The labour movement environment is a very political one that is attendant with organizational carrots and sticks. This reality was brought home to me when I challenged a major labour leader for a seat and the national executive board of CUPE and have a racialized person who represented me in an affirmative action seat for racialized members supporting a motion for my opponent that was engineered by the old guards on CUPE Ontario’s executive board. In spite of the fact that a part of her mandate is to work for the participation of racialized members in the senior leadership of the Union, she took the path of least resistance and endorsed the long-tenured labour bureaucrat. At the national convention in 2009, aforementioned affirmative action seat holder and another brother who represents racialized members in a provincial labour federation became the scrutineers for the White incumbent.

I highlighted these political incidents to bring attention to the fact that many racialized aspirants to political office believe that they have to make deals to survive. In
private these individuals and others whom I have worked with express views and
analyses that are at variance with their behaviour in the presence of the entrenched White
leadership. Co-optation is a tool used by the people in power to render ineffective the
participation of most racialized members in the leadership positions, especially the
affirmative action seats (Das Gupta, 2007). Labour unions and their structures are
designed to maintain the status quo. But collective action and grassroots education and
organizing have the potential for serious change to the way that power is exercised and
the ends to which it is directed.

Critical about education is essential to the agenda of shifting the pro-management
bias and pro-establishment worldview that exist within the educational spaces in the
wider society and even within the working-class (Parker & Gruelle, 1999). Fletcher, Jr.,
and Gaspasin (2008) offer an approach to labour education that is conforms to the ideas
and concerns expressed by most of the interviewee on the way forward for education
within the labour movement:

…Membership education is largely conceptual and secondarily technical. It aims
to provide a framework that members can use to analyze their experiences and to
guide actions in their own interests. Thus it deals with the big picture. It does not
start and end with tips on how to handle grievances or how to even organize. It
needs to begin with certain basic concepts: What is a union? How do employers
operate, and why do they have the upper hand? What is capitalism, and what are
its impact on workers in the United States and overseas? What role do race and
gender play in the workplace and in the larger society? From such a conceptual
base, education can move to specific skills building or more in-depth conceptual education (pp. 206-207).

Based on my experience of labour education courses and examination of facilitators course guide, the approach to labour education outlined above is not the norm. I have noticed a kind of anti-intellectual bias within the labour movement. One could conclude that the role of ideas and theories in labour struggle is very much unwelcomed. In my judgment, the entrenched leadership is more afraid of intellectuals in their midst than communists, unless the intellectuals are also communist.

The critique of labour education programmes by the participants in this research project on the question of race did not surprise me. These racialized trade unionists did not see themselves as a part of the organizational forces with the power to encourage and prioritize participation in anti-racist and other human rights courses. Given the reality of racialized members being underrepresented on the executive committees or boards in their unions and not being at the centre of the information flow about the availability of courses, they are not able to use moral suasion or the power of office to educate members about the need to take anti-racist and other human rights courses.

When information comes into a local union about courses and other educational opportunities, it is the recording secretary or the president who receives them. In order to get around the problem of the “choir” invariably attending the anti-racist courses or White members mistakenly believing that anti-racist courses are not for them, the leadership in local unions has to take the lead in attending these educationals and actively recruit white members to register for them and share their learning experience with other members at the general membership meetings. It would be helpful for the bargaining
committee, stewards, executive, grievance committee members, union staffers and other organs of the union where leadership is exercised to be targeted for anti-racist and humans rights education, especially “about the existence of multiple oppression” (Walker, 2009, p. 91) with respect to how these issues are relevant to effectively carry out their respective mandates and serving the members. The work of educating members about racism and their participation in learning situations must come from efforts within the local unions. But the learning outcomes must be closely tied in the work of the local in representing the members in the workplace as well with the role of labour organization as catalyst for change in the broader society.

Racialized trade union activists also problematize the fact that the bread-and-butter courses such as labour law, health and safety, bargaining, workers’ compensation, stewarding and confronting management should integrate anti-racist or human rights themes or subjects into their respective curricula. In addition to the absence of human rights concerns into the central and prioritized courses, the question of educating members for class consciousness and class solidarity is noticeably absent or quite weak in most of the courses offered by the labour movement. Many unions and some of their progressive backers have bought into the dominant idea of Canada being a largely middle-class society and our work should be about protecting its material existence (Alphen & Perry, 2009 Burke, Geronimo, Martin, Thomas & Wall, 2002; Yalnizyan, 2011). I find this approach to understanding political economy quite troubling to the goal of a critical labour education programme:

When organized labour and social democratic parties push a program of growing the middle class, they are unwittingly cultivating a consciousness that is
detrimental to working class solidarity and interest. It should not come as surprise that many workers do not gravitate toward social democratic parties in North America when the goal is to get them into the middle class (Nangwaya, 2009b)

Building consciousness through labour education is important to the task of eliminating racism among White workers in trade unions and facilitating genuine class solidarity that would see individual and structural as being anathema to building a just and equitable society for Canada’s working-class majority. While the workplace resistance literature tends to see the fight between labour and capital as the principal fault line at the point of production or in the workplace, it would serve the labour movement and labour researchers well to centre the conflict over racism as a central factor in point of production struggles. I was at an April 2011 meeting of CUPE Ontario’s Racial Justice Committee, where a part of the meetings agenda was devoted to speaking with two education representatives on staff about some concerns of the group’s racialized constituency.

The staffers admitted that the courses are weak on class consciousness contents and that reality was brought home them at a recent workshop where an external facilitator interrogated that glaring omission. The staffers were provided with resource materials on teaching class in labour education courses. It was encouraging to hear about that development and the willingness of the education staff in Ontario to include members in a reference group that would examine the courses and offer suggestions. The concern raised by the research participants about applying an intersectional analytical framework and not aping the dominant classes in executing labour education will remain areas of ongoing struggle. Progressive locals and community activist will have to go of create the
exemplary and desired membership education programmes that they would love to have in the labour movement. The efficacy of these educationals as reflected in practical and wider participation of the members in running their union could have positive and replicatory impact on the mainstream labour education infrastructure.

One of the vexing issues raised by participants was the existential reality of the powerless nature of affirmative action leadership seats and the equity committees and structures set up unions (Das Gupta, 2007; Walker 2006 & 2009; Wall, 2009). These affirmative action seats in unions and labour centrals such as the CLC, OFL and other provincial labour federations are not living up to their potential as spaces for the effective representation and mobilizing of racialized members. In a lot of ways the participants see these representational entities as symbol of representations rather bodies through which the interests and needs of racialized members may be pursued. It is for that reason that Walker (2009) has called the proper financing and assigning of skilled and knowledgeable people to these bodies as take them as seriously as the bread-and-butter concerns. Wall (2009) asserts:

It is a new era, and today’s younger generation of Aboriginal and people of colour is not asking but demanding to be included in a meaningful way. It is no longer willing to be over-represented on human rights committees and under-represented on finance committees and within the leadership of the labour movement (p.81). Racialized activists and White allies need to build grassroots organizing educational and mobilizing campaigns to demand the commitment of resources to equity structures. They should also make it a priority that have accountability structures whereby the affirmative
action seats and equity structures take direction from the organized base of racialized members.

A related element to the above call for accountable and relevance equity structures is the need for autonomous, self-organizing structures of racialized members. Many of the equity bodies that have been created for racialized people in union and the labour centrals or federation are really advisory bodies or standing committees of the executive committees or boards. In effect, they are not really spaces for advocacy and militant opposition to the union as was pointed out to me in a phone conversation with one of CUPE national officers. But based on experience and observation in the labour movement, racialized activist consistently view equity seats and structures as centres of advocacy and frank representation of their interests. The difference between an advisory and an advocacy does not exist for all intents and purposes, because of racialized members’ long struggle for a real voice at the leadership table (Gordon, 1990).

However, the tension between advisory and advocacy role could be bridged by having groups of racialized people who are not a part of the official structure exist as autonomous entities in the union that educate, mobilize and organize racialized members to seeking full participation in all structures of their unions and other labour organizations. Briskin (2006) supports a dual approach of integration and autonomy as they relate to equity-seeking groups:

Distinct and autonomous committee structures offer a vehicle for equity seeking groups to assert their specific concerns. They help prevent the political marginalization of equity groups and increase pressure for inclusion and democratization. Integration into union structures, on the other hand, prevents
organizational marginalization, ensures resource allocation, and encourages the mainstreaming of equity into union policy and strategy (p.109).

Briskin is making the case for the equity-seeker having the space to be advocates while being connected to the official structures of the unions.

However, there is a level of self-organizing and autonomy that I am proposing that goes beyond that of Briskin. She uses CUPE Ontario dual equity structure as her model and it is a different thing in practice. We need equity structures that are separate and autonomous of the trade unions. The following constituency groups of racialized workers have the potential to become centres of advocacy and union renewal: the Latin American Trade Unionists Coalition (LATUC), (Schwartz, 2011), Asian Canadian Labour Alliance (ACLA) (Kisi & Han, 2002) and the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists (Gordon, 2000). These organizations are not officially sanctioned and a part of the labour movements’ structures. They are free to be advocates for their respective racialized constituency in the labour movement and be the “conscience of the labour movement”, as articulated by Bev Johnson of CBTU (Ontario Chapter) (cited in Das Gupta, 2007, p. 194).

Theoretically, these groups ought to have the freedom to press the issues as they see fit without fear of retaliation from the entrenched White leadership. They are not financed by the labour movement and they have their independent leadership recruitment, selection and development process. Some labour leaders and even rank-and-file trade unionists (both racialized and non-racialized) are apprehensive about these independent constituency groups out of fear that they are dividing the working-class and accentuating differences (Das Gupta, 2007; Kisi & Han, 2002). Another central misgiving of the
labour bureaucracy is the perception of “autonomous organizations as community organizations since they, unlike labour caucuses, are not structurally accountable to the labour movement” (Das Gupta, 2007, p. 196). The preceding concern is an actual strength of these self-organized that are made up union members and/or non-unionized workers. The labour movement ought to provide no-strings-attached resources to these groups because they are taking up issues that the mainstream unions are not adequately addressing, if at all.

In practice, self-organized groups such as LATUC, ACLA and CBTU are still susceptible to the influence and power of the White-controlled labour bureaucracy. Many of the most active racialized people in these autonomous racialized groups are members of union staff, sit in affirmative action seats or are active in their local unions and other labour organizations. As staff members, they still experience racist alienation and if they are too vigorous in their anti-racism and class solidarity militancy against the labour movement, pressure may be brought against them as staffers. I have personally seen this apprehension played itself out in CBTU and I do not anticipate that it is any different in ACLA and CBTU. I was at a birthday celebration of longstanding racialized activist in the Canadian labour movement. In a conversation with a racialized staffer, he stated that he could come out publicly in agreement with many of my critiques of the labour movement. However, he said that there are covert ways to give a platform to these of critics without making one vulnerable to retaliation. The mainstream union may exercise influence over these autonomous groups through purchasing tables at fundraising dinners and in-kind donations which can be very significant. This state of affairs would likely cause these groups to be measured and temperate in calling the entrenched leadership to
account on anti-racism measures. They may get around these particular challenges by severely reducing the proportion of union staffers, who are principal leaders, self-finance their organizations through dues levied on their membership and seek financial support from progressive locals that are not seeking quid pro quo relations. These organizations cannot go wrong with basing their approach to advocacy and assertive representation in their membership and avoid relationships that would cause them to become co-opted by the labour bureaucracy.

Lastly, the question of the representation of racialized women in the structures of the unions and their dual oppression being rooted in racism and sexism are matters that ought to be taken seriously by racialized trade union men, White allies and the labour bureaucracy. Racialized women have been vocal (especially starting from the 1980s) in the labour movement about their gendered and raced exclusion from the time of the self-assertion of White women about their subordination as a result of sexism (Leah, 1993, 1999). The former Human Rights Director June Veecock shared an incident that is instructive of the way that they raised issues pertaining to racialized women:

I started pushing around women of colour issues and made a lot of enemies. I ruffled a lot of feathers, because I was always reminding white women that we had to do things differently. You don’t wait until the last minute to invite black women to speak; instead you need to involve them throughout the struggle. I remember one women’s conference with the Canadian Labour Congress where Nancy Ritchie was speaking. I looked around the room, and of the three hundred women, I saw about ten women of colour. I said I thought we should protest. I said I thought we should sit in the front, front along with a woman who had a
disability. We just sat quietly, all the women of colour in the front row. Later we made a speech at one of the plenaries. It was a silent protest, and it was effective (cited in Rebick, 2005, p. 98).

The disturbing reality about women’s conferences in the labour movement today is the conspicuous, overwhelmingly White racial character of the attendees. Many things have not changed for the representation of racialized women.

Many of the structures of representations have women present (staff, executive committees or boards, bargaining committees, national or overseas delegations), but the self-satisfaction of the labour bureaucrats ought to be tempered by the reality that racialized women are underrepresented or absent. Grace Hartman, the first woman president of CUPE, was oblivious of race in her positive assessment of “women” being a part of CUPE’s leadership:

I don’t think they liked having women at the top, but the public sector unions were growing rapidly, which meant taking a significant number of women into membership. By the time I retired in 1983, the [presence of women on the] national executive board was in proportion to the membership of the union. Now the two top officers are women (Finlayson, 1995, p. 89).

At that time all of the women to which Grace Hartman referred were Euro-Canadians. But their race was invisible to many observers, except for racialized people who were able to see that the call for the advancement of women as a provincial and race-informed one.

Advocacy, educational agitational, organizing, and mobilizing campaigns guided by an intersectional analytical framework will be necessary to reach the grassroots of the labour movement so as to create traction for the subordinate position of racialized women
in the labour movement. Given the proposition of an intersectionality approach, racialized activists and allies should also problematize the how questions of disability, age and sexual orientation/gender identity affect the status of racialized women in the labour movement and the workplace. One cannot stress too much the need for a multiple oppression lens so has not to marginalize some groups of women in that broad category called women. A lot of the push for inclusion of women came down to the existence of the political will, self-organizing work of women, the support of White male power brokers and interest convergence. In the 1980s, CUPE made a push to have women staffers being more proportionately represented in job classifications beyond clerical and other administrative roles. It happened but the women were predominantly White and one may see that current reality throughout the job classifications in that union as well as in most other labour organizations. This pattern of racial privileging cannot go on if the labour movement is serious about reflecting the diversity that is seen on the streets of Toronto, Vancouver, Montreal and other major metropolitan regions across Canada.

**Contribution of this study to Critical Race Theory and related practice**

This study contributes to the labour studies literature on co-optation and resistance history and experience of racialized trade unionists in the Canadian labour movement. The stories of the research participants made it quite clear that the structures and processes in the labour movement, while appearing racially neutral on the surface, serve to work as barriers to the full participation of racialized trade union members. Labour studies needs to deal with the issue of racism and its impact on racialized trade union members as well as strategic interest and purpose of the labour movement. Given the fact that immigration is increasingly being relied on to grow the national labour
market and about eighty per cent of the immigrants are racialized, it is in the self-interest of the house of labour to resolutely dismantle the extant racist barriers in the movement. In this respect, this research study has exposed some of the racial (and gender) challenges of the day.

This study has made a contribution to critical race and anti-racist scholarship in this country. It has shown the extent to which the forces of racism have morphed from its more vulgar expressions in the late nineteenth century to the first three decades of the twentieth century to a systemic, subtle form in the period in which we are living. Racialized trade union members have been fighting racism from the inception of organized labour in this country and its durability is not an accident. Racism buttresses the sectional interest of the White working-class. The White capitalist class is the ultimate and principal beneficiary of a labour force that is divided by racist oppression.

Interest convergence is an essential component of critical race theory and it asserts that Whites are likely to make concessions to the demand for racial progress when it is in alignment with their interests. But Whites, as a group, are not inclined toward a racial remedy that “threatens the superior societal status of middle and upper class whites” (Bell, 1980, p. 523). Further, the pace at which change occurs may be so deliberate and measured that it does very little to really undermine the architecture of power, which effectively continues to privilege whiteness and the people who are the principal beneficiaries of this system of domination (Milner IV, 2008). This study has contributed to critical race theory by affirming the relevance of interest convergence in explaining the behaviour of White trade union leaders’ and rank-and-file members’ support or opposition to anti-racist initiatives. It was self-interest that guided the action
of the Canadian labour movement in promoting anti-racism initiatives in the wider society in the 1930s and beyond as well as removing the most outrageous expressions of white supremacy in trade unions. White domination and control was never threatened.

However, with the antiracism advances of the 1920 and 1930 and their acceleration in the 1980s (Leah, 1999), racial progress advanced moved at a slow pace and gave the impression that power was being exercised on a non-racial basis. This study through the voices of the racialized research participants and mine demonstrates that the central ideas within interest the convergence concept manifest themselves in the state of race relations in the labour movement. While organized labour has created policies and even conceded affirmative action seats in many labour organizations, it not moving forward substantively in eliminating racial hierarchies and privileges in its own organizational structures and workplace spaces in which it has a presence.

When Ling, a research participant, made the following comments on racial progress:

…if I’m sort of looking back on where we’ve been and where we’re now, I would say yes there is progression, but that the progress has also been a bit… the more it changed, the more it stayed the same. There’s progress in terms of numbers, in terms of representation, but…, it created a bit of an illusion that people, particularly workers of colour are seeing through as well. The reason I’m saying it is I think back in the early ‘80s, or in the late ‘70s the racism was so blatant and so visible that you can name it. People knew it, and it became a rallying point.

Ling’s above comment points to the objective need of the White leadership of the 1970s and 1980s to remove the visible manifestations of racial exclusion. They were in a period
of social ferment that accented social equality. Further, the rapid increase in the number of racialized workers entering the labour force compelled the trade union bureaucrats to act. The White leadership was also pushed by the anti-racist organizing and agitational work of racialized trade union members. The “illusion” of change to which Ling referred is something that I can confirm as a researcher and activist within the labour movement. The concessions made by the White leadership merely confirmed its ascendant position within the labour movement and the operationalizing of the logic of interest convergence.

Therefore, this research project has shown that interest convergence as a conceptual tool is applicable outside of the legal and educational arena (Bell, 1980; Guinier, 2004; Milner, 2008). Anti-racist struggles within ostensibly class organizations such as trade unions and other labour movement groups run up against the barrier of the unearned White privileges and interests of White trade union leaders and members. Interest convergence does provide an explanatory framework for understanding the reluctance of the Canadian labour movement to fully implement the recommendations of the CLC’s Challenging Racism report. Notwithstanding the cardinal trade union values of solidarity and unity or the message embedded in the motto “An injury to one is an injury to all”, White material interest grounded in the race hierarchy predominate with respect to the workplace and labour movement experience of the racialized. Racialized trade unionists felt probably felt that their time for substantive inclusion had come in the 1980s when formal anti-racist policies, equity statements and affirmative action seats were being formulated in the house of labour as well as experiencing racial harassment clause getting into collective agreements.
This research has added to the body of literature that constitutes critical race theory by sharing the stories of the research participants and I about the enduring, pernicious and morphing character of racism in the wider society and the labour movement. Critical race theory asserts the centrality and importance of experiential knowledge of the racially dominated in interrogating and analyzing the structures and institutions within society (Schneider, 2003). Further, critical race theory “participates in the production of knowledge through the creation of counter-discourse that documents and disseminates the knowledge and experience of the oppressed and silenced” (Cho & Westley, 2002, p. 50). The lived experiences that we have related above about systemic racial exclusion in the Canadian labour movement are often-times missing from the narratives of the labour movements or barely meriting a footnote, as evidenced in the text *Building a Better World: An Introduction to Trade Unionism in Canada* (Black & Silver, 2001). Interestingly enough, “women” merited an honourable mention in the preceding text on the labour movement in Canada. This research project shows fidelity to the critical race project by bringing to the surface of popular consciousness those voices that are generally silenced by superordinate racial bodies.

The importance of a group of racialized trade unionists asserting experiential knowledge and contributing to the transgressive endeavour that is critical race theory cannot be overstated. The following quote from Cho and Westley (2002) highlights the importance that the study is making to the tradition of critical race theory:

> The intersubjective nature of the CRT project underscores its political-theoretical essence: The moment critical race theorizing loses its grounding in the political and communal is the moment that CRT ceases to be an antisubordinationist
project. The search for subjugated knowledge therefore is an attempt to preserve the history and the meaning of struggle as well as the context of movement politics (p. 51).

This research is an act of documentation of the struggles of a number of racialized trade unionists in the Canadian labour movement. The research project is also an act of resistance, because it attempts to remove the veil of darkness that shrouds the current manifestation of structural racism in labour organizations, which serves to unmask it to the full view of the discerning and undiscerning public (Schneider, 2002). The critical race theory body of knowledge has benefited from the act of voicing and this documented research on race and racialized gendered experience in the labour movement.

Another area of scholarship to which this study has made a contribution is that of critical race feminism, which emerged out of critical race theory. This study enabled the voice of racialized trade unionists to speak to the exclusion of racialized women who are (on the basis of race and gender) simultaneously affected by their participation in two oppressed categories; women and the racialized. It should be noted that some racialized women are also affected by their age, sexual orientation or gender identities, disability or immigrant status. Critical race feminism also centres the preceding factors in its stance against the construction of a typical racialized woman as the representation of that identity (Onwuachi-Willig, 2005-2006). The research participants and I believe that there has been substantive, albeit not full, progress for White women in the labour movement. However, the White labour bureaucrats (both women and men) have not been similarly inclusive of racialized women in the representational structures and organizational opportunities.
In the wider society and its organizations, the stand-in archetype for a “woman” is one who is White, heterosexual and able-bodied (Aylward, 2010). One tends to find this concept at work in the house of labour. Given the push for representation in the structures of the unions from different equity-seekers such as young workers, LGBTQ members, and workers with disabilities (Briskin, 2006), race has become the principal criteria for access and allocation of material resources like that which is obtained in other societal institutions (Aylward, 2010). The study’s participants identified the undifferentiated category “White women” as the women trade unionists who are the primary beneficiaries of gender justice initiatives. Based on my observation, White women who self-identify as young workers, lesbians, bisexuals, transgendered or queer women or person with a disability are the ones who generally access affirmative action seats or sit on equity committees for those self-identified categories of women. Since 2007, my union has had two appointment cycles and the women on the equity committees for members with disabilities, LGBTQ and young workers have been White. The national Women’s Committee has a token presence of Aboriginal and racialized women.

It is not often the case that active racialized trade unionists research and document their experience of racism in the labour movement and this work has added to the dearth of materials on race, racism and Canadian trade union movement. As such the study is contributing to that small but growing resource of labour studies texts written directly by racialized trade unionists or allies.

Labour education is critical to preparing the working-class to wage the struggle for the social and economic reconstruction of society in its image and interest (Leah,
The Canadian labour movement is doing itself a disservice when it does not use its educational infrastructure to assault White supremacist thinking and behaviour. This study contributes to the critical and emancipatory labour education discourse by documenting racialized workers’ perspectives on the need for the integration of critical anti-racism and an intersectional analytical frame to the contents of the curriculum in labour education programmes. The racialized participants in this course are not pleased with the sequestering of anti-racist education to race-specific courses that are usually undersubscribed. They would like to see anti-racism contents in the bread-and-butter courses such as bargaining, health and safety, stewarding and arbitration.

Leah (1999) calls for courses on racism that are directed at White union members to incorporate emotional and experiential components, which would allow learners to self-interrogate the way that they feel about racialized and indigenous peoples and make them open to cultural differences. While that approach is necessary, it does not deal with the concern of the study’s participants that anti-racism teaching be integrated into all relevant courses or educationals. Union education is not value-neutral (Fletcher, Jr., & Gaspasin, 2008) and as such this study captures the voice of racialized members who have shown through experience that the absence of the reality of racial domination and the exploration of lasting solutions in these educational initiatives privileges a particular outcome or set of values. This research project has problematized the state of educational curriculum as it relates to race and racism and offers a way forward. It also contributes to the call for class consciousness goals and contents in labour education. The working-class, in its diversity, has a weak or non-existent sense of its class identity and trade unions are seen as pragmatic instrument to get it to a “middle-class” status.
Limitations of the study

There are tens of thousands of racialized members in the Canadian labour movement and I choose to work with a small sample of seven interviewees. My voice and presence are very much a part of this research project given my experience of activism and involvement in anti-racist initiatives in my union and the Canadian labour movement. My sample of respondents was drawn from the Greater Toronto Area and the majority of them are from public sector unions, which may be reflective of the fact that I am also from one such labour organization. With respect to diversity, none of the participants claimed a Queer identity or self-identified as person with a disability. This research project is qualitative and makes no claim to its findings being generalizable and replicable for racialized people throughout the Canadian labour movement. However, as a labour movement activist, a writer and researcher on the movement and a trade unionist who has conversed with many other racialized trade union activists, it is my belief that the findings accurately and broadly capture the experience of racial exclusion of many racialized trade union members in Canada.

I am anti-racist and union renewal activist and my ideological perspectives and biases were not checked at the entrance of this research project. I have experienced and observed many of the things that were related to me by the participants. Therefore, this research endeavour was both personal and political. As a result of this frankness with which I raise questions of racial oppression and the top-down leadership in my union and the labour movement, and my willingness and courage in electorally taking on the some of the top labour bureaucrats in my union, I am privy to their behaviour and political machinations when vigorously challenged. I have been able to see how some racialized
activists have allowed themselves to be co-opted or compromised by the entrenched
White leadership. However, I am also an organic intellectual who believes that my
approach to scholarship is fair-minded and honest while being committed to the struggle
for justice and emancipation of all subaltern groups.

There are a few racialized people who are serving in high level capacities in the
Canadian labour movement who I wanted to interview. But while they did not explicitly
refuse to participate, they were slow in getting back or had excuses for why had not done
so. I believe that they have rich and deep narratives to share about white supremacy in
the labour and the ways in which co-optation may manifest itself. I believe the fact that I
am an activist who is very engaged in the labour movement may have caused
apprehension among some of these prospective interviews. As someone who served on
the executive board of CUPE Ontario, I know that racialized people who serve at that
level are privy to a lot of problematic happenings in their unions or labour organization.

Suggestions for future research

It is critically important for labour researchers to carry out oral history research
among racialized trade union activists and rank-and-file members from the 1940s to
today. Their stories and experiences of racism, sexism and capitalist exploitation are
needed to round out the historiography of working-class resistance within the ranks of
organized labour. We are losing some of the most senior veterans as they reach the end
point of the life cycle. I believe they have insights to offer us on what it was like, in their
own words, to deal with racist and other forms of oppression in the labour movement and
unionized workplaces. In other words, having voices from the trench would fill the gaps
in the history of the working-class in general and the racialized one in particular during a
period when the labour movement had shifted away from overt racism and, at least in principle, had embraced anti-racism (Das Gupta, 2007, Leah, 1998).

A future research project that explores the strategies and tactics used by racialized trade unionists who believe in working cooperatively and non-assertively within the existing White-controlled power structure is needed to cast light on the efficacy of this approach. Further, it is important for labour movement researchers and activists to have access to tools of resistance and their usefulness. I believe that substantive change in the labour movement is going to come from bottom-up resistance. It would certainly be helpful towards the end of creating a labour movement that becomes a catalyst of societal transformation to know the role that may be played by sympathizers and allies working “behind enemy lines.” Politically, I know the benefits of having staff and members inside the labour bureaucracy sharing sensitive information that can be used as the basis for challenging the entrenched leadership.

Many racialized trade unionists are dissatisfied with the performance of the equity structures and affirmative action seats geared toward this group of equity-seekers. A future research projects that gather the experience and perspective of the people who have being appointed or elected to these representational structures would provide some insights that may not be available to us. It would be useful in such an endeavour to get the views of the White leadership on the purpose and usefulness of these structures to advancing anti-racist practices with concrete examples. I suspect that many racialized people who serve on these structures are aware of their relative uselessness but may have other reasons for participating in them. Many of them are not using these spaces as to take a prophetic stance on the state of racism in the house of labour. A few racialized
people view these spaces as launching pad for a political career or staff job in the union. A number of activists have shared such sentiments with me and believe that they cannot be seen as “union troublemakers” in these equity structures.

**Concluding thoughts**

The struggle for racial justice in the Canadian labour movement needs to become of strategic importance to White trade unionists who lay claim to being progressive and of broad sympathies. In practice, I do not see the level of support and commitment that is necessary to move forward a principled, genuine and power-altering anti-racist agenda from even the White trade unionists who have mastered the art of the anti-racism lingo. This mastery of equity languages serves to mask the absence of concrete and substantive outcomes. Racialized people since the 1990s have largely taken an approach to anti-racism activism that subscribes to the commonsensical notion that “you catch more flies with honey than with vinegar.” But it was an assertive activism that forced the hands of the trade union bureaucrats as well as those in labour organizations such as the Ontario Federation of Labour and the Canadian Labour Congress to create affirmative action seats, formulate anti-racism policies, hire a few racialized people on staff and give the appearance of a commitment to anti-racism. With the passage of time, the accumulated evidence has pointed to business as usual in terms of the entrenchment of power and opportunities along the colour line.

Given the preceding state of affairs and the reality of racialized workers constituting an increasingly larger proportion of the Canadian labour force, racialized labour activists and their erstwhile White allies ought to re-examine the non-confrontational, polite and “reasonable” stance that they are employing in fight for racial
justice. Further, the entrenched leadership is coming to the realization that a labour movement that covers a mere thirty percent of the labour force will be vulnerable and likely to be seen as self-regarding movement. According to *Toronto Star* national affairs columnist Tom Walkom (2010):

> Today (with a few notable exceptions) unions tend to be viewed as bastions of privilege, latter-day versions of medieval guilds that exist only to protect the lucky few. Indeed, unions have become bastions. The roughly 30 per cent of Canadian workers who still belong to unions enjoy better pensions and benefits, higher wages and more paid holidays than the 70 per cent who do not.

It is the above reality coupled with the growing presence of racialized workers in the labour and the need to win the support of the non-unionized workers that make unions vulnerable to a type of class-based, community trade unionism that will force them to engage in serious anti-racist action. Unions are coming to realization that if wages and working conditions continue to decline among the majority of workers it will create the basis for the same among organized workers.

Given that many of the workers in precarious employment are racialized and immigrant workers (Galabuzi, 2006), trade unions cannot seriously work in solidarity with these categories of workers without giving serious attention to structural or institutional racism with the house of labour. Further, trade unions will have to use the collective agreement to mount an assault on racist employment barriers in the workplaces in which they are present, if they want to have credibility among precarious workers in general and racialized workers in particular. This prospective development provides an
opening for racialized trade union activists to work in alliance with non-unionized racialized workers in undertaking a assertive, robust and muscular anti-racist challenge to the Canadian labour movement. The house of labour loves to assert that “the union makes us strong” or that “solidarity forever” among workers is a foundational creed. Now is the time to force the labour movement to live up to its values and let its action do the talking.

However, the above approach is just a part of the resistance work and challenge to co-optation in the labour movement. Racialized workers ought not to settle for integration into unchanged labour structures. They ought to have the goal of union renewal which entails shifting power and responsibility to the rank and file, adopt a self-organizing model of trade unionism which would have the members doing the central activities and setting the direction rather than the staff and the elected labour bureaucrats, a commitment to building class consciousness and class solidarity and advancing the concerns of the union beyond bread-and-butter issues. The aforementioned components of a union renewal agenda would have the effect of broadening the democratic process in trade unions and make them forces for transformative and liberation politics. These features of a renewed labour movement will not come about without struggle and this must take place inside locals, which are the base of the union.

The tools that are used to co-opt racialized trade unionists and other trade union members gain their effectiveness from people being self-regarding or genuinely believing that they can fake it until you make it into the seat of power from which change organizational reform will be undertaken. It is my contention that the co-opting tools are impactful, because many trade unionists have decided to take the path of least resistance. They know that the work of education, mobilizing and organizing the members is a
challenging and time consuming one. Yet here is no other option to doing the requisite activities among the grassroots to advance an anti-racist, anti-oppression, class struggle and self-organizing model of trade unionism in the house of labour. In order to move forward with such an agenda a different approach to labour or union education must be effected. Membership will still get the skills to do the union activism but it will be surrounded by an understanding of political economy and exposure to the ideas and operation of different systems of oppression. Further, this type of critical and interrogative labour education would lay bare the manner in which the different forms of exploitation intersect, overlap and reinforce each other.

The following recommendations on dealing with co-optation, facilitating resistance and effecting relevant labour education programmes are of strategic importance in the Canadian labour movement:

- Racialized women and men trade unionists in elected or appointed position need to institutionalize processes which allow that them be accountable and in regular contact with their constituency. Therefore, when they push for an agenda for change, they can point to a vocal, organized and mobilized constituency as the source of the issues that they are advancing. This approach is a way to prevent racialized leaders from being isolated among the labour bureaucrats and limiting their susceptibility to co-optation.

- Racialized leaders in responsible position ought to develop the art of sending “brown envelopes” with critical information to activists, who will the use it to expose the action or plan of the leadership that are not
promoting the anti-racist agenda. The intent behind giving out this information is to mobilize the base or constituency to pressure or challenge the leadership to do the right thing. Public shaming or exposure could place the White leadership the position not living up to its explicit commitment to fighting racism. A brown envelope protects the source of information, because there would not be a paper trailer to the sender.

- Racialized trade unionist activists and their allies from other equity-seeking groups and general allies must fight for the adequate resourcing of the equity committees and structures, as well as push for formalized link to their respective constituencies. The base will push the elected or appointed leaders to take a more vigorous approach to the advocacy and articulation of the anti-racist and the general equity agenda.

- The electoral process ought to be used as an arena to raise issues relating to the equity and anti-racist agenda and union renewal. Contesting elections are not merely about winning but should be linked to a grassroots programme centred on anti-oppression, member-control of locals and other labour structures of power and class struggle trade unionism. The thrust to a broad platform is informed by both pragmatic and principled considerations. Firstly, racialized members are a numerical minority and the appeal only to racial justice will not likely garner the broad support that is needed to win office and candidates generally need to speak to issues with wide appeal. Lastly, an expansive and transformative platform shows that progressive racialized candidates are not seeking to integrate
into unchanged and problematic political structures of the union or a labour organization.

- Racialized members should be exacting in their evaluation of the candidates who seek to represent them in affirmative elected positions or constituency representational committees or structures. Only people with a history of principled struggle for racial justice in union and/or the community or who have a progressive or radical record of activism are deserving of your vote.

- Racialized communities ought to be drafted into the fight for racial justice inside the labour movement. A majority of the members of the working-class are not in trade unions, but the type of issues championed by the labour movement could advance the material interest of the class as a whole. Historically, racialized communities have contributed to the anti-racist and class struggle in the labour movement, and they remain valuable to this fight.

- Racialized workers should organize within their respective local around using the collective agreement as an instrument through which racist practices in the workplace are addressed, especially in the area of discriminatory employment barriers.

- All initiatives that are pushed forward in the labour movement should be examined for the extent to which they are inclusive of racialized women, in their diversity. Too often racialized women are slotted in the race
category are ignored or tokenistically represented in programmes aimed at advancing gender justice.

- Racialized members need to create a process whereby the representatives in the formalized affirmative seats, the equity-seekers representational structures and the informal anti-racist caucuses inside unions are able to breakout of their respect organizational silos and form broad networks of support and activism to collective fight systemic racism and sexism within the labour movement. The problems of racial and race-informed gender discrimination are institutionalized throughout the labour movement and need the coming together of the racially excluded to seek wholesale changes.

- Racialized activists and allies ought to prioritize the inclusion of anti-racist ideas and practices with all relevant courses, and especially those that deemed bread-and-butter. The preceding courses are usually over-subscribed, which is unlike the equity or human rights courses that do not attract a lot participants. While the courses should integrate conceptual understanding of the system of white supremacy, they should also look practically at how to implement anti-racist initiatives.

- Racialized activists, progressive locals and white allies should use the material resources at their disposal to create the type of labour education programmes that anti-oppression thoughts and practices as well as advance self-organizing model of trade unionism. The participating local could use their financial wherewithal to underwrite the cost of executing a
transformative anti-oppression and class struggle labour education programme. Progressive social movement activist and organizations ought to be invited to participate in this learning process. A commitment to a labour movement wherein the members are the ones who do the work, and not labour bureaucrats within the elected leadership and, necessitates a progressive labour education that endows the former with the knowledge, skills and attitude to get the work done.

- A progressive agenda for anti-racism should see racialized people working solidarity with union and community members who experience oppression based on gender, age, sexual orientation/sexual identities, indigenous or Aboriginal status, class and disabilities. Too often the entrenched leadership is able to play equity-seeking groups and their agenda against each other. But a principled solidarity is necessary because a racialized trade union member may have other identities, which go beyond race but is implicated by racial domination.

The above recommendations are drawn from the insights and stories, which were shared by the research participants as well as from my experience, observation and readings on the Canadian labour movement. They are relevant to the anti-racist agenda.
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Appendix A:
Interview Schedule

1. Please share your story of why and how you became active in your trade union or the labour movement.

2. Can you tell what role your position as a trade unionist play in your identity as a racialized person?

3. Who are your role models in your trade union and the labour movement?

3b. What are the qualities or personal traits that you appreciate in the above-mentioned role models?

4. Please tell me about your experience of being mentored in the labour movement as well as the background of the person(s) who did or is doing the mentoring.

5. Can you tell about your views and practice on the best way to work against discrimination within organizations and the wider society?

6. Please share with me your perspective and understanding of racism.

7. In what ways does racism in your trade union and the labour movement affect yours and other racialized trade unionists’ needs and interests? Please provide examples.

8. Tell me about the barriers that you have experienced as an elected or appointed leader in your local.

9. Solidarity between trade unionists is a “sacred” principle. Based on your experience and/or observation how does solidarity promote resistance to racism?

10. In what ways does the idea of union solidarity promotes silence and co-optation of racialized trade unionists around racism in the labour movement?

11. Share with me some of the things that you have done to overcome discriminatory attitude and behaviour that serves to keep you in your place?

12. Tell me about actions that you have observed other racialized trade unionist have taken to challenge racism in trade unions and the wider labour movement?

13. What kind of actions count as resistance to racism and other forms of discrimination in the labour movement?
14. Please share with me your thoughts on the experience, opportunity, and barriers of racialized women in your labour organization and the wider labour movement.

15. Based on your experience and/or observation of racism in the labour movement, what should racialized trade union activists be doing to challenge the exclusion of their issues and presence at the leadership level?

16. What does solidarity between racialized trade unionists means to you?

17. Tell me about your experience of solidarity with racialized individuals or group, and what are the prospects and challenges of racialized trade unionists working together?

18. Based on your experience and/or observation, what are some of things that the White leadership has done to co-opt or domesticate racialized trade unionists?

19. Please share with me the reason(s) that the strategy of silencing and co-opting of some racialized leaders has been successful and what can be done to change that trend?

20. Tell me about some of the individual and collective acts of resistance that you have participated in to challenge racism.

21. How would you assess the effectiveness of the above-stated actions in challenging the racist status quo in your union and the labour movement?

22. Can tell me about the individual and collective actions that you have taken to support the racialized fight sexism in your union and/or the wider labour movement?

23. Please share with me your thoughts on the role of educationals in maintaining and/or reducing barriers in your union and the wider labour movement.

24. I have asked all the questions that I have on the topic. Is there something that you would like to share with me about the subject that we have yet to deal with?
Appendix B:

Questionnaire on Background of Participant

The questions below are aimed at help me to understand the role that your background and experience play in your approach and perception of resistance in the labour movement.

1. What was your age in years at your last birthday?
   - □ Less than 20
   - □ 20 to 30
   - □ 31 to 40
   - □ 41 to 50
   - □ 51 to 60
   - □ Over 60

2. What is your gender?
   - □ Woman
   - □ Man
   - □ Transsexual
   - □ Transgender
   - □ Other ________________________________________

3. In which racialized group(s) do you identify yourself? You may select more than one group.
   - □ African/Black
   - □ Arab
   - □ Caribbean
   - □ Chinese
   - □ East Asian
   - □ Filipina/Filipino
   - □ Indian
   - □ Japanese
   - □ Korean
   - □ Latina/Latino
   - □ Pakistani
   - □ South Asian
   - □ South East Asian
   - □ West Asian
   - □ Other __________________________________________________________

4. Where is your country of birth?
   ________________________________________________________________

5. What is the highest level of formal schooling that you have completed?
   ________________________________________________________________

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6. What is your occupation? ____________________________________________

7. Are employed:
   □ Full-time – Permanent
   □ Full-time -Contract
   □ Part-time - Permanent
   □ Part-time - Casual
   □ Other __________________________________________________________

8. Do you work in the:
   □ Public sector
   □ Private sector
   □ Non-for-profit sector
   □ Other __________________________________________________________

9. Do you work for a trade union or another labour movement organization?
   □ YES          □ NO

10. Did you grow up in household where, at least one of the adults was a member of a trade union or labour organization?
    □ YES          □ NO          □ DO NOT KNOW

11. Did you grow up in a household where a parent or an adult in your household was member of a left-wing political organization?
    □ YES          □ NO          □ DO NOT KNOW

12. How many years have you being a member of a trade union(s)?
    ____________________________________________

13. Do you currently hold an elected or appointed political position(s) in your trade union?
    □ YES          □ NO

14. If YES, what is the title of your trade union political position(s)?
    ____________________________________________
    ____________________________________________

15. What is the total number of years that you have served in political positions in your union?
    ____________________________________________

16. How would you classify your political orientation?
    □ conservative  □ moderate  □ liberal  □ radical  □ socialist  □ other
Appendix C:

Informed Consent Form

Study on Race, Co-optation and Resistance in the Labour Movement

My name is Ajamu Nangwaya and I am a Ph.D. student in the Department of Adult Education and Counselling Psychology at the University of Toronto. I am doing research for a doctoral thesis on race, co-optation and resistance with respect to racialized trade unionists in the Canadian labour movement. This research project seeks to document, describe and analyze the experience of organizational resistance to racism and co-optation of racialized trade unionists in trade unions and other labour organizations. You will be asked to participate in a semi-structured interview of not more than two hours, which will be recorded on a cassette recorder. The tape of the interview will be used exclusively by the researcher, and will for a brief time be in the position of a trusted transcriber. The tapes will be destroyed on the completion of this research project. The tape and transcript will be kept in a locked cabinet that will only be accessible to me. You will not receive any payment for participating in this study. However, a benefit that may be derived is the contribution that you will have made to expand the labour studies literature on racialized trade unionists, resistance and the documentation of anti-racism activism. You will receive an electronic copy of the completed thesis and it may give you a global picture of the state of organizational resistance and co-optation in trade unions.

There are no physical or psychological risks associated with this research project. Your name and that of your trade union will not be associated in any way with the information collected about you, or with the research findings from this study. The anonymity and confidentiality of your identity will be strictly observed even in the event of scholarly publication or public presentations. Further, you will be provided with a transcript of your interview so as correct, add, and/or delete material as you see fit.

You are not required to sign this Consent Form. However, if you refuse to sign the Consent Form you would not be able to participate in this study. You may withdraw your consent to participate in this study at any time. You also have the right to cancel your permission for me to use and disclose information collected about you at any time by sending your written request to: Dr. Jack Quarter; 252 Bloor Street West; Department of Adult Education and Counselling Psychology; Toronto, ON M5S 1V6 or call him at (416) 978-0802. Further, if you have any concerns about this study, please get in touch with the University of Toronto’s Office of Research Ethics at (416) 946-3273 or by email at ethic.review@utoronto.ca.

I agree to take part in this study as a research participant. By my signature I affirm that I have read and received a copy of this Consent Form.

_________________________________________         ______________
Participant’s Name (Type or Print)                 Date

____________________________________________