



## RISING TO THE CHALLENGE

Report of the  
Year of Black Workers  
surveys 2023

**2023** YEAR OF  
BLACK  
WORKERS

Establishing legacy to generate change

## Contents

Introduction	3
Visibility – the gap between Black members and branch activists	4
Potential for activism amongst Black members	6
▪ Branch support for Black activism	7
▪ Other support needed by branches	8
Racism and race discrimination in the workplace	9
▪ The experience of Black members	9
▪ Reasons for not contacting UNISON for support	10
▪ The experience of branch activists	12
▪ Confidence, knowledge and awareness	12
Black members – outcomes when branch is approached	14
Visibility of Black members and activists within branches	15
Conclusions	16
Appendix – Who took part in the surveys?	17

## Introduction

2023 is UNISON's Year of Black Workers. The focus of the year is on tackling racism and improving the working conditions and opportunities for Black workers in Scotland. This is not just another one-off 'event'. It is about building capacity, confidence and knowledge within the union so that change can be effected for years to come.

The aims and priorities in Scotland for the Year of Black Workers were informed by a survey of UNISON's Black members undertaken in 2022. The findings highlighted the importance of visibility:

- The visibility of the trade union and of the Black members' organisation amongst Black workers and members;
- The visibility within the wider union of both Black activists and the Black Members organisation;
- The visibility of racism as a workplace issue amongst activists, including activist awareness of UNISON's Race Discrimination Protocol.

The Scottish Black Members Committee (SBMC) decided to re-examine these issues by carrying out two Scotland-wide surveys in 2023. The findings are reported here.

## Methodology

Two separate online surveys were carried out in spring 2023: a survey of Black Members and a survey of all UNISON branch activists (Black and those who do not identify as Black). UNISON Scotland branches shared the survey links with their activists and members respectively. Where the same questions were asked of Black Members in both 2022 and 2023 then year-on-year comparisons are given.

## Response

The survey of Black Members received a total of 229 responses (n=171 in 2022), while the survey of branch activists received 105 responses. The survey responses are a self-selecting sample of members and activists. See Appendix for more information.



## Visibility – the gap between Black members & branch activists

Reaching out to Black members and communicating what the union is doing with and for them is important. However, awareness of what the union is doing for Black members appears to be low (Chart 1).

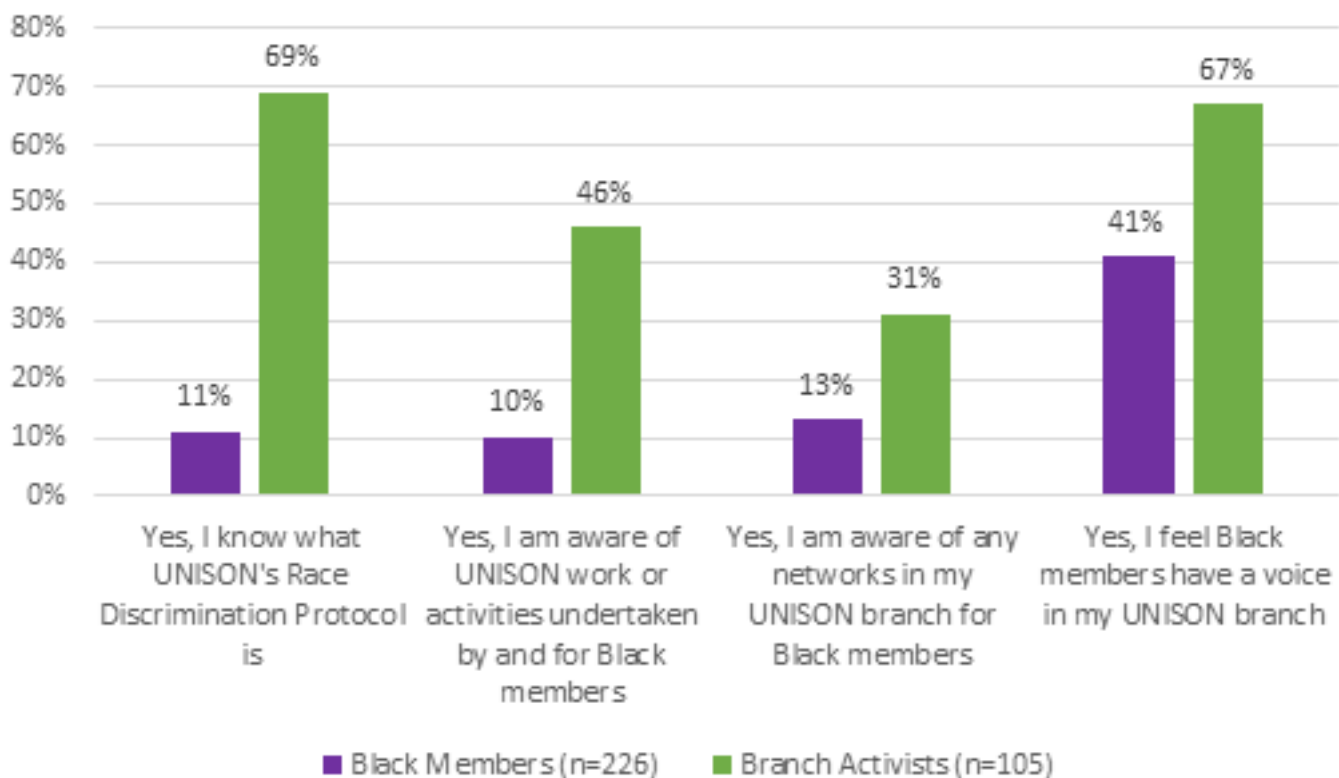
**Just 1 in 10 Black members** surveyed say they are aware of either UNISON activities and networks by and for them, or of UNISON's Race Discrimination Protocol.

**4 in 10 Black members** say they feel they have a voice in their branch (7 in 10 branch activists say they feel Black members have a voice in their branch).

Visibility of all of these things is much higher amongst branch activists. In fact, awareness of these measures is between 3-6 times higher amongst branch activists than amongst Black members.

To avoid complacency, it is important to be aware of the gap in perception between activists and Black members.

**Chart 1 – Awareness: Black members compared with UNISON branch activists**



This gap in perception was explored further in questions posed to Black members (Chart 2). The results show there is a way to go to make the union’s Black members’ organisation and activities more visible to its Black membership.

While a majority of Black members know which branch they belong to (89%), a minority (4 in 10) feel that Black members have a voice within the branch (41%).

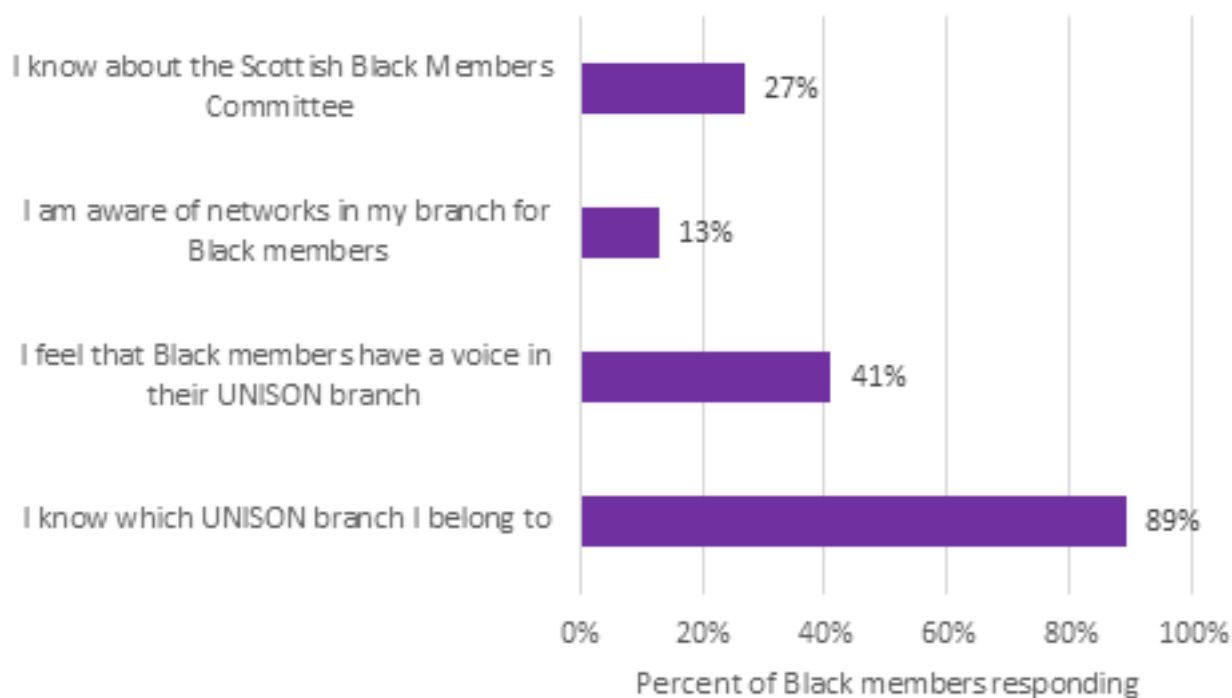
Amongst Black members there is a low level of awareness about Black members’ organisation within UNISON:

Fewer than a third (27%) know about the Scottish Black Members Committee.

Just 13% (n=28) are aware of any networks in their branch for Black Members.



**Chart 2 – Black members: knowledge and awareness**



## Potential for activism amongst Black members

Winning greater involvement of Black members at all levels of the union and building a strong Black members organisation is a key aim of the Year of Black Workers.

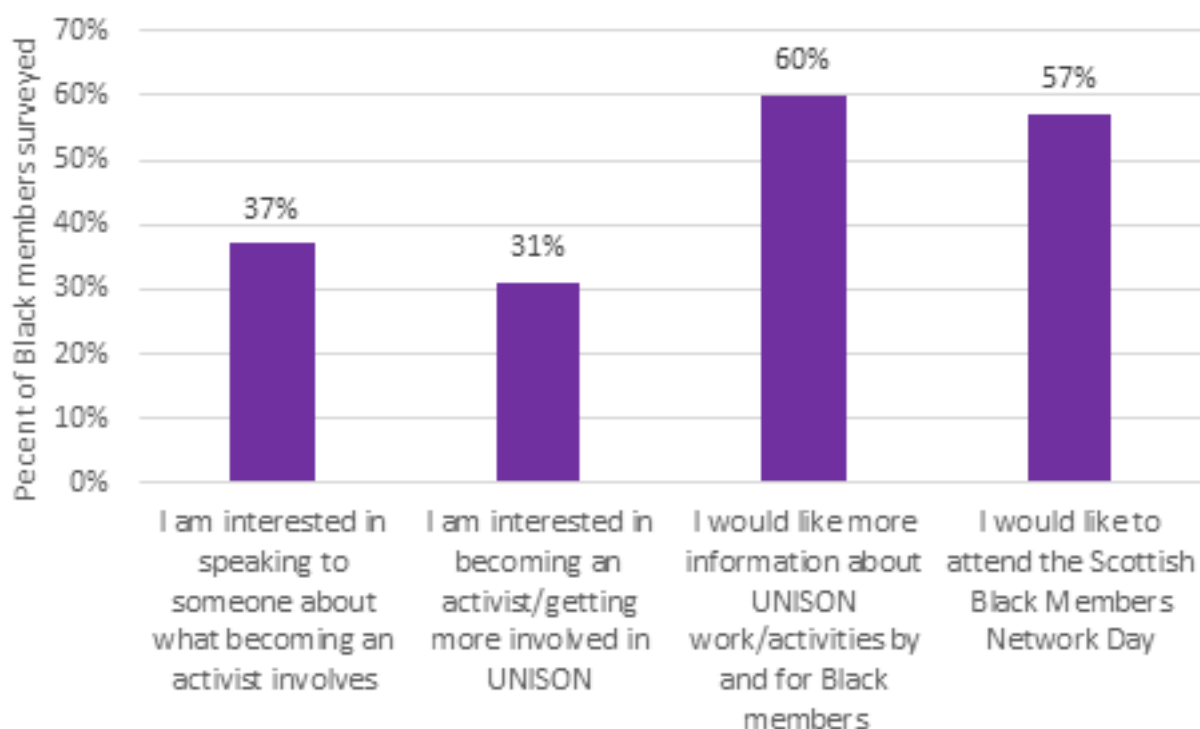
While a minority (32%) of Black Members in the survey say they know what a UNISON activist is, there is an appetite for getting more involved (Chart 3). This is particularly the case for UNISON activities specific to Black members. There is a clear message here about the importance of Black members organisation and activity at branch level for engaging with Black members and encouraging involvement.

Around a third of Black members surveyed (between 31-37%) are interested in finding out about/getting more involved/becoming a UNISON activist<sup>1</sup>

A majority of Black members (57 – 60%) surveyed want to know more about activities specifically for Black members or express an interest in attending the SBMC Network Day.

Strong interest was expressed by Black members in attending trade union education courses.

### Chart 3 – Black members: interest in getting involved



## Branch support for Black activism

Around 1 in 5 of the branch activists who took part (19%, n=19) say they are aware of plans to increase the numbers of Black Members and/or Black Activists in their branch. Seventeen gave brief information about these plans which included holding local events by and for Black members with examples including International Women's Day and a Black Members Celebration Day. A number mentioned activities or initiatives organised by their branch Equalities Officer or Black Members Officer. These include recruitment drives either targeted at or incorporating Black workers.

*"We are promoting the Year of Black Workers on all our social media, website and stalls and at our recent AGM. We are always actively looking to recruit members."*

*"Be visible have meetings. What's app group. Visits sites and let other Black Members that there is Black Members Group. Invite them to branch meetings and conferences."*

*"Increased recruitment drives Visibility in workplaces Campaigns on things that matter to members (org change, relocation etc)."*

In contrast, one activist said they did not feel that their branch had a 'clear and genuine plan' to maximise BAME membership.

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## Other support needed by branches

Almost half of survey participants gave examples of other types of assistance that would help them support their Black Members. A number commented on the absence of or very low numbers of Black workers in their workplace, or in their section of the workforce. One commented, “Black members are best placed to identify what support they require and then it’s our job to provide it”.

Education and training is one of the main themes and this includes comment on the type and content of education, the benefits of working together with employers on anti-racist training, and discussion of UNISON’s use of ‘Black’ as a political concept. Examples of comments include:

*“Union learning improving on challenging racism course (lay Tutors with lived experience) and advising branches, stewards to complete as a part of their initial training as a steward. A more comprehensive training for Equality Officers, Black members reps, secretaries and chairs. this will increase knowledge and understanding to foster an inclusive culture and actively engage with Black members.”*

*“More visibility on anti racism training in work place especially in care sectors to be conducted with care providers including private or charity based. This training must be in their curriculum of e-training and in-house training for staffs.”*

*“Training in upscaling the political consciousness of the Black leadership in Scotland. Especially in contemporary socio-political issues such as inequality, geopolitics, and EDI in the workplace. How to organise/do campaigns, advocacy and m public mobilisation.”*

*“UNISON’s terminology (“Black”) is a barrier to many. In terms of ethnic minorities, our branch (much like our employer) is mainly made up of British Arabs, Indians, Pakistanis and East Asians, many of whom simply do not wish to identify as “Black”. There is also the issue of Eastern Europeans and other white immigrants, many of whom face discrimination in the community and/or the workplace, but who would not feel comfortable participating in a “Black” space as white people.”*

Specific suggestions include:

Providing UNISON recruitment materials, employment rights information and publicity in a range of languages to reflect the composition of the workforce in sectors like care.

Having more black stewards in visible positions which in turn would attract more black members to get involved.

Training on the Race Discrimination Protocol, on tackling ‘covert’ race discrimination.

A dedicated space for Black members to come together on the union’s social media platforms.



## Racism or race discrimination in the workplace

The findings reflect the perspectives of both Black members and branch activists about responding to racism in the workplace.

### The experience of Black members

Racism and race discrimination in the workplace are common. This is well established. Of those who took part in our survey:

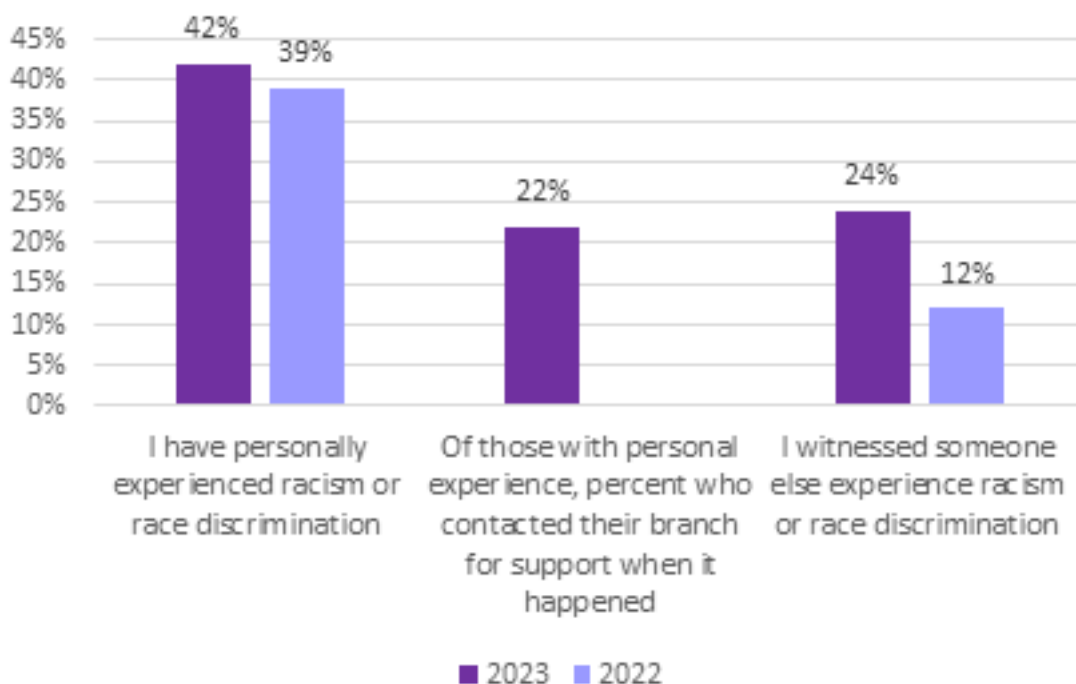
Around 4 in 10 Black members report direct personal experience of racism or race discrimination in the workplace over the past 12 months. The proportion reporting this is broadly the same in 2023 as in 2022 (Chart 4).

Around a quarter (24%) of Black members say in the past 12 months they witnessed someone else experience racism or race discrimination in the workplace. This is a higher percentage than in 2022 (12%).

Despite the prevalence of racism and race discrimination at work, just a small minority of Black members who experienced it, approach their UNISON branch for support.

Only 1 in 5 (22%) Black members contacted their branch for help when this happened to them in the past 12 months.

**Chart 4 – Black members: past 12 months, experience of racism or race discrimination in the workplace (%)**



## Reasons for not contacting UNISON for support

A majority (78%) of survey participants who personally experienced race discrimination did NOT contact their UNISON branch for support when it happened. A wide range of reasons were given for not seeking the union's support (Chart 5).

The two most common reasons given were (1) believing there was nothing the union could do (n=18) and (2) not knowing how to get help from the union (n=15).

*"Didn't know it was a union matter"*

*"Didn't know it was an option"*

*"Not sure who to contact"*

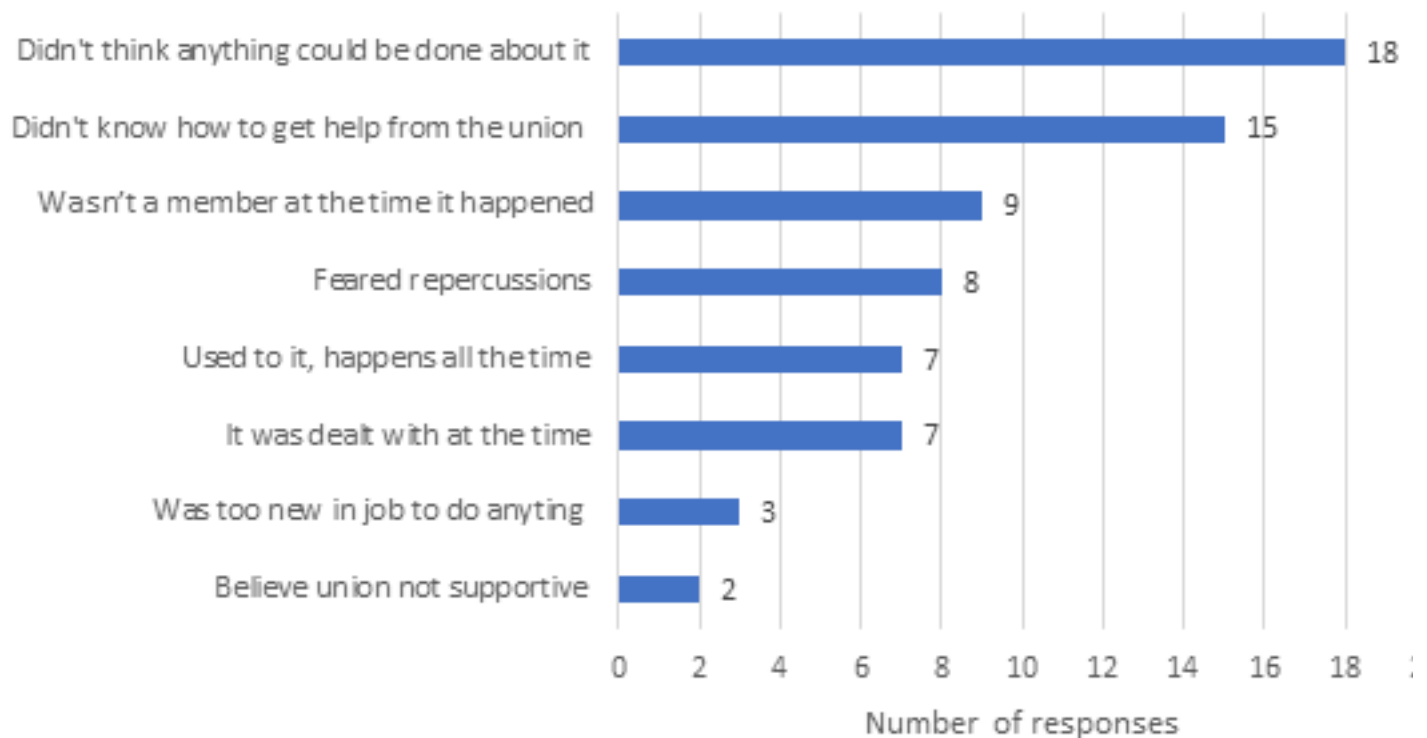
*"I was so exhausted and grateful to have survived the shift, I let it go unreported and I also wasn't sure who to speak to."*

This shows how important it is that every UNISON branch makes it known loudly and clearly to Black members that:

racism and race discrimination are trade union matters;

your branch is here to help with this, here's how to contact us.

**Chart 5 – Black members: reasons for not contacting UNISON branch for support**



In only a small minority of cases (n=7) in our survey was the incident addressed and dealt with at the time.

*“The racism I experienced was from a patient and the other staff were not happy with it. So, they rebuked the patient immediately and it all got sorted out.”*

An equal number of respondents either expressed resignation, minimising the incident as something they were ‘used’ to putting up with or, alternatively, expressed apprehension about ‘drawing attention to themselves’ and the possible consequences in terms of ‘making things worse for themselves’.

*“Because this type of discrimination is what I received in so many work places in my life I just learn to ignore it”*

*“Because it happens ALL the time and cannot go to report everyday”*

*“I just think what is the point , I feel I would be labelled a trouble maker and there could be repercussions and I have not got the strength”*

*“Sometimes if u try to put your point across what you get back is 'you are being aggressive'. So the only way to keep yourself sane is to just ignore and suppress your feelings.”*

Finally in some cases respondents did not seek support because they were either very new in post or not a union member at the time (n=9).



## The experience of Branch activists

### Confidence, Knowledge and Awareness

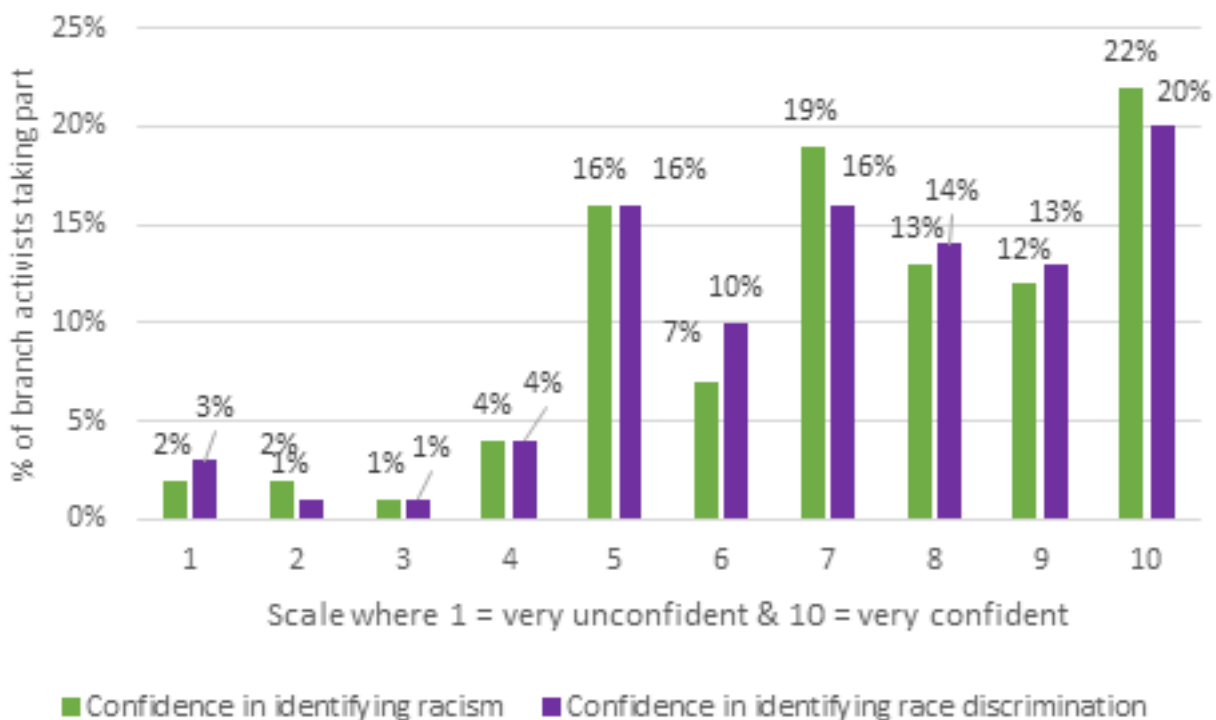
Most branch activists who took part in the survey are confident in their ability to recognise racism and race discrimination at work (Chart 6).

Confidence in identifying racism: almost half (47%) of activists rate themselves 8-10 on a scale where 10 is very confident.

Confidence in identifying race discrimination: Similarly, 47% rate themselves as very confident in being able to identify race discrimination.

However, there is room for improvement. Around 1 in 10 activists say they do not feel very confident about either (1-4 on the scale), while a quarter (24%-26%) rate themselves as middling in confidence (5-6 on the 10-point scale).

**Chart 6 – Branch activists: how confident are you that you can identify racism & race discrimination in the workplace?**



While a majority of branch activists who took part are confident about responding to racism or race discrimination at work (Chart 6) it is clear more can be done to improve levels of confidence within branches.

77% (n=79) say they feel confident supporting Black Members experiencing workplace racism or racial discrimination.

But 22.5% do not feel confident (n=23) and 85% (n=88) say either they or their branch would benefit from training.

**UNISON’s Race Discrimination Protocol**

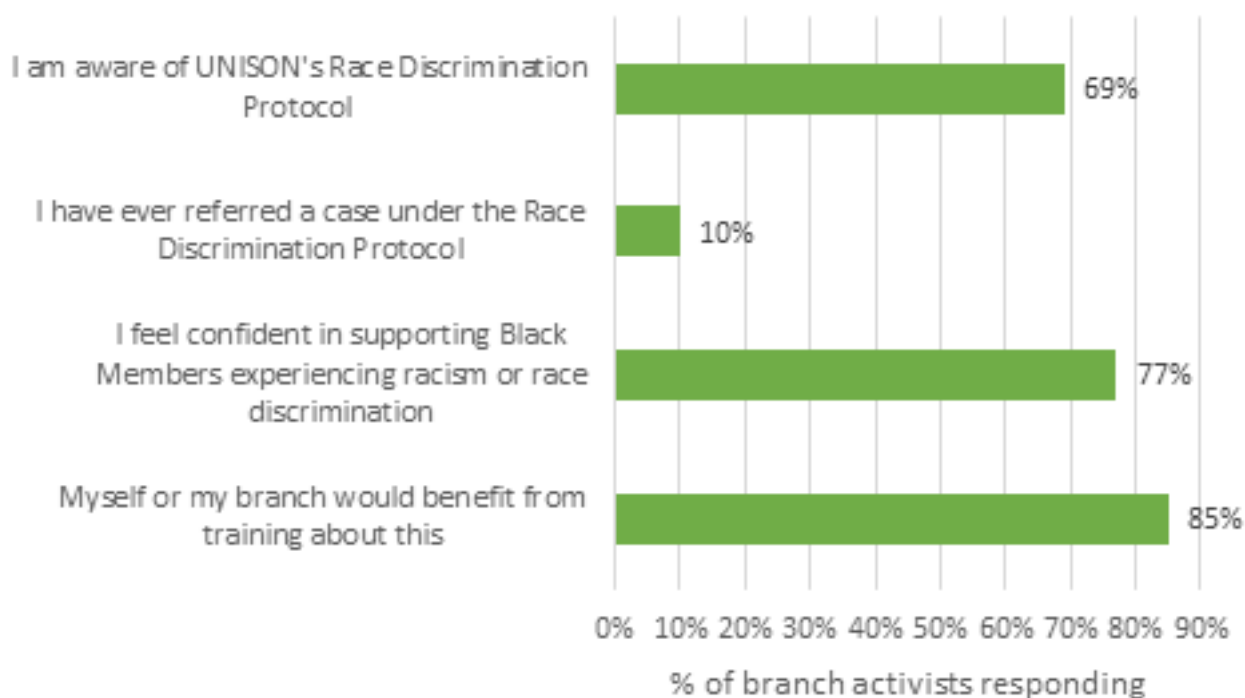
Awareness: 69% (n=70) of branch activists say they are aware of the Protocol.

Using the Protocol: Only 10% (n=7) of those who are aware of the Protocol, have ever referred a case under it. One person had made 3 referrals within the last 3 years, another had made 2 referrals, and 4 people had made 1 referral.

The survey also asked about confidence in reaching out to update members’ Equalities information. A majority, 88% (n=87) of activists say they feel confident doing this.



**Chart 7 – Branch activists: confidence in responding to racism and race discrimination**



## Black members – outcomes when branch is approached

Of those who did contact their branch for support, there were a range of outcomes. Some were positive, members felt well supported and their complaint was resolved satisfactorily. In other cases, either the initial response received from the branch, or the ultimate outcome, was dissatisfactory.

There are 18 responses concerning outcomes, but in only 14 cases are actual outcomes reported. Of these:

7/14 had a positive outcome

6/14 had a negative outcome

In another 5 cases processes were either still ongoing, or had not been taken forward. Comments include:

*“They showed good support”*

*“Nothing, it was a waste of time.”*

*“Disciplinary actions against me were closed, but no acceptance that I was experiencing racism by my supervisor and no follow up to tell me what actions had been taken to stop it happening again”*

While this is a small sample, denial by employers that racism or race discrimination is a factor is reported as an issue. As would be expected, the responses also suggest an inconsistency in the quality of response received by Black members.

## Visibility of Black Members & Activists within branches

There appears to be a low level of awareness amongst branch activists of Black members and activists locally. The largest group of activists taking part in the survey are workplace stewards and this may not be information they have access to.

Only 22% of branch activists (n=22) could state approximately how many Black Members their branch has. More than three quarters (78%) could not.

Of the 22 activists who stated a number, 12 say their branch has 10 or fewer Black Members. The numbers provided ranged from zero to 5000.

62% (n=58) of branch activists say there are NO Black Activists in their branch.

A minority (43%, n=15) of those who said their branch HAS Black Activists, could state an approximate number within their branch. The number provided ranged from 1 to 20.



## Conclusions

This is a summary of lessons drawn:

Awareness is low amongst Black members about what the union is doing with and for them. We must remind ourselves of the gap in perception between branch activists and Black members - and act upon it.

In turn, awareness of Black members and Black activists is low amongst branch activists.

There is an appetite amongst Black members for becoming more involved in UNISON. It's clear that Black members' organisation and activity at branch level is the way to harness this.

Some branches are already taking strong proactive initiatives to recruit, engage and activate Black workers that others can learn from. Branch activists are looking for a range of support to help them do this.

Few members who experience racism or race discrimination at work contact their UNISON branch for support. The main reasons for this are believing that there is nothing the union can do, and not knowing who to contact or how to get help from the branch. We must do more to make it known that racism and race discrimination are trade union issues, create direct pathways to UNISON support for Black members and improve the consistency of the response they receive.

Branch activists are keen to improve their confidence in dealing with racism and race discrimination in the workplace. While there is good awareness of UNISON's Race Discrimination Protocol very few activists have experience of using it.



## Appendix: Who took part in the surveys?

### Black Members Survey

229 Black members took part in the survey, of whom 5 (2%) are UNISON activists. Three quarters of participants are female (76%) and 6% are disabled. British Asian/Asian or Asian other was the largest group (44%) followed by British African/African/African other (25%) and British Black/Black/Black Other (10.5%).

Of the 229 Black members who took part (171 in 2022):

37% work in the NHS (n=83). However Black Members in only 9/14 NHS boards took part in the survey. In 3/9 of these health boards only 1 or 2 Black Members took part.

32% work for councils (n=72) but Black Members in only 20/32 councils took part in the survey. In 14/20 of these councils only 1 or 2 Black Members took part.

The coverage of the survey in 2023 is an improvement on 2022, when members in only 4/14 NHS boards and 12/32 councils took part. The proportion of respondents working in the NHS and local government was broadly the same, at 32% and 34% respectively.

### Branch Activists Survey

105 branch activists took part from 48 different UNISON branches. These branches cover a range of sectors including local government, health, public bodies, public utilities, voluntary sector and further and higher education. Stewards are the majority of respondents (n=59) along with branch officers (n=55). The branch officers include 4 Black Members Officers.

The survey respondents are self-selecting and unlikely to provide a representative picture of branch activists for that reason.



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