

Dismantle Anti-Asian Racism

APRIL 1, 2021

Since the Toronto Joint Labour Committee for Human Rights was formed, this Labour Council has fought racism and systemic discrimination in our workplaces, in our society and within our local unions. The shooting deaths of six Asian women in Atlanta, Ga. on March 16, 2021 and the increasingly attacks on Asian-Canadians since the start of the coronavirus pandemic highlights the importance of the work we do as a labour movement in challenging all forms of racism.

History

Anti-Asian racism is not new – it has taken many forms since the first Chinese labourers arrived in Canada in 1868 to build the railroad that would eventually lead to Confederation. Asians were seen as the “Yellow Peril,” an existential threat to the “white” nation that Sir John A. MacDonal and others were trying to construct. Lawmakers enacted policies, such as the Chinese Head Tax, to deter the arrival of Chinese workers and their family members; and shamefully many unions called for restrictions on Asian immigration. As well as deeply ingrained racism, some workers believed that these immigrants would be used to undermine hard-won wage standards.

The Komagata Maru

In 1914 the Komagata Maru steamship, carrying 376 passengers from India, arrived at Vancouver. While Canada was welcoming hundreds of thousands of white immigrants from Europe, special laws had been enacted to keep Asians from immigrating. Passengers from Komagata Maru were denied entry to Canada and were forced to return to India.

The Chinese Exclusion Act

On July 1st, 1923 Canada imposed the Chinese Exclusion Act, an outright ban on Chinese immigration. In 1942, under the War Measures Act, the Canadian government dispossessed more than 90 per cent of Japanese-Canadians living in BC and sent them to live in internment camps.

The Civil Rights Movement

It wasn't until the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s that the dominant narrative on Asians changed. Asian-Canadians were cast as the “model minority” – law-abiding

citizens who kept quiet and worked hard (or studied hard) to assimilate. This myth was developed as an attempt by white supremacy to pit communities of colour against each other, and to continue a racial hierarchy in Canadian society. Yet racist groups still targeted everyone of colour. In 1975 labour helped create the Urban Alliance on Race Relations in response to the rise of physical violence against Asian Canadians.

Filipino Canadians

Filipino Canadians have specific experiences with domestic worker, healthcare and temporary foreign worker programs designed to create a pliable workforce with few rights. The structuring of precarious work in key sectors such as agriculture, long-term care or meat-packing is predicated on racial hierarchies across this country.

Anti-Asian Racism Today

Learning about and acknowledging this history is important to breaking down barriers in 2021 and beyond. We must recognize that racism remains deeply entrenched in our institutions and in our collective psyche. A leading Conservative politician openly questions the loyalty of Canada's Chief Medical Officer of Health, while a fifth-generation Chinese or Japanese-Canadian person will still be asked today "Where are you really from?".

The Impact Of Racism

Unless we recognize that white supremacy is used to divide communities and pit groups against each other, we will never develop the collective willpower we need to fight racism in all its forms. And while the impact of racism is different on Asian communities than it is for Black or Indigenous communities, working people are all have the same goal - to dismantle and eradicate systemic racism.

Challenging Racism

Challenging racism requires that we build bridges between communities, and to uphold the slogan that an injury to one is an injury to all. This is the ongoing work of this Labour Council and all its projects.

Challenging Ideas

Fighting racism is not just about stopping individual behaviours, or about questioning the moral quality of a person's character, but it involves challenging the powerful ideas that we have all been socialized into, and the way that these ideas present themselves within our systems. It begins with learning about the history and subjugation of different peoples, and it continues with the unpacking of the ideas and social concepts

that are normal and seemingly neutral. And while our labour movement has undertaken important work in challenging employers and workplaces, there is still more to be done within our union organizations.

On April 1, 2021, the Labour Council resolved to:

- Call on all affiliates to incorporate anti-racism work in every aspect of union activity, including health and safety work. Urge every union to fully adopt the “Yes It Matters” campaign, and call on employers to implement extensive workplace anti-racism programs.
- Ensure that the Day of Mourning events on April 28th acknowledge the disproportionate impact of the COVID pandemic on workers and communities of colour
- Call on all educational and healthcare institutions to develop strategies and commit resources to dismantle all forms of racism within their operations and services
- Support community allies leading the struggles for migrant workers, employment standards, and human rights in every aspect of Canadian society