

LABOR **NOTES**

Race and Labor

Scenarios:

Our belief is that maximum participation is key to building multi-racial democratic unions that can challenge power and win on racial justice issues. Pick 1 of these scenarios and discuss in small groups how this would exclude or prevent minority workers from participating in the union? Then discuss what are the steps you as the union (stewards, leadership, members) could take to address these scenarios and build solidarity among the members.

- A group of Latino members are sitting in the break room when another member walks in. They burst out laughing and continue talking in Spanish. A member who only speaks English gets agitated and tells them, “I know you’re talking about me. “We speak English in this country.”
- You’re collecting photos for your slate’s Facebook page, website and campaign leaflets. All of the pictures you’re getting are of white members. You ask the other slate members if there are pictures of members of color and they say, “ We don’t have many members of color who are involved.”
- Some racist graffiti is found scrawled on someone’s locker with a Sharpie, including the N word. Management cleans off the locker and moves on. Rumors fly about what the graffiti said and didn’t say.
- The university announces layoffs to the custodial staff, a workforce that has many Black, Latino, and immigrant members in a different union. You discuss mobilizing for their rally and lending them staff support at the Executive Board meeting. One member protests, arguing that faculty don’t want to be associated with the custodial staff and it will hurt your reputation.



Campaign Examples:

Pick one campaign example to read through and discuss with your group what issues they were experiencing, what steps they took to address these issues and what makes these examples racial justice.

[Teamster MLK Day campaign](#)

1. Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU) have been organizing to make Teamsters a more democratic union since the 1970's. In 2022 a reform slate led by Sean O'Brien and Fred Zuckerman won union leadership. Teamsters launched a campaign on MLK DAY in 2022 called "Deliver on the Dream" which called for UPS to make MLK a paid holiday, end two-tier jobs, create more full-time jobs and pay part-time employees a living wage. It mobilized shops all across the country with parking lot rallies and petitions. UPS increasingly relies on part-time workers who are disproportionately black and brown and has a starting wage of only \$15/hr. One union member spoke about the impact the campaign had on their local:

"A lot of members showed up for our action. It got people talking and showing unity. We want to show the company numbers. When they look out the window and see a lot of us united across the country they see we're going to stick together. That's the only thing that shows them we're building momentum for the contract and the concession stand is closed."k

[Racist manager at Kroger](#)

2. At a Kroger in Portsmouth, Virginia a racist manager was targeting black workers and disciplining for things white workers would not get in trouble for. The company refused to do anything about it. So members took matters into their own hands and started documenting every incident of racism and calling the manager out on it every time. When people started to see that they could stand up to the racist manager, folks who were never interested in the union before signed up. They continued to document everything she did and put together a team of people from different departments and shifts to make sure we caught every incident. As the workers got stronger the manager got more desperate in her attempts to get rid of them and made a mistake that even Kroger couldn't ignore and finally after 2 years she was gone.

[Workers at Twin Peaks go on strike to have racist and sexist manager fired](#)

3. Workers at Twin Peaks (Hooter-style restaurant) were facing abuse, sexual harassment, stolen wages and other mistreatment by a racist and sexist manager. The front of the house servers were rated by their looks and given shifts and sections that made more money based off their rating. Racism affected the ranking, no matter how done up the servers were if they weren't a white girl or blonde they would be ranked last. Back of the house workers weren't allowed a lunch break until 10 pm once the restaurant wasn't as busy and faced extreme abuse from the manager.

Ricardo Juarez, a cook who has worked at the restaurant for 8 years, began talking with his coworkers in the back of the house that something needed to be done. They organized a march on the boss, the co-owner of the restaurant, to demand that the racist and sexist manager be fired. When they ignored their demand and shrugged it off, the back of the house staff walked off the job on a busy Saturday forcing the restaurant to close early.

"We never really made eye contact with back of the house until all this [the strike] happened," Reilly said. "When we found out back of the house was on strike, everyone in the front of the house was communicating with each other saying, 'Oh my gosh, we've been experiencing the same thing. Because the back of the house was brave enough to stand up, it opened up this opportunity for all of us to share our stories and to unite.'"

Management deliberately divided the two groups of workers, preventing them from talking among themselves and to each other even when the restaurant wasn't busy. Despite this front of the house staff joined the strike in solidarity.

"We're not fighting for just one position at the restaurant," said one worker. "We're fighting for everyone in there; everyone that's been there; everyone that's yet to come—and making sure that all of us have a happy and safe experience, because that is not what's been happening lately."

[Minneapolis Strikers demand living wage for the lowest-paid Educator](#)

4. The Minneapolis Federation of Teachers went on strike on March 8, 2022 following close by was Minneapolis Public Schools food service workers with Service Employees (SEIU). Some of the members of MFT who are Education Support Professionals (ESP's), and members of SEIU that consisted of food service workers, were being paid poverty wages and living out of cars.

“When we knew the strike could happen,” Callahan said, “we had meetings in every site and let people get their fears out. What if the parents don’t support us? What if the special education students don’t get their needs met? What if the boss comes after me? What is the alternative?” Callahan would ask in response. “That question galvanized members.”

They used a paper survey, carrying it from person to person as part of a conversation about what members wanted in the contract. The organizing for a potential strike and the focus on ESP demands increased the ESP’s chapter membership by more than 100.

“Schools operate to create intentional isolation,” said Laden. “There is a lot of tension. Classism plays into that, racism plays into that, and how we operate as a district. Not only did the unions in each city have to learn to work together, but teachers and ESPs also had to overcome years of operating in silos within the same union. The majority of teachers in the Twin Cities are white; the majority of the ESPs are people of color. They began sitting down and building relationships with each other. Teachers also joined the ESP open bargaining sessions. As people learned more about each other and talked to each other, it has been transformational- especially for ESPs, hearing teachers say “I’m going on strike for ESPs to have a living wage.”

The courage and conviction of these members owes a lot to the uprising that swept the Twin Cities in 2020 after Minneapolis police murdered George Floyd. “It showed everyone we need to be in control of our lives, our jobs, our cities,” said Callahan, who is white. “It is all the same fight,” said Callahan. “When we are fighting for our schools we are fighting for Black lives.”

Howard, who is Black, agrees. “It wasn’t until there was a rally with teachers, some in red [SPFE’s color] and some in blue [MFT’s color], walking across the bridge to St. Paul [that] I knew: this is what solidarity looks like,” she said. “I was in tears.”