

Black Transit Worker Campaigns to Increase Diversity in Union Leadership

Demographic shifts in union membership have not translated to demographic shifts in union top brass

By Stacy M. Brown
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Keith Bullock, a bus operator for the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA), wants to transform the leadership of his local union and push for greater diversity in top labor positions nationwide.

According to a 2013 report by the Labor Center at the University of California at Berkeley, Black workers are more likely to join unions than non-Blacks.

“These differences were magnified when limiting the analysis to the ten most pop-

ular metropolitan areas in the United States. Among U. S. workers, Blacks were 19 percent more likely to belong to unions than non-Blacks; however, among workers in the largest metropolitan areas, Blacks were 42 percent more likely to belong to unions com-

pared to non-Blacks,” the report said. In the northeast, union density for Black workers is 23.8 percent compared to 16.5 percent for non-Black workers.

Bullock, born and raised in Southeast, Washington, D.C., is campaigning to become the next Recording Secretary in the Amalgamated Transit Union Local 689, which represents operators, clerical, paratransit and maintenance workers in the Washington D.C. area transit system. The position is one of three elected positions in the powerful union.

board member for Local 689. “Today, the union leadership is more a ‘me’ and ‘my’ attitude.”

While Bullock campaigns for a leadership position in his Washington, D.C.-based union, the election has far-reaching implications for other trade groups.

In 2015, the Black Labor Collaborative, a group of influential African American leaders from major labor organization, released a white paper that said, “Black workers have been, for the working class as a whole, the canary in the mine...What befalls the Black worker inevitably confronts the bulk of the working class.”

The paper also suggested that the, “the Achilles’ heel of organized labor has been its failure to respond to attacks on Black workers and its inability ‘to recognize that the Black working class is, indeed, a component of the larger working class and not some marginal category.’”

Bullock said that the powers-that-be are more concerned with maintaining power than they are about the workers. During elections, Bullock said that group leaders will run a five-person slate for office, tying all of the positions to-



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gether to form, “a clique where there’s no accountability.”

The married father of five wants to push for greater transparency in leadership, increase benefits and improve the quality of life of his fellow transit workers in the region.

Bullock’s mission is to ward off attacks on pensions, ensure adequate and affordable health care and fair wages for workers and to provide solutions for inclusive management and employee relations.

His appreciation of history can also be an advantage, as Bullock noted the distinct ties that labor unions have with the Civil Rights Movement.

“I know that during the height of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s there was strong solidarity and support from the leadership of the AFL-CIO with Dr. Martin Luther King and the Southern Leadership Conference,” Bullock said, noting that King’s assassination in Memphis occurred during a struggle over the labor rights of primarily African-American sanitation workers.

Bullock said that the unions adopted some of the organizing traits that became prominent during the Civil Rights

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