

COMMUNICATIONS WORKERS OF AMERICA

# Report of the CWA National Civil Rights & Equity Committee

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# CWA

## CWA National Civil Rights & Equity Committee

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# Addressing Racial Trauma Through An Anti-Racist Lens

*Doug Johnson, CWA Local 6215, Penny Franklin, IUE-CWA Local 82160,  
Reginald Small, CWA Local 6215, and Pamela Bell, CWA Local 9003*

Racism is one of the most deep-seated forms of oppression in America. Since the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation in 1865, it has been hidden like an affair in the backdrop of everyday life. Often a perennial and controversial topic, many people fail to see racism because of its normalcy in our everyday lives. It can be subtle in the form of microaggressive statements, or it can be in its bold, clearly-stated form. Examples include, but definitely are not limited to, a teacher who tells you to think about being a nursing assistant because you do not have what it takes to be a doctor, being followed in a store, being denied a loan for a home while a white person who makes less money and has a lower credit score is given a loan, or seeing Black and Brown people killed by police. Whatever the form, racism is very much real, and for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC), being the subject of racism either directly or vicariously through the media often leads to racial trauma.

Racial trauma is a mental and emotional injury caused by racial bias, discrimination, blatant racism, and hate crimes.<sup>1</sup> Essentially, it is the devastating side effect of ongoing exposure to racism and racist abuse. Any individual who experiences an emotionally painful, sudden, and uncontrollable racist act is at risk of feeling racial trauma. Racial trauma can affect many aspects of a person's life, including their ability to have relationships, concentrate on work, and feel safe.<sup>2</sup> Racism is a dangerous, ugly disease, and when society lacks the tools to fight, it can fester and spread. As unionists, if we continue avoiding the topic and failing to address racism, we create a weakness in our movement.

CWA is founded on the principle of solidarity and unity among all workers. We provide opportunities for people of different racial backgrounds and identities to not only work side by side, but to work toward a common goal together and enhance respect and mutuality across racial lines. The only way we can keep our movement strong and dismantle racism is by standing together and supporting each other. We have to reject hateful and divisive rhetoric and instead focus on addressing the issues we face through worker solidarity. Although the era of Jim Crow is formally over, racism continues to drive a wedge between people who could have more to gain by standing together than apart.

The murders of our BIPOC siblings and the regurgitating displays of anti-Black racism shine a spotlight on the grim reality that, without a radical and profound change both in ourselves and in this country, our country will never move forward. We need to create situations that

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.mhanational.org/racial-trauma>

<sup>2</sup> <https://blogs.chapman.edu/wilkinson/2021/02/19/racial-trauma-a-study-by-dr-andrew-kami/>

lead people to recognize that there are common interests across racial lines. A 2020 study found that unions do not simply focus on wages and benefits for workers on the job — union membership is also linked to diminished racist attitudes among white workers.<sup>3</sup> If we want to defeat racism, building strong and democratic unions is essential.

In June of 2020, the Executive Board of CWA passed a resolution committing to an open dialog on race to define clear steps that CWA leaders and members must take to fight racism in the union. The resolution clearly stated that we must no longer stand in the in-between. We must do the hard, transformational work of rooting out racism in America's consciousness and the institutions that uphold it. CWA has developed a way for members to fight against racism and racial trauma. As part of our commitment to creating spaces for open dialogue on race and its nasty side effects, we have developed a series of virtual training sessions on recognizing implicit bias and how to dismantle racism through our active anti-racist work. We have made available multiple educational opportunities to have in-depth conversations about race, racism, and the efforts to promote anti-racism.

We have to continue providing training that promotes an anti-racist movement within and beyond our union. This training is made available to every Local within our union and should not be denied to members because of the region in which they reside. We will continue to invest in opportunities to dispense knowledge so that anti-racism is the key to ending racial trauma and promoting equality.

## **In Focus: Health Care Disparities & People of Color**

*Fred Smith, CWA Local 3902 and Sylvia Chapman, CWA Local 4250*

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<sup>3</sup> <https://organizing.work/2021/02/union-membership-and-white-workers-racial-attitudes/>

Differences in race and ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, disability, and immigration status all contribute to long-standing and systemic health inequities. It is those inequities that disproportionately place minority groups at an increased risk of becoming ill and dying. Health inequities often arise from the unequal distribution of power, resources, and various determinants, including social, economic, and environmental conditions that have historically prevented many people from equal opportunities to health services.<sup>4</sup> The factors that make up the root causes of health inequity are diverse, complex, and evolving. However, equitable access to health care and intentionally debunking misinformation are essential factors that can be used to eliminate disparities.<sup>5</sup>

Consider the pregnancy-related mortality rate among women of color and non-Hispanic white women in the United States. While health care disparities in the maternal mortality rate have increased worldwide, the United States has a much higher and more disproportionate maternal mortality rate between racial and ethnic groups than any other developed nation.<sup>6</sup> Black women are two to three times more likely to die from pregnancy-related causes than white women, and this disparity increases with age.<sup>7</sup> For example, pregnancy-related deaths for Black women older than 30 years of age are four to five times higher than for white women.<sup>8</sup> According to a report from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), pregnancy-related mortality ratios were 41.7 deaths per 100,000 live births for Black women compared to 13.4 deaths per 100,000 live births for non-Hispanic White women between 2014 and 2017.<sup>9</sup> Even in states with lower pregnancy-related mortality rates and a higher number of women with college education levels, significant differences persist. These findings suggest the disparity observed in pregnancy-related deaths for Black women is a complex national problem. The existence of structural racism within the health care systems is evident by these disparate outcomes.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.nap.edu/read/24624/chapter/5#101>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4724388/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.ajmc.com/view/racial-disparities-persist-in-maternal-morbidity-mortality-and-infant-health>  
<sup>7</sup> <https://www.npr.org/2017/12/07/568948782/black-mothers-keep-dying-after-giving-birth-shalon-irvings-story-explains-why>

<sup>8</sup>

<https://www.cdc.gov/reproductivehealth/maternal-mortality/disparities-pregnancy-related-deaths/infographic.html>

<sup>9</sup>

<https://www.cdc.gov/reproductivehealth/maternal-mortality/pregnancy-mortality-surveillance-system.htm>

Another discrepancy in health care shows that people of color are four times more likely to be hospitalized and nearly three times more likely to die of COVID-19.<sup>10</sup> Black Americans have almost the lowest vaccination rates among any ethnic group, while White Americans are being vaccinated at a rate 1.3 times higher than African Americans.<sup>11</sup> The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) reported that as of August 16, 2021, the percentage of Black people who have received at least the first dose of a COVID-19 vaccine was 40%, compared to 50% of white people.<sup>12</sup> It is America's history of medical experimentation among Black Americans that has resulted in the Black community's suspicions of any new medicines, including the COVID-19 vaccine. This history is a contributing factor to the skepticism surrounding the government's rollout of the COVID-19 vaccine. The fear is evident in a recent Kaiser Family Foundation poll showing 13% of the Black community still remains unvaccinated and believes the vaccine would prove to be a greater risk to their health than getting the virus.<sup>13</sup> The uncertainty is not that people of color fear new medical technologies; it is a legitimate concern from a long history of being dehumanized, mistreated, and violated by our U.S. policymakers and the health care industry.

For people of color, the stain of the Tuskegee Study, the Henrietta Lacks case, and other examples of how Blacks have been treated in the medical field make many of them justifiably scared and skeptical about the COVID-19 vaccine. Black Americans do not have to look that far back into history to recall a bad experience. They can look to an experience they or their family members have had while interacting with the health care system that has left them feeling a bias in the system against them. It is a very rational skepticism and the only way to address it is to end the systemic racism in medicine and health care that caused it in the first place.

Tackling disinformation and misinformation is a high priority. Our nation should invest in institutions that serve communities of color to offset disparities in information regarding the vaccine. Additionally, increase the number of vaccine sites to include locations that are easy to get to by people in the African American, Hispanic, and Indigenous tribal communities. Most vaccine locations are set up in higher-income zip codes and receive a higher share of the vaccine than middle-class or impoverished communities.<sup>14</sup> Many

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<sup>10</sup>

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/covid-data/investigations-discovery/hospitalization-death-by-race-ethnicity.html>

<sup>11</sup>

<https://www.kff.org/coronavirus-covid-19/issue-brief/latest-data-on-covid-19-vaccinations-race-ethnicity/>

<sup>12</sup>

<https://www.kff.org/coronavirus-covid-19/issue-brief/latest-data-on-covid-19-vaccinations-race-ethnicity/>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.kff.org/coronavirus-covid-19/poll-finding/kff-covid-19-vaccine-monitor-july-2021/>

<sup>14</sup>

<https://www.statnews.com/2021/02/11/covid19-vaccination-rates-follow-the-money-in-states-with-biggest-wealth-gaps>

individuals in those communities don't have access to travel, access to information to enroll in services, and many other things that keep them from health care access.

There's been a lot of effort to portray the vaccine as safe, yet the same amount of thought, effort, and concern has not been put into figuring out how to get the vaccine to Black and Brown people and the community. CWA must continue to work to eliminate systemic racial disparities through the education of our members and the communities in which they reside. Through political, legislative, and movement-building actions, we can work to get legislation enacted that addresses inequities of any type in all communities. CWA must also continue outreach to members and communities of color and share fact-based information that can help end skepticism about the vaccine. We can work to stop racism in medicine and health care that caused the distrust in the first place by educating our members and supporting the vaccine nationwide with additional information.



## Climate of Misinformation

*Tim Fitzgerald, TNG-CWA Local 32035 and  
Reginald Pierre-Louis, CWA Local 1106*

Throughout history, disinformation, untruths, and propaganda have been used as tools to shape public opinion and make it harder to differentiate what is real and what is fake. The ruling class, party, and other affiliated organizations often use methods of deceit to keep their fragile majority in power and to disenfranchise groups of people who outnumber them, such as the poor and working class. Misinformation has taken on many forms such as simple gossip, propaganda campaigns, and false scientific and medical claims to name a few. As the conduits for information have expanded with technological advances so have the ability of those to disperse falsehoods to the larger population. From the days of ancient Greece, medieval Europe, early colonial America, and up until now mankind has gone from word of mouth, the printing press, radio, and television, to the dominant player in disseminating information, better known as the internet.

The internet has allowed for greater access to information for a larger number of people across the globe. Unfortunately, access to this worldwide network has also allowed many the ability to consciously use this platform to plant false information. Some influencers even disguise their sites and information to mimic accredited sites, which further deceives the user into believing the content. To make matters more difficult, many of these sites then link themselves to social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter which multiply their views by the thousands. Having full trust in the disseminated information, many internet users rarely follow up and research the information received from these fake sites.

Social media sites have algorithms specifically designed to repeatedly send information based on things users like or routinely look up, but fail to take into account its authenticity. An article in the Guardian in July 2017, remarked on how fake news may have influenced the 2016 election. For example, millions of Americans use their Facebook news feed as a major source of news, despite the fact that Facebook is not a news site. This is why both Facebook and Twitter have come under attack for their negligence in removing fake news, especially during the 2016 U.S. Presidential election. In fact, in the last decade, politicians and their supporters cite a wave of false information that has seemingly swept over the nation.

Finally, in the face of pressure, Facebook banned the use of the term “fake news” in August 2017. Many governments around the world have since looked to block access to the internet, by implementing measures to track and cite so-called fake news sites with legislative initiatives. Social media giants such as Facebook, Twitter, and Google have launched their own internal watchdogs, as well as partnered with credible independent fact-checkers, to warn readers and provide labels for the content that could be inaccurate. Government and regulatory agencies will play a vital role in helping to turn the tables toward a more accurate and objective news experience for citizens across the globe, but especially here in the United States.

In 2016, Donald Trump used the momentum of his growing campaign to repurpose the phrase “fake news” into a battle cry for his supporters. While the term may not be new, the volume and persistence of Donald Trump’s disinformation campaign intentionally created confusion through misinformation and misrepresentation. This reckless disregard for the truth culminated in a deadly attack following a rally near the U.S. Capitol building in Washington, D.C. on January 6, 2021. After weeks of refusing to concede the 2020 Presidential election, and claiming widespread election fraud, Donald Trump rallied his constituents around a 77-day campaign to overturn the results, while entirely denying the insurmountable evidence that the results were determined fairly. The facts didn’t hold up to the continual assault from agents of the right claiming the election was rigged and subsequently had an explosive outcome on that fateful day.

There are many examples of “factual inaccuracies” during the Trump administration. The dismissal of the severity of the COVID-19 epidemic and our national government's late and abysmal response resulted in the deaths of nearly 650,000 husbands, wives, sons, daughters, and family members.<sup>15</sup> The battle to combat this method of control has caused devastating effects in the pursuit of true equality, but the question is what can be done to turn the tide towards an environment where facts, science, accuracy in reporting, and analysis can be used to help restore trust in our institutions and what role can labor, specifically CWA, play in promoting these ideals.

CWA and our partners in labor, the community, and the legislature must push legislation to ensure that information distributed on any platform is done so with integrity adhering to the highest ethical standards. By promoting legislation that safeguards our ability to access information based on facts and science, we stay true to our union values. We have been at the forefront in promoting equality in the workplaces we represent and that has been done with fairness, intelligence, education, and integrity being the core of what organized labor

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<sup>15</sup> <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/#countries>

and CWA are about. In that work our union has time and time again pushed forward the agenda of honesty and integrity with fact-based perspectives to support our members and the greater society.

CWA has consistently demonstrated to the world our commitment to these efforts. During the past year, CWA provided members with accurate science-based information in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic and our responsibility to keep our members and families safe. CWA has supported those courageous members of the news media who exhibit integrity in reporting the facts and discrediting dangerous information. At the Local level, CWA's Human Rights Committees play a pivotal role in providing education and information to the membership through the town halls we sponsor, the legislation we promote, and the social media campaigns we spearhead.

## Native Sovereignty and Tribal Labor Relations: Shared Working-Class Struggle

*Joaquin Chavez, CWA Local 9119*

The Navajo Nation is the largest block of sovereign tribal territory within the United States. In March of 2020, CWA organized and won representation for employees of Frontier Communications on the Nation's land after multiple previous attempts had failed to overcome cultural and political boundaries between organizers and the Navajo and Hopi workers. Typical of tribal lands, the Navajo Nation is highly rural and therefore less profitable than urban areas to telecommunications companies like Frontier, which are resistant to invest there. In a move that amounts to de facto discrimination and threatens the underdeveloped public services that tribal citizens depend on, management has fought against a 40-hour guaranteed workweek for the native technicians working on reservation land. Although the Navajo operate a competing tribal telecommunications cooperative, they depend on Frontier's continued involvement as the incumbent local exchange company to maintain their communications infrastructure. Citizens fear that the company will move resources off the reservation. Our union has responded by pressuring the Arizona Public Utilities Commission for consumer protections that will protect the jobs of those technicians working on tribal lands, uniting the struggle for better labor standards and much-needed public investment.

Tribal labor relations ordinances create new opportunities for solidarity and union power. The Navajo have legislated a hire-from-within mandate for companies operating on their lands, which means that in a strike or lockout, Frontier would be hard-pressed to replace the labor of CWA members. Although Frontier refused to negotiate with the union to create a safety committee, they buckled when the Local threatened to bring the issue to tribal OSHA and the tribal labor relations board to force the issue. These fights demonstrate the potential of tribal sovereignty as a tool for progress.

In Southern California, Local 9400 represents workers at the San Manuel Casino, owned by the Yuhaaviatam people, or San Manuel Band of Mission Indians (SMBMI). While the Navajo Nation has more tribal members than any other within the United States, the SMBMI only numbers a few hundred. The tribe has grown wealthy through the casino, one of the region's largest employers. This surge of growth is common throughout California, where

tribal gaming has grown enormously in recent years. Also familiar to tribal gaming, the tribe relies on corporate managers from Atlantic City and Las Vegas to run the casino.

For example, tribal gaming has been a huge economic success for those nations which own casinos, and they have become obvious symbols of questions about tribal labor relations. The San Manuel Casino was specifically at issue in the 2004 Supreme Court ruling, establishing NLRB jurisdiction over tribal enterprises. While the case originated out of a dispute over which union would have jurisdiction to organize the casino, the Supreme Court used the opportunity to rule expansively that federal labor law would apply to all commercial activities of tribal governments. Management at San Manuel has maintained that sovereign status gives them the power to reject state-level labor law mandates like mandatory COVID infection reporting under California AB 685 and the state minimum wage. However, they observe the latter in practice by paying at or above the state minimum.

As a leading voice in the labor movement, CWA has an opportunity to organize with native and non-native workers on tribal lands for political and economic self-determination. We can support sovereignty as a tool to improve the lives of all working-class people by fighting for resources for public investment, higher labor standards, and solidarity with indigenous people to win a better future for all. We should continue organizing with employees on tribal lands and take opportunities to partner with tribal governments to expand fair labor practices and resist domination by corporations that we continue to fight outside of the reservation. We should also expand our efforts to educate the broader American labor movement to understand our shared fortunes with the working-class people of indigenous nations.

This means supporting the fight of Navajo and Hopi workers against Frontier with the resources of our whole union. First, this means supporting the legal struggle for self-determination on tribal lands, in part by honoring tribal labor relations ordinances to further progressive regimes of labor law. Secondly, this means including Native nations in our struggle for public investment in our members' infrastructure, and then all of our communities benefit. Finally, it also means connecting all of our members in the fight to make the United States government honor its treaty obligations to our Native sisters and brothers everywhere!

## **References:**

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**For this report, I also relied heavily on direct conversations with:**

Joe Gosiger, District 7 Staff Representative, on the subject of Frontier Communications on the Navajo Nation

Karen Macias, Senior Director, Legislative and Political Chair, and Vice President at CWA Local 9400, on the subject of negotiations and representation at the San Manuel Casino.

Aamir Deen, President and former Organizing Director of UNITE HERE! Local 49, on the subject of tribal gaming and organizing in California.