MOHAMMAD TAJ – Steering from the front
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FOREWORD

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“The powerful story of Mohammad Taj is a true inspiration. I strongly recommend it to everyone.

Elected TUC President on 11 September 2013, the first Muslim and the first South Asian President, Mohammad Taj’s story is an incredible journey. When thousands of people saw Taj’s photo which featured in a poster campaign by the Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants, this is what they read:

“My name is Mohammad Taj. I am an immigrant. For 40 years I have been a bus driver and committed trade unionist fighting for the rights of ordinary working people”

Now, thanks to this excellent booklet, they can find out so much more.

From his early life in Kunjar Mal, a small agricultural village in Pakistan-administered Kashmir, to life in Bradford working in the textile mills and then the bus industry, active in the TGWU (Transport & General Workers Union) now Unite, Mohammad Taj has exposed shameful exploitation and discrimination, won major advances for equality and justice, and supported workers in struggle everywhere.

As we elect delegates to the TUC Black Workers Conference and Committee, celebrate the achievements of Unite Regional and National Black, Asian Ethnic Minorities Committees and Conferences, and the vital impact of BAEM shop stewards, reps and delegates at every level of the union, including on the Executive, we can and must pay tribute to Mohammad Taj. His dedication, his experience, his genuine warmth have all played a part, but above all it has been his ability to organise beyond short-term setbacks, ill-informed opposition, outright racism and discrimination, and his ability to build solidarity, unity and alliances within and beyond the workplace, that have in reality made a difference to millions of people’s lives worldwide.
Mohammad Taj’s time as TUC President encompassed all he has stood for all his life. A TUC President on the picket line supporting so many workers. A TUC President expressing solidarity and support at the TUC Women’s Conference for women’s struggle for equality, in the context of Muslim women’s struggles. A TUC President supporting equality for all and explicitly for disabled workers and LGBT workers. A TUC President addressing the Labour Party Conference as world statesman, bus driver, trade unionist and grassroots Labour activist at every level. A TUC President and a powerful effective black and Asian trade union leader.

I am proud to pay this tribute to a very special person, who has achieved so much himself. But above all, Mohammad Taj’s legacy is in others – black, Asian ethnic minority men and women workers and trade unionists as a powerful progressive force in the country – and today’s workers having confidence that in the struggle against injustice, they are not alone.

Thank you, Taj.”
Mohammad Taj was born in 1952 in a small agricultural village, Kunjar Mal, in the district of Mirpur, in Pakistan-administered Kashmir. As there were no official registration documents, his birth was recorded by Fazal Mohammad, his father’s cousin. The infant, the first of what was six children in the family, was named Mumtaz. He kept this name until he left for England in 1966, when no family member was sure how to spell Mumtaz. Consequently the Pakistani immigration officer listed the departing teenager as Mohammad Taj.

Taj’s father, Mohammad Shafi, was a long distance truck and bus driver with the Zaman Shah Goods and Transport Company. This post meant he was frequently away from home.

As he grew older, Taj was expected to help with many chores on the small family farm where two main crops, wheat in the winter and corn in the summer, were grown along with lentils.

There were also water buffalo for milk and butter, with the excess sold to the hotels in the local bazaar in old Mirpur City, which was four miles away. Each morning before school, Taj walked there carrying a bucket of milk weighing five kilos. On his journey he could see the mountains in the background.

There were few trucks or buses, with perhaps just a dozen cars in Mirpur City. In 1956, Mohammad Shafi became the first person in his village to obtain a bicycle. Such was the fascination that people from 18 nearby villages came to view it. Most local people were not politically engaged and they would rely for news on what they heard on the one radio in the village that was tuned to the only station available, the government one in Lahore.
Taj could possibly have done with a bicycle himself as he also had a daily walk four miles each way to school, which was for boys only with a separate establishment for girls. Facilities were basic with no desks or chairs and pupils sat on the ground on jute sacks. In the first five years of education, pupils studied basic mathematics and Urdu. It was not until the sixth year that pupils studied English.

Taj was to miss much of his school years. He was given the wrong injection to treat a malaria illness and became so unwell that he was given just three months to live. Taj cannot remember this time but he was told later that he had not received any further medicines when an unknown holy man arrived to touch and say prayers on his behalf. In the event, Taj was to make a full recovery.

In 1960, Taj’s father left for Britain. He had contracted tuberculosis (TB), an infectious disease which attacks the lungs, treatment for which locally was affordable only by the richest people. Taj’s family was not rich and like everyone else they accepted they occupied a lowly place in society.

Mohammad Shafi knew that if he went to England he could obtain free NHS treatment. He had never flown before and spent his savings on a flight from Karachi to Heathrow, where he was immediately diagnosed with TB. The new arrival was then transported to an isolation unit in Grassington in the Yorkshire Dales.

There, he was, said Taj “treated exceptionally well over the next six months by health specialists. Local people were brilliant and brought him in food he would enjoy eating. As he recovered from his illness he was asked where he wanted to go to.”

Knowing other Mirpurer migrants were living there, the reply was Bradford. Mohammad Shafi was taken by ambulance and dropped off in Lumb Lane in the West Yorkshire city. The new arrival entered a dressmakers shop, explained his predicament and, thanks to the networks that had been created by earlier arrivals from South Asia,
within a couple of hours a room was found for him to stay in a multi-occupied house. It was common in this period for over ten men to live in one house.

As was customary, Mohammad Shafi was expected to start paying for his rent and food only after finding work. This was fairly easy as with many indigenous people unwilling to work nights in local textile mills there was a desperate shortage of staff. He settled down to work twelve hours a day, seven days a week, with any money that could be saved from his wages sent back to Mirpur as in the long term he planned to return permanently to Kashmir.

Moving to Britain
However, in the early 60s it was announced that the 147 metre high and 3,140 metre long Mangla Dam would be constructed across the Jhelum River in Mirpur. This would bury under the waters old Mirpur City, with a new city subsequently being constructed from the late 60s onwards on the banks of the new lake.

The project was primarily aimed at increasing the amount of water needed for irrigation with a secondary function being electrical power generation. Two hundred and eighty villages and over 110,000 people were displaced as a result of the dam’s construction and subsequent flooding. They included Mohammad Shafi’s family.

The compensation being offered to families that were being forced to move was pitiful at around £90 per family, who were being offered land away from Kashmir in other parts of Pakistan. This sum wasn’t enough to pay to build a decent sized family house.

Many of those who were to be displaced began to look further afield including abroad. In the UK at this time the unemployment level was low and there were many low paid jobs that employers could not find labour for. Pakistani citizens didn’t have British passports and so the British and Pakistani governments agreed to the issuing of 20,000 work permits to allow selected people displaced by the Mangla Dam to move to Britain.
This migration pattern has consequently meant that in many UK cities – particularly Bradford - the majority of the ‘Pakistani’ community is from Mirpur.

Mohammad Shafi returned to Pakistan in 1965. According to Taj, “My dad decided it would be best to emigrate. My mother, (Fazal Begum), myself and my oldest sister, Shamim Akhtar, and two brothers Riaz Ahmed and Arshad Ahmed – were very excited. Moving to Britain would mean the four of us at this time would see our dad regularly from thereon. My sisters Tanvir and Parveen were born once we were settled in Britain.”

Taking his first ever flight, Taj journeyed with the rest of the family to Heathrow before continuing by car to Bradford, where the first Asians to settle were former seamen who had been directed to move there at the start of World War II from Liverpool and Hull. The newcomers worked in munitions factories and essential wartime services.

Taj arrived in Bradford on the Leeds Road, where there was a small network of Asian families from Mirpur, during the night of 18 December 1966. The dark buildings and tall chimneys stretching right up to the sky made for an eerie scene, which, due to the fog and mist generated by coal burning fires that left the outside of houses black, did not subside at dawn.

With the arrival of his family, Taj’s dad had bought a house in Heath Street, which is in the Laisterdyke area of Bradford on the east of the City bordering Leeds. Such a purchase was a practice that many new
arrivals adopted as there was a surplus of run-down terraced houses that no one wanted in areas such as Manningham and Little Horton. New immigrants could thus buy property cheaply by putting down a cash deposit and paying off a certain cash amount each week. This avoided the need to take out a mortgage, which due to institutional racism may well have been denied at this time anyway.

The Heath Street house was a back-to-back three storey terraced house costing £150. It had three bedrooms, a gas water heater and an inside toilet, which was something of a novelty at the time. In Pakistan, Taj and his siblings had never been to the cinema. So there was real pleasure when they discovered a black and white television in their new accommodation. It required a 6d (2.5p) piece to start it. The first thing Taj watched was the Magic Roundabout, a BBC Children’s TV programme that ran from 1965 to 1977.

Taj waited three months before starting school at a nearby immigrant centre. He stayed three months to study basic English, leaving at aged 15. With his father determined that his son would have better English skills than himself, Taj enrolled on a two year English for overseas students course at Bradford College. However, the knowledge that his dad was giving him ten shillings a week (50 pence) expenses, combined with the fact that he was not contributing to the family income, proved uncomfortable for Taj. With just three months remaining of his course he left to find work in early 1969.

There then began a series of largely unskilled jobs at local textile mills, Colorflex, James Tankard and Brown Muff’s department store, where, as the only black staff member, Taj became aware that some white staff did not want to speak to him. “It was when I sat down in the canteen with friends and found that some others at the table would ignore me. They weren’t openly rude or racially abusive, just ignorant. Conversely, other staff were helpful when I struggled to correctly express myself in English.” It was whilst working at the department store that he first became good friends with Gerry Sutcliffe, who later became leader of Bradford City Council and a local MP.

English people outside of work were also helpful. Taj was tasked with taking his dad’s weekly £5 mortgage repayments into a central Bradford solicitors company, A.V. Hammond and co. He gave the money to Norman Bishop, who on establishing that Taj’s English needed improving agreed to visit the Shafi family home. This visit was viewed with great
excitement as “it was regarded as an honour for white people to visit an Asian household. Norman told my father he was helping the children of a number of Asian families and asked if he would let his eldest son join them by visiting on Sundays. My dad agreed and at Norman’s house I found lots of books to read. I visited each week for many years until Norman died tragically quite young in 1973.”
In early 1974, Taj applied for work with Bradford City Transport, which on 1 April 1974 merged with Leeds City Transport, Huddersfield Bus fleet and Halifax and Calderdale Joint Omnibus Committee to form the publicly owned West Yorkshire Passenger Transport Executive. (WYPTE)

The new body adopted the name ‘Metro,’ which was suffixed with the area of operation – Leeds, Bradford, Huddersfield and Calderdale.

A publicly owned bus service had resulted from the chaos after World War I when small private operators sought to profit from increasing urbanisation by racing each other to pick up passengers. The subsequent deaths and injuries led to a Royal Commission and a Road Traffic Act of 1930, which brought London Buses into public ownership, that in turn paved the way in 1949 for the Attlee Labour government to introduce nationalisation nationwide. In 1969, and with passenger numbers falling due to increased car use, Harold Wilson’s Labour government created the National Bus Company (NBC), which was the owner of a number of subsidiary bus operating companies. Alongside the NBC, many local authorities operated and subsidised their own bus operations or companies.

Much of the British bus network was to remain in public ownership during Taj’s first decade as a bus worker.

Taj started as a conductor on 18 February 1974. In addition to signing his contract, including his pension agreement, the new worker became a trade union member for the first time as the buses were a union shop after WYPTE and the Transport and General Workers’ Union (TGWU) had concluded an agreement that only workers who were union members would be employed.
“The pension agreement, whereby the company and myself contributed each month, meant very little at the time. I now realise that decent pensions are essential as you can’t work forever. I retired in 2015 and my pension is only slightly less than what I earned when I finished work. Added to my state pension then I’m comfortably off and can enjoy my retirement. Everyone should have a pension that allows them to fully participate in society when they retire,” contends Taj.

“I joined the TGWU. My only previous union experience had been negative. When I worked in 1971 at Colorflex I wanted to apply for a better paid job in the dye house. I was told that it was a closed shop, where only workers who were already trade union members were employed. Furthermore, I could not join the Dyers, Bleachers and Textile Workers Union because of the colour of my skin. I accepted this as a fact of life.”

Taj had at Colorflex exhibited some of the negotiating skills that were to serve him well when he later became highly active in the TGWU. Asian staff, who all worked nights, wanted a shift off for the Eid celebrations at the end of Ramadan. At his fellow workers request, Taj approached his supervisor and was able to overcome the initial refusal he received by offering to get all staff to work an extra hour each night for ten consecutive nights. This meant there would be no loss of production. The supervisor agreed.

Taj’s new job on the buses brought him into contact with many other Asian workers who he found “were willing to work long hours in order to have the cash to buy land back home, where most believed they would eventually return permanently to. They happily wore a work uniform as it gave them status. The Asian lads felt they had, during and since WWII played an important role in a Britain that needed them to run the mills, the buses and the NHS.”

Why did people stay, rather than return to the Indian subcontinent?
“People realised there was a better future here, especially for their children as there was superior education opportunities and better jobs on offer. The Muslim community was following the Hindu and Sikh communities in deciding to stay.”

Taj progressed to become a driver when he passed his driving test in February 1975. He was based at Bankfoot bus depot where towards the end of 1975, Richard Jowett, who came from a labour movement background, became a conductor on the inner city circle 601 and 602 buses that Taj drove. Jowett, a bus worker since 1973, had transferred from Horton Bank Top bus depot because he found it difficult to stomach the racist attitudes common amongst many of his fellow white workers.

The pair quickly hit it off. “To some extent we were kindred spirits,” says Jowett, who describes the majority of Asian workers on the buses at the time as being “progressive, secular and in some cases Marxist as they were heavily influenced by the Indian Workers Association (IWA) and the Pakistani People’s Party. As a result of anti-colonial movements they had developed strong left wing attitudes that chimed with the attitudes of a western liberal democratic society. Many had fought in WWII and later found themselves moving thousands of miles to live in a Northern English town. They believed in working hard and looking after their families and the communities around them.”

**Racism at work**

When Jowett, whose grandfather thought that people like singer Paul Robeson were magnificent, spoke about disliking racism it was the first time a white person had mentioned the subject to Taj.

Racism is defined by the Oxford English dictionary as ‘prejudice, discrimination or antagonism directed against someone of a different race based on a belief that one’s own race is superior.’

Racism has played a major role in every aspect of British society for centuries. Having become the first industrialised nation, Britain began colonising overseas territories, looting the natural resources there and replacing the indigenous people with migrants from Britain. To justify such behaviours it was argued that whites were superior to non-whites. Author Rudyard Kipling created the idea of the White Man’s Burden by which the white man had the burden and responsibility of bringing the
blessings of their superior civilisation to the savages of the non-European world.

It was therefore hardly surprising that the arrival of relatively large numbers of overseas workers in Britain after the end of WWII was not seen by many as positive especially when the arrivals began to seek jobs at workplaces where no black workers had ever been previously employed. In situations that had parallels with events at the start of the twentieth century, when male trade unionists had refused to allow females to work alongside them or to join their trade unions, white workers at all levels began to organise to keep black workers out.

On the buses in particular, while absolutely not official union policy, discriminatory practices, against black and Asian workers were commonplace. In 1955 Wolverhampton bus workers banned overtime and West Bromwich bus workers staged one day strikes in protest against black labour being employed.

In 1963 the Bristol Bus Boycott arose from the refusal of the Bristol Omnibus Company, with the backing of the TGWU workplace branch, to recruit black or Asian bus crews in Bristol.

The four-month boycott, which was led by youth worker Paul Stephenson and the West Indian Development Council, drew international attention to racial discrimination in Britain. Its successful conclusion, which lead to the employment of the first non-white conductor in Bristol, is regarded as being influential in the passing of the 1965 and 1968 Race Relations Acts that made it illegal to refuse housing, employment or public services to a person on the grounds of colour, race, ethnic or national origins.

The dishonourable history of trade unions failing to tackle racism on the buses is mirrored in other sectors of the economy. For years the National Union of Seamen (NUS) sought to keep black seamen off British ships.

In 1968 a group of London Dockers, some of whom were members of the TGWU, and Smithfield porters famously joined a march organised by extreme right wing activists in support of Tory MP Enoch Powell’s notorious anti-immigrant “Rivers of Blood” speech.

London dock workers had lost a nine-week strike only a few months.
This made it easier for Powell to mobilise some support for his reactionary ideas.

Black workers did fight back with strikes for union recognition by Punjabi workers at the Woolf Rubber Company taking place in 1965 and at Mansfield Hosiery in Loughborough in 1972. In 1974 at Imperial Typewriters in Leicester the TGWU, with the support of the majority of the white membership, who were better paid than their Asian colleagues, was exposed for allowing management to badly exploit the predominantly Asian workforce.

The adverse publicity at the participation of trade unions in racial discriminatory practices was to shake up the trade union movement, especially as black workers who belonged to unions preferred to look for outside support from local community organisations, other black workers and the IWA.

Discriminatory practices also excluded black school leavers from apprenticeships. Many apprenticeships were based on quiet agreements between unions and management such that they were not widely advertised and there was a strong preference to the family of employees when recruiting.

The then official Trades Union Congress (TUC) policy position was that there should be ‘energetic representation of any workers from minority groups who are being discriminated against by management.’ Yet whilst unions had seldom made formal representations against ethnic minorities they had also rarely made positive representations either. In 1974 a House of Commons select committee stated: “the TUC is similar to the Confederation of British Industry (CBI). Both have declared their opposition to racial discrimination, but have taken wholly inadequate steps to ensure that their members work effectively to eradicate it.”

Added to this there was the worrying growth in the early 70s in support amongst white workers for the National Front, a fascist organisation. In response – and in order to provide alternative ideas to racism and fascism amongst the white working class – black activists and local community groups and political organisations began working much more closely with grassroots anti-racist activists in the trade unions, local trades councils, the Labour Party and left wing socialist parties. Racism though continued. In July 1977 a black Birmingham-born man
was refused a machine tool fitter’s job at British Leyland’s Castle Bromwich plant after the Amalgamated Union of Engineering Workers (AUEW) members there passed a motion at a meeting saying they would not accept a black fitter. The company and two AUEW stewards were later found by a formal investigation by the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE), which had been set up under the 1967 Race Relations Act to address racial discrimination and promote racial equality, to have contravened the Race Relations Act. At the TUC conference that year, delegates called upon the TUC general council to conduct a campaign against racists in the unions

Also in 1977, the TUC recognised the need for resources to be directed towards programmes of education of shop stewards and officials and produced a 19 page booklet for use on shop stewards courses.

In September 1981, Taj was seconded by his employer to work on a project based at Bradford College and jointly organised by the TUC, CRE and the college itself. Such was Taj’s commitment to the project, which was aimed at increasing the involvement of black and Asian workers within the trade union movement, that he was prepared to accept a 40 per cent pay cut during his time away from bus driving.

Bristol Bus Boycott plaque in Bristol.
The initial part of the project involved approaching regional secretaries from different unions. The aim was to encourage them to get their officers to obtain from management at various union recognised workplaces the right for black and Asian workers to be released on full pay to attend a trade union course lasting ten days.

The regional secretaries were informed that it was important that black union members got much more involved at all levels and this in turn would aid recruitment during a period when trade union membership levels as a whole were falling. Management were persuaded that by aiding black workers to play more prominent roles in recognised trade unions they would demonstrate their commitment to good employment practices. This in turn was likely to lead to more contented employees with the result that levels of absenteeism would fall and productivity levels would jump.

Of those that did attend the courses around a fifth were elected workplace representatives and everyone agreed they had been a success. The results were analysed at national level by the TUC and CRE and they played a part in 1983 when the TUC published the ‘Race Relations at Work’ handbook and the ‘TUC Workbook on Racism’. There then began the provision of special courses directed towards black workers themselves. The most common was English language training courses for Asian workers. Some courses were designed to increase the awareness of Asian workers to union activities, with information printed in ethnic minority languages.
Fighting racism and getting active in the TGWU

Taj was unaware what was happening nationally in the fight against racism and fascism. He was stunned when “Richard asked me what I thought about many Asian drivers and conductors paying bribes, which I hadn’t, to get a job on the buses. The money, around £200 a time, which was over a month’s wages, was being paid to middlemen connected to the TGWU and personnel management, by Asians with poor English skills. These were workers who left their jobs when they returned for a few months every couple of years on an extended holiday to the Asian subcontinent. Many felt paying up was the easiest way to ensure they could get a job back on the buses when they returned to Britain.

“I felt it was wrong but believed I could not do anything about it and why should I as I was convinced I wasn’t going to be on the buses for long. I listened to Richard, who said we should go along to a union branch meeting and start to challenge what was happening. I agreed to go because I didn’t have the courage to say no.”

There were twenty people at the meeting of the 9/8 TGWU branch, which was formed in 1922. Taj found it very boring with a ‘language’ all of its own that he could not understand. Nevertheless, he agreed to accompany Richard to the next gathering. When his subsequent non-appearance was later vigorously challenged by his colleague, Taj realised that he “had done something wrong over an issue that clearly needed tackling. This guilty conscience inspired me to become more fully involved. I attended the next meeting with Richard and thus began my long, active involvement in the trade union and labour movement.”

In 1978 Taj was approached by John from the Yorkshire Evening Post (YEP). The journalist had been working on the bribery story for over a
year and had been secretly speaking to bus workers. “I am not sure exactly how John knew of me but I was happy to help him. I added to the statements that he had already taken and passed on names of those I knew who had been exploited.

“I was – still am – a keen amateur photographer. I used my camera to get a snap of Tommy Shuttleworth, the by now former TGWU branch secretary. When a passenger asked me to take her picture with an inspector, which was Tommy, I took a separate image of him. They used this photograph in the accompanying YEP article, which created a big splash.”

Shuttleworth was suspended and the CRE was appointed to conduct an enquiry during which they examined why no Asian employee had been promoted to an inspector’s role. Two years later, four or five black people were appointed to the post. Also by then discrimination against married women – whereby a woman whose husband was promoted to a management position had to leave her post within the company or work in the canteen where pay rates were much lower – had been successfully tackled.

According to Jowett, “Everyone knew about the bribery and that the branch was corrupt but Taj was very brave and worked with John. Shuttleworth, and a man whose surname was Kohli, rightly went to jail for 18 and nine months respectively.”

Nevertheless, Taj’s actions were viewed extremely negatively by some Asian drivers who feared he may have prevented them getting future work with the company. Management struck back at him by filing seven or eight reports suggesting he had left a bus stop before the designated time. He had never previously had one such report against him.

When Taj met with management he was unable to secure union representation. He was accused of a number of transgressions including one by a female passenger of swearing in his mother tongue. There was silence when he asked how the complainant would know he was swearing as she didn’t speak Urdu. Taj then pointed out that he always spoke in English at work. The harassment ended when a new personnel manager was appointed.

The struggle to challenge racist practices had played an important part in creating a large informal and growing network of employees who
understood that the 9/8 TGWU bus workers branch in Bradford needed new leadership.

According to Jowett “lots of employees were dissatisfied with the lack of leadership from the branch officers but there was no organised opposition and the workers, particularly in the smaller depots, had little say. Taj and I decided to get more actively involved.”

**Rank and file organisation**

In many major cities, bus workers had set up PLATFORM – a rank and file (R&F) group within the TGWU. Similar R&F initiatives were being established nationally in many industries and occupations by the International Socialists (IS) (known today as the Socialist Workers Party) as a way of recruiting workers into IS and replacing the Communist Party of Great Britain as the main revolutionary left influence within the trade unions.

Leeds Platform sold a small newspaper – METRO PLATFORM (MP). Writers argued that bus workers needed to be better organised in order to resist attacks on jobs, services and pay and conditions by management and the 1974 - 1979 Labour government who, with the TUC’s support, had adopted a social contract that sought to restrain pay demands.

This had led to wage levels being reduced considerably and yet this did nothing to curb rising unemployment levels or the prices of goods in an era where businesses increasingly looked to invest their profits overseas. MP contended that workplace and branch reps with a fighting spirit were needed to counter anti-democratic practices within the TGWU and take up busworkers needs.

MP Issue 6, dated July/August 1977, carried, for the first time, Kirklees busworkers articles. These criticised many previously elected TGWU reps that had become inspectors and stressed why it was important for busworkers to get involved in the TGWU national Save Our (bus) Service (SOS) campaign. MP praised South Yorkshire County Council (SYCC) for standing up to the Government by refusing to increase bus fares, which at around 40 per cent of those charged elsewhere had led to a massive four million increase in passenger numbers, which in turn generated substantial additional revenue. In response the Ministry of Transport had withdrawn a £5 million subsidy to SYCC.
Taj, Jowett and their colleagues in the 9/8 branch travelled over to Leeds to meet those involved in Platform and they agreed to contribute articles and buy 500 copies of each newsletter. This figure later rose to 1,200. “We felt that the newsletter could help unify people. Word of mouth can help disseminate ideas, but information can be forgotten and the written word can also help to reach people you might never get a chance to speak to.

“Through the Platform Group we were able to articulate the discontent of ordinary members who were disenchanted by the corrupt cosy union-management relationship that had existed for quite a while. We conducted conversations with members wherever we could. We put up posters and advertised and held meetings that were open to all.

“We were threatened with the sack. You could argue we were naive in believing that management would not carry out their threats but we knew that WYPTE was constantly needing workers and that there were other jobs available locally,” explains Taj.

Articles from members of the 9/8 branch first appeared in MP in issue 8, dated Oct/Nov 1977. These damned the branch committee for frequently ignoring branch decisions but also noted that members were now refusing to be ignored.
Members were recommended to vote in forthcoming branch elections for driver John Freear as branch secretary, Richard Jowett for branch vice president and driver Barry Austin for the committee.

In Freear’s election address he contended that the branch secretary should spend at least three days each week driving, make the union more democratic by creating more shop stewards, be more willing to listen to member’s problems, oppose racism and fight for a good basic living wage. He promised to fight for these things wholeheartedly.

“We built a left opposition within the branch,” states Jowett.

Freear and Jowett were both elected whilst Pat Donohue retained the presidency. Freear defeated the incumbent official Tommy Shuttleworth by a very comfortable majority. The 9/8 branch then voted to donate £100 to the local Fire Brigade Union branch whose members were on strike for nine weeks in 1977 and 1978 as part of a national pay claim directed against the Labour Government’s incomes policy.

“Sadly, John, in an era when industrial relations could get very heated and physical with chairs and tables being thrown around was a disappointment when it came to negotiating with management,” recalls Jowett. Freear was deselected and replaced by J Sahota, a Sikh employee.

Jowett and others involved with the Platform Group had wanted Taj to stand for a position on the branch committee as a shop steward or branch official. “He refused because he feared that his ability to read and write English was not so good. He knew it would be necessary to go through lots of documents and understand them,” explains Jowett.

According to Taj, “It is important that people should speak English as best they can. You do not want to be sitting around a negotiating table waiting for an interpreter and when the CRE had earlier come in to
examine the company’s operations it was possible to get an agreement with management that every worker would get one week's paid training to improve their English. Within Unite today we have many Union Learning Reps and they have helped push many companies to provide English Language training, particularly for migrant workers. That is great.

“Far too many women within the Asian community do not have good English skills. This is partly to do with cultural values that prevent women from being liberated. If I was a council leader I would only fund voluntary groups that have a minimum of 50 per cent women on their management committee. Once women get on the committee they will get active as they will get sick of men telling them what to do.

“It is, of course, true that many people from different backgrounds have poor skills in English and extra resources need to be found to train them. Education should be a life long process. Sadly, Further Education Colleges have been closed down when really they need expanding.”

Elected as a steward
Taj waited until November 1979 before standing for election as a shop steward for a two year period starting on 1 January 1980. There were 22 posts and 38 stood for the election and he obtained the largest number of votes. He became the branch vice-chair on 1 January 1982. On 1 January 1984 Taj beat Sahota by 39 votes to become elected as the 9/8 branch secretary and he performed that role until the end of 1992.

In 1980/81, Jowett secured a TGWU scholarship at the London School of Economics. He departed believing his friend would go on to play a prominent role in the trade union movement.  

“I knew he would be very good and I predicted that he would go on to be the first black trade union general secretary. Bill Morris beat Taj to that
when he became the TGWU general secretary. But Taj was the first South Asian, Muslim and bus driver to become the TUC President and so it was not a bad prediction,” smiles Jowett.

Jowett’s departure did not end his involvement as he retained close links with the 9/8 branch, providing regular practical support when asked to do so. In the mid 80s, Jowett became one of the first people in northern England to own an Apple Mac computer. This allowed him to help Taj when he needed – often regularly – a well designed leaflet, which could then be distributed to members to keep them informed about ongoing negotiations with management on different issues.

New ways of doing things during disputes were invented. On one occasion a key manager reneged on an agreement that had been concluded during negotiations. The 9/8 branch published thousands of leaflets for distribution and also hired, for the proposed strike day, two food trailers, including one for the Asian section of the workforce. The Trisha day time TV programme later became the first entertainment show to start using lie detectors when a guest on the show would be asked awkward questions such as “are you having an affair?”

After tracking down the lie detector operator the 9/8 Branch hired him to help branch officers as they attempted to ask the manager involved to stop and answer some questions. Faced with an industrial relations and media disaster, management were forced to cave in.

According to Jowett “whilst it took time for Taj to develop the confidence and skills to succeed as an elected workplace representative and branch officer he is a very intelligent man who is capable of looking at a problem
from very different angles. This makes him a powerful negotiator. What also assisted him at the beginning was that Pat Donohue, an older guy who was a popular branch President, was, despite many failings, a brilliant negotiator.

“So, gradually the terms and conditions for Bradford bus workers improved; the canteen became better, the working day became shorter, sickness schemes were boosted, car parking facilities at work were introduced and the 9/8 branch became an organisation that produced results for its members, who as a result also began to play a more prominent role within the local trade union and labour movement.

“Taj himself also became more involved within the TGWU. Region 9 was dominated at the time by phantom branches where there was no organisation or activity and this allowed the representatives there to utilise their positions for their own ends. Taj was to become central to modernising the regional union structure after he got on to the regional committee. Taj being on the committee also benefitted bus workers as it made it easier for them to get their sickness and other benefit cases dealt with efficiently by the TGWU.

“Taj was also constantly on the lookout for people who might have the leadership skills to become elected workplace reps. By extending the number of reps across every depot and section then every member can be kept in touch with what is happening and have a chance to get involved. All of which is great for democracy.”

Developing new workplace reps
On 2 January 1987, Taj Salam, who came to Britain as a youngster ten years earlier from Pakistan joined the company as a (mini) bus driver. As someone willing to speak up, Taj was quickly pushed forward and he was elected to represent minibus drivers when a vacancy arose as a union steward.

“The amount of time and support given by Taj to myself and all new stewards was unbelievable. He sat down and explained in great detail the role, highlighting things that you should and shouldn’t do.

“He told me that everyone comes to the shop steward with their problems. Taj stressed never to promise something that you cannot deliver as well as to also never turn anyone away and instead state that whilst you felt it might be difficult to obtain what they were after there was no harm in trying.
“I wanted to win improvements at our unit, which had 60 people at the time. Taj agreed and we were successful over an issue about unpaid walking time between jobs. But Taj also pointed out that if our unit started accepting things without discussing it with the rest of the workforce then management would be creating an individual bargaining unit and destroying the collectivism that is essential to trade unionism and the winning of better terms and conditions for all. We can’t allow management to be playing off one section of drivers against another.”

Trade union courses
“Taj always stressed the need for workplace reps to get the education they need. I was a much better representative after I had been on shop steward stages I and II and then, when I became an elected safety rep, I attended the health and safety stages I and II courses. I have continued to undertake union courses ever since.”

Industrial action
“I was a much better trade union representative once I had attended the Trade Union Congress Stage 1 and 2 of the Shop Stewards Courses. When I became a Health and Safety representative, I also went to study on the TUC health and safety stage 1 and 2 courses. I have continued to undertake Union courses ever since then.

“We had a one day official strike over pay in 1999 and we got an acceptable agreement. We also took two days official strike action in 2015 when we had some of our work shifted to another depot. http://unitelive.org/triumph-in-solidarity/

“We again obtained an acceptable agreement. We knew that the company was doing very well financially and were simply looking to further increase profits at our expense.”

Taj Salaam.
Negotiating with management

Mohammad Qamer Shafi became a bus driver around the same time as Taj Salaam and nine years later he was elected as a shop steward when he became concerned about the lack of canteen and toilet facilities, both of which management were pushed into improving by the TGWU. Today he is the Branch President at Bradford First Bus garage, a role that involves him regularly negotiating with management.

Qamer admits he is not someone who can ‘suffer fools gladly’ and he states that he has been “grateful on many occasions to Taj’s calming influence. I bounced many of my ideas off Taj before I met management as his negotiating skills are first class.

“He is an excellent listener in meetings. He understood so much about the company, our agreements with them, laws affecting the industry and the general rules and regulations affecting employment practices at all businesses. He knew more than the bosses we met with.

“Management hated negotiating with him as he was also articulate and never lost his temper even when provoked. He had often worked out how management might respond and this meant he was rarely caught out. At the same time he made sure that he did not make anything personal with management even when he was suspended on one occasion. It was a sad day for bus workers when Taj retired but he has, thankfully, left us with enough experience to carry on and also pass on what we know to those who will become the union reps of the future.”

Supporting those who fight against fascism

Taj had not long been elected as secretary when the 9/8 branch was asked to support an important local campaign.

Early in the summer of 1981, rumours had – wrongly as it transpired – begun circulating that fascists were planning to attack Bradford’s Asian communities on 11 July. The United Black Youth League (UBYL), an organisation that was formed over an internal dispute about state funding being accepted by some leading members of the Asian Youth Movement (AYM), decided to organise the defence of the community. Twelve UBYL members were charged with conspiracy to cause an explosion and endanger lives after a crate of home-made petrol bombs was found on waste ground.
The subsequent trial and the campaign mounted by black communities and anti-racists in support of the 12 was to prove significant in asserting the right of a community to self-defence and direct action. Many young Asians had been murdered by racists in the 70s and 80s and the police, whose members also included those who had killed Asian people such as Blair Peach at Southall in 1979, often seemed indifferent and unable to catch the perpetrators. Thus emboldened by the police doing nothing, fascist groups such as the National Front were open in speaking about their organised violence against black communities.

The mobilisation for the Bradford 12 defendants generated massive support nationally within Asian communities. Other black communities and white anti-racists were also supportive.

“There were a number of branch members who supported the Bradford 12 and leaflets were distributed at bus depots. Some white drivers, including some stewards, were hostile. Rather than get into a big argument at branch meetings we did not seek donations from the branch but got an agreement to organise collections so that those who did not want to donate did not have to. We collected quite a bit of money and some members attended the court cases at which the 12 were all acquitted by the jury” says Taj.
In July 1981, a new joint publicly owned company was formed by the WYPTE and NBC. It was titled ‘Metro-National Transport Co Ltd’.

Changes though were afoot as Margaret Thatcher’s Conservative Government, elected in 1979, was dedicated to defeating what it saw as socialism by ‘rolling back the state’ and pursuing a free market agenda first practised in Chile under the murderous regime of General Pinochet in the mid 70s onwards.

Thatcher pushed ahead with deregulating different markets. It became easier to borrow money, transport companies were deregulated to encourage competition, state schools were pushed to opt out of local authority control, hospital costs were slashed and public industries such as gas, electricity and water were privatised.

On the buses this meant a desire by the Tories to open up the buses to free competition, a policy which saw the government cut the amount of money allocated for subsidising bus fares to local authorities. When such as the Greater London Council (GLC) and Sheffield authorities – both left-wing Labour controlled and keen to keep buses operating in economically deprived areas – spent more of their own taxation resources from local rates on the buses the Conservatives reacted by transferring London buses to the government at the same time as closing down the GLC.

Then the 1985 Transport Act, one of seven in the 80s, saw the buses deregulated in England, Scotland and Wales on 26 October 1986. Local authority owned bus companies had to be operated at arms’s length.
Competition on local bus services was introduced for the first time since the 1930s. Inevitably, existing operators faced competition on their most profitable routes, which had often been used to subsidise the less profitable. This led to bus drivers being forced by management to rush against one another in order to reach stops before their competitors, pick up passengers and collect fares. Inevitably there were accidents.

The impact of the changes on the buses were to be the exact opposite of what the Thatcher government promised beforehand. It led to major fare price increases for bus passengers. Inevitably there was then a fall in passenger numbers as many more people began to use their cars to get to work, this in turn led to increased congestion and environmental pollution. An overpriced, inefficient, poor-quality mess was to become the order of the day.

Meanwhile, the NBC was divided into 70 separate entities and these were sold off, many in management buyouts.

On 26 October 1986, WYPTE transferred its bus operations (and those of United Services) to Yorkshire Rider Ltd, a new company registered in Leeds.

On 21 October 1988, Yorkshire Rider was offered for sale and it was purchased under an employee stock ownership plan (ESOP), which is an employee-owner programme that gives a company’s workforce an ownership interest in the company by allocating them shares in the company. The majority of ESOP’s actually prevent employees from holding too much of the company’s stock – where they hold the majority the term ‘employee-owned corporation’ is used. The purchase price of the new company was £22 million and the money was borrowed from the Co-operative Bank. Labour Councillor Mike Simmonds was key to the deal.

The shares in the company were owned 51:49 in favour of management. The new five man executive board reflected this position with three
members of management and 2 people elected from the workforce, which were always going to be those nominated by the various union branches consisting of TGWU bus workers and the engineering AUEW branches that serviced the buses.

In 1992, Taj was still secretary of his TGWU branch and he was also deputy convenor across the Yorkshire Rider group. He was required to stand down from these posts when he was subsequently elected on 1 January 1993 onto the ESOP board as a worker director, a role he performed until September 1996 when he returned to driving a bus until 31 December 1997. After which he was re-elected again as branch secretary until he finally retired in September 2015.

“Yorkshire Rider was doing well following the sale in 1988. We had maintained our terms and conditions, including our pensions, we wanted to invest in new rolling stock and we continued to provide a good public service. We were in a strong position to successfully compete against any rival operator hoping to bid against us for contracts. Morale was high and sickness levels were well below our local rivals because people felt committed to the firm as they saw themselves as part owners. This meant we maintained an experienced workforce, resulting in fewer costly accidents.”

Refusing to accept racism
Taj had to be pressurised by many TGWU members before he chose to stand for election as a worker director. There were two nominations. Taj’s opponent, some of whose supporters engaged in an openly racist abuse campaign against Taj and Asian bus drivers in general, was to enjoy the open backing of management who even refused to allow the Bradford bus driver to take holidays in order to visit depots and speak to as many union members as possible.

“I was determined to get my views known as widely as possible. During the 6 weeks of campaigning I went to bed early before visiting each depot during the night and very early in the morning.

“At Todmorden the workforce was 98 per cent white and there were 49 TGWU members. I was openly told that as a P..i I had no chance of
getting a single vote. I wasn’t though going to take it for granted that racism could not be challenged. I turned up at 2am and was allowed to present my views and was listened to respectfully and following which there were many questions.

“The key member at the depot was an electrician called Jim. I am led to believe he used industrial language about me but he told everyone I had spoken sense and should vote for me and which they did. I won by 39 votes and management were furious.”

**No to private ownership**

In early 1994, management announced that they had received a bid to buy the company from Badgerline for a sum of £38 million, a figure that included a handsome £3 million plus payout to the three members of management on the board. When the board met Taj was the only one of the five to vote against accepting the offer, which now needed the agreement of the shareholders for it to be accepted.

The Huddersfield TGWU 9/14 Branch and Bradford 9/8 TGWU Branch opposed and campaigned against the buy out. However, amidst a background in which racism was employed against opponents of the proposed sale, the vote amongst the shareholding workforce was overwhelmingly in favour of accepting the bid and selling their shares for, an admittedly healthy amount of, cash.

Attempts by some Labour MPs to then get the Transport Secretary John MacGregor to intervene to protect the interests of the West Yorkshire public were then rejected.

“I was very disappointed in the decision to sell, which was made possible because we were ESOP run. An ESOP is better than the capitalised model of private bus companies but they are inferior to Worker Co-ops. I have always felt the Labour movement here should be more like some of our European counterparts and back Workers Co-ops,” says Taj.

On 15 April 1994, Yorkshire Rider was purchased by the Badgerline Group, who on 16 June 1995 merged with Grampian Regional Transport (GRT) to become FirstBus. On 1 September 1995 Yorkshire Rider was split into five different trading divisions based in Leeds, York, Bradford - re-named Bradford Traveller, Calderdale and Huddersfield.
Standing up for what he believed in: the 1995 Bradford riots

Just before Badgerline merged with GRT, Bradford hit the national news when over the weekend of Friday 9 June to Sunday 11 June 1995 public disorder occurred in the Manningham District, where many Asian people live, before spreading to Bradford City Centre. Central to the disorders were young Asian men, a generation scarred by racism, restricted job opportunities and police harassment.

The trouble started at around 9.25pm on 9 June after two police officers, angered at being abused, arrested two young Asian men. In the ensuing chaos, requests from several residents about why the youths were being arrested were ignored and were met with the arrival of several more police vehicles and officers at the scene. Events spiralled out of control when more arrests were made and a police dog handler roughly instructed a respected elderly resident to go indoors and threatened the man with his dog in an area where the predominant culture regarded such an animal as unclean.

Many in the local community viewed the police actions as examples of racism, intolerance and ignorance. Consequently when further arrests were made of local people, the vast majority of whom had previously never been in trouble with the police and were mounting peaceful protests demanding the release of those arrested earlier, the situation descended into rioting as bottles were thrown at police officers. On Saturday 10 June 1995 there was at one point around a thousand mainly young Asian men battling with around 600 police officers in riot gear.

A debate on the disorder was secured in Parliament by Max Madden, the MP for Bradford West, on 21 June 1995, at the conclusion of which Nicholas Baker, the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home
Office Department, rejected calls for a wide-ranging public inquiry, saying: “The Government are satisfied that the Inquiry by the Police Complaints Authority (PCA) will investigate all the circumstances surrounding the complaints against the police over that weekend.”

When the Inquiry was completed in April 1996 the PCA concluded that: “Allegations of police misconduct and assault in particular were of major concern to the public. The investigation had, however, found the allegations (with one exception) to have been entirely without foundation.” The Crown Prosecution Service decided that no criminal charges should be brought against any police officer.

The decision by the Government to reject a wide-ranging public inquiry led to the Bradford Congress, a voluntary association of representative Bradford institutions including the City Council, agreeing to appoint its own Commission of Inquiry.

The terms of reference were: “to conduct hearings to consider the wider implications for Bradford of recent events in a part of the inner city of Bradford, in order to help to create a better future for all people of the district and to promote peace, harmony and understanding between the communities of Bradford.” Hearings began in October 1995.

Bradford Congress appointed sociology professor Sheila Allen, consultant John Barratt, a solicitor with experience in investigations into local authorities and who became chairman of the inquiry and Mohammad Taj as its Commission members. Following the bruising battle over the sale of Yorkshire Rider, Taj was given time away from work by his management.

Seventeen months after the Bradford riots in 1995, Taj criticises police for learning nothing.
“I think they were glad to not see me at work for a while. When I was approached to be involved I made clear I would only do so if the final report would include recommendations that I felt would be bound to include requests for public funds. I felt I was given this guarantee.”

The Commission read an immense number of books, research papers and official documents. 76 members of the public were interviewed and 189 attended lengthy small group meetings to put forward their individual views. 119 officials and public representatives assisted the Commission, which recorded that 45 per cent of young men in the local Asian communities of Manningham were unemployed. When the Commission issued its report on 20 November 1996 it was very critical of the actions of the police on 9-11 June 1995.

According to Taj when he spoke to police officers during the Inquiry he was “shocked to find out that their anti-racist training was literally done in a day and involved a visit to a Muslim ‘Temple’ not Mosque! The officers had no understanding of the people they were policing.”

The Commission commented on long-term problems between the police and local Kashmiri youths who were regularly forced to endure “inappropriate, unfair, or racist treatment by individual officers.”

The Commission ended its report quoting US President Johnson’s 1968 statement on civil disorders in his country: “the only genuine, long-range solution for what has happened lies in an attack upon the conditions that breed despair and violence. All of us know what those conditions are: ignorance, discrimination, slums, poverty, disease, not enough jobs.”

However, the Commission’s Report did not outline any practical tasks – or attacks in Johnson’s words. On 25 November 1996, Max Madden tabled a motion in Parliament which noted the ‘lack of specific recommendations for action, especially by Central Government to help people living in the Manningham and Girlington areas of Bradford overcome acute poverty and deprivation...(such as) increasing Local Government funding to enable Bradford City Council to maintain key services......to increase numbers of police officers on duty, to expand the recruitment of ethnic minority police officers and training programmes to combat endemic racism within the police service.”

Taj refused to sign off the report because it was vague and made no positive recommendations.
Instead he issued his own 25-page report: A CAN DO CITY. Bob Purkiss, the first TGWU National Equalities Officer for race equality, praised this as “excellent…. much of the report is also relevant to many other parts of our society.”

Taj was widely reported in local and national newspapers. He felt that too much of “the City’s institutions can’t do culture” had damaged the report such that “When challenged to admit that there are racists within their ranks the Police Service ‘can’t do’ that for fear of undermining public confidence” and “When challenged to deal with the extensive discrimination existing in the field of employment the private sector ‘can’t do’ anything because of the exigencies and pressures of commercial life.

“When challenged to condemn the repressive and extremist forces at work within their own communities Asians ‘can’t do’ that because they would be seen as comforting bigots. The ‘can’t do’ culture is at is most pervasive and extreme within the Local Authority. Over twenty years of reducing real budgets, an unsympathetic central government and media ready to pounce on any misjudgment by a Council have habituated the authority to inaction. It has a culture that is far more ready and practiced at explaining why it can’t do anything rather than devising a way of getting something done.”

On police racism as an exacerbating factor to the riots, Taj stated: “I want them to openly acknowledge that there are racists in their ranks and kick them out in short order”. He felt that: “For the Asian communities, and here I mean the largely Muslim communities, I have challenged them to start addressing their own failings.”

The Daily Jang, an Urdu newspaper based in Karachi, Pakistan reported that significant amongst these criticisms by Taj of his own community was an

Taj has always spoken up on behalf of women in the Asian community.
attitude that integration would mean a loss of religion and culture and the subordinate role allocated to Muslim women.

Additionally, Taj said: “There are real failings and I have not been afraid to speak out about them. Koranic education can be a powerful force for the good. However, this will not occur if Arabic rote teaching is not accompanied by guidance in an accessible language.”

Because so many children from the Asian community were entering school with inadequate language skills, for which Taj contended most did not recover, he argued “there is an urgent need for a truly vast increase in new buildings – the construction of which would boost jobs and the local economy – for nursery education if the school system is to stop turning out ill educated, disenchanted and disruptive young ‘Asians’. This is a massive task to undertake but huge problems are not resolved by meagre solutions.”

Taj’s other suggestions were for a councillor-led Manningham Development Executive, and a clamp-down on drugs trafficking, particularly in the Manningham area.

Taj felt: “The Local Authority must also look to central Government for co-operation. It is entirely reasonable to request additional assistance from this source when pursuing innovative, radical and cost effective solutions to deepening difficulties.”

Speaking in 2017, Taj explains. “As we got nearer to completion there was pressure from the major institutions not to make financial demands on national Government or even on Local Government, as in the latter case it would mean diverting resources from the outer areas of Bradford towards the inner city. Neither was politically acceptable and I argued that the Girlington Report, where most residents are of South Asian origin, from 6-7 years previously had already identified the issues in inner cities.”

According to Jowett: “Taj was under tremendous pressure by the Bradford political establishment to sign the official report. I know they approached him just before the report was due to be officially signed by its three commission members with a job offer to him to become the co-ordinator of a new community relations body they hoped to establish in Manningham. Taj had been critical of many 1970s black radicals, including those in the AYM, from inner-city areas who were co-opted by local authorities and then became of no use to the communities they came from. He did not want to tread the same path.”
“Taj, who I know always liked being a bus driver, stood by what he believed and I think that may have later counted against him when he sought selection as the Labour candidate in Bradford West shortly afterwards. Generally, Taj believes in having arguments internally within any organisation and if he loses he will go out and support the policy or person. But there comes a time on certain issues when the gap is too big and you have to stand your ground no matter the consequences. This was one such occasion.”

“I disagreed with him over his decision not to put his name to the report as I felt he was setting himself up to fail but if Taj feels strongly enough about something he will stand his ground,” states Gerry Sutcliffe.

The authorities unwillingness to take up Taj’s demands meant that in 2001 there was a much more violent riot in Manningham. Right in the middle of the mayhem a bus got stuck with passengers and its driver on it. “Taj actually went to the bus and assisted with it leaving the scene without harm. It was a very brave thing to do,” says Jowett.

Taj’s decision to turn down the job as community co-ordinator was the second time he had to make a decision about his future. In the mid 80s, Taj, whose first language is Punjabi, second is Urdu and third English, successfully applied to become a full-time TGWU officer. The union had very few black Asian ethnic minority officers. Fearing his application would not be successful, Taj had, wrongly, not informed his wife Naseem that if he became an officer he would be required to work in London. The couple had married on 28 July 1973. Taj had gone to Kashmir seven months earlier to attend the funeral of his grandfather. Naseem and Taj had previously met when both were much younger but with a five year age difference they had little in common. Seven years on there was an instant attraction and Taj told his auntie Maqsood he “quite liked” Naseem, a coded term that means you want to marry someone.

Naseem’s family were not initially convinced as Taj was viewed as perhaps a little too westernised. “Fortunately after about seven months they accepted me and we got married a couple of months later. We flew back to Britain together in December 1973 and initially we lived with my parents before we bought our own house in Pudsey in December 1979.” The couple have two children, Rehana Khan, born 15 January 1976, and Irfan Taj, born 26 July 1980.
When Taj did inform his wife about a possible move to work in London, Naseem said she did not want to go south as Rehana and Irfan were still young children. He thus turned down the post only for Naseem to then change her mind. Although the TGWU had kept open their offer of an officer’s post, Taj felt his wife’s original decision was the correct one. “I thus stayed in Bradford and worked as a bus driver for the rest of my life. I don’t regret the decision. I enjoyed working on the buses, I liked chatting with the passengers, many of whom would discuss things with me after they had seen me reading a particular newspaper at timing points.

“In Bradford, like elsewhere, we have had local bargaining for some time and our terms and conditions are the best. That’s because unlike at other garages we have not accepted management arguments that in order to win bus contracts the workers must accept inferior pay and conditions. Even after privatisation we won two extra days holidays, with one each at the end and start of the financial year, to take the total up to 27 holidays plus 10 statutory bank holidays.

“In Bradford 80 per cent of drivers are currently on the higher ‘A’ rate of pay with new starters on the lower ‘B’ rate of pay. In many other bus depots there are three grades. Many starters remain for three years at the lowest ‘C’ rate of pay and they will need to work for another seven years before reaching grade ‘A’. There are fewer and fewer depots where ‘A’ remains the norm as employees fear they may be put out of work if they push up their wages by too much.

“The 9/8 branch has also been creative in negotiations and one year we managed to obtain an additional bus pass for a third adult family member. This does not cost the company too much. It was estimated beforehand that there would be a fifty per cent take up but it proved to be ninety per cent.
“Our stance has lost some jobs too, especially since the recession in 2008, with a growth in smaller bus companies offering to run certain, smaller distance, services more cheaply. That is really only possible by paying lower rates of pay. Larger companies cannot, because of competition rules, cross subsidise fares as if that was allowed I feel sure that the smaller companies would be gone. These smaller operations don’t actually provide a better service as they are content to use rules that pay a subsidy if 95 per cent of the buses run as a target, rather than aiming for 100 per cent. In the past, managers would see it as a personal affront if they did not run a full service but managers today see the target as 5 per cent less.

“What has happened on the buses is disheartening and especially in the North, because down south even the previous Tory London Mayor Boris Johnson understood the need for public investment and operations as part of a co-ordinated municipal transport system. Such a vision seems lacking across much of Britain. “

Taj himself sat between 1982 and 1994 on the TGWU Passenger Regional Industrial Sector Committee that sought to develop a regional strategy for transport.

“We require a political solution that understands transport is an essential service. That it is like other basic essentials such as gas, water and electricity and the NHS, which should be free at the point of need, including for overseas visitors and students. Bus and rail transport should be in public hands,” argues Taj.
Getting more black people active within the trade unions

At the start of the 1980s, statistics showed that black people were more likely to be unemployed, homeless, low paid, in prison or have mental health problems and the same remains true today. In its bid to improve the future prospects for black people the TUC in 1981 published “Black Workers: A TUC Charter for Equal Opportunity.”

Instead of just talking about it, the Charter encouraged unions to be active in creating equal opportunities and stressed that they should review their own structures and procedures.

The Charter’s main points included: the removal of barriers which prevent black workers from reaching union office and decision making bodies, the need for vigorous action on employment grievances concerning racial discrimination, a commitment to countering racist propaganda, an emphasis on personnel procedures for recruitment and promotion being clearly laid down, the production of material in relevant ethnic languages when necessary and the inclusion of equal opportunity clauses in collective agreements.

The Charter was important as it marked an understanding that whilst the trade union movement seeks to defend the interests of all the working class it must take into account and vigorously oppose the specific oppression of black Asian ethnic minority workers.

The Charter was published in the aftermath of a series of successful struggles around women that established that women suffer discrimination and harassment and that positive action, women’s structures and resources were needed to help overcome them.
In 1979 a vote by the TGWU Biennial Delegate Conference (BDC) had led to the establishment of the Regional Womens Advisory Committees and later the National Womens Advisory Committee, which contributed successfully to increasing the involvement of women members.

Successful national campaigns of real benefit to the TGWU and its members, such as that on Cervical Cancer Screening, were subsequently developed. These experiences and lessons were shared by Chair Jane McKay to support the establishment of the race equality structure.

In 1985 Ron Todd was elected to succeed Moss Evans as the TGWU general secretary. Todd was a former plumber who became active in the union when he started work at Fords Dagenham. Todd was the first secretary of Region One Vehicle Building and Automotive Trade Group.

He was a highly vocal opponent of the South African apartheid regime. It was whilst working at Fords that Todd had become painfully aware of his own lack of understanding of racism and its consequences. Despite a large number of black workers who were members of the TGWU the stewards structure was overwhelmingly white.

One day Todd was addressing stewards and referred to how important he felt it was to “look after our coloured people.” A black rep raised his arm and asked Todd what colour he thought he was and what colour he thought the other people he was talking about were. Struck by the fact that he really knew very little about people from black and ethnic minority communities, which had seen him fall into the comfortable trap of calling people coloured, Todd acted on his honest to goodness socialist principles and worked to create structures and supportive attitudes to help ensure black people could play a full role within the TGWU.

The TGWU 1987 BDC passed a resolution covering a number of equal opportunity policy areas, for which the Deputy General Secretary, then Bill Morris, was given executive responsibility for implementing. The resolution stated: “Black and ethnic minority committees should be established in line with Womens Advisory Committees.”

Change was in the air! New structures and legitimate areas of interest needed to be established for the committees and adequate officering and resources required allocating. The TGWU also recognised that it had other equal opportunities obligations to fulfil covering the training,
recruitment and general conditions for both staff and full time officials.

There was also a recognition of the need to eradicate discrimination at work and in the trade unions.

It was understood that Black Asian Ethnic Minority (BAEM) members needed to be involved in the establishment of any positive programme of positive action at an early stage. This was something of a catch 22 situation, of course, because the previous practices of some in the TGWU meant that there was an under representation of BAEM members involved within the union.

“I was one of those who voted at the 1987 BDC conference for change. There were close to 1,200 delegates but I’d guess there was not even ten delegates who were BAEM. Yet the TGWU had hundreds of thousands of BAEM members,” explains Taj. In 1987 it was calculated that 23 per cent of trade union members from the ethnic black Asian ethnic minorities belonged to the TGWU.

A TGWU Equal Opportunities Working Party was established and Taj was present when it met for the first time on 18 May 1988. The Working Party brought together for the first time BAEM delegates from each region to examine what the current position of BAEM members was in the union and to set priorities for action which included monitoring committee membership and officers, calling for new race equality structures and a race equality officer and identifying bargaining and representation issues. These recommendations were agreed by the TGWU General Executive Council and proposed and agreed at the TGWU Biennial Delegate Conference, and then acted on, which included rule changes later being agreed at TGWU Rules Conference.

Taj was subsequently to serve on the TGWU Regional and National Race Equality Committees, later Unite Regional and BAEM committees, from 1989 to 2016 and he also chaired the committee between 1997 and
2015. He rarely missed a meeting, thus demonstrating great commitment as the quarterly meetings were held in London. Taj subsequently served as a member of the TUC Race Relations Committee.

**Bob Purkiss**

In December 1989, Bob Purkiss was the TGWU regional education officer in the South east. He had been actively involved in the Equal Opportunities Working Party. Purkiss was appointed as the new national Equal Opportunities Officer for race equality and he ensured the establishment of the National Race Equality Advisory Committee (NREAC), which was chaired until late 1995 by Carol Forfar, and Regional Race Equality Committees. Purkiss serviced and helped the committee to run its affairs effectively.

In 1960, Purkiss had started work at aged 15 on Southampton Docks on large cargo ships and oil tankers. He immediately joined the NUS. He sailed regularly to South Africa between 1961 and 1964 and so witnessed apartheid at first hand. The 1966 Seamen’s strike established the right of NUS members to elect representatives who could raise their concerns whilst at sea – previously members had to wait until vessels returned to port, a period of anything up to six months.

Purkiss was sent on a NUS stewards training course in Liverpool and became a NUS convenor in Southampton. His experiences as a working class activist and black person made him the ideal person to take on the new Equal Opportunities Officer role. He could assimilate easily with members and he appreciated the difficulty people, black or white, might have in making decisions and raising difficult questions. Purkiss had twice been on strike for six weeks and understood that it was not only money that motivated workers to take action. “It was not about cash but about representation and fairness, being treated humanely, which in my early years was not the case at sea as it was wage slavery.”

Then in 1991 Bill Morris was elected as the TGWU general secretary by a postal ballot, thus becoming the first black general secretary of a UK
union. Morris was widely supported across the union and in spite of media predictions that he could not win, and in spite of racial abuse, including from some workplace representatives, during the election. Such attitudes showed that Purkiss needed allies in his new role. He found two of them in Carol Forfar, a Scottish public sector worker of Afro-Caribbean heritage and Mohammad Taj from the Asian community. Others included Martha Osamor.

“What was occurring within the union was that some of the previously dominant sections such as the docks and car industries were declining whilst the public sector, including the NHS and local authorities, was growing. Within these sectors there were many black workers joining the union. The regional race equality advisory committees did not have sufficient influence and in some areas were marginalised. Action was needed to counter this in order to build black workers’ involvement.”

“When I met Taj and visited Bradford it was clear he was highly regarded locally within the Asian community for combining his industrial background and trade union work with campaigns for social justice. He spoke up on behalf of women in the Asian community.

“At the same time he was patient in tackling complex problems and understood that getting people to alter their attitudes and actions can take time and might need handling delicately. We needed the backing of regional secretaries, who always see new committees as a threat to their power. We met with them and Taj helped me overcome the opposition of some of the right wing ones.

“We might set up a black workers conference in a region or meet certain people we had identified and nurture them to get involved. We would provide practical, ideological, emotional and moral support. In this way we helped get more black members involved and the race equality regional committees operating. Where we needed issues raising nationally within the union we would look to various regions where we had support such as in London, South and East Anglia and then make sure the same resolution would go into the BDC by further gaining the backing of another 6 or 7 regions.”

At the NREAC meeting in May 1990 delegates from ten of the 11 TGWU regions were present and discussed how to assist a new drive to recruit amongst a group of 2,5000 unorganised Punjabi-speaking Asian women contract cleaners at Heathrow airport. Len McCluskey, national secretary of the general workers’ trade group, spoke of how the group would benefit
from the advice of the NREAC. Discussions took place on the need for black Asian ethnic minority officers and an imaginative approach to recruitment, for example, by using a recruitment bus. A weekend course at the Eastbourne centre was planned to encourage a greater number of black and ethnic minority members to get actively involved in the TGWU.

The following meeting it was reported that Purkiss had received agreement to hold a meeting of regional officers with responsibility for race equality in their region.

In April 1992, the committee was informed that Purkiss had met with the officer in Wales with responsibility for race equality and had been assured that the first meeting of the regional race advisory committee would finally take place in June.

At the meeting in October 1994 it was reported that a pilot for a race equality bulletin had been circulated and was now to be shown to the general secretary. Taj reported that weekend schools for black members were being held in Bradford during the next month.

In May 1995, Taj reported on the successful end to the lengthy Industrial Tribunal (IT) racial discrimination case against John Haggas, worsted spinners near Keighley. White workers at the company had not been disciplined when they had refused not to take on extra responsibilities. Asian workers who took similar actions were disciplined and they were also, unlike their white colleagues, not paid overtime, received four days a year less holiday and had non-existent promotion chances. With the assistance of the TGWU a number of Asian workers took the company to an Industrial Tribunal.

The tribunal found the company guilty of direct discrimination and significant sums of money were awarded to a number of Asian workers.

John Haggas was instructed to implement a race equality code of practice and the company agreed to sign a recognition agreement with the TGWU.

Anti-racism was now becoming a recognised issue within the TGWU and the trade union movement as a whole with the TUC issuing a booklet aimed at helping officers at industrial tribunals and indicating the type of agreements needed with companies to prevent discrimination at work.
In July 1996, Purkiss reported that there continued to be a high level of racist activities at regional levels including harassment, lack of promotion and discriminatory wage levels. In the past many black members had chosen to pursue these cases through their local CRE but were now using the structures of the TGWU. Purkiss felt this indicated that shop stewards and full-time officers were now feeling more comfortable in handling race issues themselves.

**TGWU stands its ground at Fords Dagenham**

At Fords Dagenham, where 45% of the workforce was black, the TGWU supported black workers, including Surjuit Palmer, who successfully took a number of harassment, discrimination and equal opportunities cases to an IT. Fords had on paper a number of good equality statements and zero tolerance policies. These were not always being adhered to and Fords had even been forced to apologise when it whitened the faces of its black employees on an advert for its cars.

The Ford Truck Fleet drivers, almost exclusively white, earned twice as much as the shop floor average. They reacted badly to the TGWU supporting an IT racial discrimination challenge by six Asian workers and one Afro-Caribbean. The ‘Dagenham Seven’ had failed to end the unofficial colour bar within the Truck Fleet sector where the white workers wanted to retain the relatives-first policy.

The TGWU was aware that a victory for the seven could possibly provoke a strike by the drivers, who were also threatening to quit the TGWU and take their valuable subscriptions with them to the much smaller United Road Transport Union. (URTU) The TGWU had thought already decided to stand its ground over the issue of racism. The seven men subsequently won a total of £70,000 compensation and an agreement was introduced on the establishment of independent recruitment procedures. Some of the white workers subsequently left the TGWU and joined URTU.

Purkiss, who later left the TGWU to become the chairman of the European Union Monitoring Agency in Vienna in 2000, concludes: “The structures that were established allowed black members to raise the level of awareness regarding race discrimination, helped educate officers and representatives to aid them negotiate meaningful and understandable equal opportunities policies, which consequently lifted the TGWU’s level of representation on defending members who were being subjected to racial discrimination.
“There is little doubt that thanks to Taj and other people who were involved during this time that things improved dramatically for BAEM members within the TGWU. Problems though still remained – and still do – with high levels of racial discrimination and low promotion rates amongst black workers, high levels of unemployment in black communities, too few black and ethnic minority officers in the union and low representation of black members on constitutional equality committees.”

Years of campaigning meant that in 1998 the TGWU rules conference agreed to amend women’s and BAEM representation rules. From 1999, the Race Committees were no longer ‘advisory,’ becoming the National and Regional Race Equality Committees with full constitutional status. It was agreed that there would be a national BAEM representative on the GEC. Taj became the elected representative. By 2002/03 the representative would only be elected by BAEM members.

The 1998 conference also agreed that by 2002/03 their must be proportionate representation of women and BAEM members on all TGWU committees and conferences.

The union established cross-industrial national organisers and this structure was also adopted across Equalities. Diana Holland, formerly National Secretary for Women, working closely first with Bob Purkiss and then with the first black woman National Officer Collette Cork-Hurst, was appointed as National Equalities Officer for race equality. The aim of these changes was to ensure that equality was on the bargaining agenda at the workplace and in every industrial sector and region.
Political affairs

Labour and the working class

Taj was clear that many issues faced by the members he represented needed political change and he wanted to get involved in the Labour Party.

When Taj first asked his local Labour Party about joining he was met by a racist official who told him ‘Sorry, there are no vacancies. We are full up.’ A chance encounter with a sympathetic member helped him join the party two years later at aged 21.

“I felt from the beginning that more working class people needed to be involved in the Labour Party and in the early 90s around half of our bus workers branch joined and so we set up a workplace branch that lasted for 6-7 years and out of which we got 8-9 drivers to become local councillors. We had issues we wanted to pursue on public services in order to maintain our jobs and provide a good public service. It meant that we had our own representatives on important political bodies and thus had our voices heard more clearly and taken into account when decisions were made. We would hold workplace meetings and invite speakers to attend and there would be an annual event with Gerry Sutcliffe, our local MP. I think there should be many more Labour Party workplace branches,” says Taj.

Once Taj found his bearings in the Labour Party he began to work very closely with Gerry Sutcliffe, who after leaving Brown Muffs to find better paid employment had become employed as a printing assistant at Field’s Packaging, where he had got very involved with the union, SOGAT, initially as a workplace rep before being elected as Deputy Father of the Chapel. He later became secretary of his union branch. Sutcliffe became a full-time officer for SOGAT in 1980. At just aged 26, he was the youngest officer.

Taj and Gerry had renewed their friendship after meeting again at Bradford Trades Union Council (BTC), which in the early 80s was
Labour lost heavily at the 1979 general election when under Margaret Thatcher the Conservative Party secured a Parliamentary majority and their policies began the attack on workers in key industries and the manufacturing base, where there was strong union organisation. Thatcher was to tread delicately in her early years in directly attacking the trade union movement but the large majority she obtained, on the back of the military victory in the Falklands in 1982, in Parliament at the 1983 general election was to give her a mandate for radical change.

Gerry Sutcliffe: “I got involved politically because my trade union experiences demonstrated that politics affects everything you do. I stood for a Bradford council seat in the Clayton Ward in a by-election in 1982 on a no rent or rate rise platform. It was a Conservative Ward and the Labour Group refused to work with me. But Taj, who was by now on the Labour District Party, Richard Jowett and Ian Greenwood assisted me every day. With their help I won the election by 35 votes.

“When I got on the council I would get upset about many things but Taj was always a good friend, telling me that improving things may take a long time and that I should remain calm. In 1986 I became the deputy council leader but just as I was looking to stand against the leader I lost my seat at the local elections. Taj and Ian Greenwood told me to forget it. Looking back losing can be important if you take the time to assess why.”

In 1990, Sutcliffe sought to get back on to the Council as a councillor in the Tong Ward of Bradford, “Taj helped me out by getting trade union
nominations and this enabled me to make the selection list and I later became a councillor for the ward. Two years later I was leader of the council in an era when we had almost 75 per cent flexibility on what we could spend our money on. Today that figure is around 20 per cent and that makes councils much less effective. I tried hard to get a common improvement plan agreed right across all sectors and communities in Bradford but it wasn’t easy as this was a time when the Tory Government was making major cuts in our budget.”

In 1994, Bob Cryer, the Labour MP for Bradford South, was killed in a car crash and Gerry Sutcliffe was selected to replace him and then won the subsequent by-election. He was in post until he retired from Parliament in 2015.

Mohammad Taj attempted to follow his friend into the House of Commons at the 1997 General Election but lost out in the Labour selection battle in Bradford West to Marsha Singh, who beat him by 29 votes. Despite his disappointment, Taj worked tirelessly to ensure that Labour retained a seat previously held by Max Madden for Labour from 1983 to 1997.

Labour Party democracy
“I am not in favour of MPs being deselected but I do also feel that every Labour MP should stand for selection by its local Party members at the end of each Parliamentary term. In this way, a Labour candidate enters any general election battle knowing they are the one the Party wants. I feel there are too many lifetime MPs. I was elected as a union workplace representative every two years. I had to get the nomination from members and win majority support and I feel such a process should apply within the Labour Party.

Military adventures
Taj has campaigned against many British military adventures. He was on the massive 2003 London demonstration against plans for Britain to join the US in invading Iraq. Taj felt Blair’s decision to involve Britain in Iraq was illogical. That Britain’s armed forces helped raze the place to the
ground and then the coalition forces basically charged the Iraqi people to rebuild their country.

“Lots of money was spent in Iraq but it was the US companies, such as Haliburton, who then won the major contracts and as these were then sub divided downwards it was local firms who were at the very bottom of the chain and local people missed out on finding work. Many local young people had no jobs and no future and were easy recruitment pickings for the local warlords.

“Iraq was a venture that destroyed a whole civilisation stretching back centuries. The same scenario has in more recent times been played out in Libya by the French with our support. Even the Americans didn’t initially get involved on that occasion. Britain has helped create a huge power vacuum in Iraq and Libya with nothing to indicate things will improve in the medium term.

“After 9/11, troops were sent to Afghanistan because it was argued by some political commentators and politicians that something must be done. Yet, like many other people I knew about the history of Afghanistan and how previous invading forces had not been able to stay the course. As things became progressively worse – and overseas soldiers began to get killed – it was argued by those politicians who had invested their support in the invasion that Britain was now staying to improve democracy and women’s rights. But discrimination just does not apply to women in Afghanistan as there is a caste and clan system which discriminates against many men and the poor. If the invading countries were serious about change it would not just be about a limited series of objectives.

“We now have areas previously liberated by overseas forces being reoccupied by the Taliban, who now face no military opposition, and the situation is back to as before. Billions spent and many dead on all sides cannot be judged a success.”

Alternative economics
“I am not someone who wants to see anyone out of work but I don’t personally agree with the money Britain is spending on Trident. It is billions of pounds that should be spent more creatively, especially as actual control over the weapons system is with the USA. As a young worker I was aware that workers at Lucas Aerospace had, in one of those regular periods where jobs are cut when military contracts are
slashed, drawn up an alternative plan to use the public funds that were spent on redundancies and military hardware on more socially useful products such as vehicles that could combine running on roads and rail. It still seems a good idea.

“One of the reasons that trade unions are so keen to protect defence jobs is that there is a constant haemorrhaging of manufacturing businesses. Britain appears to have no considered manufacturing strategy; certainly not compared to the German's. Britain’s economy is far too reliant on our financial services and then we have major companies such as McDonald’s and KFC who provide jobs with low pay and try their best to avoid paying tax.

cleaned, decent teachers for our children and properly funded health and social services and so we require real concentrated action on collecting taxes to pay for these things.”

**Industrial tribunals (IT)**

Taj became a trade union nominee on an Industrial Tribunal panel in 1990 and has listened and made judgements on numerous cases relating to redundancy payments, discrimination and unfair dismissal.

“As a workplace representative myself I have, in fact, rarely been involved in taking cases to IT. This is because there was – and still is – a well established workplace agreement in place on the Bradford buses to resolve disciplinary and grievance cases. I estimate I dealt with in excess of 2,000 such cases during my time as a workplace representative but only six ever ended up at an IT.
“Outside of my workplace I have freely assisted many people in lengthy cases and it can be a traumatic time. In one case the tribunal lasted 38 days and when an offer was made to the employee I advised the person to accept it. They decided they would get more if the Tribunal was forced to make a ruling. In the event they lost the case, had costs awarded against them and were left to pay out a six figure sum.

“I think IT’s have largely been a success. So I was disappointed that the 2010-15 coalition imposed a large fee on any worker who wants to go to an IT. This naturally led to a fall in applications. No doubt in some cases justice was denied. I am pleased that UNISON managed to overturn the fees policy in 2017 but there are rumours that the Government is looking to possibly re-introduce charges at a smaller level. I hope that is not the case.”

Elected and serving as the TUC President

On 11 September 2013 the TUC announced that Taj had been elected at that morning’s general council as their next President.

Taj was to be the first Asian and first bus worker to hold the post of President. He said: “I am proud to have come from the lay membership level and be the first Muslim and first South Asian President of the TUC.

“During my year as President I’m keen to reach out to trade unionists in the Arab World where people are living and working in extremely dangerous and unstable situations, and help them build, strong, independent and democratic unions.

“Protecting the NHS and campaigning against government policies – which have seen the increasing involvement of the private sector – will also be one of my priorities. The NHS saved the life of my father in the early 60s.

“I want to highlight the distress being felt by families across the country as people struggle to cope with the fallout from the living standards crisis.”

He was also keen to warn against the scapegoating of immigrants. He accused all the major parties of being less than honest with the electorate about what he saw as the dangers of restricting immigration because far from being a threat to living standards by depressing wages, as some claim, immigrants provide an economic boost to the country. “The Economist estimates that Britain actually benefits by £7 billion
annually. Our ageing profile means by 2050 there simply won’t be the tax income from the numbers living here to pay pensioners a decent pension. A Harvard University professor has told me that Britain and Europe will eventually need migrant workers to come here, work and pay taxes, which in turn will help fund basic public services and pensions.” Purkiss believes Taj’s election was a marvellous honour for the Bradford bus driver himself and also justified the work of many black activists – especially those within the TGWU, which led the way – in pushing for equal representation at all levels of the trade unions.

“Despite the TUC passing policies at successive conferences in the 80s and 90s on equal representation the leadership continued to be predominantly white general secretaries and especially male ones.

Unions who had developed their own women and race committees began to insist that women and black workers had their own representatives and voice on equality at the top levels rather than having white general secretaries interpret what they felt was the way forward.

“The TUC black workers conference continuously pushed for direct representation on the TUC General Council (GC) and eventually the GC gave in. As the chair of the TUC race committee I was elected on to the GC and then on to the executive committee as the first directly elected black representative. Taj was to continue this level of representation and after being originally nominated from the TGWU he had taken up one of the three reserved seats for BAEM members on the GC and this is how he became the President and thus represented British workers all over the world. I know that many black activists felt proud of the parts, small or large, they had played in making Taj’s election possible and I know he was grateful to them,” said Purkiss.

Wilf Sullivan, the TUC race equality officer since 2006, believes the Presidential year was a success. Wilf, a black trade union activist since the mid 80s, has witnessed significant changes for the better within trade
unions. “There is an awareness that racism is not good, that unions should be fighting on behalf of black workers and the struggle against racism includes getting more BAEM members involved in all sections of the union movement.”

Wilf first met Taj when they served together for many years on the TUC race relations committee. “The committee was the first to invite Neville Lawrence to come and speak about his son Stephen’s death and the subsequent deliberate failure of the police to properly investigate the murder. This led to Neville addressing the TUC conference.

“We also successfully campaigned against the process, introduced by Tony Blair’s government, which paid asylum seekers benefits in vouchers rather than cash and which was heavily criticised by groups such as Oxfam and the Refugee Council. The scheme was combined with dispersing asylum seekers across the country and resulted in a rise in racist attacks.

“Taj, as usual achieved what he said he would, when he persuaded Bill Morris to attend the TUC black workers conference. Bill’s criticism of the voucher scheme helped focus the need for them to be scrapped and that is what eventually happened.”

According to Wilf, Taj used his position on the TUC race relations committee to speak out about the need for unions to be much more representative of society in general. In particular of the necessity to actively involve black women facing struggles not only against racism in their daily lives but sexism and misogyny as well.

Wilf describes Taj as a “very open person. He does not have an ego and he does not seek to advance himself. He encourages participation.”

Everyone at the TUC was taken aback when Taj arranged a year away from the buses in order to concentrate full-time on being the TUC President. No-one had previously done so. In order to encourage people to approach him, Taj got a special jacket made with ‘TUC President’ on the front. He made clear he wanted to go and stand on picket lines and
this raised the TUC’s profile. A Facebook page let people know what activities he was attending including his many workplace visits.

“Taj was extremely active, explaining what the TUC did and showing solidarity with striking workers. As the year progressed the number of attendance requests we received for him increased considerably. He travelled to a number of conferences abroad including the European TUC where he spoke about how his experiences as a black worker were relevant to the problems now being faced by migrant workers, who more than ever need to be persuaded to join trade unions.”

It was during his time as TUC President that Taj agreed to have his photograph taken in order to feature on posters produced by the Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants and which were prominently displayed at many railway stations.

“I felt I could play a part in breaking down prejudice against immigrant workers by taking part in the poster campaign. I am glad I did it,” said Taj.

According to Wilf Sullivan: “There was enormous affection shown towards Taj during his time as the TUC President. He was a brilliant ambassador amongst ordinary people, heightening people’s awareness of the organisation and the trade union movement’s principles in general. His personal and collective experiences of fighting racism added enormously to what he had to say and helped educate and change the outlook of many of those he met.”

Taj retired from work in September 2015 and by which time he had been awarded an Honorary Degree from Bradford University for his contribution in the fight against social injustice. At the ceremony where he was named Doctor of the University on 15 July 2015 he said: “I was shocked when they decided to give me a doctorate and it has been a brilliant day.

“It is very encouraging to see so many Asian girls here. One of my goals has been to get more Asian girls to participate in further education. I am very pleased that Asian families are starting to invest the same levels of money in educating their daughters as they do for their sons.”

In 2015 he also obtained a Honorary Fellowship from Bradford College and where he attended many union courses at the Trade Union Centre.
At the ceremony he credited the Head of Trade Union Studies, Steve Davison and Bradford College Lecturer Bill Morgan-Cooper for encouraging him in his union work during his early career. He said: “I would say thank you to Bradford for giving me and my family education – we have all gone on to successful careers.”

Taj was then awarded an OBE for his contribution towards trade unionism in the 2017 New Year’s Honours list. He said: “I won’t disguise the fact that it is pleasing to have one’s life’s work recognised. But for me this is also recognition of the, quite literally, thousands of women and men who have supported and inspired me. It also recognises the value of trade unions – they are by far the biggest voluntary organisations in the country, they are where ordinary people come together to support each other. I am always reminded that my late father would say that trade unionism is, at its best, a truly noble endeavour.

“Though, in truth, I think it’s my wife, Naseem that really deserves a medal for without her love and support I would have achieved nothing!”

A special presentation from the Pakistan Labour Federation to Taj for chairing a seminar against privatisation in Pakistan in 2014.
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Many thanks to the following people for making this booklet possible.


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If you are a Unite member who is writing a book and needs some advice on how to get it published then please contact Mark Metcalf on 07392 852561 or mcmetcalf@icloud.com

Mark has now assisted a number of Unite members to get their work published.
A special presentation for his contribution to the union and labour movement was made to Taj on his retirement at the 2018 Unite Equalities Conferences. The card, which was signed by delegates, staff and officers, was presented by Len McCluskey, Tony Woodhouse (Chair of the Unite Executive Council) and Diana Holland.