

Black History Month - Interview with Atong Ater

1. Tell us about your role with the Federal Black Employee Caucus (FBEC) - created to support efforts at the national, regional, and local levels to address issues faced by Black federal public service employees - and why you got involved?

Atong Ater: The Federal Black Employee Caucus (FBEC) was founded by a group of Black employees and works to address anti-Black systemic racism within the federal public service. As a member of the core team, I work full-time on these issues with a focus on strategic planning, engagements, and education and awareness.

I became aware of FBEC in early 2019. In January 2019, FBEC held their inaugural Annual General Membership meeting. I remember seeing the promotional material for the event and realizing that in my over 10 years within the federal public service, I had never seen initiatives, groups or programs specifically focused on the experience of Black employees. The existence of FBEC went against the “colour blind” narrative that was commonplace in our workplaces – a narrative that hides the experience of Black employees. A narrative that was propped up because of the lack of disaggregated data.

I got involved with FBEC because it felt like coming home. Being able to discuss my experiences with people who could understand was so freeing but being in a position to possibly do something about anti-Black systemic racism in our workplaces – that was liberating.

2. In November 2020, you took part in our very first [Speaker Panel Series on Anti-Black racism in the workplace](#). Why do you think such discussions are critical and what should workplaces be doing to address racism and racial discrimination?

A. Ater: As I mentioned in that talk, there is a lack of fair and accurate representation within the unions themselves and this lack of representation can manifest in different ways, but perhaps the most damaging is in creating bodies that are either unable or unwilling to deal with issues that stem from anti-Black racism because they do not understand the issues.

I felt that such a discussion was critical because the same issues that Black employees are facing in their workplaces, they also face in dealing with the unions and the first step in dealing with these systemic issues is through education and awareness.

3. What role do you see FBEC play in addressing anti-Black racism within the federal public service?

A. Ater: That’s an interesting question, and here I have to remind people that FBEC is an employee-led group. We are not a union and we are not the employer. We are a group of Black



employees from different departments and agencies that have come together with a common purpose and a goal of addressing issues of anti-Black systemic racism.

I think the role FBEC should play in addressing anti-Black racism within the federal public service is the same role that everyone should be playing in building an equitable, merit-based and representative public service – and that is the role of holding each other and our institutions accountable.

From an institutional perspective, there have been a number of announcements that have been made recently (Clerk's [Call to Action](#), [Deputy Minister Commitments on Diversity and Inclusion](#), [TBS' government's priorities](#) to foster greater diversity, inclusion and accessibility in the public service) that all of us should be looking to and seeing how our own workplaces are incorporating into how they do business.

This is not an abstract exercise. For example, the DM Commitments on Diversity and Inclusion requires Deputies to designate a senior official responsible for developing a comprehensive action plan to address issues of diversity and inclusion. Do you know who that senior official is within your organization? And do you know which three (minimum) of the 28 measures in the DM Commitments your department has chosen to focus on?

4. What does “Allyship” mean to you and how can a group or an individual be an ally in the federal public service workplace?

A. Ater: Allyship, to me, is an active thing. As people are learning about the Black Canadian experience through their own journey of education and awareness, what are they doing with this information? What are you doing as the disaggregated data is being released and showing higher reported rates of harassment or discrimination and underrepresentation for Black employees? If you're not doing something, how is that different from being a spectator?

For those looking to learn more about how to be an ally, I would direct people to the excerpt from the [Understanding Anti-Black Racism and How to Be an Ally](#) event that the Canada School of Public Service, in collaboration with FBEC, held in July 2020. In that video excerpt, Patricia Harewood, in-house counsel for the Public Service Alliance of Canada provides 10 points for how to be an effective ally.

5. The President of the Treasury Board's [Supplementary Mandate Letter](#) released on January 15th, 2021 tasks him, amongst other things, to “*improve the collection, use and publication of disaggregated data as a basis of measuring and tracking progress on increasing diversity in the Public Service.*” Why is the collection and publication of disaggregated data so important?

A. Ater: The 2015 movie *The Big Short*, which looks at how the 2008 financial crisis was triggered by the housing bubble in the US, starts off with a quote attributed to Mark Twain, “*It ain't what you don't know that gets you into trouble. It's what you know for sure that just ain't so.*”



The way that data has historically been captured about Black employees is in the grouping of “visible minorities” and that grouping does such a disservice to understanding what is actually happening with Black employees. Beyond just masking or hiding the experience of Black employees, it denies their experience all together. You could have one sub-group doing well and the data will skew the reality for another sub-group that may not be doing well.

As one of our priorities is disaggregated data, we were glad to see the release of the 2019 Public Service Employee Survey (PSES) data starting in October 2020. This was the first PSES that allowed for people to select “Black” as an option under the visible minority category. Because of this, we can see differences between Black employees and the rest of the public service. For example, the PSES 2019 data shows that while 26% of the public service said that they experience discrimination based on race. For Black employees, that number was almost three times higher – at 75%.

In another example, in January 2021, the Public Service Commission released the [Audit of Employment Equity Representation in Recruitment](#). The audit looked at over 15,000 external applications through the five stages of the recruitment process (job application, automated screening, organizational screening, assessment, and appointment). One of the main findings was that “visible minority groups experienced reductions in representation at the organizational screening and assessment stages.” It is because of the collection and publication of disaggregated data that we are able to look at this audit and see that the drop in representation of the visible minority group was predominately due to what was happening to Black applicants.

The collection and publication of disaggregated data is important because it can reveal areas and patterns that disproportional impact certain groups that have been overlooked for far too long. As more disaggregated data is collected and released, first, it’s reinforcing what we’ve been hearing from our members, but second, from a data perspective, it’s showing that what we thought we knew, “just ain’t so.”

6. What role do you see federal public service unions such as CAPE play in addressing racial discrimination in the workplace?

I think unions need to understand anti-Black racism, anti-Indigenous racism, and other forms of racism. Beyond that, they also need to understand both the individual and systemic ways those types of discrimination can manifest in the workplace and then take action.

On an individual level, unions need to be able to support their members through the grievance process. As a both a core member with FBEC and an active CAPE member, I want to know that if I’m having issues in my workplace and I require union intervention, that the union is well equipped to deal with my issues as well as support me. Otherwise, why am I paying union dues if I’m not being properly represented?

In the wake of the class action that was launched by current and former Black federal public servants, a number of federal public service unions, including [CAPE](#), put out statements of



support. On an institutional level, if unions are aware that systemic anti-Black racism exists, I think they should be able to identify and analyze those systemic issues and use the tools available to them to take action. At the heart of it, unions need to build the capacity to both understand the issues and properly address them.

The three pillars of the United Nations International Decade for People of African Descent (2015-2024) are recognition, justice, and development. These pillars require action, and the unions must act.

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