

Year in Review: Acts of racism foster action for construction industry in 2020 and beyond

Angela Gismondi December 30, 2020



COURTESY CARPENTERS' DISTRICT COUNCIL OF ONTARIO — Outside of the Michael Garron Hospital construction site in Toronto, where multiple racially motivated hate crimes occurred, community members pasted posters and art condemning the acts.

Following the killing of George Floyd by police officers in May, racially motivated hate crimes began to surface at construction sites across Toronto, bringing to the forefront an issue in the industry that had been hidden for too long.

The first incident occurred at the Michael Garron Hospital site in June. Two nooses were found strategically placed near equipment used by two Black subtrade workers.

Throughout the summer, nooses were also found at projects being built by The Daniels Corporation, EllisDon and Govan Brown and Crosslinx Transit Solutions, the consortium building the Eglinton Crosstown LRT. Two more nooses were found at the Michael Garron Hospital construction site in late September and a week later a racist message written in a washroom stall was discovered.

In response to the incidents the construction industry took action condemning acts of racism, supporting and signing anti-racism pledges and appointing individuals to lead their firms in equity, diversity and inclusivity roles.

The Daily Commercial News recently spoke to stakeholders who have been leading the charge and asked these questions:

- Black, Indigenous and People of Colour in construction say racism has been an issue in the industry for years. Do you agree or disagree?
- What are your organization's plans for combatting racism in 2021 and going forward? Are there any equity, inclusivity and diversity initiatives and programs you are planning to implement in addition to what you are currently doing?
- In your opinion, what is the key(s) to combatting racism in the industry?



SCREENSHOT — EllisDon president and CEO Geoff Smith spoke at Buildings Week, being held virtually this year due to the COVID-19 pandemic. He addressed racism in the industry, saying “this industry is far too white and has been for a long time.”

Chris Campbell, equity and diversity representative, Carpenters' District Council of Ontario

“I remember being on the tools, usually when folks say rude or racist stuff to you, you would just walk away. You walk away because you felt at the end of the day you are the first one that is going to be sent home. You're trying to last as long as you can on the job because you have your rent to pay, your car payment, you have responsibilities. I remember one day I was at this place working. I saw these guys coming and they said 'boy, get over here.' I looked at the individual who said it and then I looked at the old man and I was about to go crazy. The old man made a gesture for me to come over and he pulled me away. He wanted to protect me.

“But things have changed. Some folks say the George Floyd murder brought everything to the boiling point and made people want to expose it,” says Campbell.

“In January, we're (the Carpenters') going to start running equity and diversity courses. We're going to go out and recruit workers of colour. We're trying to help dozens of youths coming in and finding ways to remove the red tape to make it more equitable for them.

The key is training. What should be mandatory is supervisors must be trained on anti-Black racism and discrimination.

Accountability should be a requirement for major projects in procurement documents. Penalties for being a part of such things have to be written in black and white in procurement documents so folks know if you hang a noose you won't have a job.

We must keep data, statistics by race. I know people are apprehensive but if you don't you are just shooting in the dark at finding solutions. You must have something to measure what you do.”

Rosemarie Powell, executive director, Toronto Community Benefits Network

“Systemic racism and anti-black racism is alive and well in the industry, as you've seen from the nooses found on construction sites. There is also a lot of good will and when we are able to form meaningful relationships within the industry, we can break those barriers.

We started a mentoring program a few years ago and that is because Black youth in particular in our community benefits programs have been sharing their issues and frustrations of trying to access the industry. Even when they get in, they face challenges in the workplace, which unfortunately includes overt racism but also lots of micro aggressions that they have to deal with.

We will definitely continue to strengthen the NexGen Builders Mentoring Program and also we are working with the equity and diversity working group made up of leaders from the industry on an awards and recognition program – Building Diversity.

Leading up to that we are doing education within the industry about equity, diversity and inclusion and we're using the global benchmarks for diversity and inclusion as the evaluation criteria.

We have to have leadership from the top that is going to direct this work. Policies and procedures need to be established within the organization that makes it really clear that there is zero tolerance for anti-Black racism and systemic racism.

We've got to treat racism with the same level of importance as other types of injuries within the workplace.”

Amina Dibe, manager of government and stakeholder relations, Residential Construction Council of Ontario

“We understand that these incidents that occurred in the summer didn't occur in isolation. It clearly is an issue in Canadian society in general.

In September we held a webinar on addressing racism in the construction industry and that was a kickoff to the Construction Against Racism Everywhere campaign intended to bring employers, unions and government together to address racism.

RESCON joined Tridel's Built for Respect campaign in partnership with EllisDon, the Labourers' International Union of North America Local 183 and Building Industry and Land Development Association, to tackle and eliminate racism within the construction industry.

Most of our work in 2021 is going to stem from the anti-racism roundtable we held. We have three subcommittees — one is focused on workplace policies and legislative requirements, the second is on marketing and communications and the third is on training and education.

Our roundtable, similar to many other coalitions on this file, is not just construction industry associations. We're also speaking with our secondary and post-secondary education partners. We're speaking with our partners in the health and safety sector and we're really trying to engage with government on this file.”

Jennifer Khan, head of inclusive diversity, EllisDon

“I definitely don't think that racism in construction is new. People have reported incidents of racism in the past but what has changed now is that organizations are more confident in their position to say we're not taking it anymore and we don't accept it anymore.

We have recently launched an identity campaign where we are asking our employees to self-identify on factors such as race, gender, nationality, sexual orientation. This information that we are collecting right now is going to be critical for us to creating a strategy moving forward in 2021.



TRIDEL CORPORATION — Tridel kicked off the Built for Respect campaign in partnership with EllisDon, the Labourers’ International Union of North America Local 183, the Residential Construction Council of Ontario and the Building Industry and Land Development Association, to tackle and eliminate racism within the construction industry

In addition to the new Alliance of Black Employee Experience and Leadership, we’ve also started up two other employee leadership groups, one that is tackling gender equality and the other one tackling anti-racism and intolerance in general.

The key is that you have to think about racism both in short- and long-term goals and initiatives. There are things that organizations have to do in the short term to make sure that there is a clear message that racism is not tolerated.

You also have to look at the long-term effects of systemic racism. You have to look at how do you bring awareness to the issue at hand? How do you give people the tools to have conversations around race in a non-confrontational, productive way? We’re not going to be fixing this in the short term, it’s the long-term gains that are really going to make the impact on breaking down racism.”