

Diversity equity inclusion



**Mack I.
Julion**

This month we celebrate the iconic life of a transformational leader, human rights advocate, true American hero and labor leader: the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Anyone who knows me knows what an inspiration his work and ministry has been in my life's journey. Although commonly recognized as a civil rights leader, his impact far exceeded just race relations. He set the stage for a seismic shift because he dared to dream of a better place for all of us.

Of the many powerful statements made in his famous "I Have a Dream" speech, one line still speaks to the yearning of

those marginalized in this country, but especially to people of color. Dr. King spoke of a day when "my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character." That speech was given in 1963, and 61 years later we are not there yet.

Overall, we may be in a better place, but that is not saying a lot, considering that the speech was given when this nation was besieged by a mentality of segregation and Jim Crow laws. At that time many labor organizations, including the NALC, were not fully integrated by membership or leadership. There were divisions in our union, whether dual charters were formally in place or not. Many African Americans back then chose the National Alliance of Postal and Federal Employees because the NALC was considered "not for us." The Alliance served unofficially as the representative body for many postal workers of color. I bring this up because I believe where we are today as a union is only better relative to where we were.

When I was elected president of Branch 11 in Chicago in 2010, I made a concerted effort to assemble representatives who were qualified and reflected the full face of the membership. Branch 11 was more than 80 percent African American and historically led by men. But it was important to me that our members see and feel they were an active part of their union. Our transformation began with the highest number of female elected officers at one time. They eventually would

move up, and today, we have women as full-time officers, including the branch president. We also had two officers of Hispanic descent and one with an open alternative lifestyle. None of this was done to "check a box." They were all an active part of the administration. I guess it was diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) before it became a thing.

To me, it was just a matter of common sense. I believe that the leadership of an organization should reflect the membership. And you can do that without compromising the representation on the workroom floor. The strength of our union is our unity and diversity. But when we don't support our diversity, we undermine our unity, which weakens our union.

Unfortunately, DEI has taken on a negative connotation in recent years. The phrase "DEI hire" references placing people in positions for which they are not qualified. On the contrary, it is the rectification of others being placed in positions for which they are not qualified other than having the privilege of association. DEI allows for the inclusion of those who have systemically not been given opportunities despite their qualifications.

Chicago is a strong union town, and we are very proud of that. It's the birthplace of the labor movement from the Haymarket riots to more "local ones" than any other city in the country. Yet if you ask folks who live in the inner city, many people of color will tell you that the unions "aren't for us." They have seen the way that many trade unions have consistently limited new job opportunities to those who are "privileged." Likewise, there is a feeling within our union from many members of color that the NALC generally isn't for us when it comes to leadership opportunities. That's unfortunate, because as the faces of our workforce and union continue to change, we need to embrace the diversity on the workroom floor.

We can do that on a local level with our branches and state associations by attracting and encouraging all to get involved. On the national level, we saw an introduction to DEI at the convention in Boston and a stated commitment to embrace our diversity. Hopefully what comes out of it is more than what was displayed at the convention workshop, because for many of our members of color it did not meet their expectations, and once again left them feeling like "this isn't for us." That's too bad, but obviously we still have a long way to go.