

Western University: 'Western Lives Matter' slogan evidence that Mayor Matt Brown must create anti-racism task force



By [Jennifer O'Brien](#), The London Free Press
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London anti-racism activists are stepping up demands for Mayor Matt Brown to create an anti-racism task force after after Western University students mocked the Black Lives Matter movement in a banner.

“If a community were to set the tone that it is invested and committed to anti-racism, then you don’t have Western breeding such hate,” said Mojdeh Cox, who co-facilitated a forum on racism in London last month. “We can make excuses for our kids if we want, but we will continue to be the armpit of major cities in Canada. Because London is still considered one of the most racist cities.”

The incident — four white male students were photographed in front of the words Western Lives Matter written on a homecoming bash banner — was just the latest example of rampant and systemic racism that people of colour face in London, on campus and off, Cox said Wednesday.

It comes during a year when a black American actor, in London to play civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr., at the Grand Theatre, was called the N-word twice on the street.

It was also a year when an Iranian student was attacked at a London market by two men whom he said used racial slurs during the attack.

Last summer, a Muslim woman was spat upon at a grocery store and had her headscarf pulled off.

Cox said her heart sank when she saw pictures of the banner online — they went viral, of course — and her thoughts went instantly to her oldest child, only a few years away from post-secondary education.

“This just goes to show how systemic and structural racism works. Even if (as a person of colour) you defy all odds and barriers and have access to higher education, look at what you have to face,” she said. “Systemic racism is having that kind of a sign at homecoming,” she said, referencing the unsanctioned Western homecoming held this past weekend.

Western has publicly condemned the students but that's not enough, said Rowa Mohamed, who just completed a health sciences degree at the university and still works on campus and has been a leading voice demanding Brown create an anti-racism task force.

"Western doesn't exist outside of London. Racism at Western is racism in London," said Mohamed.

"It's a systemic problem. It's not some one-off event."

Mohamed said the mayor "has to create an anti-racism task force to deal with the issue of racism — and that's including racism on campus."

"Western has a very specific history of racist incidents going on and Western specifically doing nothing," added Mohamed, who is black and Muslim and wears a headscarf and was part of the Black Student Association during the five years she studied there.

"On campus, I've heard people say the N-word in class while the teacher's there. There are so many things you deal with," she said. "Seeing that (Western Lives Matter banner) yesterday reiterated to me all the things that have happened."

Black Lives Matter is an international movement against violence and racism toward black people, one that has been fuelled by recent police shootings of African Americans in the United States.

The banner with the slogan Western Lives Matter, captured in a photograph that circulated widely on social media this week, "trivializes" the Black Lives Matter movement, said Leroy Hibbert, multicultural outreach co-ordinator at Luso Community Services in London.

"I think students don't know the impact, it has a negative impact on the black community as a whole," he said.

"It seems like they are mocking the movement and mocking the idea, and (it) sends a negative message to those building bridges and (trying to address) the very systemic racism that exists in society."

"Racism does exist in London — through racial jokes, comments people make and innuendos — those are called microaggressions," he said. "Those things that take place throughout the course of a day and people don't think are racist but still have the same impact of overt things in the community.

Hibbert said the banner proves Western's student council needs to keep racism on the agenda and students need to be educated on the Black Lives Matter Movement.

But when there is a Black Lives Matter event on campus, "nobody comes out except for black people," Mohamed said. "And if we (the black students association) don't do anything for black history month on campus, this campus does nothing," she said.

“There’s all this burden of making this campus a safe and inclusive place, it’s on us,” she said. “We have to take time out of our energy as students to try to educate people about how not to be racist toward us.

“And it’s the same when it comes to making London a safe and inclusive place.”

Mohamed and other activists called out the mayor at a racism forum last month demanding he apologize for racism in the city under his watch and create the anti-racism task force.

In response, Brown did apologize for racism in London and the following week vowed to work toward an anti-racism strategy in London. But more than two weeks have since passed, with no word.

Wednesday, Brown said he was “disgusted and appalled . . . like all Londoners” about the banner. But he stopped short of committing to a task force, saying he wants to wait for a recommendation from the city’s diversity, inclusion and anti-oppression advisory committee., which put together last month’s racism forum.

“I strongly believe the answers to address this need to come from the community and not from within the walls of city hall,” he said.

“As the person in a position of privilege like I am, I feel it’s extremely important to listen to the recommendations from our advisory committee and our entire community.”

The advisory committee meets Thursday and will discuss the issue, said chair Shawna Lewkowitz.

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