

Union of Concerned Scientists (UCS): A Record of Abuse and Mistreatment

To the Union of Concerned Scientists Leadership:

Stop denying the fact that you have been and continue to be complacent in the abuse and undermining of employees. Your enabling of toxic supervisors has given them free rein to undermine BIPOC staff, which weakens the entire environmental movement.

Coming up on two years after leaving my job in science policy at the Union of Concerned Scientists, I'm reflecting on the traumas that I and other BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) staff endured under incompetent, toxic, wildly unprofessional, predominantly white leadership.

You can read Ruth Tyson's letter about her [experiences as a Black woman at UCS](#) here, which has also been covered in [E&E](#), [LegalPlanet](#), and Washington Post.

In several of the incidents below, I have written "BIPOC" instead of identifying a specific race to protect people from retaliation, which is a potential threat even when stories are anonymized and even for staff who have since departed UCS. However, I do want to state the importance of being specific in our language as much as possible, to highlight unique impacts and avoid hiding disparities of treatment toward people who are Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and/or AAPI. I worked at UCS from 2017-2018 but the issues detailed below are still ongoing today, and many of the supervisors have perpetrated these toxic actions for more than a decade.

Starting with the outrageously unprofessional:

- My boss, Michael Halpern, would regularly enter other people's offices to change clothes during work hours--on multiple occasions, he left his underwear in someone else's office, and forced a young woman of color, Tiffany Hsieh, to sit on his chair with his underwear on the armrest.
- Michael clipped his toenails during 1:1 check-ins. He didn't wear shoes or socks in the office. HR's response was to send a vague all-staff email reminding everyone of the dress code.
- He regularly swiped on a dating app during check-ins. He showed up late to meetings--or didn't even show up at all.
- When my coworker reported several of these instances, the director of HR Giselle Piantedosi told her, "You're just a young woman. I don't like it either, but when you have more years of experience like me, you'll toughen up." This was said to

my coworker, a young woman of color, who by that point had worked in the Obama White House, at the UN, and at another environmental nonprofit.

- Piantedosi has told multiple people they should "be grateful" for their job and that they should "wait their turn." UCS outwardly praises youth leadership superficially while holding back its young leaders internally.
- My office was shared with a coworker. When either of us had closed-door meetings with BIPOC employees, my boss would burst into the room, without knocking, to ask a random question—but only if BIPOC staff were in there. In one instance, he vigorously jiggled the door handle without saying a word or coming in. Closed-door meetings with white employees were not interrupted.
 - A Black colleague had similar experiences: every time they had a BIPOC staff in their office with the door closed, Michael Halpern would look in suspiciously and create feelings of being watched.
- When Michael Halpern asked my colleague to clean up old filing cabinets and they found resources on how to be an effective manager, he threw them in the trash and said, "Don't tell anyone."
- When my colleague and I brought this to the attention of the head of our department Andy Rosenberg, he dismissed our well-documented claims by saying that Michael was just being Michael. In departmental meetings, Rosenberg had previously said that he was 'always here to listen' to our concerns. This was just one of multiple documented complaints we made to Andy Rosenberg about mistreatment of employees. Very little ever changed in response.
- My boss's office was in a constant state of disarray and uncleanliness. There would regularly be moldy cups and bowls, smells of unknown sources, and trash even outside the office. Several staff that worked under him were forced to clean his office multiple times. The officer manager and my boss himself intimated that this was part of the expectations of their job as a Program Assistant.
- Once, he went into the office of a colleague and took her iPhone charger from her desk without asking or notifying her. He absconded with it for a 2-week vacation. In the interim, the colleague was forced to buy another charger and had no knowledge of what had happened. Later on, during a departmental meeting, Halpern was playing with the charger and putting it in his mouth, so she asked him afterward if it was her charger and he said he had "borrowed" it. The boundary violations were constant.

- In any meeting with my boss (1:1, departmental, or even coalition meetings with external partners), I commonly faced similar experiences as those described by Ruth in her letter:
 - “The women did most of the work. The BIPOC were ignored, tokenized, silenced, exploited and largely in temporary positions. The [microaggressions](#) felt more like [dodging the devil](#) than the mosquito bites described in our racial equity training. I saw how white men scrolled through their phones or laptops as I talked, and got up and left whenever they wanted to be done meeting with me.”
- Michael Halpern’s program assistant had to build the entire department’s budget because he himself did not know how to use Excel to create a budget.
- When Tiffany was managed by Michael Halpern, she suffered a bike accident, breaking her arm and ending up in the hospital. She had to get stitches on her eyebrow and suffered from joint pain for several months. At the time of the bike accident, Halpern was on vacation. When he returned, he chastised Tiffany for taking time off to recover from her injuries and reprimanded her for it in her annual review, which at UCS is tied to raises and promotions.

Undermining of BIPOC Staff:

- During the hiring process, I negotiated on salary, job title, and moving expenses (from New Jersey to DC). My soon-to-be boss Michael Halpern came back and said that unfortunately HR denied all my requests. However, a colleague later told me the truth: After getting off the phone with me, my boss told the entire department what I had asked for and he expressed shock that I dared to negotiate.
- When BIPOC staff expressed dissatisfaction with the lack of representation in leadership, senior management (including the President Ken Kimmell, the Executive Director Kathy Rest, Chief Administrative and Financial Officer Cheryl Schaffer, and multiple department heads) would repeatedly say that they wouldn’t force people leave or retire from UCS to make way for diverse leadership. This rhetoric shifted the issue into a (false) zero-sum situation where BIPOC staff (especially junior staff) were smeared as going after people’s jobs.
- In addition, UCS hires the majority of its junior staff on temporary contracts for work that is long-term or permanent. A silly example: I was hired on a temporary contract in summer 2017 for a position to explicitly push back on the Trump administration. The contract was slated to end in December 2018. I asked if that meant that UCS expected the work to fight Trump’s anti-science policies would be done by 2018. They laughed and said no. Another staffer was hired on a temporary contract as Program Assistant, a position that exists in all departments

and that had been occupied for years.

- Staff on temporary contracts are often not notified of the extension until their term is nearly up (despite departments having decided to extend the contract weeks or months earlier), forcing them to pursue other job offers without any certainty on whether they would be asked to stay.
- Even during the COVID-19 pandemic, many staff on temporary contracts are facing a cliff in the next 2 months due to UCS's decision not to support these workers who have poured immense benefits into the organization. And, unsurprisingly, many of UCS's BIPOC staff are on temporary contracts. UCS has an endowment of \$40 million; it would cost them very little to protect these staff from becoming jobless in the midst of massive unemployment, major reductions in unemployment insurance, the ending of eviction moratoriums, and a literal pandemic.
- Another common response to the nearly all-white leadership was: "Not all the department heads are white! We have Ricardo [Salvador]." They constantly evoked the name of the *only* nonwhite department head, **the very definition of tokenism**. UCS used his presence to pretend that the entire organization was diverse and representative and therefore they did not need to do more around hiring, retention, or expanding opportunities for BIPOC staff within UCS.
 - When staff questioned the lack of diversity in UCS's organizational partners, the response was mostly "We work with Hip Hop Caucus!" More tokenization of Black and brown environmentalists.
- After a Black colleague wrote a blogpost that was immensely popular and garnered one of the highest view counts for UCS's blog, my boss became bitter toward her. His visible jealousy created palpable tension in standup meetings and made an already uncomfortable workplace even more hostile.
- Multiple times, staff asked for transparency from HR on gender and racial pay gaps. HR claimed that "there is no gender pay gap" but when pressed for the data, they said, "We don't have the data." On racial pay gaps, HR simply said there were too few BIPOC staff to accurately determine if gaps existed.
- The first month that a Black coworker started working at UCS, leadership announced her arrival by explicitly tokenizing her during the 60-person, DC staff meeting: they patted themselves on the back for hiring someone Black. My colleague continued to face racism from all parties involved, for years.

- On multiple occasions, when employees brought their concerns to HR and asked how they could offer input—whether about promotions, salary, or internal structures—they were met with a response from HR that essentially summed up to "You can leave UCS."
- White managers often undermined BIPOC staff, and other white managers would protect and enable them. One such staff was Liz Schmitt. After failing to show up on time for a webinar and neglecting to attend the prep meeting, she weaponized [white woman tears](#) to blame an Asian American employee and a Black employee for not preparing her on the webinar technology and said that it was not explained during the webinar rehearsal. The Asian American staffer told her supervisor, Danielle Fox, that Schmitt had not attended the rehearsal and showed her the tracking information from Adobe Connect that proved Schmitt was lying. Despite this evidence, Danielle said that the junior staffer must be confused and that Schmitt would not have lied.
- While working on the above-mentioned webinar series, a junior BIPOC staff was constantly blamed for errors that her supervisor committed without her knowledge. On multiple occasions, the supervisor CC'ed senior staff from multiple departments asking for the status of a task that they had never assigned to the junior staff nor had they even informed them of the task's existence.
 - No corrective action was ever taken to improve this boss's supervision, and instead the supervisee was told to learn how to "manage up" instead of UCS requiring the supervisor to learn how to be a proper manager.
- When Tiffany Hsieh was promoted from Program Assistant, her new title and salary were lower than the person whose position she was taking over, despite having the same exact job description plus new additional responsibilities.
 - Tiffany's promotion replaced a Black colleague, whose departure meant that the nearly 20-person department had **only one Black staffer left**.
 - On top of that, her position change occurred around the same time as the Program Assistants successfully lobbied for a multi-thousand-dollar salary increase because they were paid substandard wages (mid-\$30k starting for Washington, DC). When she tried to re-negotiate her salary, given this increase in the wage tier below hers, she was chastised and told: "You should be grateful to work here."
- During my one year at UCS, scores of employees left the organization. Yet, senior leadership never publicly questioned why all these staff would leave a 'leading science nonprofit'. In the six months after I left, an excess of junior staff in UCS's DC location also resigned. Many departments became, and still remain,

overwhelmingly white-dominated. Hiring BIPOC staff, much less men of color, has been abysmal.

- This white supremacy culture exists in all departments at UCS. While BIPOC staff were facing harm and would share their painful experiences, so many white staff chose to ignore, dismiss, and discount BIPOC staff and their experiences. They would observe as bystanders and not intervene, and uphold the white supremacy culture rather than hold their white colleagues accountable. Power dynamics aside, even white directors and managers who knew about the experiences of BIPOC staff would gaslight BIPOC staff experiences and would stay silent.

Mistreatment of external partners:

- My boss had previously been assigned to manage partnership with grassroots environmental justice organizations. He eventually was so unresponsive to them--stopped responding to Environmental Justice partners' emails and didn't answer their calls. Yet he retained his job at UCS, has worked there for 15 years, and is now the deputy director of the department.
- When I proposed to my boss that we invite UCS's environmental justice (EJ) partners to join a coalition which included many powerful organizations, and which was increasingly being seen as an important advocacy space for science policy, he said it would 'take too long' and suggested I consider if it was worth my time. These EJ organizations were community-based, Black- and brown-led, and their continued exclusion keeps power out of the hands of the communities most impacted and in the hands of white-led organizations like UCS.
- UCS rarely used direct or transparent language to talk about race and racism. The absence of BIPOC in leadership was swept into the acronym "DEI" which also encompassed opaque HR meetings and other pablums designed to dissuade employees from real change. The Black and brown people who suffered the most from environmental injustice were referred to as "frontline communities" without any language acknowledging the roots of disparate impact in racism. Yet now, UCS is finding it convenient and popular to say "Black Lives Matter" while it continues to undermine and hold back its Black employees.
- Ruth details an incident during the all-staff retreat in her letter:
 - "During our private dance party at a hotel in Cape Cod, our keynote speaker, [Xiuhtezcatl Martinez](#), came onto the dance floor with a friend. They were both wearing hoodies and seemed a little nervous. They weren't familiar to me so my instinct was to introduce myself and ask how their night was going, their role at the org. I recognized them from other spaces and was so excited to learn about their fantastic EJ work and we danced for

a bit and moved on. Later, I overheard a few white women who spotted them saying they should call security because there were intruders there. I was glad I overheard because I was able to explain that they were the keynotes. They wouldn't believe me and insisted they were a danger. They said "no way!" and laughed at me."

It's Time.

Ruth Tyson's letter inspired me to write this piece: I am indebted to her courage and conviction. I regret not sharing these incidents publicly earlier, but would UCS have listened if not for the sea change in public opinion and consciousness of white-led, white-supremacy-perpetuating nonprofits? I owe an immense debt to the millions of people who have put their lives on the line for #BlackLivesMatter and Black liberation, whose protests and organizing have created a stronger environment for holding groups like UCS more accountable. We must all join the fight together because, as poet and author Maya Angelou said, None of us can be free until everyone is free." In AAPI (Asian American and Pacific Islander) labor organizing, we say "Isang Bagsak," the rallying cry of Filipino farmworkers that "One fall, all fall" // "One rise, all rise."

When I left UCS in 2018, I told most coworkers that it was to join an electoral campaign in Las Vegas. While this was factually true, the main reason that I chose to leave a permanent job for a 3-month organizing position was that I would no longer tolerate the mistreatment and white supremacist culture at UCS. I was fed up with seeing my colleagues with loads of potential be silenced, their ideas squashed, and their opportunities for fundamental workers' rights like adequate pay be shut down. Having pursued all internal channels, I knew that the strongest message I could send was leaving. This decision rang true once a multitude of DC staff left shortly after my departure, rendering many departments still to this day mostly white with 1-2 token BIPOC staff.

UCS, and especially the Center for Science and Democracy, hoarded resources and never built real power for the goal of advancing science. It wastes the time, talent, and resources of bright young staff whom the environmental movement so desperately needs. One of the most harmful components of UCS are the staff in leadership, especially the white staff (and some BIPOC staff), who witnessed the incidents described in this document and much much more, yet never said anything. Many of them, including department heads, the director of communications, and HR staff have worked with Michael for years. They didn't put his and other managers' bad behavior in check, didn't apologize to impacted staff, and didn't say a word to stop UCS promoting harmful managers. They shielded themselves from the worst of the incompetence and abuse, but did nothing for the scores of BIPOC staff and junior staff who have since left UCS. The experiences detailed in this 8-page letter are many, but they still only scratch the surface of numerous times that managers directly harmed staff with microaggressions, direct

aggression, cutting off opportunities, blocking access to contacts and partners, gaslighting, and more. And this doesn't even begin to cover the actions of other staff who enabled it all, and who still refuse to fully reckon with their responsibility for hostile working conditions.

I have documented here only a sampling of horrifying workplace conditions at UCS. There are numerous other experiences from my time there, and countless more from the other BIPOC staff who have worked at UCS. The willful ignorance that UCS displays around these wildly unprofessional, abusive managers and leadership is an outright lie. UCS actively silences employee dissent, lacks the integrity to reckon with its history and culture of suppressing BIPOC staff and organizations, and betrays its stated mission and principles by enabling abusive management and leadership to continue to harm employees and fail up.

Signed,
Vivian Chang

In Solidarity,
Tiffany Hsieh