

Sisters are still doing it for themselves!



This year we 'celebrated' the 100th year of the first women getting the vote, and although we have now gained electoral independence for all women over the age of 18, financial independence of women still has a long way to go.

On June 7th 1968, women workers at the Dagenham Ford plant went on strike for equal pay. Those women worked as sewing machinists and after a pay regrading exercise, their jobs were graded as 'B', "unskilled labour", whilst men doing a similar job elsewhere in the factory were given a higher grade of 'C' - skilled labour.



Women working at Ford's plant in Halewood on Merseyside also went on strike in solidarity with their sisters in the south, although their action has largely been overlooked.

Just two years later, the Equal Pay Act was passed, something which might not have happened without the stand taken by these brave women workers.

50 years on, you would think that demanding equal pay would be a thing of the past, but as we know, women still earn less than men.

Despite repeated Conservative government promises to help low paid women their wages aren't getting any better. In fact, a study of the chancellor's recent budget has shown that millions of women in low-paid, part-time work will be among the main losers from tax and benefit changes that will come into effect in April next year.

“While women are badly paid because of their unorganised condition, they remain unorganised mainly because they are badly paid.”

Mary Macarthur, a British suffragette and GMB trade unionist

I am very pleased and proud to say that the GMB is at the vanguard of organising low paid women.

Mary Macarthur was born on 13th August 1880 in Glasgow. She would have been proud, as we all are, of the GMB women working in her city of birth today.

It is never easy for an employee to take the decision to go on strike, especially if you are low paid. When our members do, it's because they are extremely angry and frustrated about an injustice that they are facing in their workplace.

In October this year, over 6,000 low paid women in Glasgow went on strike for two days. Cleaners, care workers, caterers and school staff and other council workers effectively closed down Glasgow Council for those two days. The cause of their anger was unequal pay; they were being paid up to £3 an hour less than council staff in male-dominated but broadly equivalent roles such as bin collecting and street sweeping.





This was a truly historic strike and these women should be an inspiration to us all. The solidarity that they were shown by the public, other male council workers and trade union members was impressive. I am sorry that I was unable to get there to support them in person.

Low paid women have always taken strike action to defend or improve their terms and conditions. Their stories have often just been lost in the history of our movement.

Part of the reason why striking women are dismissed as not being quite so important as their male counterparts is because there is still the assumption that women have the innate qualities necessary for jobs such as caring or working with children and therefore the emotional labour of these jobs is not rewarded in monetary terms.

We hear a lot about the 'glass ceiling' for women, those barriers that exist which block the advancement of women at the top of their organisation, but not as much about 'the sticky floor'. This term, coined in 1992 by sociologist Catherine White Berheide, describes the discriminatory employment pattern that keeps a certain group of people at the bottom of the job scale. We need to mount a challenge to this huge structural impediment that keeps women stuck in low paid employment to the detriment of their emotional and financial wellbeing.

Although there will be new challenges in 2019, GMB members, women and men, will I know, be at the forefront of defending and improving workers' pay, terms and conditions wherever and whenever the need arises.

I wish you all a happy and restful time over the festive season. We need to take the time out to rest because there is much to fight for in the future.



In Solidarity

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