



Social Justice not Charity!

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**Disability History isn't just for Disability History Month.
Farzana Jumma, National Equality Forum Disabled Workers
Lead talks about the history of disabled people's strength
bringing about changes to laws still in place today**

The National League of the Blind was the earliest trade union for disabled people, formed in 1894 and becoming the National League for the Blind and Disabled in 1968. Public opinion at the time was that blind people were not able to work and were thought of as a burden upon the government and society. The first General Secretary, Ben Purse, a piano tuner from Salford, was blind from the age of 13. At the time disabled workers were being exploited in the industry and the union became affiliated to the TUC in 1902.

The union campaigned for the government to accept responsibility for blind workers and ensure a fair pension for them. In 1912 a strike lasting six months in Bristol was held and then further strikes followed with blind workers marching to Trafalgar Square in 1920 from Leeds, Manchester and Newport, demanding justice. This trailblazing industrial action led to the Blind Persons Act 1920 being implemented, a duty placed on local governments to "promote the welfare of blind persons".

This was the first disability legislation and led the way to further the rights of disabled workers through the trade union demanding "social justice not charity" nor pity.

Fast Forward to the 1990s and disabled people had no choice but to take significant action after they were repeatedly discriminated against in and out of the workplace. Direct Action Network brought disabled people together who needed legal protection against the discrimination they faced in and outside of work.

This action led to the Disability Discrimination Act 1995, which made it unlawful to discriminate a person on grounds of their disability in relation to employment, and in areas of some consumer goods and services. Better facilities on public transport followed this legislation making using public transport a more comfortable experience for disabled people.

Fifteen years later the Equality Act 2010 was given royal assent and this absorbed the Disability Discrimination Act, amongst other equality areas, identifying nine protected characteristics. This vital piece of legislation dealt with workplace discrimination based on disability, age, sex, race, religion or belief, sexual orientation, marriage or civil partnership status, pregnancy or maternity, and gender reassignment.

Under this legislation you are defined as having a disability if you have a physical or mental impairment that has a 'substantial' and 'long-term' negative effect on your ability to do normal daily activities.

Unfortunately many disabled people still face barriers finding jobs and getting on at work. Some areas where the Equality Act 2010 supports disabled people include:

- Preventing employers from creating employment criteria which cannot be achieved, or which a disabled person would find much harder to meet than a non-disabled person, unless the criteria was objectively justified
- Prohibiting employers from treating disabled workers less favourably than others
- Ensuring employers make 'reasonable adjustments' to prevent disabled employees being substantially disadvantaged at work
- Protecting disabled employees from bullying and harassment because of your disability or association with someone who has a disability
- Negotiated disability leave.

Little has changed since the Equality Act 2010 and as trade unionists we work hard to defend the rights of our members. We campaign to bring about better working conditions for disabled people in the workplace.

Current GMB campaigns for disabled workers include the Reasonable Adjustments Passport. Let's take inspiration from our disabled workers' history - read about the campaign and get active today.

