

*TUC Equal Pay Archive*  
*Recording Women's voices*

*The Wainwright Trust TUC*

*A woman's worth: The story of the Ford sewing machinists*

1968

**Vera Sime**

When the war finished, I went into dressmaking, then when my youngest daughter was five, I went to Ford's. I was thirty-six.

**Violet Dawson**

We had to pass the test, machining tests; we had to sit there and thread all the machining up, the machine up with the cottons and do a bit of machining; we had to pass that test before we got in.

**Bernie Passingham**

Some of the convenors were involved in it and they had assessors going round doing all the evaluations of the jobs, not only the women's jobs, sewing machinists, all the jobs; and, er, I challenged the company to bring so many men over and sit them on a sewing machine. They did – I couldn't help laughing, you know, because they had to give up!

**Violet Lawson**

At that time we had men night-work machinists and they were getting paid more than us. They were getting a C Grade, weren't they?

**Bernie Passingham**

Everybody else on a Grade B should be able to go and do another Grade B job; it doesn't matter what plant it's in, but here they couldn't do it!

**Violet Lawson**

And, er, we said, "Well, we want C Grade if the men are getting it. We want equal pay."

**Bernie Passingham**

So it come to the point where I just picked the phone up and phoned back to the plant, to the stewards and stewardesses there and that, and said, "Well, that's it! They don't want to know, that's the end of it!" and they went out on strike!

**Sheila Douglass**

Oh, I don't think it was unanimous but it was more for than against. But you do get a lot of, "What are you doing this for – you only come to work for pin-money, women?"

**Bernie Passingham**

The mighty Ford Motor Company, right? Now they've got women in dispute, you know, and it's something new. Oh, I think it shook them to the core.

**Sheila Douglass**

We didn't really think that we was going to fetch the whole Ford empire and bring it down to its knees, as you might say, but that's what happened eventually!

**Bernie Passingham**

Now the company and that are pressing the government and that to get people back to work, because now you'd got Ford's not building any cars!

**Sheila Douglass**

All women in the Ford company was going to get an extra 7p an hour – I was one of those that argued that we came out for C Grade!

**Bernie Passingham**

There was a woman's rate of pay – that got abolished on that dispute. Now to be quite honest we thought we'd done a vastly good job! But the girls didn't think so! (laughter) As a union, you know, now you'd got the status of equal pay, and Barbara Castle put it on the books afterwards as a statute and things like that.

**Sheila Douglass**

After things started up again about equal pay and things like that, that's when you realised that maybe you'd started something quite big.

*Sixteen years later the sewing machinists were still waiting for recognition of their skill.  
In 1984 they went on strike for a second time to win equal pay.*

1984

**Maureen Jackson**

I didn't have to do the test, I think it was the union said, because the other women hadn't got their grading, "You've got to do away with the test, because what you're saying is they're not skilled."

**Geraldine Dear**

When I started, I think there was – I think I started with about twelve or thirteen of us; we went and sat round this big table and it was Lil Callaghan again; and she said, "Right, you've got to join this union," and she, you know, she just put you right and said, "You've got to join this union, because you'll need us behind you," and we really did actually.

**Dora Challingsworth**

The cutters used to cut by hand, like with the scissors and all that and then they brought the machine in and they, they just stood there – the machine cut it!

**Pamela Brown**

?taped/hacked? it; ?tapped? it in.

**Dora Challingsworth**

They couldn't do that with machines – they still had to have women sitting on a machine and doing her work but they fetched machines in just to cut and they were C Grade, they just stand there watching a thing going round.

**Geraldine Dear**

Yes.

**Maureen Jackson**

If our work built up and they didn't need so many car seats, they would say to some of the girls, "Oh, we'd like you to go over to the door panels, because they're a bit short-staffed," and the girls would go over there and get stuck in and do the door panels, or in the tank shop; they would find you work over there, but when we were very busy and there was quite a few spare machines, they could never say to the men, "Would you come over and do a bit of machining?", because, you know, the men would never have a clue how to even thread a needle, I shouldn't think, rather than do machining, and in the end the women started talking amongst themselves and saying, "Well, this is not on; we can sort of turn our hands to anything but the men can't,"

which is, which seemed very unfair to us. So I think that was the start of us digging our heels in.

**Bernie Passingham**

Every year you negotiate wages; you could argue certain grading jobs but the last time we didn't get an answer. We sat there three hours making the case – me and the two stewardesses and never even got an answer! Everybody else got an answer when they made a claim: "Yes" or "No" but we never even got an answer.

**Geraldine Dear**

I think we really shocked the management because I think they all sat back thinking; everybody, they think, the management just sat back and thought, "Ah, they're going to walk in from there, they're going to walk back from the canteen and they're going to start work." And they were so shocked; we had managers trying to get our work out the back fences to get it down the PTA.

**Dora Challingsworth**

They had trainloads coming from Genk but the men wouldn't do it, down there, give them their due they did stand by us.

**X**

Yes, they did.

**Maureen Jackson**

Even the postman with the mail – that was when we first went out – and he said, "What are you all doing out here?" so we said, "Well, we've come out on strike." "Right-ho, girls!" and he turned round and went! (laughter) So they never got their mail!

**Geraldine Dear**

We didn't have any trouble with anybody.

**Pamela Brown**

We had the police from Dagenham Police Station come round every night to make sure we was all right.

**Maureen Jackson**

Oh, they were very good; yes, they used to look after you, didn't they?

**Geraldine Dear**

They used to come down just to make sure we was all right, they used to come down, didn't they? You could say if you want, Pam!

**Pamela Brown**

They used to bring us a bottle of whisky down here (laughter) now and again to keep us warm but there was this one particular policeman – he would always come down – but they looked after us!

**Geraldine Dear**

Well, Pam was single and I think this particular policeman fancied her actually! (laughter)

**Dora Challingsworth**

Well, it's because the women came out and they stayed out, as they said, nine weeks, and that was holding the pay claim up anyway. So nothing could be settled until that was settled.

**Bernie Passingham**

We got ACAS involved and er, I've got it in there, all the characteristics and what they done because I went round with them.

**Dora Challingsworth**

Well they came round and looked at individual work; they came down the plant and like for samples, when you was given a sample and you was told to put a job together; I mean they didn't always tell you what went here and what went there and that's, I think, when they came round, they came round to see what the men do and what they get C Grade for and what the women did and only got B Grade for; they watched women machining, didn't they?

**Pamela Brown**

Mm.

**Bernie Passingham**

The designer guy come up with a bundle of cloth, bits and pieces, put it down to the sewing machinists and the company man started running around! (laughter) And no, this is what happens – a change of design comes here – they just put it in front of the machinists; the machinist has never seen it before, opens it up, puts all the bits and pieces together to make a seat.

**Geraldine Dear**

I think they realised then that the person that was looking at it could no way put it together; I think they then realised, yes, we definitely should get C Grade and, as we keep saying, I think we was like a fraction away from getting D Grade, but I think if they'd have give us D grade then it would have proved that they'd have been wrong all them years ago. Women, everything you wanted you really had to fight for.

*The TUC wishes to thank:*

- *the Ford Sewing Machinists: 1968: Violet Dawson, Sheila Douglass, Vera Sime; 1984: Maureen Jackson, Pamela Brown, Dora Challingsworth, Geraldine Dear*
- *Bernie Passingham, Diana Holland and the Transport and General Workers' Union*
- *Sue Hastings and Christine Coates*

*for their co-operation and assistance.*

*A TUC production with the support of the Wainwright Trust.*

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