



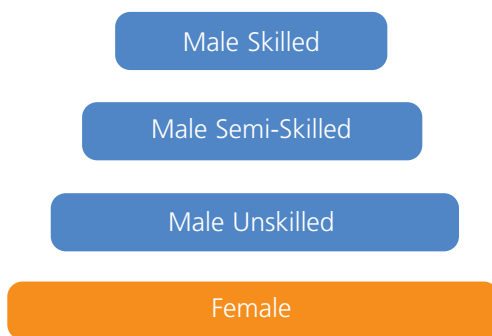
■ The story of the ■ Ford sewing machinists

a TUC oral history project on equal pay,
in association with the Wainwright Trust

RECORDING WOMEN'S VOICES



BEFORE 1970 it was common for women in the UK, especially in the private sector and in manual support roles in the public sector, to be paid on separate lower rates of pay. So, for example, at the Ford Motor Company before a new job evaluated structure was introduced in 1967, there were effectively four grades for production workers:



The largest single group of female Ford production workers at that time were sewing machinists, who earned 92 per cent of the basic rates of men undertaking unskilled jobs, such as sweeping floors and supplying components to the production line, and 80 per cent of the male semi-skilled rate. Ford was not alone. Similar grading and pay structures prevailed in other motor companies, and indeed in many other manufacturing companies.

In 1966-7, the Ford Motor Company commissioned consultants, Urwick Orr & Partners, to develop and implement a job evaluation scheme covering production and craft jobs. The scheme was typical of those for manual jobs at this time, with a large number (28) of factors (called characteristics in the Urwick Orr system) and a relatively small number of levels for each factor.

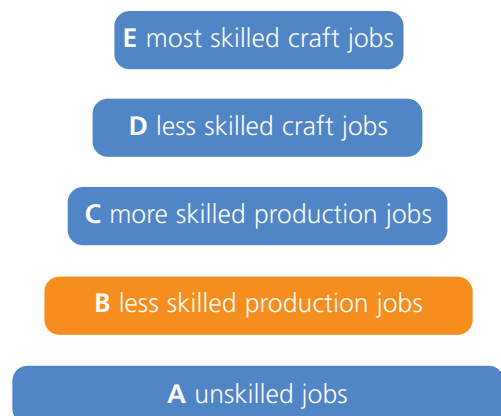
The job of sewing machinist was one of 56 benchmark jobs used as the basis for designing the system. Their jobs were assessed by the consultants and used as the framework for the remaining jobs, which were evaluated

by teams of assessors, who went round the various Ford plants interviewing jobholders, observing their work and then making assessments on the spot for each factor by comparison with the relevant benchmark job assessments.

The resulting grading structure, introduced from July 1967, had five grades.

THE SEWING MACHINIST JOB came out in grade B, but as this was before the 1970 Equal Pay Act, the machinists were not paid the full grade B rate, but only 85 per cent of it. The sewing machinists were incensed, not only that they received only 85 per cent of men doing work in the same grade as themselves, but also on account of the grade of the job: they thought their jobs should have been in grade C. They took industrial action (no ballots needed in those days) and, as cars cannot be sold without seat covers, rapidly brought production to a halt.

The dispute was resolved in June 1968 following a meeting with Barbara Castle, Secretary of State at the Department of Employment and Productivity. It was agreed that the sewing machinists would receive 100 per cent of the male grade B rate phased in over two years; and that there would be a public court of inquiry to examine the grading of the job.



The Court of Inquiry, chaired by Sir Jack Scamp, determined that the dispute was 'about the grading of sewing machinists, not about equal pay', and recommended an internal review committee with an independent chairman, which ultimately confirmed the grade B rate. The machinists remained aggrieved.

"We have to pass a test on three machines. If we don't pass that test, then we don't get a job. So why shouldn't they recognise us as skilled workers?"

THE IMPACT OF THE DISPUTE on Barbara Castle was to hasten the preparation of the Equal Pay Bill, which was enacted in 1970. By introducing an implied equality clause into the contracts of all employees, the Equal Pay Act (EPA) had the effect of making separate women's rates of pay illegal. Employers were allowed until 1975 to eliminate such separate lower rates.

The EPA provided for those not receiving equal pay for 'like work' or for 'work rated as equivalent' under a job evaluation system to be able to take claims to an industrial tribunal. It is clear from the Standing Committee proceedings on the Bill that this latter was a direct response to the situation of the Ford sewing machinists.

BUT THE STORY of the Ford sewing machinists does not end with the passing of the Equal Pay Act in 1970.

In 1972, the UK joined the European Economic Community (EEC), as it was then called, and in 1975, the EEC agreed the Equal Pay Directive,

which amplified an article in the Treaty of Rome requiring EEC member states to provide for equal pay for equal work between men and women and to have legislation in place to provide for national enforcement of its provisions. It was under this provision that the European Commission took the UK Government to the European Court of Justice.

In spite of the 'work rated as equivalent' clause of the EPA, the ECJ was satisfied that a significant proportion of women in the UK fell outside the scope of the 'equal value' provision. The result was the Equal Value (Amendment) Regulations of 1983, which, from 1 January 1984, added a third ground for a complaint to a Tribunal - where an Applicant considered that her work was of 'equal value' to that of a male comparator in the same employment. The concept of 'equal value' is not defined in the amended Act, except to say that the jobs of Applicant and Comparator should be compared 'under such headings as effort, skill and decision'. However, because the idea of a comparison under headings is also the basis of job evaluation, the amending legislation allowed as a primary defence to an equal value claim the existence of a fair and non-discriminatory job evaluation scheme covering both applicant and comparator jobs.

The Ford sewing machinists submitted equal value claims in early 1984, arguing that their jobs were of equal value to Eastman cutters and paint spray operators (both then manual operations), whose jobs were in grade C of the Ford structure. However, because all of these jobs were covered by the Urwick Orr job evaluation scheme, the applicants had first to show that the scheme was flawed. At a tribunal hearing, the consultants gave evidence in support of the scheme being fair and non-discriminatory. The expert called on behalf of the applicants failed to convince the majority of the tribunal that there was a problem with the scheme and the machinists' claims were rejected.

AN APPEAL WAS SUBMITTED, but by this time the frustrated machinists had had enough and once again took industrial action, bringing Ford's UK plants to a halt just before Christmas 1984. So that work could be resumed and employees could benefit from the recently agreed annual pay settlement, the dispute was resolved by the establishment of a panel of enquiry, under the auspices of ACAS, and quite outside the provisions of the equal pay legislation. The terms of reference for the enquiry required it to re-visit and 're-profile' all the benchmark jobs, which still existed, and to re-evaluate the sewing machinists job by comparison with these other benchmarks. Following visits to most of the Ford UK plants and observation of the benchmark jobs, the panel unanimously evaluated the machinist jobs at levels, which put it firmly into grade C.

WHY THE DIFFERENCE FROM THE ORIGINAL EVALUATION? The report of the panel of enquiry changed the original assessments on a number of the scheme characteristics, for example, in relation to 'hand/eye co-ordination' (where the panel judged the degree of hand eye co-ordination to be higher than that of the highest level benchmark job) and to a factor measuring 'visualisation of shapes and spatial relations'.

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Most of the jobs, which scored at the higher levels of this factor, required visualising 3-dimensional components from 2-dimensional drawings. The original assessors had failed to appreciate that while sewing machinists did not use drawings, they nevertheless had to visualise the finished seat cover when working on it inside out. The panel also increased the level on the 'paced muscular effort' factor,

because of the pace of work, even though the sewing machinist job did not require as great physical exertion as many of the benchmark jobs. The panel were unable to change the scheme or a number of factors on which the benchmark jobs occupied by men scored higher, for example, in relation to physical strength and various aspects of working conditions.

The view of the company representatives in 1985 appears to have been that the panel's conclusion arose because so many of the benchmark jobs had disappeared since 1967. An alternative interpretation, hinted at in the report, is that the scheme had been implemented in a discriminatory way in 1967.

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Filmed interviews on the sewing machinists strikes are available from TUC publications on 020 7467 1294. Further information on the TUC oral history project on equal pay is available from September 2007 at www.unionhistory.info



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