

Catch of the Day

Hull Fish Packers win equal pay

Pete Allen, Transport & General Workers' Union (retired)

And I sat myself down and I'm thinking to myself 70% of my members are women, but I concentrate on looking after the men, keep them happy and me job is easy and I decided there and then that I would be an officer to all my members, not just the men and I started looking around and I thought to myself right, what is the best thing to do to look after the interests of women and I thought well, no woman goes out to go dipper-kipping or filleting, no not filleting fish, trimming fish for the stimulating company. They go out for money. I thought right concentrate on money, so I started looking at the rates and that's when I discovered and realised we had a male rate and a womans rate and we had a labourer on one rate and a woman on another rate. So I decided there and then that my job was to eradicate the differences between the salaries, sorry the wages, cos if they were weekly paid or hourly paid.

Work and conditions in the fish factories

Betty Hodson

at the Birds Eye where I used to head the fish as they came down and put your finger and thumb in the eyes and chopped the heads off and then they would sail past again. We would wipe your hands in the icy water didn't you as the fish going past. Horrible.

I know people used to say to me how could you handle fish but when you work on them all your life, it doesn't bother you.

PA

I mean a lot of people may think it is boring but I did it for nearly 3 and a half years and a good filleter can know what he's doing but he's somewhere else. I was always, my mind was always somewhere else so the job never became boring and that's why I didn't mind filleting. I enjoyed the job actually, I just went off to new things.

Janet Worth

I worked at to Birds Eye for 7 years but I wasn't actually. I started off on the packing line, but to be honest, it didn't agree with me because when the lines used to run along and you was constantly watching I started to feel sick, so I don't know how the women used to stand up, you know, packing on the lines but some had done it for years and they didn't think nothing to it, you know, but it made me feel sick so they actually I got taken off and I got more of a manual job, where I was stripping big blocks of fish on a big platform and pushing it along the belt and then that would chop that into fingers and I worked there for, did I say 7 years, no sorry it was 5 years I worked there. We had some really good times and I'm sad to see the place going really, cos it has been part of the community for years.

BH

When we was at Birds Eye the men got better pay than the women, you know, mind I was only part time, but they got more hourly, you know, higher paid yeah cos you was alongside the men doing the same work, but you was on lower pay.

JW

It's definitely unjust isn't it. I think, I used to be quiet, when I first started work I was quite quiet and wouldn't say boo to a goose and then you sort of realise that things aren't right and you start speaking up don't you Betty?

1st January 1984 the Equal Value (Amendment) Regulations became law enabling claims to be made for equal pay for work of equal value.

PA

So I started off, I went back to the Smales lasses and said right I am now prepared to put your claim in, so I put the claim in to the tribunal, managed to convince the tribunal that an expert should be appointed, got the expert appointed and he produced his independent expert's interim report. I have always said it I didn't know whether to have a nervous breakdown or go home sick or resign cos there was 59 pages and I wondered what the hell he was talking about cos unless you was a job evaluation expert just understanding I was struggling. Now fortunately I rung our central office and they says have a word with the Equal Opportunities Commission which I did and they said to me "look would you like to talk to us about this" and I said "absolutely". Hang on when would you like to come? I said "How about yesterday" so they said "well you can come tomorrow". So I jumped in my car the next morning, drove down and they was really polite cos they were trying to say to me would you like help but they didn't know how to actually ask and when they said "well you know would you like a bit of help" and I always take things literally and I dropped on my knees and put my hands together and said "thank you very much cos I don't know where the hell I am going from here". I said "I have been waiting and waiting for all of the case notes to come through so I could feed off them" so they said "we've got news to you you're only the second one in Great Britain and yours is further ahead than everybody else. We're all sat waiting for you". I said "if you're sitting waiting for me then you're going to lose cos I don't know where to go from here". So fortunately they put in a barrister and a team but it was my case, my women and I decided only to use their legal expertise to present and process the case.

The second hearing of the case at the Industrial Tribunal was in April 1985.

Now I used an argument to the tribunal chairman and to his eternal credit he accepted it. What I said was "near enough is going to be good enough because under a job evaluation scheme you don't get grade 1 at a 100, grade 2 110, grade 3 120, you get grade 1 at 95-105, then you get grade 2 106-110. So I said from 85 to 100 is normal". I said it's within the range of what a graded job is. Of course the alternative is every time that woman does a slightly different job I'll put another claim in and see if she's got 90 points this week or 95 so I said "we should argue that near enough is good enough and you should accept it" and he did and what he ruled was that all of the women there qualified, although he says those who were more highly skilled I could only give them the basic rate, because that's who your comparator is. So we won the equal pay and they actually got paid up within a fortnight.

In April 1985, in the case of Wells v Smales, 15 fish packers were the first women in the UK to win a claim for equal pay for work of equal value.

PA

I must have done another 18-20 odd cases, separate cases, and that was the mainline cases, but riding on the backs of other cases. Some cases – there might be another 3 or 4 companies who agreed to pay whatever I won on them so they didn't have the expense and I did it all, I did fish packers, I did meat, I did metal box and I did offices, so I had a whole range but I started off in the meat packers. Basically I got my feet wet in fish packing and then moved on from there and the only thing is that people think, you know, I was a bit daft, I actually enjoyed them. I enjoyed doing the case, I enjoyed winning the cases for the women, to see some of them and in Britfish we actually got five years back pay because it took me 2 years to do the case but it had already been running for 3 years so you're entitled to back pay from 2 years prior to the time you put the claim in and it came out at 5 years back pay. I mean it was brilliant, absolutely brilliant.

In 1990 Bea Campbell interviewed, for a T&G video, the comparator and some of the named, victorious claimants, in the case of Lawson v British Ltd.

BC

What difference do you think it made that you were all in the union?

Person 1

If we hadn't been in the union we just wouldn't have got it at all. Well we had the union to fight for us there was no way we could have won it on our own. No way at all.

Person 2

He'd have to have you know like independently the union fought on our behalf.

Person 1

They did an excellent job. They really did. They fought really well for us.

BC

What's the mood and the atmosphere in the factory now that you have won?

Person 1

Even the men are cheering us. They think it's brilliant. There's no bitterness. They're just really glad for us and proud of us.

Person 2

Yes because they know don't they?

Person 1

Yes, they're proud of the union as well. The biggest part of the time it's been a man's world though in fact it is now.

Between 1984 and 2002 when Pete Allen retired, he fought 18 equal pay for work of equal value cases and won 17.