

Transcript

My Experience as a Shop Steward: British Leyland in the 1960s and 1970s

SPEAKER 1: Well, when you started at British Leyland it was assumed you would join the trade union. You were there a matter of days, and the personnel and the firm itself encouraged you to join the union. They weren't against the union, and I think they must have invoked-- formed a convener of new starts, and he approached me and asked me if I would join. Funnily enough, I have found my original union card.

Transport and workers one. And then one of the girls I worked with, she was our shop steward. And she did it for a few months, and got a bit bored. And I was quite interested in, as I see I felt quite strongly how I could see the difference. She was a bit younger, and that had been her only job. I saw the difference in the working conditions, and the way women were treated from where I'd been before. Another place that I'd worked. So when he asked me to be the shop steward in her place, I thought, well that's good. It's good to be represented.

So it was not only the service technical ghettos, and even in other Terrapin buildings, because we were new to the main factory. And it was a track to sales girls as well, and I covered that area. So I did that for, I think it must have been about a year and a half to two years. It's hard to remember. And then Dave Smith, the convener, the secretary retired, and he wanted me to apply for the position secretary to take all the notes. I wasn't having that, I didn't want to be the secretary. I did too much of that in my job. So I said no, no.

So a wee time later, a few months later, he decided to create a new role, vice convener. And asked me if I would be that or not. Oh, yeah nice. So I was voted, I took it to votes, all the people put up their hands. So that was me vice convener. But looking back, I think he wanted to create a prominent role for a woman. A woman, because a lot of the members were women in that union. In the ACTS part of the general transport workers. So I think he was quite forward thinking in his way. And he wanted them to see a prominent woman, not a man dictating to them what you should do and what you shouldn't do.

That's what I think looking back, to accompany Dave Smith, the convener to the meetings he had with management. To be honest, I didn't see a lot. But in truth, I think he was teaching me how to go about negotiation. It's not the easiest thing in the world or to be a good negotiator. There's a pick top tips, there are ways to go about it, and I was learning them. Didn't talk a lot, because as I say, I spent my time listening and picking up things.

You could be a wee bit-- but they would never intimidate me. To be honest, they just treated me-- union people are funny. One of the members, they were very respectful and very nice to me. They never made me feel uncomfortable. Never.

And I worked in a big office for a loom making firm. It was in huge offices, and there was quite a lot of men that worked in the army, and they're clerical workers now. They'd done clerical work in the army. And the women worked here. The men were allowed to smoke in the office, but the women weren't.

SPEAKER 2: OK.

SPEAKER 1: And that was accepted. Now, I wasn't a smoker, so it didn't bother me. But even although I wasn't a smoker, I still thought, "Oh, that's a bit-- [INAUDIBLE], but they just accepted it. So that shows you how men-- that was in the '60s. They treated-- women were treated compared to men. I worked at Sterling Poultry, just outside Edinburgh, and I was earning 12 pounds. And I left to go to British Leyland for 19 pounds, and that was a huge rise.

SPEAKER 2: For while-- is that for pretty much similar work?

SPEAKER 1: Yeah, yeah, yeah. No more responsibility, and place is round about the council officers, all the other people, they didn't earn nothing like that. Nothing. That was what we should earn. We should have a good wage in it, fought for the men as well. The men had good wages compared to other men, roundabout as well.

The big unions, the men's union, the production lines, they'd been on strike sometimes, but we still carried on. But once we went on strike, I think it was just for a couple of days or so, if that. But usually, it was maybe just a case, we took a meeting in the morning, and all out. And we would go out for the rest of the day, but we'd go back there next day or the next day. It was nothing big, no big strikes for our union.