

## Women Workers Strike Over Job Evaluation

In the closing months of 1984, 270 women sewing-machinists struck at Ford's main UK plants at Dagenham and Halewood. The strike, which lasted for six weeks, ended a dispute with management which had rumbled on for 16 years. The struggle for re-grading began as long ago as 1966 when the machinists were first given unskilled status. The women have consistently demanded that their work be upgraded from grade B to grade C, which would increase their basic pay by R13,00 per week and give them parity with skilled metal finishers and welders. The women make seat covers for cars and their job entails the sewing together of scores of pieces of material with great precision. The sexual discrimination which led to their being refused skilled status is obvious: the male workers who cut the material which the machinists sew together are on the higher grade C.

The women, who picketed the plants to ensure that scab seat covers were not brought in from Europe, rejected a management proposal for a new company-dominated job evaluation committee on which their union (TGWU) would have only observer status. The strike ended in late-December 1984 when management conceded the union equal status on an evaluation committee under an independent chairperson. The importance of this as a step towards the right of workers to evaluate the worth of their own jobs may be gauged from management's insistence that this mode of job evaluation was to be seen as a one-off case, and not used in other parity claims. Nevertheless, the strike may yet have important repercussions at Ford plants in other parts of the world, and in other struggles by women seeking recognition for the value of their work.

One member of the Ford management distinguished himself by comparing the sewing-machinists job to "peeling bananas". This gentleman, however, was to slip rather badly: the strike proved the centrality of the machinists' job by halting all car production at the Dagenham and Halewood plants for five weeks, stopping production at Ford's Southampton plant

- Ford strike -

for two weeks, and leading to the laying off of 10,000 manual workers at a cost to the company of R500,000,000.

(Jeremy Krikler, February 1985)

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## **STOP PRESS - Change in Workmen's Compensation**

During the past year, a joint certification panel consisting of 8 doctors from both the Medical Bureau of Occupational Diseases (MBOD) and the National Centre for Occupational Health (NCOH), has provided a service to medical practitioners wishing to submit cases of suspected pneumoconiosis to the Workmens Compensation Commissioner (WCC). Xrays and work histories submitted to this panel received a prompt, collective and objective assessment. This assessment was normally accepted by the WCC as a diagnosis, of occupationally-induced disease, and compensated accordingly

In January the panel's authority was restricted, at the request of the WCC, to certification of workers seen at the MBOD clinic only. All other claims have to be submitted in full to the WCC as before. This move is retrogressive:

- a) the procedure is once again more secretive
- b) the basis for making medical decisions about occupational diseases is contracted and bureaucratised
- c) the only route of appeal against future medical decisions is through the WCC court, involving lawyers, inconvenience and expense
- d) bureaucratic delay will again disadvantage workers in obtaining their rightful compensation
- e) with access to the panel closed off, an important means of sharing knowledge and learning has been closed for outside medical practitioners.
- f) The NCOH - a body specifically dealing with occupational health in industry and concentrating much expertise and knowledge in this field - is now excluded from diagnosing occupational disease.

A full report follows in the next edition of SALB.

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