

Ayodele Adefila and Carol Woodham: The Pattern Cutters Pay Divide

Trade Unions were, in part, a response to the Industrial Revolution of the 18th century. The Unions, which were decriminalised in 1867, were established to help protect workers from the industrialists and employers by using workers group membership to effect positive wage change and lead on working conditions.

The Trade Unions effectively formed the basis for today's Labour Party, which still has extensive links with the Trade Union Movement in Britain. In 1978–79 the Unions across Britain took strike action bringing the country to a standstill in what would be called the 'Winter of Discontent'. The devastating strike action — over a requested pay increase of less than 5% — crippled the country and led to the downfall of the then Labour government who, seemingly unable to avert the strike action, lost the confidence of the people. This caused a major swing in voting intention from Labour to Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government. It was Thatcher's government who, on gaining power at the next election, legislated to weaken the powers of the Trade unions. There has been a slow decline of the Unions since then however Trade unions remain among the biggest organisations in the country.

It is with this backdrop that the women pattern cutters of Davies & Field found that their wages were stagnating and not keeping up with the cost of living. There was also a blatant gender disparity between wages.

“...within Davies & Field there was a male grader, these were responsible for changing the pattern sizes of the garments. He was less qualified than the pattern cutters — we knew that we could do his job but he wouldn't be able to do ours — but because he was a man it was considered that he should be paid more. We went to the company to get equal pay but they wouldn't listen so we took it to the union and they took the case on and won. It wasn't about us being paid more than him, it was about equal pay. The grader himself believed that the pay should have been equal with us his colleagues.”

Ayodele Adefila and Carol Woodham speaking in 2014



Carol Woodham at the cutting table, 1980s

Copyright: Carol Woodham

