

Barbara Castle and the Equal Pay Act 1970



SWU Trade Union Advice and Representation Officer **Julie Long** reminds us of the political achievements of one of the Labour Party's most charismatic female figures



In post war Britain equal pay had become an issue close to the hearts of women all over the country. On the 28th January 1970 Barbara Castle, the Labour Party's most charismatic female politician, introduced the Equal Pay Bill to the House of Commons.

Unusually the Bill received an unopposed second reading, prompting MP's from all parties to cross the floor of the house to congratulate Barbara on what was an historic piece of legislation.

The Equal Pay Act (1970) introduced an 'implied equality clause' into all employees' contracts. This had the effect of eliminating separate, lower, women's rates of pay. The gender pay gap in the UK remains among the highest in the European Union with women earning 15.5% less than men (23rd Jan 2019).

Barbara was born on 6th October 1910 into a middle class, non-conformist, devoutly political family. The youngest of three, Barbara grew up in Yorkshire with her parents and siblings. Barbara attended grammar school and completed her education at Oxford. Her father Frank was a tax inspector and a well-known Independent Labour Party (ILP) personality. The ILP originated in Bradford in 1893; its main purpose being to send working men to Parliament.

Barbara Castle, later Baroness Castle of Blackburn, was a Labour Party politician and member of Parliament for Blackburn from 1945 to 1979, making her the longest-serving female MP in the history of the House of Commons until 2007. She later became a member of the European Parliament for Greater Manchester between 1979 - 1989, receiving a life peerage in 1990. Her strong commitment to equality has inspired subsequent generations of women to enter politics as well as employment.

The Equal Pay Act (1970) was both a defining moment in Barbara's political career and a watershed in the fight for gender equality in post war Britain. Many organisations continue Barbara's pioneering work by putting pressure

on governments to close the gender pay gap. One example being the introduction of equal pay audits for large employers to ensure that the Minimum Wage is a real Living Wage.

During her time in government Barbara served as minister for Overseas Development and the Secretary of State for Health. As Minister for Transport (1965 -1968) she oversaw the introduction of speed limits, the breathalyser and seat belts. For example, between 1945 and the mid 1960s there were 150,000 fatalities and 7 million injuries on UK roads. Barbara's measures significantly reduced the fatality rates for drivers, passengers, and pedestrians. She was then elevated to Secretary of State for Employment & First Secretary of State (1968-1970), successfully intervening in the strike by Ford Motor Company sewing machinists against pay discrimination.

On 7th June 1968 one hundred and eighty-seven machinists at Ford Motors in Dagenham went on strike to protest at their jobs being classified as unskilled. The women were infuriated by a pay structure that blatantly favoured male workers. The machinist's strike brought production at Ford's plant to a standstill as there were no leather seat covers for their cars. Not all fellow workers agreed with the strike. Some male employees, laid off because of the strike, blamed the machinists remarking that they were only earning 'pin money' anyway. A claim that was strongly rejected by the machinists who maintained their wages were needed for essential living expenses.

The strike leaders later met with Barbara Castle (Employment Secretary) who brokered a deal with Ford Motors to end their three weeks strike which resulted in the women returning to work and the seeds of the Equal Pay Act were then sown. Subsequently, the machinists returned to work following an offer by Ford Motors of 92% of a male 'B' grade rate. The women were only regraded into category 'C' following a further six-week strike in 1984.

Barbara Castle thrived in a male dominated sphere and was instrumental in the fight for Equal Pay which she fought for admirably. Barbara was only the fourth woman to hold a Cabinet post. She was tipped to become the first woman prime minister and but for a fatal political decision that nearly brought down the government, she may have succeeded.