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**Women, Workplace Militancy and Political Subjectivity in
Britain, 1968-1985**

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Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctorate of
Philosophy

School of History

College of Arts

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Abstract

This thesis examines the experiences and political subjectivity of women who engaged in workplace protest in Britain between 1968 and 1985. The study covers a period that has been identified with the ‘zenith’ of trade-union militancy in British labour history. The women’s liberation movement also emerged in this period, which produced a shift in public debates about gender roles and relations in the home and the workplace. Women’s trade union membership increased dramatically and trade unions increasingly committed themselves to supporting ‘women’s issues’. Industrial disputes involving working-class women have frequently been cited as evidence of women’s growing participation in the labour movement. However, the voices and experiences of female workers who engaged in workplace protest remain largely unexplored.

This thesis addresses this space through an original analysis of the 1968 sewing-machinists’ strike at Ford, Dagenham; the 1976 equal pay strike at Trico, Brentford; the 1972 Sexton shoe factory occupation in Fakenham, Norfolk; the 1981 Lee Jeans factory occupation in Greenock, Inverclyde and the 1984-1985 sewing-machinists’ strike at Ford Dagenham.

Drawing upon a combination of oral history and written sources, this study contributes a fresh understanding of the relationship between feminism, workplace activism and trade unionism during the years 1968-1985. In every dispute considered in this thesis, women’s behaviour was perceived by observers as novel, ‘historic’ or extraordinary. But the women did not think of themselves as extraordinary, and rather understood their behaviour as a legitimate and justified response to their everyday experiences of gender and class antagonism.

The industrial disputes analysed in this thesis show that women’s workplace militancy was not simply a direct response to women’s heightened presence in trade unions. The women involved in these disputes were more likely to understand their experiences of workplace activism as an expression of the economic, social and subjective value of their work. Whilst they did not adopt a feminist identity or associate their action with the WLM, they spoke about themselves and their motivations in a manner that emphasised feminist values of equality, autonomy and self-worth.

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Author's Declaration

I declare that, except where explicit reference is made to the contribution of others, that this thesis is the result of my own work and has not been submitted for any other degree* at the University of Glasgow or any other institution.

Signature:

Jonathan Moss

* Chapter 5 examines the 1981 Lee Jeans factory occupation in Greenock, which was also the subject of my dissertation submitted for MLitt in History at the University of Glasgow in 2011. I have drawn upon an oral history interview I conducted with Margaret Wallace and some archival materials that were used in this research, but have reconsidered these sources in relation to the different aims of this thesis. I have since carried out another interview and accessed further documentary material. As a result, I have significantly developed my analysis and offered further insights into the meaning and nature of this dispute than the work submitted in 2011.

Abbreviations

ACAS	Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service
ACTT	Association of Cinematograph Television and Allied Technicians
AEF	Amalgamated Union of Engineering and Foundry Workers
APEX	Association of Professional, Executive, Clerical and Computer Staff
ASTMS	Association of Scientific, Technical and Managerial Staffs
AUEW	Amalgamated Union of Engineering Workers
CPSA	Civil and Public Services Association
COHSE	Confederation of Health Service Employees
CSU	Civil Service Union
EEC	European Economic Community
GMWU	General Municipal Workers' Union
IRSF	Inland Revenue Staff Foundation
MRC	Modern Record Centre, Warwick
NALGO	National and Local Government Officers Association
NBPI	National Board of Prices and Incomes
NFWW	National Federation of Women Workers
NJACWER	National Joint Action Campaign for Women's Equal Rights
NUFLAT	National Union of Footwear Leather and Allied Trades
NUGW	National Union of General Workers
NUHKW	National Union of Hosiery and Knitwear Workers
NUT	National Union of Teachers
NUTGW	National Union of Tailor and Garment Workers
NUPE	National Union of Public Employees
NUVB	National Union of Vehicle Builders
PTA	Paint, Trim and Assembly Shop
STUC	Scottish Trade Union Congress

SWP	Socialist Workers' Party
TGWU	Transport and General Workers Union
TNA	The National Archives
TUC	Trade Union Congress
TWL	The Women's Library, London
UCS	Upper Clyde Shipbuilders
USDAW	Union of Shop and Distributive Allied Workers
WAC	Women's Advisory Committee
WLM	Women's Liberation Movement
WTUL	Women's Trade Union League
WWCC	Working Women's Charter Campaign

Introduction

This thesis is a study of women's workplace militancy in Britain between 1968 and 1985. It focuses on women who worked in gender segregated, manual manufacturing industries, who fought for equal pay, skill recognition and the right to work. From the late 1960s to the early 1980s, thousands of women engaged in industrial protest in various public and private sector industries across Britain.¹ These disputes occurred in a period that has been identified with the 'zenith' or 'apogee' of trade-union militancy in British labour history; a period in which over half the labour force joined trade unions and working days lost to strikes reached record high levels.² Yet the experiences, motivations and understandings of women who engaged in workplace protest remain largely unexplored.

This is surprising considering certain industrial disputes involving working-class women, such as the 1968 Ford sewing-machinists' strike in Dagenham, Essex, are frequently cited in the histories of trade unionism and feminism in this period.³ Instances of women's militancy have been understood as reflections of the changing face and priorities of organised labour, as the number of female trade unionists grew from 1.3 million to 3.8 million between 1960 and 1980.⁴ Industrial disputes involving women have also been integrated into narratives about wider changes in gender relations during this period and understood in relation to women's growing presence in the labour force, the passage of equality legislation, and the emergence of the Women's Liberation Movement (WLM).⁵ The WLM developed campaigns incorporating a range of issues that challenged

¹The timeline in Appendix 1 compiles instances of militancy involving women, from the late 1960s to the early 1980s.

² John McIlroy, Nina Fishman and Alan Campbell (eds.), *British Trade Unions and Industrial Politics: The High Tide of Trade Unionism, 1945-1979*, (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 1999); Derek H. Aldcroft and Michael J. Oliver, *Trade Unions and the Economy: 1870-2000*, (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2000), p. 88; Chris Wrigley, *British Trade Unions Since 1933*, (Cambridge University Press: 2001), pp. 40-56; Hamish Fraser, *A History of British Trade Unionism 1700-1998*, (Basingstoke; Macmillan Press, 1999), pp. 225-229; Selina Todd, *The People: The Rise and Fall of the Working Class 1910-2010*, (London: John Murray, 2014), p. 284.

³ For examples of historians that cite this strike as an example of women's militancy, see: Chris Wrigley, 'Women in the Labour Market and in the Unions' in John McIlroy, Nina Fishman and Alan Campbell (eds.), *British Trade Unions and Industrial Politics: The High Tide of Trade Unionism, 1945-1979*, (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 1999) p. 55; Harold L Smith, 'The Women's Movement, Politics and Citizenship, 1960s-2000' in Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska, *Women in Twentieth Century Britain*, (Harlow: Pearson, 2001), p. 283; Gerry Holloway, *Women and Work in Britain Since 1840*, (Routledge, 2005), p. 208; David Bouchier, *The Feminist Challenge: The Movement for Women's Liberation in Britain and the United States*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1984) pp. 56-57.

⁴ Wrigley, *British Trade Unions Since 1933*, pp.19-23.

⁵ See for example: Sheila Rowbotham and Beatrix Campbell, 'Class Struggle in Britain', *Radical America*, Vol.8, no. 5, (1974), p. 66; Anna Coote and Beatrix Campbell, *Sweet Freedom: Struggle for Women's Liberation*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd: 1987), pp. 9-10; Sheila Rowbotham, *The Past is Before Us*, (London: Pandora Press, 1989) pp. 165-166; Lynne Segal, 'Jam Today: Feminist Impacts and Transformations in the 1970s' and Pat Thane, 'Women and the 1970s: Towards Liberation?' in Lawrence

gender inequality within a local, national and international context and produced a shift in public debates about gender roles and relations in the home and the workplace. Female workers' militancy provided both a source of inspiration and an issue of concern for WLM activists during the 1970s; however, the relationship between the feminist movement and female workers engaged in industrial disputes has still to be understood.

What follows seeks to understand how post-war changes in female employment patterns, trade unionism and feminism were experienced by working-class women who sought to improve their workplace conditions by participating in collective action. Utilising a combination of written sources and oral history, it examines five case studies of industrial disputes that were instigated by, and primarily involved women. The first section considers women who fought for equal pay, focusing on the 1968 sewing-machinists' strike at Ford's river plant in Dagenham and the 1976 strike by female assembly workers at Trico-Folberth windscreen wiper factory in Brentford, west London. Section two investigates female workers' struggle against factory closure and redundancy at Sexton's shoe factory in Fakenham, Norfolk in 1972 and the 1981 Lee Jeans factory occupation in Greenock, Inverclyde. The concluding chapter returns to Ford, Dagenham to analyse the 1984-85 sewing-machinists' strike for skill recognition and improved grading – the original grievance of the 1968 strike. Ending in the same location where the thesis begins, the final case study illustrates the centrality and continued salience of the subjective value of women's work that runs throughout the period between 1968 and 1985.

By focusing on in-depth case studies, the thesis offers an original analysis of each dispute from the perspective of women who were involved. Drawing upon newspaper reports, trade union records and correspondence, feminist writings and oral history interviews, it seeks to contribute new insights into the relationship between feminism, trade unionism and workplace activism in Britain from the late 1960s. The thesis also examines why the women interviewed believed they engaged in such action when they did, and what they felt the subsequent impact of their militancy had been upon their attitudes towards work, trade unionism and feminism. By exploring the subjective motivations, understandings, memories and beliefs of the women who participated in such action, the thesis aims to identify the relationship between workplace activism and the political subjectivities of the women who were involved.

Black, Hugh Pemberton and Pat Thane (eds.), *Reassessing 1970s Britain*, (Manchester University Press, 2013), p. 154 and p. 171; Sarah Boston, *Women Workers and the Trade Unions*, 2nd Ed, (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1989), p. 279.

Industrial action was important during this period because it represented a new assertiveness amongst female workers who contested unequal gender hierarchies and demanded a greater say in how their work was organised. This is not to suggest that female workers had been unaware, or unwilling to challenge gender inequality in the workplace until this particular historical moment; case studies of women's workplace militancy from earlier periods illustrate how female workers challenged the social and political roles ascribed to women in British workplaces from the nineteenth century to the interwar period.⁶ However, it is significant that the disputes analysed here occurred in a period that coincided with women's increased presence in the labour force, greater access to higher education and professional careers, equality legislation and a resurgence in feminist activism, which had a significant impact upon women's sense of self. This specific context influenced how these disputes were represented as novel in newspaper, trade union and feminist publications at the time. The disputes examined here thus also provide unique snapshots through which to examine how working-class women retrospectively understood such changes within their own lives. By unique, I do not imply these women were exceptional; rather that industrial disputes offer particular opportunities for analysis because this situation compels participants to articulate their grievances, expectations and beliefs.⁷

Each chapter adopts a similar structure and considers each case study in relation to respondents' experiences of paid work, trade unionism and feminism. These were three of the key themes that emerged from my oral history interviews and provide a useful framework for thinking about the origins and wider impact of these disputes, and contextualising them in relation to broader social and political change in this period. By examining the extent to which women's militancy represented a wider shift in women's attitudes towards paid work, and considering the relationship between the workers and their trade union, as well as WLM activists who attempted to support them, this study builds on three strands of literature: the history of women's work in post-war Britain; the

⁶ See Sarah Boston, *Women Workers*; Sheila Lewenhak, *Women and Trade Unions: An Outline History of Women in the British Trade Union Movement*, (London: Benn, 1977) Sheila Blackburn, 'Working Class Attitudes to Social Reform: Black Country Chain makers and Anti-Sweating Legislation, 1880-1930', *International Review of Social History*, vol. 33, no. 1, (1988), pp. 42-69; Sonya Rose, 'Gender Antagonism and Class Conflict: Exclusionary Strategies of Male Trade Unionists in Nineteenth-Century Britain', *Social History*, vol. 13, no. 2, (1988), pp. 113-131; Eleanor Gordon, *Women and the Labour Movement in Scotland, 1850-1914*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991); Laura Lee Downs, *Manufacturing Inequality: Gender Division in the French and British Metalworking Industries, 1914-1939*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press 1995); Selina Todd, *Young Women, Work and Family, 1918-1950*, (Oxford University Press, 2005); Louise Raw, *Striking a Light: The Bryant and May Matchwomen and Their Place in History*, (London: Continuum, 2011); Ursula de la Mare, 'Necessity and Rage: the Factory Women's Strikes in Bermondsey', 1911, *History Workshop Journal*, vol. 66, no. 1, (2008), pp. 62-80.

⁷ Richard Hyman, *Strikes*, (Basingstoke: MacMillan Press, 1989), p. 120.

labour history of the 1970s; and the history of the WLM and its wider interaction with women who did not necessarily identify themselves with the movement. The remainder of this introduction provides an overview of the context and historiography, before further explaining some of the key concepts that inform the analysis. The following chapter provides a full discussion of the sources and methodology used in each of the five case studies.

Women and Paid Work in Post-war Britain

Whilst workplace militancy is the focus of the present analysis, my respondents' broader experiences of paid work are a central theme investigated in each chapter. The increase of women in paid employment after the Second World War was one of most significant social changes in post-war Britain.⁸ Between 1948 and 1980, the total number of female workers in Britain grew from 6.7 million to 9.2 million.⁹ Women as a proportion of the total labour force had only grown from 27 per cent in 1881 to 33 per cent in 1948, before rapidly increasing to 41.7 per cent in the short period between 1948 and 1980.¹⁰ The growth of the bi-modal work pattern (women leaving the labour market on the birth of a first child and re-entering it when the child or children were older) meant that there were more married female workers, who returned to work after having children.¹¹

Many of this group returned to work in part-time jobs. The total number of part-time jobs in Britain increased by 2.3 million between 1961 and 1980, whilst the number of full-time jobs fell by roughly the same amount. Between 1951 and 1981, part-time female employment increased fivefold from 750,000 to nearly 4.1 million.¹² In 1971, 33 per cent of female workers were in part-time jobs; by 1981 this had increased to 42 per cent¹³ Part-time work was necessary for many women who could not afford childcare and needed to balance a job with their family responsibilities. Wrigley suggests that a lot of the part-time

⁸ Holloway, *Women and Work*, p. 180; Lewis, *Women in Britain*, p. 2.

⁹ These figures are from J. Martin and C. Roberts, *Women and Employment: A Lifetime Perspective*, (Department of Employment and Office of Population Censuses and Surveys, HMSO, London, 1984) quoted in Shirley Dex, *The Sexual Division of Work: Conceptual Revolutions in the Social Sciences*, (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1985), p. 3. The shortcomings with women's employment statistics are well known. Figures for part-time work in Britain have only been available since 1961 and census enumerators often missed casual work, or work performed part-time by married women. Jane Lewis suggests that although the precise degree of growth in married women's employment is unclear, there was an observable shift in the manner with which married women became formally attached to the labour market after the Second World War. See Lewis, *Women in Britain*, p. 66 or Dex, *Division of Work*, p. 5.

¹⁰ Dex, *Sexual Division*, pp. 3-4.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 4; Holloway, *Women and Work in Britain Since 1840*, p. 180 and pp. 196-201; Lewis, *Women in Britain*, p. 66 and pp. 74-77.

¹² Dex, *Sexual Division*, p. 5; Holloway, *Women and Work*, p. 216.

¹³ Figures from 1951 Census of Employment; Department of *Employment Gazette*, November 1973; *Labour Market Trends, Historical Supplement*, March 1996, October 1997 and December 1998 quoted in Gallie, 'Labour Force', p. 297.

work performed by women after the Second World War became further isolated and hidden from the established norm of the full-time male job.¹⁴ Flexible labour increased employers' productivity, competitiveness and profitability, but often meant job insecurity, low pay and fewer benefits for female workers.¹⁵ In addition, it did nothing to alter the unequal division of care within the family, and served to accommodate the double burden rather than challenge it.¹⁶ Whilst some argue part-time work reflected women's preference, Crompton emphasises that women's choices are made in a context of constraint caused by structural inequalities.¹⁷ Women's disproportionate participation in part-time work has crystallised sexual divisions of paid and unpaid labour with detrimental effects for wage differentials.¹⁸

Further evidence of change in post-war women's employment was the removal of marriage bars in teaching (1944) and the civil service (1946), and greater access to further education after the Labour government adopted the recommendations of the 1963 Robbins Report, which enabled a minority of women to enter professions and pursue careers that had previously excluded them.¹⁹ The development of the welfare state and white collar service industries accounted for the majority of women's employment after the war, yet women were often in low-paid and low-status jobs, with little opportunity for promotion.²⁰ For example, research on clerical work in 1970s and 1980s showed that 70 per cent of office staff and 99 per cent of secretaries and typists were women in 1979-1980, whilst only 14 per cent of office managers were female.²¹ The 1970 Equal Pay Act and 1975 Sex Discrimination Act represented a greater commitment of both Labour and Conservative

¹⁴ Wrigley 'Women in the Labour Market and in the Unions', pp. 44-45.

¹⁵ For example The Contracts of Employment Act 1963 did not recognise the rights of those who worked fewer than 21 hours a week, whilst the Employment Protection Act 1975 did not recognise the rights of those working fewer than 16 hours a week, which accounted for 34 per cent of part-time workers across all sectors, who could be paid less, had no job security, pension, holiday or sick pay. Susan Lonsdale, 'Patterns of Paid Work' in Caroline Glendinning and Jane Millar, *Women and Poverty in Britain*, (Brighton: Whitesheaf, 1987), pp. 92-105, p. 104.

¹⁶ Lewis, *Women in Britain*, pp. 87-90.

¹⁷ Catherine Hakim, 'Five Feminist Myths about Women's Employment', *The British Journal of Sociology*, vol. 46, no. 3, (September 1995), pp. 429-455; Rosemary Crompton, *Women and Work in Modern Britain*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

¹⁸ Elena Bardasi and Janet Gornick, 'Women and Part-time Employment: Workers' Choices and Wage Penalties in Five Industrialised Countries', Discussion Paper for Institute for Social and Economic Research, Essex, (2000).

¹⁹ For example, the proportion of female lawyers grew from 4 per cent to 27 per cent between 1971 and 1990, the number of female medical students grew above 50 per cent by the 1990s, whilst the proportion of female university students increased from 25 per cent in 1963 to 40 per cent in 1981 in Pat Thane, 'Women and the 1970s', p. 179 and Penny Summerfield, 'Women in Britain Since 1945: Companionate Marriage and the Double Burden' in Peter Catterall and James Obelkevich (eds.) *Understanding Post-War British Society*, (London, Routledge, 1994), p. 64.

²⁰ Jane Lewis, 'Women and Social Change in Britain, 1945-1995' in Jonathan Hollowell, *Britain Since 1945*, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2003), p. 264.

²¹ Summerfield, 'Women in Britain since 1945', p. 65.

governments to the pursuit of an 'equality agenda', which officially offered individuals a level playing field for equal access to jobs and wages, irrelevant of sex.²² Whilst the fact the state thought it was important to be seen to be addressing gender equality in the workplace suggests there was a change in ideas about women, work and individual rights after the war, the legislation was largely ineffective at improving the material position of women or political attitudes towards women workers in the 1970s.

Inequality between male and female wages represented a significant historical continuity in post-war Britain. In 1980, five years after the passage of the Equal Pay Act, the average hourly pay of all working women (both full-time and part-time) was less than 66 per cent of the average male wage.²³ Table 1.1 shows the persistence of wage inequality between men and women in spite of women's growing presence in the labour force.

²² Rosemary Crompton, *Women and Work in Modern Britain*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 63-65.

²³ Figure from Jackie West, 'Introduction' in Jackie West (ed.) *Women, Work and the Labour Market*, (Routledge: London, 1982), p.1; Jane Lewis also argued that the average hourly pay of all women did not improve between 1975 and 1980 in Lewis, *Women in Britain*, pp. 80-81.

Table 1.1: Earnings Table: Public and private sectors: average gross weekly earnings. Full-time men aged 21 and over, full-time women aged 18 and over. 1970-1981. £ Per Week

	1970	1971	1972	1973	1974	1975	1976	1977	1978	1979	1980	1981
ALL MEN AND WOMEN												
<i>Public Sector</i>												
Men	29.7	33	37.6	42.1	48.6	64.3	76.7	82.7	91	102.4	128.7	147.2
Women	19.6	21.6	24.8	27.1	31.8	44.6	55.3	59.6	64	70.5	89.2	105.1
Differential	10.1	11.4	12.8	15	16.8	19.7	21.4	23.1	27	31.9	39.5	42.1
Women's Earnings as a % of Men's	65.9	65.5	65.9	64.4	65.4	69.4	72.1	72	70.3	68.9	69.3	71.4
<i>Private Sector</i>												
Men	29.7	32.9	32.9	36.3	47.3	59	69.4	76.8	88	100.8	122.2	135.8
Women	14.3	16.3	18	20.7	24.3	32.3	39.4	44.4	50.7	57.4	70.7	80.3
Differential	15.4	16.6	18.3	21.1	23	26.7	30	32.4	37.3	43.4	51.5	55.5
Women's Earnings as a % of Men's	48.1	49.5	49.6	49.5	51.4	54.7	56.8	57.8	57.6	56.9	57.8	59.1

NON-MANUAL MEN AND WOMEN

Public Sector

Men	35.6	39.4	44.7	48.4	55.7	71.4	87.4	92.9	101.3	112.4	143	168
Women	21.2	23.2	26.6	28.7	33.3	46.5	58.2	62.5	66.8	73.7	92.8	109.9
Differential	14.4	16.2	18.1	19.7	22.4	24.9	29.2	30.4	34.5	38.7	50.2	58.1
Women's Earnings as a % of Men's	59.5	58.8	58.6	59.3	59.8	65.1	66.6	67.3	65.9	65.6	64.9	65.4

Private Sector

Men	34.8	38.9	42.8	48	53.8	66.4	78	86.3	100.3	113.5	140.2	158.1
Women	15.1	17.1	18.7	21.4	25.1	33.1	40	45.2	51.6	58.6	72.8	83.6
Differential	19.7	21.8	24.1	26.6	28.7	33.3	38	41.1	48.7	54.9	67.4	74.5
Women's Earnings as a % of Men's	43.4	43.9	43.7	44.6	46.6	49.8	51.3	52.4	51.4	51.6	51.9	52.9

MANUAL MEN AND WOMEN

Public Sector

Men	25.4	28.2	32	37	42.7	58.1	67.2	72.7	81.2	93	114.6	127.3
Women	13.3	15.5	17.8	20.2	25	35.5	42.5	45.9	50.5	55.1	71.4	78.7
Differential	12.1	12.7	14.2	16.8	17.7	22.6	24.7	26.8	30.7	37.9	43.2	48.6
Women's Earnings as a % of Men's	52.4	55	55.6	54.6	58.5	61.1	63.2	63.1	62.6	59.2	62.3	61.8

Private Sector

Men	27.2	29.9	33.1	38.5	43.9	54.7	64.3	71	80.5	93	110.3	119.2
Women	13.3	15.2	16.9	19.6	23.2	31	38.3	42.9	49	55.2	66.6	72.9
Differential	13.9	14.7	16.2	18.9	20.7	23.7	26	28.1	31.5	37.8	43.7	46.3
Women's Earnings as a % of Men's	48.9	50.8	51	50.9	52.8	56.7	59.6	60.4	60.9	59.4	60.4	61.1

Sources: Annual Report of the Equal Opportunities Commission (London: HMSO, 1976); Annual Report of the Equal Opportunities Commission (London: HMSO, 1981).

As Table 1.1 shows, women continued to be paid significantly less than men in both manual and non-manual, and private and public sector jobs throughout the 1970s. In spite of an initial narrowing of the differential between total men's and women's wages between 1970 and 1976, this gap began to increase again between 1977 and 1981. One can also see that the largest differentials between male and female wages occurred in the non-manual private sector consistently throughout the period, with women earning 52.9 per cent of men's weekly wage in 1981. However, female workers in the manual private sector remained the lowest paid workers in Britain throughout the period, earning an average weekly wage of £13.30 in 1970 and £72.90 in 1981, £33 less than the average weekly wage for all women, and £75 a week less than the total average male wages during 1981.²⁴

Women's low pay was connected to the gendered division of labour. Lewis pointed out that 84 per cent of women worked in occupations dominated by other women in 1971, whilst 63 per cent of women worked in jobs that were performed only by women in 1980.²⁵ Writing in 1989, Harriet Bradley challenged the notion that employment 'flexibility' would alter the sexual division of labour, suggesting that: 'new jobs created by new technology for women are typically degraded and highly automated, located in highly pressurised and tightly policed environments, low-paid and part-time.'²⁶ Table 1.2 shows the concentration of women in low-paid industries and Table 1.3 demonstrates that the sexual division of labour occurred both in low-paid manufacturing industries that entered decline during the 1960s, and in emerging public sector and service industries, either as non-manual clerical workers, or manual labour such as cleaning, catering and retail services.²⁷

²⁴ Figures from Table 1.1.

²⁵ Lewis, *Women in Britain*, p. 81.

²⁶ Harriet Bradley, *Men's Work, Women's Work: A Sociological History of the Sexual Division of Labour in Employment*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989), p. 233.

²⁷ Jackie West, 'Introduction' in Jackie West (ed.) *Women, Work and the Labour Market*, (Routledge: London, 1982), pp.1-2.

Table 1.2: Job Segregation Table: Manual Employees in Low Paid Industries, 1975 and 1981. (1981, p. 75)

	Percentage of all female manual employees			Women as a percentage of all manual employees in each industry	
	1975	1981		1975	1981
Low Paid Industries. (Industries where the average full-time male earnings are less than 95per cent of the average for all industries and services)					
Agriculture	0.8	1		10.7	14.5
Textiles	6.6	4.2		44	45.1
Clothing and Footwear	8.4	6.2		78.3	76.6
Distributive Trades	4.4	5.5		24.4	24.8
Professional, Scientific	20.5	26.1		71.9	75.5
Miscellaneous Services	15.2	20.2		51	53.1

Source: Annual Report of the Equal Opportunities Commission (London: HMSO, 1981), p.75.

Table 1.3: Proportions of men and women (aged over 16) as a percentage of employees within selected occupations, 1985.

Occupation	Men	Women
Construction, Mining and Related	99.5	0.5
Professional and related in science, engineering and technology	93.3	6.7
Transport, Operation , materials and related	96.4	3.6
Clerical and Related	22.8	77.2
Catering, cleaning, hairdressing and other personal services	20.8	79.2

Source: Bradley, *Men's Work, Women's Work*, p.13.

Although the majority of women worked in the expanding public sector, white collar and service industries, a significant amount of women continued to work in manufacturing up until the 1970s – such as the women considered in this thesis.²⁸ Women represented 42 per cent of employees in ‘new industries’ such as electronics, telecommunications and radio during the 1960s; however, the number of women employed in these industries declined from 324,000 in 1961 to 217,000 in 1981.²⁹ Similar trends occurred in clothing manufacturing, with the overall number of employees within the industry falling from 629,000 in 1948 to 517,000 in 1968, and to 292,000 by 1981, 85 per cent of whom were women who mostly worked full-time.³⁰ Industrial decline and the corresponding expansion of employment in managerial, professional and service sectors has been understood to have had an emasculating effect upon working-class men, however less is known about the effects of deindustrialisation upon women’s attitudes towards work.³¹ .

Feminist sociologist Irene Bruegel argued that female workers suffered disproportionately from unemployment compared to men during the 1970s. Between 1974 and 1978, unemployment increased three times as fast amongst women than men.³² Women in manufacturing were more likely to be affected, as in the same period women lost 9 per cent of their jobs in manufacturing whilst male jobs fell by less than 5 per cent.³³ Bruegel explained that women suffered disproportionately due to their perceived lack of skill and dispensability, and the unwillingness of trade unions to support them.³⁴ Women were also less likely to be entitled to large redundancy payments due to their smaller wages and shorter service time, which made them more vulnerable to redundancy as it was cheaper for employers to dismiss them.³⁵ Chapters 4 and 5 will explore how the women at Sexton’s shoe factory in Norfolk and the Lee Jeans factory in Greenock responded to redundancy.

Whilst the general trends in female employment patterns highlight continuity and change, less is known about how women subjectively valued their work in post-war Britain. Arthur McIvor has recently emphasised the value of personal testimony for

²⁸ Sue Bruley, *Women in Britain Since 1900*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1999), pp.163-164

²⁹ Figures from Census, quoted in Bradley, *Men’s Work, Women’s Work*, p. 169.

³⁰ Figures from Simon Crine and Clive Playford, ‘From Rags to Rags: Low Pay in the Clothing Industry’, (Report by Low Pay Unit, November 1982), p. 3.

³¹ Arthur McIvor, *Working Lives: Work in Britain Since 1945*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), pp. 279-279.

³² Figures from Department of Unemployment in Irene Bruegel, ‘Women as a Reserve Army of Labour: A Note on Recent British Experience’, *Feminist Review*, No. 3 (1979), p. 15.

³³ *Ibid.* p. 16.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Claire Callander, ‘Redundancy, Unemployment and Poverty’ in Glendinning and Millar, *Women and Poverty*, pp. 142-145.

uncovering how the meaning of employment was ascribed by workers themselves.³⁶ He characterises post-war Britain as ‘a nation of grafters where a powerful work ethic prevailed and people worked for intrinsic rewards as well as the extrinsic material benefits’.³⁷ Although employment opportunities were unequally influenced by gender, class, race and disability, work represented a central aspect of people’s everyday lives and self-understanding.³⁸ Previous oral history projects have suggested women’s experience was slightly different to men’s. Elizabeth Roberts, who carried out oral history interviews in 1970, concluded that although there was greater social approval of women working outside of the home after the Second World War, the majority of women continued to be happily defined by their familial role.³⁹ This argument was echoed in Angela Davis’ recent study of motherhood in post-war Britain, and is often accepted in other social and political histories.⁴⁰ Davis suggests that whilst women’s work was ‘reconceptualised’ after the Second World War and paid employment could offer some women an opportunity to gain independence, ‘it remained true that only a small minority of educated, professional women considered their role as worker to be as, or more, important than that of mother.’⁴¹ Yet there remains a space here to consider the subtle ways these roles and identities interacted with each other; it seems plausible that women did not consciously privilege one role above the other and their social and political identity was temporally shaped by both at different moments within their lives. This thesis shows that paid employment was crucial to shaping working-class women’s daily experience and understanding of their position within wider social relations throughout their life course.

McIvor emphasises an important contradiction in women’s post-war experiences of paid work. On the one hand, women’s experience, agency and choice of work was defined and constrained by material circumstances and structures of power, which meant that many working-class women remained in low-paid, monotonous, undervalued work, either in manufacturing or services such as catering and cleaning.⁴² On the other hand, the personal testimony he draws upon also reveals how some working-class women enjoyed their work on a personal level in terms of the actual jobs they performed, the social aspects and

³⁶ McIvor, *Working Lives*.

³⁷ *Ibid.* p. 271.

³⁸ *Ibid.* pp. 270-271. .

³⁹ Elizabeth Roberts, *Women and Families: An Oral History 1940-1970*, (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 1995), chapter 7 and p. 235.

⁴⁰ Angela Davis, *Modern Motherhood: Women and Family in England, 1945-2000*, (Manchester University Press, 2012) Other examples include: Ross McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures: England 1918-1951*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998); Steven Fielding, *The Labour Governments 1964-1970 vol 1: Labour and Cultural Change*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), pp. 9-10.

⁴¹ Davis, *Modern Motherhood*, p. 271.

⁴² McIvor, *Working Lives*, p. 95-103.

workplace camaraderie, whilst others suggested their employment gave them a sense of personal independence. He highlights the conflict between ‘the material reality of structural and deep-rooted subordination of women at work within an intensely patriarchal, capitalist economy and society, and the ways that women actually perceived and narrated their experiences of work’.⁴³ This tension needs to be interrogated further.

Finally, Selina Todd warns that it is important not to over-emphasise the significance of paid work to working-class identity – pointing out that work was a means to an end, rather than a source of satisfaction, and something that people sought to make the best of.⁴⁴ For Todd, the majority of working-class individuals knew they had to work for a living, but frequently imagined escaping from this reality, thus it is more suitable to view class struggle as centring on evading work, rather than identifying with it.⁴⁵ The testimony gathered in this thesis reveals the centrality of paid work to women’s sense of self. The women I interviewed had not always enjoyed their work, and used many other aspects of their lives to fashion their identity and self-understanding. However, it became clear that their experiences of work were a crucial component to their understanding of who they were, and why they engaged in workplace activism in the past. Indeed, it was the fact that they had sacrificed leisure time and other more enjoyable elements of their life to provide for their families that generated anger when work was taken away from them, or undermined in relation to skill and wages.

Uncovering women’s everyday experiences and attitudes towards paid work is significant, not just for recovering lost voices, but for revealing the complexity of the ways in which individuals have interpreted and managed structural inequalities they have faced in the past. A comprehensive account of this is the subject of a much larger research project, beyond the realms of this thesis. However, by analysing the strategies deployed by women who attempted to alter their workplace experience, this thesis does consider how women negotiated tensions between structural inequality and personal experience in the past, and renegotiated them in the process of the oral history interview in the present.

Women and Trade Unions in Post-war Britain

Each case study also contributes fresh insights into women’s experiences of trade unionism between 1968 and 1985 – a period that has been associated with a significant transition in the relationship between women and the labour movement. Prior to the

⁴³ Ibid. p.101.

⁴⁴ Selina Todd, ‘Class, Experience and Britain’s Twentieth Century’, *Social History*, vol. 56, no. 4, (2014), pp. 489-508, at p. 506.

⁴⁵ Ibid. p. 506.

Second World War, women's trade union membership levels were lower than men's and frequently oscillated. In 1914 there were 437,000 female trade unionists, which rose to 1,342,000 in 1920 after the First World War. Female membership levels declined to 731,000 in 1933, which was symptomatic of high levels of unemployment throughout the 1930s, before increasing to 1,716,000 in 1943 due to the influx of women into the labour market during the Second World War.⁴⁶

Women's lower levels of trade union membership have been explained by the unskilled, part-time and irregular nature of their work and the adversarial attitudes of male trade unionists wanting to maintain their breadwinner wage.⁴⁷ Sarah Boston argues, in her survey of women's relationship with the labour movement from the nineteenth century to the present, that female workers had to fight to become equal members within trade unions before they could fight against their employers.⁴⁸ Cathy Hunt's recent history of the National Federation of Women Workers shows how women had to develop their own separate organisations to recruit and organise female workers and raise public awareness of their needs and interests.⁴⁹ Whilst these overviews of women's trade unionism emphasise gender antagonism, case studies from earlier periods importantly demonstrated how women organised informally, in spite of the divergence of interests between rank and file women and male trade union leaders and officials. Studies of female chain-makers at Cradley Heath, the Bryant and May match stick 'girls', female jute workers in Dundee, food factory workers in Bermondsey, as well as various accounts of women's militancy within interwar 'new' industries show that gender antagonism within trade unions could inhibit but did not prevent women from asserting their rights and seeking to improve their conditions in the past.⁵⁰ Female workers were not apathetic, and were more likely to draw upon their own cultural resources, outwith the formal support of trade unions, to influence how their work was organised.

⁴⁶ Figures from Todd, *Young Women*, p. 171.

⁴⁷ Sheila Lewenhak suggested that domestic responsibilities disinclined women from participating in workplace politics and explained their low levels of union membership from the nineteenth century to the Second World War. Lewenhak, *Women and Trade Unions*, pp. 177-270.

⁴⁸ Sarah Boston explains how female workers have had to contend with a range of exclusionary practices within trade unions, from protective legislation that prevented women from working in certain industries, to a failure to support women's claims for equal pay and preserving the male breadwinner wage. She concludes that female workers relationship with the labour movement has been marked by their fight to become equal members within it, before they could fight with it. Boston, *Women Workers*, p. 11.

⁴⁹ Cathy Hunt, *The National Federation of Women Workers, 1906-1921*, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), p. 161.

⁵⁰ Blackburn, 'Working Class Attitudes to Social Reform'; Rose, 'Gender Antagonism and Class Conflict': Gordon, *Women and the Labour Movement in Scotland*; Raw, *Striking A Light*; De la Mare, 'Necessity and Rage'; Downs, *Manufacturing Inequality*, Introduction and Chapters 3, 6 and 8 especially; Miriam Glucksmann, *Women Assemble: Women Workers and New Industries in Inter-war Britain*, (London: Routledge, 1990); Todd, *Young Women*, chapter 6.

After the Second World War, the number of female trade unionists rose from 1,638,000 in 1945 to 2,743,000 in 1970. The 1970s represented a period of substantial growth as female membership increased to 3,902,000 by 1979. Female union density rose from 32.1 per cent to 39.4 per cent.⁵¹ The increase in women's union membership has been explained by the growth in white collar trade unionism, which increased by 33.8 per cent between 1964 and 1970.⁵² By 1979, 44 per cent of trade unionists were white collar workers.⁵³ Between 1968 and 1978, women's membership increased as much as it had in the previous 30 years. In 1968, no union had more than 200,000 female members; by 1978, this figure had increased to six, whilst the NUPE, NALGO, TGWU and GMWU had over 300,000 female members each.⁵⁴ The increase in membership reflected job segregation within industry as 3.1 million of the 3.8 million female members could be found in 20 unions, whilst ten unions accounted for 70 per cent of the female membership.⁵⁵

The growth in women's trade unionism was accompanied by greater commitment from organisations within the labour movement aiming to represent the specific interests of female workers. Militant shop stewards in the Civil Service Union were influential in the Equal Pay Campaign Committee, which pressured the government into introducing equal pay for civil service non-manual grade workers in 1955 (to be phased in over a six year period), and teachers in 1961.⁵⁶ The Labour Party Manifesto for the 1964 General Election included 'the right to equal pay for equal work', and TUC adopted a similar resolution at their 1965 Annual Conference.⁵⁷ The TUC Women's Advisory Committee (WAC) withdrew its opposition to working mothers and day nurseries in 1957.⁵⁸ The National Joint Action Campaign for Women's Equal Rights (NJACWER) was set up in the aftermath of the 1968 Ford sewing machinists' and established an informal network of female trade unionists committed to campaigning for workplace equality. They attracted

⁵¹ Figures from Wrigley, 'Women in the Labour Market', Table 2.1, p. 62.

⁵² Wrigley, *British Trade Unions Since 1933*, p. 22.

⁵³ *Ibid.* p. 22.

⁵⁴ Figures from TUC Annual Statistic Statements in Judith Hunt, 'A Woman's Place Is in Her Union' in Jackie West (ed), *Work, Women and the Labour Market*, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982), p. 158.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.* p. 158.

⁵⁶ Sheila Cunnison and Jane Stageman, *Feminizing the Unions*, (Aldershot: Avebury, 1993), p. 28.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ The TUC Women's Advisory Committee (WAC) was established in 1930. This was comprised of 16 members of affiliated unions, five of whom were elected by the unions involved, whilst the remaining 11 members were appointed directly by the TUC General Council. This formal structure remained in place until 1978 and, according to Breitenbach, meant that the WAC was dominated by men. As an advisory body, it had no policy making power and could only advise the TUC on the interests of female workers. See Boston, *Women Workers*, pp. 149-161 and Esther Breitenbach, 'A Comparative Study of the Women's Trade Union Conference and the Scottish Women's Trade Union Conference', *Feminist Review*, vol. 7, (1981), 65-86.

further public attention by organising an equal pay demonstration attended by 1000 women in Trafalgar Square in May 1969.⁵⁹

The Working Women's Charter Campaign (WWCC) was formed in 1974 by the London Trades Council and drew together women's liberation activists and female trade unionists organised in 27 local groups across Britain. They developed a ten-point charter that included demands for childcare, maternity protection, family allowances, legal equality, as well as equal pay and better training opportunities. They also aimed to get feminist non-unionists co-opted onto women's committees in local trades councils.⁶⁰ Coote and Campbell suggest the campaign had an unmistakable influence on the TUC, which published *Aims for Women at Work* in 1975, and included the same demands as the charter, with the exception of abortion and publically provided childcare, which were added in 1978.⁶¹ Stephen Brooke describes the charter as: 'the most important example of a developing intersection between second-wave feminism and the labour movement'.⁶² He argues that by introducing the notion of the double burden and focusing on the division of labour in the family, women in the Labour party and trade unions became radicalised in this period in a way that signified a break from the past.⁶³ TUC support for the National Abortion Campaign, and the defeat of the John Corrie Bill in 1979, which sought to amend the 1967 Abortion Act, was significant because the TUC General Council had only officially adopted a pro-abortion stance at their 1975 annual conference, having previously claimed it was not a trade union issue.⁶⁴

Further evidence of the evolution in women's relationship with the labour movement can be found in the propagation of campaigns to challenge low pay and 'women's grades' organised by individual trade unions including, APEX, TASS, NUPE, GMWU and ACTT.⁶⁵ These campaigns were accompanied by a growth in positive action from trade unions on a national level to increase women's representation and activity throughout the 1970s. This included the creation of women's seats on executive councils, separate women's committees, training days and publications for female shop stewards, regional equality committees and some crèche provision at union meetings. There was also an

⁵⁹ Sheila Rowbotham, 'The Beginnings of Women's Liberation in Britain', in *Dreams and Dilemmas: Collected Writings* (London: Virago, 1983), pp. 32-33.

⁶⁰ Cunnison and Stageman, *Feminising the Union*, p. 29.

⁶¹ Coote and Campbell, *Sweet Freedom*, pp. 156.

⁶² Stephen Brooke, *Sexual Politics: Sexuality, Family Planning and the British Left from the 1880s to the Present Day*, (Oxford University Press: 2011), p. 197.

⁶³ Brooke, *Sexual Politics*, pp. 197-199.

⁶⁴ Boston, *Women Workers*, p. 334.

⁶⁵ A full account of the proliferation of positive action from trade unions towards female workers can be found in Coote and Campbell, *Sweet Freedom*, pp. 155-158.

increase in participation rates and the number of motions placed on the agenda for the TUC women's Annual Conference throughout the 1970s.⁶⁶ The structure of the WAC was altered in 1978 and extended to eighteen members, eight elected and ten appointed by the General Council, with two seats reserved for women.⁶⁷ Esther Breitenbach concluded in 1981 that it offered women a valuable space to build confidence and experience, and to discuss and formulate strategy to combat the various issues they faced, yet remained severely limited in its ability to alter the unequal position of women within the labour movement due to its advisory status.⁶⁸

With more people attending the TUC women's conference, and more unions discussing issues surrounding gender equality in the workplace, one can see how women's increased labour force participation had a positive impact upon women's position within trade unions. The effects on the shop floor are more difficult to discern. On a practical level, women remained excluded from union official positions and executive committees, as can be seen from Table 1.4. Women's unequal presence with the labour movement's hierarchy continued into the 1990s as women comprised just 20 per cent of national executives, 23 per cent of delegates to union conferences and fewer than seven per cent of general secretaries in 1990.⁶⁹ Such figures question the extent to which the 1970s marked a significant transition in women's representation and experience within the labour movement

⁶⁶ There were 166 delegates from 48 unions and 12 trade councils at the 1969 annual women's conference. By 1976, this had increased to 232 delegates from 51 unions and 25 trade councils. See TUC Library Collections, London Metropolitan University, HD 6661: TUC Women's Conference Annual Report, 1969, p. 36 and TUC Women's Conference Annual Report, 1976, p. 37.

⁶⁷ Breitenbach, 'A Comparative Study', p. 78.

⁶⁸ The advisory status was eventually dropped in 1986. *Ibid.* p. 78.

⁶⁹ Cunnison and Stageman, *Feminising the Unions*, p. 32.

Table 1.4: Representation of Women in Trade Unions, 1976. (Adapted from Judith Hunt, 'A Woman's Place is in her Union' in Jackie West (ed.), *Work, Women and the Labour Market* (1982), p. 166.)

Union	Female Members	% of Women Members	Male Executive Committee Members	Female Executive Committee Members	Male Full-time Officials	Female Full-Time Officials	Male TUC Delegates	Female TUC Delegates
NUPE	382,638	65	20	6	120	2	29	4
GMWU	290,283	33	30	0	272	10	64	4
TGWU	289,000	16	39	0	480	3	76	2
NALGO	267,221	43	61	5	174	17	69	5
USDAW	223,649	59	16	1	129	4	21	5
NUT	197,453	75	1	7	24	2	30	1
AUEW	166,000	14	9	0	186	1	10	1
CPSA	145,693	68	18	8	24	4	22	8
COHSE	101,059	70	27	1	35	5	8	0
NUTGW	96,070	88	10	5	36	6	11	5
APEX	75,278	55	11	4	5	1	10	3
NUHKW	52,836	73	23	2	29	2	11	1
IRSF	31,826	58	25	3	6	1	9	0
NUFLAT	30,268	48	15	1	46	2	13	0
CATU	23,636	53	16	2	6	0	7	2
TWU	13,381	65	18	1	6	3	4	1

These historical patterns of women's membership have been well documented and have sometimes been understood in terms of the 'feminisation' of British trade unions. Yet there is an absence of women's voices from this narrative. Disputes involving women are often drawn upon as examples of female workers becoming more active within trade unions, without a full understanding of what the participants believed they were doing and what they now think they did. A better understanding of women's militancy from this period is important because it was perceived to be occurring more frequently than in previous periods, and received wider attention from feminists who claimed it represented a transition in working-class women's political consciousness.⁷⁰ In 1981, Anna Pollert wrote of the 1970s:

Women began to take on their employers in unexpected areas... Most of the new wave of women workers' struggles were not 'spectacular'. Many were small, and because they did not 'grind the country to a halt' could be conveniently ignored by the mass media. Many of the disputes were long drawn out; many ended in defeat because they were isolated and failed to draw support from other trade unionists... Yet because they never reached the headlines it should not be assumed they were outside (class) struggle, or that they lived untroubled, uncomplicated lives – content with their lot... To ignore these would be to take the Hollywood epic view of history, where great battles eclipse the subtle movements behind the scenes: the various shades of consciousness, the motives behind action.⁷¹

Pollert's concern to understand 'the subtle movements behind the scenes' of women's workplace activism remains unresolved and connects to Josie McLellan's recent call to move away from whiggish narratives of women progressing towards some endpoint of 'normality' after years of change.⁷² Focusing on women's reconstructed experiences of trade unionism through oral history moves beyond accounts that have focused on women's relationship with the labour movement at an institutional level. It aims to draw attention to the values and beliefs of the women underlying these broader changes, for whom trade unionism represented a vehicle to try and assert greater control within their workplace.

Women's Workplace Militancy, Feminism and the Women's Liberation Movement

Each case study also provides new insights into the relationship between women's workplace militancy, feminism and the women's liberation movement (WLM). I understand feminism as an 'umbrella term' for individuals, groups, networks, debates and initiatives which share the same underlying aim: 'to challenge masculine domination, to

⁷⁰ For example: Rowbotham, *The Past is Before Us*, p. 233.

⁷¹ Anna Pollert. *Girls, Wives, Factory Lives*, (Basingstoke: MacMillan Press, 1981), pp. 13-14.

⁷² Josie McLellan, 'The 'Problem of Women' in Post-War Europe', *English Historical Review*, (July 2015), vol. 130 (545), (July 2015), pp. 934-944.

contest male privilege and sex-based hierarchies in socio-political, legal, economic and cultural arrangements...to rebalance power between the sexes in a society in which men have monopolised the privileges and the authority'.⁷³ The WLM is understood as a particular manifestation of women's activism that emerged as part of a transnational movement from the late 1960s to the early 1980s. The WLM took many forms as various groups spread across British towns and cities from 1969 seeking to challenge male domination of political life and also to raise women's consciousness of the daily oppression they faced in their personal lives. By discussing, campaigning and making demands for equal pay, 24-hour childcare, contraception and abortion, freedom from male violence, financial and legal independence and an end to discrimination against lesbians, the WLM contributed to an important shift in public debates about women's roles and gender relations during the 1970s.⁷⁴

The first historical accounts of the WLM were written by women who actively engaged with women's liberation and focused on the public face of the movement: the demands, campaigns, national conferences and subsequent fragmentation.⁷⁵ Early analyses emphasised the practical effects of women's activism during this period through the development of women's aid and rape crisis centres across Britain, as well as the ideological impact through increased public awareness that 'the personal is political'.⁷⁶ Jeffrey Weeks asserted that WLM 'cast a spell which impacted on the lives of women for over a generation.'⁷⁷ More recently, there has been a greater focus on the local and personal impact of the movement upon individual participants. Sue Bruley emphasises the novelty of consciousness raising groups as a process '...by which women sought to understand their oppression, redefine themselves and create new feminist identities.'⁷⁸

⁷³ Definition from Maud Anne Bracke, *Women and the Reinvention of the Political: Feminism in Italy, 1968-1983*, (London: Routledge, 2014), p. 5; Karen Offen, 'Defining Feminism: A Comparative Historical Approach', *Signs*, vol. 14, no. 1, (1988), pp. 119-157 and Karen Offen, 'Understanding international feminisms as 'transnational' – an anachronism?' in Oliver Janz, Daniel Schonpflug (eds.), *Gender History in a Transnational Perspective: Networks, Biographies, Gender Orders*, (Oxford: Berghan Books, 2014), p. 25.

⁷⁴ For early histories of WLM see Coote and Campbell, *Sweet Freedom* and Rowbotham, *The Past is before us*, Other analyses of the movement include Martin Pugh, *Women and the Women's Movement*, (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), chapters 11 and 12; Eve Setch, 'The Women's Liberation Movement in Britain, 1969-79 : organisation, creativity and debate', (Unpublished PhD Thesis: Royal Holloway, 2001); Thane, 'Women and the 1970s' and Segal, 'Feminist impacts and transformations' in Lawrence Black et al. *Reassessing 1970s Britain*.

⁷⁵ Sue Bruley, 'Consciousness-Raising in Clapham; Women's Liberation as 'Lived Experience' in South London in the 1970s', *Women's History Review*, Vol. 22, no.5, (2013), pp. 717-738, at p. 719.

⁷⁶ Sheila Rowbotham, *The Past is Before Us*, (London: Pandora Press, 1989); Anna Coote and Beatrix Campbell, *Sweet Freedom*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd: 1987); Lynne Segal, 'Feminist impacts and transformations'.

⁷⁷ Jeffrey Weeks (2007) *The World We Have Won* (Abingdon: Routledge), pp. 18–19 in Bruley, 'Consciousness-Raising'.

⁷⁸ Sue Bruley, 'Consciousness-Raising' p. 719.

Sarah Browne has also used oral history to write the first history of the WLM in Scotland from the perspective of grass-roots activists. Browne concludes that women's activism in this period, especially around the issues of abortion and violence against women, transformed the way Scottish society both 'discussed and understood the role of women'.⁷⁹

The WLM has thus been understood to have had a significant effect upon women's experience and sense of self. Yet it is important to place the movement within its historical context before considering its relationship with women who engaged in workplace activism during the 1970s. Feminist groups such as the Fawcett Society, Women's Freedom League and Six Point Group campaigned in the 1960s for better housing, equal pay and equal training opportunities.⁸⁰ Pat Thane argues the WLM gained much from the successes of these earlier campaigns, which provided a base to demand more equality at a local level, outwith the formal structures of political parties. Thane emphasises the significance of post-war prosperity producing higher living standards, full employment, improved education, the national health service and welfare provision, which 'set the tone for the seventies' and created a space for more radical and diverse social and political movements in Britain.⁸¹ Thane distinguished the WLM from previous feminist movements as 'militants', suggesting their radical ideas and use of direct action made 'feminism public again' and raised awareness of issues such as domestic violence and sexual harassment. Whilst pointing out that it is difficult to judge the extent to which the movement raised the consciousness of gender inequality outside the WLM's own consciousness raising groups, she suggests that it led to increased activism from female workers.⁸²

The WLM were an important part of the story of women's workplace militancy in Britain during the 1970s, and the relationship between female workers and WLM activists is explored in each chapter. Women's rights in the workplace were a key concern for the WLM during the 1970s. Audrey Wise, who was active in both the WLM and USDAW, wrote in 1973:

Trade union women's actions raise possibilities of breaking down divisions between groups of workers, not just men and women, but manual and clerical.

⁷⁹ Sarah Browne, 'The Women's Liberation Movement in Scotland: c.1968 - c.1979', (Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Dundee, 2009), p. 307. For local impact of WLM also see Bridget Lockyer, 'An Irregular Period: Participation in the Bradford Women's Liberation Movement', *Women's History Review*, Vol. 22, No. 4, (2013), pp. 643-657.

⁸⁰ Thane, 'Women and the 1970s'; Lynn Abrams, 'Liberating the female self: epiphanies, conflict and coherence in the life stories of post-war British women', *Social History*, Vol. 39, no.1, (2014), pp. 14-35.

⁸¹ Thane, 'Women in the 1970s'. p. 171. This is similar to Ronald Inglehart's argument about 'post-material' values) see Ronald Inglehart, *The Silent Revolution: Changing Values and Political Styles Among Western Publics*, (Princeton: Princeton Legacy Library, 1977) and Lawrence Black, *Redefining British Politics: Culture, Consumerism and Participation*, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

⁸² Thane, 'Women in the 1970s'. p. 181.

Equal pay strikes attempting to force employers to begin to adopt terms of the act show that legislation is the beginning rather than the end of the struggle. Women who have only just joined trade unions are being confronted with the whole repressive paraphernalia of laws and clauses... The actions women are taking make our support really urgent. Apart from what we are trying to do in our own unions, there are several things we can do: we can publicise strikes and expose the conditions of women at work. We can help women who are picketing - as we have done already but in a more systematic way. We also need to be more ready to provide help and support if women come to picket in another town where we are.⁸³

According to Lynne Segal, 'women sewing-machinists on strike at Ford factories, and other militant working-class women, alongside those female fighters in Vietnam, provided the early role models for the Women's Liberation Movement'.⁸⁴ Sheila Rowbotham has stated that the interaction between feminists and trade unionists influenced the evolution of the WLM in Britain as much as the inheritance of ideological points of reference from the American new left or European Marxist traditions. She suggests feminist activists 'joined picket lines, helped produce strike papers, raised money, monitored civil liberties and organised meetings and conferences', which influenced the development of the WLM by widening its original social base and forming personal links with organised labour.⁸⁵ Anna Coote and Beatrix Campbell also described trade unions as a central site of struggle around employment, pay and conditions for WLM. They identified them as a means of reaching out to women who were not acquainted with feminist politics, an organisational base for feminist campaigns and 'a means of anchoring women's liberation in working-class politics'.⁸⁶ Rowbotham claimed in 1989 that historians in the future would need to 'explain the experiential encounter between feminism and the labour movement and the transformation in consciousness that has taken place among working-class women'.⁸⁷ This claim represented a starting point for this thesis – to examine the nature of the relationship between female strikers and WLM activists from the perspective of female workers. Yet it must be stressed that by focusing on this relationship, I do not imply that feminism could only arise, or be practiced by identifying with the WLM. As Selina Todd points out, the relationship between class and feminism was never without tension and many working women disagreed with some middle-class feminists' belief that male behaviour was the primary cause of women's exploitation.⁸⁸ My oral history interviews explore this tension further by asking women to explain in their own words

⁸³ 'Striking Progress 1972-1973', *Red Rag*, (No. 5 August 1973), pp. 22-24.

⁸⁴ Segal, 'Feminist Impacts', p. 151.

⁸⁵ Rowbotham, *The Past is Before Us*, pp. 165-166.

⁸⁶ Coote and Campbell, *Sweet Freedom*, pp. 144-149.

⁸⁷ Rowbotham, *The Past is Before us*, p. 223.

⁸⁸ Todd, *The People*, p 307.

what they felt about feminism, and the extent to which they felt their militancy had been influenced by the women's movement, as well as other aspects of their everyday experience.

Lynn Abrams has illustrated the value of looking beyond the women's movement and its precursors to take account of the impact of wider cultural and social change upon women's sense of self in post-war Britain.⁸⁹ The 'sexual revolution', demise of religion, full employment and greater education and professional opportunities offered women new means of constructing a lifestyle and belief system that was different to that of their mothers.⁹⁰ Abrams' oral history respondents often framed their life stories around a liberationist practice, but with little relation to liberationist movements or ideology. Many women talked about their decisions regarding education, careers, and personal morality to distance themselves from the service and self-sacrifice of their mothers' generation, and to construct themselves as independent, autonomous, modern women. They used feminism as a coherence system to construct their life story, but in an indirect, unattached manner.⁹¹ The interviews in the following case studies not only provide new insights into the relationship between female workers and WLM activists, but offer new understandings of how class effected women's changing sense of self in post-war Britain.

Research on earlier periods illustrates how women became 'politicised' or practiced 'rough forms of feminism', without identifying themselves as feminists. Valerie Wright's work on women's organisations in interwar Scotland illustrates how women interchangeably utilised different gendered conceptions of citizenship – that either emphasised women's different qualities to men, or their right to equality as individual citizens – as political claims for greater female participation in public decision making on issues such as education, health and housing. Wright argues that groups such as the Glasgow Society for Equal Citizenship and Edinburgh Women's Citizen Associations did not pursue explicit 'feminist' agendas, but 'raised the political consciousness' of the women involved through education and cooperative action to ensure they became active and equal citizens.⁹² Similarly, Catriona Beaumont shows how mainstream women's organisations from the interwar period to the 1960s utilised conceptions of citizenship that

⁸⁹ Lynn Abrams, 'Liberating the female self', pp. 14-35.

⁹⁰ Abrams, Lynn, 'Mothers and Daughters: Negotiating the Discourse on the 'Good Woman' in 1950s and 1960s Britain' in Nancy Christie and Michael Gauvreau (eds.), *The Sixties and Beyond: Dechristianisation in North America and Western Europe, 1945-2000*, (University of Toronto Press, 2013), pp. 60-80.

⁹¹ The concept of 'coherence systems' was first introduced by Charlotte Linde, *Life Stories: The Creation of Coherence*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

⁹² Valerie Wright, Education for Active Citizenship: Women's Organisations in Interwar Scotland, *History of Education*, vol. 38, no. 3, (2009), pp. 419-436, at p 419.

distanced themselves from feminism, which was perceived to be an ‘extreme, unpopular and controversial ideology’, but continued to act in feminist ways by seeking to secure social and economic rights for women.⁹³ Beaumont argues that organisations such as Women’s Institute, the Women’s Co-operative Guild and the National Housewives Register developed a new kind of politics and a space for women’s organising, without critiquing existing gender relations.⁹⁴

Annemarie Hughes’ study of gender and political identities in interwar Scotland demonstrates how working-class women responded to heightened sexual antagonism – in the workplace, politics, community and home – by practicing a ‘rough kind of feminism’.⁹⁵ For Hughes, this involved women subverting ‘traditional’ separate spheres ideology in their daily lives to provide a sense of empowerment and legitimisation that challenged male privilege and men’s advantaged access to resources and power in the workplace, neighbourhood and the home.⁹⁶ Women exploited their subordinate position, and emphasised the feminine as a political tactic or survival strategy to gain resources that determined levels of power in the workplace, political arena, family and community so that they were behaving in a feminist manner, even if they did not do so consciously.

These examples of studies from earlier periods illustrate the value of looking beyond formal institutions, or women’s movements that explicitly identified themselves as feminist. As Annemarie Hughes points out, feminism and women’s activism are not coterminous. Focusing on institutions and (in)formal movements can disguise the diversity of ideas, aims and successes of women, and obscure other forms of feminism practiced in everyday life by women who did not necessarily identify themselves as feminists.⁹⁷ By focusing on women’s workplace militancy, the present analysis addresses a form of activism that can be situated in a space between formal and informal politics. The women interviewed in the case studies that follow were all trade union members who interacted with feminist activists who visited their factories, joined them on picket lines and wrote about them. As a result, the thesis explores what this relationship meant to the women involved. On the other hand, I have also explored the women’s broader experiences and everyday responses to gender antagonism in the workplace. I have made every effort to listen and respect my respondents’ own understanding of feminism. The thesis thus offers

⁹³ Catriona Beaumont, *Housewives and Citizens: Domesticity and the Women's Movement in England, 1928-1964*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013).

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Annemarie Hughes, *Gender and Political Identities in Scotland, 1919-1939* (Edinburgh University Press, 2010).

⁹⁶ Ibid. p. 8.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

fresh insights into both the relationship between feminist activism and women's workplace militancy during the 1970s, and the influence of working-class women's broader everyday experiences of gender antagonism upon their sense of self, and political subjectivities. The final section of this introduction will explain what I mean more fully by political subjectivities.

Women, Workplace Militancy and Political Subjectivity

An important aim of this thesis was to understand why the women I interviewed felt they had engaged in such action when they did, and how they felt it affected their political attitudes, understandings and sense of self in the subsequent period, in their own words. In doing so, a key aim of each case study was to analyse how women who engaged in workplace disputes constructed their political subjectivities during the oral history interview. To focus on subjectivity is, in the words of Lynn Abrams, to explore: 'the relationship between the states of mind of real people who act in the real world and the cultural formations that 'express, shape and constitute those states of mind'.⁹⁸ Subjectivity is necessarily contingent as the individual reconstructs both their sense of self and their understanding of past experience within the range of meanings and knowledge available to them at given historical moments.⁹⁹ In the context of this thesis, glimpses of personal testimony found in letters, strike bulletins and newspaper interviews provide clues to the political subjectivity of women engaged in disputes *at the time*, whilst my own oral history interviews offer an insight into the meaning participants ascribed to their past experience in relation to their political subjectivities *at the time of the interview*. I address the intersubjective encounter of my interviews in the following chapter which outlines my methodology.

Focusing on political subjectivity is to consider how individuals' interpretations of their experiences reflect and reproduce systems of power and meaning; individual dispositions are shaped by class and gender relations that influence and are influenced by everyday relationships in the workplace and the family. This approach to subjectivity can be traced to mainstream sociology: Pierre Bourdieu's concept of habitus refers to the process where the individual internalises the class, race and gender structures that condition their existence and form dispositions, values and beliefs that orient practices, choices and behaviour in ways that conform to external structures.¹⁰⁰ Anthony Giddens places greater emphasis on individual agency. His theory of 'structuration' treats people as

⁹⁸ Lynn Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), p. 55.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.* p. 57.

¹⁰⁰ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, (London: Routledge, 1984).

‘knowing subjects’ with the capacity to engage with structures and respond to them in ways that reshape structure: it is in and through their practices, agents reproduce the conditions which make these practices possible.¹⁰¹

My starting point for approaching political subjectivity stems from oral history and histories based upon personal testimony. After reading British soldiers’ letters from the First World War, Michael Roper stressed the importance of focusing on subjectivity as a means of investigating the emotional significance of events and practices. He critiqued ‘top down’ approaches that identified cultural representations of gender operating via institutions to constitute subjects, and pointed out that social scripts circulating within a culture do not by themselves constitute subjectivity. Instead, he argued subjectivity should be investigated as a matter of personality formed through lived experience and the emotional responses to these experiences. A focus on individual testimony and life stories enables the historian to see ‘the assimilation of cultural codes as a matter of negotiation involving an active subject.’¹⁰² Such an approach to subjectivity enables one to go beyond identifying normative constructs of masculinity or femininity and approach gender as a matter of human relationships. James Hinton advocates a similar approach to understanding the past in his analysis of Mass Observation diaries from the Second World War. He also emphasises the importance of moving beyond the identification of cultural resources individuals have used to construct their identities, arguing that selfhoods are fashioned as much from relationships with other people. For Hinton, the point of examining individual subjectivity is not necessarily to offer more ‘authentic’ accounts of the past, but to ‘locate individuals in their social context, and to understand how, in constructing their own selfhoods, they contributed to larger patterns of continuity and change.’¹⁰³

Focusing on individual subjectivity - in a way that accounts for the interaction between personal experiences, relationships with other people, beliefs and behaviour - provides a means of developing a fresh understanding of women’s workplace militancy in Britain between 1968 and 1985. As industrial relations expert Richard Hyman explained in 1989:

The very act of striking is a collective act and implies a certain amount of understanding and belief in the efficaciousness of mass action...strikes are

¹⁰¹ Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration* (London: Polity Press, 1984).

¹⁰² Michael Roper, ‘Out of View: Subjectivity and Emotion in Gender History’, *History Workshop Journal*, Vol. 59, no. 1, (2005), pp. 57-72, pp. 65-66.

¹⁰³ James Hinton, *Nine Wartime Lives: Mass Observation and the Making of the Modern Self*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 18.

occasionally spontaneous outbursts due to accidental circumstances or long periods of repression – but workers with no feeling of solidarity or common interest would be unlikely to strike.¹⁰⁴

For Hyman, the key to understanding the causes and rationale behind industrial conflict was to focus on the dynamic relationship between structural factors (such as agitators, human relations, and community, technology and industrial relations systems) and ‘social consciousness’. Strikes would not occur were it not for workers behaving as agents with beliefs and values that led them to consciously interpret their employers’ behaviour as unjust and perceive collective action as a legitimate and effective response. Therefore, ‘only by exploring subjective dimensions – human consciousness and the interrelations of people’s definitions and responses – it becomes possible to understand the regularities and patterns that exist within industrial relations’.¹⁰⁵ Hyman’s approach to understanding the rationale behind workplace militancy remains valid and can be reconciled with more recent approaches to individual subjectivity.

Contemporary analyses of workers’ motivations for engaging in industrial disputes were often interpreted and judged against scholars’ preconceptions of what political consciousness should look like. For example, Michael Mann broke the concept of class consciousness into four stages: class identification, class antagonism, class totality and finally the conception of an alternative society.¹⁰⁶ It was assumed that workers could develop ‘class consciousness’ from an apolitical sense of shared identity and experience stemming from their awareness of productive relations, to a sectional trade-union consciousness that acknowledged a shared stake in fellow workers’ wellbeing, before finally adopting a socialist or revolutionary consciousness that desired an alternative society to be realised through class struggle. People who held beliefs that implied their own subordination could be understood to possess a false consciousness. From the 1960s, this teleological spectrum appeared to inform, (either explicitly or implicitly) a range of sociological studies that explored the existence of collective forms of consciousness and their political efficacy.¹⁰⁷ Workers who were ‘unaware’ of the ‘social sources of their

¹⁰⁴ Hyman, *Strikes*, p. 37.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Michael Mann, *Consciousness and Action among the Western Working Class*, (London: Humanities, 1973), p. 29.

¹⁰⁷ For example, Beynon suggested the workers at Ford Halewood possessed a ‘factory class consciousness’, defined by the relationship between management and workers within Ford that did not translate into a wider political consciousness, Huw Beynon, *Working for Ford*, (London: Penguin, 1973). Following Gramsci, Pauline Hunt suggested trade union participation could not produce class consciousness as they only sought to further their members’ interests within existing class relationships rather than seeking to change them. She argued ‘Until the employed population are able to see what is of general significance in their particular experience there can be little development of political awareness’. Pauline Hunt, *Gender and Class Consciousness*, (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1980), pp. 166-167.

expectations or of the conditions frustrating these', or workers who used strikes as 'economic weapons' to achieve better wages and conditions could be dismissed as 'trade union conscious', 'economistic', or 'apolitical'.¹⁰⁸

One can see this approach to political consciousness in studies of female workers during this period. For example, in her ethnographic study of the Fakenham factory occupation (which I revisit in chapter four), Judy Wajcman found the female workforce's experience of activism had little effect on their attitudes towards trade unionism, their 'political' orientations, or the sexually based division of labour in the home. She concluded their experience did not alter their political consciousness and the women continued to adopt dominant ideologies as their own.¹⁰⁹ Anna Pollert drew similar conclusions after becoming involved in a strike over wages whilst undertaking an ethnography of Churchman's Imperial Tobacco Factory in Bristol in 1972. She described the world of trade unionism as 'hostile to women' and claimed female workers were demoralised after male union negotiators made a compromise deal on their behalf, which resulted in a 'passive fatalism' amongst the female workforce. Pollert went on to argue the women possessed a 'fragmentary consciousness – incoherent ideas, and unresolved common sense...containing partial acceptance and partial rejections of ruling conceptions of the world.'¹¹⁰ Both Wajcman and Pollert appear to view the women they studied as 'lacking the tools' to make sense of their private frustration and to 'develop their consciousness' to fight abuses of female wage labour and unequal division of labour in the home.

Such conclusions are problematic because they potentially deny the women's agency and imply that in order to be political, collective action must be motivated by a coherent view of the world, derived from a socialist or feminist critique of society. In doing so, they fail to account for the political nature of women's everyday concerns and responses to gender and class antagonism. Miriam Glucksman illustrates this problem in her participant observation study of female workers at Smiths Industries in west London between 1977 and 1978. She pointed out that 'neither the women's movement nor any other political grouping is in a position to affect all the different spheres of (working-class women's) life at present'.¹¹¹ She reflected 'the reason we haven't attracted working-class women to the

¹⁰⁸ Mann, *Consciousness and Action*; Eric Hobsbawm, 'The Forward March of Labour Halted', *Marxism Today*, (September, 1978); John Mclroy, 'Strikes and class consciousness in the early work of Richard Hyman', *Capital and Class*, vol. 36, no. 1, (2012), pp. 57-64.

¹⁰⁹ Judy Wajcman, *Women in Control: Dilemmas of a Workers' Cooperative*, (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1983)

¹¹⁰ Pollert, *Girls, Wives, Factory Lives*, p. 233.

¹¹¹ Ruth Cavendish (Miriam Glucksman), *Women on the Line*, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982) p. 163.

women's movement is not that they aren't feminist or are unaware. Our discussions are too up in the air for them and reflect a very different way of life.¹¹² Glucksman explained that the women at Smiths Industries '... were more likely to take action on their own behalf at work than outside. Here they were brought together daily under the same conditions, and had a collective awareness of being exploited...the solidarity that grew out of the shared experience is what gave the women strength and self-confidence.'¹¹³ The point here is that women working in manufacturing industries appeared to be operating with a different set of interpretive devices to articulate their subjective experience and understanding of class and gender relations to the frameworks offered by their unions or the WLM. It therefore seems inappropriate to judge their political consciousness against the extent to which it was produced by, or led to further participation within trade unions or the WLM. Instead, it is important to identify the subjective values, beliefs and motivations generated from working-class women's personal experiences and relationships that lay behind their decision to engage in industrial action. Such an approach broadens historical understandings of feminism and permits for a greater appreciation of how working-class women actively constituted themselves as political subjects during this period.

An approach that privileges the subjective understandings and motivations of workers engaging in industrial conflict is also necessary to challenge popular narratives that characterise the 1970s as a period when unruly unions and working-class greed caused economic decline. For example, Vernon Bogdanor described the rise in militancy as 'an upsurge, not of collectivism, but of individualism'¹¹⁴. Selina Todd offers a more nuanced interpretation suggesting that workers were provoked by 'the chasm between their high expectations of life in an affluent society and the reality they experienced on the factory floor'.¹¹⁵ Similarly, in her re-study of Richard Brown's Tyneside shipbuilders study, Florence Sutcliffe Braithwaite suggests militancy is better understood in relation to a decline in deference, rather than a rise in individualism, as workers increasingly refused to subscribe to a moral order legitimating their subordinate position and asserted a basic demand for egalitarianism instead.¹¹⁶

This approach adds to existing histories of the post-war labour movement that have explained workplace militancy as a response to wider economic, political and institutional

¹¹² Ibid, p. 164.

¹¹³ Ibid, p. 165.

¹¹⁴ Vernon Bogdanor, 'The Crisis of Old Labour', in Anthony Seldon and Kevin Hickson, eds., *New Labour, old Labour: the Wilson and Callaghan governments, 1974-79* (London, 2004), pp. 5-17, at p. 14.

¹¹⁵ Todd, *The People*, p. 275.

¹¹⁶ Florence Sutcliffe Braithwaite, 'Class, Community and Individualism in English Politics and Society, 1969-2000', (Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Cambridge, 2014), chapter 3.

change.¹¹⁷ As Jack Saunders recently pointed out, histories relating workplace militancy to post-war affluence and full employment have tended to propagate the story of ‘traditional’ working-class consciousness being eroded and replaced by mass consumer society.¹¹⁸ Such accounts often take for granted the values, ideas and collective cultures developed by workers themselves, which were also required for workers to unite and engage in collective action.¹¹⁹ There has been even less consideration of how these processes were shaped by gender. So it is important to look beyond broad economic change or the actions of large institutions when examining workplace militancy during this period. As Selina Todd argues, workers’ growing assertiveness can also be explained by their shared aspiration for greater control over the organisation of their lives, which included the way their work was organised and paid.¹²⁰ The following chapters will argue that female workers demands for equal pay and protests against being treated as a secondary labour force were also shaped by their aspiration to have the value of their work recognised; to have their specific skills and role as economic providers accepted by patronising male employers and trade union officials; to be treated with dignity and respect which they felt was undermined due to their sex.

Drawing upon oral history interviews with women who sought to transform their workplace conditions through collective action, alongside and in dialogue with a range of other sources, my aim has been not to ‘reconstruct’ the political consciousness of the women at the time, but explain how my respondents reconstructed this experience in the process of the oral history interview. The focus has been on identifying how the women represented themselves to themselves, and in the case of group interviews, to each other as political subjects. By focusing on subjectivity, the point is not to deny the effects of the material and social conditions that lay behind women’s experience of industrial conflict; instead the aim has been to identify the women’s own understanding of their conditions and how this influenced their decision to engage in such action. In doing so, the thesis aims to offer new insights into working-class women’s experiences and attitudes towards paid work, trade unionism and feminism in post-war Britain.

¹¹⁷ For example, Keith Laybourn, *A History of British Trade Unionism, 1800-1990*, (Stroud, Sutton Publishing 1992); Alasdair Reid, *United We Stand: A History of British Trade Unionism*, (London: Penguin, 2005); Chris Howell, *Trade Unions and the State: The Construction of Industrial Relations Institutions in Britain*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2005).

¹¹⁸ Jack Saunders, ‘The Untraditional Worker: Class Re-Formation in Britain 1945-65’, *Twentieth Century British History*, Vol. 26, No. 2, (2015), pp. 225-248, p. 228.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.* p. 228.

¹²⁰ Todd, *The People*, p. 275 and p. 284.

Chapter 1: Reconstructing and Interpreting Women's Workplace Militancy

The thesis aims to offer original accounts of industrial disputes primarily organised by and involving women from the perspective of female workers involved. It provides new insights into working-class women's experiences of paid work and trade unionism. It seeks to understand why women felt they engaged in such action, and what they believed the impact was on their political attitudes and sense of self. This chapter explains the sources and methodology underpinning this thesis. The first section outlines why each case study was chosen, and why a combination of oral history and archival evidence have been utilised to analyse each dispute. The second section discusses the various sources that have been used throughout the thesis. It sets out the written sources used in each chapter, explains who was interviewed and reflects upon the manner in which memory and the intersubjective circumstances of each interview situation influenced how my respondents composed their testimony.

Methodology

Case Studies

The industrial disputes analysed in this thesis occurred in a period that has been identified with a surge in class struggle. Existing historical accounts of women's trade unionism during this period suggest that women had a distinct, gendered experience of this rise in workplace militancy because they were likely to work in different jobs, to be paid less and to have less influence within their trade union than their male workmates.¹ The period has also been associated with a transition in ideas about women's rights in the workplace evidenced by the passage of equality legislation and greater commitment from trade unions to integrate and represent the specific interests of their increased female membership.² This thesis identifies the personal implications of these broader social and political changes for female workers who engaged in collective action through an analysis of five case studies of workplace disputes organised by women during this period.

A focus on individual case studies – and the accounts of individual women – permits a greater appreciation of the impact of local context and everyday practices upon women's

¹ Boston, *Women Workers*; Rowbotham, *The Past is Before Us*, chapter 13; Wrigley, 'Women in the Labour Market and in the Unions'; Stageman and Cunnison, *Feminising the Unions*.

² For example: Boston, *Women Workers*; Coote and Campbell, *Sweet Freedom*, pp. 9-10; Thane, 'Women and the 1970s' Towards Liberation?', p. 171.

subjective motivations to engage in collective action. I have focused on case studies and relied on women's testimony as a primary source to, following the words of Claire Langhamer, 'effect an analysis embedded in everyday practices', instead of offering an overview of representations and discourses of a wider sample of women who engaged in workplace disputes during this period.³ 'Recovering' these women's stories and presenting them together in a collective portrait enables one to identify some shared experiences and understandings, but also allows an appreciation of the differences amongst individual women's attitudes and the manner in which they made sense of the past.

The case studies present five different examples of women asserting their rights in the workplace. The first section considers women who went on strike over issues of grading and equal pay at Ford, Dagenham and Trico, Brentford. The second section examines women who occupied their factories as they fought for the right to work at Sexton's shoe factory in Fakenham and the Lee Jeans factory in Greenock. The final chapter focuses on the women's strike for skill recognition at Ford, Dagenham and highlights the centrality of the value of women's work, which is a key theme running throughout the thesis. The disputes occurred in manual manufacturing industries and the women involved could be broadly categorised as process, plant and machine operative workers. However, each dispute occurred in a markedly different local context, as well as in factories with their own specific history and culture of industrial relations. Ford was a much larger company with a well organised workforce by comparison to Sexton's shoe factory, whilst Brentford was a racially diverse, metropolitan area with a progressive trade council compared to Greenock, which had its own distinct history of industrial relations but was comparatively isolated geographically and faced severe economic depression at the time of the Lee Jeans occupation. These local circumstances, which are described in each chapter, distinguished individual women's experiences and political identity. Yet, importantly women were taking similar action to one another across Britain, in a range of industries and both urban and rural locations. This picture of women's action is illustrated by the timeline in the Appendix.

The case studies were chosen for the frequency with which they are cited as examples of women's workplace militancy in histories of women's trade unionism and feminism in post-war Britain, but without being the subject of a significant investigation

³ Claire Langhamer, 'Love and courtship in mid-twentieth-century England', *The Historical Journal*, 50 (2007), p. 173-196, at p. 173.

from an historical perspective.⁴ In terms of representativeness, the aim was not so much to establish broad conclusions about working-class women's behaviour – it could be argued that the women were atypical or extraordinary by engaging in such action in the first place. Instead, it focuses on the meaning of each dispute for the self-selecting sample of women who came forward to tell me stories about their past. Following James Hinton, 'individual subjectivity is always more complex than generalisations about the life of a group' and 'no one is typical because every person does it differently'.⁵ Nonetheless, Hinton suggests, in his study of the influence of the Second World War on everyday life and personal relationships in Britain, that individual case studies and life histories provide acute insights into more general historical processes because it is the choices made by individuals which drive those processes forward.⁶ Similarly, Lynn Abrams' study of women and gender in Shetland demonstrates the value of looking at 'unique' case studies for offering a fresh perspective on more general narratives of women's experience and gender relations in the past. Abrams argues that prioritising women's own voices and interpretations of the past is useful as a means of challenging established historical explanations of women's role in society, but also for offering an 'authentic story with meaning for those who narrated it'.⁷ In the context of this thesis, I have focused on women's voices and local case studies to move beyond existing accounts that situate women's collective action in a general narrative about women's increased presence in the labour force and trade unions, as well as the emergence of second-wave feminism and equality legislation. The case studies and individual stories that follow offer new insights into how female workers interpreted the influence of these wider social and institutional changes on their own personal experience and sense of self.

Each case study draws upon a combination of written sources and oral history. Written sources include national and local newspaper coverage of each dispute, WLM pamphlets and articles, and trade union publications and correspondence. Written sources were used to establish the context and sequence of events surrounding each dispute. They also indicate how each dispute was publically perceived, represented and judged at the time, and offer evidence of the social and cultural expectations surrounding working-class women's behaviour during this period. Finally, the numerous interviews with female

⁴ For example Boston, *Women Workers* on Ford at pp. 278-280, on Trico at pp. 315-317 and Rowbotham, *The Past is Before Us*, on Ford at pp. 165-166, on Trico at p. 227, on Fakenham at p. 200, p. 208, p. 233, and on Lee Jeans at p. 239.

⁵ James Hinton, *Nine wartime lives*, p. 17.

⁶ *Ibid.* p. 18.

⁷ Lynn Abrams, 'The Unseamed Picture: Conflicting Narratives of Women in the Modern European Past', *Gender and History*, Vol. 20, no. 3, (2008), pp.628-643, at p. 631.

workers that appear in these sources, although obviously mediated, provide clues as to women's understandings, motivations and evaluations of their action at the time and are valuable as records of contemporary voices.

Oral history was used to find what could not be discovered elsewhere: personal experiences of paid work, trade unionism and workplace militancy, and the manner in which individuals made sense of these past experiences as they constructed their political subjectivities and sense of self in the present. The thesis draws upon interviews with 17 women contacted through advertisements in local newspapers, libraries, supermarkets, internet community forums and also by word of mouth. Locating women to interview was a challenge; a limited number of people responded to my adverts and some interviews were dependent upon respondents contacting their former workmates on my behalf. This assistance was invaluable in enabling me to interview people who would otherwise have been unavailable, but it also removed an element of the interview situation from my control. It meant that each interview was carried out in different circumstances, with some women interviewed individually and others interviewed as part of a group, whilst some women were interviewed on more than one occasion whilst others were not.

Although group interviews were not my initial methodological preference, they actually produced an interesting and invaluable opportunity to consider the interaction between individual and collective memory. Graham Smith explains the value of group interviews. Firstly, he suggests they can confer identity and affirm individual competence. Group members cue each other's memories and construct a collective memory that goes beyond the individual recollection of one person.⁸ Yet it is not just the collective accumulation of details about past events that are valuable. Smith also emphasises the value of the interaction between the individual and group memory as individuals construct common identities through talking about lived experience.⁹ He points out that remembering represents an everyday pastime that often involves the interchange and comparison of memories between individuals. For Smith, the group interview presents an opportunity to 'chart the terrains of transactive memory', recognise the memories individuals share and take for granted and investigate an individual's capacity to critically engage with inherited ideologies.¹⁰ In the context of this thesis, two group interviews have been used to examine how participants made sense of their personal experience by

⁸ Graham Smith, 'Beyond Individual/ Collective Memory: Women's Transactive Memories of Food, Family and Conflict', *Oral History*, vol. 35, no. 2, (2007), pp. 77-90, at p. 80.

⁹ *Ibid.* p. 80.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* p. 88.

collectively reconstructing and interpreting the meaning of each strike. This involved the creation of common accounts, as well as oppositional narratives that challenged pre-existing assumptions about the meaning of each dispute.

The following section further explains some of the variances in my oral history interviews and reflects on how such differences influenced respondents' testimony. The remainder of this section explains why oral history is an appropriate and indeed essential methodology for this thesis.

Oral History

The historiography of oral history can be divided between what Michael Roper describes as the 'the reconstructive mode' and 'the interpretive mode'.¹¹ The 'reconstructive mode' refers to examples of pioneering oral historians, such as Paul Thompson or Elizabeth Roberts, who sought to use personal testimonies as a means of capturing evidence about past events from eye-witness participants that could not be found in conventional historical sources, or to reveal the histories of individuals or groups that had previously been marginalised in established accounts of the past.¹² From the late 1970s, oral historians faced criticism that personal testimony could not be verified and was tainted by memory and personal bias. Oral historians, such as Thompson, adopted what Penny Summerfield describes as a 'methodological defensiveness' that sought to justify the practice through cross-checking information found in the oral interview with documentary sources, and adopting scientific sampling methods to ensure interviewees' representativeness.¹³

The 'interpretive' mode of oral history refers to a methodological shift in oral history from social science to cultural history.¹⁴ Leaders of this new wave of oral historians included Luisa Passerini, Alessandro Portelli and Ron Grele who moved away from seeking to justify the veracity and reliability of oral sources and began to assert the value of understanding individuals' subjectivity as a significant object of analysis in its own right.¹⁵ Oral history has increasingly centred on examining 'how people make sense of

¹¹ Michael Roper, 'Oral History' in Brian Brivati, Julia Buxton and Anthony Seldon (eds.), *The Contemporary History Handbook*, (Manchester University Press, 1996), pp. 345-352.

¹² Paul Thompson, *The Edwardians: The Remaking of British Society*, (London: Weidenfield and Nicolson, 1975); Elizabeth Roberts, *A Woman's Place: An Oral History of Working-Class Women, 1890-1940*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984).

¹³ Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*, (1st edition, Oxford University Press, 1978); Penny Summerfield, *Reconstructing Women's Wartime Lives, Discourse and Subjectivity in Oral History*, (Manchester University Press, 1998), p. 17.

¹⁴ Lynn Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), p. 7.

¹⁵ Luisa Passerini, 'Work, Ideology and Consensus under Italian Fascism', *History Workshop Journal*, vol. 8, (1979), pp. 82-108; Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning*

their past, how they connect individual experience and its social context, how the past becomes part of the present, and how people use it to interpret their lives and the world around them.¹⁶ In the words of Portelli, oral sources tell us ‘not just what people did, but what they wanted to do what they believed they were doing and what they now think they did’.¹⁷ The value of oral sources lies not necessarily in their ability to produce a more ‘authentic’ version of the past in terms of factual reliability, but in their capacity to reveal what appears to represent authentic versions of the past to individuals and how this shapes their understanding in the present.

The distinction between ‘reconstructive’ and ‘interpretive’ modes of oral history is useful for visualising the evolution of oral history theory, yet in practice these approaches do not have to be mutually exclusive of one another.¹⁸ A motivating factor behind this thesis was to ‘recover’ the voices of women who engaged in workplace disputes. The following chapters offer new evidence of working-class women’s experiences of trade unionism and their attitudes towards the WLM. Yet I also wanted to understand how my interviewees remembered and reconstructed these disputes to fit with their sense of self and reshaped political subjectivity in the present. In this sense, my use of oral history was both ‘reconstructive’ and ‘interpretive’.

Oral history provides a useful means of analysing individuals’ experiences, motivations and the personal consequences of participating in collective action in the past. Maud Bracke argues that analysis of social and political movements based on the mobilisation of collective identities requires awareness of the individual’s sense of self. She shows how feminist groups provoked political and legislative change in Italy, but also draws upon oral history effectively to illustrate the movement’s ‘existential impact’ upon thousands of women who associated their experiences of feminist activism in the 1970s with a transition in their social attitudes, personal relationships, political outlook and self-understanding.¹⁹ In Scotland, Sarah Browne examines personal testimony with WLM activists to develop a more ‘in-depth understanding of who supported the movement and why’. She demonstrates the important effects of the personal experiences of individual members upon the main arguments and campaigns developed by the wider movement in

in *Oral History*, (Albany, N.Y: State University of New York Press, 1991); Ron Grele (ed.), *Envelopes of Sound: The Art of Oral History*, (New York: Praeger, 1991).

¹⁶ Michael Frisch, *Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History*, (New York: SUNY Press, 1990), p. 188.

¹⁷ Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli*, p. 50.

¹⁸ Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, pp. 8-9.

¹⁹ Bracke, *Women and the Reinvention of the Political*, pp. 23-24.

Scotland.²⁰ Similarly, Celia Hughes uses oral history to illustrate the effects of cultural change in 1960s Britain upon political activists' sense of self and identity, on the radical left.²¹ The point is that oral history represents a useful methodology for examining instances of collective action in the past because it reveals how social and political mobilisation was not just the product (as well as producer) of structural processes, but was also shaped by the personal lives and experiences of active participants and their understanding of the world around them.

Oral history has the capacity to offer similar insights into workers' militancy in the past. For example, Jim Phillips argues in his study of the 1984-85 Miners' strike in Scotland that the privileging of high politics has obscured the broader economic, social and cultural dimensions of the strike from historian's analysis.²² Using a combination of quantitative data and oral history, Phillips illustrates how the strike was shaped by economic variables, as well as the 'moral economy' of workers involved.²³

Another example of oral history being used effectively to examine workplace militancy from this period is Sundari Anitha et al.'s study of the 1976-79 Grunwick dispute primarily involving south Asian female workers. They argue that celebratory accounts of the strike as a pivotal moment in the labour movement's representation of minority workers often emphasised the 'exoticism' of the 'strikers in saris', without considering the working lives and experiences of the women involved.²⁴ Drawing upon interviews with five participants, they argue that the particular migratory histories and socioeconomic backgrounds of women were crucial to explaining their decision to engage in collective action. Many of the women came from middle-class backgrounds in East Africa and were indignant at the poor conditions and low pay of factory work. At the same time, some of the women reported to feeling ashamed at asking the public for money during the dispute, whilst others felt uncomfortable talking about particular aspects of the strike that violated 'gendered scripts of appropriate behaviour'.²⁵ Anitha et al. emphasise how these personal,

²⁰ Sarah Browne, *The Women's Liberation Movement in Scotland*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014).

²¹ Celia Hughes, *Young Lives on the Left: Sixties Activism and the Liberation of the Self*, (Manchester University Press, 2015).

²² Jim Phillips, *Collieries, communities and the miners' strike in Scotland, 1984-85*, (Manchester University Press, 2012), p. 4.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Linda McDowell, Sundari Anitha and Ruth Pearson, 'Striking Narratives: Class, Gender and Ethnicity in the 'Great Grunwick Strike', London, UK, 1976-1978' *Women's History Review*, vol. 23, no.4, (2014), pp. 595-619.

²⁵ Sundari Anitha, Ruth Pearson and Linda McDowell, 'Striking lives: multiple narratives of South Asian women's employment, identity and protest in the UK', *Ethnicities*, vol.12, no. 6, (2012), pp. 654-775, at p. 763 and 767.

social and cultural factors intersected with women's material experiences of paid work to shape south Asian women's narratives about the dispute.²⁶ These examples of existing studies illustrate the value of oral history as a methodology for understanding the everyday motivations and personal concerns of workers in a manner that challenges dominant narratives that associate 'unruly unions' with economic decline in post-war Britain.

Joan Sangster's study of a 1937 strike organised by female textile workers in Peterborough, Canada highlights the value of using oral history to focus on women's subjective accounts of workplace militancy. She argues that oral historians must adopt an approach that reconciles the cultural construction of memory within a framework of social and economic relations and imperatives. She writes:

Asking why and how women explain, rationalise and make sense of the past offers insight into the social and material framework within which they operated, the perceived choices and cultural patterns they faced, and the complex relationship between individual consciousness and culture.²⁷

Sangster suggests the strength of oral history lies in its ability to interrogate how individuals perceived and understood their past experiences, decisions and behaviour. The interview represents both a linguistic and social event that elicits a construction of the past rooted in the perspective of the present, yet based upon a historical and material reality.²⁸ The job for the oral historian is to identify how respondents' explanations for their past behaviour are shaped by their personal experiences of social and economic processes, but also the various cultural resources and shared stories they draw upon to represent their experience in the interview.

The concept of 'composure' is essential to understanding how individuals narrate their past. It is now widely understood that people relate the stories they tell about themselves to popular and public narratives about particular historical events. In the words of Penny Summerfield, the oral historian must examine not only 'the voice that speaks for itself, but also the voices that speak to it'.²⁹ Summerfield illustrates how her female respondents drew upon popular discourses surrounding the impact of the Second World War (heroic or stoic) upon gender roles as they sought to 'compose' coherent memories of their personal experiences of war. Anna Green argued that Summerfield moved too far from interpreting the significance of individual memory by trying to situate women's

²⁶ Ibid. pp. 769-770.

²⁷ Joan Sangster, 'Telling our stories: feminist debates and the use of oral history, *Women's History Review*, vol. 3, no. 1, (1994), pp. 5-28, at p. 6.

²⁸ Ibid. p. 13.

²⁹ Summerfield, *Reconstructing Women's Wartime Lives*, p. 15.

testimony in pre-existing cultural frameworks. She concluded that oral historians needed to avoid ‘culturally deterministic’ understandings of individual memories and reassert the ‘capacity of the conscious self to contest and critique cultural scripts and discourses.’³⁰

Graham Smith advocates a balanced approach to understanding the process of remembering that champions neither the influence of cultural discourses nor the boundless agency of individuals and their memory. Instead, he suggests oral historians must focus on how memory is the product of both cultural context and individual experience of social processes.³¹ Celia Hughes study of British activists on the radical left provides a good example of this approach. She reflects how her interviewees’ constructed their identities in relation to the national and international context of expanding social and political boundaries in the 1950s and 1960s, but also emphasises the local and familial context ‘which fostered certain ways of seeing, feeling and being’ for her interviewees.³²

In the context of this thesis, it was not always easy to identify coherent public narratives available to my respondents to draw upon when constructing accounts of their collective action. There was no obvious ‘third man in the room’, an expression coined by Rebecca Clifford that refers to the shared public memories and meta-narratives surrounding 1960s activism that influenced her interviewees’ testimony about their experiences of 1968 in Italy.³³ Although each dispute received public attention at the time, and has since been recognised within histories of women, trade unions and feminism, my respondents were often unaware and detached from these public narratives, with the exception of the Dagenham sewing-machinists. Very often the women I interviewed seemed surprised that I had taken an interest in their past. Many expressed views such as ‘I haven’t thought much about it for a while’ or ‘I didn’t think it was important until this came up’. The public recognition of the oral history interview itself made many women rethink the significance of the dispute within their own lives with comments like ‘thinking about it now it was probably quite important’ or ‘looking back, you realise you have done something with your life’. This was similar to what Anitha et al. found when they interviewed women who participated in the Grunwick dispute.³⁴ They suggested that their interviews represented the first time their participants had reflected on the historical

³⁰ Anna Green, ‘Individual Remembering and ‘Collective Memory’: Theoretical Presuppositions and Contemporary Debates’, *Oral History*, vol. 32 no. 2, (2004), pp. 34-44, at p. 42.

³¹ Smith, ‘Beyond Individual/ Collective Memory’, pp. 77-90.

³² Celia Hughes, ‘Negotiating Ungovernable Spaces between the Personal and the Political: Oral History and the British Left in 1960s and 1970s’, *Memory Studies*, vol. 6, no. 1, (2013), pp. 70-90, at p. 87.

³³ Rebecca Clifford, ‘Emotion and Gender in Oral History: Narrating Italy’s 1968’, *Modern Italy*, vol. 17, no. 2, (2012), pp. 209-221.

³⁴ Anitha et al., ‘Striking Narratives’, p. 769.

significance of their agency because they were previously unaware ‘or had not been part of the ‘celebratory accounts of Grunwick as a turning point in British labour history subsequently constructed by the trade unions.’³⁵

Summerfield’s research on women’s experiences of the Second World War also showed how composure was difficult for groups who experience ‘cultural silences’.³⁶ She writes ‘ordinary people who have memories that do not fit publically available accounts have difficulty finding words and concepts with which to compose their memories whether in anecdotal snapshots or extended narratives. If individuals cannot draw on appropriate public accounts, they must seek to justify their deviation or fit their stories into alternative frameworks, or express memories in fragmentary accounts.’³⁷ The women interviewed in the following chapters faced some of these challenges as they rethought the significance of their action within the moment of the oral history interview. It was not that there was necessarily a ‘cultural silence’ surrounding women’s workplace activism at the time of the interview – the disputes analysed here have been cited in academic studies, have been memorialised through public events and in the case of Dagenham woven into a feature film. Instead, my interviewees’ ambivalent relationship with public narratives surrounding their activism recalled Lynn Abrams’ reminder that individuals do not always situate their stories in a context that is familiar to historians; whilst I became interested in placing the women’s stories in relation to historical narratives about women’s employment and trade union trends, my interviewees were more likely to position their experience in relation to their personal, family or local history.³⁸ Selina Todd has recently emphasised the influence of personal knowledge, constructed from interaction with family, friends, the workplace and state officials upon self-understanding. Todd argues that material circumstances were as influential as public and expert knowledge in shaping individuals’ understanding of their place in the world.³⁹ In what follows, I seek to identify both the wider public narratives and personal contexts that respondents drew upon when constructing their testimony.

I aimed to gain life stories from my interviewees to gain an understanding of the personal meaning of each dispute and to examine how each respondent felt it had affected their sense of self. Following Charlotte Linde, people compose their sense of self through

³⁵ Ibid. p. 769.

³⁶ This is also demonstrated by Alastair Thomson’s well know example of Fred Farrell and the Anzac legend, Alastair Thomson, ‘Putting Popular Memory Theory into Practice in Australia’ in Robert Perks and Alastair Thomson (eds.), *The Oral History Reader*, (London: Routledge, 2006), pp. 300-311.

³⁷ Penny Summerfield, ‘Culture and Composure: Creating Narratives of the Gendered Self in Oral History Interview’, *Cultural and Social History*, vol. 1, (2004), pp. 65-93, at p. 93.

³⁸ Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, p. 47.

³⁹ Todd, ‘Class, experience’ at p. 495.

the stories they tell about their past: ‘In order to exist in the social world with a comfortable sense of being a good, socially proper, and stable person, an individual needs to have a coherent, acceptable and constantly revised life story’.⁴⁰ The individual revises their life story to align their past experience with their sense of who they are in the present, and with how they would like to be perceived by other people. The life story can be distinguished from a ‘life history’ which represents a chronologically told narrative of an individual’s past based on transitions between recognisable life stages and events such as childhood, education and marriage.⁴¹ Focusing on a life story is different to a life history because it is less about the details of an individual’s life course, and more about how an individual reinterprets their past. The process of retelling and reinterpreting one’s life story offers a means of achieving a stable and composed sense of self in the present. Linde suggests individuals develop coherence systems that emphasise the causality and continuity between their past experiences in a manner that makes sense to themselves, as well as their audience.⁴² Lynn Abrams’ research on the post-war female self illustrates how some of her respondents framed their life stories around a coherence system that drew upon a feminist emancipation narrative that told a continuous story about equality of opportunity, choice and freedom to determine their own lives as individual women, without identifying themselves with feminist politics.⁴³

I devised semi-structured schedules to guide life stories from respondents prior to every interview. The aim was to establish where they situated their activism within their wider experiences. Each respondent was asked about their childhood, family and early experiences of work and trade unionism, the details of their practical involvement in the dispute, and the extent to which they felt this had influenced their political attitudes. Whilst I aimed to gain life stories from each respondent, this was sometimes inhibited by two factors. Firstly, all my interviewees knew that I had contacted them because I was researching workplace militancy. The majority of respondents appeared to have prepared themselves prior to the interview to talk about the details and their experience of each dispute specifically – a ‘memory frame’ that was narrower than the framework I wished to encourage. The implications of this were that respondents were sometimes unprepared, or reluctant to talk about their families or wider experiences of work in other jobs, which were not necessarily seen as relevant or part of the story that they were aiming to tell about

⁴⁰ Charlotte Linde, *Life stories: the creation of coherence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 1-3.

⁴¹ Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, p. 40.

⁴² Linde, *Life Stories* in Lynn Abrams, ‘Liberating the female self: epiphanies, conflict and coherence in the life stories of post-war British women’, *Social History*, Vol. 39, no.1, (2014), pp. 14-35 at p. 21.

⁴³Ibid. pp. 29-34.

themselves. Secondly, the women from Dagenham and some of the Brentford women were only willing to be interviewed together as a group. This possibly demonstrated a lack of confidence in their own stories and may also have prevented individuals from sharing certain information in front of each other, yet also presented opportunities as discussed above. The following section introduces my interviewees and offers some further reflections on how the various circumstances surrounding each interview influenced respondents' testimony.

Interviews and Interviewees

1968 Ford Sewing Machinists' Strike, Dagenham

The 1968 Ford sewing machinists' strike represents a unique case study because it is widely understood as a crucial turning point that led Barbara Castle to implement the Equal Pay Act in 1970. The strike occupies a key position in the histories of the labour movement and the WLM.⁴⁴ The idea that the strike was a decisive victory in women's fight for equal pay was popularised by Stephen Wooley and Elizabeth Karlsen's 2010 feature film *Made in Dagenham*, which has been adapted into a West End musical. The film was a box office hit and has been described as a 'feel good movie' that portrays the strike as a progressive campaign for women's rights that acted as a direct catalyst for the Equal Pay Act.⁴⁵ The subsequent publicity generated by the film has proceeded to weave the place of the dispute firmly within the public history of women and gender equality in Britain.⁴⁶

In June 2013, I interviewed Gwen, Eileen, Sheila and Vera, in a group interview at Vera's home in Rainham, Essex.⁴⁷ All four of these women were born in the 1930s, had left school at the age of 15 and worked as sewing-machinists. At the time of the strike, they were all in their thirties and members of the National Union of Vehicle Builders. Eileen, Vera and Gwen worked as sewing-machinists at Ford until they retired in 1985 and 1989. Sheila was promoted after the strike and proceeded to work in the office of the print

⁴⁴ Sheila Rowbotham, *The Past is Before Us*, (London: Pandora Press, 1989) pp. 165-166; Pat Thane, 'Women in the 1970s' and Lynne Segal, 'Feminist impacts and transformations' in Lawrence Black, Hugh Pemberton and Pat Thane (eds.), *Reassessing 1970s Britain*, (Manchester University Press, 2013), p. 154 and p. 171; Sarah Boston, *Women Workers and the Trade Unions*, 2nd Ed, (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1989), p. 279; Chris Wrigley, 'Women in the Labour Market and in the Unions' in John McIlroy, Nina Fishman and Alan Campbell (eds.), *British Trade Unions and Industrial Politics: The High Tide of Trade Unionism, 1945-1979*, (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 1999) p. 55; Harold L Smith, 'The Women's Movement, Politics and Citizenship, 1960s-2000' in Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska, *Women in Twentieth Century Britain*, (Harlow: Pearson, 2001), p. 283.

⁴⁵ Tom Brown and Belén Vidal (eds.), *The Biopic in Contemporary Film Culture*, (London: Routledge, 2014), pp. 11-13.

⁴⁶ For examples of public representations of the strike as a crucial turning point see: Gregor Gall, 'Women didn't just strike in Dagenham', *The Guardian*, 4 October 2010; Maureen Paton, 'The Dagenham Girls: Meet four friends whose crusading work inspired a new film', *The Daily Mail*, 11 September 2010.

⁴⁷ Interview with Eileen, Gwen, Sheila and Vera, Rainham, Essex, 21 June 2013.

department until she retired in the 1980s. Whilst their work trajectory was not uncommon amongst the other women interviewed in this thesis, the way in which they remembered their activism was sharply distinguished by the fact a film had recently been made about the dispute they were involved in.

From my initial contact with the former sewing-machinists on the phone, it was clear that the film had changed their lives. Since its production they have attended film premieres across the world, been interviewed on numerous occasions and in 2013 were voted ‘Women of the Year’ by *Women’s Weekly* magazine.⁴⁸ This public recognition and disruption to their daily lives marked a stark contrast to how my interviewees remembered the manner in which they were treated during the strike. Gwen pointed out: ‘the newspapers didn’t bother with us did they? After we returned to work nobody was interested in us...I think until this film came out everyone had forgotten about us!’⁴⁹ It was apparent that not only had the film influenced the sewing-machinists’ daily lives in the present, but had also affected ‘what they now think they did’ in the past.⁵⁰

The film served to transmit the idea that the dispute represented a crucial turning point in the battle for equal pay to a wider audience, including the sewing-machinists themselves. Based on the ‘real’ events of the strike, it dramatizes the relevant social processes and political debates through the personal narratives of fictional characters, mostly Rita O’Grady played by actor Sally Hawkins. Rita is a fictional rank and file worker with limited trade union experience; sick of being patronised by a variety of men in her life, she decides to stand up and fight for her rights. In a dispute that begins as a demand for skill recognition, she develops her consciousness of gender inequality and transforms the sewing-machinists’ grading claim into the broader, and apparently more important demand for equal pay. It ends with the sewing-machinists embracing Barbara Castle, after Rita convinces her to ignore Ford’s threats to move their business out of Britain and implement equal pay in the future. The final captions proclaim that: ‘Two years later in May 1970 the Equal Pay Act became law. Similar legislation quickly followed in most industrial countries across the world’; and could as well say ‘they all lived happily ever after.’

By presenting a fixed and socially acceptable version of the past in public memory, films have a significant impact upon an individual’s personal memory by affirming or

⁴⁸ ‘The Fighter’s from Ford’, *Women’s Weekly*, 5 November 2013.

⁴⁹ Interview with Eileen, Gwen, Sheila and Vera, Rainham, Essex, 21 June 2013.

⁵⁰ Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli*, p. 50.

contradicting their private experience and interpretation of the past.⁵¹ It was apparent that the sewing-machinists have only seen their strike within the wider context of the history of women's work since the production of the film, and the subsequent invasion of the press and people like myself into their lives. Whilst they all commented on how they had enjoyed the film (with the exception of the swearing and undressing in the factory), they also felt that it had completely changed the way that the strike had been remembered. For example, Sheila explained to me: 'well when the film came out and then all this hullabaloo came along, you realise how brave we were and how good we were, but we didn't think that at time.'⁵² Whilst Eileen suggested that looking back on it now having seen the film: 'we were stupid weren't we, we didn't take any proper notice - Ford's had won and they knew it. We just started back like we hadn't had a day off.'⁵³ So whilst the strike has publically been remembered as a key turning point sending the history of women and equal pay on a positive trajectory towards equality, the sewing-machinists had only recognised this wider significance of their action after they had seen the film. As a result, the film forced them to rethink the impact of their strike within the rest of their life stories, to fit in with their newfound role as 'history makers' during the process of the oral history interview.

The Dagenham women had been interviewed before, which also influenced their personal testimony. Vera and Sheila had participated in a group interview alongside a fellow worker named Violet in 2006 as part of a project organised by the TUC.⁵⁴ I have drawn upon the film and the available transcript in the TUC Archive alongside my own interviews.⁵⁵ The women have also been interviewed in numerous local and national newspapers, and participated in public events to commemorate the strike.⁵⁶ They had clear expectations of what I might ask them based upon their previous experiences of being interviewed. This was not a story they were telling for the first time and they had clearly

⁵¹ For the relationship between film and memory see: Thomson, 'Putting Popular Memory Theory into Practice', pp. 244-255; Maud Bracke, 'From politics to nostalgia: the transformation of war memories in France during the 1960-1970s.' *European History Quarterly*, vol. 41 no. 1, (2011), pp. 5-24; Geoff Eley, 'Finding the People's War: Film, British Collective Memory, and World War II', *American Historical Review*, vol. 106, no. 3, (2001), pp. 818-833.

⁵² Interview with Eileen, Gwen, Sheila and Vera, Rainham, Essex, 21 June 2013.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ TUC, *Winning Equal Pay*, <http://www.unionhistory.info/equalpay/voices.php>, [accessed 12 October, 2013].

⁵⁵ A full transcript of the interviews was unavailable but I was able to watch the film when I visited the TUC Archive.

⁵⁶ For example: 'Made in Dagenham's real-life sewing machinists speak to students at Barking and Dagenham College', *Barking and Dagenham Post*, 21 June 2013.

practiced and perfected their personal accounts of the dispute.⁵⁷ By comparing my own interview to the available transcript from the 2006 TUC interview, it is possible to identify common themes and anecdotes the former sewing machinists drew upon in their stories. These repeated themes and anecdotes are important as they represent cultural resources generated by the women themselves. By asking the women further questions about their personal experiences of the dispute, I examine how they consciously utilised, critiqued and adapted these public scripts to make sense of their past behaviour.

A further consequence of the former sewing-machinists' previous interview experience was that they had established a repertoire for responding to interview requests, which involved being interviewed as a group in Vera's house. Vera explained to me that they preferred the group interview format 'because it helps us to remember properly'. Speaking in a group clearly facilitated composure for some of these women who feared they may forget important details or provide an incomplete account of the dispute. Sharing their memories collectively allowed the women to reassure and validate each other's stories. Yet despite these benefits and interesting interactions, the group interview obviously does not provide the ideal setting for eliciting a life story; respondents interrupted each other and shaped their testimony to not only answer my questions, but also offer an account that they felt would be approved by their fellow interviewees. In addition, it is usually not the ideal environment to focus on an individual's life trajectory.

In 2015, I carried out a further interview with Gwen and Eileen in a local library in Dagenham. I asked to interview the women individually but was told by Gwen that this would not be possible for logistical reasons. Whilst it could be frustrating that the women's personal preferences for the oral history interview did not align with my own methodological inclinations, the second interview enabled me to ask further questions about the women's wider experiences based upon the prior knowledge I had acquired from the initial interview. It must be stressed that the testimonies gathered from the group interview did not represent a seamless reconstruction and there were tensions between voices, which means that an element of individuality remains. I have thus been able to offer a fresh account of this strike centred on participants' partly individual and partly collective reconstruction and interpretation of its causes, consequences and subjective

⁵⁷ Summerfield found that her own respondents with previous interview experience had a high level of understanding of the interview's dual purpose to construct a private account of their experience but also to contribute to a public project about women's experience more generally. She also claimed that producing their narratives helped to maintain their self-esteem. Summerfield, *Reconstructing Women's Wartime Lives*, p. 31.

meaning.

The oral history interviews have been analysed alongside reports of the strike in local and national newspapers. Unpublished archival material surrounding the dispute is difficult to trace.⁵⁸ I have examined official reports and the transcripts of evidence submitted to the Court of Inquiry into the sewing-machinist's grading grievance, as well as Harold Wilson's personal correspondence with the machinists and Ford management available in the National Archives. These sources provide insights into contemporary representations and understandings of the sewing-machinists' collective action.

1976 Trico Equal Pay Strike, Brentford

Chapter Three focuses on the 1976 strike for equal pay organised by female assembly workers at the Trico windscreen wiper factory in Brentford, west London. This case study draws upon a group interview with three former workers. I placed an advert in a local newspaper and online community forum, which received a very small response. Sally, a former shop steward agreed to be interviewed and contacted two of her former workmates – Phyllis and Peggy - on my behalf. Peggy and Phyllis were only willing to take part in a group interview, which took place in Sally's home in Ealing in April 2013. The interview lasted nearly four hours and involved a number of breaks that provided opportunities to speak with Peggy and Phyllis individually. Sally was interviewed a second time on her own in June 2013.

The Trico women had slightly more diverse personal backgrounds to my interview respondents from Dagenham. Peggy was born in Brentford in 1941 and had lived there her whole life. She left school when she was 15 years old and began working in Trico when she was 21 years old. She became active in the AUEW during the 1960s and was a shop steward at the time of the strike. Phyllis was born in Ireland and moved to Ealing, west London in 1969. She began working at Trico in 1970 and had played a less active role in the union. Finally, Sally was born in 1949 and grew up in Hertfordshire and Surrey in the South East where she had what she described as a 'Tory upbringing from Tory parents'. Sally moved to London in 1968 where she worked as a social worker and studied for a sociology degree until she split up with her husband in 1975. Sally began working at Trico soon afterwards. She played a lead role in organising the strike and became a shop steward

⁵⁸ I consulted the following records at the Modern Record Centre: MSS.631/8/8, NUVB London District Head Office Circulars; MSS.572/150, Papers of Ron Todd, Non-TGWU business and personal papers; MSS.126/TG/193/1/48, TGUW, Central Office Papers, The Record, 1968; MSS.126/TG/RES/GW/240/F/3, TGWU, Research Department Papers, Ford Motor Co Ltd. 1966-1968; MSS.126/TG/RES/GW/254/2, TGWU, Research Department Papers, Women, Equal Pay, 1968-1973

for the AUEW and women's officer for her local branch committee of the union. These brief biographical introductions illustrate the diversity between my respondents' age, personal history and levels of union activism. These differences occurred between the women in this case study, but also with the women interviewed for other case studies.

By comparison with the Dagenham sewing-machinists' dispute, there did not appear to be a prominent public memory of the Trico strike. Despite being the longest equal pay strike in British labour history, there had been no feature film, no musical, no commemorative plate and no TUC project to recognise the women's action at the time of the interview. Sally had given a talk about the strike for International Women's Day in March 2013 for the Ealing Trades Council and been interviewed as part of the TUC's Britain at Work project a couple of weeks before our group interview.⁵⁹ For Sally, the strike clearly represented a significant event within her life story despite its absence from public memory. She had collated her own scrapbook containing photographs, newspaper cuttings and ephemera and evidently felt that it was important that the strike was preserved for the historical record. By contrast, Peggy and Phyllis had not been interviewed before. At the beginning of the interview Peggy explained: 'all these things come back to you after all these years... I mean you sort of close your mind to it, but I was fascinated by Sally's scrapbooks... you know you feel as though you have done something in your life... especially when people like yourself come and ask you questions about it!'⁶⁰

Unlike the Dagenham sewing-machinists, they seemed surprised that I had taken an interest in their past. Sally's scrapbooks re-opened Peggy's memories of the dispute, whilst the oral history interview by 'someone like myself' – a researcher from an elite university (it is difficult to speculate who else they imagined me to be – I discuss this further below) – represented a new form of public recognition of her past that prompted her to think about the personal meaning of the dispute. A consequence of this was that Peggy and Phyllis initially did not appear to feel confident about telling their story of the strike on their own and found the company of their fellow workmates reassuring, interesting and a source of stimulation for their own memory. The preference of both the Dagenham and Trico workers for a group interview recalled Graham Smith's suggestion that whilst one-to-one interviews represent a familiar method of collecting data for the oral historian, group

⁵⁹ Interview with Sally Groves by David Welsh and Rima Joebear on 25 March 2013 for TUC, Britain at Work Oral History Project, available at <http://www.unionhistory.info/equalpay/display.php?irn=1209&QueryPage=advsearch.php>

⁶⁰ Interview with Peggy, Phyllis and Sally in London, 10 April 2013.

remembering represents a more common aspect of everyday life for most people in post-industrial countries.⁶¹

The group interview presents challenges as well as benefits. Valerie Yow claims that ‘conjoint interviews are at the top of the scale for high-risk endeavours’, whilst Donald Ritchie suggests ‘group interviews increase the potential for trouble’.⁶² The subject of the discussion can change quickly, which disrupts personal reminiscence and could potentially minimize the amount of information shared between the groups as a whole. Power relationships occur between interviewees as well as the interviewer. Interviewees can challenge or ‘correct’ one another, and dominant characters can inhibit those with less confidence from sharing their own interpretations of the past. For example, at one stage of the Dagenham interview I asked the women whether they had enjoyed working at Fords. They responded as follows:

Gwen: Oh definitely. Yeah, I made some really good friends, and we’ve been friends ever since.

Sheila: It was pretty well paid as well, with regards to other work.

Vera: Yes it was the best paid job definitely.

Gwen: But then all of us did outdoor work as well, because we all had our families.

Sheila: Err...excluding me!

Gwen: Sheila is the only single one amongst us...well, we’re all single now.

Sheila: Vera’s still got Tom!

Vera: So I am the lucky one then? I think he likes to keep away from me, he’s always upstairs He’s got to go out for a haircut today...⁶³

Whilst I aimed to encourage a free flowing narrative and avoid disrupting respondents’ when speaking, there were times during the interview and transcription process where I struggled to see the relevance of some subjective emotional responses to the aims of the thesis. The example above illustrates not only how the subject of conversation could rapidly change, but also how individual respondents attempted to speak on the behalf of other group members. The former sewing-machinists in particular were aware when they deviated from their established account and would often attempt to steer one another back towards the subject of the strike. They would say things like ‘but you don’t want to hear about this’ or ‘we’ll start telling you about our old boyfriends next! What you really want

⁶¹ Smith, ‘Beyond Individual/Collective Memory’, p. 79.

⁶² Valerie Yow, *Recording Oral History: A Practical Guide for Social Scientists*, (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1994) and Donald Ritchie, *Doing Oral History*, (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1995) in Smith, *Beyond Individual/Collective Memory*, p. 77.

⁶³ Interview with Eileen, Gwen, Sheila and Vera, Rainham, Essex, 21 June 2013.

to hear about is the strike, don't you?'⁶⁴ This straying off topic also occurs in individual interviews and can be seen as informative.

The topic of conversation also changed frequently in my interview with the Brentford women. For Peggy and Sally, who had both played an important role in organising the strike, the interview appeared to represent an opportunity to share as many anecdotes and stories about the strike as they could remember. They reminded each other of former colleagues, union officials, picketers, strike-breakers, incidents, events and decisions they had taken in the past, which they also passed judgements on. Phyllis had worked in a different department to Peggy and Sally, and had not been as active in the union. She added her own stories about personal conflicts with union officials or workmates, and other protests she had participated in aside from the equal pay strike. In this manner, the group interviews helped elucidate the ways individuals used their memories of the past as a means of establishing common identities and a sense of belonging, but also, in the words of Smith, 'delineating their personal memories from those of others' as a means of asserting their individuality.⁶⁵

The group interviews provide new insights into the women's own subjective understanding of why they went on strike and personal implications of these moments that would otherwise be unavailable. Their words do not have less meaning simply because they were spoken in front of people other than myself. The transition in conversation topic and power dynamic that occurred between respondents could be seen as problematic, certainly in terms of eliciting a detailed life history from respondents. Yet it could also be argued that the influence of these relationships between interviewees are interesting occurrences in themselves that reflect the reality of how memories are created in the first place: in a dialogue between personal memory and shared public narratives. It seems naive to expect that the women I interviewed were likely to volunteer a more authentic account of their selves to me on a one-to-one basis than they were in front of each other, especially when it was their own personal preference to be interviewed as part of a group.⁶⁶

There remained aspects of women's wider experience and personal relationships in terms of their family, childhood and upbringing, as well as their subsequent experiences of work that I would have liked to have known more about. Respondents may have felt reluctant to talk about these broader experiences in front of their former workmates. They

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Smith, 'Beyond Individual/Collective Memory', pp. 88-89.

⁶⁶ Portelli suggests that no interview will produce the representation of an undivided or whole self. Alessandro Portelli, 'What makes oral history different' in Portelli, *Death of Luigi Trastulli*, p. 41.

may have just thought it was inappropriate. Not everyone buys into the ‘confessional culture’ and nor should oral historians expect them to. Another plausible explanation is they prepared themselves to talk about their specific experiences of the strike and aspects of these wider experiences did not seem relevant to the story they were trying to tell about themselves.

Chapter Three draws upon a further interview Barbara was 25 old at the time and had grown up in Brentford. She was chairperson of her local branch of the Labour Party Young Socialists and joined the assembly workers on the picket line throughout the strike.

Personal accounts of the dispute were analysed in relation to a range of written sources. These included local and national newspaper reports, as well as articles and documents produced by various left wing political groups found in the Papers of Alan Clinton at the Modern Records Centre. The strike was also reported in feminist publications such as *Red Rag* and *Spare Rib*, which situated the strike within the broader context of growing feminist activism and WLM groups that emerged across Britain in the period following the Dagenham sewing-machinists’ strike. The Amalgamated Engineering Union (AEU) officially supported the strike and the women received significant backing from the Southall District Branch. The correspondence of the AEU Southall Branch was consulted alongside the records and strike bulletins produced by the official strike committee. I also considered how the union responded to the strike at a national level in their monthly publication. This combination of published and unpublished material provides insight into public representations of the dispute at the time. They offer a view of the AEU’s response to the dispute from a local and national perspective. Taken together, these written sources indicate contemporary expectations and judgements made about the women’s collective action and the legitimacy of their demand for equal pay.

1972 Sexton Shoe Factory Occupation, Fakenham

Chapter Four reconsiders the 1972 occupation of Sexton’s shoe factory organised by female workers fighting to save their jobs in Fakenham, Norfolk. The occupation lasted 18 weeks before the women established their own co-operative that traded with varied levels of success until it entered receivership in 1977. The interviews for this chapter had a different format to the previous case studies and took place in a slightly unusual setting. Rather than in a group interview, I interviewed Marees, Margaret and Patricia individually at a commemorative day held in the Fakenham Gas Museum. Marees and Margaret were born in the 1950s and had grown up in Fakenham and the surrounding area. Patricia was born in 1946 and moved to Fakenham from Surrey with her husband shortly before the

occupation. Marees and Patricia both became directors of the newly established co-operative. All three women were members of the National Union of Footwear and Allied Trades (NUFLAT).

The commemorative day had helpfully been organised by members of the local history society in response to an article I had written for the *Fakenham and Dereham Times* attempting to locate surviving women from the occupation. I was able to interview the women individually, which facilitated a better opportunity to adopt a life story approach than the group interviews in the previous chapters. This meant the women possibly discussed the specific details of the occupation less than the group interviewees, who reminded each other about specific events and individuals involved in each dispute. However, the women I interviewed individually appeared to talk more freely (without interruption) about themselves and gave a greater impression of what the dispute meant to them personally, and how they related it to other aspects of their lives. They spoke for longer periods about their families, childhood and experiences of work after they had left the co-operative than participants in the group interviews. Sometimes it appeared that they preferred to talk about these broader themes than the specific details of the dispute itself. This recalled Joan Sangster's experience of interviewing Canadian textile workers about their participation in a strike for union recognition in 1937. Sangster expected to hear tales about violent class conflict from reading contemporary newspaper and union reports about angry exchanges and fighting on the picket line. She was shocked when her five respondents downplayed the seriousness of the strike, with one woman preferring to talk about her wedding and another respondent remembering the strike as a 'hey-day' that involved street dances rather than tear gas.⁶⁷ For Sangster, the divergence between public accounts and individual memories of the strike's meaning illustrated the variance between individual women's experience. Yet she also insisted on the value of women's narratives, not just as individual representations of the past, but as active rejoinders to women's work and family experiences. Similarly, the Fakenham women I interviewed (and the other women I interviewed individually) did not always remember full details, and did not always align their stories with – or even seem aware of - public representations of the dispute. Nevertheless, their testimony enables a greater appreciation of where they situated this moment of collective resistance in relation to their wider sense of self.

The National Union of Allied Footwear and Leather Trades (NUFLAT) refused to recognise the dispute. However, the women received substantial backing from the wider

⁶⁷ Sangster, 'Telling our stories', pp. 16-28.

labour movement, WLM and radical left. These varied levels of support had two significant consequences. Firstly, the backing the women received from political activists raised the profile of the occupation. The occupation's progress was reported regularly in the local press and their action was commented upon in national newspapers. Moreover, their action was discussed in both feminist and socialist publications; it was the subject of three political films and an episode of BBC's Women's Hour. It has since been cited by historians and sociologists as an example of working-class women's militancy that symbolised changing ideas about gender, work and class in the 1970s.⁶⁸ Yet it appeared from my interviews that this form of collective remembering had taken place away from the women themselves. For example, when I first enquired at the TUC archive about the occupation, the archivist remembered it as being 'massive'. By contrast, my interviewees appeared surprised that I had shown an interest in the dispute, with Marees pointing out that she had not thought about it for a while, whilst Patricia did not remember 'anyone saying much about it at the time'.⁶⁹

Secondly, the widespread media coverage of the dispute meant there were numerous written sources available to reconstruct contemporary accounts of the occupation. It was widely reported in both the local and national press, as well as WLM publications. Many of these publications included interviews with female workers involved in the occupation at the time. More extensive interviews carried out by filmmaker Diane Glass with forewoman Nancy McGrath and other workers have also been examined. These personal accounts offer glimpses into the everyday experiences and understandings of women who participated in the occupation. Finally, I carried out an additional oral history interview with Judy Wajcman, who completed an ethnographic study documenting her experience of working in the factory for three months in 1975 as a WLM activist at Cambridge University.⁷⁰ Her testimony provides an account of the interaction between feminist activists and female workers engaged in industrial action, which was not forthcoming from the interviews with former workers.

1981 Lee Jeans Factory Occupation, Greenock

Chapter Five offers an original account of the 1981 Lee Jeans factory occupation, involving 240 female sewing-machinists in Greenock, Inverclyde. The women occupied the factory for seven months and successfully saved their jobs. The chapter draws upon

⁶⁸ Rowbotham, *The Past is Before Us*, p. 233.

⁶⁹ Interview with Marees in Fakenham, 15 April 2013; Interview with Patricia in Fakenham, 15 April 2013.

⁷⁰ Wajcman, *Women in Control: Dilemmas of a Workers' Cooperative*, (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1983).

two oral history interviews with Margaret and Helen who I located via personal contacts and word-of-mouth. Margaret was born in 1961 and grew up in Greenock. She left Lee Jeans shortly after the occupation and opened her own laundrette business in the town, which is where the interview took place. Helen was born in 1946 and had worked in a number of machining jobs before she moved to Lee Jeans in 1970. She was elected shop steward and played a crucial role in organising and leading the occupation.

The occupation received significant support at a local and national level. In their interviews, Helen and Margaret both emphasised the significance of support from the local shipbuilders, trades council and STUC, which had continued to organise reunion events to celebrate their victory. Helen had been interviewed for a Scottish Television documentary called 'Women of the Clyde' shortly after the occupation.⁷¹ The 30th anniversary of the occupation had also been recognised by the Scottish Parliament in 2011 with a special debate, which was widely covered in the local and Scottish press. The result was that both interviewees were well aware of the wider significance of their fight for the right to work, and its connections to public narratives about the West of Scotland's labour heritage. The occupation represented a significant event to have occurred in both their lives, and appeared to leave a greater legacy in the local and national collective memory than the Fakenham occupation. This influenced respondents' testimony in the sense that they had rehearsed their story and thought about the personal and public meaning of the occupation before the oral history interview. They appeared more aware of public stories about who they were and the meaning of the occupation which they could utilise or critique in the process of the oral history interview.

The oral history interviews were examined alongside extracts of personal testimony from workers gathered at the time, or shortly after the dispute. The Scottish feminist publication *Ms-Print* printed a special report that contained interviews with the workers at the time. Shirley Henderson interviewed former workers in 1986 and Nick Lorentzen interviewed Helen in 1984 for articles about Scottish women's history and resistance to unemployment.⁷² The extracts were read critically and compared to my own respondents' testimony. They represented windows on to the values, ideas and attitudes of the Lee Jeans workers at the time of the occupation, but did not provide a 'full picture' of individuals'

⁷¹ Women of the Clyde, *Time Quines*, A Scottish Television Production, air date unknown, available online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ifs8QvgiMg>.

⁷² Shirley Henderson 'Fighting for our Jobs' in Shirley Henderson and Alison Mackay (eds), *Grit and Diamonds: Women in Scotland Making History, 1980-1990*, (Edinburgh: Stramullion Ltd., 1990), p. 2; Nick Lorentzen, "You Can't fight for jobs and just sit there": The Lee Jeans Sit-In' in Hugo Levie, Denis Gregory and Nick Lorentzen (eds.), *Fighting Closures: De-industrialisation and the Trade Unions 1979-1983*, (Nottingham: Spokesman, 1984).

life stories or broader political consciousness. Yet these glimpses of contemporary political subjectivity are useful for understanding women's own explanations and evaluations of their motivations and efficacy of their collective action at the time.

The occupation was reported widely in the local and Scottish press. Press reports were used to reconstruct events surrounding the occupation and provide examples of how the women's action was judged at the time. The occupation received minimal support from the National Union of Tailor and Garment Workers; it was briefly mentioned in the union's monthly publication, yet I found no reference to the dispute in the National Executive Committee's internal minutes and correspondence. The STUC provided full support for the occupation and their correspondence and minutes provide a view of contemporary representations and attitudes towards the occupation from within the labour movement.

1984-85 Ford Sewing Machinists' Strike, Dagenham

The final chapter returns to Ford Dagenham to examine the successful nine-week strike for improved grading involving 150 predominantly female sewing-machinists in 1984, 16 years after the demand was originally put forward. I interviewed Dora and Pamela in individual interviews at each respondent's home. Both women had grown up in Dagenham, worked in various machining jobs before moving to Ford in the 1970s. Dora became TGWU shop-steward and remained active in the union after she retired. She recommended that I should speak to Pam who had played a prominent role in organising the strike and later became a supervisor in the factory.

Both women had been interviewed in 2006 as part of the TUC Winning Equal Pay project. Dora had participated in some further interviews and public events since the production of *Made in Dagenham*, although neither of them had been involved in the 1968 strike. There was a sense that the film and subsequent media attention focusing upon the 1968 strike had diverted attention from their own dispute, and their core concern with skill recognition. Dora was tired of answering questions about the strike from journalists who did not understand the distinction between the strikes in 1968 and 1984.⁷³ Similarly, Pam explained that the film producers had originally consulted them when they decided to make the film, 'But then, after a little while, they got rid of us sort of thing. And just kept with the 68 girls.' She felt 'No one really wanted to know about the 84, which annoyed us... because we was out for seven weeks, and the other girls were only out for about a week,

⁷³ Interview with Dora in Dagenham, 4 August 2015.

and still never got what they wanted. But we got what we wanted and everyone was forgetting us'.⁷⁴

The presence of the 1968 strike, and the various public narratives identifying it as a key moment in women's history loomed large in the room. Both respondents composed their narrative by distancing themselves from *Made and Dagenham* and by emphasising the distinctiveness of their own personal experiences and work culture that led to their decision to go on strike in 1984. The interviews were considered in relation to national and local newspaper reports. I found no reference to the dispute in the TGWU notes of proceedings of the Ford National Joint Negotiating Committee, yet I have considered the TGWU's response from a national level focusing upon their monthly publication.⁷⁵

Gender and Intersubjectivity

Intersubjectivity refers to the interaction between the subjectivities of the interviewer and interviewee.⁷⁶ The personal testimony gained from an oral history interview is the result of a dialogic process between the respondent with him or herself, the interviewer and the respondent, and between the cultural discourse of the present and the past.⁷⁷ The stories my interviewees told me represented narrative constructions of memories of experience actively created for who they imagined me to be (and fellow workmates in the case of the group interviewees). It is an inescapable aspect of the production of memory and is significantly influenced by gender.⁷⁸ A feminist approach to oral history suggests that an uneven distribution of power between men and women in wider social relations will influence the relationship between interviewer and interviewee, as well as more general socio-linguistic processes.⁷⁹

In terms of the relationship between myself and my interviewees, a feminist approach to oral history recognises that the idea of an equal relationship between academic researchers and their subjects is impossible to achieve because the researcher cannot escape their institutional position.⁸⁰ Kristina Minister suggested that oral historians could limit the inequality of the intersubjective relationship by placing themselves in a subjective

⁷⁴ Interview with Pam in Romford, 16 September 2015.

⁷⁵ MRC, MSS.126/TG/466/A1/1/2/6, TGWU, Ford National Joint Negotiating Committee, Notes of Proceedings; MSS.126/TG/193/1/64, TGWU, The Record, 1984; MSS.126/TG/193/1/65, TGWU, The Record, 1985.

⁷⁶ Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, p. 56.

⁷⁷ Ibid. p. 57.

⁷⁸ Summerfield, *Reconstructing Women's Wartime Lives*, p. 23.

⁷⁹ Ibid. p. 23.

⁸⁰ Ibid. p. 24.

position within the project.⁸¹ The previous section's account of the various circumstances surrounding my interviews illustrates that both my subject position, and the levels of responsibility interviewees assumed changed throughout the project. Whilst my gender, race, age, accent, appearance, demeanour and questions remained (relatively) constant, the manner in which different interviewees interpreted and responded to these factors, and imagined who I was will have varied considerably. Respondents also assumed different levels of responsibility for the shape of the project: some took it upon themselves to organise group interviews and some recommended other people I should speak to. All respondents were given the opportunity to read the interview transcript, but nobody made any adjustments. Ultimately, the responsibility for interpreting and analysing their narrative lay with me.⁸²

The majority of respondents seemed generally pleased that I had taken an interest in their past, and appeared to assume that I sympathised with their action and subsequent political beliefs from the fact that I was there to speak to them about it.⁸³ Some women gleaned further insights into who I was from various encounters outside of the 'interview frame': Sally gave me a lift in her car from the train station; Helen walked with me to the station in Greenock; and I shared a taxi with Gwen and Eileen before our second meeting. These external encounters possibly facilitated a richer personal testimony as I built a rapport with interviewees and we both gained a better understanding of each other's attitudes and expectations towards the interview. By contrast, there was limited opportunity to talk with the Fakenham women before the interviews due to the formal nature of the commemorative event that had been organised by the local history society. My interviewees' responses were also shaped by shifts in my subject position during the interview itself. For example, Gwen and Eileen commented that I had asked them different questions to what they had been expecting in our second interview, which implies that their understanding of who I was and what my interests were changed over the course of the interview.

It would be reasonable to assume that the fact I was a male researcher, born 28 years after my youngest respondent and 58 years after the eldest, will have influenced my

⁸¹ Kristina Minister, 'A Feminist Frame for the Oral History Interview' in Sherna B. Gluck and Daphne Patai (eds.), *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History*, (London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 27-40, at pp. 30-31.

⁸² Summerfield, *Reconstructing Women's Wartime Lives*, p. 25.

⁸³ This possibly facilitated a richer and more confident personal testimony, and I am satisfied that I have constructed a critical analysis of their testimony, regardless of any sympathy I had for their actions. I was not assessing the moral value or legitimacy of their action, but was seeking to understand what it meant to them personally.

interviewees' testimony. It is difficult to judge the precise effects of this without being able to compare my interviews with those of a female researcher. Hilary Young argues that her subject position as a young, educated and liberated woman affected her older male respondent's testimony in her research on Scottish masculinities.⁸⁴ She suggests that they perceived her 'as someone who approved of changed gender roles' and composed their testimony accordingly by either: giving examples from their past that conformed with contemporary discourses surrounding the 'new man'; or by asserting a macho image they felt had been undermined and challenged by women like herself. Young felt that a male interviewee may have elicited a different narrative from the same respondents.⁸⁵

In the context of this thesis, not one respondent commented directly on my gender. There were a few occasions where women began talking about instances where men had made derogatory comments about their sexuality before stopping quickly – clearly uncertain about how to talk about this with me in a way that may not have occurred with a female researcher. Respondents also openly said little about their children and their families without specific prompts. I wondered if they may have said more to a female researcher who they imagined might have had similar experiences of returning to work after having a child. Although a female interviewer may have elicited different responses, the key point here is that I have adopted a feminist aim throughout my interviews to recognise and privilege women's own definitions, understandings and interpretations of their experiences.⁸⁶

Whilst my aim was to foreground women's individual voices, memories and motivations, I was also aware that people exist, think and talk within social structures and that these frame individual experiences. My respondents' understanding and articulation of their experiences of workplace militancy were also shaped by class, but nobody made explicit reference to my own social class as an interviewer. As Selina Todd suggests, class represents an important discourse in twentieth century Britain, which provided people with a 'means of understanding the unequal distribution of power, but also a means by which they understood their daily lives and place within society'.⁸⁷ The majority of my respondents referred to their material circumstances throughout the interviews, yet it was difficult to identify a clear relationship between class and my interviewees' explanations

⁸⁴ Hilary Young, 'Hard Man, New Man: Re/composing masculinities in Glasgow, c. 1950-2000, *Oral History*, vol.35, no. 1, (2007), pp. 78-79.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.* p. 77-78.

⁸⁶ Kathryn Anderson and Dan Jack, 'Learning to Listen: Interview Techniques and Analysis' in Rob Perks and Alistair Thomson, *Oral History Reader*, (London: Routledge, 1998), pp. 155-170, at p. 170.

⁸⁷ Todd, 'Class, Experience and Britain's Twentieth Century', p. 493.

for their behaviour. As Jon Lawrence writes: ‘in everyday usage, class was a mutable concept – its boundaries fuzzy – its purpose to make sense of inequalities in power relations rather than to make powerful claims about self-identity’.⁸⁸ The point I wish to make here is that by emphasising the complexity of the relationship between class and individual self-understanding, I am not denying the presence, or influence of structured class inequality on women’s experiences of workplace militancy. However, class represented only one of multiple discourses my interviewees used to make sense of their subjective motivations to engage in collective action, and my respondents identified themselves and their aims with other people in different ways.

Finally, a limitation with this study is attention to race. Race is obviously a prominent issue within women’s workplace politics after the Second World War, with workers from ethnic minorities representing some of the lowest paid and most exploited section of the female labour force.⁸⁹ McDowell, Anitha and Pearson have recently demonstrated how race and ethnicity, as well as gender, divided the experience and interests of the South Asian women on strike at Grunwick from their supporters in 1976-1978. They suggest that although the imagery and ‘otherness’ of South Asian women on strike captured the imagination of the labour movement at the time, the voices of the women were largely ignored by union leaders, and have been absent in the history of the strike since. It is suggested that the failure of the TGWU (now UNITE) to support South Asian female workers involved in a dispute at Gate Gourmet in 2005 illustrates the persistence of racist and sexist attitudes within trade unions in the present.⁹⁰

Whilst race was a key issue that I wanted to explore in my case studies, only white women came forward to be interviewed. As a result, the experiences presented in this thesis are those of white working-class women and race is only touched upon in case studies where a large proportion of the workforce comprised of women from ethnic minorities, such as the Trico strike examined in chapter 3.

Conclusion

This thesis aims to offer original accounts of industrial disputes involving female workers from the perspective of women involved. I interviewed participants from each dispute to: gain an understanding of their broader experiences and attitudes towards paid

⁸⁸ Jon Lawrence, ‘Class, Affluence and the Study of Everyday Life in Britain, c. 1930-64’, *Cultural and Social History*, vol. 10, no. 2, pp. 273-299, at p. 275.

⁸⁹ Juliet Cook and Shantu Watt, ‘Racism, Women and Poverty’ in Caroline Glendinning and Jane Millar, *Women and Poverty in Britain*, (Brighton: Whitesheaf, 1987), pp. 53-73.

⁹⁰ McDowell, et. al, ‘Striking Narratives’, pp. 595-619.

work, trade unionism and feminism; and examine their political subjectivity as they discussed their personal motivations for engaging in collective action and the subsequent impact upon their political attitudes. The preceding discussion illustrates how my interviews did not always align with my initial methodological ideal: some women were only willing to be interviewed in a group; some women could only be interviewed at a specific event; some women appeared to feel like they had little to say. Yet as Abrams points out, whilst researchers may be disappointed when they struggle to elicit self-reflective life-story narratives from their respondents after reading the theory, ‘we can still gain insights from seemingly unpromising material into that person’s sense of self and the way that they position themselves within the broader narrative.’⁹¹ The personal testimonies used in the case studies that follow varied in ways that reflected the specific circumstances of each interview, the various public narratives and collective memories surrounding each dispute, and obviously the different experiences and attitudes of each individual. Whilst there were instances where I would have liked to have known more about my interview respondents, the same could be said about the various accounts of each dispute found in written documents. At no point did I feel I had failed to achieve an elusive ‘saturation’ point in listening to my interviewees’ testimony. Portelli’s advice that one must ‘always respect what people choose to tell you’ was at the forefront of my mind at all times.⁹² I appreciated my respondents’ explanations for why they engaged in each dispute and analysed the meaning they ascribed to their past experience that they conveyed to me in the interview. In doing so, the thesis achieves its aims of offering original accounts of each case study and contributes to post-war women’s and gender history by examining women’s own stories about paid work, trade unionism and feminism told in their own words.

⁹¹ Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, p. 51.

⁹² Portelli, *Death of Luigi Trastulli*, p. x.

Chapter 2: The Ford Sewing-Machinists' Strike, 1968, Dagenham

On 7 June 1968, the 187 female sewing-machinists at Ford's River Plant in Dagenham, Essex, walked out of their factory and apparently 'into the pages of history', as they went on strike against sex discrimination in their job grading.¹ Ford had introduced a new wage structure in 1967 that separated the workforce into five standard grades, ranging from the least skilled Grade A, which included non-production workers, to Grade E, which comprised the most skilled craft jobs. The sewing-machinists, who produced car-seat covers, were placed in the second-lowest, semi-skilled B grade. They believed they were entitled to the higher C grade because of the levels of experience and training required to perform their work. They argued that the company undertaking the job evaluation scheme failed to recognise the skilled nature of their work because it was performed by women and they voted to strike until Ford re-graded them.

The strike lasted for three weeks and brought Ford's entire British production line to a standstill.² The women gained official support from the National Union of Vehicle Builders (NUVB) and Amalgamated Union of Engineering and Foundry Workers (AEF). They were joined by the 195 women at Ford's Halewood plant in Merseyside after two weeks. The dispute was resolved when Ford asked Barbara Castle, the Secretary of State for Employment and Productivity, to intervene and 'do whatever it takes' to persuade the women to return to work.³ Instead of recognising the sewing-machinists' demand for skill recognition, they were offered a 7 per cent pay increase, a court of inquiry into their grading grievance and the promise of equal pay legislation in the future. As a result, although the women did not gain the re-grading they desired, the strike has been seen as a landmark in British industrial relations, widely associated with prompting the 1970 Equal Pay Act, which made pay discrimination on the basis of gender illegal.

¹ John Friedman and Sander Meredeem, *The Dynamics of Industrial Conflict: Lessons from Ford*, (London: Croom Helm Ltd., 1980) p. 1.

² For full details of how the strike unfolded see: Friedman and Meredeem, *Dynamics of Industrial Conflict*, chapters 3 and 4. Henry Friedman, the River Plant convenor, and Sander Meredeem, Ford Personnel Manager have written a full account of the causes and consequences of the dispute from the perspective of leading union and management figures involved. Rather than analysing the behaviour of the unions and management involved, I have drawn upon documentary sources generated by the company and unions as evidence of contemporary representations and judgements made about the sewing-machinists themselves, of whom much less is known.

³ *Ibid.* p. 96.

Consequently, the strike occupies a key position in the historiography of feminism and women's trade unionism in Britain.⁴ It is generally associated as a turning point in British attitudes towards women's work and gender equality.⁵ Feminist activists identified the strike as an important moment in the formation of the WLM.⁶ It has also been cited as evidence of the effects of women's growing presence within the labour movement.⁷ The strike is an unusual example of an industrial dispute from the post-war period that has publically been remembered, even celebrated for its national impact. The film and subsequent musical served to weave the place of the dispute tightly within the public history of women and gender equality in Britain, as discussed in the previous chapter. Gregor Gall wrote in *The Guardian* in 2010:

But make history the Ford women machinists did. Their action was the inspiration for the Equal Pay Act 1970...the Dagenham women workers were among those that laid the foundations for something bigger – women starting to play a much fuller part in deciding how their workplace relations were determined.⁸

From the opposite end of the ideological spectrum, *The Daily Mail* claimed the women 'changed the course of British history by going on strike in 1968, demanding the same wages as the men and paving the way for the 1970 Equal Pay Act.'⁹

Such accounts have failed to consider the impact of the strike upon the sewing-machinists themselves. Whilst not necessarily denying the wider impact of the strike, by focusing on how it influenced equality legislation, the WLM and the representation of women in the labour movement, the existing literature has centred on its effects upon women who worked outside of Ford at the expense of the sewing-machinists' own interpretation of the strike's outcome. Although former sewing-machinists have been interviewed in the press about their experiences of the strike since the production of the film in 2010, the extent to which they felt their militancy allowed them 'to play a fuller part in deciding how their workplace relations were determined', and the position of the

⁴ Rowbotham, *The Past is Before Us*, pp. 165-166; Segal, 'Feminist impacts and transformations', p. 171; Smith, 'The Women's Movement, Politics and Citizenship', p. 283; Bouchier, *The Feminist Challenge*, pp. 56-57.

⁵ Thane, 'Women in the 1970s', p. 154; Holloway, *Women and Work*, p. 208; Helen McCarthy, 'Gender Equality', in Pat Thane (ed.) *Unequal Britain: Equalities in Britain since 1945*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2010), p. 111.

⁶ Sheila Rowbotham and Beatrix Campbell, 'Class Struggle in Britain', *Radical America*, Vol.8, no. 5, (1974), p. 66; Coote and Campbell, *Sweet Freedom*, pp. 9-10; Pollert, *Girls, Wives, Factory Lives*, pp. 12-13; Ruth Eliot, 'How Far Have We Come? Women's Organization in the Unions in the United Kingdom', *Feminist Review*, No. 16, (1984), 64-73; Val Coultas, 'Feminists Must Face the Future', *Feminist Review*, No. 7 (Spring, 1981), pp. 35-48.

⁷ Boston, *Women Workers*, p. 279; Wrigley, 'Women in the Labour' p. 55; Todd, *The People*, pp. 288-289.

⁸ Gregor Gall, 'Women didn't just strike in Dagenham', *The Guardian*, 4 October 2010.

⁹ Maureen Paton, 'The Dagenham Girls: Meet four friends whose crusading work inspired a new film', *The Daily Mail*, 11 September 2010.

disputes within these women's life stories has still to be explored.¹⁰ This is significant considering they interpreted the initial outcome of the strike as a defeat at the time and had to wait until 1985 to have the skilled nature of their work recognised after another seven-week strike (which is analysed in chapter 6). The sewing-machinists' disappointment with the strike's outcome was captured in an interview with shop steward Lil O'Callaghan in 1978 when she reflected:

We mucked it up. We should have left it open to fight another battle on another day... The girls felt they were in B Grade because of sex discrimination. It wasn't the money, it was the principle involved – our skill was not recognised, and we are skilled. Today we still feel it isn't fair'.¹¹

Fellow shop steward Rose Boland echoed her disillusionment, saying: '... although we did get more money, we did not gain the point, we won a battle, but lost the war'.¹² Looking back on the strike in 2013, a former worker named Gwen expressed a similar view to me:

I mean really Ford's had won, if we're being honest, after we had gone back to work Ford's had won because we never got our grading. We hadn't got what we wanted... All they had given us was a rise. And not an equal pay rise, not equality.¹³

This failure to analyse the personal meaning of the strike within the participants' life stories raises issues about how class and gender inequality in the past are publically remembered and interpreted, and whose memory of such inequality is accepted and portrayed in the public sphere. It is a literal example of the 'Hollywood epic view' of history, which emphasises the individual's capacity to produce social change whilst downplaying the fact they do so within conditions not of their choosing.¹⁴ The women's continued experience of class and gender inequality after their strike spoils the 'feel good' narrative and is thus ignored.

This chapter offers an original account of the dispute from the perspective of the women involved. (As discussed in Chapter 1, I carried out a group interview with Eileen, Gwen, Sheila and Vera and an additional interview with Eileen and Gwen). It is original because it locates the strike within participants' life stories; it foregrounds their own understanding of why they engaged in the strike and their judgements of its outcome. It accounts for the women's perception of the strike as a defeat and explains how they reconciled this with the public memory of it as a victory for equal pay. For my interviewees, this involved constructing narratives that emphasised their agency, but also

¹⁰ Gall, 'Women didn't just strike at Dagenham'.

¹¹ Interview with Lil O'Callaghan and Rose Boland by Henry Friedman in 1978 in Friedman and Meredeen, *Dynamics*, p. 176.

¹² *Ibid.* p. 176.

¹³ Interview with Gwen, Eileen, Sheila and Vera, 21st June 2013.

¹⁴ Pollert, *Girls, Wives, Factory Lives*, p. 11.

accounted for the gender and class constraints that characterised their experiences of work and trade unionism, and limited the impact of the strike upon their sense of self until the production of the film. Respondents continuously drew upon two distinct narratives of change to make sense of the dispute and account for their personal experience. The first narrative concentrated on (their perception of) the effects of industrial decline in Dagenham. They claimed job stability, trade unionism and affordable housing in the past enabled them to construct a vibrant work culture and a degree of personal autonomy that explained their role in the strike, which they also felt was no longer available to their grandchildren. The second narrative centred on the different ways that gender relations had changed within their own lifetime. On the one hand, wider education and job opportunities available to their granddaughters was used as evidence of a positive change in gender relations that had occurred since their strike. On the other hand, they discussed unequal pay-differentials between men and women in the present to make sense of their continued experience of gender inequality and explain why they had doubted their political efficacy until they had watched the feature film. Respondents returned to these narratives of continuity and change throughout the interviews to align their personal memory of the strike as a defeat with their newfound public role as history makers. In doing so, they accounted for both their individual and collective agency, but also the social and economic constraints they faced as working-class women, which characterised their experiences of work and trade unionism and meant the strike was inscribed in a narrative of decline rather than progress.

Context

Each dispute examined in this thesis was shaped by the specific local context in which it took place. Dagenham was one of the largest housing estates in the world and Ford represented one of Britain's largest employers with a turbulent history of industrial relations. Ford moved its original factory from Manchester to Dagenham in 1926. The Essex town represented an ideal location due to the ready supply of unskilled and unemployed workers who had moved into the newly built Becontree Housing Estate.¹⁵ The London County Council built 27,000 houses there between 1921 and 1932 in response to the housing shortage in London's East End at the end of the First World War.¹⁶ In 1963, Dagenham's population was 90,000 and Ford employed 35,000 people.¹⁷

¹⁵ Friedman and Meredeen, *Dynamics*, p. 54.

¹⁶ Peter Willmott, *The Evolution of a Community: A Study of Dagenham After Forty Years*, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, 1963), p. 6.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* p. 13.

A significant proportion of British people moved from inner city urban districts to new suburban housing estates during the interwar period.¹⁸ Post-war sociologists were particularly concerned with understanding the effect of this process upon working-class people's lives.¹⁹ Some initially felt the transition disrupted family and kinship networks in 'traditional' working-class communities and led to isolation and aloofness in new housing estates. Between 1958 and 1959, Peter Wilmott interviewed almost 900 residents in Dagenham seeking to identify the social patterns that had evolved amongst the first generation to grow up there.²⁰ Wilmott found that the town had developed from an isolated 'dormitory' that suffered from a lack of industry, services and transport links, into a vibrant community that maintained similar patterns of sociability, kinship networks and political attitudes as 'traditional' working-class communities from where many of Dagenham's first residents had migrated from. 'Dagenham is the East End reborn' wrote Wilmott, as he expressed surprise at the levels of affection residents showed for a place he also described as a 'monstrosity in town-planning.'²¹ For Wilmott, Dagenham remained a 'one class' town in 1963 and continued to be distinguished by its lack of civic centre, which he believed inhibited associational culture.²² However, he concluded that the residents of Dagenham had built a way of life they enjoyed because they had access to local employment and affordable housing that enabled them to spend time with their family and neighbours and pursue leisure activities.²³

The women I interviewed were part of this first generation to grow up in Dagenham and the surrounding area. The local context was particularly important for understanding the position of the strike in my interviewees' life stories. They all spoke positively about growing up and working in Dagenham at the time of the strike and contrasted this to the sense of insecurity they felt existed in the town in the present. Sheila was born in Dagenham in 1936 after her parents had moved from Poplar, East London. Her father worked at Briggs Motor Bodies and Ford, and her mother 'didn't go to work at first, not till the children were older' (further information about her mother's work was not forthcoming). Sheila left school when she was 14 years old and worked as a sewing machinist producing overalls and jeans at a local factory. She moved to Ford when she 21

¹⁸ Mark Clapson writes about a 'suburban boom of the inter-war years' when 4 million new homes were built, including 1.5 million council dwellings in Mark Clapson, 'Cities, Suburbs, Countryside' in Paul Addison and Harriet Jones (eds.), *A Companion to Britain: 1939-2000*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), pp. 60-61.

¹⁹ Ibid. p. vii. See also Selina Todd, 'Affluence, Class and Crown Street: Reinvestigating the Post-War Working Class, *Contemporary British History*, vol. 22, no. 4, (2008), pp. 501-518.

²⁰ Willmott, *Evolution of a Community*, p. ix.

²¹ Ibid. at p. 9, at p. 110 and at p. x.

²² Ibid. Chapter 2, Chapter 7 and chapter 9.

²³ Ibid. Chapter 8.

and stayed until she retired when she was 55.²⁴ Vera was born in 1930. Her mother worked in Fords and ‘...was a widow – from the First World War. She had six children, so she had always worked anyway.’²⁵ Vera appeared not to know her father. She had also left school at the age of 14: ‘I done machining up London... I done, tailoring, dresses, anything. And then of course I had the children, then I done machining indoors when I had the children. When my last one went to school, I went to Fords because I had another sister working in there at the same time.’²⁶ Vera started working at Ford when she was 36 years old after the birth of her third child and stayed there until she retired when she was 61.

Eileen was born in west London in 1929. She remembered moving to Rainham and thinking ‘there was nothing there...it was the country!’²⁷ She explained to me:

My Dad had come into some money and he wanted to buy his own and so he bought a bungalow. We moved into Dagenham. And from Dagenham we moved into Rainham. That was 1938. I came to Rainham when I was 9 and I have been in Rainham ever since. I went to school there. I went to work there. I got married there. I suppose I’ll get carried out from there (laughs).²⁸

Eileen had two brothers and a sister. Her father had worked in the docks before getting a job at Ford. Her mother ‘stayed at home and waited until we all got our own family and then she got a cleaning job at the school.’²⁹ Eileen began working as a machinist in a toy factory when she was 14 years old. She started working at Ford in 1947. She married a fellow worker from Ford in 1950 and had one child in 1954. She returned to Ford when her son went to school and eventually retired in 1985. All three of these women grew up in Dagenham and had lived there for their entire lives.

Gwen had a slightly different personal history. She was born in 1931 in Natal, South Africa. She got married in 1955 and moved to Dagenham in 1957 with her husband and her mother. Gwen’s mother was a milliner and ‘had worked all her life because my Dad left us when I was two...there was only my mother, my sister and I and my mother had to support us.’³⁰ Gwen also left school when she was 14 and worked as a bespoke tailor. She chose to leave Natal and move to Dagenham to be closer to her sister who moved to London in 1955, but also because ‘the life out there, you know there were a lot of problems. It wasn’t very nice. I mean today it’s so totally different. You know, and there

²⁴ Interview with Gwen, Eileen, Sheila and Vera, 21st June 2013.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Interview with Eileen and Gwen 11 August 2015.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

was such a lot of trouble with the natives...It was really horrible...'³¹ Gwen went on to speak about how she wanted to move away from an environment she described as 'racist' and 'cruel', which caused her to feel shame as a white South African. She remembered her mother hiring a domestic servant who was paid 'next to nothing' and said 'when I think about it now I am absolutely disgusted with myself. I really feel ashamed.'

Gwen emphasised how happy she felt moving to England; she 'fell in love' with it, and spoke about how much she had enjoyed working and living in Dagenham. Gwen and her husband first moved in with her sister who was a sewing-machinist in a slipper factory in London's East End. Her husband found 'a very heavy job' operating a hoist in the docks but 'lucky enough for him he enjoyed it'. Gwen explained that 'we bought a house and I had my family'. She remembered 'we had the opportunity of looking around and we were going to go to Cambridge but we didn't have enough deposit for Cambridge (laughs). So of course we looked around...and fortunately we found this house...And you know, I've been very happy and I've never been back to South Africa.'³² Between 1957 and 1960, Gwen had three children and her mother moved into her family home. She decided to go back to work because:

Mum had worked all her life and of course she was tired of working and so she said: 'if I stop work and look after the children then you can find a job'. And so I said 'fair enough'. I didn't mind and so I looked after her and she looked after the children for me. And so I started at Fords in 1962, at the end of 1962 and I've always been very happy there.³³

Gwen worked at Ford until 1989 when she took early retirement to look after her husband who was suffering with kidney failure.

It was noticeable that paid work was central to the stories my respondents told not just about themselves, but about Dagenham as a place. I asked the former-machinists about their memories of living in Dagenham in the first group interview:

Sheila: Well in them days you could walk out of one job and into another.

Vera: There were so many jobs about.

Eileen: No one had to be out of work.

Gwen: There were factories everywhere in Dagenham.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

Eileen: And if you wanted a job, you just walked out and the next day you found another one.

Gwen: I mean Marks and Spencer's had factories making their clothes. All the shops did, didn't they?

Vera: But I mean every place every place had machining. I can't believe it now.

Eileen: There's nothing up there now.³⁴

Similarly, in the second interview I asked Eileen about her experiences of growing up in Dagenham, and asked Gwen about her first impressions after moving from Natal; the following exchange took place:

Gwen: It wasn't very nice looking buildings was it?

Eileen: No it was all factories really wasn't it? There was Stirling, Matchmakers, Fords, Briggs...

Gwen: (interrupts) there was a lot of trade. of course on the right hand side down the road was the docks.

Eileen: And of course along there was all them factories, Victor engineering.

Gwen: There was a lot of trade in Dagenham wasn't there?

Eileen: Yeah it was much busier, but then there weren't as many cars on the road. It was all bikes.

Gwen: I mean then Heathway was the main shopping for us wasn't it? But it has changed so much hasn't it? There were lovely dress shops that used to be there, it's all changed completely.

Eileen: Even down the Chequers it had all the shops.

Gwen: We had a good cinema up on the Heathway as well. It's all changed so much hasn't it?

Eileen: No it's all closed down now. It's a few warehouses and Tesco's, Sainsbury's, that's all there is isn't it? ...B&Qs. It's all warehouses isn't it?³⁵

Aside from the choice of work, another positive aspect of living in Dagenham my respondents commented upon to contextualise the strike was the availability of affordable housing. In the first group interview, Gwen explained that: 'all of us had just started

³⁴ Interview with Gwen, Eileen, Sheila and Vera, 21st June 2013.

³⁵ Interview with Eileen and Gwen 11 August 2015.

buying our homes when we went to work, didn't we?'³⁶ Vera was 26 and Eileen was 31 when they bought their first homes. They both agreed how important it was for them to 'have a bed for life'.³⁷ In the second interview Gwen remembered: 'we found this house and we have been there ever since so that shows that we are quite happy we are, and eh it was the right deposit at the right price. £2000 we paid for our house. You wouldn't believe it now would you?'³⁸ My respondents' perception of housing availability illustrated how they believed the strike occurred in a context that was significantly different from the present.³⁹ For example, in the first group interview Vera talked about how her adult grandchildren could not afford to move from their parents' home but 'did not give any money up'. The women collectively disapproved of this because 'it wasn't teaching them any responsibility', 'did not give them any independence' and meant 'they didn't know anything about money'.⁴⁰ Gwen went on in the second interview to point out that this was not the responsibility of the grandchildren themselves because:

(It) was a terrible shame because when they built all those lovely council houses and of course what happened? Thatcher said you could buy them, didn't she? And that was the end of Dagenham really because all the houses were sold, weren't they? I mean when you think, my mother-in-law had a lovely council house...they'd been there 15-20 years and they were offered the house for £11,000. I mean when you think of it, buying a house for £11,000...it was next to nothing. Now, those people have sold those houses two or three times and look at the money they have made on it. And they're not building the places for those who can't afford it.⁴¹

The language the women used to describe how Dagenham had changed is really important for understanding where they position the strike in their life story. The strike occurred in a context that appeared to them as significantly different to the present context from which they remember it. They associate the strike with a period when 'no one had to be out of work'; when 'we had a good cinema'; when 'they built all those lovely council houses' and when 'we used to have good times'. By contrast, today's Dagenham from which they remember the strike is 'empty' and 'all closed down'; 'the jobs are not here anymore' and it was 'very hard for young people' because 'there's no work, there's no nothing', which meant 'they can't get on'. They thought of 'the thousands that used to work at Ford' and compared them to 'only 2000 in the engine plant now'; they discussed the long service men being made redundant at the time of the interview, like Gwen's son,

³⁶ Interview with Gwen, Eileen, Sheila and Vera, 21st June 2013.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Interview with Eileen and Gwen 11 August 2015.

³⁹ Prior to the introduction of right-to-buy in 1980 Housing Act, two-thirds of homes in Barking and Dagenham were owned by the council. Account of social housing in Dagenham in 'Safe as Houses, *The Guardian*, 30 September 2008.

⁴⁰ Interview with Gwen, Eileen, Sheila and Vera, 21st June 2013.

⁴¹ Interview with Eileen and Gwen 11 August 2015.

and how ‘he has had to accept it.’⁴² This narrative of loss the women chose to talk about in the interviews contrasts with the popular narrative of the 1968 sewing-machinists’ strike as a moment when these women gained something.

The women used this description of local change to make sense of their individual and collective assertiveness during the strike. The availability of stable work was central to this story. Wilmott’s study in 1963 suggested that Ford was synonymous with Dagenham to outsiders from the town. 20 per cent of his male interviewees and six per cent of his female interviewees worked in the car plant.⁴³ He believed that ‘virtually everybody knows someone, among relatives or neighbours, who works there’, which is reflected in my interviewees’ testimony.⁴⁴ Wilmott also found that nearly two thirds of his interview sample worked locally, which had a positive effect on community ties; however, he suggested that the lack of civic centre and long distance between amenities meant ‘the people of Dagenham, when they are not at work, opted to stay at home.’⁴⁵ Wilmott made this point to illustrate the contrast between inner city and suburban life, and the increasing ‘home centred’ nature of working-class life in general. However, this point also emphasises the importance of the workplace as a site of sociability for women and men living in Dagenham. It became clear in my interviews that paid work was crucial to my respondents’ stories about Dagenham, but also about themselves— not just in terms of their role as economic providers, but also through the friendships and work culture they established collectively. During both group interviews, the women continued to speak positively about their personal experiences of work as well as their collective work culture to contextualise the strike and explain why it happened and what it meant for them.

Experiences of Work

The former sewing-machinists I interviewed all emphasised how important their work had been to their sense of self. They considered their militancy in 1968 as a demand to have that personal significance recognised publically and materially. Work was central to these women’s lives and had been since they left school as young women, as mothers, and when they were older and looked after their own parents. It was the norm. As the women talked about their experiences of working at Ford, there were three key stories that emerged that could be identified with their subjective motivations for going on strike.

⁴² Interview with Gwen, Eileen, Sheila and Vera, 21st June 2013.

⁴³ Wilmott, *Evolution of a Community*, pp. 16-17.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* p. 17.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* p. 89.

The first story was that the women enjoyed their work and had created a strong collective culture, which was important for implementing the strike. For example, Sheila explained that she enjoyed working at Ford because ‘I made some really good friends...’ whilst Vera replied ‘I suppose that’s what we went to work for, wasn’t it?’⁴⁶ Eileen remembered: ‘when I had my John, I didn’t intend to go back. But, em I had a friend who worked there and she said: ‘oh come back, come back’ so my mother took over.’⁴⁷ For Gwen: ‘I enjoyed it. I mean getting out of the house when you had children, you know you’d think oh it’s a different sort of life isn’t it? You’d meet other people, you’d join in’.⁴⁸ It was described as a ‘happy shop’; ‘We used to go on outings ... and we used to have a real laugh’.⁴⁹ Eileen remembered ‘We used to go up London as well.’ And Gwen recalled: ‘We used to go to Belgium didn’t we? We’d get the crossing to Ostend. We’d go Saturday early morning, and then we’d come back early morning Sunday.’⁵⁰ Vera summarised: ‘I enjoyed it anyway...Most of us did... We used to have our wirelasses, and we used to have a sing together didn’t we? It was a happy place wasn’t it? I wasn’t miserable.’⁵¹

They enjoyed work because of the social aspects and friendships they made there. But it would be wrong to over emphasise the satisfying nature of work. For example, Sheila pointed out: ‘Some of the supervision was a bit of a pain in the backside, but they always are aren’t they?’ and ‘the conditions we worked in were appalling. How hot it was and the rain used to come in; no joke, it was a couple of old aircraft hangers.’⁵² Vera remembered ‘you were tired weren’t you?’ and feeling under pressure because ‘you *had* to complete so many an hour’ and ‘the time and motion man used to stand there and watch you...’.⁵³ There was also antagonism between workers: Vera described the woman who sat in front of her as ‘as the worst person you could ever be with’ and Eileen ‘hated’ one of their shop stewards because ‘she used to treat you like a little girl’.⁵⁴ But it was generally agreed that ‘we had a good time’ and ‘at Ford’s I can honestly say that they left you alone as long as you were doing your work’, which offers a clue towards these women’s collective identity and desire for autonomy from ‘they’.⁵⁵ Whilst work could be restrictive

⁴⁶ Interview with Gwen, Eileen, Sheila and Vera, 21st June 2013.

⁴⁷ Interview with Eileen and Gwen 11 August 2015.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Interview with Gwen, Eileen, Sheila and Vera, 21st June 2013.

⁵⁰ Interview with Eileen and Gwen 11 August 2015.

⁵¹ Interview with Gwen, Eileen, Sheila and Vera, 21st June 2013.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

and conflictual, the women also emphasised their individual agency throughout the interviews, which was epitomised by Eileen's statement: 'it was a job for life for me... I did enjoy it, yeah otherwise I wouldn't have stayed there 31 years!'⁵⁶

For the women interviewed for this study, it was clear that work represented a central aspect of their daily lives and provided a key site of sociability. This was further evidenced when they discussed their retirement. Whilst Sheila described her last day at work as 'the best day's work I ever did', Eileen 'didn't like it at first because you was wondering what to do weren't you? It's different staying at home and going out to work isn't it? It's a different life.'⁵⁷ By contrast, Gwen remembered 'having a really good time' at the Ford Retirement Club and suggested 'it gave us another life' until it had recently been sold to West Ham United football club.⁵⁸

Paid work was a central aspect in these women's social lives. Work was not a temporary experience between school and marriage and children; rather work was a continuous feature of the life course. A consequence of this was that the women had cultivated a robust work culture with high levels of solidarity and strong bonds between each other that were necessary for the workers to collectively assert themselves. Gwen provided some evidence of these informal levels of solidarity when she mentioned that workers had the opportunity 'but a lot us didn't want to become supervisors...because if you had been one of the girls, the girls were a bit funny about you taking the job'.⁵⁹ Eileen agreed 'it changed them.'⁶⁰ This informal identification of shared identity and interests was crucial to my interviewees' understanding and experience of the strike. Again, they contrasted their experience with the present. Sheila said: I don't think that they (women) have the opportunity that we had. Because the industry, or whatever, the groups of people that used to work together aren't there anymore.'⁶¹ Vera agreed: 'That's it. There's no big place like where we worked.'⁶² Sheila came back to this at the end of the interview and said:

...people don't sort of gather together and raise these issues anymore as regards to just us women, I don't know about men, but women don't seem to get together any more...and well there's not the work there for a start there, is there? For women to be together like they were and eh... If you can get a big lot, a great number of people to

⁵⁶ Interview with Gwen, Eileen, Sheila and Vera, 21st June 2013.

⁵⁷ Interview with Eileen and Gwen 11 August 2015.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Interview with Gwen, Eileen, Sheila and Vera, 21st June 2013.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

be with you, and shout with you, and make yourself heard, it makes a big lot of difference.⁶³

Work was a central site of sociability and a key space where they could ‘gather together’ and ‘stand up for themselves’ alongside their friends. My respondents did not describe themselves as particularly ‘militant’ – in the sense they had deliberately identified shared interests and sought to redress the balance of control over the production process. They possessed what could be described as instrumental or non-confrontational attitudes towards work: ‘just wanting to be left alone’. It was their work culture and solidarity developed from their shared experiences in ways that they felt women no longer ‘had the opportunity’ to do so in the present, that was central to their own understanding of why they went on strike.

The second story my respondents shared about their work experiences emphasised their material interests and role as economic providers across their life course – an aspect of their lives they felt was undermined when Ford regraded them. The women interviewed all stressed they had worked from leaving school at the age of fourteen. Vera remembered: ‘Yes I needed the money... In them days, when we were younger, but I don’t know about your mothers, but I used to give my mother all my money.’⁶⁴ Similarly, Gwen pointed out that ‘I came out of school straightaway. I couldn't afford to do anything else, I had to go to work because of circumstances, you know? My mother couldn't afford to keep me at home.’⁶⁵ Sheila said ‘I would have liked to have been a hairdresser, but my mum said sorry Sheila, I need your money on the machine, and that was it. I was the eldest one out of my sisters and so she needed my money, even though it was only £2.12s a week.’⁶⁶ The sense of ‘having’ to work, ‘needing’ to work and being ‘unable to afford to do anything else’ because of ‘circumstances’ remained with the women throughout their lives. Vera and Gwen both did ‘indoor work’ ‘making garments or whatever’ before their children went to school. Gwen pointed out ‘that was hard work...and it was next not nothing you got paid for it...but a lot of women did it, didn't they?’⁶⁷

An attraction of working at Ford was the higher wages. According to Sheila ‘it was pretty well paid, with regards to other work’.⁶⁸ The higher wages were an important theme repeated from the group interview with Vera, Sheila and Violet in 2006 as part of the TUC *Voices from the Workplace* project. Sheila said the wages ‘seemed like a lot to me because

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Interview with Eileen and Gwen 11 August 2015.

⁶⁶ Interview with Gwen, Eileen, Sheila and Vera, 21st June 2013.

⁶⁷ Interview with Eileen and Gwen 11 August 2015.

⁶⁸ Interview with Gwen, Eileen, Sheila and Vera, 21st June 2013.

I had been on piece work prior to moving to Fords. If I didn't work, I didn't earn. When we went to Ford we were on time work, so whatever we done we got a weekly wage. So that was a bonus for us, for me anyway. I could go out and buy a pair of shoes...'⁶⁹ The women needed their wages to pay for informal childcare. Vera explained 'I gave my sister half my money. She looked after my children so that was how we worked it.'⁷⁰ Similarly, another worker named Violet suggested her wages 'went on the oven, the children and I paid my sister because she had my youngest one from Monday morning to Friday night'.⁷¹ Gwen also discussed the relationship between her need to work and her reliance on family in order to work in the first place: 'my mum was in her 70s and she looked after my kids... so you had to look after them...I kept her.'⁷²

The high wages and material interests of the sewing-machinists were reflected upon at the time of the dispute. *The Observer* approvingly quoted TGWU research officer Eileen McCullough when she said: 'Most of Ford's strikers are married and the reason for this new found militancy is that increasingly households are budgeted on a double wage packet...with higher standards of living and large hire-purchase debts, women are finding that they have to work just to keep up.'⁷³ However, the representation of the sewing-machinists as affluent workers was also used to undermine the moral legitimacy of their claim to equal pay. Publically, the *Barking and Dagenham Post* felt 'it is clear the strike is for more rather than equal pay.'⁷⁴ *The Sunday Telegraph* described the sewing machinists as 'among the highest paid manual women workers' and claimed 'it has long been recognised the most militant agitation comes not from women on the lowest rates of pay from those who receive only a little less than men...they are demanding 5d. an hour more which is their idea of equality.'⁷⁵ Privately, a member of the Court of Inquiry who investigated the women's claim pointed out in a personal letter to the chairman of the investigation that the women had received a 'remarkable' and 'completely unproductive' 35 per cent wage increase that gave them 'considerable monetary gain' as a result of the new grading system.⁷⁶ The sewing-machinists' comparatively high wages - in relation to

⁶⁹ Interview with Violet Dawson, Sheila Douglas and Vera Sime for film produced by Sarah Boston for TUC in 2006. Film available at TUC Archives, London Metropolitan University. Full transcript of interview was unavailable.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Interview with Gwen, Eileen, Sheila and Vera, 21st June 2013.

⁷³ 'The Logic of Equal Pay', *The Observer*, 30 June 1968.

⁷⁴ *Barking and Dagenham Post*, 3 July 1968.

⁷⁵ 'Government Anxiety Over Ford Women's Dispute', *The Sunday Telegraph*, 16 June 1968.

⁷⁶ Modern Records Centre (MRC), MSS. 178/17, Ford Motor Company Limited: dispute with the National Union of Vehicle Builders about the grading of women sewing machinists (inquiry held in June and July 1968), 1965-1968, Letter from J. Grange Moore to Jack Scamp, 9 July 1968.

other women - were used to suggest that their concept of equality was flawed and to delegitimise their militancy.

By contrast, my respondents did not connect their motivations for working or going on strike with the pursuit of a luxurious lifestyle. Gwen explained:

My wages just went into the house....you never sort of had it for yourself. It was never your money. It was always put together for the family expenses. I mean you didn't go out to work just to clothe yourself. It was to help with the house. And I think most women did didn't they?⁷⁷

Sheila summed up their attitude towards work, pointing out: 'It wasn't pin money; it was for making a better life for yourself and your family.'⁷⁸ The strike was partly for recognition of this personal significance. My respondents' experience of 'having' to work from a young age to contribute to their family income represented a source of pride and was crucial to shaping their sense of who they thought they were politically. During the first group interview, the women compared their need to work to their perception of people in the present. Gwen pointed that she had never claimed income support from the state and had always had to work in order to look after her family, which she did not believe was the same today.

Well in fact, with me being a widow, but having family and having to look after my mum, a few of us went up to social services - I mean today it's so easy to get money isn't it? I mean be honest - but there was a few of us...we were in the same boat, but nobody got any money from social, but I mean today you can go and then you get hand-outs left, right and centre.⁷⁹

Whilst such stories were clearly influenced by modern discourses surrounding 'benefit cheats' and 'scroungers', the former sewing-machinists I interviewed distinguished their own experience to their perception of the present to emphasise the central aspect that work had played in their lives. Their experience of working in a job they enjoyed, learning a skill and earning enough to support themselves and their families was central to how they thought about themselves politically. This was encapsulated most clearly by Sheila who explained that: 'we all vote Labour; we're working-class, so you do don't you? I ain't got anything to conserve, everything I've got I earned! You have to work for it don't you?'⁸⁰

The final and possibly most important theme the women continuously drew upon when talking about their work was the skilled nature of their job. They had worked

⁷⁷ Interview with Eileen and Gwen 11 August 2015.

⁷⁸ Interview with Gwen, Eileen, Sheila and Vera, 21st June 2013.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

throughout their lives, acquired skills and passed tests. ‘Not everyone could machine’ as Eileen explained to me.⁸¹ Working at Ford represented a ‘proper job’ and the women wanted that to be recognised. It is now well established that the strike was originally over grading instead of the issue of equal pay. Some have suggested this meant the strike had little to do with gender because workers had common grading grievances, not just in Ford, but in manufacturing industries across Britain.⁸² Yet it was clear, both from contemporary sources and the oral history with women that the sewing-machinists believed gender was the key reason for why their skill had not been recognised. In one of the few instances when the sewing-machinists’ shop steward Lil O’Callaghan was invited to speak at the court of inquiry, she explained:

Ford motor company applies for experienced sewing-machinists – experienced. You go in and you get a trade test, on three different sewing machines...So I feel a machinist should be classed with a skill which would take the women to be in grade C. ...also the females are on the same personal allowances as the males. Where do we stand? One minute we are classed as females, the next minute we are classed as males.⁸³

Sex discrimination was central to the sewing-machinists’ understanding of why they went on strike. In a statement submitted by the AEF as evidence to the Court of Inquiry, a union representative wrote:

The feeling of women members is that they have not been treated equal to men over a long period of time...It was a great disappointment to our sewing machinists when they found that, even under this new wage structure, their skill at the trade did not find the recognition it surely deserved, particularly since the Sewing Machinists were about the only production workers in any trade to have to pass a Trade test.⁸⁴

During the TUC oral history interviews from 2006, shop steward Bernie Passingham explained: ‘It slowly dawned on me, the company were frightened that if they gave women their grade, it would cause a revolution amongst the women.’⁸⁵ During my own group interviews, the women emphasised the personal implications of having their work devalued. Vera explained: ‘I mean I’d had lessons and done machining ever since I had left

⁸¹ Interview with Eileen and Gwen 11 August 2015.

⁸² Sheila Cohen, ‘Equal pay – or what? Economics, politics and the 1968 Ford sewing-machinists’ strike’, *Labor History*, Vol. 53, No. 1, (2012), pp. 51-68, at p. 57.

⁸³ TNA: LAB 10/3312, Court of Inquiry into strike of Sewing-machinists employed at Dagenham Plant of Ford Motor Co Ltd: transcripts of evidence, (London: HMSO, 1968), pp. 60-61.

⁸⁴ MRC, MSS.178/17: Statement On Behalf Of The Amalgamated Union Of Engineering And Foundry Workers Concerning The Present Situation Of Women Sewing Machinists Employed By The Ford Motor Company, Gt Britain.

⁸⁵ Interview with Bernard Passingham for film produced by Sarah Boston for TUC in 2006. Film available at TUC Archives, London Metropolitan University.

school. And you had to have that experience before they would even think about employing you, didn't you?⁸⁶ Sheila agreed:

I mean you had to prove to them that you could machine, didn't you? And so if you have to sit down and show that you can machine and you've had to have experience for two years, it proved that we were skilled at what we were doing... but they wouldn't accept it.⁸⁷

The re-grading and the strike itself made the women acutely aware, not only of the training and knowledge required to perform their work, but also the significance of their contribution to the company's production process. For example, Gwen said:

I mean when we were changing seats from a like Cortina to an Anglia, or whatever car they were producing at the time, I mean you were given the new samples, and you had to get on with it and put the new seat together.... I mean nobody used to sit down and show you how to make all of these seats did they? They didn't know, did they? The designer used to come up from down the road somewhere and speak for a bit and say that goes there, that goes there and then leave.⁸⁸

Looking back on the strike today, the former sewing-machinists continuously emphasised how they had brought production at the company to a standstill because it affirmed the indispensable nature of their role. Gwen said: 'I mean it proves that even with the amount of women compared to men, we kept the cars going all the time with the seats didn't we? I mean when you think, 187 women producing enough seats to keep all those cars that there were, I mean it was about 2000 cars a week they were producing.'⁸⁹ Sheila agreed that: 'Fords just didn't want to acknowledge us as skilled, just a handful of women - but that handful of women brought Ford motor company to a standstill, you can't sell a car without a seat!'⁹⁰ At the time, the strike was borne out of the women's desire to assert the value of their work, but looking back on it today, their activism was also an example of their agency and ultimately the control they possessed over the company – despite the fact the company were unwilling to 'accept' or 'acknowledge' their understanding and experience.

The distinction between demands for equal pay and skill recognition are not particularly helpful because the two issues are inherently linked. Speaking at the time, shop steward Lil O'Callaghan felt the grading system was unfair because '... we are classed as females'.⁹¹ The AEW pointed out at the time: 'For this union, the question in dispute is that of EQUAL PAY and EQUAL GRADING... THE UNDERLYING CAUSE OF THE

⁸⁶ Interview with Eileen, Gwen, Sheila and Vera, Rainham, Essex, 21 June 2013.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ TNA: LAB 10/3312, Court of Inquiry, pp. 60-61

DISPUTE is a feeling of sex discrimination amongst all women workers.⁹² A popular trope used by both my interviewees and other subsequent interviews with my respondents was: ‘there was a man going around with a broom earning more than us. We could get up and use his broom but he couldn’t sit down and use our machine.’⁹³ This simple rhetoric encapsulated the reasons why the women felt they had gone on strike. The point was that the women wanted the value of their work recognised both subjectively and materially on the basis of the nature of the work performed, rather than the gender of who was performing it. However, according to Sheila, ‘it was all turned around which was to everybody else’s convenience wasn’t it?’⁹⁴ Sheila’s testimony indicates a sense of lost control in relation to the articulation of their demands at the time, but also in terms of how it has been publically remembered specifically as a victory for equal pay. The following section explores the sewing-machinists’ experiences of trade unionism, and further considers the influence of the unions involved on how the women articulated their demands at the time.

Experiences of Trade Unionism

Trade Unionism and workplace militancy represented a central aspect of working at Ford, Dagenham. Ford refused to recognise trade unions until 1944 and generally avoided major disputes due to relatively high wages and levels of unemployment.⁹⁵ This changed when Ford took over the well organised workforce from Briggs Bodies in 1952. They developed a strong Joint Shop Stewards Committee with a plant-wide newspaper that sold 50,000 copies in 1960.⁹⁶ Graham Turner suggested in 1963 ‘the stewards at Ford are still the most powerful group of their kind in the country’.⁹⁷ Ford’s grading restructure in 1966 represented an attempt to curtail the high levels of militancy by inviting trade union officials to play an active role in developing a new wage structure based on a nationwide job evaluation scheme.⁹⁸ Jack Saunders recently argued the high level of conflict over factory conditions and management prerogative fostered a collective culture at Ford that

⁹² MRC, MSS.178/17: Statement On Behalf Of The Amalgamated Union Of Engineering And Foundry Workers Concerning The Present Situation Of Women Sewing Machinists Employed By The Ford Motor Company, Gt Britain.

⁹³ Interview with Eileen, Gwen, Sheila and Vera, Rainham, Essex, 21 June 2013; Interview with Violet Dawson, Sheila Douglas and Vera Sime for film produced by Sarah Boston for TUC in 2006. Film available at TUC Archives, London Metropolitan University; The same women I interviewed also speak about being paid less than janitors in an interview in Simon Goodley, ‘Dagenham sewing-machinists recall strike that changed women’s lives’ *The Guardian*, 6 June 2013.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Friedman and Meredeem, *Dynamics of Industrial Conflict*, pp. 54-57.

⁹⁶ Beynon, *Working for Ford*, p. 51.

⁹⁷ Graham Turner, *The Car Workers*, (London: Pelican, 1963), p. 139.

⁹⁸ Henry Friedman interviewed by Kay Fraser, 14 June 1994 in Kay Fraser, *Same or Different: Gender Politics in the Workplace*, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999), p. 186.

shaped workers' expectations and the practices they adopted in response to management failure.⁹⁹

The sewing-machinists were also representative of the growing number of women joining trade unions during this period. My respondents had all joined the NUVB as part of a closed shop agreement before being incorporated into the TGWU. The high frequency of unofficial strikes was a key characteristic of working life at Ford's, which they commented upon and distinguished their experience from the women analysed in the other cases considered in this study. It was suggested that 'Fords were known for their strikes... it would happen so often'.¹⁰⁰ Eileen agreed: 'we had a lot of strikes. We were used to it.'¹⁰¹ Gwen said: 'I think I was at Fords for 3 months before I went on my first strike' and Sheila remembered returning from holiday to a nine-week strike.¹⁰² Eileen suggested that 'everybody was in a trade union then'; her brother was a shop steward in the Engine Plant and she described her husband as 'a union man until the day he died.'¹⁰³ Although none of the women I interviewed were active in the union, they wished to emphasise that industrial activism represented an important part of their work culture and everyday lives. They explained that 'there was a group of women who always went to meetings and always kept up with everything, didn't they?'¹⁰⁴ Sheila agreed 'Yeah your shop steward used to call a meeting in your lunch hour and used to tell you what the situation was.'¹⁰⁵ In the second interview, Gwen pointed out that '...we had some young women who...were a little bit troublesome (laughs) because they wouldn't take orders, but you get that everywhere.'¹⁰⁶ When it came to their grading grievance in 1968, Sheila explained '...they were still ignoring our wants, and that was when we said enough is enough. We had a meeting over the canteen didn't we? And we voted that we should stand up and fight, which is what we did.'¹⁰⁷ The narration of the actual decision to go on strike reflects how the sewing-machinists solely made the collective decision to 'stand up and fight' from the shop-floor, exclusive of their male trade union leaders.

The militant collective culture at Ford and social practices that went with it – electing shop stewards, attending meetings, voting and going on strike - were accepted as a normal

⁹⁹ Saunders, 'The Untraditional Worker', pp. 239-242.

¹⁰⁰ Interview with Eileen, Gwen, Sheila and Vera, Rainham, Essex, 21 June 2013.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Interview with Eileen and Gwen 11 August 2015.

¹⁰⁴ Interview with Eileen, Gwen, Sheila and Vera, Rainham, Essex, 21 June 2013.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Interview with Eileen and Gwen 11 August 2015.

¹⁰⁷ Interview with Eileen, Gwen, Sheila and Vera, Rainham, Essex, 21 June 2013.

part of their work experience and not considered extraordinary – both retrospectively and at the time. However, the sewing-machinists' previous experiences of workplace conflict had ambiguous effects upon their attitudes towards trade unionism. On the one hand, they stressed how important it had been (and continued to be) to have a union 'backing us up' and suggested that 'we wouldn't have won anything without them.'¹⁰⁸ Eileen said: 'if you had any trouble, you had the union behind you and they used to fight for you.'¹⁰⁹ Gwen agreed that their familiarity with workplace conflict was important: 'I mean we moaned about being on strike, with - for the men. But it did some good in the end because it helped us in a way didn't it?'¹¹⁰ On the other hand, they felt that the high frequency of strikes limited the impact of their dispute. Sheila said: 'Let's be honest, at Fords we went on strike so many times even though ours was just for us, it didn't meant a thing to the local people.'¹¹¹

The women differentiated between their own interests and those of their union. This became clear from the way they assumed ownership of the strike in the oral history interview. Sheila said:

The difference in this strike really for us was that it was *for us*. We were always in and out on some strike or other, but not for ourselves. The men came out for different things and laid us off without even thinking about it, so it didn't mean a thing to us except that when we done it, it was for us.¹¹²

They felt they lacked control in the past when they had been on strike over wage issues that they regarded as unrelated to their own situation. 'We didn't have a choice whether we wanted to or not; we had to go' explained Gwen.¹¹³ To my respondents, their strike represented the first time that they had stood up and assumed their own voice within the factory, which was evidenced by the way they referred to it as 'our' strike throughout the interviews. It was a moment in their memory when the unequal nature of the bargain between male and female union members was brought into sharper focus.

The women's relative autonomy from the wider activities of their union officials was evident in contemporary accounts of the strike. The NUVB reported: 'The strike which took place on the 7 June was not called by the union but having regard to the frustration experienced by our members and our conviction in the justice of their claim the union

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Interview with Eileen and Gwen 11 August 2015.

¹¹¹ Interview with Eileen, Gwen, Sheila and Vera, Rainham, Essex, 21 June 2013.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Ibid.

recognised the dispute at a meeting held on 13 June.’¹¹⁴ The AEF described the strike as ‘a spontaneous reaction’, which reflects a longer trend of women’s workplace resistance being represented as the product of short-term self-interest or irrational behaviour.¹¹⁵ As Eleanor Gordon has shown, the ‘spontaneous’ strike was often the most effective weapon of resistance for women denied the status of skilled workers, and was more likely to represent an assertion of autonomy from employers and male dominated unions.¹¹⁶

The Dagenham sewing-machinists illustrate the continuation of this historical trend of women organising autonomously of the formal labour movement. On the 17 June, the union officials representing the women in the NJNC agreed on the women’s behalf that they would return to work the next day in exchange for an investigation into their grading by a ‘fact-finding committee’. The following morning, 18 women picketed the factory with posters supporting their strike. Ford’s personnel manager suggested this ‘extraordinary refusal to get this situation back on the rails’ demonstrated the union’s lack of authority over its members.¹¹⁷ In a letter signed by the ‘Women workers at Fords of Dagenham’ to Harold Wilson, they wrote:

You can call all the enquiries you wish, the women at Fords have the backing of a great number of MPs. We will not go back to work. We are fighting a great fight for Equal Pay for women. We at Fords have started the ball rolling. Our unions are backing us, funds are coming in, we’re all out for battle. Fords is the beginning, soon it will be every industry in Britain out because of us women at Fords. We will force you to give us all equal pay, or strike with our unions’ blessings. We’re sorry for Fords, we’re sorry for the men out of work, but more sorry for ourselves. It’s all for us now. Some women may be hard up. We’ll help them from our growing funds.¹¹⁸

The women believed their union’s support was important and necessary for sustaining their action. Yet the women made the decision to strike independently of their union, and understood their struggle, both at the time and retrospectively, as being for ‘us’ and ‘ourselves’, as well as other women in industry. So both at the time and in the memories of these women, the strike was ‘owned’ by themselves, not by organised labour or the feminist movement; they were and are the protagonists.

¹¹⁴ MRC, MSS.178/17, NUVB Vs. Ford Motor Company, Submissions To The Court Of Inquiry, Dispute Regarding The Grading Of The Sewing Machinists.

¹¹⁵ MRC, MSS.178/17, Statement On Behalf Of The Amalgamated Union Of Engineering And Foundry Workers Concerning The Present Situation Of Women Sewing Machinists Employed By The Ford Motor Company, Gt Britain.

¹¹⁶ Eleanor Gordon, *Women and the Labour Movement in Scotland, 1850-1914*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991)

¹¹⁷ MRC, MSS 178/17, Court of Inquiry Company Submissions, ‘Detailed History of the Dispute’.

¹¹⁸ TNA, PREM 13/2412, Letter to Harold Wilson from ‘Women workers at Fords of Dagenham’ (undated).

The sewing-machinists I interviewed had quite ambiguous judgements about their experiences of trade unionism. Although they did not criticise the NUVB, they talked about conflict with their union officials. Gwen acknowledged that ‘Not all the union members were keen on us’ and Vera talked about how the union ‘just ignored’ their grading issue before the strike.¹¹⁹ Gwen agreed: ‘every time they put in for their wages, they brought up the subject of us being classed as skilled and they just used to say: ‘you just wait...’¹²⁰ Sheila believed ‘they weren’t too happy that some of the women were causing so much havoc.’¹²¹ Bernard Passingham felt the women ‘got totally ignored’ and ‘that some of our national officials, they didn’t agree with what we were doing, they didn’t think it was right. And so we, particularly myself, had to push them aside.’¹²² Gwen pointed out in the second interview that ‘They were brilliant. Our convenor, he and our two shop stewardesses really fought for us’.¹²³ And Sheila suggested in the first interview ‘They didn’t want to know. And I think the convenor and the shop stewards got fed up with it being put down all the time.’¹²⁴

The sewing-machinists differentiated between their own interests, represented by their shop stewards, and those of their union officials who they held responsible for sacrificing their grading concern in favour of the issue of equal pay. Sheila pointed out in the first group interview: ‘The unions officials got it changed, they must have changed it because we never had any say so in it did we?’¹²⁵ Similarly, in the second interview Gwen suggested ‘...they turned it around, our union, they turned it around and they said: ‘why don’t you fight for equal pay, why stop now?’¹²⁶ There was evidence of this at the time. Charles Gallagher, the NUVB National Official, wrote to the company on two occasions suggesting that equal pay might be a ‘compromise solution’.¹²⁷ Passingham explained: ‘Women’s rate of pay was abolished. To be quite honest, I thought we’d done a good job but the girls didn’t think so. As a union, we thought we’d done a great job because we’d got equal pay.’¹²⁸

The result was that the sewing machinists’ saw their strike as a defeat at the time, and doubted their political efficacy until they saw the film. Eileen pointed out ‘Nothing

¹¹⁹ Interview with Eileen, Gwen, Sheila and Vera, Rainham, Essex, 21 June 2013.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² TUC Interview with Bernard Passingham, 2006.

¹²³ Interview with Eileen and Gwen 11 August 2015.

¹²⁴ Interview with Eileen, Gwen, Sheila and Vera, Rainham, Essex, 21 June 2013.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Interview with Eileen and Gwen 11 August 2015.

¹²⁷ MRC, MSS 178.17, Company Submissions to Court of Inquiry.

¹²⁸ TUC Interview with Bernard Passingham, 2006.

changed for us. Being honest, nothing changed.’¹²⁹ Sheila said ‘I think we could have stayed out longer. I put my hand up to stay out, we had a vote in the morning and some others did as well, but... I didn’t want to go back but it was only a handful of us that put up our hands...’¹³⁰ Eileen suggested that ‘when we went back to work, everything was forgotten, we carried on working and...it’s only since the film that all this stuff has come up.’¹³¹ Gwen explained that this was because ‘we were ignored virtually as soon as we went back to work, weren’t we?’¹³² The union were held partly responsible for this failure. In 2006, Sheila said:

The union worked it... I was just really really annoyed that what we eventually came out for was just swept under the carpet you might say...I suppose in a way we did start off the equal pay for women, but it wasn't even equal pay then, men were still getting more than us. When equal pay come round again, then that’s when you realise that maybe you started something quite big. But not at the time, no.¹³³

The sewing-machinists’ memories of the strike reveal the uneven balance of power in the relationship between the women and their male trade union officials. On the one hand, the women stressed their agency: ‘we decided that we had to do something’, ‘we were tired of it being turned down all the time’, ‘we stood up and fought’. They were aware that it was their own action, their own decision to stand up and strike which had forced their union officials to act and negotiate the equal pay deal on their behalf. On the other hand, the way they spoke about their experiences of trade unionism also revealed the lack of control they felt they had over their experiences of work: ‘they turned it around’ and ‘they worked it’, but also ‘without them we couldn't have got it.’ and ‘we definitely wouldn't have got it without the union.’

Writing in 1978, Henry Freidman, the union convenor who represented the sewing-machinists, dismissed their criticism of the strike’s outcome and labelled their concerns about skill recognition as ‘local’, ‘transient’ and ‘craft consciousness’, suggesting that they lacked the ‘high degree of political and social awareness required to appreciate the wider concept of equal pay.’¹³⁴ Such a dismissive and patronising attitude towards the women’s grievance reflects the relationship between the sewing-machinists and their union during this strike, and perhaps explains why the women I interviewed felt less inclined to play a greater role within the NUVB after the strike was over, or to identify the union as a meaningful influence upon the way that they thought about themselves politically.

¹²⁹ Interview with Eileen and Gwen 11 August 2015.

¹³⁰ Interview with Eileen, Gwen, Sheila and Vera, Rainham, Essex, 21 June 2013.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ TUC Interview with Sheila, Violet and Vera in 2006.

¹³⁴ Friedman and Meredeen, *Dynamics*, p. 181.

Interviews with the shop stewards involved in the strike may have offered a different perspective on the extent to which it influenced their experience of trade unionism. However, the sewing-machinists I interviewed perceived the strike as a women's fight, organised by women, for women, and did not think that it changed their own relationship with the trade union movement.

The manner in which the unions assumed control of the negotiating process and celebrated a victory bore similarities to the way a 1943 strike by female workers at the Rolls-Royce factory in Hillington, near Glasgow, became in the words of Penny Summerfield 'a *cause célèbre*' as a victory for the 'rate for the job', when the unions involved had actually negotiated a deal that preserved sex-related pay grades in the factory.¹³⁵

Feminism and gender relations.

Contemporary debate centred on the strike as an industrial relations issue, rather than as part of a progressive campaign for equal pay. Equal pay was described as a 'smokescreen' to disguise the unions' disregard for the company's grievance procedure.¹³⁶ Ford suggested the strike was unconstitutional and represented a 'critical problem for the British economy.'¹³⁷ Much of the national and local press focused on the implications of the disruption for male workers and the national economy. Nevertheless, the sewing-machinists' collective action was widely understood as being novel because it involved female workers.

In the meeting of the NJNC to discuss the dispute, personnel manager Leslie Blakeman said 'we appreciate the peculiar circumstances of the case.'¹³⁸ He also described the situation as 'both disturbing and confusing'.¹³⁹ When the NUVB district official first raised the sewing-machinists complaint with management in August 1967, he apologetically acknowledged: 'we appreciate that generally this type of work is carried out by female operators.'¹⁴⁰ As the dispute unfolded, the emotional state of the workers was frequently referred to: The *Ford Bulletin* suggested that: 'there has been lots of emotional talk about equal pay for women';¹⁴¹ a union official said in a meeting with the company

¹³⁵ Penny Summerfield, *Women Workers in the Second World War: Production and Patriarchy in Conflict*, (London: Crook Helm, 1984), pp. 171-174.

¹³⁶ 'The Real Issue', *The Ford Bulletin*, June 21 1968.

¹³⁷ TNA, PREM 13/2412, Telegram from Bill Batty to Harold Wilson, dated 26 June 1968.

¹³⁸ MRC, MSS. 178/17, Notes of Proceedings at a meeting of Ford National Joint Negotiating Committee, Monday 17 June 1968.

¹³⁹ MRC, MSS. 178/17, Company Submissions to Court of Inquiry, 'A Detailed History of the Dispute'.

¹⁴⁰ MRC, MSS.178/17, Letter from Charles Gallagher to Leslie Blakeman, dated 4 August 1967.

¹⁴¹ 'The Real Issue', *The Ford Bulletin*, June 21 1968.

‘our view is that there is a great deal of emotion in this dispute...’ and another explained ‘you are dealing with women who are emotionally involved’¹⁴² It was suggested that the Court of Inquiry must account for the ‘present emotional atmosphere’.¹⁴³ The management and unions responded to the strike differently because it involved female workers. They saw it as ‘emotional’ because of the personal sense of injustice and moral justification for their demands; the women perceived to misunderstand the ‘logic of equal pay’.¹⁴⁴

There was also a sense from contemporary representations that the strike represented a wider shift in the way that female workers thought about themselves as women. The AEF justified their breach of the company’s grievance procedure because they suggested the existing machinery for dealing with grading disputes was unable to deal with ‘such a radical change, required by our women members brought with radical action’.¹⁴⁵ The *Times* claimed the strike indicated a ‘new and distinctly more militant stage’ in the battle for equal pay. It went on to suggest that ‘the biggest barrier left may be the attitude of women themselves...If only more felt like the Ford ladies...most of the obstacles would vanish.’¹⁴⁶ *The Observer* declared ‘Not since the match girls’ strike of 1888 has a group of women pressed strike action as militantly as Mrs Lil O’Callaghan and her sister Ford machinists’.¹⁴⁷ It went on to identify ‘a distinct change of mood’ as a result of the example set by the ‘Dagenham girls’ and a ‘sharpened awareness by women of the injustice of their position’.¹⁴⁸ Shirley Summerskill, Labour MP for Halifax, hailed the sewing-machinists’ action in Parliament on the day the Equal Pay Act was passed in 1970 saying:

I do not like strikes any more than anyone else, but those women had to take really forceful action to achieve this principle. Like the early pioneers for women's suffrage, they faced abuse, misrepresentation and ridicule, but they demonstrated their great industrial power and their vital role in the export drive, so that politicians and public alike were made to realise that working women are indispensable to the economy...¹⁴⁹

The sewing-machinists also felt their strike defied expected norms at the time. In the 2006 interview Sheila pointed out that: ‘you do get a lot of people saying ‘what are you doing this for? You only come to work for pin-money as women.’¹⁵⁰ Violet, who was on

¹⁴² MRC, MSS. 178/17, Notes of Proceedings at a meeting of Ford National Joint Negotiating Committee, Monday 17 June 1968.

¹⁴³ MRC, MSS. 178/17, Letter from J. Grange Moore to Jack Scamp, 9 July 1968.

¹⁴⁴ ‘The Logic of Equal Pay’, *The Observer*, 30 June 1968.

¹⁴⁵ MRC, MSS. 178/17, Statement on behalf of the AEF workers concerning the present situation of women sewing machinists employed by the Ford Motor Company, Gt Britain.

¹⁴⁶ *The Times*, 6 November 1968.

¹⁴⁷ ‘The Logic of Equal Pay’, *The Observer*, 30 June 1968.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁹ HC Deb, 9 February 1970, vol. 795, col. 976.

¹⁵⁰ TUC Interview with Sheila, Violet and Vera in 2006.

the strike committee pointed out ‘Rosie Boland was the shop steward at the time; she got a lot of bad letters from men from farmers, firemen, from women who didn't work’. She also mentioned that her husband opposed her personal involvement in the strike.¹⁵¹ The *Barking and Dagenham Post* claimed male workers were angry, and the *Romford Times* suggested they had caused inconvenience by defying the NJNC’s recommendation to return to work.¹⁵² Sheila explained: ‘Because we were women, it wasn't the done thing at the time. We really frightened them.’¹⁵³ The idea that their resistance was unexpected and treated as novel was reflected in my own interviews. ‘Petticoat strike they called us’ pointed out Eileen; Vera agreed: ‘yes it was: “they’re only women!”’ Sheila said ‘Well not a lot happened before that either, you know, as regards to women fighting for themselves...’¹⁵⁴

Although the sewing machinists’ action was perceived to be unusual, it was less unexpected for the women themselves. The shop steward Lil O’Callaghan identified herself as a feminist and said ‘I have been fighting for the cause of women for as long as I can remember.’¹⁵⁵ As can be seen from the previous section, the women had been involved in numerous workplace disputes in the past. They were well organised and not afraid to stand up for themselves. Although the actual processes and practices involved in organising the strike were not particularly new, the difference was that this time ‘it was for us’. ‘It was ‘a women’s strike over a women’s issue’ and they were ‘fighting for themselves’ and speaking with their own voice. The women believed they had their own distinct interests shaped by the gendered devaluation of their labour. Yet it was clear from the interviews that they did not perceive the strike as part of a wider rupture in their experience and perception of gender relations.

The strike has often been considered a formative moment within the WLM. The formation of the National Joint Action Committee Women’s Equal Rights at a meeting organised by the machinists’ NUVB district official Fred Blake on 28 June 1968 is the main evidence to support the notion that the dispute ‘reignited’ the women’s movement.¹⁵⁶ The group was described as ‘a minority affair...several shades paler than revolutionary

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² ‘Ford’s Lay off 400 Men’, *Barking and Dagenham Post*, 19 June 1968; ‘Girls Defy Fords’, *Romford Times*, 19 June 1968.

¹⁵³ Interview with Eileen, Gwen, Sheila and Vera, Rainham, Essex, 21 June 2013.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid. *The Times* described the strike as a ‘threat of a petticoat revolution’ and *The Guardian* suggested the women were involved in a ‘sex war’ in “Threat of a 'petticoat revolt'.” *The Times*, 17 June 1968, p. 1; ‘Meeting votes to keep the sex war going’, *The Guardian*, 29 June 1968, p. 3.

¹⁵⁵ ‘Ford’s Lay off 400 Men’, *Barking and Dagenham Post*, 19 June 1968

¹⁵⁶ Coote and Campbell, *Sweet Freedom*, pp. 9-10; McCarthy, ‘Gender Equality’, p. 112.

red' by *The Guardian*.¹⁵⁷ It called upon all trade unions and the government to promote equal pay as a statutory right. On 18 May 1969, the NJACWER organised a 1000 strong rally in Trafalgar Square calling upon the government to pass equal pay legislation. The press commented upon the diversity of the group's membership, pointing out that there were women from the Labour Party, the Conservatives, as well as organisations as different as the International Marxist Group and the Status of Women Committee.¹⁵⁸ Writing in 1972, Sheila Rowbotham suggested the group had an 'impressive existence on paper', but did little campaigning in practice.¹⁵⁹

Whilst the group has been cited as a meeting place that provided a starting point for the development of a network of WLM groups in the following period, my respondents did not feel that this was something they were a part of. Gwen told me:

The trouble is that all these groups never bothered with us did they? Cos we were asked this a little while ago...if we had been fighting with the feminists, and really to tell the truth, I know they had a lot of walks and they got together in London at one time but they never ever thought to invite us did they? I mean once our strike was over I think we were just forgotten about until the film come out.¹⁶⁰

Eileen agreed that it was not until recently that she became aware of the wider movement fighting explicitly for women's rights during the 1970s. She spoke about a meeting she attended in London after the film with 'all kinds of groups that had been fighting for equal rights', but pointed out '(I) had never heard of them until we all got together...it seems as though women are always fighting on their own all the time.'¹⁶¹

To the Ford women, although they felt that they had been fighting for women's rights and equality by demanding to have the skill of their job recognised, they felt that they were doing so on a personal level. Sheila said 'I've got a bit more militant now, rather than then' and Eileen exclaimed 'We were stupid weren't we? We didn't take no notice did we?'¹⁶² During my second interview, Gwen explained:

...everybody said: 'feminists', you know? And I said: 'well, I didn't even think of myself as one until we realised what we had done.' I was just a working mother and working wife fighting for her rights (laughs).¹⁶³

¹⁵⁷ 'Mao mascot at women's pay rally', *The Guardian*, 19 May 1969, p. 18; 'Meeting votes to keep the sex war going', *The Guardian*, 29 June 1968, p. 3.

¹⁵⁸ 'Feminist ranks unite to march for equality', *The Guardian*, 18 Jan 1969, p. 3; Sally White. "Feminists meet to talk equality." *The Times*, 29 June 1968, p. 10.

¹⁵⁹ Sheila Rowbotham, 'The Beginnings of Women's Liberation in Britain', in *Dreams and Dilemmas: Collected Writings* (London: Virago, 1983), pp. 32-44.

¹⁶⁰ Interview with Eileen, Gwen, Sheila and Vera, Rainham, Essex, 21 June 2013.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ Interview with Eileen and Gwen 11 August 2015.

There was a divergence between the public memory of the strike as a milestone event in the evolution of the women's movement, and the sewing-machinists' self-understanding over 'what we had done' and how it affected their political subjectivity. In 1972, Sheila Rowbotham suggested the sewing-machinists had provoked women on the left to 'feel that they could do something' and made it easier for women within trade unions to discuss women's specific oppression.¹⁶⁴ By contrast, Eileen said to me: 'speaking honestly, it was just like another day's work and then we just carried on... Nothing changed for us. Being honest... I didn't think that we achieved all that much until everything that's happened'.¹⁶⁵ Sheila said 'you know, you want equal rights and things like that, and that was the time to do it...' but as Vera suggested, 'it didn't happen did it? It didn't happen'.¹⁶⁶ Gwen said: 'really we hadn't got what we had wanted... Fords just didn't want to acknowledge that we were skilled.' It was suggested 'they knew how to play us!' and 'we just had to get on with it.'¹⁶⁷ The important point here is that 'equal rights' did not materialise for these women. Their experiences of work and trade unionism continued to be characterised by unequal gender relations in ways that made them doubt their political efficacy, and reluctant to associate their militancy with feminism.

This raises a significant tension with the historical meaning of the dispute. On the one hand, it is a great example of people making changing change from below: the strike stimulated a significant debate about equal pay in the labour movement, and its impact upon equality legislation and early members of the WLM is undeniable. On the other hand, the former sewing-machinists interpretation of the strike as a defeat illustrates the ineffectiveness of the strike's resolution and how the government, company and unions involved militated against them to preserve the interests of capital and male workers in the factory. The value of their work was not recognised until 1985. However, emphasising the women's narrative of decline risks downplaying their agency and representing them as passive and voiceless simply because they operated with a different interpretive framework to dominant conceptions of the strike as a turning point for gender equality and feminism in Britain.

My respondents did not identify themselves as feminists, or their behaviour as feminist, because they appeared to associate feminism with a specific movement involving 'groups' that fought for 'equal rights', which they had not participated in. This is

¹⁶⁴ Rowbotham, 'Beginnings of Women's Liberation', pp. 33-34.

¹⁶⁵ Interview with Eileen and Gwen 11 August 2015.

¹⁶⁶ Interview with Eileen, Gwen, Sheila and Vera, Rainham, Essex, 21 June 2013.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

unsurprising as Hughes, Beaumont and Wright have all shown how women challenged male privilege and fought for economic and social rights without pursuing an explicitly feminist agenda that could be perceived as divisive and controversial (as discussed in the introduction).¹⁶⁸ Their collective action could be also understood as being similar to the ‘rough kind of feminism’ described by Annemarie Hughes in her study of working-class women’s political identities.¹⁶⁹ The women recognised an inequality in the dynamics of power at their workplace and challenged it through the best means at their disposal: a ‘spontaneous’ strike organised outside the formal structures of the industrial relations negotiating system in place at Ford.

It is also important to consider how the sewing machinists’ interpretation of the strike’s meaning changed over time. The shift in public memory of the strike since the film forced them to reconsider its significance within their own life stories. This proved quite difficult as they were being asked to consider the personal impact of an event that has been publically recognised as an important historical moment, which had not represented a turning point in their own lives. The dynamics of the group interview are really important here as it enabled the women to collectively affirm each other’s individual doubts about their supposed ‘victory’ and develop a counter memory that emphasised the strike’s limited impact. Sheila explained ‘Well when the film came and then all this hullabaloo came along and you realise how brave we were and how good we were, but we didn’t think that at time!’¹⁷⁰ Whilst they were aware that they had started ‘something’ off, they were less clear exactly what that ‘something’ actually was.

In both interviews, my respondents eased this tension by talking about the contradictory ways that gender relations had changed since their strike. They felt that that women had greater opportunities to earn more money and participate in different jobs compared to themselves when they left school. Vera believed that women were ‘downtrodden’ and Gwen felt ‘women were always treated like second class citizens’ when they began working.¹⁷¹ It was explained to me: ‘I mean women today have got better jobs haven’t they?’ Eileen agreed: ‘Oh yeah, because they stayed on and went on to higher education and college.’ Eileen’s granddaughter worked as a school teacher, whilst her niece was a police woman. Sheila wished ‘I had their education! I mean how many kids in our situation went to university? Gwen concluded: ‘no I think women today have got better

¹⁶⁸ Hughes, *Gender and Political Identities*; Beaumont, *Housewives and Citizens*; Wright, ‘Education for Active Citizenship’.

¹⁶⁹ Hughes, *Gender and Political Identities*.

¹⁷⁰ Interview with Eileen, Gwen, Sheila and Vera, Rainham, Essex, 21 June 2013.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

chances to get better jobs. Definitely.¹⁷² By talking about their female family members, they related their fight to a positive historical change in women's employment opportunities.

On the other hand, there was a sense that little had changed since their strike. Sheila pointed out: 'I mean our strike resulted in equal rights for women, or whatever you call it, that new law and women are still being denigrated and they're not getting their just deserts'.¹⁷³ Gwen agreed saying 'women are what, 15 per cent behind men in their wages?' and Vera said 'It seems as though we're being held down all the time'.¹⁷⁴ Sheila agreed: '

I think women are still deprived of their rights [...] And the unions aren't about anymore so people don't sort of gather together and raise these issues anymore with regards to just us women. I don't know about men, but women don't seem to get together any more [...] and well there's not the work there for a start anymore, for women to get together. There's certainly no machining.¹⁷⁵

Gwen agreed: 'There are no factories anymore. Any time you read in the paper today about a single woman who wants to fight for something in the office, she has to go through the courts to get anywhere.'¹⁷⁶

By comparing the situation of women in the past to the present, the sewing machinists collectively made sense of both why they had gone on strike in 1968 and what it meant to them subsequently. They accounted for their individual and collective agency by emphasising the importance of their work culture and union representation that enabled them to assert the value of their work in the past. They also made sense of the limited personal impact of their strike by talking about wider social and economic change in Dagenham. Whilst they recognised that women had greater opportunities for career progression since their strike, they did not feel that this had necessarily improved the daily lives of women like themselves, especially within the context of de-industrialisation.

My respondents had little to say about their own lives after the strike, which was possibly because this fell outside the 'memory frame' they had prepared to talk about prior to the interview. Vera retired shortly before the second strike in 1984-1985. She mentioned she wanted to become a typist but was unable to because 'there were problems with the women on the floor'.¹⁷⁷ Sheila moved to the office after the strike, which the other women interpreted as evidence of progress and women getting better jobs. However, Sheila said

¹⁷² Ibid.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

little about this herself other than explaining how much she enjoyed her retirement and being able to leave Ford.¹⁷⁸ Eileen took early retirement in 1984 ‘when they started taking the work away from us and they wanted to close us.’¹⁷⁹ She emphasised how much she missed the company of her fellow workers and pointed out that her husband died of a sudden heart attack shortly after her retirement.

Gwen left Ford in 1989 to look after her sick husband.¹⁸⁰ Although she was ‘glad of the time to look after him’, she pointed out that four years of hospital visits, cleaning and disinfecting three times a day ‘wasn’t easy, believe you and me, but it had to be done.’ She explained:

Me and a few of the ladies we used to work with were signing on and every time we went to sign on, they’d offer you a job – and made sure that that you were going to take that job and I used to say to them: ‘will you supply a nurse for my husband three times a day and I will take the job’ and they said: ‘no we can’t do that’ and I said: ‘well I can’t take the job then.’... my friend Joyce...they put her in some rotten jobs, but she had to accept it.¹⁸¹

More recently her son had been made redundant and she repeated the phrase that he ‘had to accept it’. She went on to say:

I think life is so different to when we worked. I mean the apprenticeships that ought to be... (pause) My grandson, the eldest one, he took an apprenticeship, mind you, we always said: ‘don’t become a mechanic’ but being with Ford’s, Ford’s was in their (his) blood, oh and he said: ‘I’ve got to be a mechanic’. He spent three years; now all he’s got is he’s working in McDonalds. That’s the only job he could get.¹⁸²

By sharing this information with each other, the women collectively constructed an account that revealed their uncertainty over the wider political meaning of their strike. This instability in the present was placed in contrast to how they remembered their own lives at the time of their strike. Although they all insisted that the strike was explicitly over the issue of grading, they also stressed the importance of their wages at the time because three of them had just bought their own houses with mortgages and were raising their families. They realigned their personal memory of defeat with the public memory of the strike as a key turning point leading to equality for women by framing this discussion around ideas about independence, autonomy and the ability to make a better life for themselves; ideas that they associated with their own struggle and felt had subsequently been eroded in the period since. Whilst they all commented that their female relatives had greater

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ Interview with Eileen and Gwen 11 August 2015.

¹⁸⁰ Interview with Eileen and Gwen 11 August 2015.

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

¹⁸² Ibid.

opportunities for further education, they also suggested that full employment and union representation in the past had enabled working-class women like themselves to ‘join together’ develop a strong collective work culture and ‘fight for their rights’ in a way that they felt was more difficult to achieve in the present.

Conclusion

The Ford sewing-machinists’ strike is a useful starting point for this thesis. The strike was optimistically hailed as a turning point symbolising a new era of equality for the growing number of female workers and trade unionists in Britain. However, the extent to which the strike represented a wider change in the experiences of female workers becomes less clear from interrogating the impact of the strike upon the sewing-machinists themselves. The women’s demand to have the value of their specific ‘female’ skills recognised and appropriately remunerated represented an active attempt to alter their position within the power relations of the factory. However, their voice was heavily diluted by their trade union officials and employers, as well as the government and lawyers, who continued to rely upon legal and managerial definitions of the sewing-machinists’ work and preserved the gendered hierarchy of labour by offering them equal pay on a formal basis, instead of recognising their specific skills as women. The women had to ‘fight’ for the next 17 years until their skill was recognised. The consequence of this was that my respondents felt the strike had very little impact on their subsequent experiences of work, which made it difficult for them to reconcile their personal memories with their newfound role as history makers. This tension between women asserting their autonomy and agency during workplace disputes with the material reality of their unequal power relationship with employers and trade union officials, which characterised their subsequent experiences of work, was a key theme that was to influence respondents’ testimony in the case studies that follow.

It is important not to downplay the importance of the sewing-machinists’ activism and its impact on forcing the government to address the issue of equal pay, yet to celebrate it as a victory of and for ‘all’ woman and ‘all’ workers side-lines the protagonists own reading of events and continues to deny their specific agency in the present. The government’s failure to recognise ‘work of equal value’ in the Equal Pay Act meant that many women continued to fight for their own right to be paid an equal wage with men by going on strike in the following decade, as the next chapter will demonstrate.

Chapter 3: The Trico-Folberth Equal Pay Strike, Brentford, 1976.

The longest equal pay strike in British labour history took place at the Trico-Folberth windscreen wiper factory in Brentford, west London, during the summer of 1976. It began on 28 May when 400 female production workers voted to go on strike to eradicate a £6.64 weekly wage differential between male and female assembly line workers. The assembly line had traditionally been split between an all-female day shift and an all-male night shift. Workers on the night shift had earned an overtime premium on top of a higher 'male' piecework rate. In June 1975, the night shift was eradicated as part of a company cost-cutting exercise and male workers were offered the choice between joining the female day shift or redundancy. Most of the men took redundancy or moved to a new intermediary shift, with the exception of five men who decided to join the women on the day shift. Those men lost their overtime premium but continued to earn a higher piecework rate than the women who were performing the exact same work alongside them. Such a differential became illegal in 1976 after the implementation of the Equal Pay and Sex Discrimination Acts the previous year, and the female assembly line workers demanded to be paid equally.¹

After six months of failed negotiations, the 400 female workers at Trico were led out of the factory by their shop stewards to the neighbouring Boston Manor Park, where they voted unanimously to begin an all-out strike until they received equal pay. They received support from 150 male workers in the factory and the local, Southall district committee of the Amalgamated Union of Engineering Workers (AUEW). The strike was made official by the AUEW National Executive after one month, and the women organised an official strike committee, which coordinated strike pay, hardship money and produced a weekly bulletin to inform workers of their progress and dismiss company propaganda. They organised a 24-hour picket of the factory, which attracted widespread support from the labour movement, the radical left and women's liberation groups. It also provided the setting for some intense clashes with strike breakers and the police in what was to be a record breaking hot summer.

¹ Details from TUC Library, London Metropolitan University, HD 6061: AUEW Official Trico Equal Pay Strike Bulletins, 16 produced from Wednesday 29 June to Monday 18 October 1976.

Trico argued that the five men working alongside the women represented a ‘historical anomaly’ and claimed that their differential would eventually be phased out.² The management requested an industrial tribunal to justify their case, which was boycotted by the workers on the grounds that only 31 of 110 previous cases had found in favour of women seeking equal pay since the implementation of the act in 1975.³ The women’s rejection of the tribunal sent a message of their intent to the company, which was beginning to dismiss male workers as production was brought to a halt in the strike’s third month.⁴ Without any alternative option, the Trico management entered negotiations with the union and on 18 October reached an agreement with the union to implement a common payment by results operational rate of pay irrespective of sex.⁵ After 21 weeks, the women, in collaboration with their union, had defeated the company and won equal pay.

Although the dispute did not attract as much media coverage as the Dagenham strike, due to it being a smaller company and the lack of government intervention, it was hailed as a success for women by the labour movement. Whilst the Ford sewing-machinists were heralded for initiating the Equal Pay Act, the Trico workers were regarded as having highlighted the legislation’s failure to secure equal pay for working-class women. *The Guardian* claimed the strike exemplified how: ‘working women have not benefited fully from the Equal Pay Act because of its loopholes and the way in which it is being interpreted by industrial tribunals.’⁶ The AUEW proclaimed:

The Trico workers were thrown into the forefront of the struggle for equal pay. From the word go, they were determined to end this exploitation of women. They have never shirked the fight, and the part played by the women here will go down in history like the match girls strike.⁷

This chapter will be the first detailed consideration of this strike from a historical perspective.⁸ Having discussed the Equal Pay Act’s failure to achieve a meaningful reduction in the differential between male and female wages in the introduction and considered the key role the Ford sewing-machinists played in the origins of equal pay legislation in the previous chapter, this case study provides an opportunity to examine how

² ‘Trico Waits for Ruling’, *Brentford and Chiswick Times*, 19 August 1976, p. 1.

³ Martin Rabstein, ‘Equal Pay Battle at Trico’, *Morning Star*, 23 August 1976, pp. 2-3; John Fryer, ‘Vive La Material Difference’, *The Sunday Times*, 5 September 1976.

⁵ MRC, MSS.259/AEU/6/3/SL/3/43, AEEU Southall District Branch Papers, Trico-Folberth Ltd, 1970-1978, Letter to All Branches in Southall District from R.C Butler, 18 October 1976.

⁶ Women find pay fight too tough, *The Guardian*, 8 Sep 1976, p. 6.

⁷ David Turner and Helen Hewland, ‘They’ve Won!’ in *Morning Star*, 16 October 1976, p. 1; ‘No Cash for You’, *Brentford and Chiswick Times*, 16 September 1976.

⁸ Sarah Boston and Sheila Rowbotham give short accounts of the strike in: Sarah Boston, *Women Workers*, pp. 314-317; Sheila Rowbotham, *The Past is Before Us*, p. 227.

the Equal Pay Act was interpreted and challenged by female workers once it was implemented in 1975. The chapter considers the Trico women's experiences of work and trade unionism. It considers the women's subjective motivations for going on strike, and examines the extent to which they associated the dispute with a shift in their expectations of paid work.

The strike also received a large amount of support from community organisations and political groups, such as the Labour Party Young Socialists, as well as the WLM. The support the Trico workers received from local feminist groups distinguished their experiences from the women at Ford, who went on strike prior to the formation of WLM groups across Britain. The final part of this chapter examines how the WLM attempted to engage with the Trico strikers during this period; crucially, it considers how the women perceived their encounter with feminists, socialists and fellow workers on the picket line and what it meant for their own political subjectivity in the subsequent period. In particular, it considers the extent to which they felt their protest influenced the way they thought about themselves as women.

Context

The strike took place in Brentford, which was heavily industrialised but without the same reputation for worker militancy as areas like Dagenham or Clydeside. Brentford is a town in west London that became incorporated into the Greater London borough of Hounslow in 1965. The Great West Road opened in 1925, which formed the main artery linking London with the west of England. The section of road around Brentford was soon known as the 'Golden Mile' because a large number of factories, such as Firestone and Gillette relocated there due to the good communication links, which provided employment and stimulus to the local economy. There was a ready supply of labour from the London docks and gasworks that entered decline in the interwar period, as well as the large amount of white, rural migrant labour attracted to the area due to the demise of agriculture in the neighbouring countryside and post-war development in cheap housing.⁹

Trico opened in 1927 and was the largest supplier of wiper blades and electronic accessories to the British car industry. The factory eventually relocated to Wales in 1982 after entering a state of decline due to foreign competition.¹⁰ According to my respondents, the company was renowned for paying low wages and it was common knowledge that it

⁹ John Grigg and Barbara Humphries, 'Labour Heritage in west London', *Labour Heritage Bulletin*, (Spring 2010), < <http://www.labour-heritage.com/spring-2010.php>>, [accessed 21 May 2013].

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

was the only factory on the ‘Golden Mile’ not to have negotiated equal pay after the implementation of the Equal Pay Act in 1975.¹¹ There had been no industrial disputes of any note in the factory before the equal pay strike and the shop stewards frequently commented upon a lack of militancy amongst the workforce during the strike. A worker named Lisa Parrish said at the time: ‘We’re not a bunch of militants. Some of the women were definitely anti-union before this started.’¹²

Two of the women involved in the strike expressed similar views in their interviews with me. Sally said: ‘before the strike, Trico didn’t have much of a reputation for supporting causes outside of the factory...no we didn’t really support much’. Peggy, who was a shop steward, agreed: ‘Well before the strike, if somebody came into Trico’s collecting for a strike nobody would be interested, but afterwards it was different.’¹³ The Trico workforce had less experience of industrial unrest compared to the Ford sewing-machinists considered in the previous chapter. A consequence of this was the equal pay strike was perceived as novel at the time and represented a break from the past in the stories told by my interviewees.

Although industrial relations at Trico had been non-conflictual, the surrounding area covered by the Southall district trades council had experienced some distinct political battles in the period leading up to the strike. A large number of south Indian and Afro-Caribbean emigrants had settled in the area during the 1950s attracted by the employment opportunities in the factories and cheap housing. Barbara, who had grown up in the area and chaired the Southall district committee of the Labour Party Young Socialists at the time of the strike, discussed the mounting tension between white racists and the growing number of migrants setting up businesses and moving their families into the area.

The other incident that happened in west London that summer was in Southall, which is an Asian community not far from Brentford...you had the National Front who had organised a march and there were continued attacks on Asian workers in the area around Southall as the area became more Asian... but in the summer of 76 a couple of thugs stabbed an Asian student in the town and he died. This led to enormous protests against the police and authorities, as people didn’t feel protected...and the Labour party and district trade councils got together and organised a unity march through Southall under the banner of one race – a unity march. This all happened at same time of Trico – so it was an interesting time.¹⁴

¹¹ Interview with Peggy, Phyllis and Sally in London, 10 April 2013.

¹² MRC, MSS.539/4/17, Papers of Alan Clinton, Julia Langdon, ‘Where Women are Wiping the Smiles off the Bosses’ Faces’, (untitled and undated newspaper cutting).

¹³ Interview with Peggy, Phyllis and Sally in London, 10 April 2013.

¹⁴ Interview with Barbara, London, 16 April 2013.

Barbara remembered the growing activism of local groups and progressive trade unionists in the community surrounding the factory.¹⁵ At the time, *The Spectator* described the area as ‘fertile soil’ for ‘communists, socialists and revolutionaries’ and predicted a ‘long summer of protest’ the week before the Trico strike became official.¹⁶

So whilst the Trico factory had a tranquil history of industrial relations, the area surrounding the factory was heavily politicised at that time. These high levels of local activism were important to the context of this strike in terms of the support that the women received. My interviewee, Sally, explained the AUEW Southall district committee had ‘a progressive left wing leadership there at that time, and the whole of that district committee, which wasn’t a very big committee, were all progressive and prepared to fight for us.’¹⁷ There were a large number of International Socialist and Labour party supporters, as well as feminists in the area who were keen to offer their support to female workers in a fight for equal pay. This was to have a key effect, not just on sustaining the strike, but also on a personal level for the women involved, as many of the strikers told stories, at the time and in my oral history interviews, about coming into contact with groups of people and ideas on the picket line they had not encountered before. In this manner, the context in which the Trico strike took place was quite different to the Ford sewing-machinists’ dispute, where the workforce was well organised, but the women felt there was little interest from within the town.

Experiences of Work

Similar to Ford, the 400 female Assembly Line workers at Trico worked in a segregated, all-female section of a manual manufacturing industry, whose work was deemed to be of lesser value than work performed by men. I interviewed Sally, Peggy and Phyllis in a group interview at Sally’s home in Ealing in April 2013. Sally was interviewed on a second occasion in June 2013. As discussed in chapter one, the three women had quite different trajectories that brought them together at Trico. Nevertheless all three of my respondents told stories that emphasised the importance of their wages as well as the subjective value of their work. Peggy was born in Brentford in 1941 and had lived there her entire life. She explained at the start of the interview

(I started work) when I was 15, I had several jobs... I worked at BHS when I left school, till I was 19 and then I went to an engineering factory in Brentford, where I

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Amit Roy, ‘Summer in Southall’, *The Spectator*, Jun 19, 1976, p. 11.

¹⁷ Interview with Peggy, Phyllis and Sally in London, 10 April 2013.

met my husband, he started on the same day as me and we got married in 1960, and I started work at Trico the following year.¹⁸

Paid work was central to her narrative. She went on to say

I just worked in engineering factories... and then when I did leave Trico... in 1982 because I was made redundant... and went and worked in an office as an administrator and then from there I went to look after people with learning difficulties and I retired from there... And that's my life really... (laughs)¹⁹

The way Peggy introduced herself was quite common among my interviewees, who would frequently list the various occupations they had undertaken interspersed with personal details about getting married or having children. Work was clearly central to Peggy's self-understanding, and the way she spoke about her past, but it also seemed she had arrived at the interview prepared to talk exclusively about paid work. Similarly to the Dagenham women, Peggy also emphasised the importance of her wages. She claimed the £6.64 differential between male and female wages represented a lot of money to her at the time and said: 'work definitely became more important to me in the 60s because I bought my house in 1965, until then I had lived with my mum, but in 1965 I bought my house and I needed my wages to pay the mortgage.'²⁰

Phyllis also emphasised the necessity of paid work. She emigrated from Ireland, and claimed to have 'no education', which meant she felt she had worked all her life in order to 'get by and support her family'. She said:

Where I came from, we used to live on the border in Ireland and I didn't have an education. So (after Trico) I worked in garages, I worked in chip shops, I worked in a launderette, I worked in the trade union club in Acton for a while... bits and bobs... I worked as a cleaner as well... because my husband died very young and I then had to support my daughter so I did everything I could to put her through University. But to do that I had to take anything... I didn't mind it, but I'm glad to have retired now!²¹

Leaving school at the first opportunity and working in a low paid, segregated labour force in a factory was a common experience shared between the majority of women I interviewed, and stood in contrast to popular conceptions of the post-war period offering new career and education opportunities to middle-class women. For my respondents, paid work was central to their sense of independence, whether that was expressed through buying their own home, or providing for themselves and their families. They connected this broader narrative to their motivation for going on strike and to explain the sense of

¹⁸ Interview with Peggy, Phyllis and Sally in London, 10 April 2013.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

injustice they felt when male workers received higher wages than them for performing the same work.

Sally had a slightly different trajectory to my other respondents. She was born in Hertfordshire and had lived in Lewisham, Surrey and Norwich before she was 15 years old. She had what she described in the first interview as a ‘Tory upbringing from Tory parents’, before she moved to London in 1969, where she married and became a social worker until 1975, when she decided to go back to college to study for a degree in sociology. During that time, she left her husband and moved into a bed-sit in Ealing. She found work at Trico through the job centre and joined the AUEW immediately. Sally explained the importance of work to her livelihood:

I needed to get a job...it was quite a stressful time because of splitting up, and it would have taken ages to get another social work job - you can't just walk into them, it can take a few months, and so at the time there was lots of industry, because this was pre-Thatcher, and they paid much better in the factories, and so I went down the job centre and that day there were two jobs they offered me in local factories...So I turned up at Trico and I stayed. Then, six months later, we were all out on strike for equal pay!²²

During the second interview, Sally spoke in greater detail about the unsatisfying nature of assembly line work, and re-emphasised the material value of women's wages at the time of the dispute. She explained she chose to work at Trico because ‘you could earn a bit more if you worked the hours’ by comparison to office and shop work. She also pointed out:

...it wasn't a nice job. It was just people (pause) in a factory you make the time go by having a laugh together and the friendships you have and some of the fun you, you *make*. But the actual work is hard and pretty awful.²³

Similar to the Ford sewing-machinists, Sally talked about the collective culture and friendships established by the women themselves that made work worthwhile. She felt this was particularly important for women in the face of patronising attitudes of male managers and co-workers.

I wouldn't say I really enjoyed it... There were some terrible attitudes. There still are for women, but that pin money thing is not now quite the same is it? That really was quite (pause), but then the whole thing, pin money, you don't hear that talked of now do you? ...Pin money was not true for the vast majority of women at Trico. You wouldn't do an awful job like that just for the (pause) there might be one or two whose husbands were working and they didn't have too many outgoings – their rent

²² Interview with Peggy, Phyllis and Sally in London, 10 April 2013.

²³ Interview with Sally in London, 19 June 2013.

and stuff – maybe some of that money would go towards holidays - that woman having a holiday and stuff. But no one had a really cushy life.²⁴

The Trico workers believed their strike was about having the economic and subjective value of their work publically recognised. At the time, one worker told *Women's Voice*, the monthly women's paper of the International Socialists: 'I've worked here for eleven years altogether. That means that I've made a lot of money for this firm, but I have no security!'²⁵ Looking back on the strike, my interviewees also emphasised the uneven balance between women's wages and their contribution to the production process. The introduction of five men to the assembly line earning higher wages than the women brought into sharper focus the sex based devaluation of assembly line work. Sally pointed out in the first interview:

The management at the plant really did treat the women with contempt, but the women at Trico were all the production workers. All the other workers were just supporting the production... But they did treat the women with contempt even though without us there was no production... having those guys, on the same assembly line, doing identical work, assembling the same thing, and then at the end of the week, if you had worked at the same rate, the same performance they were coming away with approximately £6.50 more than the women in their pay packet.... and that was incendiary!²⁶

Sally went on in the second interview to describe this sense of injustice and gradual realisation amongst the female workforce of their unequal status in the factory:

I think most of the women realised, particularly the ones who had been there a long while that they worked probably the hardest, some of the hardest of any of the workers in the factory and were very good at their job because sometimes it was noted that women worked faster than machines could do the job and they realised that they were being underpaid for it. So there was quite a lot of resentment towards men in the factory because most of the men -like in the tool room and in the press shop, setters, tool setters - half the time could sit around; they weren't working constantly. On the lines you were working constantly unless it broke down...so the women did know they probably worked the hardest and were resentful. And the men, most men, in return, really the attitude was very contemptuous, towards women.²⁷

The idea that they were treated with 'contempt' as female workers (a phrase also used by Vera in the previous chapter) prompted Peggy to tell a story about being ignored during a meeting between the union convenors, the management and four or five women:

Eileen Ward (shop steward) was reading out things that were about equal pay, you know? Coming up to this equal pay thing, and I remember Slidders (manager) sitting

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ 'Trico Women Keep Fighting', *Women's Voice*, No. 3, September 1976.

²⁶ Interview with Sally in London, 19 June 2013

²⁷ Interview with Peggy, Phyllis and Sally in London, 10 April 2013.

there, and Georgie Evans (manager's 'henchman') leant behind Slidders' back to talk to whoever was behind him and I just turned around and I said... 'Excuse me..., there's another meeting going on here'...and all we did was just pick up our paperwork and we walked out and...I said 'Excuse me but when my chairman is talking please don't have your own meeting separately,' and that's how ignorant they were...²⁸

Collectively, my interviewees constructed a narrative that emphasised how they felt patronised and undervalued as female workers in the build up to the strike. The introduction of five men to the assembly line represented the turning point that brought clarity to a vague sense of injustice they felt before. Sally explained this transition in awareness: 'Once they were working beside you, yeah they had all that additional money, oh that was dynamite, that really was dynamite because... you have to see an injustice in your face really, don't you? If it's still theoretical or it's somewhere out there...(tails off).'

29

The idea that gender equality was 'theoretical' or 'somewhere out there' encapsulated the notion that a broader shift was taking place in the way they thought about themselves as women as political subjects. Ideas about paid work were central to this process; for example, my respondents identified the sewing-machinists' strike and the Equal Pay Act as key moments that altered the way they felt about their own experiences of work. But they also situated the strike in a context where they felt their attitudes towards equality outside of the workplace were changing as well. Peggy said:

To be honest...when I got married in 1960...you weren't man and wife in the way you are now...there wasn't that independence, until the sort of thing that came up in the 1970s with the Equal Pay Act, and then you were equal... I don't think (equal pay) was ever discussed to be honest in the 60s. I think women just went to work and did their job and then went home again. I'd never ever heard it until it was brought into law really...In the 70s when it first came out, when the unions said, 'well we're working at getting equal pay', then it was planted and you realised! But before in the 60s I don't think anybody really used that term... And then of course there were Ford's and there were lots of other little equal pay strikes around the country wasn't there?³⁰

Sally agreed with Peggy's assertion that she had never really thought about equal pay and women's rights until the passing of the Equal Pay Act and the Ford strike. She said:

It (equal pay) wasn't on the agenda in the 60s... Yes and so it (Equal Pay Act) did help, didn't it? Because the Ford's women if I'm right, when they came out, they were looking to get the rate for the job to do with their grades weren't they? They were not on a skilled grade, and of course their work was very skilled, making the

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Interview with Sally in London, 19 June 2013

³⁰ Interview with Peggy, Phyllis and Sally in London, 10 April 2013.

car seat covers, but they didn't use the term equal pay at first, and wasn't it their convenor, who said it's about equal pay? I think that probably is true. But before then the words weren't really used... And then it focused our minds, even though it didn't help us, it focused our minds on what we needed to fight for.³¹

Phyllis on the other hand suggested that society in general was changing during this period in a way that made her feel differently about her rights as a woman.

I don't think it (equal pay) was ever discussed (during the 1960s), the woman would stay at home whilst the man would go out to the pub and the woman would be minding the kids and doing the housework, but once the 70s came in then maybe ... women got a little bit more of an independence? In the 70s things were changing, times were changing, people were more liberated; then the hippies came in and we (women) didn't want to be second class citizens (laughs). So we weren't going to do what some men was telling us, because people were changing and they had different ideas, and you'd go out on the street and you'd go on marches. But maybe it was always the same in London, but it wasn't like that in Ireland so that's how I felt. And women were getting their own little bit of independence and things like that...³²

The Trico workers I interviewed contextualised their motivations for going on strike by suggesting the years surrounding the dispute represented a break from the past and a moment of realisation about their experiences as women. They constructed a narrative where the Equal Pay Act represented a key moment that inaugurated an idea about equality that had hitherto not existed in their minds. Della Porta argues that changes in social structure are interpreted within a process of cultural evolution through which new ideas emerge in the minds of individuals. She explains that people become 'politicised' when traditional norms no longer succeed in providing a satisfactory structure for behaviour and the individual is forced to challenge the social order through various forms of non-conformity.³³ The Trico women I interviewed adopted this evolutionary framework to explain their motivations for organising an equal pay strike. Retrospectively, the Ford strike, Equal Pay Act and ensuing public debates surrounding equality were understood as key moments connected to a transition in the Trico women's minds that led them to question their own experiences in the workplace.³⁴

Although the women interpreted the period around the strike as a time when attitudes towards women's role as workers were changing, the press coverage and union publications surrounding the strike indicate that public attitudes were less clear. On the one

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Della Porta, *Social Movements*, pp. 20-28.

³⁴ At least that was how they retrospectively understood and explained their motivations for the strike in the process of the oral history interview.

hand, women's increased presence in the labour force, the passage of the Equal Pay Act and increased male unemployment in the early 1970s meant that the importance of female wages to the household economy was increasingly recognised during the Trico strike.³⁵ For example, an article written for the International Marxist Group's paper claimed:

For a large majority of women at Trico, the strike has highlighted the importance of their earnings – Women don't work for pin money these days, they work to keep their homes together... They have sent a message to employers that you can't treat women as cheap labour anymore.³⁶

An article in the TASS Journal suggested: 'the idea that women work for pin money is a myth. Two incomes are now needed to support a family.'³⁷ *The Guardian* commented that the strike had placed family budgets under strain saying: 'if women did work for pin money there would be little problem, but myths do not pay the rent.'³⁸

The press suggested that the strike revealed problems with equal pay legislation. The Equal Opportunities Commission had been established in 1976, but only 31 of 110 industrial tribunals had found in favour of women seeking equal pay, whilst a further 335 had been thrown out of court in the first six months after the Equal Pay Act was implemented.³⁹ *Time Out* described the strike as the: 'most significant happening to highlight the problems with the Equal Pay Act.'⁴⁰ *The Sunday Times* observed that the Trico women were: 'pushing an open door as dissatisfaction at Barbara Castle's act grew amongst female workers.'⁴¹ *The Guardian* suggested that the women had demonstrated the need to change the wording of the act to recognise women performing 'similar work' to 'work of equal value'.⁴² In this sense, the strike gained public recognition of the importance of female wages to household economies and exposed the wider issues surrounding the failure to recognise the specific skills involved in work performed by women in a labour market still segregated by sex.

³⁵ The number of registered unemployed increased by 50 per cent between 1970 and 1975. James E. Alt, 'The Politics of Economic Decline in the 1970s' in Black et al. eds., *Britain in the 1970s*, p. 33.

³⁶ MRC, Papers of Alan Clinton, MSS.539/4/17: Gary Gurmeet, 'Just one small step for women – A minor Victory as Equal Pay Strike Enters 9th Week', International Socialists newspaper, September 1976.

³⁷ TUC Library, HD. 6061: *TASS Journal* August 1976, pp. 9-10.

³⁸ 'More equal pay: Geoffrey Sherdian looks at the Trico dispute, where men may have to wait for women to catch up'. *The Guardian*, 14 July 1976, p. 9.

³⁹ John Fryer, 'Vive La Material Difference', *The Sunday Times*, September 5 1976; Only 22 per cent of industrial tribunals involved trade unions and their long term ineffectiveness was illustrated by fact the number of tribunals fell from 1742 in 1976 to 91 in 1980 in Boston, *Women Workers*, p. 314.

⁴⁰ 'MRC, Papers of Alan Clinton, MSS.539/4/17' A long Haul to Equal Treatment for Women', (untitled and undated newspaper article); 'Hot for Equality', *Time Out*, 2-8 July 1976.

⁴¹ John Fryer, 'Vive La Material Difference' in *The Sunday Times*, 5 September 1976.

⁴² Women find pay fight too tough, *The Guardian*, 8 Sep 1976, p. 6

However, other accounts of the strike patronised the women and undermined their cause on the basis that their work was secondary to their familial role. The inflationary effects of the £6.50 weekly pay rise required for equal pay were also discussed within the context of the Labour government's incomes policy, largely at the expense of the women's demand to have the value of their work recognised. For example, *The Brentford and Chiswick Times* wrote:

Superficially it appears to be a straightforward case of a wicked management exploiting cheap female labour, contrary to contemporary thinking and legislation. But if the Trico management is guilty of anything, it is of short sighted humanity... men made redundant took on new jobs on the production shift with a considerable drop in wages...the management agreed to allow them to keep their higher piecework rates as a reward ...It so happened that the 400 other production workers on the day shift were women. It is easy to interpret men on this line - on a higher rate - as sexual discrimination. It is very obvious that this is not the case...this is not a chauvinistic defiance, but a fair minded assessment of the issues...they will not strike a blow for sexual equality, but throw a below the belt punch at the government's fight against inflation.⁴³

The local papers continued to support the company, with reports of European rivals taking advantage of the factory's halt in production, the inflationary nature of their equal pay demand and criticism of the women when male workers were laid off in August, suggesting that their irrational protest had: 'prevented married men from running their families.'⁴⁴ The economic context meant the women's demand to have the value of their work recognised were sometimes overlooked; instead they were publically understood as irrational and connected to some abstract notion of 'contemporary thinking' about equality.

The tabloids also discussed the levels of disruption the strike caused to household relations as much as it affected production at Trico. *The Mirror* reported that 'a bitter equal pay strike by women has threatened to split families', whilst *The Sun* claimed: 'Angry factory girls are on a kitchen sink strike in an attempt to force husbands to support their battle for equal pay. The Men are grumbling about wives refusing to cook dinners or even doing their normal wifely duties'.⁴⁵ This quote was repeated frequently in the local press and the women were continuously harassed about whether or not they were on a 'sex strike' as well.⁴⁶ The press continued to trivialise the strike by focusing on the physical appearance of the women on the picket line or discussing it in relation to their sexuality

⁴³ 'Below the Pay Belt', *Brentford and Chiswick Times*, 24 June 1976, p. 1.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Terry Pattinson, 'Husbands v Wives in Equal Pay Battle', *Daily Mirror*, (undated); Keith Deves, 'Wives in a Kitchen Sink Pay Strike', *The Sun*, (undated).

⁴⁶ 'Factory Girls Deny 'Sex Strike'', *Evening Mail*, Keith Deves, 'We're on Sex Strike Say Wives in Equal Pay Strike', *The Sun*, 1 June 1976.

and domestic life⁴⁷. After Sally was involved in a car chase with some scabs, *The Northants Post* wrote ‘A pretty strike picket told the Post this week of her night of terror in Northampton when lorry drivers chased her across fields after ramming her car.’⁴⁸

Sally described how the press coverage had surprised her, saying: ‘people didn’t realise, that until you actually experience it, just how vicious and biased the press are generally...against women and workers, obviously by attacking the union, but also just trivialising it as women...who have got a bit upset.’⁴⁹ Phyllis agreed with this, remembering the local radio discussing ‘all the lovely women outside the factory, without even mentioning the strike or anything to do with equal pay’ and Peggy described the media response as ‘patronising’.⁵⁰ *Time Out* magazine summarised the situation at the time claiming that the newspaper coverage had: ‘exploited the ‘sex’ angle while the more mundane reality is that the strikers are expected to go home after a hard day’s picketing and cook the family’s evening meal.’⁵¹

The Trico women connected their motivations for going on strike to the personal importance of paid work in their daily lives. They retrospectively associated the strike with a growing awareness amongst female workers of their unequal status in the workplace and in wider society. Their experience of workplace militancy was distinguished from male workers because they had to contend with public assumptions about their domestic role and levels of skill, which undermined their right to equality. The disapproval in the press also suggested the women were defying cultural norms, despite the fact women had fought to improve their conditions in the workplace since the nineteenth century. The following section will consider how the women’s union dealt with the strike, and what this reveals about women’s relationship with the labour movement.

Experiences of Trade Unionism

The official backing and large amount of support the Trico women received directly from their union distinguished my interviewees’ experience from the women involved in the following case studies on the Fakenham and Lee Jeans factory occupations. The AUEW provided strike pay of £9 a week for every striker. It organised delegations of workers to visit factories across Britain and raised £34,644 from its own members, which

⁴⁷ See Terry Pattinson,, ‘Standing Put...The Petticoat Pickets, *The Daily Mirror*, (undated).

⁴⁸ ‘M1 Terror for Picket Girl Sally’, *Northants Post*, 7 August 1976.

⁴⁹ Interview with Peggy, Phyllis and Sally in London, 10 April 2013.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ ‘Hot for Equality’, *Time Out* 2-8 July 1976.

was used to pay hardship money to women who were struggling financially.⁵² They raised the strike's profile by publishing a weekly bulletin and urged their own members and other unions to support the women on the picket line in their monthly journal.⁵³ The district official, Roger Butler, and factory convenor, John Inwood, advised the women's strike committee on how to coordinate their action and led the negotiations with the company.⁵⁴

The high levels of support the women received locally and from the wider labour movement were crucial to the strike's success. The solidarity and organisation necessary to sustain the 24 hour picket line for 21 weeks should not be taken for granted. The AUEW Southall District Committee printed and issued notices around British car manufacturers urging workers to black Trico products, and followed this up with letters to branches in Essex and Bedfordshire to investigate workplaces that did not comply.⁵⁵ They organised mass meetings throughout the duration of the strike to keep the workforce up to date with negotiation procedures.⁵⁶ The Greater London Association of Trades Councils organised fund raising events and asked each of its affiliated trades councils to join the women on the picket line to ensure victory in what they perceived as a 'crucial and historic dispute.'⁵⁷

The high levels of organisation and widespread appeals for public support were necessary to combat the opposition from male workers and AUEW members within the factory. The Southall District Committee explained in an appeal for support that Trico was 'only able to maintain a small amount of production through the use of non-union labour and scabs' who 'resorted to breaking our picket line at 3am in the morning with convoys of non-union lorries and with the assistance of the police.'⁵⁸ The shop-stewards representing the labourers, setters and tool room workers were reported to the AUEW Executive Committee because they had 'actively worked with the management of Trico to break the

⁵² MRC, MSS.259/AEU/6/3/SL/3/43, Final Statement and Balance Sheet from the Trico-Folberth Strike Committee (undated) pays tribute to 150 male workers who supported the strike.

⁵³ AUEW Engineering Section Journal, vol. 43. No. 9, September 1976.

⁵⁴ See TUC Library, HD. 6061: AUEW Trico Strike Bulletins, 16 produced from Wednesday 29 June to Monday 18 October.

⁵⁵ MRC, MSS.259/AEU/6/3/SL/3/43, Letter to South Essex District Secretary of AUEW from Roger Butler, 8 October 1976; Letter from Bedfordshire County Association of Trades Councils to Roger Butler, 13 October 1976

⁵⁶ MRC, MSS.259/AEU/6/3/SL/3/43, Report of William McLoughlin, London Divisional Organiser FAO Southall District Committee, 21 September, 1976; Reports of Brother W. McLoughlin, Divisional Organiser FAO Southall District Committee, 13 October 1976.

⁵⁷ The women were joined on the picket line by representatives from the Acton Rails AUEW; Brent Trades Council; Barnet Trades Council; Enfield and Edmonton Trades Council; Hammersmith Trades Council; Westminster Trades Council; Battersea and Wandsworth Trades Council and Working Women's Charter according to rota in MRC, MSS.259/AEU/6/3/SL/3/43, Letters from Frank Stiller, Secretary of the Greater London Association of Trades Councils to his members, 6 September 1976.

⁵⁸ AUEW Southall District Committee Circular, 2 August 1976

official dispute...and had at many times abused our women on the picket lines and had at least on one occasion caused an injury to a woman shop steward.'⁵⁹

The shop-stewards representing the labourers, setters and tool room workers wrote to Hugh Scanlon, the AUEW General Secretary, voicing their shared objections to the strike:

It has been requested by many employees at Trico (AUEW members), that the present dispute and the serious consequences that have resulted are not in the best interest of full employment, nor a state of solidarity among our members...no useful purpose can be served by closing down our place of employment resulting in some 1600 people being out of a job. All this strike has achieved is to split the membership of what was largely a loyal group of trade unionists who can see that this non-issue...can result only in loss of jobs if the strike continues'.⁶⁰

The letter included a petition with 232 signatures of workers who opposed the women's demand for equal pay.⁶¹ In a letter to the AUEW Southall District Committee, the tool room shop steward described the strike as 'mindless action' that would 'cause endless troubles' and 'does not benefit our real members one iota.'⁶² He concluded:

All this can achieve is to lose members, and I mean long term members, as against the in and out membership of the women, our hold on them was always tenuous, most of them never see their cards... I have in past year strived to keep a union shop, even stubborn people who held out for forty years. I got them round to joining by patient pressure, explaining how they would benefit in various ways, and finally achieved a 99 per cent membership. This of course has now been destroyed by this strike action which so many of them could see no clear justification, years of work down the drain!⁶³

The women did not receive full support from male workers who perceived equal pay as a 'non-issue', women's union membership as temporary and the strike as a threat to their livelihoods. Peggy mentioned her brother was a 'scab' (but had little else to say about this), whilst Sally described how they also faced opposition from male workers:

We were still far outnumbered by men, some of them were supportive ...but there were some very reactionary guys working in the factory, some of which were in the tool room and in the press shop and other places. There were some very unpleasant characters. There were some men actually in the National Front...I remember on one occasion we were meeting in the park and some of the men who were scabbing

⁵⁹ MRC, MSS.259/AEU/6/3/SL/3/43, Letter from Roger Butler to John Boyd AUEW General Secretary, 28 September 1976

⁶⁰ MRC, MSS.259/AEU/6/3/SL/3/43, Letter from 'AUEW Shop Stewards and Members', (Setters; Labourers; Tool Room) to Hugh Scanlon 27 August 1976

⁶¹ MRC, MSS.259/AEU/6/3/SL/3/43, Signed Petition.

⁶² MRC, MSS.259/AEU/6/3/SL/3/43, Letter from R. Brown, Shop Steward, Tool Inspection, to Roger Butler 21 September 1976

⁶³ MRC, MSS.259/AEU/6/3/SL/3/43, Letter from R. Brown, Shop Steward, Tool Inspection, to Roger Butler 21 September 1976

on us climbed over the fence and were very threatening towards us.⁶⁴

At the time, the strike committee explained the opposition and company tactics ‘though prolonging the strike and causing terrible hardship to those involved, also had the effect of strengthening the bonds of comradeship of both the strikers and their many supporters.’⁶⁵

The conflict between male and female workers at Trico meant the women’s collective action was distinguished from an ‘ordinary’ strike and was conceptualised as novel by the unions involved. Female workers were perceived to face unique difficulties; the AUEW Southall District Committee reported: ‘Many of the women are single, widowed, and unsupported parents. You will understand the urgent need for finance in this dispute.’⁶⁶ The GLATC suggested ‘It is very difficult for the women in the dispute to picket at night time and at weekends.’⁶⁷ The women’s lack of union or ‘political’ expertise was continuously stressed; the chairman of the Brent Trades Council wrote a poem that emphasised the women’s lack of experience and the important role of the union in supporting the women:

The strikers had courage and guts galore but never were in a strike before.
Courage and guts needs something more to put Trico bosses on the floor
But the Union Southall Districts a tremendous role did play
To weld and lead this fighting role as day succeeded day⁶⁸

At the end of the strike, the women’s convenor John Inwood suggested the women:

(...) had entered a new world to them and in the early stages were somewhat bemused, apprehensive and not particularly organised. However by sheer courage and endurance they gradually formed themselves into such an impregnable unit that they succeeded in changing the course of society in this country as far as its attitudes towards equality for women was concerned.⁶⁹

The women’s lack of organisation prior to the dispute shaped the women’s political subjectivity at the time. Shop steward Betty Aitson said in an interview: ‘I must admit that we were a very, very inexperienced union. Although I have been a shop steward for 9

⁶⁴ Interview with Peggy, Phyllis and Sally in London, 10 April 2013.

⁶⁵ MRC, MSS.259/AEU/6/3/SL/3/43, Final Statement and Balance Sheet from the Trico-Folberth Strike Committee (undated)

⁶⁶ AUEW Southall District Committee Circular, 2 August 1976

⁶⁷ MRC, MSS.259/AEU/6/3/SL/3/43, A letter from Frank Stiller, Secretary of the Greater London Association of Trades Councils to his members dated 6 September 1976.

⁶⁸ MRC, MSS.259/AEU/6/3/SL/3/43, Tribute to the Trico Strikers (Poem By Tom Durkin) member or UCATT and Chairman of Brent Trades Council

⁶⁹ MRC, MSS.259/AEU/6/3/SL/3/43, Final Statement and Balance Sheet from the Trico-Folberth Strike Committee (undated)

years, I've learned more since I came out on strike in 14 weeks I think than I would have learnt in the 15 years I've been in the factory. It's been thoroughly educational to me.⁷⁰ The sense of novelty was reflected in the words of a worker appearing in a contemporary strike bulletin: 'at first there was a kind of disbelief about it all - that we'd need to collect money, to organise. We had to take it into our own hands...at first we suffered from a lack of confidence.'⁷¹

In the oral history interviews, Peggy discussed her inexperience despite being in the union since 1960 and a shop steward: 'to be honest when I first went out on strike...I was green...But once we got organised, it went so smoothly after that... but the atmosphere was...at the beginning, in the first three or four weeks, we didn't really know what we were doing.' Sally agreed pointing out 'we didn't even get the strike committee together for a while, or there was one but it didn't really function at the very beginning.'⁷²

The women's prior lack of union experience contributed to the notion the strike was 'historic'. It was frequently described as 'an historic struggle for equal pay' or 'the most important going on in the country'.⁷³ The union assumed responsibility for the strike and almost presented itself as the vanguard of women's rights. For example, one bulletin proclaimed:

We (AUEW) are leading a strike, which is now recognised as the most major battle for equal pay since the coming into effect of the act – and we have shown what solidarity and a united trade union movement can achieve.⁷⁴

Another bulletin said:

Our main strength lies in our organisation and collective action. We have justice on our side and when we win we will tell the world: **OUR MOVEMENT WON FOR US THESE RIGHTS AND NOBODY WILL TAKE THEM AWAY FROM US.**⁷⁵

The opportunity to highlight the failure of equal pay legislation provided the union with a chance to attack the Labour government's incomes policy and assert their right to determine wages through collective bargaining. For example, the AUEW Southall district secretary Roger Butler declared after their victory:

⁷⁰ 'Trico Women Strike', *Shrew*, Autumn 1976.

⁷¹ TUC Library, HD. 6061: AUEW Trico Strike Bulletin no.3, 15 July 1976.

⁷² Interview with Peggy, Phyllis and Sally in London, 10 April 2013.

⁷³ MRC, MSS.259/AEU/6/3/SL/3/43, Letter from Frank Stiller, Secretary of the Greater London Association of Trades Councils to his members dated 31 August 1976.

⁷⁴ TUC Library, HD. 6061: AUEW Trico Strike Bulletin no. 4, Thursday 22 July.

⁷⁵ TUC Library, HD. 6061: AUEW Trico Strike Bulletin no. 8, Thursday 12 August.

This is a lesson to the movement on how equal pay can be achieved. It will not be brought about by tribunals. It is only through trade union unity and working-class struggle that justice for women workers will be won.⁷⁶

The AUEW's support for the Trico women indicated the type of success female workers could achieve when they received official backing from their union. It also illustrated how British industrial relations continued to be dominated by men. Similar to the Ford sewing-machinists' strike, whilst the original decision to strike was taken by female workers on the shop-floor, the dispute was similarly resolved by all-male union officials negotiating equal pay on behalf of female workers. In both cases, the unions involved claimed to have won justice for their members.

The high levels of support and solidarity influenced the Trico women's political subjectivity at the time, as well as my interviewees' retrospective explanations of their motivations, and the effects of the strike on their self-understanding. The women I interviewed had joined the AUEW when they began working at Trico. There was no closed-shop agreement, and Sally suggested that, in total, the factory was 70 per cent unionised, with 93 of the 400 female workers non-members before the strike.⁷⁷ Peggy explained that she joined the AUEW in 1960, even though none of her family were members, because it represented something that she 'believed in', and was proud that she had been voted shop steward in 1971.⁷⁸ Sally remembered joining as soon as she arrived at Trico in 1975 and pointed out that it represented the first opportunity for her to become involved in the labour movement:

I arrived at Trico and obviously joined the union... because I was already (pause) I would actually have said I had become, I would say socialist from when I was doing my social work training, and part of the influence was a great guy who taught us sociology, he was Marxist, but he was a real character, and he was terrific and he really made me begin to see the difference between the haves and have nots, and it did start me thinking much more about that sort of thing because my parents were both Tory, so it wasn't like I was getting any of this from home.⁷⁹

Sally played an active role in the strike committee as the press relations officer. She was voted as a shop steward after the strike and operated as women's delegate for the AUEW Southall District Committee until she left Trico in 1982. She participated in the anti-poll tax protests in 1989 and remained active in local campaigns against hospital closures and government cuts to public services at the time of the interview. Subsequently,

⁷⁶ TUC Library, HD. 6061: AUEW Strike Bulletin no. 16, Monday 18 October.

⁷⁷ Interview with Peggy, Phyllis and Sally in London, 10 April 2013.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

the strike marked a pivotal moment in Sally's narrative that portrayed a middle-class, politically inexperienced pre-strike self, transformed by the strike into an active, politically engaged trade unionist post-strike self.⁸⁰ Sally's experiences of trade unionism formed a crucial aspect of this narrative. During the second interview she explained:

Well it changed my life but eh. (pause) I suppose it made me realise the importance of...you know this thing that was said about a woman's place is in her union? We used to always say that, and that you need your organisation and women need it as much as men. I wasn't one who felt you should just fight our (women's) side and all that. But, well I mean you can on some issues, but that strength was in your sort of working-class organisation alongside other men. But having to battle them as well of course. But, but not just that, you see all this stuff that is said about you having to battle your union, well we didn't, we couldn't have done what we did without our union.⁸¹

Sally and Peggy both emphasised the importance of the solidarity they experienced on the picket line and further afield. Similarly to the Dagenham sewing-machinists, they contrasted their experiences to their perception of organised labour at the time of the interview. Peggy remembered:

One of the things that surprised me was how generous people were. People giving all their hard earned cash. ...A lot of young people now haven't had that experience. A lot are unemployed. They don't have that experience where people actually support you!⁸²

Sally believed the new alliances forged with fellow workers represented an eye-opening moment for her workmates, as well as herself, pointing out:

We learnt who our friends were. I mean locally we met trade unionists and the working women's charter, but also up and down the country, Scotland, Wales, England and even people sent letters and unions wrote letters from France and Switzerland... it completely changed people's attitude towards the trade union and the trade union movement and all the other sections that supported us.⁸³

Sally's comments prompted Peggy to remember her colleague: 'Rosie Cook wasn't in the union, joined during the strike and became a shop steward after 6 months!' Phyllis felt 'there were a lot of women in the factory for which it opened their minds.'⁸⁴ During the group interview, the women affirmed each other's accounts by suggesting the strike represented a moment of change in the relationship between the female workforce and the union. Whilst their account was obviously shaped by memory, in the words of Selina Todd, this 'does not mean the incident did not loom large at the time'.⁸⁵

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Interview with Sally in London, 19 June 2013.

⁸² Interview with Peggy, Phyllis and Sally in London, 10 April 2013.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Todd, 'Experience, Class and Britain's Twentieth Century', p. 498.

The women's experience of trade unionism was shaped by how their union was organised locally, rather than the attitudes of their national leadership. They emphasised the personal relationships they established in their local branch and suggested they were fortunate to have sympathetic officials. Sally said: 'We were very lucky politically having the Southall district committee and not ... some AUEW district committees, which were quite right wing...in which case we would have almost certainly lost...' ⁸⁶ Peggy agreed:

Yeah we had good people like Roger Butler (district official) and John Inwood (the convener). He wasn't very smart but oh God could he talk his way out of a paper bag...he was fantastic. But the knowledge that those two blokes had was so important ...and we couldn't have done that without their support...I don't think we would have got what we got had it been 5-6 years later because of Thatcher and what she did to the unions. ⁸⁷

Sally pointed this out herself and discussed how female workers had demanded equal pay at the Electrolux factory 30 miles away in Luton only six months earlier, but had difficulty sustaining their strike, even though they won their employment tribunal, because their AUEW district committee were unwilling to support them. ⁸⁸

Whilst the union's support for the strike was important, it is crucial that its significance does not disguise the agency of the individual women who actually organised it. Phyllis explained that she had 'always belonged to the union' because she 'had a socialist background' and 'was always on the left'. However, she had been less involved in the AUEW than Peggy and Sally and was slightly more critical of its treatment of female members. She pointed out that the union had five years to sort out equal pay before the Equal Pay Act was implemented:

But then after the women at Ford went on strike, wouldn't you think all of the trade unions would have been talking about giving all the women in factories...you know...equal rights? You would have thought it would have come up and it would have been building into something big to give women equal rights... but it was the women who had to go and get it in the end. The trade unions didn't seem bothered... you know there were a lot of male chauvinists as well at that time... some of them just would not support us...in the factory and in the union, some of them in the unions wouldn't support us either. ⁸⁹

Phyllis's alternative perspective on the AUEW's influence upon the women's strike importantly highlighted how the decision to organise and fight for equal pay was made by the women themselves, and was not part of a wider campaign initiated by the AUEW.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid; Electrolux dispute also mentioned in Boston, *Women Workers*, p. 317.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

Peggy and Sally discussed the organic nature in which the women originally decided to go on strike. Peggy remembered ordering all of the women into the park for a mass meeting after the union's equal pay negotiations had broken down:

There were about 400 women in the park and they said they wanted some action there and then... the women who had been directly working alongside these five guys were so angry! There was actually three proposals put to the meeting; one was for lightning strikes, one for one or two days a week strikes and then the last proposal was for all out strike action. Well, the last proposal was put first and it was overwhelmingly supported. So suddenly everyone realised that we were now on strike. Our District Secretary, Roger Butler, said it was obviously up to the shop stewards and the members to decide what they were going to do, not necessarily thinking that that it would be there and then... it was incredible. I mean there were feelings of excitement, confusion, anger about the whole issue, about how management was treating people, especially as there now was an Equal Pay Act actually on statute since the end of the previous year.⁹⁰

Although Peggy and Sally emphasised the importance of the support they received from their union officials and other male workers in the factory, they embellished their account with tales of collaboration, confrontation and personal bravery that revealed the central role that the women themselves had played in sustaining the strike. Peggy remembered 'we marched all around Brentford, it was like a carnival, right at the start.' Sally explained 'we went and occupied the DSS offices. That was to try and get some supplementary support for people without help at home.' They had to prevent the company from moving raw materials to their sister factory in Northampton. Sally explained 'it was a really highly organised operation between the company management, the police and these scab lorries'. She remembered 'We really confronted the convoys... These huge 40 ft. lorries drove through the picket line at huge speeds. It was very dangerous'. Sally 'used to go on the back of a motorbike with Eric, Eric Fudge, a lovely guy who came out right at the beginning, he was a sort of hell's angel guy, we used to go on his bike and look for where the convoys were hiding.' Whilst, Peggy 'used to get inside information' because 'although a lot of the guys didn't support our strike... A lot of the guys used to speak to me at the back gate and would pass on messages... especially from my brother, he used to give me information and then I used to pass it on to the union.' At one stage, they formed a human blockade that involved Sally lying down in front of a lorry to prevent it from moving materials from the factory.⁹¹ These episodes cemented their own place within the wider story they were trying to tell me, which was about a group of workers uniting

⁹⁰ Interview with Peggy, Phyllis and Sally in London, 10 April 2013.

⁹¹ Ibid.

together with little experience of trade unionism and successfully refusing to be exploited by their sexist employer.

The financial hardship the women incurred as a result of the dispute was frequently discussed. They established a strike headquarters in the local pub where they administered strike pay and a hardship fund. Peggy explained ‘I was thinking of a lot of the younger girls who weren’t with men, not me personally because I knew that I would be all right, but they would face hardship... And I spent a lot of time trying to keep them out because let’s face it, if you’ve got no food in your cupboard...you can be starved back.’⁹² In an interview at the time, a worker named Peggy Long said: ‘I have no security. When the strike is over what I’ll remember will be the hardship...how I survived on £10 week strike pay and hardship money.’⁹³ Phyllis suggested: ‘When you think about what we went through, all right we had a bit of fun, but it was hard as well. Especially for the people that were living in rooms...Because when everybody goes out they had no money for anything’.⁹⁴ My respondents associated a moment of personal change with a wider shift in their collective awareness of issues facing other female workers in the factory. Peggy remembered ‘It was like a family...and the attitude changed a bit when we went back to work and people were mixing in and having a laugh because they knew each other from the picket line.’⁹⁵

The Trico strike demonstrates the essential role that trade unions could play in supporting women’s fight for equal pay. The women interviewed here all agreed that they would not have won equal pay without the financial backing and guidance of the AUEW. In this sense, the Trico strike also revealed the unequal power relationship that continued to exist between male trade union officials and female workers in Britain during the 1970s. Whilst the AUEW claimed to have won equal pay for its members, this was not part of some ‘top-down’ campaign that sought a re-evaluation of their female members’ labour across Britain. Instead it was the self-organisation and desire of the women themselves who had raised the issue in the first place and sacrificed 21 weeks of their time and wages to obtain a victory. My interviewees felt ‘lucky’ to have progressive union officials who were willing to support them. The following case studies on Fakenham and Lee Jeans will show that not all trade union officials were interested in listening to women’s voices.

Feminism and Equal Pay

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ ‘Trico Women Keep Fighting’ in *Women’s Voice*, No. 3, (September 1976).

⁹⁴ Interview with Peggy, Phyllis and Sally in London, 10 April 2013.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

A significant distinction between the Trico strike and the Ford sewing-machinists' dispute was the presence of the WLM. In the eight years between the two strikes, the first UK Women's Liberation conference had taken place at Ruskin College, Oxford, in 1970, consciousness-raising groups had spread across the country and numerous feminist publications emerged that demanded equality and recognition of women's specific skills in the workplace. Feminist groups recognised the Trico strike as a valuable opportunity to engage with the growing number of working-class women who were joining trade unions in this period. *Shrew*, the newsletter of the London Women's Liberation Workshop described the strike as the 'first major strike by women for equal pay since the passing of the act' and pointed out:

Equal pay is one of the demands of the WLM, and the movement has taken a great deal of interest in the Trico women's strike. Individual women from within the movement, who have become involved in the strike, have found it a valuable experience because they have had first-hand contact with one kind of action that is necessary if the demands of the movement are to become a reality.⁹⁶

Spare Rib reported the strike's progress and *Women's Voice*, the monthly women's paper of the International Socialists, interviewed workers involved in the strike and urged 'women and readers to help the Trico women in their fight for equal pay by organising a collection at their work, coordinating a delegation or a public/street meeting or by asking repair shops, and garages to boycott Trico windscreen wiper blades'⁹⁷. The Women's Theatre group, which was a feminist ensemble that performed agit-prop in factories, clubs, women's groups, women's prisons, hospitals, schools and theatres to raise public awareness of gender inequality, produced a play about the women called 'Out on the Costa Del Trico'.⁹⁸ Sally told me:

The Working Women's Charter came down to the picket. They were very active at the time and they came down to the picket line a lot and gave support, and they gave money too. In fact, we did have some money from groups, for example, north London Women's Liberation group; they raised quite a lot for us.⁹⁹

The Working Women's Charter group was a collective of feminists and female trade unionists organised in 27 local groups across Britain, which encouraged female workers to join trade unions and pressured trade union officials to support the concerns of their female members. Cunnison and Stageman explain they aimed to enable female trade unionists to campaign alongside WLM members, who were not necessarily union members, by

⁹⁶ 'Trico Women Strike', *Shrew*, Autumn 1976.

⁹⁷ 'News', *Spare Rib*, issue 49, (July 1976), p. 20; 'News', *Spare Rib*, issue 51, (September 1976), p. 19; 'Trico Women Keep Fighting' in *Women's Voice*, No. 3, (September 1976).

⁹⁸ 'Out on the Costa Del Trico', *Spare Rib*, issue 56, (March 1977), p. 41.

⁹⁹ Interview with Peggy, Phyllis and Sally in London, 10 April 2013.

organising their own committees within district trades councils.¹⁰⁰ Member Pat Longman explained that they aimed to extend networks of support in their local branches by supporting women involved in industrial disputes, such as Trico. They assisted the strikers on the picket line, raised money and promoted the strike by producing badges and pamphlets.¹⁰¹ Feminists conceptualised the Trico women's demands for equal pay within a broader context of women's subordination in the home:

In this society women workers are oppressed in every sphere. We are oppressed and exploited as workers, and then doubly oppressed in our role as mother, housewife and general dogsbody in the home. It is still expected that women should go out to work and then come home and cook our husbands' and children's dinners...working-class women work for necessities like food and clothing for our families. But where are the nursery facilities, cheap laundries and canteens, which would enable women to play an active part in trade-union life?¹⁰²

The promotion of the Trico women's cause by WLM groups shows feminists attempting to reach out and support working-class women on an everyday, local level. The Trico workers' perception of feminism was also a key concern for contemporary feminist journals, which nearly always asked the workers for their views on the WLM. For example shop steward Betty Aitson told *Shrew*:

I've watched them, (WLM groups) but I've never taken part because of work and union activities from 8-5pm. I have a family as well; husband, daughter and granddaughter, and they take preference. So as far as women's organisations are concerned, no, I haven't really participated in any of these things, though I read about them and I watch with interest, and they have given us tremendous support.¹⁰³

Whilst another worker named Peggy Long told *Women's Voice*:

I also didn't realise that there were so many organisations supporting women's equality till I was on strike and I've seen all of you down here. But I've also learnt a lot, noticed a lot of things since I have been on strike. Like this morning I heard on the radio about how women get less benefits than men, even when they pay the same stamp. I never realised such things before. Normally you don't even have time to think about things, you take them for granted.¹⁰⁴

Spare Rib suggested that 'women's lib was not left on the picket line' as one of the women 'horrified' her manager by applying to become a fork-lift truck driver when she returned to work.¹⁰⁵ There was also evidence that the strike influenced how the women

¹⁰⁰ Cunnison and Stageman, *Feminizing the Unions*, p. 29.

¹⁰¹ Pat Longman, 'Restarting Our Women's Work', Alliance of Worker's Liberty, <<http://www.workersliberty.org/node/8199>>, [accessed 12 December 2013].

¹⁰² MRC, Papers of Alan Clinton, MSS.539/4/17, Mary Corbishley, 'Trico: A Struggle For Equal Pay', (Undated Workers' Action Pamphlet).

¹⁰³ Trico Women Strike', *Shrew*, Autumn 1976.

¹⁰⁴ 'Trico Women Keep Fighting' in *Women's Voice*, No. 3, (September 1976).

¹⁰⁵ 'Work News: Trico Women Win', *Spare Rib*, no. 53, December 1976.

thought about the relationship between their exploitation in the workplace and the home.

For example, their strike bulletins discussed the double burden:

Women on strike are faced with having to overcome particular difficulties. We have two jobs. One running the strike, and the other at home, where we are still expected to care for the children, cook, wash and clean. But our strike has proved that women can unite and fight for their rights and that we can overcome the tradition of women accepting an inferior role.¹⁰⁶

Another Trico worker wrote about how the strike highlighted women's specific interests and experiences as political subjects in an article for the TASS Journal:

We have come up against many obstacles associated with being women – total lack of union experience and confidence, having to bear the burden of looking after homes, families, picketing then returning home to cook dinner and housework. Our dependence as women was brought home to us when we found that only two of us had cars for the purposes of visiting other factories to enlist supporters. Attitudes are deeply ingrained...loyal trade unionists find it difficult to consider the issue of equal pay with the same seriousness as other kinds of disputes. References to 'the girls on the picket lines' reflect well-meaning but patronising attitudes.¹⁰⁷

My respondents retrospectively associated the strike with a broader transition in how they thought about themselves as women, but did not feel this was because of any direct engagement with WLM groups. Peggy said:

They didn't influence me at all... I mean I never spoke to them in *that* way, you know? They only spoke to me about the actual strike, and I didn't get involved with them but they were there and I remember them being there.¹⁰⁸

Phyllis thought 'they didn't have too much to do with the Trico strike' yet at the same time connected the strike to a shift in attitudes towards gender relations within the factory:

But you'd think that people got more interested though, I mean when you think about people who didn't know anything about trade unions and then became interested in trade unions. I think I used to look at it (feminism) as quite important... you would have been reading about these women's meetings... it probably influenced teenagers, you know 16-18 year olds who wanted to change from the old way of life to the new way of life. I'd say it probably influenced a lot of us.¹⁰⁹

For Sally: 'I did not see it as a feminist issue because I mean sometimes it's been posed as a strike of men versus women, but of course it wasn't like that.'¹¹⁰ However, she clearly felt the strike had an important influence on her own, and other workers' attitudes towards gendered privilege within the factory. She said:

¹⁰⁶ TUC Library, HD. 6061: AUEW Trico Strike Bulletin no. 4, 19 July 1976.

¹⁰⁷ TUC Library, HD. 6061: *TASS Journal* August 1976, pp. 9-10.

¹⁰⁸ Interview with Peggy, Phyllis and Sally in London, 10 April 2013.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

At the time we did realise that although we'd got equal pay, there was still a whole battle of equal opportunities, because when we went back in, someone put themselves forward to be a forklift truck driver and later on I put in to be a trainee setter and got the job, and so we began challenging all of these things that I don't think we'd have had the confidence to before, or the awareness. And then the whole thing about crèches for women in workplaces and elsewhere, that was quite a big agenda. I think the strike and the experience of the strike for those who were most involved gave us as women much more confidence in ourselves for fighting for not only what's your right, equal rights, but also that you can do it and you can succeed.¹¹¹

Sally's testimony provoked Peggy to think about how her own views about women had changed during this period. Although she did not feel like she had been guided by the WLM, she said:

I think that the generation of women from the 70s influenced all women didn't you... I think because the 70s began to change people and their outlook, I think we got liberated in our own way, you know what I mean? We never sort of joined any group.... But I think even talking to other people on the picket line made you realise that we were in that category, really you know, we were doing something not all other women would do. Pushing it over the line you know... I suppose you might call that women's lib if you like?¹¹²

Although the women did not identify themselves, or their militancy with the WLM, they did associate their encounter with feminists and other activist groups on the picket line with a transition in terms of how they thought about themselves as women. However, rather than associating this with a shift in political outlook, or even behaviour, they retrospectively associated it with having increased confidence as individuals and awareness of unequal gender hierarchies, which was clearly linked to the aims of WLM.

The women I interviewed reconstructed the strike, and the picket line in particular, as a unique space where they encountered different people and various political ideas that opened their minds and enabled them to imagine themselves, and the organisation of the factory, in a different way. Sally suggested: 'You couldn't have a bigger example of people supporting you. We met people we just wouldn't have met otherwise...'¹¹³ Peggy agreed saying: 'the knowledge you get from talking to other people. To me it was a lesson, a very long lesson.'¹¹⁴ The strike was framed as a turning point and crucial learning experience where the women refused to accept unequal pay, or to be 'treated with contempt' by their employers and male co-workers. However, the legacy of the strike upon their sense of self

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

was not explicitly related to any ‘political’ or ‘feminist’ framework. Barbara did not work at the factory but spent a lot of time on the picket line supporting the women with the Labour Party Young Socialists. She observed:

A lot of groups like us went down to try and talk to them, but you had to be quite careful, because sometimes they didn’t want to talk about politics, you know? They didn’t see things from the same point of view. They really just wanted the strike to be over. For instance, somebody once said to them: ‘oh isn’t this good?’ And they said, ‘well no it isn’t good because we’re still out here!’ To be involved in a strike of that length... I had no idea because at that time I had never been involved in a strike myself.¹¹⁵

My respondents did not relate the dispute or themselves to any formal political party. Instead, they were more likely to offer anecdotes about individual acts of defiance or informal solidarity they remembered from the picket line. For example, at one stage Peggy said:

I don’t know how many times I was called a communist? They would walk by and say you’re all communists you know? But, I must tell you another story...I was on the picket line, on the back gate, and ...I was chatting to this Irish girl and maybe another couple of people and I said ‘see when these cars come in, you gotta give them a bit of stick’ you know? bit of stick meaning a bit of verbal abuse, or whatever you want to call it, but anyway this car comes in and she had an umbrella with her and she started whacking the car! I had to go and stop her and she said: ‘well you told me to give him a bit of stick’ ...she was whacking this man’s car...those are the sort of things you remember...¹¹⁶

This quick shift from talking about communism to a personal memory reflected the everyday, ‘authentic’ nature of the way the dispute was organised and perceived at the time. The women’s convenor John Inwood commented on ‘mass propaganda portraying the women as ‘reds under the bed’ and explained that ‘the ladies themselves had made the original decision to strike and there was no indication that many of them were red or indeed pink...’ but ‘responsible caring human beings just like the rest of us.’¹¹⁷ This emphasis on the everyday nature of the women’s concerns was used to justify and legitimise their demand for equal pay. They were ‘responsible caring human beings’ with a genuine grievance generated from their personal experience of inequality on the assembly line, rather than derived from an external set of ‘red’ or ‘feminist’ political beliefs.

Similar to the Dagenham sewing-machinists interviewed in the previous chapter, my respondents associated the Trico equal pay strike with a change in how they thought about

¹¹⁵ Interview with Barbara, 16 April 2013.

¹¹⁶ Interview with Peggy, Phyllis and Sally in London, 10 April 2013.

¹¹⁷ MRC, MSS.259/AEU/6/3/SL/3/43, Final Statement and Balance Sheet from the Trico-Folberth Strike Committee (undated)

themselves as women. It represented a moment when the ‘injustice’ of the Trico pay structure became visible, but also occurred at the same time as a wider societal transition was taking place to ‘a new way of life’ where they felt ‘liberated in our own way’. After the strike, 15 female workers were elected to the Trico shop stewards committee.¹¹⁸ The women were invited by various organisations and union branches to give presentations and encourage female members to play an active role within their union.¹¹⁹ The AUEW Southall district committee organised a ‘Women’s Shop’s Stewards School’ the following year, which was another example of how the strike stimulated greater commitment from local unions to integrate their female members. Sally reflected: ‘the strike gave women terrific confidence. And to value themselves and what they could do. It changed people enormously.’¹²⁰

However, Sally was different in that she had gone on to play an active role in the AUEW Southall district council, and had later become involved in the anti-poll tax protests. For Peggy and Phyllis, the strike had a different impact. Whilst they both associated it as a key moment in their narratives where they gained greater independence and confidence in standing up for themselves, they had less evidence to draw upon to demonstrate how it affected them ‘politically’ and appeared more reluctant to talk about their lives after the strike. Phyllis had left Trico the year after the strike when her husband died and had gone on to work in a range of low paid jobs with little opportunity to join a union. Peggy was made redundant in 1982 and had gone on to work as an office administrator and a care assistant. Changing jobs brought their AUEW membership to an end, and the strike seemed to occupy a distinct phase in their working lives that was remembered differently to the thirty years after leaving Trico. As a result Peggy remembered the dispute in a similar manner to the Dagenham sewing-machinists, who suggested their strike had been forgotten about until its significance had been publicly recognised in the nation’s collective memory via the feature film:

In all honesty I’d not thought about it for a while until recently...but all these things come back to you after all these years...I mean you sort of close your mind to it, but I was fascinated by Sally’s scrapbooks...and then people like yourself come and ask you questions about it...and although it was hard work at the time, you feel as though you have done something with your life.¹²¹

¹¹⁸ GLATC Circular 2 November 1976.

¹¹⁹ MRC, MSS.259/AEU/6/3/SL/3/43, Letter to R Butler from AUEW Croydon District Secretary 6 January 1977; Request to talk at Oxford Trades Council Meeting on Women’s Rights, March 1977; Letter from Chair of Britain’s GDR Society 17 January 1977; Letter from History Workshop Collective 12 January 1977.

¹²⁰ MRC, MSS.259/AEU/6/3/SL/3/43, Interview with Sally in London, 19 June 2013.

¹²¹ Interview with Peggy, Phyllis and Sally in London, 10 April 2013.

Peggy and Phyllis's narratives of life after the strike were imbued with a sense of decline. This connected to where Sally situated the strike within the life story she was willing to share with me. Although being a shop steward was clearly important to her political identity, she also explained:

It was hard work... But you've just got to keep plugging on with it really. We did quite a lot at that time. Yeah it's awful to think about what's happened to a lot of the unions you see today and how difficult it is to take action. It's really bad..... It's all very individualised now. That's the idea is to make it that everyone is just an individual and if they fight for their rights, they don't fight collectively. Yeah, em, so yes. Well I suppose it made me far more aware of the issues than before and that if you fight for something, if you stick together, you can win. You certainly can't if you don't.

Trico closed in 1982 as did many of Brentford and Britain's manufacturing industries, and the power of the labour movement went into decline. The result was that, with the exception of Sally, these women's union activities were brought to a halt shortly after they had begun, and the history of workers' struggles such as this have been collectively remembered less fondly than the women may have anticipated at the time of their victory in 1976. This did not reduce the significance of the strike in their own understanding of how it influenced their political views and perspective today; however it limited the material effects of the dispute upon their subsequent experiences of work and meant that it occupied a distinct phase of their lives, as well as Britain's history of industrial relations.

Conclusion

Taken together, the Dagenham and Trico strikes show that equal pay was not given to women by an increasingly liberal, meritocratic society; women had to go out and win these rights for themselves and continue to fight for them by taking direct action against employers, politicians, lawyers and trade union officials, who were unwilling to recognise the value of women's work in a manner that would alter the gender hierarchy of labour. As a result, the majority of women continued to receive lower wages than men after the Equal Pay Act was implemented in 1975. The strikes analysed here show that these workers' militancy was borne out of transitions in their own attitudes to work and forged in their own direct experiences of unequal gender relations within their factory. Whilst these disputes occurred in different contexts, work increasingly occupied a central role in these women's lives and affected how they thought about themselves in relation to wider gender relations outside of the factory. They became increasingly aware of their own importance

to their employers and were unwilling to have their work devalued on the sole basis that they were women.

The strikes also demonstrate the importance of trade unions in representing women's voices in battles for equal pay. Unions were the main vehicle through which female workers could pursue their demands for equal pay and generate change. Whilst the NUVB and AUEW supported the workers at Ford and Trico, such support was not uniform across Britain, and was largely the result of the attitude and interests of their local officials and district committees at a grassroots level. Both strikes show how women were treated differently by unions, employers and the press to male workers. This was highlighted at the time by the growing WLM, which provided an extra form of support to women at Trico and influenced the way the workers thought about themselves as women, without necessarily identifying themselves with the movement.

Chapter 4: Sexton's Shoe Factory Occupation, Fakenham, Norfolk, 1972.

In the spring of 1972, 45 female workers organised an 18-week occupation of Sexton's shoe factory in the small market town of Fakenham, Norfolk. The company had entered receivership at the end of February and announced that 800 jobs would be lost across their two factories in Norwich and Fakenham. The unions representing the workforce, National Union of Footwear Leather and Allied Trades (NUFLAT) and Association of Scientific Technical and Managerial Staffs (ASTMS), arranged a public meeting where it was agreed that workers would occupy the main factory.¹ Within days, NUFLAT negotiated a deal with a local property developer that saved 500 of the 800 jobs in the Norwich factory, but excluded the satellite factory in Fakenham.² This sparked outrage amongst the all-female workforce who complained that both unions had failed to consult them throughout the negotiation process.³ Led by their supervisor Nancy McGrath, on the 17 March 1972 the women implemented the unions' original plan and barricaded themselves inside the factory, where they were to remain for the following 18 weeks.⁴

During the occupation, the women re-organised themselves on a new collective basis. They participated equally in decision making and all information about the factory was shared between the workers. They held demonstrations at the NUFLAT and DSS offices, which gained them publicity and attracted both moral and financial support from feminist campaign groups.⁵ Using the scraps of suede and leather that remained in the factory, the women began to produce skirts, bags and belts that were sold to markets in Fakenham and Norwich. As news about their operation travelled, numerous orders for leather products from feminists and trade unionists flooded in from across the country. The income generated from these sales was reinvested in further materials to produce more goods, whilst any surplus was used to pay the workers a wage allocated equally or according to need.⁶

The women planned to set up a co-operative, where they could continue the practices they had developed during their occupation. They also wanted to re-employ their former

¹ MRC, Fakenham Enterprises Limited, MSS.30, 'Unions Ready for a Fight', *Eastern Evening News*, 1 March 1972.

² 'Angry Women Demonstrate Over Loss of Jobs', *Eastern Daily Press*, (EDP), 12 March, 1972.

³ 'Staff to take over doomed shoe factory', *EDP*, 18 March 1972.

⁴ For a narrative of the key events that occurred during the occupation, see Judy Wajcman, *Women in Control: Dilemmas of a Workers' Co-operative*, (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1983), chapter 3.

⁵ 'Women's Lib and Shoe Workers in Demo', *EDP*, 6 April 1972.

⁶ Wajcman, *Women in Control*, pp. 50-51.

workmates who had been forced to leave the factory. Following the advice of their prospective Labour Party candidate, the women sought assistance from the International Common Ownership Movement. They received a £2500 loan from chemical company Scott Bader that allowed them to rent a new factory, purchase their old equipment and pay themselves the minimum union wage of £15.63 for a 40-hour week.⁷ Scott Bader became the majority shareholder of the company, but the 12 women who agreed to the terms each received their own shareholding and ability to elect three board members and a chairperson of the company from amongst themselves. The co-operative was fully established and declared open on 17 July 1972 under the name Fakenham Enterprises.⁸

The following five years were characterised by a continuous struggle for survival. In brief, the co-operative was undercapitalised from the outset and was unable to develop its own products.⁹ Throughout its existence, Fakenham Enterprises relied upon low paid, unstable sub-contract work - precisely the type of work the women had sought to avoid when establishing the co-operative. They manufactured a variety of products, including suede jackets, plastic postal bags, chastity belts and golf club covers. It is worth noting the co-operative reached a peak in 1974, when it employed 30 women and made a small profit due to a stable shoe contract. However, economic recession and a slump in the shoe industry led to a decline in contracts from 1975. Scott Bader returned their shares and withdrew from the board of directors. Threatened with collapse, Fakenham Enterprises operated for a further two years essentially as a collective of 'home-workers under one roof', completing sub-contract work for a local clothing firm.¹⁰ The women had to accept the external company's wage and productivity agreements and no longer operated under the principles of self-management upon which the factory was founded.

This remarkable story received considerable attention from political activists and the press at the time. The occupation occurred at the beginning of a wave of 260 factory occupations across Britain, inspired by the 1971-1972 Upper Clyde Builder's 'work-in'. The Fakenham women were one of the first group of workers to try and establish workers' control, and were followed by more high profile co-operatives at Fisher Bendix, Merseyside,

⁷ 'Sit-in's happy ending', *The Guardian*, 17 July 1972: p. 5; Geoffrey Sheridan, *Work in work on*, *The Guardian*, 18 July 1973: p. 11.

⁸ MRC, FAK, MSS.30: 'Work-In Group Has Own Factory', *EDP*, 17 July 1972; 'Work-in Women form new Firm', *EDP*, 23 June 1972; Elaine Grand, 'Love at the Work-In' (untitled and undated article). See also: Wajcman, *Women in Control*, pp. 53-55.

⁹ For a full account of how the Fakenham Enterprises functioned as a co-operative see Wajcman, *Women in Control*, chapters 3 and 4.

¹⁰ Cynthia Cockburn, 'Review of Wajcman, "Women in Control"', *Marxist Review*, (March 1984), p. 40.

Triumph, Meriden and the Scottish Daily News.¹¹ During the occupation, the women received thousands of letters of support from workers engaged in similar occupations, as well as WLM groups, trade unionists and high profile politicians including Labour's Tony Benn and Michael Foot.¹² The occupation's progress was reported regularly in the local press and their action was commented upon in national newspapers. Moreover, their action was discussed in both feminist and socialist publications; it was the subject of three political films and an episode of BBC's Women's Hour; and they received international recognition from WLM groups and trade unions.¹³

The Fakenham occupation has since been cited by historians and sociologists as an example of working-class women's militancy that symbolised changing ideas about gender and work in the 1970s.¹⁴ According to Marie Cerna et al. it 'focussed attention both as labour and women's issues and broadened the appeal of feminism from university educated to working-class women.'¹⁵ The most detailed study of the Fakenham women exists in the form of Judy Wajcman's book, *Women in Control*. This was developed from her doctoral thesis, an ethnographic study documenting Wajcman's experience of working in the factory for three months in 1975 as a WLM activist from Cambridge University. For Wajcman, Fakenham Enterprises was unsuccessful for two reasons. Firstly it failed to alter the factory's relationship to the market. The women were unable to operate on labour-only contracts because of their irregularity and low profit margin, whilst they lacked the capital and managerial expertise to develop their own product. The co-operative only survived due to the 'self-sacrifice' of the women involved. Secondly, it failed to alter the women's political consciousness. Wajcman described the women as 'apolitical'. They voted Conservative; they were apathetic towards trade unionism; they expressed views that accepted and justified gender inequality, including the belief the co-operative would have been more successful had it been run by men. As a result, Wajcman concluded:

¹¹ For an account of these disputes see Ken Coates (ed.), *The New Worker Co-Operatives*, (Nottingham: Spokesman Books, 1976).

¹² Letters of Support are available in MRC, FAK, MSS.30/3/1.

¹³ See for example: In MRC, FAK, MSS.30: Regular reports from *Eastern Daily Press*; 'Crisis in the Shoe Industry: What Happened at Sexton's: A Socialist Worker Pamphlet' (undated pamphlet); 'Fakenham Occupation', *Libertarian Struggle*, February 1973, pp. 4- 5; Sue Shapiro and Tessa Van Gelderen, 'Fakenham: Danger Women at Work', *Socialist Women*, (undated); Kathleen McCreery 'We want to Work: The Shoemaking Women of Fakenham', *ATMS Journal*, August 1972, (Reprinted in *Melbourne Herald*); David Clutterback, 'Lady Leather Workers Mind Their Own Business', *International Management*, November 1973. *BBC Women's Hour*, Interview 19 July 1972, Broadcast 21 September 1972.

¹⁴ Lynne Segal, 'Slow Change or No Change?: Feminism, Socialism and the Problem of Men', *Feminist Review*, No. 31, (Spring, 1989), p. 9; Rowbotham, *Past is Before Us*, p. 200.

¹⁵ Marie Cerna, John Davis, Robert Gildea, and Piotr Oseka, 'Revolutions' in Robert Gildea, James Mark, Anette Warring (eds.), *Europe's 1968: Voices of Revolt*, (Oxford Univeristy Press: 2013), pp. 125-126.

Whatever the potential for political radicalisation in a worker-controlled enterprise, a failed attempt of this kind may actually increase workers' sense of powerlessness. Having fought to take control over their workplace, and having seen that attempt fail, the Fakenham women experienced more intensely the apparent inevitability of the capitalist system...Co-operatives are not a panacea. Naively embarked upon, they cannot provide more than a temporary alternative and are as likely to inhibit as to develop consciousness.¹⁶

Whilst the economic problems with Fakenham Enterprises are self-evident, Wajcman's second conclusion about disempowerment and de-politicisation is more problematic because she appears to equate political consciousness with 'radicalisation'. Political consciousness could only arise if the women developed an explicitly socialist or feminist critique of society, whilst the effect of working in a co-operative on the actors' everyday experiences of work and sense of self is left unexplored.

This chapter revisits Fakenham Enterprises from the perspective of women who were involved at the time. The widespread interest in the dispute from local journalists and feminist groups meant the women were frequently interviewed, which provides a greater balance between oral history and personal testimony gathered at the time of the occupation. I have drawn upon transcripts of interviews of the Fakenham women carried out by the filmmaker Diane Glass in 1976. The women's testimony here was obviously shaped by the intersubjective encounter of the interviews, although it is difficult to reflect upon these effects without further available information about the interviewers. However, I have critically read the transcriptions for women's explanations of why they occupied the factory and what it was like to work at Fakenham Enterprises. This material may not offer a 'pure' insight into women's sense of self, (if such sources even exist), yet it provides evidence of how the workers represented themselves and the meaning they ascribed to their collective action at the time.

The Fakenham occupation moves the thesis onto a different track away from the equal pay debates considered in the previous two chapters, towards working-class women's fight against factory closures and unemployment. Whilst these women were fighting for different ends, their narratives of work and industrial struggle continue to offer insights into the three themes discussed in the previous chapters: working-class women's experiences of manual labour; the relationship between female workers and their trade unions; and the interaction between working-class women and the WLM during this period. Building from the previous case studies, this chapter also considers what the dispute retrospectively meant to the individual women who participated in it within the context of deindustrialisation. As such,

¹⁶ Wajcman, *Women in Control*, p. 183.

rather than focusing on the extent to which the occupation ‘broadened the appeal of feminism’ and led the protagonists to engage with wider political critiques of class and gender relations, the chapter identifies the personal criteria by which participants judged the efficacy of their action and suggests how this was influenced by their subsequent experiences of paid work.

Context

Fakenham is a small market town in Norfolk, which was inhabited by fewer than five thousand people in 1972. Like most of East Anglia, the economic structure of the area was dominated by agriculture and low rates of pay, with typical earnings almost 8.5 per cent below the national average in 1975.¹⁷ With no train station and poor bus links to the largest neighbouring towns of Norwich and King’s Lynn, it was difficult for residents to seek work elsewhere. As a result, a small number of manufacturing firms had been attracted to Fakenham due to the ready availability of cheap female labour and its close proximity to natural materials. This included Cox & Whyman print works, a construction company and three food-processing plants which, alongside the shoe factory, provided the only alternative source of employment to agricultural work in the area.¹⁸ The women who carried out the occupation characterised it as a ‘conservative little town’ in their interviews with Judy Wajcman; Edna, the NUFLAT shop steward described it as a: ‘backward area, purposefully kept so’ to maintain the interests of the local landowners.¹⁹

Shoe manufacturers Sexton, Son and Everard was a family firm based in Norwich that had produced shoes since the nineteenth century. They set up a satellite factory in Fakenham in 1964 after a peak of prosperity in the 1950s. The firm employed 60 women for the sole purpose of closing shoe uppers with custom built sewing machines. In February 1972, 45 machinists worked at the factory under the supervision of Nancy McGrath, who represented the only form of contact between the workforce and management based at the main factory in Norwich, and became the key figure in organising the occupation.²⁰ At the end of the 1960s, the British shoe manufacturing industry entered a state of decline due to competition from cheap foreign imports. Between 1960 and 1970, the number of people employed in the shoe industry in Norfolk alone had fallen from 8500 to 6000.²¹ With falling profits, Sextons called in the receiver on 29 February 1972.

¹⁷ *New Earnings Study, 1976* and *Small Towns Study*, Cambridgeshire and Ely County Council, 1972 in Judy Wajcman, *Women in Control*, p. 38 and p. 196.

¹⁸ Wajcman, *Women in Control*, pp. 38-39.

¹⁹ ‘Fakenham Occupation’, *Libertarian Struggle*, February 1973, pp. 4-5.

²⁰ Wajcman, *Women in Control*, pp. 41-43.

²¹ Mary Holland, ‘Women give Shoe Firm the Boot’, *The Observer*, 7 May 1972, p. 3.

The factory's closure was symptomatic of a national economic slump that led to decline in manufacturing and an increase in unemployment to above 1 million by 1972. According to feminist economist Irene Bruegel, female unemployment increased three times as fast as male unemployment between 1972 and 1978.²² Unemployment rates in Fakenham averaged between 1 and 2 per cent higher than the rest of East Anglia as a whole, due to a decline in agriculture and limited opportunity for the development of new forms of manufacturing, services and facilities.²³ The town's distinct sense of decline was investigated as a matter of urgency by the East Anglia Economic Planning Council in 1972, which emphasised the importance of women's labour due to low wages and high male unemployment in the area.²⁴

The Norfolk shoe industry did not have a culture of industrial struggle and there had not been a dispute at Sexton's since 1926.²⁵ Whilst the factory was unionised as part of a closed-shop agreement, NUFLAT was a conservative trade union that aimed to attract contracts and preserve employment in a faltering industry. Their policy was characterised by the pursuit of peaceful coexistence with employers, which generally meant low wages and poor conditions for workers.²⁶ The ASTMS District Official for Norwich explained in an interview at the time that he became involved in the dispute because: 'it became clear very early on that the experience of the shop-floor trade union (NUFLAT) was limited, being limited to the footwear industry and had not dealt with this problem in this way before and not really experienced it.'²⁷

Despite the lack of conflict within the factory, the occupation occurred against a backdrop of turbulent industrial relations in the national context. The 1972 miners' strike caused national power cuts and led the government to declare a state of emergency, three weeks before the women were made redundant.²⁸ There had been a swelling of industrial action and protest during the previous year against the 1971 Industrial Relations Act, whilst the Upper Clyde Shipbuilders' (UCS) successful 'work-in' from 1971-1972 inspired workers across Britain to adopt the occupation as a new defensive tactic against wage cuts

²² Figures from Department of Unemployment in Irene Bruegel, 'Women as a Reserve Army of Labour: A Note on Recent British Experience', *Feminist Review*, No. 3 (1979), pp. 12-23.

²³ Figure from F. Field, *Are Low Wages Inevitable?* (Nottingham: Spokesman Books, 1976), quoted by Wajacman, *Women in Control*, p. 196; Penny Symon. "Life or death in rural Norfolk?" *The Times*, 14 Dec. 1972, p. 16.

²⁴ Penny Symon. "Life or death in rural Norfolk?" *The Times* 14 Dec. 1972, p. 16.

²⁵ Mary Holland, 'Women give Shoe Firm the Boot', *The Observer*, 7 May 1972, p. 3.

²⁶ Wajacman, *Women in Control*, p. 193.

²⁷ MRC, MSS. 30B/7/1, Fakenham, Misc., Dianne Glass, Fakenham Film, Transcripts, Tape 31, c. 1976: Interview with Roger Spiller, divisional officer of ASTMS, (undated).

²⁸ See Beckett, *When the Lights Went Out*, pp. 65-86. or Sandbrook, *State of Emergency*, pp. 118-133.

and the growing threat of unemployment. Labour historian Ken Coates argues that ‘prior to 1971 the vocabulary of sit-ins was hardly ever used’, but after the success of the UCS work-in 260 factory occupations were recorded to have taken place across Britain between 1971 and 1976.²⁹ Nancy McGrath reflected at the time that the UCS ‘work-in’ provided a source of inspiration for their action: ‘it was reckless to do it, to really defy the law and everything... I think possibly the fact that the Clydeside workers had done it before us... meant I thought there’s somebody making a stand against these redundancies. Why don’t we?’³⁰ One of my respondents described their decision to form a co-operative as ‘automatic’, which suggests the powerful influence of the work-in and growing prevalence of occupation as a legitimate tactic used by workers during this period. Yet it must be stressed the women also understood their action as novel because of the local context in which it occurred. A worker explained in 1976:

Nothing like that had ever happened before in nice Conservative little Fakenham. You walked down the street and somebody said, ‘oh go home you old bag or something like that’... You didn't expect them to because you thought that they should have understood. But then it wasn't Clydeside and Jimmy Reid, it was Fakenham and that sort of thing was illegal. It had never happened here before.³¹

The women were aware of industrial disputes on a national level, and placed their own action within that context at the time. However, with the exception of struggles between labourers and landowners, Fakenham did not have a history of industrial militancy, and the surrounding constituency of North Norfolk continuously elected Conservative MPs throughout the 1970s. So the occupation took place in a very different context to the Ford sewing-machinists’ strike, which was a very militant workforce with a culture of unofficial rank and file militancy; there was considerably less racial and ethnic diversity in the area compared with Brentford, and far less opportunity to engage with progressive social movements and trade unionists locally than was available to the women in the other case studies. Yet in spite of these differences, the Fakenham women shared similar experiences of work and expressed similar attitudes towards trade unions and feminism. Whilst their personal circumstances and local contexts were considerably different, it is significant that these women took similar decisions to engage in industrial struggle.

²⁹ Ken Coates, *Work-ins, Sit-ins, and Industrial Democracy: The Implications of Factory Occupations in Great Britain in the Early Seventies*, (Nottingham: Spokesman, 1981).

³⁰ ‘Open-Day Plan for Factory Work-In’, *Dereham and Fakenham Times*, 10 April 1972.

³¹ MRC, MSS. 30B/7/1, c. 1976. Tapes 37-38, interview with Nancy McGrath at her home on 17 March 1976.

Experiences of Work

Working-class women's jobs in Fakenham, like much of the rest of Britain, were concentrated in the lowest paid, least skilled sectors of the labour market. At the time of Judy Wajcman's study in 1975, Fakenham Enterprises employed 22 women, all of whom had worked on production lines in food processing or clothing factories, or in the service sector as shop assistants and waitresses before working in the co-operative.³² My respondents for this case study shared similar experiences of work to the women in Brentford and Dagenham. The typical trajectory was to leave school at the age of 15 to work in low paid manual labour; many women remained in these types of jobs until being made redundant in the late 1970s, when they moved in to services, retail or care work. Like the women in the other case studies, the Fakenham respondents felt they had worked from an early age as a given 'in order to get by'. They worked in the shoe factory due to economic necessity and felt that they lacked any alternative choice. For example, Margaret was from the neighbouring village East Marsham. She discussed how she was from a poor family, which meant that she had worked on the land as a child before getting her first 'proper job' at Sexton's in 1966, when she left school at the age of 15:

My father worked on the farm and he never claimed benefits or anything, even though he had eight children. And even though he didn't earn very much, he gave all his wages to my mum, he never took any of them. I think it was about £9 or something... My mum worked on the land, and in the school holidays I went to work on the land, even when I was five or six. And I remember that when I was about 11, this man used to come and pick us up in a gang and we used to go potato picking...

I went to the shoe factory when I was 15. So that was my first proper job. But it sounds bad when you say it, but we never starved and we never went without anything. We always had cooked meals and everything. My dad worked on the farm and the money wasn't a lot... but yeah they (my parents) were brilliant and that was the way that they brought us up, we used to share things. And I think that is the difference between nowadays - people are greedy...³³

Margaret did not explicitly identify herself as working-class, but explained that her parents had struggled financially when she was growing up, which meant that she had worked from a young age. She felt that this might 'sound bad', but thought this information was significant because it taught her to share things (amongst her family) and suggested that the work they performed, although low paid, had guaranteed their independence from 'claiming benefits', and as a result was something she was proud of. Although this use of modern language was clearly influenced by contemporary debates about welfare at the time

³² Wajcman, *Women in Control*, p. 41.

³³ Interview with Margaret in Fakenham, 15 April 2013.

of the interview, Margaret understood her early experiences of working out of economic necessity as sign of her strength and independence, rather than a sign of class struggle or inequality.

Marees left school at the age of 15 to work as a shop assistant at the Co-op, before moving to the shoe factory when she married a farmer in 1970. She was 22 years old and pregnant with her first child at the time of the occupation and accepted her early experiences of work as natural.

My parents were just ordinary people...you know they weren't any different, they were just ordinary people. Well ordinary working-class people; they went to work, scraped a living; they were just ordinary people...which is what I am. I am from Dereham, about 12 miles up the road. I must have been 22 (when the sit-in started). I worked there for not quite 2 years before it started cos I remember you needed to be there for 2 years to be entitled to redundancy and I wasn't entitled to it. Not that we got any! I had worked in a grocery shop after leaving school, the Co-op. and moved to Sexton's because I got married... and like always (laughs) you moved to wherever your family, your husband was working! But I enjoyed working there and I think it was easier early on because my in-laws worked there...And back then, compared with shop work, I was earning good money because of the piece work, so I was earning good money, which was a novelty!³⁴

For Marees, being an 'ordinary working-class person' meant going to work and scraping a living. The inevitable acceptance of low paid work amongst the Fakenham workforce was also evident in Wajcman's study. It showed that of the 17 married women who worked at Fakenham Enterprises in 1975, 15 were married to manual labourers who earned between £27 and £42 per week at a time when low pay was defined by the Low Pay Unit as £40 a week.³⁵ One worker discussed the importance of her wage to her family's income in an interview at the time: 'Men's wages are so low in Fakenham it barely covers the housekeeping. We are not working for luxuries but essentials.'³⁶ Materially, the Fakenham women emphasised the need to work to raise their families above the poverty line; redundancy represented a serious threat to their family income and a source of personal anxiety. Yet, the decision to occupy the factory was not simply contingent upon the lack of alternative sources of employment in the area, and was also understood as an assertion of the subjective value of women's work. A worker explained in 1976:

We said why we sat-in, or worked-in to be correct, is to keep a job. But the reason we wanted to keep a job was because it was something more: we felt that we shouldn't be

³⁴ Interview with Marees in Fakenham, 15 April 2013.

³⁵ *New Earnings Study*, 1976 and *Small Towns Study*, Cambridgeshire and Ely County Council, 1972 in Judy Wajcman, *Women in Control*, p. 39.

³⁶ Kathleen McCreery, 'We want to Work: The Shoemaking Women of Fakenham', *ASTMS Journal*, (August 1972).

ditched...I mean a job wasn't the only thing...we felt that we'd been badly treated...And we were against being badly treated, being treated more or less like dirt, for want of a better word. We hadn't been consulted. In fact we'd been insulted.³⁷

Paid work was also important to my respondents' personal identity and they shared a sense of pride in their ability as machinists. Marees liked that the shoe factory paid higher wages than her previous job and valued the training she received, which enabled her to improve her skills:

I was upset about losing my job because I'd trained to be a machinist, I'd been doing it for nearly two years, and I was quite a good machinist... working in a factory was quite hard to start off with, but then I was always good with my hands. There was a lot of different machining work, but that was quite easy to get into because I was already quite crafty and arty...And I was earning good money because of the piece work...Yeah so you wanted to be the best you can and well you want to earn as much as you can.³⁸

Whilst the job was low paid, labour intensive and perceived as unskilled, the women themselves remembered their work fondly, especially after they formed their own co-operative. To my respondents it represented a period when their labour was recognised as important on a personal level. Marees placed herself within a position of responsibility when she explained her role in the new co-operative:

I went to work in the co-operative, the new factory, which we set up and I remember because I was quite a good machinist Nancy asked me in to teach some of the newer ladies who were then going to start how to use an industrial machine, and I remember one or two of them being a bit...: 'who's this kid trying to tell us what to do?!' because I was only young then and they were older ladies who'd been machining, but they hadn't been machining on industrial machines when they came there.³⁹

The women enjoyed the variation in their work; sharing their skills with one another also gave them a greater sense that their contribution to the labour process was being recognised. This perhaps marks where the story of Fakenham goes down a different track compared to the Dagenham and Brentford women. Rather than engaging in a fight to demonstrate the value of their work in terms of equal pay, the Fakenham women were attempting not only to preserve their jobs, but by forming a co-operative were also attempting to take control of the labour process and alter it in a way that suited them, as female workers.

The women resented the way they had been treated by the previous management, and the dehumanising nature of the labour process. During the occupation, the leader Nancy

³⁷ MRC, MSS. 30B/7/1, c. 1976: Tapes 34-36, transcripts of group discussion at Fourth Anniversary Party of Occupation on 17 March 1976.

³⁸ Interview with Marees in Fakenham, 15 April 2013.

³⁹ Interview with Marees in Fakenham, 15 April 2013.

McGrath explained that they sought to form a co-operative because after 18 weeks of struggle, the last thing she wanted was to be taken over by another firm ‘and have some other board of management or whatever they call themselves stepping in and using our skills, our brains and our labour to swell their profits.’⁴⁰ Another worker named Edna said: ‘When you work in a factory and you don’t make your own decisions...you just get rusty and don’t care. Once you’ve had your eyes opened, you’d never accept it again.’⁴¹

Running their own co-operative meant they reinterpreted their previous experience of employment as unfair. Nancy claimed: ‘We don’t want to revert back to being creatures behind a machine with all the decisions being made by remote control’.⁴² By occupying the factory and developing a worker co-operative, the women took control of the factory’s orders, produced what they wanted for who they wanted, and paid everybody an equal wage. A company director from Scott Bader reported to the International Common Ownership Movement: ‘Through the solidarity developed by their sit-in, the group works very well together and some of the group approaches to problem solving they have evolved are surprisingly sophisticated.’⁴³ This democratisation of the shop floor tells a story about working-class women challenging the drudgery and dehumanising aspects of manual labour, and attempting to establish control of the decision-making process in their workplace, and in doing so taking control of their own lives.

Retrospectively, my respondents had little to say about this, other than pointing out how much they had enjoyed making different products, and having an input into the decision-making process of the factory. Marees explained: ‘I definitely enjoyed it and we had laughs whilst we stayed there, trying to persuade somebody to help us. Yeah we did have a lot of fun and we were a very close knit, friendly lot. And em... I think I have grown up thinking that I should stick up for myself as well...’⁴⁴ Margaret reflected on how much she enjoyed working there, and compared the benefits of working in the co-operative with her subsequent experiences of work:

Yeah I loved it. I really enjoyed it because like I said, we used to make all sorts of interesting things...you know you was never sort of fed up making the same thing because you didn’t actually know what you were going to make. And like I said, we

⁴⁰ ‘Fakenham Occupation’ in *Libertarian Struggle*, February 1973, pp. 4-5.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² MRC, MSS. 30, Sue Shapiro and Tessa Van Gelderen, ‘Fakenham: Danger Women at Work’ in *Socialist Women*, (undated).

⁴³ MRC, Warwick, MMS.30/3/3, Correspondence about the early organisation of Fakenham Enterprises, Report for ICOM, 30 July 1972.

⁴⁴ Interview with Marees in Fakenham, 15 April 2013.

tried to still do our own stuff, what we was doing and that. I used to go down the market and sell the handbags and the leather skirts to the market men.⁴⁵

Margaret and Marees both remembered working at Fakenham Enterprises as an enjoyable experience where they appreciated their friendships and ability to make their own decisions. It was clearly a very unique work environment that was unlike anywhere else they ever worked before or since, in terms of being a company director or having free childcare (which is discussed below). Marees had spent most of the rest of her life working for Sainsbury's supermarket, Margaret had worked in pubs and hotels, and Patricia had spent the rest of her life working in the care sector, looking after children and the elderly.⁴⁶ Like the women in the other case studies, the work they performed, despite its low pay and value, was essential to their income and personal identity. Whilst the Sexton's management were willing to treat them like a disposable form of labour, they certainly did not consider their work as temporary and fought not only to preserve their jobs, but to recreate a working environment that would suit their needs as women. However, the initial anger and desire to alter the system of production expressed at the time was difficult to trace in the interviews today, in the context of their post-industrial experiences of work. Instead it had been remembered in terms of the personal impact, teaching them to stand up for themselves as individuals.

Experiences of Trade Unionism

Like the women in the previous case studies, the Fakenham workforce became unionised during the 1960s and were representative of the growing number of female workers joining trade unions in post-war Britain. In 1972 all 45 female production workers were members of NUFLAT, with the exception of supervisor Nancy McGrath who was a member of ASTMS. The women were outraged NUFLAT had been willing to save the jobs of male workers in the Norwich factory, without even consulting them.⁴⁷ NUFLAT responded to a request from the women for 'financial and moral support' with a letter that explained 'the Union cannot officially condone the 'sit-in' which has been embarked upon'.⁴⁸ They refused to make the action official and offer strike pay, and later seized money raised unofficially by workers in the local district council to support the occupation.⁴⁹ The

⁴⁵ Interview with Margaret in Fakenham, 15 April 2013.

⁴⁶ Interview with Patricia in Fakenham, 15 April 2013.

⁴⁷ 'Work-in Plan for Sexton's as Receiver Appointed', *EDP*, 1 March 1972; 'Sexton Girls Hope to See Receiver Today', *EDP*, 21 March 1972.

⁴⁸ MRC, Warwick, MMS.30/3/3, Correspondence about the early organisation of Fakenham Enterprises, Letter from NUFLAT General Secretary to Edna Roach (Shop Steward), 20 April 1972.

⁴⁹ 'Angry Women Demonstrate Over Loss of Jobs', *EDP*, 12 March 1972; 'Sleep in by Women Workers at Sexton's', *Norwich Evening News*, 18 March 1972; *EDP*, 'Bid to Move Plant', *EDP*, 20 March 1972; John Windsor, *The Guardian*, 'No Nonsense with Women's Enterprise' 7 April 1972.

Norwich Branch secretary explained in a 1976 interview: ‘I think the girls over at Fakenham were annoyed because...when the parent factory closed down we were so busy here dealing with it that for a few days we’d forgotten, we had forgotten Fakenham. And they were rather angry.’⁵⁰ The behaviour of NUFLAT was a far cry from the unions in the previous case studies, and demonstrates how male union officials were willing to ignore the interests of their rank and file female members.

The women’s anger and determination was directed against the union as much as it was against the company. The union’s dismissal of their demands and subsequent action only compounded the sense of alienation and exploitation that they had experienced after being casually discarded by the company. A banner appeared outside the factory proclaiming: ‘FORGOTTEN FACTORY SOLD OUT BY THE UNIONS’, which was to remain there for the full 18 weeks of the occupation, in spite of union official attempts to remove it during the early stages of the protest.⁵¹ The women who were interviewed at the time expressed resentment at the way NUFLAT had treated them, and clearly felt that they had been ignored due to the fact that they were women. Shop steward Edna Roach reported that after approaching NUFLAT: ‘the union called us ‘a silly bunch of girls’ and told us to ‘go back to the kitchen sink’...They didn’t know what to do with us and were embarrassed’⁵². She pointed out later on:

Men expect women to back them up and women do; look at the Miners’ Strike and the Post Office strike. I’m afraid that they will have to learn that women are to be heard as well as seen. They’re not just something trotting down the high street in a mini skirt to be whistled at. Women are human beings and to be treated as equals, not something to be locked in four walls in a house.⁵³

Nancy said: ‘they should declare immediately that our action is official and pay us strike pay...We are fighting for the right to work and will not give in. We will not be bought off, and with the support of other workers we will win.’⁵⁴ Another worker, Eileen English, pointed out how the unions’ rejection had spurred them on: ‘We know damn well that if we make this work then we will put ourselves on the map, because we’re unique and women have never done this sort of thing. That’s why the union officials told us to go home and stop being a silly bunch of girls.’⁵⁵ Nancy was the sole member of ASTMS, who decided to support her in her supervisory role and paid her £10 a-week strike money, which she donated

⁵⁰ MRC, MSS. 30B/7/1, c. 1976, Interview with Arthur Ellsegood, Branch Secretary of NUFLAT, Norwich, (undated).

⁵¹ ‘Angry Women Demonstrate Over Loss of Jobs’, *EDP*, 12 March, 1972.

⁵² ‘Fakenham Occupation’ in *Libertarian Struggle*, February 1973, pp. 4- 5.

⁵³ McCreery, ‘We want to Work’, *ASTMS Journal*, ASTMS August 1972.

⁵⁴ ‘Sexton Girls Hope to See Receiver Today’, *EDP*, 21 March 1972.

⁵⁵ ‘Under Worker’s Control’ *The Guardian*, 15 June 1972.

to the communal fund. She also expressed dismay at the way ASTMS had proceeded to take credit for their action even though they had initially failed to support them. She said:

I was the lone ASTMS member in Fakenham and as such I was discounted...He (the union district secretary) came out to see me and said: 'there's nothing you can do Nancy - you close the doors - you walk out - you hand over the keys' so I said 'maybe you can do nothing - but I can do something.' They took the credit for the work-in, and said that they had organised it - they didn't. They backed it once we had done it.⁵⁶

The women organised a demonstration against their treatment by NUFLAT outside the union's office in Norwich, where members of the Norwich Women's Liberation Group joined them. They picketed an official meeting and distributed leaflets that declared: 'We are not a group of silly women. We have acted as trade unionists. Now the union should make our action official and give us full strike pay. Union officials should declare publically that they support us.'⁵⁷ A worker named Edna Roach commented at the time:

They weren't going to pay us our out-of-work money...we went up to the union meeting and took it over and that's the only time the union doors have ever had to be locked, because we had loads of the women's liberation movement outside and they wouldn't let them in. They were dead scared of them getting in.⁵⁸

The relationship between Fakenham workers and the WLM shall be explored below. The workers felt patronised and undermined by their male trade union officials on the basis of their sex. One can see that this moment of genuine radicalism was organised entirely on a shop floor level by the workers themselves, and was a reaction to what they perceived as sexist treatment by their union, as much as their employers. To this extent, the Fakenham occupation offers an insight into the continuation of sexist attitudes and structures within trade unions during this period of increased female membership and demonstrates the frustrating everyday effects this had for female members attempting to organise at the time and assert their identity as both workers and trade unionists. Without the official support of their union, the women were forced to develop alternative methods of resistance by occupying their factory, which was a practice adopted by other female workers involved in disputes at Plessey Electronics in west London in October 1972, Lucas Industries in Birmingham in March 1974 and Lee Jeans in Greenock in 1981, which will be discussed in chapter 5.⁵⁹ The effects of independently developing alternative methods of resistance upon women's political subjectivity can be seen from considering the workers' memory of the occupation today. They viewed it as a unique moment when they assumed their own voice

⁵⁶ 'Fakenham Occupation' in *Libertarian Struggle*, February 1973, pp. 4-5.

⁵⁷ Wajcman, *Women in Control*, p. 48.

⁵⁸ 'Fakenham Occupation' in *Libertarian Struggle*, February 1973, pp. 4-5.

⁵⁹ See Appendix 1: Timeline for other examples of female workers occupying their workplace during this period.

and emphasised the informal nature of their collective organisation, as well as their personal resilience and individual autonomy.

The Fakenham women were unionised as part of a closed-shop agreement and my respondents were not particularly active within their union. Patricia explained:

Well I suppose we paid the union, but the union didn't really sort of want to know. Eh, once they said they were closing and I think it was Nancy's union who came and helped us, and gave us support... but our union, for the factory workers, they didn't want to know. I don't really know why, I don't have a clue! (Laughs).⁶⁰

Margaret had a similar sense of ambivalence towards the union and her membership. She said: 'It's difficult to remember but I should imagine we were members (of NUFLAT), but no, I didn't want to do anything like that. I was just a worker really...'⁶¹ She went on to explain:

No, well I wasn't political really. I did go on the march once for the farmers when they wanted the 39 hour week at Norwich and I had a banner, because my dad worked on the farm all his life you see. That must have been about the same time. Yeah so I did go on a march for that, but apart from that no, I wasn't political, and the occupation was not really, because it meant another place was closing, and I think in them days you never earned a lot of money anyway and I mean people worked so hard for their pennies so it was more about sticking together to try and prove we could do it yeah? But that wasn't anything political or anything like that, I don't think so anyway. It was just about that we want to prove a point.⁶²

Patricia understood the occupation in a similar way. She said: 'No, (the occupation didn't affect me politically), no - I just carried on with life, you've got to haven't you? Just deal with what life throws at you.' It became clear that Margaret and Patricia had not played an active role in the union, and distinguished its' activities and politics from what represented the norm to them. Perhaps this is unsurprising as Karen Sayer claims that female workers in rural England historically organised and protested outside of the labour movement from the nineteenth century. She argues that there was heightened expectations for rural women to conform to idealised notions of respectability and femininity compared to urban women, which meant agricultural women's involvement in political activity was often condemned both by unions, and the middle class, and largely isolated from wider political movements taking place locally and nationally. Sayer suggests this left a legacy for the way that rural women negotiated their identities throughout the twentieth century.⁶³

⁶⁰ Interview with Patricia in Fakenham, 15 April 2013.

⁶¹ Interview with Margaret in Fakenham, 15 April 2013.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Karen Sayer, *Women of the Fields: Representations of Rural Women in the Nineteenth Century*, (Manchester University Press: 1995), pp.126-135 and p.180.

Although the women at Fakenham did not work in the fields, one can see how this moment of genuine radicalism was similarly isolated from a wider political movement locally. The owner of Sextons commented in 1976:

I honestly feel that this was entirely a self-generated thing at Fakenham. The people...at Norwich, I don't think had any influence on them at all...people in Fakenham I think they just thought it was a bit of a curiosity. I don't think there was much reaction outside because I've spoken to other Fakenham people and, as I said before, it was rather a curiosity and like something at the zoo as far as the other Fakenham people went...some weird plant that flowered in their midst and they wondered what it was.⁶⁴

However, at the national level the women received letters of support and solidarity from numerous other trades councils. Indeed fellow NUFLAT members from Bally shoe factory in Lowestoft, Suffolk, organised a collection for the women and wrote 'We are sorry that our union officials did not give you immediate recognition and financial help, but knowing how difficult they are sometimes through our own experience we are hardly surprised.'⁶⁵ Their action was also perceived as novel: the Wycombe Trades Union Council wrote to the women 'sending you our best wishes, and our admiration for what you are trying to do, in some sections of the industries women do not seem to realise what 'it is all about' and it is a shot the arm, as it were to learn of the determination and sheer guts that your ladies have.'⁶⁶ The Ealing branch of the AUEW wrote to the women to offer them free advertising space in their journal and said 'The value of such work by you girls cannot be measured and a place of honour in the workers' history of its struggles will most certainly be recorded for you by the historians.'⁶⁷

Marees had a slightly different experience with trade unions and suggested she had greater emotional attachment and belief in them at one stage in her life. However, she also felt the Fakenham experience and her subsequent dealings with trade unions had changed her attitude towards them in the present to one of detachment. She said: 'I was in a union before I went there. I was in the union at my previous job at the Co-op. So it was automatic for me...for some reason back then I believed that you needed to be in a union, to stick

⁶⁴ MRC, MSS. 30B/7/1, c. 1976, Diane Glass interview with Eric Sexton, former owner of Sexton Everard and Managing Director of Meadows Company, Norwich, 11 March 1976.

⁶⁵ MRC, MSS. 30/3/1, Letters of support to Fakenham Workers, Letter from NUFLAT Members of Ballys, Undated.

⁶⁶ MRC, MSS. 30/3/1, Letters of support to Fakenham Workers, Letter from Wycombe Trades Council dated 28 April 1972.

⁶⁷ MRC, MSS. 30/3/1, Letters of support to Fakenham Workers, Letter from Ealing Branch of AUEW, 28 August 1972.

together!’ However, her attitude towards trade unions changed considerably after the experience of the occupation. She said:

No the union did not support us, that was a waste of money, a complete waste of money...they just sold us down the river, they just decided to look after the big factory and they forgot about us, they just left us. They wouldn’t even pay us unemployment money, which only used to be a few pence, but they wouldn’t even give us that. They wouldn’t give us anything... they just expected us to go out and find another job...but I didn’t think it was fair that we didn’t get union pay. I definitely didn’t. I’d been paying my union dues and I didn’t get anything back.⁶⁸

Marees pointed out how she did not believe in unions afterwards, and rather than believing in an organised workforce, she described how the occupation had taught her that she could stand up for herself, and did not need to rely upon the support of other people.

I think it (the occupation) probably did affect me because I always sort of...especially in recent years and I know because people have said to me, that I do stick up for myself now. I did join the union again when I went to Sainsbury’s but I left after 3 months because I thought why am I paying to the union when I don’t have to? So I didn’t bother because I thought ‘I can stick up for myself – I don’t need other people’ you know so yeah I think I am quite independent, and possibly that is from going back to then, which was quite important really.⁶⁹

Marees identified the occupation as an education about herself, rather than ‘politics’ and collective action. Remembering it in a post-industrial context where she felt isolated from other workers, it represented a learning curve where she gained her own personal independence and autonomy.

Marees also suggested that there was a gulf in understanding of the occupation between the workforce and the groups that supported them. She did not see their action within a ‘political’ context, but understood that journalists, political activists and probably people like me, who have asked her questions about it since, do. The extent to which the women’s action was driven by a deeper commitment to trade unionism was a key question asked in Judy Wajcman’s interviews in 1975, whilst *The Observer* described the occupation as ‘something of an education in politics and production for the women’, claiming that the majority of them had voted for the Conservatives at the last election but would not be doing so again.⁷⁰ Yet it was clear from Marees’ testimony that she understood it more as a personal transition, as opposed to a ‘political awakening’. She told a similar story to Peggy from Brentford in the previous chapter:

⁶⁸ Interview with Marees in Fakenham, 15 April 2013.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Mary Holland, ‘Women give Shoe Firm the Boot’, *The Observer*, 7 May 1972.

I got told that I was a communist once and I didn't even know what that meant. This was when the sit-in was going on and I got told I was a communist and I said 'what's a communist?' and nobody seemed to know. It was somebody who came to visit us must have said it, called us communists, and I thought: 'what on earth is he talking about?' I still don't really know the difference between that or being a bit more labour than not labour I guess (laughs) I'm not political, I'm not a political person. *Did you not think that the sit-in itself was political?* No, I didn't at the time, no...I done it cos I wanted to keep my job. That's really the main reason...other people may have had their ideas but mine was just to keep my job...the job I had just got used to doing.⁷¹

Patricia and Margaret repeated these sentiments. For example, Patricia said: 'we were just fighting for our jobs, you know, and there wasn't that much in Fakenham, and it's just that we saved our jobs and gave jobs to other people for a while, so we achieved something, you know?'⁷² Margaret also claimed that saving her job was the most important motivational factor behind her decision to sit-in 'because it meant another place was closing'.⁷³

The women were ambivalent towards their own union and trade unionism in general, both retrospectively and at the time, which is unsurprising because their union undermined them and failed to support the occupation. These sentiments echoed Wajcman's findings and led her to conclude the women continued to share similar conservative political views with their husbands despite the 'obvious opportunity for political development'.⁷⁴ She argued that the very real constraints they faced in both the domestic economy and paid employment created a sense of powerlessness, which meant they accepted the inequalities they faced as natural and adopted views that justified their oppression.⁷⁵ These pessimistic conclusions were criticised by Veronica Beechey for emphasising the ideology of domesticity and giving weight only to the women's experiences within the family, therefore losing sight of how their attitudes towards paid work had changed after working in the co-operative.⁷⁶ The present analysis shows that the occupation affected the women as individuals by giving them confidence and independence, which permits for a more complex view of the impact of such action on the women's political attitudes and raises questions around the assumption that 'workers' control' would equate with leftist political views.

The women I interviewed were keen to stress that they were 'not political' and emphasised their 'ordinariness'. My respondents' desire to represent themselves as

⁷¹ Interview with Marees in Fakenham, 15 April 2013.

⁷² Interview with Patricia in Fakenham, 15 April 2013.

⁷³ Interview with Margaret in Fakenham, 15 April 2013.

⁷⁴ Wajcman, *Women in Control*, pp. 157-182.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 157-182. These conclusions were very similar to those of other feminist factory ethnographies. Glucksmann found women in Smith's Industries were ambivalent towards trade unionism and doubted efficacy. Pollert found women in Bristol Tobacco powerless and lacking control of their lives.

⁷⁶ Veronica Beechey, 'What's So Special about Women's Employment? A Review of Some Recent Studies of Women's Paid Work', *Feminist Review*, No. 15 (1983), pp. 23-45.

‘ordinary’ is unsurprising as British sociologists find that working-class and middle-class people have preferred to describe themselves in this manner as ‘a means of refusing both a stigmatised and pathologised identity...at the same time that it refuses a privileged position.’⁷⁷ Beverley Skeggs argues that white working-class women are likely to experience their class position as particularly denigrated and are therefore most likely to ‘dis-identify’ with class in this manner.⁷⁸ Savage is sceptical of this argument because it risks positing a correct manner in which working-class women should identify themselves. Instead, he argues the theme of ‘ordinariness’ relates to people’s desire to assert their personal ‘authenticity’ and ‘naturalness’, and avoid snobbishness which involves insincere judgements of people based on their ‘social position’ rather than as ‘primordial individuals’.⁷⁹ In both cases, ‘ordinariness’ assumes a political guise because it intimates common interest with other people, against non-ordinary people.

The Fakenham women’s personal testimony can be read in this way – an assertion of common interests. But it could also be understood as an attempt to claim their own voice from a fuzzy mix of ‘non-ordinary’ people: the company who ‘treated us like dirt’; or the union who ‘forgot about us’ and just expected us to find another job’; or ‘the people who came to visit us’ and ‘called us communists’, or ‘the Fakenham people’ who treated them like a ‘curiosity at the zoo’. In this sense, their identification as ‘ordinary’ was connected to an individual assertion of their authenticity, as much as an identification of collective interests. Also, identifying and understanding oneself as ‘ordinary’ is not entirely the same as identifying and understanding oneself as ‘not political’. In this context, the women’s description of the occupation as ‘non-political’ should be understood as a means of claiming ownership of the dispute and distancing it, and themselves from what they perceived as external ‘political’ causes and ‘ideas’ of other people who supported them. They identified the dispute as non-political to show that it was generated from everyday conditions and that they possessed natural and authentic motivations for occupying their factory. Nancy McGrath explained in an interview in 1976: ‘The main support that we got was from...people in universities and things like this. And a lot of ordinary people when they began to find out what it was all about and that we were really serious and it wasn’t just a stunt or something.’⁸⁰ The Fakenham women differentiated themselves from the ‘people in

⁷⁷ Mike Savage, ‘Working-class identities in the 1960s: revisiting the affluent worker study’, *Sociology*, 39 (2005), pp. 922-246, at p. 938.

⁷⁸ Beverley Skeggs, *Formations of Class and Gender: Becoming Respectable*, (London: Sage Publications, 1997).

⁷⁹ Savage, ‘Working-Class Identities’, pp. 939-942.

⁸⁰ MRC, MSS. 30B/7/1, c. 1976. Tapes 37-38, interview with Nancy McGrath at her home on 17 March 1976.

universities' and developed political subjectivities around convincing other people that they were ordinary as a means of justifying their collective action and asserting their right to work.

Feminist Support and Influence

The lack of assistance the women received from their trade union left a space for the emerging WLM to play a prominent role in supporting the occupation, and further complicate the relationship between women and the labour movement. Thousands of donations, letters and orders for leather goods were sent to the women from fellow workers expressing solidarity and offering support. WLM groups in particular offered their support, including Pat Sturdy, a Lucas worker from Burnley, who set up the short-lived Women's Industrial Union the previous year.⁸¹ A letter from Liz Burke of Brighton WLM informed the Fakenham workforce: 'you're in the front line of the industrial struggle and women workers everywhere are relying on you'.⁸² Beryl Foster wrote on behalf of the Glasgow Women in Action group to say: 'We are encouraged up here to read about your occupation of your factory... We realise you have taken on two battles, one at work and one in the home and we hope you win both'.⁸³ After receiving a leaflet from the Colchester Women's Lib group, Jill Walker of the East Manchester and Stockport Women's Lib Group asked the Fakenham women to send a catalogue so they could: 'find local shops who will take your goods'.⁸⁴ Such letters show how the Fakenham women's action received significant support from an emerging network of feminist groups, and was conceptualised as being part of wider feminist awakening that they perceived to be taking place across Britain.

Nancy McGrath explained that the occupation's main source of support had come from women's groups.⁸⁵ On a national level, feminist groups publicised the occupation and appealed for donations and orders on behalf of the women in various journals and newsletters. The occupation was discussed and a collection was held at the 1972 Women's Liberation conference in Manchester.⁸⁶ Feminists raised a large amount of money with donations coming from as far away as Bristol and Glasgow, which allowed the women to maintain their occupation and begin to produce and sell leather goods to raise the necessary funds to launch their co-operative.⁸⁷ Three films were also made about the occupation by socialist

⁸¹ MRC, FAK, MSS.30/3/37: Letters of Support. For discussion of Women's Industrial Union see Boston, *Women Workers*, pp. 294-295.

⁸² MRC, FAK, MSS.30/3/147: Letters of Support.

⁸³ MRC, FAK, MSS.30/3/155: Letters of Support.

⁸⁴ MRC, FAK, MSS.30/3/171: Letters of Support.

⁸⁵ 'Selling Factory Work-In Goods', *EDP*, 30 March 1972.

⁸⁶ 'Factory Work-In Gains Support'. *EDP*, 4 April 1972.

⁸⁷ 'Selling Factory Work-In Goods', *EDP*, 30 March 1972.

and feminist filmmakers.⁸⁸ Susan Shapiro produced a film about the occupation for Cinema Action Group, a collective committed to making film as a form of political activism. Shapiro ‘wanted to make a film about women who had done something that could be shown to other groups of both men and women who might be on the verge of some kind of political commitment.’⁸⁹ This raised the profile of the occupation, and whilst their own union was unwilling to support them, donations arrived from other workers including the UCS.⁹⁰

Local feminist groups in East Anglia also supported the occupation. Norwich had its own women’s centre and a separate women’s liberation group, which paid regular visits to the factory and joined the women for demonstrations outside of the NUFLAT and DSS offices in Norwich in April.⁹¹ Sheila Bell, a member of the Norwich women’s liberation group discussed how important it was for WLM groups to support the Fakenham women in light of ‘union disregard for women’s jobs’:

I think that these women are putting up a jolly courageous fight. If men’s jobs were involved then there would probably have been a strike but because they are women’s jobs they are not counted as very important. Although the NUFLAT union has mostly women members, it is ran by men who the women feel are just embarrassed by the whole situation.⁹²

As a result of this support, the occupation was publically portrayed in a feminist context by the local and national press, which raised the profile of some of the key issues affecting working-class women. This included the sexual discrimination they faced from their union, the importance of women’s wages and their treatment as a disposable form of labour.

The Fakenham case, similar to Trico, is a revealing example of how WLM groups attempted to engage with working-class women and trade unions in this early period of the movement. The support the women received from feminist groups was an example of a wider historical phenomenon taking place at the time. Whilst middle-class female social investigators had been concerned with working-class women’s experience of factory work since the nineteenth century, the interest shown by WLM groups, academics and filmmakers during the 1970s was part of a wider transnational social movement that developed new research practices and mediums in the forms of participant observation ethnographies and film, but also problematized and attempted to redefine the relationship between women and

⁸⁸ MRC, MSS.30/3/5: Papers and Journals about Films and Propaganda Fakenham, Sue Shapiro, *Fakenham Film*, (1972); Martin Colvey, *Nothing to Lose*, (1972); Diana Glass, *Fakenham Four Years Later*, (1976).

⁸⁹ ‘Under Worker’s Control’, *The Guardian*, 15 June 1972.

⁹⁰ ‘Sexton Women’s Plea to PM’, *EDP*, 5 April 1972.

⁹¹ ‘Women’s Lib and Shoe Workers in Demo’, *EDP*, 6 April 1972.

⁹² ‘Factory Work-In Gains Support’, *EDP*, 4 April 1972.

paid work in a different way.⁹³ Wajcman's study should be seen in a similar context to Anna Pollert's *Girls, Wives, Factory Lives* and Miriam Glucksman's *Women on the Line*.⁹⁴ Both of whom were WLM members and students who ended up in factories undertaking similar participant observation studies with female workers. Judy Wajcman's discussion of her own feminist trajectory from a poor Jewish immigrant community in Melbourne to a leather factory in Norfolk, via Cambridge University, reveals the wider opportunities open to some young women during the post-war period, and the impact of this upon her understanding of class and gender relations in a manner that led her to Fakenham:

As a sociologist I would just say, and you'll just laugh if I go through all the characteristics...I have a classic feminist trajectory. I'm exactly the right age; I was brought up by a Jewish immigrant family who valued education... I went to do a degree in politics, and then I got very involved in the anti-Vietnam demonstrations. I had a political science education in Marxism... and it was only around the end of that when feminist inklings started to emerge around the communist party and something kind of clicked! It was like a flash, like of those gestalt things, where I just thought: 'oh yeah!'

But I became involved in Fakenham through the women's movement actually. I was in Cambridge studying for a PhD and I was absolutely going to do it on work - I was really interested in work and pay and stuff - and you know it was the beginning of the kind of second-wave stuff, so you know I got very involved with the women's movement in the university and in the town .I got very involved in particular with the socialist feminist bid, like I didn't get involved with domestic violence and those things. I was absolutely involved with the trade union orientated, women's work, equal pay, socialist feminist thing.... Then the word was out that there was this occupation, it was in Norfolk... And so I think I went up and visited with a mate of mine in Cambridge to try and help... and we thought that we would try and get them some orders for stuff to keep them going. I had lots of trips up there... and my supervisor just said well given that's where you're spending your time and you haven't yet organised to go anywhere else, why don't you just do your PhD on that? So that was what I was going to do. And nobody at Cambridge was doing anything to do with women's work, it was all male dominated themes...like it was completely a topic that nobody was doing and I can remember people who are now famous and have done stuff on women's work just saying to me 'well what's interesting about women's work?' and 'what a stupid topic!'⁹⁵

Wajcman was acutely aware that her 'typical feminist' trajectory meant that she had very different experiences of work and education than the women she worked alongside and interviewed in the summer of 1975. She went on to talk about her initial impressions of

⁹³ Examples of social investigators with an interest in women's work include: Lady Bell, *At the Works: A Study of a Manufacturing Town*, (London: Virago, 1985) or Margery Spring Rice, *Working-class Wives: Their Health and Conditions*, (London: Virago, 1981).

⁹⁴ Anna Pollert, *Girls, Wives, Factory Lives*, (Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1981); Ruth Cavendish, *Women on the Line*, (London: Routledge and Keegan Paul, 1982).

⁹⁵ Interview with Judy Wajcman in London, 22 April 2013.

working at the factory, but also of her awareness at the time that the women did not see their struggle in the same socialist feminist terms as herself, and also of her (and WLM's) limited capacity to influence their wider political outlook:

I remember when I arrived that they had incredibly thick Norfolk accents, and they thought I had a really strong Australian accent ... it was just such a foreign world to me in a whole lot of ways...I just did not understand that feudal England was alive and well in Norfolk...like when I met some of the husbands and went to do interviews and they were in tied-Cottages... so it was quite an extraordinary world to have fallen into, and I just thought they were amazingly kind of brave. It was an incredibly courageous, kind of amazing thing to do, given who they were and their background and stuff.

It was rural poor and I had never seen that before because I had come from a cosmopolitan background...so I just thought it was real poor, and I was aware that I was at Cambridge and incredibly privileged, and I would never have dreamt of patronising them, or suggesting stuff ...I suppose we (WLM campaign) didn't try and influence them because, I am a real structural Marxist, and if you can't give people the conditions in which they can live out different lives then what the hell are you doing going around and telling them to be different. ⁹⁶

Wajcman's testimony illustrates the dynamic relationship between theory and practice within academic feminism during this period, and how feminist research was both informed and inspired by local activism. However there was also a clear distinction of the meaning of the Fakenham occupation between the WLM groups that provided support and the women who actually organised it. Whilst the former generally interpreted it as part of a wider stirring of working-class women's consciousness, the latter understood their action as a direct attempt to save their jobs and alter the power relations within the specific context of their workplace.

The workforce at Fakenham was aware that their action was being publically conceptualised as a fight for women's rights. Sexual difference was central to their own understanding of how their occupation had evolved and how other people responded to them. Nancy believed their co-operative received little support from their union and the government because they were women. She said in an interview in 1976:

If we had half a dozen men in there strutting about telling us what to do I'm quite sure they'd be prepared to help us. Because most of those people in government circles...like Tony Benn sent a man down. He didn't send a woman down – he sent a man down. He approached it from a man's viewpoint. He wasn't interested in us because we're women but I'm quite sure that it had a bearing on the outcome of his

⁹⁶ Ibid.

visit, the fact that we were women. And most of the men think women don't know what they're about anyway.⁹⁷

Similarly, the women believed the co-operative's economic failure could also be explained by sexual difference. A worker named Isabel discussed how 'vulnerable' they were: 'because we are an all-woman factory and people are inclined to lean on us a bit heavy' or 'people try and rip you off all the time'.⁹⁸ They also discussed how married women felt under pressure from their husbands to find more stable work. In 1976, Nancy explained how one worker left the co-operative after her husband 'almost bodily dragged her from the place'.⁹⁹ She went on to say:

Nancy: I know one husband who told his wife that rather than work here for, what was it, about £15 a week, she could go to the laundry and get £28 or nearly £30 at Fakenham laundry. And he created quite a fuss because she didn't go there. But her health wouldn't stand up to it with the steam and the chemicals and everything else. And he was a husband who I would never in my wildest dreams have envisaged saying that sort of thing. But they had economic pressures on them.

Interviewer: And you think it's economic the reason why...

Nancy: I think it must be. I can't see what other reason there is, can you? Can you think of another reason? I mean people aren't avaricious, are they? Not from choice.
100

Whilst the above passage shows that male behaviour was not necessarily understood as the primary cause of women's exploitation, it was clear the women felt their experiences of work and trade unionism were shaped by gender and their relationships with individual men. In response, the workers reorganised their work in different ways. The practice of weekly meetings and participation in shared decision making represented a fundamental break from the past in the women's experiences of paid work. In the 1976 interviews, one woman compared their meetings to 'group therapy', where everybody 'talked', 'shouted' and 'aired their grievances'.¹⁰¹ They allowed working mothers to synchronise their working hours with their childcare responsibilities. Nancy pointed out 'I haven't known of anywhere else, at least not around here anyway, where it is possible to do this sort of thing, where women cater specifically for women with women's problems.'¹⁰² Nancy suggested the male

⁹⁷ MRC, MSS. 30B/7/1, c. 1976. Tapes 37-38, interview with Nancy McGrath at her home on 17 March 1976.

⁹⁸ MRC, MSS. 30B/7/1, c. 1976. Tapes 27-29 are interview with Isabel Gilder at her home in Fakenham and her husband Basil. (Undated).

⁹⁹ MRC, MSS. 30B/7/1, c. 1976. Tape 3 and Tape 4 are from an Interview with Nancy McGrath in the office of Fakenham Enterprises, 10 March 1976

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ MRC, MSS. 30B/7/1, c. 1976. Tapes 34-36, transcripts of group discussion at Fourth Anniversary Party of Occupation on 17 March 1976.

¹⁰² MRC, MSS. 30B/7/1, c. 1976. Tapes 37-38, interview with Nancy McGrath at her home on 17 March 1976.

directors they dealt with from Scott Bader ‘haven’t understood what it’s all about. They haven’t understood basically that it’s an all-woman concern. And they haven’t been able to integrate into the system we have there which is a peculiarly feminine or female approach to it.’¹⁰³

My interview respondents retrospectively emphasised the significance of this ‘peculiarly female’ collective culture and practices they developed working at Fakenham Enterprises. Margaret remembered:

Well, it was important that we were women...I used to take my baby, Cathleen, with me. Sometimes I’d stay there until about 8 o’clock at night, but I used to take everything with her and you know everyone took it in turns to feed her and that...I know that nowadays you wouldn’t be allowed to, but in them days you know it was a thing where I wanted to help and support and so she had to come with me and she did...It was like a family really. We all worked together, we never used to fall out, everyone got on and we stuck together. When we used to make a decision, we all stuck by it and that was it. But nowadays that doesn’t happen; people say one thing and do another.¹⁰⁴

For Marees:

I definitely enjoyed it...we were a very close knit, friendly lot. And em... I think I have grown up thinking that I should stick up for myself as well. When I was voted as a director, I thought, ‘why would they pick me?’ you know ‘why bother’ because I suppose this was the first time in my adult life that somebody had actually thought that I was worth listening to! Yeah I got confidence from the fact that somebody had voted for me yeah, and that people wanted me to have a say, yeah. Definitely, that did make me feel a bit better about myself, but until then I was just one of the girls.¹⁰⁵

The women remembered the collective culture they fostered that enabled them to assume their own voice, or ‘have a say’. However, whilst gender difference was central to how they made sense of their collective action, they were reluctant to identify themselves as ‘feminists’ either at the time, or retrospectively.

At the time, they welcomed ‘the right kind of support’ from feminist groups on a practical level but they did not associate themselves with that wider movement and differentiated themselves from the women they encountered during their occupation.¹⁰⁶ Nancy McGrath made it clear: ‘we do not necessarily agree with all of the images projected by women’s lib and did not make a request for their backing. But we are glad of their support that they are giving to our specific fight.’¹⁰⁷ Patricia expressed similar views to Nancy; she

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Interview with Margaret in Fakenham, 15 April 2013.

¹⁰⁵ Interview with Marees in Fakenham, 15 April 2013

¹⁰⁶ ‘Women’s Lib and Shoe Workers in Demo’, *EDP*, 6 April 1972.

¹⁰⁷ ‘Factory Work-In Gains Support’, *EDP*, 4 April 1972.

identified the occupation with feminist discourse of the time, she did not associate herself with that movement. She said:

Yeah that (we were all women) was important yeah, us women stuck together and we was fighting for our jobs...YOU HAD TO FIGHT FOR WOMEN'S RIGHTS! (laughs) *Why are you laughing when you say that?* Oh dear...I suppose we did think that at the time. We received lots of cheques, support, but no I would not describe myself as a feminist. No, no, no, that was not something we were really involved in. I don't know why not really, I wasn't (pause), we were just fighting for our jobs, you know?¹⁰⁸

Marees was more explicit about her attitude towards feminism. I originally asked her if she felt her action had been influenced by feminism, to which she responded: 'I don't know, I'm not really sure, it might have done because I have been told constantly that I was a feminist.' Although she did not necessary identify herself as a feminist, the fact she emphasised how other people identified her in this manner is important. She went on to talk about her surprise at the solidarity and wider support they received at the time, again in a similar manner to Peggy in the previous chapter:

Em, I was surprised that people sent us money for the fighting fund, I was thinking, 'why did these strangers send us anything?' why would they be interested in helping us?! Well I suppose I come from a family where you work for what you get and you don't get it if you don't work so I suppose if somebody was helping somebody else outside of the family, I was thinking, why are they? That's how I was, and I was always shocked and surprised and thinking why are they sending us money?! You know it sounds silly now, but at the time I was very surprised that anybody who was outside of our little group what we were sitting in, or people around here, would be interested in us.¹⁰⁹

She pointed out that she felt that the occupation had been identified with the wider feminist movement, although she said that she would never have identified with that herself.

A lot of money came from feminist groups, and...I got the feeling that people thought that's what we were, but I was... It wasn't a 'woman's woman' sort of person. I did sometimes feel that because there was a lot of feminists and people like that, I did feel that that's what they thought we were but...I didn't feel the same as them no, because I was a married woman having a baby! That's why, it's silly, really silly, but yeah ...some of the ladies we met were very sort of strong and outspoken types of people. Not how I thought I was; I probably am now, but not how I was then. That's probably why...I just thought a lot of people probably did think that's what we were, not just ordinary housewives and mothers. I was just an ordinary housewife and mother to be. I didn't think of myself as being anything special.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁸ Interview with Patricia in Fakenham, 15 April 2013.

¹⁰⁹ Interview with Marees in Fakenham, 15 April 2013.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

Marees was not involved in WLM groups and did not adopt a 'feminist' identity after the occupation had finished. However, she did identify the occupation as a turning point for her personally. In her narrative, she constructed her pre-strike self as shy and embarrassed, to having grown into a strong independent woman, willing to stick up for herself in the present. Whilst she did not necessarily feel comfortable with explicitly identifying herself as a feminist – to avoid representing herself as 'anything special' - she was keen to point out that other people identified her in this manner. Whilst she was uncomfortable with the term, she also associated it with being strong and independent, which she was proud of. She reflected on the personal effects of the occupation:

I can now see how it impacted on me, but I just buried it all, I didn't ever think about it, I think I was always a bit embarrassed by it! I used to be quite embarrassed by people looking at me because I wasn't a very confident 22 year old, I was very shy ... I didn't speak out a lot, no I was quiet...but during the occupation, there was a lot of people who supported you and we would speak to people down the market and the store holder would say 'go on! well done girls', and that sort of thing...So I didn't think it had affected me until this come up, I didn't think much about it, but I think it probably did because I always sort of...especially in recent years, and I know because people have said to me that I do stick up for myself now...you know so yeah I think I am quite independent, and that possibly is from going back to then, which was quite important really. ¹¹¹

Margaret similarly discussed the occupation in relation to her own personality and strength of character as an individual. Rather than suggesting the occupation represented a turning point in her life that was influenced by feminism, she suggested that she had been brought up to be a strong woman, unafraid to stand up to men and defy expected gender norms in the first place. Her participation in the occupation was only used as an example to further demonstrate these characteristics she identified with herself, and downplayed the significance of 'external' political influences.

Well, it was important that we were women; I think we were the first ones ever for women to actually stick up and say 'yeah we're going to take over the factory!' But I think I had always thought 'why should we women be treated differently from men?' from before the occupation, because them days women were treated differently. I remember like the men used to be up the pub... and them were the days what when women didn't used to go in pubs. But I used to go to the pubs on my own but they'd look at you like there was something wrong with you. But I used to always say: 'well if I want a drink I'll go up the pub'. But because you're on your own they used to think you were just after blokes and stuff like that. But that wasn't the case at all, so I had always been like that. You know people saying that you should do this or shouldn't do that, because you're a woman... and things like that. But I didn't.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

I come from a family where there was eight of us, four boys and four girls. And I was brought up sort of tough, you know? With 10 of us in the family and I'd never give in anyway even when I was a kid you know, so you know my brother used to tell me he'd break my arm because I called him a name ...so I suppose I have always stuck up for myself...and so that's why I am quite loud really! Well I don't mean nasty loud, I just mean that I was one who was willing to fight for the factory and help them in every way. But people don't stick by you now in the same way cos...I think people are frightened to lose their jobs and so they don't stick together now. You know even when I worked at my other jobs and if anything cropped up, we said we'd stick together over something we didn't agree with, but when it came down to it I was the only one who did. And I was the only one who said anything, which was a shame.¹¹²

Although Margaret did not identify the occupation as a turning point in her life, it was clear she felt it had influenced her on a personal level and represented her own fearlessness to stand up for her rights as woman, which was something she felt she had learned from her childhood. Both Marees and Margaret told stories about their personalities when they spoke about their motivations and the impact of the occupation. This recalls Michael Roper's suggestion that subjectivity is not simply composed by ideological formations, but is a matter of personality formed through lived experience and emotional responses to these experiences.¹¹³ In this respect, the Fakenham workers did not necessarily identify themselves as feminists, but framed their experiences around feminist values in terms of emphasising the importance of their self-worth and individual autonomy.

Conclusion

In 1983, Wajcman argued the women at Fakenham doubted their political efficacy because they were unable to improve their material conditions by forming a co-operative. However, focusing on oral history and personal testimony permits for a broader view of the various criteria with which the women themselves judged their experience of 'self-management'. In 1976, Nancy McGrath reflected:

If the worst comes to worst and it folds up... it's been a good four years and I wouldn't have changed it. I wouldn't give it up for anything, not the experiences that I've gone through... Maybe somebody else will learn from it. Maybe we can put our knowledge or experience at somebody else's disposal.¹¹⁴

In my oral history interviews, respondents generally reflected that working at Fakenham Enterprises was a positive experience, particularly in comparison to their subsequent experiences of work in low-paid, insecure service industries. The women I interviewed judged the effects of their brief experiences of self-management upon their individual sense

¹¹² Interview with Margaret in Fakenham, 15 April 2013.

¹¹³ Roper, 'Slipping out of view'.

¹¹⁴ MRC, MSS. 30B/7/1, c. 1976. Interview with Nancy McGrath at her home, 17 March 1976.

of self. They emphasised the importance of the economic and subjective value of their work, the alternative working arrangements they developed as a co-operative and their encounters with workers and political activists outside of Fakenham.

Whilst their political subjectivity was by no means radicalised, this should not mean we overlook the personal significance of self-management for the protagonists who identified it as a break from the past. This is reflected in their handling of the co-operative where they claimed their own voice and leadership as women. However, my respondents' experiences of work after the occupation, although not in manufacturing, remained similarly polarised in low paid service sector work.

Whilst the Fakenham women's influence upon feminist activists can clearly be seen from Wajcman's testimony, the influence of the WLM upon the women themselves is less obvious. They felt the occupation had not led to wider critiques of class and gender relations across society. Instead of telling stories about feminist epiphanies, in the context of deindustrialisation, they told stories of personal strength, independence and learning to stick up for themselves as individual women. This raises questions about the influences of feminist campaigns in the 1970s, which may not have transformed working-class women's political orientations, but may have provoked them to ask questions about their own personal autonomy and experiences of work.

Chapter 5: The Lee Jeans Factory Occupation, Greenock, 1981

On the 5 February 1981, the 240 workers at the Lee Jeans factory in Greenock, Inverclyde, did not go home. The primarily female workforce decided to barricade themselves in the factory after being made redundant by the multinational Vanity Fair Corporation (VF). They declared the factory ‘occupied’ and refused to leave until their employers negotiated a deal that secured their jobs and the future of the factory. Lee Jeans had established the factory in 1970 with the assistance of a government aid scheme to combat local unemployment. The grants came to an end in 1976 and the company was taken over by VF, an American corporation that also owned larger clothing firms in Northern Ireland and Belgium.¹ At the time of the takeover, Lee Jeans was supposed to expand the workforce in Greenock. However, the new management reversed this decision and moved the cutting-room of the factory to their new plant in Northern Ireland, which it also acquired with a government aid scheme.² This raised the cost and slowed down the levels of production in the Greenock factory providing the management with a viable excuse to make the women redundant when their government grants came to an end at the beginning of 1981.³

The workers became increasingly suspicious in November 1980, when they began a work-share scheme with their Irish counterparts. Their worst fears were confirmed on 29 January 1981 when shop steward, Helen Monaghan, was informed that falling productivity rates and a decline in orders caused by the recession meant VF was closing the factory in Greenock.⁴ There was very little reaction from the press to the news that 240 Greenock women were about to lose their jobs. The *Daily Record* had a three-sentence report that the factory was to close due to falling interest rates and the weakness of the pound.⁵ The anti-poverty charity, War on Want, summed up the initial reaction to the factory closure in a

¹ War On Want Pamphlet, *For a Few Dollars More: Lee, the Ultimate Rip-off*, (London: WOW Publications, 1981): pp. 1-3

² Ibid.

³ For further details about background of the occupation, see War On Want Pamphlet, *For a Few Dollars More: Lee, the Ultimate Rip-off*, (London: WOW Publications, 1981): p. 1. Nick Lorentzen, “You Can’t fight for jobs and just sit there”: The Lee Jeans Sit-In’ in Hugo Levie, Denis Gregory and Nick Lorentzen (eds.), *Fighting Closures: De-industrialisation and the Trade Unions 1979-1983*, (Nottingham: Spokesman, 1984), pp. 43-4.

⁴ ‘Factory to Close’, *Daily Record*, 31 January 1981, p. 2; ‘Jubilant Jeans Women Poised to Clinch Deal’, *Glasgow Herald*, 30 July 1981; Katy Campbell, ‘The Lee Jeans Sit-In’ *Scottish Trade Union Review*, no.13 (April-June, 1981), p.7.

⁵ Factory to Close’, *Daily Record*, 31 January 1981.

special report on the occupation saying: ‘at a time of unprecedented unemployment, no one really expected that workers in the textile industry would give a lead in the fight for jobs.’⁶

Yet this was the role the women at Lee assumed as they locked themselves in the factory, unaware that they would remain inside for the next seven months. For many of the women, this was their first experience of paid work, and for most it was their first experience of a major industrial dispute. They received little support from their union, the National Union of Tailor and Garment Workers (NUTGW), and it was through solidarity and a unique style of workplace organisation that these women formed a robust collectivity, capable of representing and actively protecting their own interests. They formed an Action Committee that was responsible for ensuring the factory remained occupied at all times. Delegations of workers visited factories across Britain, from Burnley to Aberdeen, raising high levels of financial and moral support from the wider labour movement. They were publically supported by the Scottish Trade Union Congress (STUC), whilst the Govan and lower Clyde shipbuilders donated over £1000 every week helping them to sustain the occupation.⁷

The women raised the public profile of the occupation with events that included a 70-mile march from Greenock to Edinburgh to present George Younger, Secretary of State for Scotland, with a petition containing 40,000 signatures demanding government intervention.⁸ On 25 August 1981, the VF Corporation agreed to sell the factory to a consortium led by their former director of operations for UK and Ireland who, with assistance from the Scottish Economic Planning Department, bought the factory and kept all 150 workers remaining in the occupation.⁹ In doing so, the women forced their multinational employers into a U-turn that prevented them from closing the factory and saved their jobs.

The Lee Jeans factory occupation symbolised a unique victory that was hailed at the time by the STUC for ‘capturing the imagination of the British trade union movement’.¹⁰

⁶ *For a Few Dollars More*, p. 2.

⁷ Willie Griffin and Bob Wylie, ‘Lee Jeans’ in *Militant*, Issue 545, 27 March 1981, p. 14; Campbell, ‘The Lee Jeans Sit-In’, p.8.

⁸ Glasgow Caledonian University Archive, GB 1847, STUC Records, Minutes of Meeting of General Purposes Committee, 17 June 1981.

⁹ ‘Big Order Spells Success for Sit-in plant’ *Glasgow Herald*, 23 June 1981, p. 1; ‘A Famous Victory’, *Glasgow Herald*, 25 August 1981, p. 6; Scottish Economic Planning Department was formed in 1973 with responsibility for oil-related development, electricity supply and new towns. From 1975 it was also responsible for the administration of regional selective assistance from the Department of Trade and Industry’s Office.

¹⁰ STUC Archive, Glasgow Caledonian University: Report of the Proceedings from 84th STUC Annual Congress, April, 1981 p. 536.

From a historical perspective, James D. Young suggested the occupation renewed working-class resistance to Thatcherism and taught the protagonists that ‘women’s liberation and socialism are do-it-yourself movements.’¹¹ Sheila Rowbotham cites the occupation, alongside the disputes analysed in the previous chapters, as evidence of working-class women continuing to fight for equality and resist growing unemployment at the beginning of the 1980s.¹² More recently, the 30th anniversary of the occupation was celebrated with a special debate in the Scottish Parliament where MSPs described the occupation as ‘an inspiration to women workers all over the world’.¹³ One MSP made the claim that:

Those women were not political, and they certainly were not party political. What they were was determined. I believe they had a distinctly female type of politics that makes me wonder how different the world would be if women were making more of the world’s decisions—perhaps Greenock women, in particular.¹⁴

This chapter seeks to understand what this ‘female type of politics’ was, and whether indeed there was such a thing. The Greenock women shared similar experiences to women examined in Dagenham, Brentford and Fakenham, in that their protest was distinguished as novel, both at the time and by observers since, on the basis that it was carried out by women. Yet there have been limited attempts to consider the extent to which the workers involved understood the influence of gender upon their action in a way that differentiated their protest from those of male workers. Focusing on their experiences of work, trade unionism and feminism, the chapter assesses the extent to which these women felt their militancy represented a shift in their political sense of self and understanding of their rights and role as women.

The fact that their militancy occurred in 1981 moves this study into a new era of economic and social policy and considers the early impact of Margaret Thatcher’s Conservative government on working-class women’s experiences of work. Whilst the previous case studies were associated with hopeful transitions in the attitudes of the labour movement, the state and women themselves towards gender equality in Britain, the

¹¹ James D. Young, *Women and Popular Struggles: A History of Scottish and English Working-Class Women, 1500-1984*, (Edinburgh: Mainstream Publishing, 1985), pp. 184-186.

¹² Rowbotham, *The Past is Before Us*, p. 239.

¹³ Duncan Morgan in Meeting of Scottish Parliament 10 March 2011, ‘Lee Jeans Sit-In’ from *The Scottish Parliament* <http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/apps2/business/orsearch/ReportView.aspx?r=6175&mode=html> [accessed 23 June 2011].

¹⁴ Anne McLaughlin in Meeting of Scottish Parliament 10 March 2011, ‘Lee Jeans Sit-In’ from *The Scottish Parliament* <http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/apps2/business/orsearch/ReportView.aspx?r=6175&mode=html> [accessed 23 June 2011].

different economic and political context of the Lee Jeans occupation permits a wider perspective of the long term significance of these disputes on women's experiences of work. Building on the Fakenham case study, this chapter continues to reveal the central importance of women's jobs to the domestic economies of working-class families and women's sense of self. It also considers the problems in thinking about women's militancy as 'non-political' or 'distinctly female', which risks essentialism and ignores the political nature of the everyday concerns of working-class women like those considered in the present analysis, and further marginalises them from history of the labour movement.

Context

The Lee Jeans occupation took place against the backdrop of the Conservative government's implementation of tighter fiscal and monetary policy and legislation that curtailed the powers of trade unions. Privatisation, deregulation and the ending of state subsidies for manufacturing industries had devastating effects on Britain's manufacturing industries. Between 1968 and 1979, unemployment steadily rose from approximately 400,000 to 1.3 million.¹⁵ Between 1979 and 1981 it rose to 2.7 million.¹⁶ Those who worked in manufacturing were more likely to be affected as 1.2 million manufacturing jobs were cut in the period between 1979 and 1981 alone, which led Layard and Nickell to suggest in 1986 that 'unemployment is basically a matter affecting manual workers and low skilled non-manual workers', with unemployment of 22 per cent for manual workers compared with 5 per cent for non-manual workers.¹⁷

Scottish women's employment patterns did not differ significantly from those in the rest of Britain. Women represented 42.2 per cent of the total Scottish labour force in 1976, slightly higher than the rest of Britain which was 41.2 per cent. Similarly, women remained concentrated in the least skilled and lowest paid jobs in services and manufacturing. Women in Scotland earned on average 59.9 per cent of the average male wage in 1979, which was slightly less than the British average of 62.2 per cent. In the clothing industry, there were 27,000 women making up 79.4 per cent of the industry's total Scottish labour force, compared with 292,000 in Britain making up 72.5 per cent of the total labour force.¹⁸

¹⁵ Gallie, 'The Labour Force' in Halsey and Webb, *Twentieth-Century British Social Trends*, p. 314.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* p. 314.

¹⁷ Rob Bryer, Stan Brignell, Allen Maunders, 'The Origins of Plant Closures' Denis Gregory and Nick Lorentzen (eds.), *Fighting Closures:*) p. 18; Richard Layard and Stephen Nickell, 'Unemployment in Britain', *Economica*, New Series, Vol. 53, No. 210, Supplement: Unemployment (1986), pp. S123-S124.

¹⁸ Figures from *New Earning Survey* quoted in Breitenbach, 'A Comparison', pp. 65-67.

Unemployment and deindustrialisation affected Greenock and the surrounding Inverclyde region particularly severely. Distinguished by its relative geographical isolation on the lower end of the Clyde, Greenock had historically relied upon shipbuilding and sugar refining for employment from the eighteenth century. Annemarie Hughes has revealed the close relationship between the shipbuilding industry and the social and economic fortunes of the town's inhabitants, demonstrating how an interwar slump coincided with some of the highest rates of infant mortality and overcrowding to occur in Britain.¹⁹ The local economy's reliance upon shipbuilding continued into the post-war period. Hugh Hagan suggested that the effects of the industry's decline were particularly catastrophic for the Inverclyde region due to the lack of alternative forms of employment and investment in new industries compared to other shipbuilding communities that benefited from a more diverse economy, such as Glasgow.²⁰ The impact of the industry's decline upon the local economy could be seen at the time of the occupation. In 1981, average unemployment in Greenock stood at 15.3 per cent against a Scottish average of 12.7 per cent. Male unemployment in Greenock was 16.6 per cent, whilst female unemployment was slightly less at 13.3 per cent, but still well above the national average of 14.9 per cent for men and 9.3 per cent for women.²¹

The women's redundancy was also symptomatic of a wider decline in the clothing industry. The clothing industry was dominated by women and comparatively low paid to other manual manufacturing industries. In 1981, women represented 75.6 per cent of all clothing workers and earned an average weekly wage of £65 compared with the average of £75 for all manual women and £121 for all manual male workers.²² Similarly, by the end of the 1970s the industry was entering a state of decline as the unemployment rate within the industry grew from 1.5 per cent in 1970 to 14.5 per cent in 1981.²³ Whilst not quite on the same magnitude as shipbuilding, the impact of the industry's decline could also be seen locally as 5000 clothing manufacturing jobs had been lost the previous year in the west of Scotland.²⁴

¹⁹ Annemarie Hughes, 'The economic and social effects of recession and depression on Greenock between the wars', *International Journal of Maritime History*, vol. 18, no. 1, (2006), pp. 281-306.

²⁰ Hugh Hagan, "It's My Job to Work and It's Yours to Make it Go Round:" The Experience of Shipyard Workers' Wives in Port Glasgow between the Wars', *International Journal of Maritime History* June vol. 18, no. 1, (2006) 307-331.

²¹ Statistics from *Department of Employment Gazette*, 1981 quoted in WOW, *For a Few Dollars More*, p. 5. Greenock District Trades Council Letters express concern at raise of youth unemployment. There is no reference to the Lee Jeans Occupation in the documents available in the STUC archive.

²² Simon Crine and Clive Playford, *From Rags to Rags: Low Pay in the Clothing Industry*, (Low Pay Unit Pamphlet no. 20, 1982), p. 10.

²³ *Ibid.* p. 5.

²⁴ Grace Franklin, 'They Shall Not be Moved', *Daily Record* 30 April 1981, p. 10.

The Lee Jeans workers were told their redundancy was inevitable and unavoidable. George Younger, Secretary of State for Scotland, wrote to James Milne, General Secretary of STUC to say: ‘The workforce must recognise that the best way to secure jobs is to co-operate in the efficient and profitable running of their company...the longer the occupation of the factory goes on, the more difficult it will be to identify interested parties, either in taking over that plant or in investing generally in the Greenock area.’²⁵ Yet the Greenock sewing-machinists refused to accept such arguments based on established economic rationale. They fought for their right to work in a manner that was perceived as novel and historic. At the STUC Annual Conference, it was declared:

...the workers have organised themselves into an efficient, capable and disciplined body which is unique and has never been seen before in the British Trade Union movement’s history. It is even more remarkable, Mr President, when one recognises the fact that many of these workers are young girls and many of the women are in fact breadwinners in the family because of the serious male unemployment in this particular area.²⁶

Female workers were still not expected to behave like this, despite the fact that women in Scotland had a rich history of organising themselves and independently developing their own means of resistance to workplace inequality.²⁷ The Greenock women were not publically perceived within this wider context, which is possibly indicative of women’s marginalised position in the collective memory of the Scottish labour movement. Instead, the women’s emphasis on their right to work, and the importance of their wages within the context of high levels of male and female unemployment meant they received greater public sympathy and were perceived as less threatening than, for example, the predominantly male workforce at the Chrysler car plant in nearby Linwood, whose high levels of unofficial strike activity in the 1970s earned them the reputation of being ‘a hard boiled bunch’ and subsequently responsible for the factory’s closure in 1981.²⁸

Experiences of Work

Although the Lee Jeans women’s decision to occupy their factory surprised Scotland’s media and the STUC, the women themselves interpreted it as an obvious response. When asked by a journalist to explain the reason behind their occupation at the time, shop steward Helen Monaghan responded by asking him: ‘Well, would you sell your

²⁵ STUC Archive, Letter from George Younger to James Milne, 5 June 1981.

²⁶ STUC 82nd Annual Report 1981 p. 536.

²⁷ Eleanor Gordon, *Women in the Labour Movement*, pp. 170-211; Annemarie Hughes, *Gender and Political Identities in Scotland, 1919-1939*, (Edinburgh University Press, 2010), pp. 84-102.

²⁸ Gilmour, ‘The Trouble with Linwood’, pp. 76-78.

job for £1000?’²⁹ Such common sense explanations behind the women’s defence of their jobs demonstrated the importance of paid work to their daily lives. According to my interviewee, Margaret, the majority of the women at Lee had worked all of their adult lives from leaving school at the age of 15.³⁰

The importance of work to the material conditions of the Lee Jeans women was central to how the occupation was reported and conceptualised publically. It was repeatedly reiterated throughout the occupation that the women were out to save their jobs, rather than to gain higher redundancy payments. This distinction between ‘jobs’ and ‘money’ was repeatedly stressed to legitimise and enhance the moral value of their act of defiance. A worker explained: ‘they offered us more severance money but we told them it was jobs we wanted, not money. They seemed to think that money was everything.’³¹ An Inverclyde district councillor praised the ‘girls’ for their ‘quite remarkable discipline’ and went on to say: ‘these people have shown they prefer work to money. Anyone who has visited that factory knows that one of the priorities is to keep the whole place in a state of readiness.’³² Three months into the occupation, the sewing-machinists rejected redundancy payments that ranged from ‘a few hundred to four figures’.³³ The sewing-machinists ceremoniously set their redundancy notices on fire outside of the factory. They were ‘blazing mad’ according to the *Greenock Telegraph*. Yet behind this emotional response was a straightforward rationale: ‘we want a weekly wage – not pay-off money’ and ‘we don’t want money, we want jobs’.³⁴ This contributed to the idea the ‘girls...have now achieved heroine status.’³⁵

The dispute was distanced from the self-interest of the women involved and connected to collective concerns of the wider Greenock community. It went beyond party-politics as the women challenged members of the Inverclyde Liberal Party for failing to visit the factory, saying: ‘this is a community fight. We need help from everyone’.³⁶ Similarly, Jimmy Milne, STUC General Secretary, announced at a protest rally ‘this is not your fight alone. It is a fight which involves the whole community.’³⁷ The *Greenock Telegraph* described the occupation in the following terms:

²⁹ Quote from contemporary television interview used in BBC documentary *The Factory*, aired 8 March 2005.

³⁰ Interview with Margaret in Greenock, 26 July 2011.

³¹ ‘Thumbs down for new cash for new cash offer’, *Greenock Telegraph*, 16 March 1981.

³² ‘Council support but no guarantee for VF girls’, *Greenock Telegraph*, March 1981.

³³ ‘It’s the pay off at VF...’, *Greenock Telegraph*, 2 May 1981.

³⁴ ‘It’s the pay off at VF...’, *Greenock Telegraph*, 2 May 1981.

³⁵ ‘Inside the VF Corporation’, *Greenock Telegraph*, 23 April 1981.

³⁶ ‘Where have you been for the past 12 weeks’, *Greenock Telegraph*, 25 April 1981.

³⁷ VF workers plan protest rally’, *Greenock Telegraph*, 4 March 1981.

In the early stages of the dispute the management offered them more redundancy money – they turned it down. Their jobs they said were more important than the money and as more businesses are faced with short-time working, redundancies and closures, the girls feel they are fighting not just for the VF factory but for Greenock itself.³⁸

At the STUC Annual Conference, the moral value of the protest was emphasised by a representative of the NUTGW: ‘the issue is simply this today: people come before profits. The workers in Lee Jeans are fighting for that basic fundamental human right, the right to work and not to sell their jobs, recognising the fact that if you sell your job, somewhere in the future you will deprive a school leaver of their birth right – the right to work.’³⁹ At the same conference, it was further suggested: ‘the social damage being created to Greenock and Inverclyde area could be irreparable if it is not stopped now. The local community has risen to these girls.’⁴⁰ The women’s motivations were seen to go beyond their individual material self-interest and were connected to those of the wider Greenock community.

The importance of women’s wages for household economies was continually emphasised by the workers involved. Helen explained at the time: ‘some of the girls are the only wage-earners in their families and we have to help them out where they face real hardship.’⁴¹ The local newspaper interviewed women at the time who described the disruption the occupation had caused to their daily lives. An 18-year old worker called Jennifer cancelled her wedding and said: ‘We planned to buy a house before getting married but with no money at present we haven’t set a date...I am the only wage earner in the family. My dad gets an invalidity pension and my mum works part-time...my sister Patricia couldn’t find a job.’⁴² Another 18-year old worker named Wilma had worked in the factory after leaving school when she was 16 years old. She said: ‘ever since we began the sit-in we have been looking for other jobs but we have little hope of finding anything.’⁴³ Alison explained: ‘My mother and father are both redundant and I have two sisters at home. Only one is working and with me not getting any money it means only one wage coming into the house to keep us all.’⁴⁴ Carolyn offered a similar story. Her husband also faced redundancy and she did not know how she was going to pay her mortgage: ‘I don’t know what we will do. We’ll just have to live the best we can on about £20 a week dole money’.⁴⁵ 19-year old Janet had been forced to give up her flat and move in with her

³⁸ ‘Now it’s the great knit-in!’, *Greenock Telegraph*, 20 April 1981.

³⁹ STUC 82nd Annual Report 1981, p. 536.

⁴⁰ STUC 82nd Annual Report 1981, p. 537.

⁴¹ ‘Weeks without pay hit VF staff’, *Greenock Telegraph*, 5 May 1981.

⁴² ‘Future looks dim for Jennifer and other 239’, *Greenock Telegraph*, 5 March 1981.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

husband's mother. She explained: 'John's mother pays all the bills. We are really stuck. We had a holiday to Spain all planned and had to cancel it. We were shattered when we heard about the planned closure. All our plans just went haywire.'⁴⁶

Public narratives about the occupation were imbued with these stories of hardship, anxiety and insecurity. Work was central to these women's lives – their families' income and their personal sense of independence. The *Greenock Telegraph* explained:

Although the majority of workers are women, they are not all providing second wages to supplement a husband or father's income... There are many stories of hardship to tell at the factory. Nobody was working there just for pin money and families throughout Greenock have felt the pinch because of the missing wage packet.⁴⁷

In every chapter in this thesis, women's workplace militancy is presented as evidence to challenge the myth that women work for pin money. Even though most public narratives reject or lament the myth, by doing so they confirm its pervasiveness and perceived power at the time.

For my oral history respondents, paid work was once again central to their understanding of the world and their place within it. Both interviewees connected their motivations for occupying the factory to their previous experiences of paid work, which were characterised by struggles against management and employers, who had always been male. Helen was born in Port Glasgow on the Clyde in 1936 and grew up in a family of 12. She worked in various catering jobs after she left school at the age of 16, before getting a job in Drummond's tin factory when she married a pipe fitter and moved to neighbouring Greenock at the age of 21. She left Drummonds when she became pregnant at the age of 23. Similarly to Gwen and Vera from Dagenham, she worked from home throughout her pregnancy and the time spent raising her three children, undertaking various knitting and sewing contracts from local businesses. She returned to work at the tin factory in 1965 when her children were old enough to go to school, before moving to Lee Jeans when the factory opened in 1970. Looking back on her childhood, and her early experiences of work, Helen felt that events in her upbringing affected her in a manner that meant she assumed a lead role in organising the factory occupation:

Brought up in Port Glasgow, I was one of a family of 12, and eh things wis hard then because even in they days I can always remember my father eh, trying to get jobs and having to go away to try and get jobs and stuff like that and finding it difficult. And I can remember the days when my mother, she'd that many children, and if one took sick, then she had to pay when the doctor came, and very often she didn't have the

⁴⁶ 'Now it's the great knit-in!', *Greenock Telegraph*, 20 April 1981.

⁴⁷ 'Now it's the great knit-in!', *Greenock Telegraph*, 20 April 1981.

money, and it was quite...(pause) it was quite hard you know? So you were brought up, where you always had to fight for everything. ... So when you seen things happening to you, where it was a multinational and a Tory government, it made you angry!⁴⁸

She went on to explain how she had worked all her adult life because she needed the money and had never stopped to question this:

Aye, I mean you were children, you grew up, lived your life and you were glad to leave school and work, because you were getting money then. And all that was important to you. Then I married and I had three a family. After I married, my husband was a pipe fitter, but eh I tried to always be doing some sort of job and have money because it was hard. Even when my children wis young I had my knitting machine and I used to take in knitting and charge it a shilling an ounce. ...I was only a housewife trying to live my life, trying to work and I wanted my money.⁴⁹

Helen identified herself as ‘just a housewife’, yet paid work was clearly also a significant element of fulfilling this role. Helen shared a very similar work trajectory to the other women examined in the previous chapters, in terms of having worked from a school-leaving age and feeling like she had no option to do anything else. However, there were some noticeable differences in the way she talked about her wage with a greater emphasis on the need to work to avoid financial hardship. This was different to the women in Dagenham who stressed the importance of their wages, but in relation to buying their own homes, which reflected the difference in housing trends between England and Scotland. In 1966, 28 per cent of the housing stock in Scotland was owner-occupied, compared with 48 per cent in England, and in 1981, 36 per cent compared with 58 per cent.⁵⁰ Such variations in regional economies affected what paid work had meant to my respondents in the past.

Helen gave examples of the various challenges she and her family had experienced in the workplace throughout her life, which she weaved into her narrative to explain why she occupied the factory. For example, she discussed how her father, who having worked with asbestos throughout his life, died from emphysema not long before the occupation began. She said:

My father died with emphysema. And in they days I mean, they had nobody to fight for them, I mean nowadays that wouldn't be allowed. And eh, so he wasn't in a union cos there were none, and there weren't in the places I worked. And then I went into the factory (Lee Jeans) and they didn't have a union to begin with, aye so...it wasn't anything to do with being union minded that I had these feelings. It

⁴⁸ Interview with Helen in Greenock, 11 March 2013.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Figures from Andrew Holmans, ‘Owner-occupier households: recent trends in England and the USA, Australia, Canada and New Zealand’, *Social Policy and Politics*, no. 45, (February 2000), p. 35.

was (sighs) being persecuted that I had them, do you know what I'm saying? ...you realise that people, they do things that they shouldnae and that's the way that I used to look at it. I often used to think of my father, I used to say to him even when he was old and he couldn't breathe, I says: 'see daddy, they wouldn't let that happen to you now daddy, they're very strict about things you know?' But there you go, that's the way it was in they days you know?⁵¹

Whilst Helen described herself as 'socialist minded', it was clear that she did not feel that her identity and political consciousness were directly influenced by her trade union membership or political philosophy at the time of the occupation. Instead, her political views, and willingness to act upon them, were radicalised by her personal experience of loss, hardship and exploitation in her family, which she was no longer willing to accept for herself. This became clear as she discussed her experiences of work before the occupation, which were interspersed with instances of her standing up to employers who she felt were trying to take advantage of her. She explained:

I started in Lees, in 1970 but I worked in Drummonds before it. And I had a wee bit of a run-in there; it must be in my nature! Because in Drummonds, they were terrible employers, you went down and you had to clock in at 7.40. That was when we started work, but if anytime you clocked in and it was a minute past 7.40, what they did was quarter you - they didn't pay you up to 7.55. And one day I clocked in a minute late, and they refused to pay me up to 7.55, and so I refused to go to work! I got taken up to the manager's office, I says 'if you're no paying me then I don't work... next time I'm late I'll stand outside until 7.55.' So, then I didn't even realise but I always just thought that I was sort of eh, fighting for what was right⁵².

Helen went on to tell stories about becoming involved in similar types of disputes at Lee Jeans before they became unionised in 1972, which ranged from complaining about the cold temperatures during the winter, to standing up for other members of the workforce who were struggling to meet the targets set by the company's piece rate system. She told these stories about her background to align her trajectory with her motivation to organise the occupation in 1981, and reflected about herself:

In Drummonds, I would have fought for myself, I dinnae mean that in a selfish way, but I seen what was happening to me and I thought well even if I get the boot for it, I still would have stood up for myself.... When I started in Lees, they didn't have a union up there and so I had noticed all of these wee things and I thought, that's no right. I don't know if I was looking for it or I don't know....pause...I don't know what kind of nature I've got, whether I look for things and eh...see unfairness.⁵³

⁵¹ Interview with Helen in Greenock, 11 March 2013.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

This meant that when the VF Corporation decided to make the women redundant, she was completely unwilling to lose her job. She pointed out:

This crowd had come into Greenock, they got subsidies to open this factory from the British Government, and obviously it was 10 years and they were up. And just like that, they were saying that they were going to make us redundant and close the factory...⁵⁴

She described how much she enjoyed her work:

We were a great, a great workforce. I mean we really were! and I think the thing that saddened us when we were gonna shut up because we were like one big happy family, we all got on great.⁵⁵

She also stressed how desperate everybody in the factory was to work, including herself, which was evidenced by the fact they offered to adopt a three-day week to keep the factory open:

A whole lots of the girls have said, that if we had just said 'aye that's that' and just walked out, that would have been that for a lot of them...they would have been left to roam the street at 16, 17, they wouldn't have any other choice, you know what I mean? Because there were no jobs going at the time... All I wanted was to work, as I told you, I came from a family of 12, and when we left school and started work, it was great that you had a couple of bob to buy things and do what you wanted to. So I wanted to work, I wanted to earn money - all the time, and I think they were all the same, all the girls.⁵⁶

Helen situated the occupation in a wider story about responding to a gradual accumulation of inequality and injustice she had experienced throughout her life. Whilst she enjoyed her job and wanted to keep it for the wages, the fight was also an assertion of her independence and autonomy against the actions of a company that had come into her community and was willing to casually discard its labour force without a second thought for the economic and social consequences for the workers. The workforce believed they had been given a 'raw deal', and refused to accept this.⁵⁷ Importantly, Helen's testimony provides another illustration of women connecting their motivations for activism to individual qualities that meant they cared for other people. She presented the decision to occupy the factory as a moral decision, as a demand to have both her own voice, and the voice of her workmates heard, and the importance of work to their daily lives publically recognised.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ 'My plan could save 'sit-in' factory' *Greenock Telegraph*, 7 February 1981.

Margaret was only 20 years old at the time of the occupation. She began working at the factory after leaving school at the age of 16 and continued to live in her family home in Greenock. Although nearly 30 years younger than Helen, she discussed the similar sense of limited choice and working out of necessity once she left school:

I came out of school, that was in the 70s, I came straight out of school and we had a choice between the mill and the jeans factory, but my two older sisters were already sewing-machinists so it ran in the family, if one was a sewing-machinist, then the other would be a sewing-machinist and that was the way it worked. It didn't matter if you were interested in sewing or not... I had no choice, you didn't have a choice, you know if I was to turn around and say to mum that I wanted to go to college you know... that was unheard of in our days.⁵⁸

Margaret identified herself as 'an upstart' and explained that she did not particularly enjoy working in the factory. Like Helen, she also gave examples where she had stood up and challenged the management before the dispute:

The VF Corporation had started messing us around and things didn't feel right (in the years leading up to the occupation). We were making this material that you couldn't make money on because the threads were snapping and the material wouldn't feed through the folder and so your bonus was going from very high to sort of low and it was frustrating because they've trained you up to go fast, to sew properly and you were doing all this, it was all in your training, and all of a sudden you couldn't get the work done and they weren't doing anything about it. You started to sense this isn't right so I was constantly taking our line off... I thought why should we sit and take this? Why should we take this? And then as I said one of the times the heating conked out and we were all in big jumpers and it was freezing and all they were offering us was hot soup and I was like 'do you want hot soup?' and everyone was like 'NO!' 'Everybody out' - and they did, everybody walked out ... that was the start of it, it wasn't all plain sailing in the run up to it, wee cliques were starting to form and then things were starting to be said, but nothing major; we were not expecting what was before us, what was to come was just out the blue.⁵⁹

Margaret went on to explain how she welcomed the occupation at the time and the sense of excitement that went with it by comparison to the drudgery of her normal work routine:

Our jobs would have been gone, so everyone was all for this, like 'aye go on then we're barricading ourselves in'... I thought it was absolutely brilliant! For us young people this was it, because this was better than sitting at a sewing machine arguing with management. The occupation was just my cup of tea you know, right up my street.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Interview with Helen in Greenock, 11 March 2013.

⁵⁹ Interview with Margaret in Greenock, 26 July 2011.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

Margaret stressed her individual assertiveness, which fitted with her subsequent experiences of work, as she eventually left the factory and Greenock all together, before returning and opening her own launderette business. Looking back on the meaning of the occupation today, Margaret aligned her motivations for occupying the factory with the principles of being her own boss, not wanting to be pushed around and asserting her identity as an individual. She explained:

You knew at the end of the day that these guys didn't care about you. You were just a number to them and they could just pull the plug on you whenever so I think that was what was annoying - that you think that your job is going to be forever, even if it was only sewing- it was still a job; it still paid money.⁶¹

Margaret encapsulated the frustration expressed by my other interviewees from Dagenham, Brentford and Fakenham, who also stressed their dismay at their employers' lack of awareness of the personal significance of their work, even if it was low paid and not always enjoyable. Their work was central to their lives and they wanted this to be recognised.

Lee Jeans and the Labour Movement

The Lee Jeans women received varying levels of support from the labour movement. On the one hand, their union officials from the NUTGW were reluctant to make the occupation official and withdrew support after four months. On the other hand, the women received significant financial, moral and organisational support from the lower Clyde shipyards' shop stewards committee, the STUC and from other workers across Britain. The culture of militancy that existed in the West of Scotland and the political traditions within these communities were clearly very different to the context in which the Fakenham factory occupation occurred.⁶² Yet the influence of these local norms on the sewing-machinists' political subjectivity was complicated by their personal experiences of dealing with the conservative attitudes of the NUTGW's official bureaucracy.

The women at Lee Jeans joined the NUTGW in 1971 as part of a closed shop agreement.⁶³ Prior to this, Helen remembered that the women had organised informally and 'stuck together' without any formal representation, but suggested that things initially got better once they became officially unionised:

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² The legacy of 'Red Clydeside' and comparatively high levels of trade union membership and strike propensity in Scotland throughout the twentieth century contributed to the notion that Scottish workers were more militant and radical than workers in the rest of the Britain. Gregor Gall, *The Political Economy of Scotland: Red Scotland? Radical Scotland?*, (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2005), pp. 38-39.

⁶³ *For a Few Dollars More*, p. 3.

I became the shop steward, they recognised the union, things got better; wee lasses got what they called training charts... we had an agreement where they had to get so many warnings, you know, verbal, written and then the sack. Yes and so we were established as a union. And then things were good, things were going good. Everybody was making money.⁶⁴

Once unionised, the women at Lee did not play an active role in their union on a formal basis by attending weekly meetings. Helen explained she was not 'union-minded' and remembered conducting union meetings on an informal basis in the car park of the factory.⁶⁵ Margaret discussed the limited impact of her NUTGW membership upon her political identity:

I can honestly say there wasn't very much I knew about it (the union) or the purpose for it until we were actually in the sit-in where we just learned as we went along, because before it was just somebody that was backing you up if you were in trouble you know? So we didn't really see the importance because we felt we could stick up for ourselves.⁶⁶

The women's lack of formal union experience and spontaneous nature of their decision to occupy the factory contributed to the idea they had developed their own 'female type of politics', which was distinct and perceived as less threatening to the negative image of greedy, irresponsible trade unions that dominated the media throughout the 1970s.⁶⁷ At the STUC Annual Conference, it was claimed the women were 'putting people before profits' and fighting for 'the most basic human right: the right to work'; it was also declared '(we) will give these workers the necessary strength, these workers whose only political act up until this struggle was to vote in an election.'⁶⁸ The women were constructed as apolitical and inexperienced in a manner that justified and strengthened the moral value and legitimacy of their collective action. A representative from the NUM said:

These girls... have shown a courage and determination in their battle against this multi-national and Tories that has won the admiration of the whole movement, and they thoroughly deserve because a few short years ago these girls probably did not have a job... The first time they joined a Union was when they went into that factory.'⁶⁹

In place of experience, they were believed to possess 'the solidarity, the strength, the emotion and the real gut feeling of trade unionism' according a representative from the

⁶⁴ Interview with Helen in Greenock, 11 March 2013.

⁶⁵ Interview with Helen in Greenock, 11 March 2013.

⁶⁶ Interview with Margaret in Greenock, 26 July 2011.

⁶⁷ Colin Hay, 'Narrating the Crisis: The Discursive Construction of the Winter of Discontent', *Sociology*, vol. 30, no. 2, (May 1996), pp. 253-277.

⁶⁸ STUC 82nd Annual Report 1981, p. 519.

⁶⁹ STUC 82nd Annual Report 1981, p. 521.

Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen.⁷⁰

The representation of the women's behaviour as novel was similar to other disputes considered in this thesis. Like the Trico equal pay strike, the dispute was conceived as a turning point in these women's lives. At the time, Helen said: 'When we started at first...we took on something we had never experienced before. It was new to us but it was something that had to be done.'⁷¹ *The Greenock Telegraph* explained 'When the sit-in began in February the workers seemed unsure of how to conduct a dispute of such magnitude...But now the workers are old hands at running their sit-in'.⁷² The sewing-machinists' lack of formal experience was linked explicitly to gender - they were referred to as 'Petticoat Rebels' by the *Daily Record*.⁷³ However, the reason that the occupation developed in a spontaneous manner was not because of some essentialist female quality, but because they were ignored by their union and underestimated by the management who perceived them as an unorganised group of women with little understanding of trade union affairs and politics.

The NUTGW only chose to recognise the occupation - and offer the women strike pay - after 11 weeks. Representatives from the STUC Economic Committee attended a rally organised by the workforce in March, and described the attendance as 'disappointing'. They complained that their role in supporting the dispute was limited until the NUTGW confirmed it was official.⁷⁴ Helen voiced her own frustration with the union at the time and described a meeting with union officials in London as 'a day wasted going through the motions.'⁷⁵ They did not issue a call for support in their monthly journal, *The Garment Worker*, until June 1981. The journal described how Helen had given a 'short, but emotional speech' at the national conference that had taken place in Blackpool in April. A National Official explained: 'The Executive Board has been wracked with doubt about how best to proceed because the union has members in other plants' and 'we alone cannot find the answer to unemployment'.⁷⁶

The NUTGW withdrew their support for the occupation after four months. The Union's vice-president explained to the shop stewards, as well as representatives from the

⁷⁰ STUC 82nd Annual Report 1981, p. 521.

⁷¹ 'Now it's the great knit-in!', *Greenock Telegraph*, 20 April 1981.

⁷² 'Now it's the great knit-in!', *Greenock Telegraph*, 20 April 1981.

⁷³ Gordon Anderson, 'Tuck in for the Petticoat rebels', *Daily Record*, Saturday 7 February 1981, p.8; 'A Famous Victory', *Glasgow Herald*, 25 August 1981, p. 6.

⁷⁴ STUC Minutes of Economic Committee Meeting, Wednesday 18 March 1981.

⁷⁵ 'Irish plant doing our work say VF girls', *Greenock Telegraph*, (undated).

⁷⁶ TUC Library Collections, London Metropolitan University, HD 6661 C6.75: *The Garment Worker*, Official Journal of NUTGW, (June 1971), p. 5.

STUC ‘they had experienced problems because of their large membership working for the company in Ireland’.⁷⁷ They had decided to terminate support ‘some time ago’ but had stalled due to pressure from ‘Scottish interests within the union and from the STUC’.⁷⁸ Members of the STUC General Council expressed concern the announcement would weaken the negotiating position of the women, but would also leave the workforce vulnerable to ‘the interests of various political groupings including the Scottish Nationalist Party, Socialist Workers’ Party and the Workers Revolutionary Party.’⁷⁹ The STUC’s concern to represent the women and protect them from external political organisations was similar to the AUEW’s desire to limit the influence of the Working Women’s Charter upon the Trico women considered in chapter 3.

The NUTGW’s lack of enthusiasm for the women’s case was not surprising or new. Katrina Honeyman has shown how the NUTGW was conservative and dominated by men. Only one woman had served on the executive board between 1945 and 1970.⁸⁰ In 1981, although 91 per cent of the union’s membership was female, women accounted for only six of the union’s 42 full-time officials.⁸¹ Honeyman explained that the union had subsumed the interests of female workers within the industry as a whole after the clothing industry entered a state of decline after the Second World War. They were reluctant to demand changes in work practices and conditions, and low wages were considered necessary to sustaining the industry and preserving employment. The union had failed to support female garment workers who went on strike in a number of factories across Leeds after the introduction of an unequal payment by results scheme in 1970, without the consultation of the workers themselves.⁸²

On a more local level, the Greenock women’s district official, John Howard, had a poor reputation for supporting the interests of female workers. In 1977, he urged 400 women to return to work when they went on strike for equal pay at the Laird Portch clothing factory in East Kilbride.⁸³ After six weeks, the women’s union official intervened on the workers’ behalf and negotiated a deal with the company that guaranteed a job

⁷⁷ STUC, Report of Meeting with Representatives of the National Union of Tailor and Garment Workers regarding Lee Jeans Occupation, 21 July 1981.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Katrina Honeyman, *Well Suited: A History of the Leeds Clothing Industry, 1850-1990*, (Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 210.

⁸¹ *From Rags to Rags: Low Pay in the Clothing Industry*, (Low Pay Unit Pamphlet no. 20, 1982), p. 8.

⁸² For full details of the Leeds Clothing Workers’ Strike see: Honeyman, *Well Suited*, pp. 209-225..

⁸³ Frances Bowyer, ‘The Laird Portch Strike’, *Scottish Women’s Liberation Journal*, No. 2. (1977), pp. 13-16.

evaluation scheme within three months of the women's return to work.⁸⁴ The women's shop steward, Ellen Nicklin, described to me her disenchantment with the manner in which the NUTGW had conducted the dispute:

Our full-time official was the biggest problem because he was the connection between us and them. He was the one that we told everything to...which got back to management, although we didn't know that at the time, and he definitely conspired with management to make sure that we never got equal pay...John Howard, he was the go-between between us and the company and he compromised his own principles, because I am sure he had principles, for his own ends whatever they were...The rest of them (national union officials) were just faceless people.⁸⁵

The NUTGW's lack of support for the Greenock sewing-machinists added to their sense of abandonment, and of having to stand up for themselves. A worker called Carole-Anne explained her feelings towards the union at the time:

They think we're just working for pin-money. They don't realise we need jobs and if we finish here, where else are we going to go? It took them eleven weeks to make us official and now they're not supporting blacking either...But that's the way it's been all along. If we had waited on the union we'd have been out of here a long time ago.⁸⁶

Another worker named Ina Anderson doubted the commitment of the NUTGW to their cause:

We got some strike pay; however, it lasted too long for them and they started talking about how it was time for us to give up. There was a big official meeting where the official told us this and he nearly got lynched. We told him he wouldn't go into the shipyards and come out with this drivel.⁸⁷

Helen pointed out in an interview after the occupation:

If anything I could not trust my own union. I never knew what they were up to and I couldn't go to them for advice because I felt they were working against me always. I felt that they were just keeping tabs on us.⁸⁸

It was clear the workers felt their union leaders did not take them seriously because they were women. Retrospectively, Helen described her experience of being in the union before the occupation as one of malaise and a sense of not belonging:

⁸⁴ 'Strikers go back', *East Kilbride News*, Thursday 9 June 1977, p. 1.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*.

⁸⁶ Anne Kane, 'We Need Jobs' say Lee Jeans Women' in *Ms-Print*, Issue 7 (1981) p. 13.

⁸⁷ Ina Anderson interviewed in Shirley Henderson 'Fighting for our Jobs' in Shirley Henderson and Alison Mackay (eds), *Grit and Diamonds: Women in Scotland Making History, 1980-1990*, (Edinburgh: Stramullion Ltd., 1990), p. 2.

⁸⁸ Helen Monaghan interviewed in Lorentzen, "You Can't fight for jobs and just sit there": The Lee Jeans Sit-In' p. 59.

When I went to these big meetings where I felt everyone else knew more about the trade union movement than I would ever know, I worried that I would say things that didn't make sense and make a fool of myself. But I told myself I had to do it.⁸⁹

Whilst the Greenock women received little practical support from their own union, the financial and organisational backing they received from the wider labour movement was recognised as crucial to their success. Locally, the Govan and Lower Clyde Shipbuilders alone made donations of up to £1000 a week.⁹⁰ Two months into the occupation, the STUC General Council declared they would 'lend whatever support was appropriate' at a general council meeting.⁹¹ They saw their role as ensuring the dispute remained a major public issue to pressure VF into either continuing production in Greenock or selling the factory. They urged the Secretary of State for Scotland to intervene.⁹² The STUC Women's Advisory Committee sent a message of solidarity and later sent a delegation of women to visit the factory with a 'token hamper'.⁹³ The women received high-profile visits from Michael Foot, Vanessa Redgrave and Tony Benn, but it was local gestures, such as the provision of cheap meat and vegetables from a local butcher and green grocer, that highlight the community solidarity underlying this dispute.⁹⁴

Helen also stressed the importance of the financial support they received from other workers across Scotland, and suggested that: 'we couldn't have done it on our own. You know, they were working, and supplying us with money.'⁹⁵ In this sense, it was clear the culture of militancy that existed within Greenock, and the wider labour movement in the West of Scotland, ensured that the women received a greater amount of local support compared with the women in Fakenham. At the STUC Annual conference, a worker named Mary Bellingham was presented with a donation and said:

I must thank you all, and believe me, when we started this fight we did not know what we were doing, and we extended a plea to the trade union and labour movement for help. This help has been overwhelming and without your help we would never have taken the struggle so far. Believe me, we intend to fight on, because we do not believe first of all that we have the right to sell these jobs. These jobs were fought for and established for us.⁹⁶

⁸⁹ Helen Monaghan interviewed in Lorentzen, "You Can't fight for jobs and just sit there": The Lee Jeans Sit-In', p. 48.

⁹⁰ Campbell, 'The Lee Jeans Sit-In', p.8.

⁹¹ STUC, Agenda and General Secretary's Report, General Council Meeting, 1 April 1981.

⁹² STUC, Report of a Meeting Concerning the Future of Lee Jeans Dispute, 15 May 1981.

⁹³ STUC, Minutes of Meeting of Women's Advisory Committee, 23 March 1981; STUC, Minutes of Meeting of Women's Advisory Committee, 21 May 1981.

⁹⁴ 'Jeans Jobs Saved', *Greenock Telegraph*, 25 August 1981.

⁹⁵ Interview with Helen in Greenock, 11 March 2013.

⁹⁶ Ibid. p. 601.

Whilst the women at Trico received similar levels of local support, the large amount of public attention garnered by the Lee Jeans occupation meant that the dispute became something of a *cause celebre* within the Scottish labour movement, a point that has also been made by Gregor Gall.⁹⁷ It was compared to the UCS work-in and was incorporated into a broader narrative about workers' militancy on Clydeside. Writing in 1983, journalist and later SNP politician, George Kerevan claimed: 'From Lee Jeans to Timex, Scots workers continue to show a traditional syndicalist reflex for direct action, which is absent south of the border.'⁹⁸ However, the Lee Jeans women did not occupy their factory because they were Scottish, nor did they mention the UCS work-in as a motivating factor that directly inspired them to take such action. As discussed in the previous chapter, the UCS work-in influenced workers across Britain to engage in a series of factory occupations in response to redundancy throughout the 1970s. In the words of Ken Coates, occupation became seen as a 'natural' response for workers and an established trade union tactic.⁹⁹ The strategy of occupation had crept into the collective psyches of the Lee Jeans women, which meant they emphasised the spontaneous, instinctive nature of their decision to barricade themselves inside the factory. Unlike the Fakenham workers, they rejected the opportunity of self-management due to the funds required to match the scale of manufacturing and marketing.¹⁰⁰

The women also influenced the perception of female workers within the Scottish labour movement. The STUC General Secretary, James Milne, put forward a motion at the annual conference that would allow organisations with women members to nominate an additional female member to the two reserved seats for women on the STUC General Council. He said: 'we need women to represent women on the general council but also for the contribution that they can make. If there is any doubt in anyone's mind, just take account of what is happening at the Lee Jeans factory at the present moment'.¹⁰¹ Sammy Barr of the Glasgow District Trades Council compared the occupation to the Upper Clyde Shipbuilders (UCS) work-in of ten years previously, and went on to suggest:

Although the fight is to retain the factory and the jobs in Greenock, it is also a political fight. All too often the women in this movement through the government's policy are knocked from pillar to post. So this struggle is also

⁹⁷ Gregor Gall, 'Contemporary workplace occupations in Britain: Motivations, stimuli, dynamics and outcomes', *Employee Relations*, Vol. 33, no. 6, (2011), pp.607-623.

⁹⁸ George Kerevan, 'Labourism Revisited', *Chapman*, 35/36, (1983) quoted in Gall, *Red Scotland?*, p. 37.

⁹⁹ Ken Coates (ed.), *The New Worker Co-Operatives*, (Nottingham: Spokesman Books, 1976), p. 1.

¹⁰⁰ STUC Records, Report of a Meeting Concerning the Future of Lee Jeans Dispute, 15 May 1981.

¹⁰¹ STUC 82nd Annual Report 1981 p. 536.

about women's right to work, and they will give the leadership to the women throughout Britain which is so necessary in this battle.¹⁰²

The fact that the occupation was discussed in relation to widening opportunities to allow women to play a greater role within the STUC suggests that it provoked a greater awareness that women workers had their own distinct experiences and interests that were important to defend. In this sense, the dispute demonstrates the impact of female workers' militancy upon trade unions, as well as the potential success women could achieve when they were fully supported by the labour movement. However, it is important to remember that the women independently organised the occupation in the beginning, in spite of the difficult relationship they had with their own union. In this regard, the Lee Jeans occupation illustrates how female workers in the 1980s faced a contradiction between the labour movement's increasing vocal support and recognition of female workers' concerns on the one hand, and the persistence of male dominated union structures inhibiting women from actually organising and playing a more active role within their union, on the other.

Feminism and Gender Equality

The occupation also received support from the WLM. Sarah Browne explains the WLM developed in Scotland in a similar manner and campaigned for the same seven demands as the rest of Britain. Yet, she also suggests the movement in Scotland could be distinguished by its attempt to challenge the domination of southern based WLM groups. She argues the activism and interests of individual groups evolved in relation to specific local issues and many Scottish feminists felt they were 'operating in a culture perceived to be more patriarchal and socially conservative and broadly more hostile to feminist claims.'¹⁰³ Browne emphasises the influence of abortion and violence against women, in particular, as campaign issues that shaped the evolution of WLM groups in Scotland, which enabled feminists to extend their influence and build relationships with other groups and organisations.¹⁰⁴ She concludes that the movement transformed the way that Scottish society 'both discussed and understood the role of women.'¹⁰⁵

In 1981, Esther Breitenbach argued that Scottish women faced particular economic and social barriers that inhibited them from adopting a feminist consciousness. Breitenbach was active in the Dundee and Glasgow WLM groups and played a significant role in developing the *Scottish Women's Liberation Newsletter* in 1978, which became *MsPrint*

¹⁰² Ibid. p. 538.

¹⁰³ Sarah Browne, 'The Women's Liberation Movement in Scotland: c.1968 - c.1979', (Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Dundee, 2009), p. 296.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid. p. 303 and chapters 5 and 6.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid. p. 307.

the following year. She claimed that there was a greater feminist presence in the TUC and English trade unions than in the STUC and Scotland because the WLM was more advanced, in terms of having more members and well established networks that allowed it to exert a greater influence in English workplaces. However, she also suggested that Scottish women faced greater material obstacles ‘in the way of liberation’ than their English counterparts, claiming that high unemployment, bad housing, poor health, alcoholism, a high crime rate and fewer childcare and abortion facilities meant that Scottish working-class women faced a heavier burden of oppression than women south of the border.¹⁰⁶ Breitenbach claimed that greater resistance to reform of divorce laws and legal protection to battered women illustrated the prevalence of a more punitive and repressive culture towards women in Scotland. As a result, she suggested that whilst female workers became more active within the STUC women’s committee and also engaged in individual examples of workplace militancy, they were slower to articulate their concerns as feminist demands for greater gender equality across society.¹⁰⁷

In spite of the lesser presence of feminism in the Scottish labour movement, women’s liberation groups from Glasgow attempted to support the women at Lee Jeans in a similar way that local groups in Brentford, Norwich and Cambridge had supported the workers at Trico and Sexton’s. They visited the women in the factory, raised money and appealed for further support in a special edition of *MsPrint*, which included a report on the occupation.¹⁰⁸ The Scottish Working Women’s Alliance joined the Lee Jeans women on their march between Greenock and Edinburgh in July.¹⁰⁹ This ‘triple alliance’ of the Labour Party Women’s Committee, STUC WAC and Scottish Co-operative Women’s Guild offered support to the occupation:

...to combat the very real damage that this Tory Government is doing to ordinary working women and their families in Scotland... We will challenge the Tory philosophy that a woman’s place is in the home... The alliance will advocate that woman will have a real choice in the way they lead their lives.’¹¹⁰

Scottish feminists writing for *MsPrint* claimed the Lee Jeans women’s redundancy represented an attack on female workers by multinational companies, reporting that women were more vulnerable because they were perceived to be weaker and more disposable than

¹⁰⁶ Breitenbach, *A Comparative Study*, p. 80.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

¹⁰⁸ Anne Kane, ‘“We Need Jobs” say Lee Jeans Women’ in *MS-Print: A Scottish Feminist Publication, Issue 7* (1981) p. 13.

¹⁰⁹ STUC Minutes of Meeting of Women’s Advisory Committee, 18 June 1981.

¹¹⁰ STUC Archive, Labour Party Scottish Council, Press Release, 15 June 1981.

their male counterparts.¹¹¹ They also criticised the NUTGW for failing to support the women and hailed the workers' resilience for highlighting the importance of women's right to work. An interview with a worker named Senga showed how the workers felt their militant capacity had been underestimated due to sexual difference:

If we had been men they would have at least treated us seriously. They think that men are really firm and know their own minds. As well as that, employers are more frightened of stopping men's jobs...but I don't agree that women should go back to the home. What if you're not married or you need the money? Everyone should have the right to work. Both partners in a marriage should work, if men have the right to work then why don't women?'¹¹²

The article concluded that the occupation demonstrated the need for the WLM to expand its area of influence in Scotland and forge greater links with the labour movement to build on the relationships that had been established during the National Abortion Campaign.¹¹³ *MsPrint* suggested that Scottish feminists needed to reach out and influence the struggles of women by educating workers about their rights and industrial relations, and encourage them to fight sexism within trade unions. In this sense, the Lee Jeans occupation was conceptualised as a 'women's fight' by the feminist groups that supported them, and an opportunity to raise the consciousness of female trade unionists in Scotland.

The Lee Jeans occupation provides further evidence of WLM groups responding to working-class women's activism and connecting it to broader arguments about female workers facing specific constraints in the workplace. Yet the influence of this engagement upon the self-understanding of the Lee Jeans workers is less clear. As the quote above shows, sexual difference was an important aspect of workers' self-understanding and collective mobilisation. The manner in which the women organised the occupation centred on domesticity. They organised a disciplined rota that involved cleaning, cooking and the organisation of finances during the day. Alcohol was prohibited and security checks were enforced to ensure nobody was stealing. The *Greenock Telegraph* explained: 'the sit-in has given many of the teenage workers the chance to learn the basics of home craft...Many have learned to knit. They have also been taught to cook...for their hungry 'family' at the factory.'¹¹⁴ Helen explained at the time: 'Yes the wee ones are learning how to cook...All the young ones get a turn. They're a bit apprehensive at first but they're soon able to

¹¹¹ Anne Kane, 'We Need Jobs', p. 13.

¹¹² *Ibid*, p. 14.

¹¹³ The NAC received widespread support from the STUC and local trades councils. Sarah Browne describes it as the main issue to highlight the mutual interests of feminists and trade unionists in Scotland during the 1970s. Browne, 'The Women's Liberation Movement in Scotland', pp. 215-230.

¹¹⁴ 'Now it's the great knit-in!', *Greenock Telegraph*, 20 April 1981.

manage'.¹¹⁵ The paper went on to report 'the youngsters also have to take their turn at spud-bashing and washing the dishes.'¹¹⁶ This unique form of organisation also contributed to the sympathetic public perception of the workers. For example, *The Herald*, described them as:

A peaceful army of occupation setting productivity records with their knitting needles and calmly organising cooking rotas, which won them both public affection and admiration. Above all they have attracted attention for an exercise that was quite obviously aimed first and last at saving jobs and in which not the slightest interest was shown in the tempting offers of redundancy money. For a workforce that includes so many female breadwinners that was no small accomplishment and their sense of priorities leaves many of their trade union colleagues something to ponder over in the months ahead.¹¹⁷

The gendered nature of such reporting shows that women's activism remained publically conceptualised as less politicised and threatening than the militancy of their male counterparts.

Looking back on the strike, Helen suggested the women's unique form of organisation was crucial to the occupation's success:

The only thing that I ever said about us being women and different ... was, I think it's a bit easier for women because, especially, what we did, because, it was like running your house, that's exactly what it was like. It was just like running your house, you had to cook, you had to make the money go round, and you had to discipline them. So, that's what it was, and maybe men couldn't do that, you know what I mean? And there was a very strict rule of no alcohol, and eh, different things like that.¹¹⁸

The women represented and organised themselves in a way that drew upon their daily experience, which in this case involved knitting and cooking. Retrospectively, Helen explained her motivations and behaviour based on what she perceived to be an inherently 'female' way of being – and drew upon characteristics she associated as female – domestic skills, organisation and caring for other people to explain why the occupation was successful.

Similarly to the women interviewed in the other case studies, my respondents did not interpret their workplace militancy as 'feminist'. Margaret explained:

We didn't really see things as women's rights and stuff like that. I don't really feel like that was a big thing for us, I mean okay then it was mostly

¹¹⁵ Ibid..

¹¹⁶ Ibid. .

¹¹⁷ Editorial Comment, 'A Famous Victory', *Glasgow Herald*. August 25 1981, p. 6.

¹¹⁸ Interview with Helen in Greenock, 11 March 2013.

women who fought for their jobs, but I don't really feel it was a women's issue... I think the point was because they were management we weren't to be scared of them. I think that I was mostly battling with the management; you know I didn't think that they were fair with us so I was mostly against the management, rather than it being a woman's issue. You know even though the factory was mostly women, we didn't go out at the weekend and go anti-men you know? - we tried to get one, go to a disco and get a boyfriend, so that wouldn't really matter to us.¹¹⁹

Margaret's understanding of the WLM, and feminism, was influenced by negative portrayals of the movement in the media at the time, which have continued to characterise dominant representations in a collective memory of 'man-hating bra-burners'.¹²⁰ Helen also distanced herself and the occupation from feminist activism. She said: 'I think there were some feminists who wrote their papers, and wanted it to be seen as 'look at the women'... Well, I don't know, I didnae know any of them!'¹²¹ The WLM was viewed as something outside of their struggle and distant from their community. Helen recalled a disagreement she had with another woman at an STUC women's day school for shop stewards:

When I was a shop steward, I did courses because I'd think to myself, there's nothing worse than going into a manager's office with an argument about something and you don't know what you're talking about. And I tried my best to do these courses so I would know exactly what I was doing. And I mind doing a course, and the tutor was definitely a feminist and she kept saying: 'aye but do you no think that the women should do this, and the women should do that?' and one of the times she said something about...there shouldnae be any discrimination in jobs, and I says: 'well I'm sorry but there are certain jobs that I couldnae do.' I mean let's face it, I couldnae carry a bag of coal. Do you know what I mean? And I couldnae...you know, I wasnae lying about it! So I think there's always a place for the two, (men and women) and you work together, you know?¹²²

Although neither of my respondents adopted a feminist identity, neither at the time nor since, they both they believed their action was distinguished by the fact they were women. Helen emphasised the importance of what she perceived as particular female qualities to the workers' strategy to maintain the occupation. Although the occupation did not lead to a transition in the way that they thought about gender relations more broadly – in terms of attitudes towards the division of domestic labour for example - both women embraced feminist values in terms of emphasising the importance of assuming their own voice and standing up for themselves as women.

¹¹⁹ Interview with Margaret in Greenock, 26 July 2011.

¹²⁰ Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, p. 98.

¹²¹ Interview with Helen in Greenock, 11 March 2013.

¹²² Ibid.

Looking back on the impact of the occupation upon the rest of her life, Margaret saw it as an important experience: ‘I think I grew up during the sit-in... I think I realised if you’ve got something to say then say it because you think all these people at the top have all the answers well they don’t’.¹²³ After the occupation was over, she did not want to stay in the factory and eventually opened her own laundrette business. She described how she wanted to be free of ‘having a manager tell her what to do’ and take control of her own life. In this sense, the occupation did not lead her to engage with any formal political activities or ideologies but taught her to stand up for her rights and interests as an individual.

For Helen, who was thirty years older, she carried on working for the new company until 1986 when the factory eventually closed. She went on to work as a ‘home-help’, reflecting a similar trajectory to the other women from Trico and Fakenham, who also lost their jobs in manufacturing in the period following the disputes they were involved in. Reflecting on the overall impact of the occupation upon her life, Helen pointed out that she was offered the opportunity to play a more significant role within the STUC and was also invited to speak to workers in various factories in Sweden and the USA. However, she declined because:

There were a lot of people coming doon and saying to me, do you want to go to college or something like that - it’s for people going into politics, and I said no.... I’m fighting to keep the jobs in this town, in this factory and if I can do that, and it’s over, I’ll be happy to get back to my life. And I was happy just to go back... I was just happy to get back to my own life. You know, just my wee, simple life.¹²⁴

The fact the occupation did not radicalise Helen’s attitude towards gender roles, nor inspire her to become more involved within the labour movement did not mean that she did not have a political identity. Helen’s story showed that her subjectivity was shaped by everyday experiences and struggles that inhibited her from earning a living and getting on with her life; struggles often overlooked and not fully considered in dominant narratives where female workers’ militancy has been either dismissed as localised or irrational on the left, or demonised as greedy and opportunistic on the right. As a result, it is easy for an MSP today to suggest that these women ‘were not political’, but this is also problematic because it fails to recognise the political nature of the everyday, subjective concerns of working-class women like Helen and Margaret, and further excludes them from history of the labour movement.

¹²³ Interview with Margaret in Greenock, 26 July 2011.

¹²⁴ Interview with Helen in Greenock, 11 March 2013.

Conclusion

The disputes at Fakenham and Greenock demonstrate the importance of paid work to working-class women's lives in Britain during the 1970s. Although each occupation emerged in different local and political contexts, indicating the diversity of working-class women's experience, the women involved also faced comparable economic pressures and responded to them in a similar manner. Unemployment was regarded as completely unacceptable by these women; an attack on their right to work that completely disregarded the economic, social and intrinsic value of their labour. By occupying their factories, these women refused to be 'treated like a number' and seized greater control of their own lives. In both cases, they felt disregarded by their unions and developed their own tactics and methods of resistance, organising outside of the formal institutions of the labour movement, and were able to achieve short term success.

However, in both cases there was a sense that these victories were only temporary, and that the disputes' impact on the protagonists' political trajectories was limited. Their success was not greeted with the same degree of optimism surrounding the Dagenham sewing-machinists in 1968, especially in Greenock 13 years later. This was because although these women had saved their jobs, they had not improved their material conditions at work, or gained any further recognition of the value of their labour. As a result, the women involved remembered these disputes more for their personal impact than in relation to a significant turning point within their experiences of work or trade unionism. They connected their motivations and experiences to individual characteristics of standing up for themselves and assuming their own voice.

Chapter 6: The Ford Sewing-Machinists' Strike, Dagenham, 1984-1985

This final chapter returns to Ford, Dagenham to analyse the second strike that was organised by female sewing-machinists for skill recognition in the winter of 1984-1985. Chapter 2 illustrated the tensions between public representations of the 1968 Ford sewing-machinists as a 'historic' victory for equal pay, and the personal memory of the individual actors. Whilst the strike was optimistically hailed as a turning point symbolising a new era of gender equality, the sewing-machinists were dissatisfied because the skilled nature of their work was not recognised. The women I interviewed remembered the strike as a defeat and had not accepted the wider impact of the dispute upon equal pay legislation until the feature film *Made in Dagenham* was made in 2010. This was because the company and unions involved continued to rely upon legal and managerial definitions of the sewing-machinists' work; they preserved the gendered hierarchy of labour in the factory by offering the sewing-machinists equal pay on a formal basis, instead of recognising their specific skills as women. The failure of employers and trade unions to recognise the subjective value of paid work to women persistently characterised the experiences and memories of the workers involved in the case studies that followed. For the women at Ford, the underlying grading grievance and the sense of injustice that led to the 1968 dispute continued to shape their experiences of work and trade unionism for the next 17 years.

This dispute marks an appropriate place to begin to draw some broader conclusions about women's experiences of workplace activism between 1968 and 1985. The Ford sewing-machinists' eventual success in winning their grading intimates a transition had occurred in the way women's work was valued in the intervening 17 years between the strikes – at least within the Ford factory. Drawing upon contemporary representations of the dispute and interviews with women involved, this final chapter considers whether the women themselves believed the strike represented a change in attitudes towards female workers. It considers women's explanations of their motivations for going on strike in relation to their broader experiences of work and trade unionism, as well as their personal understandings of feminism. It analyses the impact of the dispute on my interviewees' political subjectivity and highlights the continuing tension between women representing themselves as agents of change in control of their own lives, whilst simultaneously accounting for ideological and material constraints on their everyday experiences.

Context

As was shown in Chapter 2, the Ford sewing-machinists were not happy with the equal pay resolution that brought an end to their strike in 1968. Although the dispute was a catalyst leading directly to the passage of the Equal Pay Act in 1970, the sewing-machinists continued to earn 92 per cent of the unskilled male B grade until the act was implemented in 1975. More importantly, the women were dissatisfied because they did not have the skilled nature of their work recognised. The sewing-machinists continued to demand skill recognition and had claims to be re-graded rejected by the Ford National Joint Negotiating Committee in 1970, 1974, 1981, 1982 and 1983.¹

The strike in 1984 was provoked by legislative change. In 1983, the European Court of Justice pressured the British government to add an Equal Value amendment to the Equal Pay Act. This entitled women to equal pay where they performed 'like work', 'work rated as equivalent' and where work was considered to be of 'equal value' to that of male co-workers in the same employment. The Ford sewing-machinists responded to this legal change in April 1984 by taking their claim to an industrial tribunal. With support from the TGWU, they argued their jobs were of equal value to Grade C manual jobs performed by Eastman Cutters and paint spray operators.²

The tribunal was organised in a manner where the women had to prove the original job evaluation scheme in 1967 had discriminated against them on the basis of sex. The male assessors from the consultancy firm Urwick Orr and Partners had ranked the women's hand and eye coordination and manual dexterity as exceptional, yet rated them as 39th of 56 jobs in the factory.³ In spite of this, the women were unable to provide concrete evidence that showed sex discrimination was the reason for this anomaly and the tribunal ruled in favour of the company. The TGWU appealed against the judgement by arguing the burden lay with Ford to prove they did not discriminate.⁴

The sewing-machinists themselves were no longer willing to wait and voted to go strike on 21 November 1984. They felt they had been lied to and treated with a lack of respect by the company. They formed a strike committee and issued the following statement:

¹ 'Striking machinists revive spirit of 1968', *The Guardian*, 7 December 1984, p. 6.

² TUC, *The Story of the Ford Sewing-machinists*, (2006), <<http://www.unionhistory.info/equalpay/display.php?irn=651>>, [accessed 1 July 2015].

³ MRC, MSS.126/TG/193/1/64, 'Taking equal pay to top', T&G Record, November 1984, p.3.

⁴ *Ibid.*

For 16 years we sewing-machinists have sought recognition for our skills. We are skilled and experienced sewing-machinists – that is what the advert said when we came here. Everybody knows the skill involved in sewing the seat covers and upholstery – it would take an unskilled worker years of training to reach the standard of skill we have. Two years ago the company pledged that our skill would be recognised. The plant manager said this is a promise that has been made and it will be fulfilled. Like lambs we believed it. Now they have gone back on their promise and they have refused us. They stuck two fingers at us. We followed all the procedures – we waited 16 years. But enough is enough.⁵

Although the 1984 strike was over the same issue of skill recognition that concerned the sewing-machinists in 1968, it is important to recognise some differences between the two strikes. Firstly, the Equal Pay Act had been passed in 1970 and there was no space for confusing the women's demands, as occurred in 1968. Secondly, the shop stewards Rose Boland and Lil O'Callaghan who led the 1968 strike were no longer alive, and had been replaced by a new group of shop stewards, who according to my interviewee Dora had less experience and confidence. Finally, the NUVB, who were the main union involved in the 1968 dispute were incorporated into the TGWU in 1972. The main continuity between the two strikes was that they were both instigated by trade unionists at a grassroots level, and the influence of Bernard Passingham, who was involved in the 1968 dispute as the NUVB Deputy Convenor for the River Plant and by 1984 had taken over as the plant convenor.

Passingham helped instigate the 1984 dispute by refusing to sign the company's annual wage agreement in protest against the industrial tribunal's failure to re-grade the women. This delayed annual pay increases of 7 per cent for 40,000 Ford workers one month before Christmas and placed greater pressure on the company and union officials involved to negotiate a resolution to the strike.⁶ The women organised a 24-hour picket of the factory and once again brought Ford's production to a halt.⁷ By the beginning of December, the company were reported to have laid off 10,000 production workers in factories in Dagenham, Merseyside and Southampton. Ford attempted to resolve the situation by suggesting 'independent' assessors examine the sewing-machinists' claim. But the sewing-machinists were no longer willing to take the company's offers seriously and demanded a comparative job review from ACAS instead.⁸

After 9 weeks, the strike was brought to an end when Ford agreed for ACAS to independently reassess the women's grade. At Dagenham, 150 women voted overwhelmingly to end the strike. At Halewood, 67 to 34 workers voted in favour of

⁵ MRC, MSS.126/TG/193/1/64, 'Ford Sewing-machinists Walk Out', T&G Record, December 1984.

⁶ 'Striking women put Ford pay deal at risk' *The Guardian*, 22 November 1984, p. 4.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ 'Ford strike leads to more lay-offs, *The Guardian*, 6 December 1984, p. 3.

returning to work. Some feared history would repeat itself; the Merseyside shop steward Kathy McGovern said: ‘You can’t help but have a lot of mistrust about arbitration after 16 years. A lot of women are not happy about it. A lot of them feel we have sacrificed six weeks’ pay.’⁹ However, the ACAS enquiry re-visited and re-graded the key characteristics from the original job evaluation scheme carried out in 1967. After observing ‘benchmark jobs’ across Ford’s UK plants, the panel changed the original assessments on a number of ratings including hand-eye coordination, visualisation of shapes and spatial relations’.¹⁰ On the 26 April 1985, the Ford sewing-machinists were recognised as skilled workers after 17 years of struggle. The company defended themselves in light of the independent panel’s conclusions by arguing that many of the original benchmark jobs had disappeared after 1967. Conversely, Mick Murphy, the TGWU national officer acknowledged ‘the original decision not to re-grade the women as skilled workers amounted to discrimination’. He felt the 1984 strike represented progress and predicted it would have an impact throughout British industry and at Ford plants across Europe.¹¹

It is important to recognise the workforce included a new generation of female workers who had not been involved in the original dispute, yet who held the same grievance as those who went on strike in 1968. The women I interviewed in chapter 2 had not been involved in the 1984 dispute. Vera and Eileen were in the process of retiring and Sheila had moved to a different part of the factory. Gwen still worked in the factory during the 1984 strike but had not played an active role and had little to say about it. In my second interview, she described it as their own ‘private strike’ and suggested it did not have the same impact upon other women outside of the factory.¹² In 2015, I interviewed Pam and Dora, who had both played an active role in organising the strike in 1984. Dora was a shop-steward and Pam stood on the picket line every night for seven weeks during the strike.

Both of my interviewees thought their victory was significant. Pam explained ‘you got your grading and you got what you were entitled to, which was all you wanted really. To be recognised that you had a skill.’¹³ Similarly, Dora remembered ‘In actual fact we nearly went to D grade. We weren’t far off D grade then but you can’t do that. We were skilled and that’s what we wanted.’¹⁴ Whilst they clearly thought it was significant to have

⁹ ‘Ford machinists end pay strike’, *The Guardian*, 29 December 1984, p. 1.

¹⁰ TUC, ‘A Woman’s Worth: The Story of the Ford Sewing-machinists’, (2006), <<http://www.unionhistory.info/equalpay/display.php?irn=651>>, [accessed 1 July 2015].

¹¹ ‘Seamstresses at Ford win skilled workers’ status’, *The Guardian*, 26 April 1985, p. 3.

¹² Interview with Gwen and Eileen, August 2015.

¹³ Interview with Pam in Romford, September 2015.

¹⁴ Interview with Dora in Dagenham, August 2015.

their ability finally recognised, my interviewees also had doubts about the wider impact of the dispute for two reasons. First, the women were moved from the River Plant to the Paint Trim and Assembly (PTA) plant shortly after the strike, which eventually closed in 1992. The majority of both male and female workers at Ford were made redundant from the late 1980s onwards.¹⁵ Pam explained: ‘it went along for a while okay. But then I think they might of started to think about shutting the place down’.¹⁶ The second reason for their doubts about the dispute’s long term impact was they seemed exasperated at how it had only been recognised more recently, rather than at the time. Dora said:

The Wainwright Trust (an equal opportunities charity) called us up to em...they had a thing up there...like for what we did. That was the first time that we were really recognised for doing anything. And you know, they wait until I’m 77, and then they want to, oh well I was about 70 then and they want to do all these things...I mean I never thought about it, we never went on strike to get publicity...No one thought anything about it at all really. And I didn’t. I certainly didn’t. It was just that what you’ve got to do you’ve got to do you know? You’ve got to stand up for women. But I mean it was lots of different things...¹⁷

Dora felt the publicity from the *Made in Dagenham* film and musical had changed the way their strike was remembered. She pointed out ‘it’s because of *Made in Dagenham* because that was only the 1968 strike. They didn’t mention the 84...’¹⁸ Dora thought the 1968 strike had been recognised ahead of the 1984 dispute because the issue of equal pay ‘involves all women’.¹⁹ She was also keen to stress that for the sewing-machinists in 1968, equal pay ‘wasn’t what they wanted’ but it was ‘better than nothing’.²⁰ She felt the ‘84 strike had been ignored because ‘when you come to recognition of skill it don’t come to so many women, does it?’²¹ She said ‘no one really knows about the ‘84 strike’ and explained she often felt angry after attending events to commemorate the disputes where she was always asked ‘what happened in 84?’...they didn’t even know. That’s not good. I mean it’s still history for women.’²² Dora felt the significance of the sewing-machinists’ collective action had not been properly recognised at the time; ‘they’ had waited nearly 20 years before taking an interest in her fight for better conditions for female workers. When the disputes had been remembered publically, it was in a manner that focused on the apparently more universal issue of equal pay. Whilst Dora appeared to accept this

¹⁵ Ford eventually stopped production in Dagenham in 2002 and has since established new plants in Brazil, Venezuela and India. See ‘When the wheels came off the dream’, *The Guardian*, 25 February 2009.

¹⁶ Interview with Pam in Romford, September 2015.

¹⁷ Interview with Dora in Dagenham, August 2015.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

rationale, she also felt her more personal fight to have her ability recognised as a sewing-machinist possessed historical meaning for other female workers. It was this personal sense of injustice – of not being treated with respect – that was overshadowed by more abstract discussions about equal pay in the immediate aftermath of the 1968 dispute, which continued to haunt the manner in which the strikes had been remembered in the present.

Dora explained:

I got a phone call from Paul O'Grady to go on there (television programme). But to me - I don't mind Paul O'Grady, don't get me wrong - but he's a comedian. And that's not funny. That's the story and it's not funny is it? I mean you can laugh about different things of it but I thought no, he's gonna take the P.²³

My interview respondents felt their memory of the strike did not fit with the way it was being publically remembered. As Dora pointed out, it was about standing up for women, but it was 'lots of different things as well'.²⁴ It was not a joke.

The rest of this chapter considers these broader tensions, between individual and public memory, and the memory of the 1968 strike as a victory for equal pay and the relative absence of the 1984 strike from public memory. These tensions are illustrated in Pam and Dora's narratives. By offering an original account of the dispute from the perspective of women involved, the rest of this chapter develops a better understanding of the impact of the 1968 strike within the Ford factory. Following chapter 2, it highlights the problems with triumphant narratives that represent the 1968 strike as a moment of change. Instead, it illustrates the continued sense of injustice and conflict that characterised the sewing-machinists' experiences of work and trade unionism at Ford. It aims to move beyond thinking about these strikes as events signifying women's 'arrival' within trade unions and develop a better understanding of what the dispute meant for the women involved.

Telling this story at the end of the period considered in this thesis sheds light on key aspects of women's workplace militancy highlighted in the previous case studies. Industrial disputes illustrate how women sought to improve their conditions and challenge inequalities they faced in the workplace. But we should not necessarily think of these moments as evidence of a movement towards more equal, or harmonious gender relations in British workplaces. Paying attention to women's voices and experiences suggests there was a persistence of conflict, which is reflected in the continuation of the sexual division of labour and the devaluation of work predominantly performed by women in the present.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

Experiences of Work

In 1984, there was no confusion over the issue of equal pay; the sewing-machinists' motivations for going on strike were conceptualised and articulated as demands for skill recognition by the workers. Like the Greenock sewing-machinists, the women emphasised the dispute was over a 'moral' principle, rather than 'economic' gain. A shop steward called Lil Thompson told *The Guardian* 'the strike is not about the £6.50 extra, but recognising women's skills'. She said: 'The reason we are in this grade is simple, it's because we are women.'²⁵ A worker named Joan explained: 'this dispute goes back a long time. We've waited for years for recognition that we are skilled workers. The girls just aren't going to put up with it any more. It's not the money that's important – it's the principle'.²⁶ Another worker told *The Guardian* it would take five years to become a skilled machinist: 'once you cross the Ford threshold you're deemed unskilled. For six months I was transferred to spot welding and did the job, but a spot welder couldn't do my job and yet he's grade C, and I'm grade B.'²⁷ A shop steward named Doreen Cook pointed out:

No, it's exactly the same as in '68 when we were 85% of the male pay and it got twisted to equal pay. Equal pay was fine for the skilled grade or C grade but we would have preferred the skilled grade because equal pay would have followed anyway. It's the principle of the thing.²⁸

From a feminist perspective, an article in *Spare Rib* explained: 'The Ford's strike clearly shows the undervaluing of women's role in industry...this results from the general belief that difficult, fiddly and repetitive work, such as sewing, is the 'natural' ability of women and as such requires little or no training.'²⁹

The sewing-machinists also had to contend with patronising attitudes from the Ford management and local press. The sewing-machinists' foreman said their work could be performed by a 'banana'.³⁰ The *Barking and Dagenham Post* also appeared sceptical about the value of the women's work. Contrary to the sewing-machinists' explanation of their incentives, they described the dispute as a 'pay row' and suggested the women wanted their '£128 weekly wage brought in line with higher skilled workers'.³¹ Such reporting diverted attention from the grading issue and sought to undermine the legitimacy of the

²⁵ 'Striking machinists revive spirit of 1968', *The Guardian*, 7 December 1984, p. 6.

²⁶ Shut Down at Ford As Women Walk Out, *Barking and Dagenham Post*, November 21 1984

²⁷ 'Striking machinists revive spirit of 1968', *The Guardian*, 7 December 1984, p. 6.

²⁸ 'It's a man's world at Ford's', *Spare Rib*, Issue 115, p. 17.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ MRC, MSS.126/TG/193/1/65, 'Ford women crash the sex barrier', T&G Record, May 1985.

³¹ Ford Women: The Strike goes on', *Barking and Dagenham Post*, 28 November 1984

women's demand by focusing on the issue of higher pay. It was suggested the women were in a lower grade because 'men's work is heavier and requires more expertise.'³² The local newspaper also emphasised the strike had blocked a 9 per cent pay rise for 40,500 workers and laid off 8000 men.³³

In an oral history interview conducted by the TUC in 2006, Dora explained how unfair it felt being paid less than men whose work the women perceived to be less skilled.

The cutters used to cut by hand, like with scissors and all that and then they brought the machine in and they, they just stood there – the machine cut it! ...they still had women sitting on a machine and doing her work, but they fetched a machine in just to cut and they were C grade, and they'd just stand there watching a thing go round.'³⁴

This was very similar to the way Sally described the situation at Trico in chapter 4, and shows how women drew upon their personal experience and sense of injustice of watching men *not* working and being paid higher wages, whilst they were denied such personal freedom for themselves. In my interview, Dora spoke about how the sewing-machinists' B Grade was used to legitimise management decisions to exploit the women in ways that would not have occurred had they been men. She said: 'what happens when you're B grade, they use you anywhere, I mean when we had no work we were washing walls and all that down'.³⁵ The women were asked to perform tasks they felt overqualified for, which compounded the sense they were at the bottom of a gendered hierarchy. A worker named Maureen told a similar story in the 2006 TUC interview when she spoke about the injustice of women being able to perform men's work, but men being unable to perform women's work. She said:

If our work built up and they didn't need so many car seats, they would say to some of the girls, "Oh, we'd like you to go over to the door panels, because they're a bit short-staffed," and the girls would go over there and get stuck in and do the door panels, or in the tank shop; they would find you work over there, but when we were very busy and there was quite a few spare machines, they could never say to the men, "Would you come over and do a bit of machining?", because, you know, the men would never have a clue how to even thread a needle, I shouldn't think, rather than do machining, and in the end the women started talking amongst their selves and saying, "Well, this is not on; we can sort of turn our hands to anything but the men

³² Ford Women: The Strike goes on', *Barking and Dagenham Post*, 28 November 1984

³³ 'Ford's pay rise halted', *Barking and Dagenham Post*, 5 December 1984; 'Ford Women Say No', *Barking and Dagenham Post*, 19 December 1984.

³⁴ Interview with Dora Challingsworth, Pamela Brown, Maureen Jackson and Geraldine for film produced by Sarah Boston for TUC in 2006. Film available at TUC Archives, London Metropolitan University. Full transcript of interview was unavailable.

³⁵ Interview with Dora in Dagenham, August 2015.

can't," which is, which seemed very unfair to us. So I think that was the start of us digging our heels in.³⁶

A worker named Geraldine reflected 'I think we was like a fraction away from getting D Grade, but I think if they'd have given us D grade then it would have proved that they'd have been wrong all them years ago. Women, everything you wanted you really had to fight for.'³⁷ At the surface, the strike was about skill recognition. But the women's testimony shows the strike was perceived and understood as challenging an unequal hierarchy in the factory between men and women. In my own oral history interviews, women located these moments in their life stories in broader narratives about asserting their independence and taking control over their own lives in the face of power relations which disadvantaged them.

Dora was born in 1938. She grew up in Custom House in East London. She moved to Dagenham with her family when she was 13 years old, but worked in a range of jobs in London's East End after leaving school at the age of 15. She got married when she was 19 and moved to nearby Ilford with her husband who was a docker. Her father was a baker and she told me: 'my mum didn't work. I mean she did get evening work once, but when it came to, you know, like my dad giving her the money he cut her down what she earned and he said "well you want to go out to work so you can"...but my dad worked hard.'³⁸ Dora's father appeared not to approve of her mother working, but it was also clear that Dora did not particularly want to talk about this in the interview and quickly stressed her father's hard-working nature instead.

By contrast to Dora's memory of her mother, paid work was central to her own life-story. At the beginning of the interview, I asked if she enjoyed growing up in Dagenham, and similarly to Peggy in the Trico strike, she replied by listing various jobs she had worked in:

I'd family down in Newham but we moved out to Dagenham and I didn't mind it but I didn't like it straight away, but I got used to it. I mean I worked in outdoor machining, I used to do upholstery, I've even made bon-bons, you know what you put out for Christmas? So I've always worked. But yeah I liked it in Fords, I enjoyed what I did and I think Fords were pretty fair to be honest. I mean people say 'oh the management' but it wasn't the management we were fighting half the time. It was the union. But yeah I liked it in Dagenham. So I lived in three different houses in Dagenham...³⁹

³⁶ Interview with Dora, Pamela, Maureen and Geraldine for TUC, 2006.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Interview with Dora in Dagenham, August 2015.

³⁹ Ibid.

From the beginning of the interview, it appeared that Dora had a clear idea of what she wanted to tell me. She was less interested in speaking about her family and what it was like growing up in Dagenham, and instead wanted to speak about her experiences of work and trade unionism, which she obviously thought were important to contextualising her involvement in the strike.

Pam was born in Dagenham in 1954. Her mother did 'indoor ironing' and her father worked in the PTA at Ford and later became a janitor. Like the women interviewed in chapter 2, she emphasised how much she enjoyed growing up in Dagenham and reflected on the sense of decline since the closure of the Ford factory. Talking about growing up there, she said:

I loved it...everybody knew everyone up the road. You know you could go into each other's houses, have a cup of tea and everything. But times have changed now. And I've lived here (Romford) 28 years and I know one couple of up there and that's about it really. But living in Dagenham, because you've got Fords as well and everybody worked there so you knew everybody.⁴⁰

Pam was 16 years old when she left school and started work. She explained 'I hated school... It just weren't me. I just liked doing things with my hands like sewing...we had sewing classes in school.' She remembered how she enjoyed making a trouser-suit in her sewing classes, which she linked to her decision to work as a sewing-machinist. Although Pam liked sewing, her early experiences of work were characterised by 'horrendous' pay and bronchitis.

I went into machining, I started making nurses' uniforms at Goodmayes. No (I did not enjoy it). The money was horrendous, it was so...well, you didn't get a lot of money. I can't remember how much it was but it weren't a lot and then I decided I don't want to do that and so I went down the road for another job...and so I left and then I went into Fergusons, to make televisions and radiograms, that was in Hainault, and then I done that for four years...But I had to leave because I got bronchitis because of the flax off all the soldering and wiring. Yeah, and I couldn't breathe and I was on a pump...I was just so ill that I thought 'I can't work here no more.'⁴¹

Pam moved to Ford in 1975 when she was 21 years old. Like the women interviewed in Chapter 2, working at Ford appealed to her because of the high wages and sense of stability it offered by comparison to other machining and manufacturing jobs. She said

Oh it was much better rewards. I really can't remember how much it was... But it was the best pay around really... And you knew that it was a factory that was going to be there for a while and so if you stayed there longer you would get your pension

⁴⁰ Interview with Pam in Romford, September 2015.

⁴¹ Ibid.

and things like that. It had more going for it really. It wasn't just pay, but it was the machining itself and the sense of security.⁴²

Pam actively chose to work at Ford because she thought it would give her more control over her life. After the strike, she became a supervisor and explained that she wanted to 'better herself'.⁴³ It was clear that paid work was important to her self-understanding and was not just a temporary stage of her life. Dora, too, retrospectively connected the sewing-machinists' motivations for going on strike to a concern to have the personal and material significance of paid work for women recognised. Dora started working at Fords in 1971 when she was 34 years old. Ford was her first 'proper job' after she had spent the previous eight years producing curtains at home whilst she looked after her three children. She chose to work at Ford 'because it was better money'.⁴⁴ She went on to speak about the importance of women's wages at the time of the strike and having to contend with the persistent notion that women worked for pin-money.

It was about time women stood up for themselves and like as I'd said the men used to say 'pin-money' but there was a lot of women in there that were widowed, divorced, had children - I mean they didn't turn out for pin money. I mean okay I could of lived without working at Fords, like he (my husband) was at work, but I wouldn't have had what I've got today if I hadn't. And you want to be recognised. You want to be earning the rate you should be earning. And also, when you got C Grade it goes on your pension when you retire, so that makes a difference as well.⁴⁵

The point here was that the sewing-machinists all faced different circumstances outside of work – some women had to work at Ford to survive, whilst others like Dora felt they could have lived without working there. However, none of the women were dependent, or understood themselves as dependent upon anyone else other than themselves. Regardless of their circumstances, they were working there to improve their lives and felt this basic 'fact' was being ignored on the basis of their sex.

As well as emphasising the importance of women's wages and security, both Pam and Dora spoke about how much they enjoyed work due to their friendships and work culture. The work itself was not particularly enjoyable; Pam explained 'it was very repetitive'.⁴⁶ But she liked working there because: 'you had a load of different people who were very strong in character... and it was just silly things really, you know what I mean - always laughing and joking about. But I loved it there. It was good.'⁴⁷ Dora also repeatedly

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Interview with Dora in Dagenham, August 2015.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Interview with Pam in Romford, August 2015.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

emphasised throughout her interview how she enjoyed work: ‘I liked it in Fords, I enjoyed what I did’ or ‘I enjoyed it and I know it was aggro at times but that passed, you know? You’d get annoyed at the time and then it’s gone... But I enjoyed what I did. I enjoyed going to work.’⁴⁸ Neither woman strongly identified with the labour process itself, but enjoyed working at Ford because it was better pay than their previous (and in Pam’s case, subsequent) jobs, because it felt secure, and because of the good atmosphere created by the women themselves. Dora spoke about organising parties and going to the pub on a Friday. She had ‘loads of photos from when we used to have office dos in the canteen.’⁴⁹ Pam had fond memories of organising ‘charity dos, raffles, fancy hat parades and ball room dancing in her lunch break. These were moments where the women broke away from the repetitiveness of the assembly line and made their own source of amusement.’⁵⁰

Although Dora and Pam both stressed they enjoyed work, their accounts were also characterised by an unequal dynamic of power between men and women. This took the form of general observations: for example, Pam explained to me: ‘It was always, men always got more money, and they always did. I don’t know why, but they did.’⁵¹ But it was also expressed in more specific anecdotes; for example, Dora told me a story about ‘having a battle’ with a male shop steward representing workers in the engine plant who believed the women ‘were taking men’s seats in the canteen.’⁵² She pointed out ‘if that had been men they would have just took no notice of it’, and suggested it was just one of ‘all sorts of things you come across because we were women’.⁵³ Similar to my interviewees in Chapter 2, Pam drew upon the leitmotif of being ‘angry with the janitors sweeping around your feet’ and went on to explain her dad became a janitor and ‘he was still earning more than me and I was sitting there machining!’⁵⁴ She also remembered ‘I thought I’ll get another job as a stack truck driver because that was C grade and they blocked it and they put it on to night work because they knew you didn’t want night work.’⁵⁵ She thought management

⁴⁸ Interview with Dora in Dagenham, August 2015.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ The way Pam spoke about these events was similar to the way female workers at the Moulinex factory spoke about the ‘good atmosphere’ in their factory when they were interviewed by Jackie Clarke. Clarke argues the high level of sociability within the factory offered the women ‘a degree of autonomy and the opportunity to humanise an environment which permitted little interaction.’ Jackie Clarke, ‘Closing Time: Deindustrialisation and Nostalgia in Contemporary France’, *History Workshop Journal*, vol. 79, no. 1, (2015), pp. 107-125.

⁵¹ Interview with Pam in Romford, August 2015.

⁵² Interview with Dora in Dagenham, August 2015.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Interview with Pam in Romford, September 2015.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

did this ‘because you was women! They weren’t going to do (allow) that were they?’⁵⁶ Dora remembered the first time the union pressured the management to pay the workforce sick pay, ‘all barring pregnant women’ and felt this was a good example of ‘how they treated women’.⁵⁷ Both Dora and Pam enjoyed work, but felt they were treated differently because of their sex in ways that limited their wages and undermined their social status within the factory.

The women connected this antagonistic environment with their personality.

According to Pam, you needed to be a ‘strong character’ to work at Ford. She explained:

Well I think for a young girl at 21 it was a bit intimidating really because there was so many women there...yeah very good characters.... I don't think they particularly liked it when all the youngsters started coming in. Because they've sort of been like, not top dog, but had their feet in the door and then they've got these young girls come in... We was one of the young girls... (but)... I think it was just because they were sort of used to ruling the roost you know what I mean? They were sort of very strong characters in there. And then you've sort of got other people that come in like us and we sort of took over. Not took over. But we were sort of strong characters as well.⁵⁸

Pam went on to associate these personal characteristics, which had been shaped by both gender and generational conflict within the workforce, with her involvement in the strike. She explained: ‘I don't think the ladies from the 68 strike really had anything to do with the later strike... it was a lot of the youngsters that were the ones that came in with me (on the picket line).’⁵⁹ For Pam, the 1984 strike symbolised a different chapter in the factory’s history when a new generation of confident women ‘stood their ground’ and finally forced the management to recognise the value of women’s labour.

Although the strike centred on the issue of skill recognition, my interviewees connected it to their broader experiences of paid work, which were characterised by conflict between men and women in the factory. Women felt they were at the bottom of an unequal hierarchy based on their gender, and they sought to challenge this when they went on strike in 1984.

Experiences of Trade Unionism

The strike was not treated as novel and unexpected by the unions involved in the same way as the other case studies considered in this study, which was obviously because it was a revival of the concerns surrounding the 1968 dispute. There was evidence of some

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Interview with Dora in Dagenham, August 2015.

⁵⁸ Interview with Pam in Romford, September 2015.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

opposition from male trade unionists reported at the time. The chairman of the Halewood joint shop stewards committee was not prepared to support the strike because he did not want to ‘polarise issues that were too complicated to express as right or wrong’.⁶⁰ He said ‘we could never say that the girls have not got a case but there are many other grievances. We have a grading system that dates back to the 1960s and is just not capable of coping with the structure of a modern car plant.’⁶¹ The body plant convenor at Halewood said: ‘They have a good case but other people could present just as good a case. The men don't know much about it because the women have played their cards closed to their chest.’⁶² The president of the AUEW said the women’s re-grading would have a destabilising impact on the Ford wage structure.⁶³

Although the women’s case was perceived by some as ‘too complicated’ to fit within a ‘modern’ car plant, the TGWU fully supported the strike and made it official after two weeks.⁶⁴ The strike occurred at a time when the TGWU perceived itself to be changing its relationship with its female members. Shortly after the strike, an article in the union’s national newspaper claimed: ‘the TGWU is firmly committed to the greater involvement of women in the union, the Living Wage Campaign and the fight for equal rights for women in the workplace and society at large’.⁶⁵ The journal suggested a ‘breakthrough’ had occurred in 1979, when they organised regional women’s advisory committees. In 1983 they established a national women’s advisory committee. They held their first ever women’s shop stewards course in 1980, and held five national courses for women between 1984 and 1985. The General Council elected its first woman member in 1984. In 1985 the union produced special booklets on equal pay, sexual harassment and other ‘issues of specific importance to women.’⁶⁶

At the time, it was reported that male workers within the factory had changed their attitude towards women since the 1968 strike. The *New Statesmen* claimed: ‘the women’s case is accepted by the men who work at Ford, and attitudes have changed since 1968’.⁶⁷ A TGWU District Official explained: ‘we have argued the job is harder, that the women are susceptible to joint strain that leads to tenosynovitis and that the job evaluation scheme

⁶⁰ ‘Striking women put Ford pay deal at risk’ *The Guardian*, 22 November 1984, p. 4.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ ‘Seamstresses at Ford win skilled workers’ status’, *The Guardian*, 26 April 1985, p. 3.

⁶⁴ MRC, MSS.126/TG/193/1/65, ‘Ford Strike’, T&G Record, January 1985.

⁶⁵ MRC, MSS.126/TG/193/1/65, ‘Women make breakthrough’, T&G Record, September 1985.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ ‘16-year fight of Ford sewing-machinists’, *New Statesman*, 14 December 1984.

should have rated the markings for physical effort and eye and co-ordination higher'.⁶⁸ The TGWU demanded an independent re-evaluation of the women's grading by ACAS and celebrated a victory for the women when they finally achieved their grading in April 1985.

In the strike's aftermath, the TGWU issued a commemorative plate that assumed ownership of the victory. The plate paid tribute to the 'Ford Sewing-Machinists' historic contribution to the advancement of women's rights at the workplace in Britain.' The plate was accompanied by a written 'brief history' of the 1968 and 1984/85 disputes, which described them as 'the most important industrial struggle by a group of British women since the Bryant and May Match girls strike of 1888'. The 'brief history' misremembered the unions' position in the 1968 dispute:

Throughout the 17 year period of struggle, the Ford River Plant's Joint Shop Stewards' Committee at Dagenham was the main centre of Trade Union support. It gave encouragement and unqualified assistance to the sewing-machinists. The committee provided the 'know how' of struggle and the links with the Labour and Trade Union Movement both nationally and locally, without which a successful outcome would not have been possible... All concerned won themselves an honoured place in British Labour history.⁶⁹

Herein lies the contradiction that characterised women's experiences of trade unionism during this period. Trade unions had a crucial role to play in improving the conditions of female workers and it was more difficult for women to fight without them, however, the 'know how' and positions of power within the union remained unequally distributed between male and female workers. Female workers did not necessarily want to be 'provided' with 'know how', but wanted to speak for themselves. The consequence on the shop floor was that many women had to organise themselves without the support of their union and subsequently defined their interests in opposition to those of their trade union officials. It is important to acknowledge that whilst union support was crucial for female workers' success, the force of change came from the women themselves. Lumping the strikes together and commemorating them collectively ignores the fact the strikes actually involved different women with different experiences and memories.

The commemorative plate memorialising the strikes issued by the TGWU illustrates this point in itself. The plate has a 'scroll of honour' that pays tribute to 16 male union officials involved in the 1984 dispute, and six female sewing-machinists. Dora, who played an active role in the dispute as a shop steward said:

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ MRC, MSS.572/150, Papers of Ron Todd, Miscellaneous Papers, 1911-1998, 'Brief History of the Ford Sewing-Machinists disputes', (undated).

My name's not on it because they forgot. I said to Bernard Passingham. Well, I didn't take no notice at first, it didn't bother me...but there were a lot of men on that plate and they shouldn't have been there. That was a woman's plate...so I didn't agree with it to be honest.⁷⁰

The union issued the plate to cement their role into a triumphant narrative about winning improved conditions for their female members. In memorialising the role of the male union officials involved, the plate cast an institutional shadow over the women themselves, like Dora and Pam, who had given up their time, loyalty and money to actually instigate and lead the strike. The focus on success misrepresents the strike's leadership; it implies closure and gender harmony; and it smoothes over the complexities of the individual actors' motivations, and hides the sense of injustice that continued to characterise female workers' experiences of trade unionism before and after the strike. Fundamentally, it ignores a whole different level of conflict between women and men in the workplace and against gender hierarchies in work and industrial action.

The women involved in the 1984/85 strike retrospectively emphasised the importance of being in the union at Ford in a similar manner to my interviewees who were involved in the 1968 strike. In the 2006 TUC interview, a worker named Geraldine remembered joining the union when she first started working at Ford:

When I started, I think there was – I think I started with about twelve or thirteen of us; we went and sat round this big table and it was Lil O'Callaghan again; and she said, "Right, you've got to join this union," and she, you know, she just put you right and said, "You've got to join this union, because you'll need us behind you," and we really did actually.⁷¹

Dora and Pam had quite distinct memories of their experiences of trade unionism from one another, but both women characterised working at Ford with industrial conflict. Speaking about her upbringing, Pam said: 'There was no politics, but my Dad, because he worked in the PTA he was always on strike, so we was always out with him when I started.'⁷² Pam didn't remember the 1968 strike, which took place when she was 14 years old, but she knew about it because: 'Well you worked there and people talked about it and all, "what we done" and "what we didn't do".'⁷³ She remembered a sense of antagonism in the build up to the strike in 1984: '...I think it was just the unrest with it all... And then you just thought 'well people are earning more money than you', really, it was just unease, unease really.'⁷⁴ Pam also spoke about the strike possessively and distinguished her

⁷⁰ Interview with Dora in Dagenham, August 2015.

⁷¹ Interview with Dora, Pamela, Maureen and Geraldine for TUC, (2006).

⁷² Interview with Pam in Romford, September 2015.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

interests from those of male workers in a comparable manner to the women interviewed in chapter 2: 'I wasn't involved in any strikes before our one... we was only put out when the men went out at the PTA really... you was in the union so you sort of had to come out, you can't really sit in there.'⁷⁵ The 1984 strike was different to her previous experiences of being on strike because it was for the women themselves.

Dora also spoke about the high frequency of strikes within the factory, and intimated that female workers generally felt they lacked control in a lot of these situations:

I was only there for a week and then they went out on strike (laughs)... But there was always strikes. I mean the women always came out with the men... And they weren't always happy about it because the men had a lot of them sort of things.⁷⁶

Dora said she generally enjoyed going on strike: 'I used to go picketing. And we used to have a laugh on the pickets.'⁷⁷ She also remembered using the spare time to learn to drive. She was eventually voted shop steward in 1984 and it was clear from her testimony that she had played a central role in the union and the union was an important part of her life. Although she did not join the TGWU until she was 34 years old, and was not voted shop steward until she was in her 40s, she explained she had always taken an interest in her previous jobs and linked this to her personality and sense of justice:

I was always interested and I always sort of got involved with the stewards. It's funny because when I first started the machining job, another machining job, I worked in the dock, the Albert dock and they had a place there that used to make everything for boats - curtains and everything. When I started in there, there was a guy in there, a union steward that I went to school with, from Newham, he went 'Oh god, no!' (laughs). Because I've always been very outspoken. And I mean some people deceit people all the time, always, but not me. Because some (stewards) didn't think you should tell people the truth, but... If I was in a meeting and they didn't want me to tell the girls, I would go back and tell them. I would take them in because it's their livelihood as well as mine and like they didn't want them to know what was going on.⁷⁸

Dora connected her role as shop steward to her personal characteristics: her outspokenness, her honesty and her authenticity. These were individual characteristics she felt aligned with her role as shop steward, where she was responsible for other people's wellbeing as well as her own.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Interview with Dora in Dagenham, August 2015.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

Dora went on to explain that her interest and involvement in the union evolved by way of chance. After working at Ford for one week, the convenor Bernard Passingham drove past Dora on the way to work and offered her a lift. She remembered:

So I actually went with the convenor and the stewards. So I used to go in the canteen – we always got in about 7 o'clock and we didn't have to be in until half past seven – but we always got in early and we used to go and have coffee together and so they used to be talking about what was going on and I used to be there and I was interested in what they was doing... Yeah I learned a lot from them actually. I knew a lot about the 68 strike because I learned it all off them.⁷⁹

Dora distinguished herself from other workers in the factory and pointed out that other workers including Vera, who I interviewed in Chapter 2, would also be in the car on the way to work:

Like I was interested in the union, before I was a steward and I'd still get involved... I'd still talk to them and say "yeah what about this? or what about that?" but (others) didn't, they weren't interested. Because Bernard used to pick Vera up and all on the way to work and so she came in with us all in the morning but she didn't know anything... she went out on picket, but that's about it. She didn't know what was going on.⁸⁰

Although Dora 'always' took an interest in the union, she did not put herself forward to be elected as a shop steward until 1984, when she had a personal conflict with a foreman. She explained:

I'd had to have a hysterectomy and so they put me on the job where I took work off the bottom, and it was heavy work, and oh it was really bad, actually so I went to see the doctor and he went 'you can't go back on that job.' He said they'll have to give you a light job for a while. I get back, of course they put me on that job. Oh and I just thought 'I've had enough'. They didn't like me because I argued with them.⁸¹

When Dora became shop steward, she put in a complaint about the foreman, who was also having an affair with a woman on the assembly line, and he was moved to a different section of the factory. She reflected: 'so that was my main aim to be honest with you, you know when I first went in, but I didn't want another woman treated how I was treated.'⁸²

This story reflects a blurring of individual and collective interests. Dora's interest and commitment to trade unionism evolved from her personal experiences of victimisation and sense of injustice. However, she linked these individual concerns to the wider wellbeing of other, predominantly female workers in the factory.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid.

Dora became very involved in the union for the rest of her working life and spent the majority of the interview describing the challenges she felt she had faced due to sex discrimination. She spoke about fighting for maternity pay. She also spoke about fighting the sense of injustice when male workers were allowed to claim compensation for deafness induced by the noise of the machinery, while women were not. She emphasised the challenges she felt she had faced in having women's voice heard with the union. She said:

Dora: ...we had to fight for everything we wanted and you know it was the union, as I said, it wasn't the management at Fords.

Jonathan: Why do you think that was?

Dora: Well they was all men. Always. You look at the union all those years ago, you never had no...we had one woman officer and that was it. Now when I look back I think how bad the union was to women as well. I mean I've been to other meetings now and they say like 'has it got better for the women?' Well, I don't think so. I think women are still left out of a lot of them. I mean in the union now haven't got many women officers.⁸³

On a structural level, Dora felt she always had to fight to have women's voice heard within the TGWU, however she also spoke about the challenges she had faced personally:

I went to a meeting once. I had to go up to the PTA and it was a stewards' meeting and I was the only woman obviously because I'm from down there (the River Plant). And they started sending notes around like to do with 'I love you' and all this sort of thing you know? And so I thought to myself I'll take no notice of them. And I went to the branch and our officer Steve Hart, he went into the branch. This particular Thursday and... he said 'you've got to do something about that'. So I said 'I weren't gonna bother Steve.' He said: 'No, that is harassment for women, sexual harassment and all this'. Anyway, I left it with him. Nothing more. Nothing at all. And I didn't follow it through because I didn't think it was that bad, but the point is that he was the one that told me to do it and he reported it and then done nothing. And so if I couldn't get anywhere with anything, nobody else was going to....Yeah so it's no wonder why women think they're second class in the union. And they always have been.⁸⁴

Although Dora found it challenging operating as a shop steward, she also emphasised the importance of this role within her life and the impact she had in the factory by talking about her reputation. She compared herself to a 'doctor' and spoke about how people used to 'come into my office with all sorts of personal things'.⁸⁵ She used to get called into the factory in the middle of the night to resolve other people's problems. When she retired, she described how 'the management couldn't get me out quick enough', whilst her former workmates still used to call her up asking for help. I asked her if she was sad to leave and

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

she replied: ‘not first of all, but I was. I really missed it. I really missed it. I used to see people going to work and think I wish that was me.’⁸⁶

The union had played an important part in Dora’s working life and led her to join the Labour party later on in the 1980s. However, like the majority of women in this study, she actively identified herself, her involvement in the union and the strike as not political. She had joined the Labour Party so she could sell commemorative plates for the strike at their annual conference. She pointed out: ‘I didn’t join it out of choice. Because I’ve never been politically minded. I don’t want to get into that, you know?’⁸⁷ I asked if she did not see her own involvement in the union as political but she replied: ‘no, not really, no I don’t. Well, you fight for your rights and other people’s rights. And I suppose I could be a little bit...no I don’t think I am. I don’t think I am.’⁸⁸

Dora left the Labour party after she retired and explained that her husband ‘hated’ Tony Blair. She also left the TGWU after they amalgamated to become UNITE in 2007 and closed her local branch. Having been in the TGWU for 30 years, she told me that she now got up when she attended meetings ‘to say how rubbish the unions are now’.⁸⁹ For Dora, the problem was the people who she perceived to have taken over the labour movement like Len McCluskey, the General Secretary of UNITE. She said:

You’ve got to have somebody with a bit of guts and not just for themselves. All their politics and all this... McCluskey is in the union for what he can get out of it - not what he can do for other people. I mean years ago, you took old Jack Jones and that, they didn’t get the money and everything they get today, and they were all for the workers. But this lot ain’t. They are only out for what they can get for their self... No but I like people with principles. They were there because they wanted to fight for the people, for the working class if you like. And they done a good job, but as time’s gone on, no. I don’t belong to a union now.’⁹⁰

Dora associated ‘politics’ with people like Len McCluskey and Tony Blair – people who she perceived to be self-serving and possessed ulterior motives other than helping other workers. Whilst her testimony could be described as nostalgic – an oversimplified and romanticised account of trade union leaders being ‘better’ in the past, (which does not actually fit with her personal experiences of trade unionism) – it also offers a significant clue towards explaining her own reluctance to identify herself as political. Throughout the interview, she emphasised her individuality when explaining her role as shop steward. She

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

said ‘‘people say to me: ‘you’ve got to be a certain person’, like a different person to take a meeting like that. Like it’s got to be in you to do it.’⁹¹ Dora felt she was that ‘certain person’ because she ‘listened to people’, but also:

Well I like people to be treated fair. I think, and I like getting into debates. Not just an argument but debating and learning, if you like? Because when I first went there, I went to meetings I wouldn’t speak because I didn’t know what I was talking about, but then as soon as I learned... I liked it and I enjoyed it.⁹²

After appearing reluctant to speak about her family at the beginning of the interview, at the end of the interview she drew a line between her father and herself.

Dora: I think it was always in me to be honest. I’ve always been outspoken. And it was just one of them things, my brothers couldn’t believe it.

Jonathan: What couldn’t they believe?

Dora: That I could stand up and do what I did. Oh they’d have been... My dad would. Because he was in the Labour party all those years ago

Jonathan: Was he?

Dora: Yeah so he would. But I’ve never thought to...

Jonathan: So, do you remember talking to your Dad about politics? Or do you think he influenced you?

Dora: No I think I was a little bit too young then, you know? Because, I don’t know. You just don’t talk about that, do you? But you know I think he’d have been good at speaking and all that you know, I mean everybody used to say, I’m good at speaking, but I don’t know how. You can’t learn it, it’s there isn’t it?... Yeah I just wish that like one of my granddaughters would, or one of my daughters would of got involved in women’s lib things really, you know? But they haven’t been really interested. It’s a shame really, but then I love athletics and they don’t - so you know?⁹³

This quote reflected a common means by which the women interviewed in this thesis appeared to retrospectively make sense of their workplace activism. Dora described herself as not a politically-minded and turned her attention inward as she sought an explanation for her behaviour. By rejecting a ‘political’ identity, she (like many of the other women interviewed for this project) dis-identified herself from the formal institutions connected with the labour movement, which had let her down and were perceived to possess external motivations. Instead, she emphasised what appeared to her as an inherent way of being – her outspokenness, her sense of justice and her authenticity. These were all characteristics necessary for her to assume her own voice and look after both herself and her fellow workmates in an environment that sought to undermine their dignity on the basis of their sex.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid.

Pam had not been as involved in the union as Dora, but identified herself in a related fashion of being not political. She had little to say about her trade unionism. Talking about herself at the time of the strike, she explained she had not been involved in the union because ‘I was young, I was too busy going out at night and I wasn't really bothered about politics or things really.’⁹⁴ She also explained her role in the strike by emphasising her individuality. She said: ‘I’ve always been a strong person and I’ve always believed in what’s right.’⁹⁵ However, she distinguished her experience of working at Ford by emphasising the importance of the collective solidarity shared amongst the workforce, which she felt was lacking in her subsequent jobs in other factories and a school kitchen. She said:

Pam: I’ve always been a strong person and I’ve always believed in what’s right. So I think that sort of kept going through my years...but it just sparked it off I suppose.

Jonathan: Sparked it off? The strike or working in Fords?

Pam: I think working in Fords, seeing the difference between what people do. You know but when I went to other factories, you saw it there, but obviously they didn't have stewards or anything so they can't do nothing about it... Yeah because (at Ford) we was in numbers, we made an effect that I think if you work in an office or anything like that and you've got a dispute, you've only got yourself and you're easier to get rid of. ,

Jonathan: Did you feel like that happened working in your other jobs after Ford then?

Pam: You sort of just got your head down really and got on with that you had to do, because like in the kitchen I think there was about 8 or 9 of us, but there was nothing that come up that made you want to do anything really. You just done it, you know? It wasn't that environment to think about someone else getting more money than you.⁹⁶

Pam did not associate the strike with a transition in the relationship between female workers and trade unions. She retrospectively related her involvement in the strike with her strength of character and personal resilience. However, she also felt she developed such qualities from working in an ‘environment’ where the workforce possessed collective strength and solidarity and had representatives with the ability to ‘effect’ how their work was organised. She felt it was more difficult for workers, and female workers in particular to assert the value of their work in the present:

Like because there were so many of us, you could stop it. But like when we went to that meeting the other night, there was all women complaining about other things, like nurses and that, you know, talking about going out on strike, but they're in

⁹⁴ Interview with Pam, Romford, September 2015.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

another situation... it's different making a car and looking after a person who is really ill. You know?⁹⁷

Dora offered a very similar explanation for women's workplace militancy in the past and felt it occurred in a manner that no longer happened in the present. She said

It is more difficult today, like they've not got big factories no more, like at Fords we had so many women in there and so many men, you've got an army going in you know, but it's different today, and especially when they take a member in out of like a supermarket say, and then don't support them, I mean bleeding hell!⁹⁸

Pam and Dora did not remember the strike as a 'breakthrough' for female workers improving their working conditions and position in the labour movement - as it was understood at the time. Pam felt the strike had a limited personal impact because she left Ford after she had children. She explained that she went back for one year, but was unable to afford childcare and so got another job as a school dinner lady because the hours were more convenient. Pam liked working in the school kitchen, because there 'was a lot nice girls there', but pointed out it was 'definitely hard work and the money wasn't as good as Fords.'⁹⁹ She also suggested the strike had a limited impact due to economic decline. She said:

I don't think (women) have got anywhere really, because there's still women who are not happy. You know? Like there's still meetings everywhere and things so I don't think it changed anything really. I think that for workers in general really because when I look at the pay for my sons and that I think its rubbish you know what I mean? You know it's not good is it? All the bills go up and everything goes up but there's not many places now that gives you rises.¹⁰⁰

For Pam, the strike for skill recognition was part of a different era.

Yeah you had choice. Yeah you could always leave one job and get another one, but I don't think you can do it now. Well I ain't had a job for years so I don't know. But it is a dying trade machining.¹⁰¹

My interviewees drew upon this narrative of industrial decline and economic instability to explain the limited impact of their dispute. They had fought to assert the value of a trade that nearly no longer existed. Pam was not particularly active in the union and felt it was dominated by men, but she also associated working in the factory as a space where she was able to 'stand her ground'. They were able to temporarily improve their situation at Ford, but they felt they were unable to transform the broader manner in how

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Interview with Dora, Dagenham, August 2015.

⁹⁹ Interview with Pam, Romford, September 2015.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

women's work was valued, which was evidenced by their own personal experiences, as well as the persistence of grievances amongst other women in the present.

Attitudes towards Feminism

At the time, the successful outcome of the strike was connected to a wider story about 'women's rights' outside of the factory. The *T&G Record* proclaimed:

Amid wild scenes of jubilation Ford women sewing-machinists celebrated a famous victory last month in ending 17 years of sex-discrimination. The battle for women's rights will have wide ranging effects through British industry – wherever the struggle for equal pay is being waged.¹⁰²

A TGWU National Officer claimed: 'The Ford fight against all the odds will be a beacon of light for all other women trade unionists'.¹⁰³ The decision to regrade the women was seen by some as representative of a societal change in attitudes towards female workers. *Spare Rib* suggested the very fact there were two women on the arbitration committee indicated change and meant 'they were able to look at the situation with greater awareness of sex discrimination than there had been in the 1968 strike.'¹⁰⁴ The victory was connected to women's struggles elsewhere as ACAS received 78 applications for upgrading of women's work on the basis of equal pay in the first three months of 1985.¹⁰⁵ For *Spare Rib*, 'it seems that the Ford women's major victory is only one of some new inroads made in undervaluing women's work.'¹⁰⁶ At the TGWU Annual Conference, the sewing-machinists were discussed in relation to 'the heroic role of women at Greenham Common and fighting alongside miners' who had 'highlighted how active women could be.'¹⁰⁷

However, for the women who actually worked at Ford, they were less inclined to relate their strike to these external struggles and were unconvinced that a change had occurred in the way their work was valued. The sewing-machinists articulated their grievance as a consequence of an unequal gender hierarchy. A shop steward called Doreen Cook explained 'we just see it as sex discrimination. We're sure it's because we're women. Had it been men this would have been settled long ago. Had it been a male dominated job it would never have been graded as it was. They seem to think women haven't got any skills but we have – they may be different skills but they're skills nevertheless and they're just as important to industry.'¹⁰⁸ The perception of the women's lack of ability was

¹⁰² MRC, MSS.126/TG/193/1/65, 'Ford women crash the sex barrier', *T&G Record*, May 1985.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ 'Ford Women Victorious At Last', *Spare Rib*, Issue 155, p. 9. 1985

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ MRC, MSS.126/TG/193/1/65, 'Heroic Role of Women', *T&G Record*, July 1985.

¹⁰⁸ 'It's a man's world at Ford's', *Spare Rib*, Issue 115, p. 17.

inseparable from a moral judgement about women as legitimate social actors. The factory was described as ‘a man’s world’ and it was suggested ‘women are nothing at Ford’.¹⁰⁹ In this way, whilst the women’s sense of injustice was not directed specifically at male workers, their collective action was conceptualised as an assertion of their own distinct voice within a male dominated environment.

As one can see from the testimony in the previous sections, my interview respondents characterised their experiences of work and trade unionism with unequal relations between men and women. They perceived this relationship as unfair and reconstructed the strike as an attempt to re-define it. But, similarly to the other women interviewed in this study, they did not identify themselves as feminists. Dora said: ‘I believe in justice for women, but no I’m not a feminist.’¹¹⁰ She explained that it was important to her that Bernard Passingham’s role in supporting the women was not forgotten, and suggested this was evidence that she was not a feminist:

I want to involve Bernard, if I was a feminist, see then I wouldn't. And them women that went to meetings were all women and they don't want to know (about Bernard). As soon as you mention a man’s name, they don't want to know, they don't want to think about him, yeah so no I’m not a feminist. If anyone does good, I’ll say so.¹¹¹

Pam offered a parallel explanation of her motivations and involvement in the strike.

I think it is just what is right and what is wrong really. I’ve never been a feminist. I’ve been to a lot of meetings with women who are feminists but I still think women are women and I’d like the door opened for me, so it’s not down them lines of being a feminist. It’s about sticking up for what is right... Yeah we never burned our bras or nothing... You was just doing it because you were being treated unfairly.¹¹²

Both Pam and Dora appeared to be operating with a definition of feminism that positioned male and female interests in direct opposition to one another. They rejected this position and represented themselves in a manner that emphasised universal values, and could be described as a type of humanist populism. They claimed to believe in ‘justice’ – what was ‘right or wrong’, and they felt they judged people as individuals, rather than as categories of men or women. Nevertheless, both women believed men had privileged access to knowledge and resources in terms of how their work was valued and their position within the labour movement. Speaking about trade unions, Dora said:

Women should get involved more, but the men won’t let them. That is true. The men don’t want them and it is that simple. Like they didn’t want me. But I persisted– (another) woman put down for steward, she got it but the other stewards made it so

¹⁰⁹ ‘It’s a man’s world at Ford’s’, *Spare Rib*, Issue 115, p. 17.

¹¹⁰ Interview with Dora in Dagenham, August 2015.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Interview with Pamela, Romford, August 2015.

awkward for her, she had to pack it in... So it's not that women won't come forward, in a big environment like that, the men don't want them¹¹³.

I asked Dora why she thought this was the case:

Well, I don't know really. I think they think that the men are governors don't they? I mean it's still there. It's not as bad as years ago, but it's still there, like in the working environment and all that... It's still spoken about quite a lot because my girls tell me. But that's all it is really... like whatever job you are doing, if you're an electrician, it was 'oh women can't be electricians'; 'women can't be carpenters'; you know?... but women can! They've proved they can. So it should be an acceptance that you work together.¹¹⁴

Both Dora and Pam drew upon a cultural model that emphasised male dominance (at least in public institutions) where 'men are governors'; 'men always earned more money' and 'men wouldn't allow' women to do things – such as play an active role in the union, or apply to become a stack truck driver. Drawing upon their personal experiences, they appeared to assume this was an inevitable aspect of life that continued into the present. As a consequence, they did not perceive their strike in 1984 as an emancipatory moment that led to a positive transformation in women's experiences of work and trade unionism. Rather, it was seen as a limited concession resulting from the determination and resilience of the sewing-machinists' themselves after 17 years of struggle.

Their subjectivity – their perception of their experience and the world around them – was bound between emphasising their individual agency, whilst also accounting for the gender and class constraints on their ability to effect how women's work was collectively organised. They believed that a feminist approach to this tension would dogmatically hold men responsible for the devaluation of their labour and subsequently rejected this on the grounds that it was inauthentic – or untrue to their personal morality and experience. They retrospectively understood the strike as a collective act challenging institutional injustice, but they did not see their beliefs as political, or their behaviour as politically motivated. Instead, they preferred to emphasise the importance of the informal bonds shared between the workers at the time. In this sense, they also represented the strike as a moral act of personal courage and virtue that illustrated women's independence and self-reliance. For my interviewees, their militancy was not understood as driven by external 'feminist' ideas or by their participation in the TGWU; instead it was seen as an 'authentic' assertion of their self-worth in response to the devaluation of their labour. The paradox here was that women rejected feminism as a label, as they simultaneously emphasised the distinctiveness of women's experience and adopted feminist principles of equality, autonomy, self-

¹¹³ Interview with Dora, Dagenham, August 2015.

¹¹⁴ Interview with Pamela, Romford, August 2015.

representation and self-fulfilment to make sense of their resistance to sex and class inequality in the past.

Conclusion

The experiences of the Ford sewing-machinists in Dagenham illustrate the continued salience of the value of women's work throughout the period considered in this thesis. The 1968 strike was publically conceptualised as a turning point in societal attitudes towards women's right to equal pay. However the triumphant narrative of the strike as a victory for equal pay served to disguise the underlying grievance that continued to affect many women throughout Britain during this period and beyond. The women at Ford continued to be perceived to possess less ability than male workers due to their sex. They were subsequently paid lower wages and occupied a lower social status within the factory. The sewing-machinists' eventual victory in 1985 was swiftly explained as a consequence of a societal change in attitudes towards female workers. Yet this chapter illustrates the dispute was instigated by a largely different group of women in response to the same sense of indignity and injustice affecting those who went on strike in 1968. Thus the sewing-machinists were not simply passive beneficiaries of abstract social change, but actively sought to change the way their work was valued themselves.

Conclusion

By listening to the voices of women who fought for equal pay, skill recognition and the right to work, this thesis contributes a fresh understanding of the relationship between feminism, workplace activism and trade unionism during the years 1968-1985. The industrial disputes analysed in this thesis show that women's workplace militancy was not simply a direct response to women's heightened presence in trade unions and second-wave feminism. The women involved in these disputes were more likely to understand their experiences of workplace activism as an expression of the economic, social and subjective value of their work and an assertion of their personal autonomy. Their political subjectivity was caught between emphasising their individual agency as independent women and the gender and class constraints on their everyday experiences of paid work and trade unionism.

Industrial disputes involving female workers have been conceptualised as evidence of changing attitudes towards women within male dominated trade unions, and shifting attitudes amongst working-class women themselves. Existing accounts of women's experiences within the labour movement have mapped where change has occurred at an institutional level in terms of the growing number of female trade unionists, and the growing commitment of trade unions to recognising the specific interests of female workers.¹ Other accounts have described this development as a consequence of second-wave feminism and women's growing participation in the labour force after the Second World War.² The starting point for this thesis was to draw attention to female workers' voices and interpretations of their experiences, which had hitherto been largely absent from this existing story.

Focusing on individual subjectivity unsurprisingly complicates the story of women playing a more active role within the labour movement during this period. It is difficult to establish patterns that illustrate when, how and why women's experiences of workplace protest were different to men's from personal accounts. But this was not the aim of the study. The nature of the research – the concentration on individual case studies and individual women's experiences – provides snapshots of the everyday transitions in thought and behaviour that lay behind women's workplace militancy. These snapshots

¹ Boston, *Women and Trade Unions*; Cunnison and Stageman, *Feminizing the Unions*.

² Rowbotham, *The Past is Before Us*; Coote and Campbell, *Sweet Freedom*.

provide clues as to how and why female workers' experiences differed from those of men. But each case study provides richer, and more nuanced evidence of how women ascribed meaning to their past experiences and how they constituted themselves as political subjects. The focus has thus been more on understanding and appreciating how differences between men and women affected the beliefs and values of the individual actors in these specific situations, rather than explaining the processes that lay behind such differences. This approach means each case study contributes fresh insights into the gendered division of labour and women's experiences of, and attitudes towards trade unionism and feminism.

Each case study reveals the central importance of paid work to working-class women's everyday lives after the Second World War. The women involved in these disputes possessed specific skills and ability, which were closely tied to their sense of self. The majority of my respondents shared similar work trajectories and all worked for most of their lives, from school leaving age, through bringing up children and proceeding to work until retirement. Work was certainly not interpreted as a temporary stage in these women's lives, nor was it simply a means of complementing a husband's income to meet the growing consumer desires of an increasingly affluent society.³ All of my respondents emphasised the economic value of their work and their role as economic providers in their families - from when they began work after leaving school in order to contribute to their family income to after they had married, bought homes or had children of their own. These women felt that they had worked out of economic necessity, to build better lives for themselves with further opportunities for their own families.

Yet paid work was not always a positive experience. Whilst women emphasised elements of their work they enjoyed, such as the camaraderie, solidarity and friendships they shared with workmates, their relationship with their employers was frequently characterised by conflict. Respondents suggested they felt 'persecuted', 'treated with contempt' or like a 'number'. Gender was a critical explanatory factor behind this sense of inadequacy. In both contemporary representations of each dispute, as well as the oral history interviews, women spoke about having to justify their action in the face of pervading notions of pin-money. The women who went on strike for equal pay and skill recognition obviously spoke about having their ability devalued on the basis of their sex. The women who occupied their factories felt they were perceived as weaker and more expendable by their employers who made them redundant. It is no surprise that the

³ Roberts, *Women and Families*, p. 235.

majority of interviewees spoke fondly about their female-centred work culture, which provided them with the means to informally influence how their work was organised.

The coherence of women's work identity was also refracted through the lens of deindustrialisation, which influenced how they reinterpreted the meaning of their activism some decades later. Whilst respondents were generally enthusiastic and eager to stress the importance of their jobs at the time of the disputes they were involved in, they had much less to say about their later experiences of work, which were predominantly in similarly low-paid, undervalued service sector jobs such as retail, catering or care work. These 'silences' reflected the persistence of gender and class structures that my interviewees felt constrained their own, as well as their friends' and family members' choices of work in the years following the disputes they were involved in. It was not that my interviewees had stopped being the 'strong women' they associated with their sense of self at the time of each dispute; rather the decline of heavy and manufacturing industry, stable employment and trade unions' power, and the persistence of unequal pay and the gendered division of labour made them doubt their political efficacy and the wider meaning of the disputes they were involved in.

The point is that women's experiences of paid work had a crucial effect on their understanding of the world and their place within it. But the significance of paid work within these women's lives should not be conflated with the notion that work represented an emancipatory experience. Women interviewed for this thesis perceived themselves to be at the bottom of a gender hierarchy in their workplaces, which they believed was unfair and which they sought to change. The fact they took action and challenged these hierarchies is the crucial point here. Yet it is also vital to think about how the persistence of occupational segregation and unequal pay at the time of the interviews led women to doubt their political efficacy.⁴ Their struggle to transform the way their work was valued says more about the forces with which they had to contend than the women themselves.

Although each dispute occurred in a different industrial sector and involved different unions, the women involved shared similar experiences and memories of their trade union engagement. The majority of women involved in each case study were all unionised prior

⁴ In 2014, the Fawcett Society found the mean gap-between male and female wages (part-time and full-time) was 19.1 per cent. Women accounted for 82 per cent of those working in 'caring leisure and other service industries', 77 per cent of those in 'admin and secretarial' and 63 per cent in sales and customer service. The predominance of women in low paid sectors meant that 62 per cent of workers earning below the living wage were women. The Fawcett Society's Gender Pay Gap Briefing, (November, 2014), p. 4 and p. 6. <<http://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/Fawcett-Equal-Pay-Day-report-November-2014.pdf>>

to each dispute, but had minimal contact with their trade union officials and their experience of trade unionism and industrial struggle was generally limited. Each dispute considered in this thesis was represented as novel and an anomaly at the time by the unions involved, and the local and national press. The lack of connection between union officials and female workers on the shop floor meant that respondents saw the role of their union as largely irrelevant to their own decision to engage in collective action and saw their interests as isolated from the wider movement, which also created space for alternative forms of action, as demonstrated by the Fakenham and Greenock case studies.

The women involved in the 1968 strike at Ford ‘believed in unions’ and were well organised, but distinguished their strike as their ‘own’ and separate from the interests and struggle of male workers in their factory. Although they appreciated the support of their union, there was resentment expressed at the time, and in the oral history interviews, at how their NUVB officials had steered them away from their grading grievance and encouraged them to demand equal pay instead. At Fakenham the women received no support and had nothing but contempt for NUFLAT, which was expressed at the time and in retrospect, and meant that the union was viewed as completely irrelevant to the lives of the women interviewed in the present. The women at Greenock organised themselves outside of the union and only received support from NUTGW once their occupation gained widespread media attention in Scotland. The union stopped supporting the workers two months before the occupation was brought to a successful conclusion. However, a pre-existing culture of militancy in the town of Greenock meant that the Lee Jeans women were well supported by their local shop stewards committee, and later received backing from the STUC and financial donations from trade unions across Britain.

The exception was the women at Trico who were well supported by their local branch of the AUEW; many of the female workers became more involved in the union once their dispute was over. Yet even in this case, it is important to remember that the strike for equal pay was initiated by the women themselves and that their relationship with the union was cut short after the factory closed the following decade. The Dagenham sewing-machinists who went on strike in 1984 received support from the TGWU that was crucial to their success, yet the women involved characterised their relationship with the union as sexist. The image that emerged of women’s relationship with their trade unions was one where they felt like they had to ‘fight for everything’. The women involved in these disputes did not necessarily want to play a more active role within their unions; rather they wanted to be leaders of their own action, to represent themselves and have a say

in how their work was organised. The diversity in experience shows that, whilst trade unions' response to female workers' everyday interests was generally insufficient, the situation varied within factories depending upon local factors, such as the nature of a union's district branch or full-time officials, as well as attitudes within the local community. Thus, the thesis also indicates the need to look beyond trade unions' official policies towards female workers, as women's experience of trade unionism was most likely to be affected by how their union was organised at a grassroots level.

Whilst the disputes unfolded in different ways, and respondents offered various opinions about trade unions' significance, each case study was similar in that the women involved initially organised themselves independently of their union. The result of this was that the majority of women saw their membership as irrelevant to their militancy and the manner in which they thought about their rights and themselves as political subjects. Marees from Fakenham described her union membership as 'a waste of money', whilst Helen from Greenock suggested that she was not 'trade union minded' and described her sense of alienation at being the only woman in attendance at branch meetings of the NUTGW.⁵ Dora from Dagenham played an active role in the TGWU throughout her working life, but was reluctant to suggest the union influenced her values and beliefs. She, like many of the women interviewed in this thesis, continuously emphasised how their 'political' understandings came from within.

Although 'more was written about women and unions in the decade between 1975 and 1985 than the previous century' and the emergence of new structures within the TUC and individual unions, such as separate women's groups and officers, demonstrated a desire to hear and reflect women's voice within the labour movement, I would argue that such changes represented the influence of women's workplace militancy upon the organisation and priorities of trade unions, rather than the converse.⁶ Women's ambivalence towards their trade union membership was explained by their direct experiences of sex discrimination, isolation and the lack of space to have their voice heard within their factories and at a local level. These experiences reflected the failure and reluctance of unions to alter the uneven balance of power between female workers and male dominated executive committees at a national level. The initial success achieved by the women at Trico and Lee Jeans highlighted the necessity of trade union support for sustaining women's action. Whilst the TGWU celebrated its role in the Dagenham sewing-

⁵ Interview with Marees in Fakenham, 15 April 2013; Interview with Helen in Greenock, 11 March 2013.

⁶ Sarah Boston, *Women Workers*, p. 311.

machinists' eventual victory in 1985, it is important to recognise women did not want to depend on trade unions, but wanted to speak with their own voice and to be listened to within them. The failure of other unions to provide official support for female workers engaged in similar action during this period must be viewed as a missed opportunity to mount a significant challenge to the way that women's work was valued in Britain.

Each case study also offers a deeper insight into the relationship between working-class women and the WLM. Whilst the Dagenham sewing-machinists' strike preceded the formation of WLM groups across Britain, the disputes analysed in the following chapters represented sites of convergence between working-class women seeking to alter the relations of power within their workplace and WLM activists hoping to extend the social composition of the movement by raising the consciousness of working-class women. Feminist support for female workers was also driven by the personal motivations of individual members who, in the words of Sheila Rowbotham: 'wanted to involve working-class women and do things about women's oppression rather than just discuss it.'⁷ Feminist support was crucial for raising the public profile of women's militancy and could provide essential moral and financial backing for women who were not supported by their union, such as the workers at Fakenham.

Historians of second-wave feminism often write about how the WLM changed the way people in Britain thought and spoke about women during the 1970s.⁸ This thesis shows how female workers, who did not identify themselves with the WLM, contributed to this process. Women who engaged in industrial disputes did not passively internalise feminist ideas, but were actively changing the way they thought and constituted themselves as political subjects in response to their everyday experiences. The women I interviewed did not feel they had been directly influenced by the WLM, which can be explained by both the material reality of the limited presence of the movement within these women's workplaces and communities, and negative portrayals of the movement in public memory. Throughout the interviews, respondents made reference to 'burning bras' or being 'anti-men', which drew upon negative and sexist stereotypes that have been idly equated with the movement by the British media since.⁹ Whilst the women did not necessarily express negative views towards feminism, it was not an identity that they adopted themselves. This common distinction between WLM activists and their own (various) identity(ies) was demonstrated most clearly by Marees from Fakenham when she explained: 'some of the

⁷ Sheila Rowbotham, 'Jolting Memory', p. 7.

⁸ Rowbotham, *The Past is Before Us*; Browne, *Women's Liberation Movement in Scotland*.

⁹ Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, p. 98.

ladies we met were very sort of strong and outspoken types of people. Not how I thought I was; I probably am now, but not how I was then.’¹⁰ This piece of testimony encapsulated the manner in which the majority of my respondents spoke about feminism, workplace activism and their sense of self. Whilst they did not adopt a feminist identity or associate their action with the WLM, they spoke about themselves and their militancy in a manner that emphasised feminist values of equality, autonomy and self-worth.

Although respondents did not interpret their activism as ‘Gestalt moments’ like Judy Wajcman experienced, nor the epiphanies common in the narratives of WLM activists, or middle class women, there was a sense that they appealed to a ‘feminist script’ in an attempt to achieve coherence in the process of the oral history interview, which aligned their militancy to fit with an image of themselves they felt comfortable with in the present.¹¹ Thus, although the women I interviewed did not describe themselves as feminists, the majority of respondents used their militancy as a symbol to evidence their independence as women and their refusal to be treated unequally with men. Some women, like Helen from Greenock, or Sheila from Dagenham fit this into a narrative about individually resisting inequality or managing adversity throughout their life. Other women, like Margaret from Greenock or Sally from Brentford discussed how they gained greater confidence during their disputes, which they related to other events that had taken place in their lives, which included: buying their own homes, fighting against the poll tax, raising children independently, applying for jobs previously restricted to men in their factory or starting their own business. Such events were connected to wider notions of independence, confidence and personal autonomy, and offer a new example of women adopting this narrative structure to talk, not just about positive opportunities for education and career advancement, but also experiences of resisting inequality in the past.

Identifying the women’s action as feminist is complicated by the issue of interpretive authority. Revisiting the disputes from an historical perspective enables one to see how these women were both indirectly influenced by and contributed towards the development of British feminism. Women’s attempts to redefine how their work was valued and to speak with their own voice within the labour movement challenged gender norms and can be described as feminist. These attitudes and behaviours had similarities to what Annemarie Hughes describes as a ‘rough kind of feminism’ developed by working-class women in inter-war Scotland in response to their dual experience of sexual and class

¹⁰ Interview with Marees in Fakenham, 15 April 2013.

¹¹ Abrams, ‘Liberating the female self’, p. 32.

antagonism.¹² However, considering how much of this thesis has focused on how women defined themselves, labelling them as feminists seems inappropriate when this did not fit with their own self-understanding. It is important to recognise and respect that this is not how the majority of women identified themselves at the time or in my interviews.

It is crucial to think about why the women interviewed did not see themselves or their behaviour as either feminist or political. In some ways, it is unsurprising my interviewees felt reluctant to identify themselves as feminists considering negative imagery and stereotypes surrounding feminism in the present. But the rejection of a feminist and political identity also stemmed from a desire to justify their behaviour and assert their authenticity – the idea they were being true to themselves. As Mike Savage has shown, people in Britain have increasingly sought to identify themselves as ‘ordinary’ as a means distancing themselves from social fixing, avoiding stigmatised class or privileged identities.¹³ As a result, people seek to avoid class when forming political judgements about their self and others (in public) and more commonly articulate a ‘naturalistic’ and ‘individualistic’ ethic instead. The evidence in this thesis suggests that people seek to avoid gender in a similar manner. In every dispute considered in this thesis, women’s behaviour was perceived by observers as novel, ‘historic’ or extraordinary. But the women did not think of themselves as extraordinary, and rather understood their behaviour as a legitimate and justified response to their very real, ‘ordinary’ experiences of class and gender antagonism. The women involved in these disputes were reluctant to identify themselves as feminist for fear it would imply they were acting out of ulterior and inauthentic motives. As one of the Fakenham women explained at the time ‘they were not pulling a stunt’. The majority of interviewees stressed how they judged people as individuals – rather than as categories. For many of the women, being feminist implied being ‘anti-men’ and they disavowed it on the basis it would involve judging people on the basis of their sex.

In a parallel fashion, many of the women said they were not political, and stressed their personal characteristics and internal sense of justice when they explained their involvement in each dispute. They thought of themselves as practicing ethics rather than politics, and stressed their individual or natural qualities, in contrast to external political ideas as a means of making sense of the world and their place within it. They blurred boundaries between individual and collective interests by emphasising personal qualities such as authenticity, resilience and strength of character to explain why they were good at

¹² Annemarie Hughes, *Gender and Political Identities*.

¹³ Savage, ‘Working Class Identities’.

looking after both themselves and each other. In this sense, their political subjectivity was influenced by public feminist narratives about being strong, autonomous women who believed in equality and women's rights. Yet it also drew upon and emphasised the importance of their 'internal' values and beliefs derived from their personal experiences.

The women's political identity and experiences of activism were also influenced and differentiated by their locality, family and age. Each dispute occurred in markedly different contexts, both in terms of region and also factories with their own specific history and culture of industrial relations. Ford was a much larger company with a well organised workforce in comparison to Sexton's shoe factory located in rural East Anglia, whilst Brentford was a racially diverse, metropolitan area with a progressive labour movement, and Greenock had its own distinct history of industrial relations, but was facing severe economic depression at the time of the Lee Jeans occupation. These local circumstances distinguished the social and economic context from which the women came as well as individual women's experiences and political identity in each case study. Yet, importantly women were taking similar action to one another across Britain, in a range of industries and both urban and rural locations, which is illustrated by the timeline in the Appendix.

Whilst respondents' did not discuss their militancy in relation to their family in great detail, it was clear family relationships also had a significant influence upon women's sense of self and political identity. Sally from Brentford claimed to have a 'tory upbringing' and emphasised that she had just split up with her husband before she went on strike for equal pay, which meant that she felt increasingly aware of and incensed at the differential between male and female wages.¹⁴ Marees was married and pregnant when she occupied the factory in Fakenham, which she felt distinguished her from the strong, outspoken types of women from the WLM she met during the occupation.¹⁵ Helen from Greenock described her father as 'red under the bed' and suggested he was a more important influence on her political views than her trade union membership, whilst Peggy from Brentford was the only member of her family to have joined a trade union.¹⁶ Relationships within families also had an important influence upon how a dispute was conducted. In every case study, there was discussion in the press of the disruption women's militancy had allegedly caused to family life, especially during occupations where women spent nights away from home in the factory. The workers at Dagenham and Trico both

¹⁴ Interview with Marees in Fakenham, 15 April 2013.

¹⁵ Interview with Peggy, Phyllis and Sally in London, Wednesday 10 April 2013.

¹⁶ Interview with Helen in Greenock, 11 March 2013; Interview with Peggy, Phyllis and Sally in London, Wednesday 10 April 2013.

suggested that it was very difficult for women with unsympathetic husbands to stay out on strike. By contrast nearly all of the women who were married emphasised the importance of the support they received from their husbands during their disputes and how they shared similar political views.

Age was also an important factor that differentiated women's experiences. It appeared that the shop stewards who played a lead role in organising each dispute had been older members of the workforce, which could have reflected greater knowledge, experience and confidence of dealing with various procedures and relations between trade union officials and management. Yet younger women were also active in organising demonstrations and fundraising, which was demonstrated by Margaret from Greenock who was 20 at the time of the Lee Jeans occupation, Marees from Fakenham, who was 21. Both of these women identified the disputes they were involved in with periods where they 'grew up' or obtained more confidence.

The experiences presented in this thesis are those of white working-class women. However, race relations clearly had a significant impact upon women's experiences of work and trade unionism during this period; the women at Trico discussed the informal racial segregation of the workforce prior to their dispute and suggested that industrial action could break down racial barriers within workplaces, in a similar manner to the claims made by the labour movement during the Grunwick dispute between 1976 and 1978. However, McDowell et al. have shown that the relationship between workers' protest and race relations was often much more complex than this, and is an issue that needs further research.¹⁷

These variances in personal circumstances show that the women interviewed in this thesis, and by extension working-class women more generally, did not necessarily express a common identity, neither at the time of their activism nor in the present. However, they did share similar experiences of gender and class inequality. The economic necessity of work had shaped their lives in a manner they felt inhibited their aspirations and opportunities for further education or careers. The majority remembered having unequal power relationships with male bosses which they challenged and sought to change. They differentiated their own interests from those of the trade union that was supposed to represent them. Whilst this experience was not uncommon and would have been shared with working-class men, it was distinguished by the fact their work was devalued because

¹⁷ McDowell et al., 'Striking Narratives'.

it was performed by women. Male workers never had to fight to have the value of their work recognised and appropriately remunerated on the basis of their sex.

The overall implications of the thesis are that female workers' experiences of work, trade unionism and workplace activism were distinguished by an unequal relationship between men and women. A comparative study that explored differences between men and women's workplace militancy quantitatively and discursively would provide more 'concrete' answers to when, how and why this was the case. But the women's stories examined here, actively and creatively generated from memory, contribute towards a better understanding of how such differences affected women's everyday experiences and sense of self. Being judged to have less ability than men meant women felt they were taken less seriously as legitimate social actors within the workplace and trade unions. Women's workplace militancy during this period should be understood as a direct response to this everyday sense of injustice and a demand to be judged as independent women, speaking with their own voice and seeking greater control over their own lives.

Appendix 1

Timeline of Women's Workplace Militancy in Britain, 1968-1985.

Date	Company and Location	Dispute Details
February 1968	Fisherman's Wives Campaign, Hull.	Women lead campaign in Hull for safety improvements on fishing boats.
May-June 1968	Grading dispute at Ford, Dagenham and Halewood.	187 sewing-machinists strike for improved grading at Ford, Dagenham.
January 1969	Renold Ltd, Coventry and Manchester.	1000 women strike for equal pay in chain making factory.
February –March 1970	Clothing workers' strike, Leeds. (Also spread to factories in south Yorkshire and Teeside).	14,570 clothing workers from factories across Leeds, the majority of whom were women, strike for four weeks after the NUTGW negotiated a national wage agreement without their consent..
September 1970-December 1972	Campaign to unionise Night cleaners, London.	The Cleaners' Action group encouraged night cleaners to join NUTGW or CSU.
January-March 1971	Post office workers strike, Nationwide.	Women play active role in strike for 15 per cent wage rise.
September 1971	Lucas, Burnley.	Pat Sturdy organises women only breakaway union – Women's Industrial Union – in protest against sexist treatment from GMWU officials.
February –July 1972	Sexton's Shoe Factory, Fakenham, Norfolk.	45 women occupy factory and successfully resist redundancy.
July 1972	Equal Pay Strike Goodman's Loudspeaker factory, Havant, Hampshire.	Women strike for union recognition and equal pay .
July 1972	General Electric Company (GEC), Erith, south London.	Female workers demand equal pay as part of a national engineering claim.
September 1972	Coops Clothing, Wigan, Lancashire.	Women strike in protest of sacking a shop-steward.

September 1972	Ever Ready Electrical Company, Wolverhampton.	Mostly Asian women involved in grading dispute.
October 1972	Plessey Electronics, London.	Women sit-in after the sacking of senior shop-steward.
October 1972	Courtaulds' Deeside Mill, Flint, Wales.	120 women on strike for a month over bonus dispute.
November 1972	Morrison Hospital, Swansea.	80 women domestic workers, mainly cleaners, strike over a pay dispute.
November 1972	South London Hospital.	Hospital Ancillary workers demonstrate outside hospital for £8 claim. Nationally there is a one day stoppage of hospital workers on 4 November.
November 1972	Mansfield Hosiery Mill, Loughborough.	Asian hosiery workers strike against racial discrimination and for higher pay. 80 women at neighbouring Clarence St Works come out in sympathy with them.
November 1972	St Anne's College, Oxford.	Cleaners go on strike for union recognition (NUPE)
November 1972	Easterbrook and Allcard tool factory, Sheffield.	Women machinists strike for the reinstatement of a sacked trade union convenor.
December 1972	Granada Publishing, London and St Albans.	ASTMS members on strike for union recognition.
December 1972	Barbour Rainwear Factory, South Shields.	60 women strike for union recognition and wage rise
January 1973	British Leyland Combine, Birmingham.	Women workers walk out in Christmas holiday pay dispute.
January 1973	Warwick University.	Cleaners and catering staff on strike for £2.40 weekly wage rise.
January 1973	Bairds Television Factory, Bradford.	4000 mostly female workers demand 40 per cent wage increase.
February 1973	Grunwick Processing Lab, Willesden, London.	Women involved in struggle for the reinstatement of a sacked worker.

February 1973	Empire Pools, Blackpool.	65 women on strike for union recognition.
March 1973	Tillotsons Print Company.	700 print workers, men and women protest against the sacking of shop-stewards and redundancies.
April 1973	Watney Mann Brewery, White Chapel, London.	Women strike with men in defiance of wage freeze.
April-May 1973	Stirmur Manufacturing Company, Paisley.	100 printers strike in support of pay increases for 25 women workers
April -May 1973	Baxters Bolt and Rivet Works, Birmingham.	Women in the AUEW walk out in support of sacked convenor.
April-May 1973	NuSwift Fire Extinguisher Factory, Elland, Yorkshire.	Women office workers, strike for substantial pay increases. Joined by canteen workers and draughtsmen.
May 1973	Alligator Rainwear Factory, Stockport.	Women strike to reinstate a sacked machinist and guarantee job security.
June 1973	Wyuna Garment Factory, Southall, West London.	Asian Women workers wage rise and union recognition.
June 1973	Croft Seafood Factory, Liverpool.	Female shell fish packers in GMWU strike against the casual labour system and demand a rise.
June 1973-July 1973	GEC Salford Electrical Instruments, Eccles and Heywood, Greater Manchester.	90 female office workers demand difference between the male and female rates be reduced by one third as a step towards equal pay.
June 1973	GEC Turbine Generators, Rugby, Warwickshire.	Women clerical workers in APEX walk out because company refused to bring women's rates up to 90 per cent of men's by 1 August 1973
June 1973	Supreme Overall Services, Wednesbury, Staffordshire.	350 laundry workers, mostly women strike for 5 days for a 5p an hour increase on their 32p wage.
July 1973-August 1973	GEC Spon Street Works, Coventry.	200 women workers earning a basic £13 a week strike after introduction of new materials brought piece rates down They fight not only the company but the AUEW convenor, who was reported to have said: 'I'm not having

		my men laid off by a bunch of silly girls’.
July 1973	Chelsea Quilt Factory, Barnstaple, Devon.	24 women in two week strike over management attempt to alter wage differentials.
September 1973	Slumberland Beds, Paisely.	Office and supervisory staff in ten week strike for ASTMS union recognition.
September 1973	Crompton Parkinson Electrical Manufacturing, Dundee.	400 women strike over management pay offer to increase male differential by £1.80.
September 1973	Seiko, Kilburn, London.	Women strike for five weeks strike for union recognition. Followed by occupation against poor conditions and piece rate system.
October 1973	Adwest Engineering, Reading.	400 male and female workers occupy factory to save from closure.
October 1973	Pressed Steel, Cowley.	Women office workers go on strike for equal pay. Men in office support with work to rule, overtime ban and one day sit-in.
October 1973	Rota Print, Willesden, London.	450 assembly line workers strike as management attempted to divide women by paying some male rates and others low unskilled rates.
November 1973	Hawker Siddely, Chadderton and Woodford, Lancashire.	Women on strike demanding a £1.50 weekly wage increase.
November 1973	Biro-Bic, Reading.	70 women in dispute for union recognition of AUEW.
December 1973	Bobcock and Wilcox, Renfrew, Glasgow.	200 women clerical workers win settlement for equal pay.
December 1973	Maclaren Controls, Glasgow.	300 mostly female workers strike for five weeks, followed by factory occupation to win £5 wage increase.

January 1974	Rank Radio International, Camborne, Cornwall.	Women shop stewards organise successful campaign to reorganise working week.
January 1974	Armstrong Patents, Beverley, Yorkshire.	80 men and women walk out after TGWU female convenor sacked for refusing to accept three day week. TGWU fails to support the pickets. 100 female workers leave the firm.
March 1974	GEC, Coventry.	200 women strike to defend jobs as management try to re-deploy women to secondary factory in attempt to break union.
March 1974	Timex, Dundee	3 week strike by 500 mostly female workers in opposition to closure. AUEW call off official support.
March 1974	Bonar Long, Dundee	500 workers walk out and strike against productivity agreement.
March 1974	Lucas, Birmingham	2000 mostly female production workers walk out over announcement redundancies.
April 1974	Lentheric, London	290 women strike because receiving £8 less than lowest male weekly rate. They win increase of £2.25.
April 1974	British Domestic Appliance, Peterborough.	1300 workers, 400 of whom are women strike for equal pay.
April 1974	Auto Machinery, Coventry.	190 men and women demand equal wages with factory in Stoke. Women demand equal pay and achieve 95 per cent of men's rate.
April 1974	Jonas Woodhead, Yorkshire.	Part-time women workers on evening shift in shock absorber plant gain recognition of AUEW and elect shop-stewards.

May 1974	Renold Gear Division, Milnrow, Lancashire.	100 clerical workers strike for equal pay.
May 1974	Imperial Typewriters, Leicester.	700 male and female, mostly Asian, workers strike over productivity agreement without support of TGWU.
May 1974	Nurses Strike for wage rises in Teeside, Liverpool and Nottingham.	COHSE members organise marches and one hour lightning strikes
May 1974	National Switch Factory, Keighley, Yorkshire.	400 women strike for eight days when management reneges on national wage agreement.
June 1974	Wingrove and Rogers, Old Swan, Liverpool.	250 mostly female workers strike at electrical engineering factory for five weeks over low pay.
June 1974	Easterbrook and Allcards, Sheffield.	600 workers strike against low pay.
June 1974	London Hospitals.	Female technicians and radiographers, join nurses in strike for 30 per cent wage rise.
June 1974	Smiths Industries, Cricklewood, London.	177 female workers occupy speedometer factory for two days after being laid off
June 1974	Kenilworth Components, Leicester.	Asian women hold two day strike against low pay and receive support from female workers from Imperial Typewriters in Leicester.

September 1974	Persona Razorblades, Hillingdon, Glasgow.	Two week strike for equal pay with women earning £6 a week less than men.
September 1974	Vauxhall, Luton.	Women office cleaners, TGWU members strike for 3 weeks over low pay and gain 10p an hour increase and one week extra holiday.
October 1974	Salford Electrical Instruments, Heywood, Lancashire.	40 women AUEW members occupy switch board as part of equal pay dispute. Undermined by male AUEW members and management remove them with security guards.
October 1975	Bronx Engineering, Brierly Hill, West Midlands.	Women receive support from male engineering workers for dispute with management.
November 1975- January 1976	Newton Derby Engineering firm, Derbyshire	20 female APEX members strike for 13 weeks for skill recognition and equal pay.
March 1976	Louis Newmarks, Ipswich.	Female office workers strike for equal pay in engineering firm.
May-October 1976	Trico-Folberth, Brentford.	Successful 21-week strike for equal pay led by 400 female assembly workers at windscreen wiper factory.
August 1976 - July 1978	Grunwick Processing Lab, Willesden, London.	Dispute for union recognition at photo processing plant involving mostly female Asian workers.
March 1976	Cockburn Valves, Glasgow.	Female members of TASS strike at engineering firm for equal pay.

May 1977	Laird Portch, East Kilbride.	400 women NUTGW members in six week unofficial strike for equal pay.
July 1977	Essex International, Kilwinning, Ayrshire.	Female workers occupy electronics factory due to differential between female wage rates in Irish and Scottish factories.
December 1978-February 1979	'Winter of Discontent'	Public Sector workers involved in strikes across Britain against wage freeze and incomes policy.
October 1979	Mass Demonstration again Corrie Bill, London.	Thousands of women participate in demonstration organised by TUC to protest against John Corrie's private members bill aiming to amend 1967 Abortion Act.
February 1981-September 1981	Lee Jeans Factory Occupation, Greenock.	240 female workers resist redundancy by occupying jeans factory for seven months.
January 1982	Lovable Lingerie, Cumbernauld, Lanarkshire.	Women occupy factory in a bid to resist redundancy.
March-May 1982	Plessey Capacitor, Bathgate, West Lothian.	220 mostly female workers occupy engineering factory for eight weeks in bid to save factory from closure.
1984-1985	Women Against Pit Closures, Nationwide.	Women's groups play active role in mining communities across Britain during the miners' strike.

Information taken from: 'Striking Progress 1972-1973', *Red Rag*, No. 5 August 1973; 'Striking Progress, 1973-1974', *Red Rag*, No. 8, February 1975; Sheila Rowbotham and Beatrix Campbell, 'Class Struggle in Britain', *Radical America*, (Vol.8, no. 5, 1974); Sheila Rowbotham, *The Past is Before Us*, (London: Pandora Press, 1989); Sarah Boston, *Women Workers and the Trade Unions*, 2nd Ed, (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1989).

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