

Sex change prejudice overcome at GEC

Trade union humanity at its best

From our own Correspondent

Our member, Linda Hollingsworth, was sacked last year by GEC, Coventry, because she underwent a sex change, but ASTMS fought her case on the basis of unfair dismissal and won her unconditional reinstatement.

This most important case not only brought to the fore prejudice and uninformed bigotry, it also highlighted the fact that rational explanation on such an issue can win solidarity from fellow workers, which was a major factor in winning Linda's job back.

Linda has a medical history of sex uncertainty since birth and, in March 1981, informed GEC she intended to come to work 'as a woman'. After much discussion with the management raising 'problems' of alleged staff disruption and difficulty over toilet arrangements, she was dismissed.

An Industrial Tribunal, held in February, found unanimously that she had been unfairly dismissed and the Tribunal itself was a damning indictment of the company's attitude of prejudice and discrimination.

The reason stated by GEC for the dismissal was '... his [they continually referred to her as male] life style made continued employment in a large organisation untenable.' And, after '... consulting with psychiatric and medical advisers...' continued employment was impractical.

Refute

The findings of the Tribunal refute this. At a meeting between a Mr Kenwright, a key company figure, and Dr Muriel Jones, under whose supervision Linda had been for some time, Dr Jones told Mr Kenwright that Linda could not continue in the role of a man, and should be given sympathetic consideration by her superiors and colleagues and be allowed to continue in her job.

Dr Jones, witness for the union, told the Tribunal that if Linda were to declare her change in sex identity she would behave in a becoming and appropriate manner and would not dress or behave in any way designed to draw attention to herself. The

Company called no medical witness before the Tribunal.

It was the view of the Tribunal: '... even before the meeting with Dr Jones, Mr Kenwright had made up his mind that the applicant would have to go', and they pointed out that Mr Kenwright rejected 'the one psychiatrist who was consulted.'

Over toileting problems management 'had not properly explored the question of how the problem relating to toilets could be overcome... The possibility of an additional toilet cubicle was never considered.'

Damning

In a damning criticism of GEC the Tribunal said: 'Furthermore, the respondents never paid any regard to the fact that the respondent might experience serious difficulties in finding new employment, after her dismissal. The applicant had been blameless... Even when she was having serious problems in her private life, she did not bring them into the work place, and indeed it was not known that the applicant had this medical problem before she gave her letter to Mr Brown.'

However, the attitude of the rest of the staff was crucial. Even after the unanimous decision that Linda had been unfairly dismissed... she still had not got her job back.

Divisional officer John Fisher, who had taken over the case, decided to embark on a massive exercise of explanation. All 50 of the representatives of the 1,100 ASTMS technicians at the plant received a copy of the Industrial Tribunal's findings, an eight-page document; then they were called to a meeting and asked for their reaction. Would there be problems if Linda came back to the plant?

Our reps, having discussed the problem and their attitudes, came down fully in support of her reinstatement.

They decided to hold a mass meeting of ASTMS members, with section meetings being held beforehand, to clear the ground of doubts and questions. This meeting also solidly backed reinstatement and rejected the concept that people would not work alongside Linda.

This was a major breakthrough — our own union members stood by their colleague. Now for the other unions.

John learned that the main clerical unions, APEX and ACTSS, were holding a mass meeting on wages and requested permission to address them on the Linda issue.

'It was an incredible meeting! There were more than 700, over half female, and I was first on the agenda. There had been no preparatory work, as with ASTMS... I was going in absolutely cold. And the response was terrific. After my explanation and call for support I was applauded and had unanimous backing. It was a great piece of solidarity.'

Another meeting, representing some 350 foremen, also supported our stand and



Photo: Coventry Evening Telegraph

ASTMS member Linda Hollingsworth starting out on her first day back at work after being sacked 15 months previously by GEC, Coventry, following a change of sex.

'I have no worries', said Linda, after ASTMS tenacity and multi-union support had won her job back — 'It will be like starting a new job'.

John estimates that over 2,000 workers at the plant took part in the debate and decided that Linda had every right to her job back and that her sex problem was a personal affair. The company really had no alternative but to accept her back.

John's word on the outcome was: I am very proud to have been associated with this tremendous act of solidarity by the GEC staff workers and hopefully it will encourage other people with social or medical difficulties to raise these matters with the union.

'It is a striking refutation

of the arguments of our enemies who say that unions do not fight for the rights of individuals, and it is another example of how only the trade union movement has the organisation to win the support of working people against the bigotry of their own employers.'

So, 15 months after being sacked, Linda Hollingsworth walked through the gates of GEC in the full knowledge that the workforce was on her side. She said: 'I have got no worries. It will be like starting a new job.'

Fullsome in her praise of

how our union had handled such an unusual problem, and the reassurance it had given through the 15 months of strain and anxiety, she said: 'In thanking the union, and particularly John Fisher, I would also thank the hundreds of people at GEC who stood by me. Since I have been back at work every one seems happy at the outcome and many I know have changed their views about the trade union movement, having seen the way ASTMS took up my personal problem to such good effect.'