

# Pressing matters for Jan

**When the Branch Secretary at Kaye Engineering (Domestic Appliance Sector) factory in Presteigne, mid Wales left nearly two years ago, members wondered who would accept the challenge of leading the branch into the future.**

Up stepped Jan Bownes, one of Britain's few women foundry workers. An aluminium die caster in the foundry, she is a woman very much in a man's world. How would the men in her branch accept her? Would she get their backing?

'I said I'd take it on because I had some experience of Union work and I didn't want our branch to die. I needn't have worried after a while I got the support of the men and we began planning for the future,' she explains.

Jan got together a union leadership team and set out her goals. 'We needed to get a recognition agreement from the company, and I wanted to see some kind of union learning scheme in our plant. These were, and still are, my dreams.'

A recognition agreement with the company was the priority. 'What a struggle it's been,' Jan says. There are 106 employees in the works, 97 of us shop floor. We had to get more than 50 per cent into Community, so that meant a lot of hard work recruiting new members without facility time.

Jan and her colleagues now have 60 in the union, more than enough. 'We're almost there. When we get it signed, the agreement will enable us to negotiate terms and conditions with management instead of them deciding what these should be. But I have written this agreement nine times, so perhaps the latest on the table will be the one we secure!'

For the past eight months Jan has also been trying to realise her second dream – a works learning centre that will enable workers to improve their skills or gain new ones.

'Learning is really important to me,' Jan explains. 'I'm severely dyslexic and when I went to Ruskin to start independent study in 1998



I didn't unpack my suitcase for the first term. I felt so stupid, I couldn't spell or construct sentences, I turned up to my first tutorial with a 250-word essay it took me a week to do. Then I got help, and my life changed dramatically. Staying at Ruskin she got a Diploma in Social Work and Hon's Degree at Oxford Brookes. She was thrilled to gain an MA in 2007, and who knows, one day she might tackle a PhD.

'We've got lots of Polish workers at our plant now; most are members of the union,' Jan explains. 'Their lack of English was a problem for many, at work and outside. I remember one day the manager told me that the batch quality wasn't good. And I said 'how do you expect it to be good when the Polish and Slovakian workers don't have good English and can't read the spec sheets? So I wanted to start to start a learning centre in the works with ESOL (English as a Second Language) classes. This would be good for them, good for the union, and of course, very good for the company.

'I got in contact with Terry Meakin in Region 5, who runs a Polish project. One of our management team came down with me to see it and he was impressed. Then I contacted the Welsh TUC to discuss funding. We didn't want to start with just one thing, we wanted our learning centre to offer learning opportunities to all our members.

'We now have the possibility of funding. Our factory director thought that employees in other small companies in Presteigne could use our learning centre and I think that's a great idea, but we will have to see. We are giving it breathing space.....'

And breathing space is something Jan could do with too. 'When I met the guy from the TUC I'd left home in Hereford at 4pm. Got into work for 6pm, worked until 6am the following morning, went back to Hereford, had a bath and changed and then off to the meeting. And that's not unusual!'

So how does she manage it all? Jan has a very supportive husband Richard, and this enables her to rise to the challenges she faces. She also has another, more personal challenge, as she nurses her disabled son.

So what drives her on? 'I suppose a desire for natural justice so people can have a better life. Jan also lends her support to a range of



Jan Bownes has big dreams for her branch and she and her members are working hard to fulfil them.

social issues, especially those concerning the future advancement of women. She harries MPs and writes to Ministers. She has received a Home Office promise that there will be funding for a group of women seeking changes in domestic violence law.

'Sometimes I feel frustrated with the pace of progress but that feeling only lasts for a day or so. 'I'm determined that we'll gain recognition and have our learning centre on the plant'.

National Officer Joe Mann is full of praise for Jan's enthusiasm, determination and dedication. 'If anyone can get the agreement and learning centre, Jan can. She knows that both will be great for our members, and importantly very good indeed for Kaye Engineering.' Let's see what 2008 brings.

