

Hello, my name is Caroline Jones and I am the Disability Officer for UNISON Caerphilly. I am disabled from birth and my disability is Cerebral Palsy, which mainly affects my mobility and balance. In recent years it has been brought to my attention, through a matter of fact conversation, by a senior physiotherapist, that my condition also affects all my processes, something I was neglected to be told as a child.

Anyway, I am happily married to a wonderful man called Chris, who is so supportive, tolerant and patient; I feel I don't deserve him sometimes. I am also a very proud mother of two sons, Lewis and James, who have grown up to be very level-headed young men, tolerant, patient and supportive of others and especially to those of us who are different! They are my most favourite and best achievement yet!

I became a Union rep because throughout my working life I have experienced many things - positive and negative within the workplace - and found myself in a position where I had had enough and felt the perception of disability needed to be addressed. We are not less able, weak individuals but individuals who are unique, who can still do our jobs but need to do it in a different way to our able-bodied counterparts. Although it must be said that perhaps this perception (in main) is borne out of ignorance due to lack of understanding and foresight rather than anything else.

I have experienced many a struggle, particularly within workplaces who do not consider when altering an office space or commissioning a new building, or implementing new policies and procedures how this will impact on the disabled workforce. We have a right to be in the workplace, be treated equally and with dignity and let's face it we all seem to have to work harder to prove we are worthy!

The main struggles and discrimination I have faced on a personal level is:

- That I am only considered able to do a menial job
- I have been compared to able-bodied counterparts
- I have been belittled, disrespected and devalued.
- Reasonable adjustments have been promised but have not been put in place.

As a result, this has and sometimes still does chip away at my confidence and my ability to function on a day to day basis which impacts on my wellbeing. Self-doubt very often creeps in! But, I have learnt to hide these thoughts and feelings, and to the outside I am still the same happy-go-lucky sociable Caroline when inside it's a very different story. As in reality, it's more their issue than mine. "Don't let anyone have the power to dictate the way you feel".

Just recently, I attended a Homeworking and Disabled People webinar on behalf of my branch, where I discovered many of us had experienced a similar issue, with lack of understanding and foresight from employers when placing us in existing or new working environments. These issues were especially highlighted to a greater degree because of the current COVID pandemic. The webinar was very insightful and informative.

What needs to change?

I believe when organisations are implementing ideas or changing policies and procedures they need to consider how any changes will affect and impact on every member of the workforce, not just the majority. Decisions need to be open and transparent and consultations between organisations and minority groups need to take place, before, during and after any changes are made within the workplace. We are not a workforce that can be brushed aside, we are loud, proud, productive, effective and worthy employees and only by working together can we achieve change that is worthwhile and longstanding for everyone!

I feel passionate about my role as Branch Disabled Members Officer and I look forward to representing and supporting the Branch if re-elected in 2021. Any queries you have or if you'd like some more information about your rights in work as a disabled employee then please do not hesitate to contact myself or the Branch.

Stay safe

Caroline