



[Tracy Abrahams](#)

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Inspiring women in our union

Tracy writes about how she has been inspired, supported and encouraged by women activists throughout her working life.

I first joined the civil service in the Department of Health and Social Security (DHSS) when I was 18 years old.

I was raised in a lone parent household and saw how complex the benefits system was to navigate and I wanted to help people understand what they were entitled to claim. Within a few days I joined the Civil and Public Services Association (CPSA), which later became PCS.

I have always been vocal, and this was noticed by Anne Bartlett and Fidelma, two strong, female NUCPS reps. They encouraged me to stand as a CPSA rep as one of the reps was due to retire. This took place within my first six months of work, and I loved being part of the team. It was where I first experienced local negotiations and then being part of a well organised branch.

I learned a lot from both Anne and Fidelma, including how to be passionate without losing my temper! They were my first union role models and I owe a lot to them both.

I attended my first CPSA conference a couple of years later as a trainee delegate and was appalled at the lack of diversity both on the top table (NEC) and on the conference floor itself. It was very male dominated and there were very few people of colour there. However, I saw female reps Zita Holbourne, Annette Rochester and Tracey Hylton and was encouraged by seeing other black women who were not just there to make up the numbers but had a lot to say! These women became my role models, and I am still in touch with them today.

The following year, I was a conference delegate for my branch and also branch secretary. I was actively encouraged by Maria Shah who was the outgoing secretary and by other reps in the region. This led to a period of 10 years attending conference and meeting so many inspiring women along the way. One of the most memorable was Anna Owens, who was “my Liverpool sister” although she worked in what was DHSS in London. We were similar ages, and both supported each other through thick and thin, sometimes having heated political debates but always with good intentions. Anna has passed away now, but I can still hear her encouraging me to get up and speak at conference to this day.

I left the civil service for seven years and returned in 2007 in the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) but did not become a rep again until about 9 years ago. I experienced bullying from my line manager, and it impacted my mental health and wellbeing. I didn't want anyone else to experience this and not feel supported. I had also noticed how fearful people were about speaking up and it made me more determined to become a rep again. I have since reconnected with reps I have known for over 20 years (including male allies) and have got to know some fantastic new reps such as Susan Webb in my current branch. We connected instantly because I feel that I have found a kindred warrior sister who motivates and inspires me to be a better version of myself.

I also met Karen Watts from HMCTS while working for that part of MOJ and her approach to negotiations was different from mine so taught me different ways of communicating with senior managers. Karen was very generous with her time and encouraged me to take on more complex cases, offering support. During this period, I have been able to meet many female activists both within PCS, and Midlands TUC. All of them have encouraged me to have greater self-belief and that it is ok to be an assertive woman!

I will continue to raise my voice loudly to fight for justice, equity, and against discrimination on behalf of PCS members, but want to champion the next generation of female activists so that we can pass the PCS baton onto them. I hope that I can inspire them as much as I have been inspired on my journey.