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Female Network Rail staff in equality fight

By Rose Jacobs

Thirty-four female middle managers at Network Rail are claiming back-pay of £25,000 each after a survey by a transport union found that women at the company earned an average of £4,500 a year less than their male counterparts.

The women's claims, due to be filed this month at a central London employment tribunal, mark the start of a union campaign over equal pay at the owner of Britain's rail infrastructure.

“This [pay gap] is completely unacceptable in a firm which receives the majority of its funding – £4bn a year – from the taxpayer,” said Manuel Cortes, general secretary of the Transport Salaried Staffs' Association (TSSA).

Network Rail said it was “committed to fair pay practices and has agreed to work with the TSSA to review our systems”.

Relations between the union and management have warmed since the departure of Peter Bennett, the former human resources director accused of bullying behaviour and racist and sexist remarks.

Under David Higgins, who joined as chief executive last year, the group is undergoing an internal review addressing “diversity and inclusion”.

Mike Emmott, an employee relations adviser at the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, said any equal pay claim filed with a tribunal could be a long-running affair. Arbiters needed advice not only on whether jobs were the same or similar, but whether they were of “equal value” to an organisation.

The TSSA estimates that claims for back-pay could mount to £25m if all 1,000 women it believes are affected by the disparities were to file claims. But Tom Condon, a union spokesman, said it was open to talks with Network Rail rather than pursuing a legal settlement.

“They [the 34 women] are a pathfinding claim,” said Mr Condon.

These women are paid between £30,000 and £40,000 a year, the Network Rail pay grade in which the highest number of employees fall. Jobs paying that rate include engineering, maintenance and communication positions.

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