

Siren

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Meet South West Region women's rep Diane Critchlow



The NWC sends best wishes to Sister Lynne Harding for a long, happy and peaceful retirement, after 44 years service to both the FRS and the FBU. Lynne spent her 44 years as a dedicated FBU member and official and an avid campaigner for women, in the historic struggle for pay equity. We hope that you now have the time to do the travelling that you always wished to do.

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Civilians stand behind a barbed-wire fence at the Manik Farm refugee camp – home to 220,000 refugees in northern Sri Lanka – that UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon toured in May 2009

It's the civilians

Following the 2009 national women's school, students decided after listening to our Sri Lankan guest speaker Narmadha Thiranaganama that her country should be an international focus for the forthcoming year for FBU women.

The national committee wrote emergency resolutions for conferences, committees, branches and meetings to pass in support of and to raise awareness to the plight of civilians in Sri Lanka who are exposed to a war not of their making. This culminated at the 2009 TUC congress where the NWC were proud to support an emergency motion moved by Vicky Knight in the name of the FBU. The hard work of FBU women on this issue has not only informed our own Union through the NWC's emergency motion to 2009 FBU conference, but it has also helped to create TUC policy on the issue. Well done and thanks to everyone who has helped make a difference. The following is from an article by Narmadha:

After nearly 30 long years, Sri Lanka's brutal civil war, which claimed more than 70,000 lives has finally come to an end. The war was primarily fought between the Sri Lankan government's armed forces and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). It resulted in a humanitarian disaster where civilians paid the highest price.

Amnesty International estimates that a further 20,000 or more people died in the last two weeks of the war.

Today, hundreds of thousands of Tamil civilians, displaced by the fighting are living in camps without adequate food, water or visits with or from their families.

UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon said after he had visited a displacement camp that it was "by far the most appalling scenes I have seen."

Following Sri Lanka's independence from British rule, ethnic conflicts intensified under economic pressure and the growth of nationalism. Successive failures to find a political solution to the conflict have contributed to the

Sri Lanka



DAVID GREY/REUTERS

who suffer

militarisation of Sri Lanka's political culture. The routine use of torture, abduction, extra-judicial killings and suppression of dissent by both sides has left a traumatised civilian population, particularly in the North and East of the country.

Women and children have found themselves in the front line. A 2004 Human Rights Watch report noted the endemic use of intimidation and threats to force families to provide sons and daughters for military service.

The history of the conflict, the way it has been conducted and its effect on the civilian population raise new questions and challenges for Sri Lanka.

Those who have long campaigned for peace, justice and democracy for all people in Sri Lanka now ask whether the government will seize this watershed moment to heal wounds and to bring together polarised communities.

The government, despite being overwhelmed by the humanitarian crisis, has not accepted the full assistance of the international community and continued, even up until a few weeks ago, to refuse full access to humanitarian agencies.

What attention the conflict in Sri Lanka has received over the last 30 years has focused on the aims of militarised groups and the government. Yet, as is usual in situations like this, it is civilians living in the war zone, particularly women and children who have endured the greatest silence and invisibility.

A long line of courageous dissenters who have fallen victim to both the LTTE and government assassins remind us with their words, actions and vision, that a real transformation of Sri Lanka's political culture will have to focus on those who have made the greatest sacrifices and borne the greatest cost for a war that has been waged and suffered without their consent.

Sri Lankan authorities are still not addressing properly the needs of the displaced. Conditions are unsanitary, freedom of movement is heavily restricted, displaced people have been prevented from talking to aid workers and no independent monitors have free access to visit camps.

All this further compounds the risks of abduction, arrest and sexual violence.

Editors' letter



Sisters,

Happy New Year to you and your families. We have a bursting issue of *Siren* for Spring. 2009 was a busy year for the NWC and 2010 looks like it will be even more action packed. We have our annual women's school to be held in Wortley Hall (see page 6), numerous women's conferences and events to attend on your behalf, FBU annual conference and our own national committee to organise and build further. We are also continuing with our agenda to have a positive influence in all consultation and planning exercises for the fire and rescue service with regard to women members from local to government level.

The FBU is your voice, so obviously this needs your input and thoughts. Thank you for your feedback, views and, most importantly, your attendance at FBU women's meetings in your brigades, regions and ultimately, the National Women's Committee during 2009 and we look forward to seeing you again at meetings in 2010.

A list of your NWC reps can be found on page 8 and they will be writing to you in the near future with dates of forthcoming meetings for the year ahead, but contact details are there for any issues or information they can help you with.

We have the additional impending General Election to add to our workload in the coming months and I'm sure you will all agree that the fascist BNP and 'Call me' Dave's Tory options merely hold promises of further cuts and social and financial division for the country. The cuts agenda from any party is also a non-starter as far as FBU members are concerned, so we have these three months before an election to use our political strength to its maximum effect.

Investment in public services is required now

As we know, the impact of recession is felt disproportionately by women and the NWC has debated the TUC's 2009 recession reports and their social and economic impact. We have decided to focus debate and attention around stress and depression, violence and ageing in the workforce, with menopause being a key concern for many of our women members.

So, onwards and upwards sisters and may 2010 be another great year for the NWC.

**Vicky Knight, Executive Council member, Women
Kerry Baigent, Secretary, National Women's Committee**

SAY NO to VO2 max 42

Fire authorities are being urged to adopt a fitness test that discriminates against women and older firefighters

Fire authorities across the UK are being encouraged to recruit and retain more women in front-line jobs. But, at the same time, those authorities are being urged to adopt a controversial fitness test that will discriminate not only against women but also against older firefighters. Whatever happened to joined up thinking?

Expect to hear more about VO2 max 42. It is poised to emerge as the new national fitness standard for firefighters unless it can be stopped in its tracks. Some FRSS are already using it and many others are preparing to do so. It is being vigorously championed by FireFit and it is believed that Communities and Local Government is likely to recommend it as the fitness standard for the service – a move which would further fuel its spread.

But there is growing concern within the Union that the VO2 max 42 fitness standard is not up to scratch. In fact, it threatens to entrench discrimination and short-change all women firefighters and their older male colleagues too. For the test discriminates on grounds of age as well as sex – the older firefighters get, the harder it

is for them to make the grade. There has been no national agreement between employers and the FBU on adopting the controversial test.

The NWC believes it is time to speak out and argue for a testing system that is fair for all, instead of one that penalises women and all older firefighters.

At its AGM in December the NWC backed a motion calling on the FBU executive committee to take a stand against discriminatory testing. It should, women argued, be replaced by properly researched gender-neutral ways of assessing firefighter fitness, drawing on the expertise of fitness professionals.

Physical workout

So how does the test work? The VO2 max test measures the maximum rate the body can take up oxygen and convert it into energy. It involves a physical workout to test the aerobic energy system – but, crucially, it takes no account of physiological differences between men and women.

FireFit recommends all operational firefighters, wholetime and retained, “irrespective of age, gender or duty system”, should reach the same aerobic fitness level and be checked at six-monthly intervals.

Everyone should achieve a VO2 max of at least 42.

But, as Helen Tooley, NWC rep for region 6 points out, the test is skewed against women: “The data shows that women of all ages have to be consistently fitter than their male counterparts to reach the same levels. A 35 year-old male of “average” fitness could successfully enter the fire service in the required parameters. But a female of 35 would have to be of “good” or “excellent” fitness,” she says.

Helen, a trained fitness instructor, says the NWC has no problem with fitness testing at regular intervals as long as it is “fair and appropriate”.

Setting a one-size-fits-all target of VO2 max 42 is far from fair, Helen says. “Females will never have the same reading as a male equivalent because they have smaller lungs. It’s also proven that VO2 max decreases with age – so an older person and all women will have to be of a higher fitness level than younger male colleagues to reach this standard.

“A fitness testing process where women



FIT: Helen Tooley takes part in a charity run in firefighting kit





SAMUEL ASHFIELD/SCIENCE PHOTO LIBRARY

THE TEST

The VO₂ max test measures the volume of oxygen a body consumes in a minute and was developed to test athletes. Physical performance is related to the amount of oxygen supplied to the muscles. The supply of oxygen is dictated by how often the heart beats, the volume of blood transported by every beat and the amount of oxygen in that blood. It is also dependent on how well the tissue or muscle extracts the oxygen. The test can be complex and expensive. A score of 42 could be considered average for a man aged 26 to 35. Average scores for women and anybody older than this are lower.

are more likely to fail will also impact psychologically on female firefighters, making them feel inferior if they fail, giving others an excuse to say women are not up to the job. “It is important to state we do not want easier standards for our women. We fully support fitness testing for capability for role. However this testing should be fair and equal for all and relate to the tasks a firefighter may carry out regardless of age or gender.”

Holistic approach

John McGhee, FBU national officer with responsibility for both health and safety and equality, says a proper equality impact assessment would expose the test as discriminatory. It was, he says, adopted on the basis of inadequate and flawed research, looking at one aspect of the firefighter’s role. Its use could lead brigades to get rid of valuable and highly experienced team members.

John argues for an holistic approach to firefighter health and fitness. But, he points out, many brigades are removing chefs from kitchens when they should be providing firefighters with dietary advice and good nutrition as part of a properly thought-out health and fitness policy.

He also points out that the FireFit recommendation that firefighters’ contracts of employment should include a statement stating the employee “has a responsibility for ensuring that they maintain a level of physical fitness necessary to carry out their operational duties” has “massive implications”.

MOTION PASSED AT THE LAST FBU NATIONAL WOMEN’S COMMITTEE ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

This Women’s AGM is concerned by the implementation of a national fitness standard being proposed by ‘FireFit’ which not only discriminates against women but also is not relevant to the role of firefighter. Although this AGM supports the need to improve fitness in the UK fire and rescue service, these tests should not be a blanket fit, but take into account the physiological differences between men and women. This AGM calls upon the EC to give a national stance against implementation of these tests until further research into gender-neutral and job-related testing has been completed by experienced fitness professionals.

SCIENCEPHOTO

NATIONAL WOMEN'S COMMITTEE

WOMEN MEMBERS AGM

The Women Members' AGM took place on 2 December and saw 26 women travel to Wortley Hall to debate 22 resolutions covering issues ranging from maternity pay to domestic abuse and why it is a trade union issue. The AGM was excellent and all delegates gave a wonderful contribution. The National Committee met the following day and picked three motions from the 22 to submit to the FBU Annual Conference. They are: Fire and Rescue Service Apparel, Domestic Abuse and The Menopause. All motions referred to can be viewed at www.nwcfbu.co.uk.



TWELFTH ANNUAL WOMEN'S SCHOOL

The FBU Women's School is being held at Wortley Hall from 9 to 11 April 2010.

The school offers students the ability to share experiences with each other, learn more about the FBU and will give women the knowledge and skills

to enable them to participate within the FBU and the wider trade union movement.

Previous students have told us that among their favourites at

the school are the workshops. Students can choose from a range of workshops and participate in two in the course of the school. Workshops (above) vary from learning more about the FBU; knowing your rights in regard to maternity; stress busting; women's health and safety; to how to deal with bullying in the workplace.

The school will also have a number of guest speakers and a crèche is provided for children and young adults up to the age of 18.

Applications have been sent to home addresses and need to be returned to Kerry Baigent at the South West Regional Office in Bristol by 10 March.

WOMEN'S TUC

The Women's TUC takes place in Eastbourne from 10 to 12 March. The WTUC is a conference of women delegates from all TUC-affiliated unions. The FBU has submitted two motions and eight delegates will represent the Union. The two motions are on Afghanistan and domestic abuse and can be viewed at www.nwcfbu.co.uk. A full report will appear in the next issue of *Siren*.



NORTHERN TUC

Engaging in local issues



Samantha Rye reports on the Northern TUC

Mandy Cregin (Northumberland Vice Chair and Womens rep) and I attended the Northern TUC this year along with Peter Wilcox, the newly elected Regional Secretary.

We attend our regional TUC conference as part of the wider trade union movement. Sitting on the regional TUC helps the FBU engage in local issues that can affect our members. As ever, unity is strength and by working closely with other trade unions we can share our knowledge.

As with any conference, we can put forward motions/resolutions and this year I moved a resolution on human trafficking. Mandy moved a resolution on statutory duty for flood rescue and Peter moved a resolution on

equality reps and statutory paid time off. All three resolutions were carried unanimously.

This year's conference focused on the economic downturn and its impact on the region and the forthcoming European elections. Unions were uniting to raise awareness of far-right parties gaining votes and were supporting the Hope Not Hate campaign.

Around the conference was a display depicting Anne Frank's life. It was very thought-provoking and had been put together to educate people (especially schools) about the Holocaust and the far-right's rise to power in Germany during the depression. We hope to have the display for the 2010 FBU Women's School.

Guest speakers at the Northern TUC this year were Nick Brown, Minister for the North East, and Frances O'Grady, TUC Deputy General Secretary. If you attended the recent lobby of Parliament then you will remember that Frances addressed the lobby with a very powerful and supportive speech. Proving that by working together we gain support and are stronger in the fight.

It is hoped that the Anne Frank exhibition at the Northern TUC can be displayed at this year's FBU Women's School



SOUNDBITES

WOMEN IN THE MAJORITY

Minister for Women Harriet Harman noted recently that women are now the majority of the trade union movement, even though the leaderships of unions are still overwhelmingly male.

At a recent meeting with government ministers at Chequers, the male general secretaries present acknowledged that women were absent from the event and raised their members' concerns, which were ... childcare and flexible working for families amongst others!

Testimony that the work done by trade union women on these issues and more has an impact at every level.



STEFANO CAGNONI/REPORTDIGITAL.CO.UK



A Barclays callcentre in Coventry

JOHN HARRIS/REPORTDIGITAL.CO.UK

WOMEN IN FINANCE EARN LESS THAN HALF MEN'S PAY

The Equality and Human Rights Commission has concluded an in-depth investigation of the nature and causes of gender discrimination and inequality in financial services organisations. Its report revealed that women working full time in the finance sector last year earned 55% less than male counterparts in the same grades or job categories. It found that widespread pay secrecy, stereotyping, discrimination, a 'macho lads culture' and the use of bonuses were all factors.

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AWARENESS

23 November 2009 saw the launch of a government strategy to tackle all forms of violence against women and girls. It will include the progressive step of introducing compulsory lessons in schools to highlight the unacceptability of domestic violence.

The NWC applauds government for stepping up this campaign and using early years education as a tool for empowering children and families.



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2010 ANNIVERSARIES

THE CENTENARY YEAR OF ...

THE 1910 WOMEN CHAINMAKERS' DISPUTE – a significant moment in UK labour history with hundreds of low-paid women, earning a pittance for their work, successfully prosecuting a dispute



that laid the foundations for today's national minimum wage.

The Women Chainmakers Festival, (held at Dudley's Black Country Living Museum in the West Midlands and open to all) each year celebrates the pioneering work of the women chainmakers of Cradley Heath through music, drama, dance, poetry and performance and 'flies the banner' for the historically important role of women within Britain's working and industrial heritage.

For more details, visit the museum website at www.bclm.co.uk.

and...

INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY. It is 100 years since the declaration of International Women's Day. Celebrated on 8 March and commemorated throughout the world as Women's Day, it is part of the history of the working class women's struggle.

The first event took place in New York, on 8 March 1908, when about 15,000 women marched to demand shorter hours, better pay and voting rights.

They were the women workers of garment companies, in the needle trade and working in appalling conditions in sweatshops. They also demanded an end to child labour.

As the struggle intensified all over Europe and America, in 1910, at a Socialist International meeting in Copenhagen, an International Women's Day of no fixed date was proposed to honour the women's rights movement. In 1911, Clara Zetkin, a leader of the working class women's movement, organised the first IWD in Germany and it was also celebrated in Austria, Denmark, Germany and Switzerland on 19 March.

In 1913, IWD was transferred to 8 March and since then the women's movement has made this day so well known that it is celebrated throughout the world.



DIANE CRITCHLOW DORSET AND SOUTH WEST WOMEN'S REP

Three years ago I went to my first FBU meeting in Bristol. I joined the Union when I first became a firefighter but was not involved until this point. I had decided not to go to any women's meetings as I did not want to highlight myself as different. I think this is a common theme with women when they first join.

But as you settle in and come across various issues that are relevant only to women, it is important to be able to discuss them with other women. Unfortunately you are often the only woman on station and, although I was on a very supportive watch, it can be difficult for male colleagues to understand how you are feeling at certain times, for example

I went to a regional school and was amazed by the support and understanding from both male and female members

when I was pregnant. It would have been nice to talk to other women who had been in that situation as, at the time, my brigade did not have a maternity policy and my station manager was not aware that I had to come off the run.

During this time my brigade secretary invited me to a South West Region women's meeting as one of the issues being discussed was maternity.

At the meeting I realised that there is a strong network of support out there. It was a structured and productive meeting that left me feeling positive and keen to get involved. I then went to a regional school and was amazed by the support and understanding from both male and female members. I learnt an awful lot at the school but realised there was so much more to learn if I wanted to help to improve conditions in the workplace.

It was not long before I became the women's rep for Dorset and with the help of my brigade secretary started to get involved with maternity policy and issues relating to uniform and facilities. Dorset is now waiting for the arrival of female-fit work trousers and once these arrive we will have a full complement of female-fit uniform and PPE.

I have also been involved in changing the plans for a new fire station from unisex facilities to separate facilities providing better conditions and dignity for all.

As well as Dorset rep, I am also now South West Region women's rep. My goal for the next year is to help to get the women in the region organising themselves within their own brigades.

There are many issues that are pertinent only to women, like pregnancy and the menopause. It is so comforting to be able to discuss such issues with other women who have been through or have concerns about them.

I am on the National Women's Committee and attend meetings to report back on and get advice on issues within the region. We are also involved in drafting a policy on domestic violence that is both challenging and rewarding.

Women are different, but this enables us to offer different skills and abilities. To be a female in a largely male environment poses challenges not always appreciated by our male colleagues.

By supporting your female section you are not separating yourself from your male colleagues. The idea is to increase our voice to enable necessary changes to be discussed with all females.

With more female members involved, the changes will be more considered and relevant due to greater consultation.

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