

# Siren

Inside this issue

- A timely Women's School
- FBU women at the TUC

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Summer 2008



## DIGNITY FOR ALL

### Facilities campaign progresses





Inside

JESS HURD

FBU Women's School  
Pages 4 to 5

#### 4 Women's school

Equality at home and abroad



#### 6 Dignity for all

Union wins significant victories as campaign gathers pace

#### 8 Sisters are doin' it

FBU success at the Women's TUC

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# Equality strategy

# FRS equality and diversity strategy new recruitment targets imminent

**O**n 28 May 2008, the Government will launch its new strategy for equality and diversity in the Fire and Rescue Service in England. Within this strategy will be a set of new recruitment targets for women and black and minority ethnic members.

Existing targets set in 1999 stated that by 2009 women should make up 15% of the firefighting workforce in England and Wales.

Rumours that you "have to be a woman to get a job as a firefighter these days" are clearly untrue and

stated purely for malicious reasons, as women firefighters in England still only make up 2.8% of all firefighters, and this is after nine years of recruitment!

**We encourage you to attend any women's meetings that are taking place in your area over the next few months**

It just goes to show that we mustn't always believe what we hear.

That said, the NWC knows that when government targets are launched, times can be tough for some women at work

and so we encourage you to attend any women's meetings that are taking place in your area over the next few months. These meetings can provide you with up-to-date information and support.



**Are you an FBU woman member but not receiving your personal copy of Siren? Contact Kerry Baigent**



MARTIN JENKINSON

# Editors' letter



**“W**e can do it! – the appropriately named 2008 Annual Women’s School heralded a manic flurry of activity for your NWC, officials, activists and members alike. After the three-month-plus organising period for the school, it passed as enjoyably and smoothly as ever! Sixty students, 31 children, speakers and guests from as far as Australia, Iraq and head office (I know, hardly exotic!) addressed the eager students over three days in Wortley Hall, near Sheffield. Many thanks to those who attended for your hard work and invaluable feed-back, we hope to see you next year discussing the topics you have asked for in 2009. (Read more on page 4)

Then, with hardly a day’s break, your officials travelled on to Eastbourne for the 2008 TUC Women’s conference – where both the FBU’s motions on childcare and women in Afghanistan carried unanimously and the FBU was re-elected to the TUC Women’s Committee. (See page 8 for more)

The committee in March also welcomed circulation of the new ‘Maternity, Paternity and Adoption Rights’ negotiating policy which was developed by the National Women’s Committee and agreed by the FBU Executive Council. As

## This document is a fantastic tool for use in negotiating maternity/ paternity and adoption rights

members, you may have seen this already, but this document is a fantastic tool for use in negotiating maternity/paternity and adoption rights. It also contains useful statutory information and contact details for organisations that can help in many situations too. Let’s hope that, as a result, fire and rescue services are already re-evaluating their policies.

Also, in the first quarter of 2008 your NWC officials joined a small delegation who met the Fire Minister, Parmjit Dhanda, to discuss equality issues impacting on our membership. We raised items of outstanding importance to FRS women, those long-standing problem areas such as facilities, uniform and maternity provision. We have also committed to continuing to work closely with the department of Communities and Local Government on improving current provisions as and where possible.

Finally, I hope you all spent 8 March – International Women’ Day – in good company. At our school FBU women members celebrated the achievements of women in the FBU and society and recognised the struggles we still face today, like our fight to protect a woman’s right to choose, for workplaces free from fear and discrimination and equality in pay, education, treatment and representation.

So, with all this in mind, look out for your next local women’s committee meeting and make sure you do all you can to attend sisters, your union needs you. Together “we can do it”.

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

## Equality at home and abroad

**S**ixty students, 31 children and three sororal delegates from Australia attended the 2008 FBU Women's school held at Wortley Hall, near Sheffield between 7 and 9 March this year.

A timely event, encompassing International Women's Day and covering a range of issues – from responding to the National FRS Equality and Diversity Strategy to equal pay, how the vote was won, and women in Iraq – ensured wide debate and the inclusion of all.

Eight workshops ran over the weekend: Workplace bullying; How the Vote was won – The East London Federation of Suffragettes and the significance of Sylvia Pankhurst; Women and the women's movement today; Finding your voice – learn to speak up; Women's health and safety; Women in the fire service; Depression and post-natal depression; and Do women have a 'best before date?' – the media's portrayal of women and attitudes towards ageing.

There were also evening sessions: DVDs on the TUC

equal pay archives and the NYFD film "Taking The Heat", which was requested again and again over the weekend.

On the morning of International Women's day on March 8, the General Secretary addressed the school and in the evening a banner procession and mass meeting/celebration was held in the ballroom presenting the work of the "young trade unionists" in attendance and contributions from guests and students alike celebrating the event.

In a three-hour session the FBU Women's response to the equality and diversity strategy and questionnaire outcomes, soon to be released by CLG, were collated and will be fed back into the relevant channels via the office of National Officer John McGhee.

The NWC hopes this process will assist in providing our members with the tools they may require to deal with the forthcoming survey results, including any negative reaction to it, and to assist brigades in addressing the outstanding equality issues in their FRS.

## Iraqi women tell how they are rebuilding their communities

### GUEST SPEAKERS

**O**ur guest speaker from the Iraqi Women's league, Dr Shatha Beserani, (pictured below) provided a highly informative and inspiring account of life for Iraqi women after the invasion.

She told us how it is for women and children still living in Iraq, many widowed or orphaned, how the involvement of trade unions and international aid is crucial to the rebuilding of their cities and how – by acting collectively – the Iraqi Women's League (IWL) has re-instated libraries

and schoolrooms from the rubble in towns like Basra to enable communities to function and grow.

A collection made for the IWL raised £545.

In a letter sent after the school, the chair of the Iraqi Women's League, Ahalam Kadoom, thanked the NWC "for your brilliant support ... With your support we will change women's situation in Iraq and give them strength to stand for their rights against all the brutal acts they face every day.

"We would like to work closely with you and contribute in any activities you would like us to participate in, we will give each other strength and learn from each other as well as when the situation is slightly better in Iraq we would love our women and organisation to meet you for you to have a first-hand assessment of the situation.

"With your support Iraqi women will feel they are not alone in their struggle."

■ Women firefighters invited from New South Wales and Tasmania fire departments gave interesting input on the political scene for women in Australia.





PICTURES: JESS HUDO

# 'I'll be confident back at work'

## FEEDBACK

The school exceeded expectations of students with the overwhelming majority of students positive about the mixture of activities and issues covered, according to written feedback given at the end of the school.

As always, students welcomed the networking opportunities, while Mary Davis' sessions, the guest international speaker and the workshops were also very popular.

The women FBU members and reps who attended liked the facilities and were particularly appreciative of the creche.

One student commented: "I really enjoyed the weekend. I feel fabulous and confident going back to work."

Another student remarked that she was "pleasantly surprised" by improvements from the 2007 school, from the workshops, structure to the evening sessions and "choice of exercise" in the morning to additional information in the school packs.

Echoing many, one student said: "I will definitely come again and recommend the school to other women."

"The feedback from the school was fantastic and there is a definite thirst for political, feminist and equality education amongst our women members and officials, said Executive Council Member Vicky Knight.

"Professor Mary Davis' sessions, linking the working class struggle with class and gender politics and feminist/socialist politics would, it has been suggested by many women in their feedback results, be a lesson to all of our members in translating the adage 'Unity is Strength'.

"The National Women's Committee did a wonderful job of organising and accomplishing the whole event. And it simply couldn't take place in the format it is and as accessibly as it is today without the services of our creche workers who enable many women members who usually wouldn't, to access FBU education."

Students' feedback will be used to evaluate the event and will be incorporated into the planning for next year's school.



## Equality sections 'bring so much' to the Union

### GENERAL SECRETARY

FBU General Secretary Matt Wrack mounted a robust defence of the FBU's equality sections in a speech that reiterated the importance of unity and addressed the challenges facing all members in the context of ongoing modernisation of the fire and rescue service.

"It would be a huge error to move away from the equality sections in

our Union. They have brought so much over the last 10 years, and the employers would be quick to fill that gap," he said, pointing to moves in this direction already taking place in the service.

The General Secretary added: "I don't need to speak to a women's school about the need for unity – a key role of the FBU is to work towards that."

Quoting John Horner and the

historic evidence that women were not welcomed on fire stations in years gone by (*Forged in Fire: The History of the Fire Brigades Union*), he added: "We face similar challenges to this in recent times with equality and diversity. Now we can either face and embrace that challenge head on – or retreat into bunkers. And we need to move on."

The General Secretary took questions on many issues.

The Dignity for All campaign, spearheaded by the National Women's Committee, is gathering pace as female firefighters speak out against sharing locker rooms with male colleagues. The union has won significant victories in Lothian and Borders and Cambridge after women made their views known, prompting fire chiefs to modify building plans. But there is still everything to play for in many other brigades

**W**hen architects drew up plans for a “changing village” for new stations planned for Lothian and Borders, fire chiefs were impressed. The concept seemed both modish and cost-saving.

But Denise Christie, FBU women's rep for Scotland, immediately spotted the plans contained bad news for women firefighters: mixed locker rooms. These form a key part of the “changing village” concept. And mixed facilities of any kind are seen by many women as compromising their privacy and dignity at work.

Denise, who had already led a successful fight for state-of-the-art separate facilities at Tollcross in Edinburgh where she is stationed, told managers mixed locker rooms would go down badly with women, but was not getting much response.

So she carried on spreading the word, called a meeting of FBU women members across the brigade and invited councillors from the Fire Board along to hear how female firefighters felt deeply uncomfortable about sharing locker rooms with male colleagues. Many felt so strongly they said they would not use them.

She then conducted a survey. Replies showed that over 70 per cent of female firefighters in the brigade rejected mixed facilities.

Women sent emails to flesh out their concerns. There were widespread fears that men would start stripping off in locker rooms, so mixed locker rooms could easily morph into mixed changing room by default. It would lead to embarrassment, lack of privacy and threatened dignity.

The compelling evidence Denise gathered could not easily be brushed aside. The Fire and Rescue Service's decision-making corporate group met, listened – and did a policy U-turn. Mixed locker rooms would not, after all, feature.

Wayne McCollins, Assistant Fire Chief,

# DIGNITY FOR ALL

an initial enthusiast for the “changing village” plans, admits to being won over by the case Denise presented. “All new facilities will be separate for men and women – showers, toilets, changing rooms and locker rooms. That is now brigade policy,” he told Siren. “The same principle will apply to station upgrades.”

Ross Wynn, the brigade's equality officer, said it was the professional evidence-based approach Denise adopted that convinced group members. “A colleague on the corporate group summed it up by saying ‘When our women staff are telling us something's not acceptable, why are we having a debate?’”

At Cambridge station, scheduled to be

**If we can make the environment for our existing employees emotionally and physically safe, then that message can't help but get out into the wider community.**

knocked down and rebuilt, women were again able to get changes to architect's plans to help ensure privacy and dignity.

FBU women's rep Emma Davis was on the case sharpish when mixed locker rooms were featured. Emma says it was immediately apparent that “those who had no problem with changing in the locker room would not bother to use individual cubicles and make others feel extremely uncomfortable. And that's just not acceptable.”

A female colleague had a frank discussion with the Deputy Chief Fire Officer, explaining that women would be embarrassed to use the Tampax machine in a mixed locker room.

“We looked at the plans, said what was wrong with them and came up with a solution,” said Emma, who is currently on maternity leave. “It wasn't really a battle,” she says. There will be a floor-to-ceiling partition wall between male and female locker areas.

The clear lesson from both these victories is that the union must scrutinise building plans at the earliest possible stage.

In the North West, many new PFI stations are planned. Lisa Smethurst, Merseyside Women's FBU rep, found out the area was in line for “unisex” facilities when she grilled a PFI project manager visiting her station at Southport.





FBU member Karen Hunt at the new separate locker room at Tollcross in Edinburgh, Lothian & Borders

## Our fear is that the lack of privacy could help deter women and ethnic minorities from sticking with their chosen career

Lisa quickly organised a women's section meeting where vehement opposition to the unisex concept was turned into a resolution and a campaign was born. Lisa has already presented the case "Why Unisex Won't Work" to the PFI project manager. No bidder has yet been selected, so there are no detailed plans to pore over – yet. But Merseyside women will be ready for them.

As Lisa put it to the PFI project manager: "Women continually inform me that they are not comfortable with the use of unisex facilities. When we were recruited it was imperative that separate facilities were installed on our stations, to make us feel welcome and secure at work. This no longer seems to be the case."

She also cites the glaring discrepancy between recruitment targets for women and

the depressing shortfall. Jack Straw wanted to see 15 per cent of frontline female firefighters in place by 2009. Fresh targets for new recruits are now out for consultation. Last figures show just over 3 per cent of operational firefighters are women and just over 3 per cent of all fire service staff come from minority ethnic groups.

The government has told fire and rescue services they must try harder to attract a more diverse workforce. Mixed locker rooms are likely to deter, not encourage Muslim women – and men – from applying. Or, as Lisa put it: "Our fear is that the lack of privacy could help deter women and ethnic minorities from sticking with their chosen career."

It's a view shared by London-based Sally Harper FBU Women's Action Committee secretary, who believes a safe and welcoming workplace that respects people's need for privacy and dignity would attract recruits from minority ethnic groups and boost the number of women in the service. The lack of separate facilities is limiting the number of women operational firefighters and officers at some London stations, she adds.

Forward-looking managements have realised that there's no shame in a U-turn when it's taken after listening to the concerns of a section of the workforce government and

fire and rescue services are being encouraged to recruit. Those employers who listen to what women firefighters are saying are more likely to attract – and keep – most female recruits.

As Assistant Fire Chief McCollins said: "If we can make the environment for our existing employees emotionally and physically safe, then that message can't help but get out into the wider community. Word of mouth is a powerful recruitment tool." Women in the FBU will be making sure that the message gets across to less enlightened fire and rescue bosses.

→ For more info and our motion to conference on the issue, visit: [www.nwcfbu.co.uk](http://www.nwcfbu.co.uk)

The clear lesson from the victories in Lothian & Borders and Cambridge is that the Union must scrutinise building plans at the earliest possible stage



The FBU delegation at WTUC 2008

## Hot on the heels of the FBU Women's School was the TUC Women's Conference – and FBU women played their part

# Childcare and international issues at TUC conference

Straight after the FBU Women's School this year, Vicky Knight, Kerry Baigent, Dona Feltham, Sally Harper, Sam Rye, Denise Christie and Sharon Sales Mossop travelled down to windy Eastbourne to attend the TUC Women's Conference on behalf of the FBU.

We took with us two of our Australian sisters to give them an overview of the wider issues in the UK regarding women.

The conference, on 11-14 March, was chaired by Lorene Fabian. She has been a tutor at the FBU Women's School for many years and did a great job of keeping us all in order and ensuring that the debates were well-balanced.

The FBU proposed two motions to the conference. The first concerned the provision of childcare at TUC

**Until the TUC addresses this issue fully the movement will be missing out**

events and Vicky Knight made a great speech on behalf of all women members.

The Women's Committee knows that until the TUC addresses this issue fully the movement will be missing out on the involvement of loads of women. As a union we are very proud of our inclusive childcare policy that not only thinks about the need for childcare during the day, but

also during the evening when a lot of informal work gets done.

We want to see this replicated throughout the trade union movement and believe that the TUC must lead by example. This resolution was overwhelmingly carried by the conference.

The other motion we proposed was about women in Afghanistan and was proposed by Dona Feltham. We wanted to ensure that the increasingly horrendous situation for the women and children in that country is highlighted so that the crimes taking place against them are not hidden from the wider world.

International issues are something that women relate to and have much empathy for, so we were delighted to hear from Dr Shatha Beserati, (our FBU Women's school speaker this year) of the Iraqi Women's League.

Shatha's contribution to the conference highlighting the plight of Iraqi women and children was shocking, yet motivational.

She asked affiliated unions to consider supporting the organisation in whatever manner they can. Following on from the amazing bucket collection held at the FBU Women's School just a week before, the FBU delegation decided to hold one at the WTUC and managed to raise just over £500.

FBU delegates spoke on a range of issues at the conference and we hope that we continue to do our members proud.

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