

WOMEN'S TUC 2003

Peace, Bread And Roses

Women's TUC delegation



The FBU delegation made its voice heard on a wide range of issues, and raised the profile of our Pay Dispute.

This year's Women's TUC was held on March 12-14 in the Adelphi Hotel, Liverpool. The delegation from the Fire Brigades Union consisted of our President Ruth Winters, Women's EC member Vicki Knight, Women's National Secretary Kerry Baigent, Women's National Chair Dona Feltham, Region 1 Women's Rep Janette Ferguson, Region 6 Women's Rep Staci Leech, Tayside Women's Rep Heather Lawrie, and London Women's Chair Sally Harper.

The conference was chaired by Alison Shepherd, who introduced the following speakers: Brendan Barber, TUC General Secretary Elect, Rt. Hon. Patricia Hewitt MP, Secretary for Trade & Industry and Minister for Women, Helen Jackson MP, Gloria Ramirez, CUT Colombia and Yvonne Strachan, Equality Unit, Scottish Executive.

We as usual raised and discussed a large number of motions, composites and emergency resolutions, including:

- ◆ equal pay
- ◆ women & pensions
- ◆ gender health & safety
- ◆ violence at work
- ◆ women & transport
- ◆ age discrimination
- ◆ employment tribunals
- ◆ temporary agency workers directive
- ◆ Equality Commission
- ◆ rights for sex workers
- ◆ privatisation and the two-tier workforce
- ◆ childcare
- ◆ work life balance
- ◆ the TUC women's issues
- ◆ globalisation
- ◆ exploitation of vulnerable women
- ◆ Greenfield report
- ◆ health service for homeless women
- ◆ autonomy in the criminal justice system
- ◆ international issues including Nestlé, Afghanistan, peace & nuclear disarmament, Colombia and war crimes.

Emergency Motions included:

- ◆ offshore working
- ◆ the white paper on higher education

- ◆ higher education for women
- ◆ the Fire Service Pay Dispute.

Because of the amount of business we had to get through and the tight schedule unfortunately our delegates felt they did not get the opportunity to speak in support of as many subjects as they were prepared for with research done and speeches written. But detailed below are the motions we were allowed to speak in support of:

Pay dispute

Vicki Knight, our Women's EC Member, moved the emergency motion on the Fire Service Pay Dispute, telling the delegates at the Women's TUC about:



- ◆ the dangers of the recommendations in the Bain Report (which has influenced much of what is in the White Paper)
- ◆ the cutbacks of Firefighters at crucial times, for instance, during the night when the public is more at risk
- ◆ the dangers of amalgamations of Emergency Fire Controls either with other Emergency Fire Controls or with other Emergency Service Controls
- ◆ the danger of this Labour Government's intervention on two occasions, interfering with talks and stopping offers being put forward by our employers, which lengthened our dispute and also the danger for every trade union member by the threat of a series of conditions being imposed on us.

Equal pay

Sally Harper, London Women's Chair, spoke in support of the motion on equal pay. She said that despite over half a century of campaigning, we are still having to prove our worth. She set the scene: an Emergency Fire Control Operator takes a very distressing call, a member of the public is trapped in a burning building, the Emergency Fire Control Operator stays on the line after they have mobilised



the fire appliances required giving life saving advice and support, until Firefighters arrive and physically rescue that person. A life has been saved.

As a member of the public, would you really see less value in the work of the Emergency Fire Control Operator, who sent the

Firefighters to you and then supported you until they arrived, than that of the Firefighters, who, using the information passed to them by Control, arrived to rescue you?

All we ask for is equal pay, equal worth and equal value

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One of the fundamental pillars of the current FBU pay dispute is equal pay for Emergency Control Staff. It's no surprise that 79% of our Emergency Fire Control Staff are women. And believe it or not our shift patterns do give us a good life balance. But due to cost cutting and understaffing

Private companies running public services will always put profit before people

(now being called modernisation) our Control Staff are being obliged to work excessive amounts of overtime on top of a 42-hour week. Yet they only get paid 92% of a Firefighter's wage. They perform a role that is a vital part of the firefighting scene and as a Firefighter myself I know their worth and value to our employers. It highlights the case that women struggle for equality in all areas of employment, and it would be advantageous to all working people, both trade unionists and society as a whole if we reassess the value we place on the jobs traditionally done by women. Surely, these are some of the most valuable roles in our society. All we ask for is equal pay, equal worth and equal value.

Privatisation

Kerry Baigent, our Women's National Secretary, spoke about the privatisation of public services and asked the question: Why has a Labour Government produced a code of practice that ensures that the terms & conditions of new employees will be no less favourable than of transferred employees, that is designed to put all workers on poverty wages and uses the term, to "consult", instead of "negotiate"? It also comes as no surprise that this Government is hell-bent on marginalising the trade union movement, and that the Fire Service Employers, supported by the Labour Government, are seeking to sideline the FBU in negotiations and in terms of our disputes procedure. This approach does not deal with the fact that private companies running public services will always put profit before people. We only have to look at the railways to see how far the fat cats will go to line their pockets with money. Blood money. We are the ones who know what privatisation means. We are the ones that can do something about it, but we must



remain strong in our opposition to the privatisation of our public services.

Work life balance

Janette Ferguson, our Region 1 and Strathclyde Women's Rep, spoke in support of the motion on work life balance. She emphasised the dangers of the Bain Report and the hypocrisy of the Labour Government, who say "they are the defenders of us the employees in both the public and private sectors."



The Government supports a report that states our shift system in its present form of two dayshifts, two nightshifts and three whole days off is not family friendly. They do this despite the fact that we in the FBU have documented proof that a large number of our members, both Firefighters and Emergency Fire Control Staff, men and women, would have to leave a job that we love doing because we would be expected to work longer hours than we do just now (42 hours per week). And they support such ideas despite the fact that large numbers of other emergency service workers, police and nurses have voluntarily opted to adopt our present shift pattern because it is very family friendly and despite the fact that the move at present by everyone is to shorten work hours to 37 hours or less per week.

Sex and relationship education

Heather Lawrie, our Tayside Women's Rep, spoke in support of sex & relationship education. She said it was abhorrent that in this 21st century that we, a so-called civilised country, have the highest teenage pregnancy rates in Europe. (Dundee in Scotland where I am a qualified Firefighter is traditionally known for its Jam, Jute and Journalism. Last week it topped the charts again!! Not only do we officially have the worst poet in

We need more investment in our future. Our children are our future

Britain 'William McGonagall' who penned "The Tay the Tay the Silvery Tay", we also have the highest teenage pregnancy rate in Scotland. Perhaps Dundee should now be known as 'Jam, Jute, Journalism and Juniors') And Heather asked why is it in this 21st century when the Government spend millions of pounds on

bombs, fat cat salaries and bailing out failed British Nuclear Fuels and privatised companies, can't they get it right. We need more investment in our future!! Our children are our future!!

So what can we do?

- ◆ Highlight the feminism of poverty!
- ◆ Campaign harder to reverse the cuts in the welfare state!
- ◆ Campaign harder to reverse the cuts in our public services!
- ◆ Campaign harder for greater support for lone mothers and carers and women fleeing from domestic violence!
- ◆ Improve access and rights to abortion!
- ◆ Give the girls what they are entitled to: access to a full and free range of high quality education and health care.

Nestlé

Ruth Winters asked the TUC Women's Committee why Nestlé still have a stall at the TUC Congress. The update that was given at the conference was that talks are still ongoing between the TUC and Nestlé. But the latest news hot off the press is that Nestlé were not allowed to have a stall at this year's TUC Congress!! And although talks are still ongoing, this can be seen as a great victory for both the Women's Committee of the TUC and the Women who attended the FBU Women's Conference in March.



Vote of thanks

Kerry Baigent was asked by the Chair of the Women's TUC to second the "Vote of Thanks," which is given at the end of the conference.

This practice ensures that all people who have played a part in the organising and running of conference get mentioned between the mover and seconder. This year it also gave the FBU another opportunity to raise the profile of our dispute as in effect we had the last word.

Kerry thanked all the staff at the Adelphi Hotel for their help. She said: "The Staff have been fantastic. Everything we asked for they helped us with, always around, always smiling, but we must remember that most of the staff are on the minimum wage and are living under the threat of getting 'laid

Strong action by millions of trade unionists across the country will make new Labour sit up and listen

off'. So we don't just thank them, we support them."

Kerry then thanked the guest speakers, in particular Gloria Ramirez from Colombia. She said: "Gloria made us all aware of the attack on trade unionists in Colombia. Comrades who do what we do, but who have the threat of death looming over them every time they speak."

It was now time to get the FBU final word in... Kerry thanked conference for their support, adding: "Your support at the picket lines, the letters you send and the money all help. But strong action taken by millions of Trade Unionists across the country will make New Labour sit up and listen. They need to know we are not alone in our struggle and that if they keep coming for us they will have you to answer to."

To finish, I would include this statement from the 2003 TUC Women's Conference on Iraq:

Iraq

The TUC Women's Conference expresses our opposition to war against Iraq, without the explicit authority of the United Nations and our abhorrence at the rush to war.

We pay tribute to the many organisations and individual women and men who have raised their voices and taken action in support of a peaceful solution through the UN.

Recognising the overwhelming support of women all over the world for this approach, Conference welcomes the attached statements on Iraq.

TUC General Council Statement - Feb 2003.

ICFTU World Women's Conference Resolution - Feb 2003.

ETUC Executive Statement - March 2003.

Letter to TUC affiliated unions from TUC General Secretary Elect - March 2003.

Conference agrees to hold a demonstrative action in

support of peace at the 2003 TUC Women's Conference on Friday March 14, to show our solidarity with women workers across the world.

Furthermore, we pledge to continue to work for peace. In the words of the traditional

labour movement song, honouring women trade unionists' struggles.

We say: "YES TO PEACE, BREAD AND ROSES."

We pledge to continue to work for peace

Janette Ferguson
Editor.