

# Siren

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- ◆ Sis Winters on the long game



The magazine of the Fire Brigades Union Women Members [www.fbu.org.uk](http://www.fbu.org.uk)

Spring 2007



## Are we heading backward?

Spotlight on annual conference

VOTES  
FOR  
WOMEN

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# Towering success for FBU London women's school



Down by Tower Bridge is a building that looks like a misshapen glitterball dumped beside the Thames.

City Hall is the Greater London Authority's HQ and inside its full of life. Adding to the energy of the place on 7 February 2007 were a bunch of women firefighters and their guests – gathered together for a days work.

From the start the noise was deafening, as everyone was taking the opportunity to catch up or make friends. It was good to see a lot of new faces from among the 190 or so women firefighters now in London.

A range of speakers kept us inspired and stimulated throughout the day – from Annie Marjoram, the Mayor of London's Policy Advisor on Women and, as a campaigner for years for greater representation of women in public life, somebody who

station life, the message of mutual support and building alliances, was underlined by a film we had the opportunity to see. All FBU members should get a chance to see 'Taking the Heat' as an example of collective action, driven by unshakeable belief in justice and respect for all human beings.

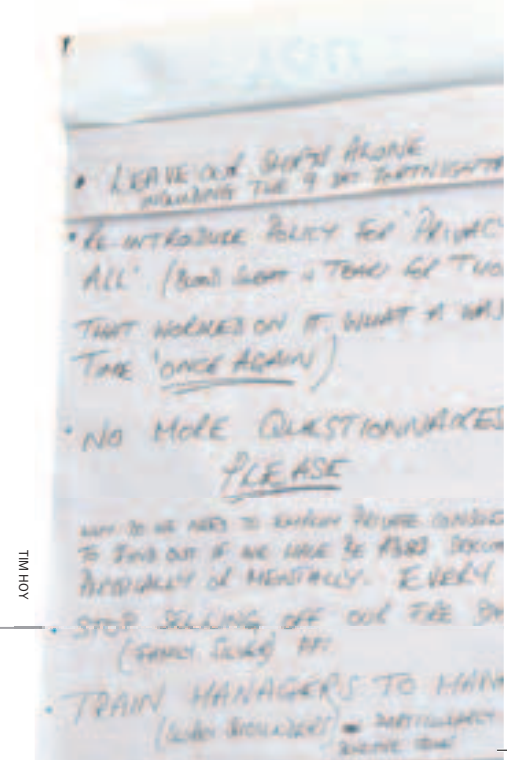
If the ice was broken early on, we got to know more of each other in the post-lunch workshops discussing how to improve our working lives in London. Some confident report-backs showed a wide range of interests and concerns. Better environmental policies, more attention to health and fitness and IT

Better environmental policies, more attention to health and fitness and IT provision on stations, were among the newer issues raised

has long taken an interest in London's women firefighters, to Brenda Berkman, retired last year after 24 years service from the New York Fire Brigade as a Captain (WM B in London), having ensured women are able to work in the Big Apple as firefighters through her successful legal challenge to the discriminatory NYFS selection procedures.

Linda's story of the difficulties of

# Education





DEAN TOMLINSON/ISTOCKPHOTO.COM

provision on stations, were among the newer issues raised. Ongoing issues highlighted included retaining our shift system, better childcare

**Some confident reportbacks showed a wide range of interests and concerns. All will feed through to FBU negotiations**

provision, well-managed part-time and other flexible working patterns, more effective support on promotion, opportunities to flag up problems, better brigade management of 'difficult' issues

on stations (and help for managers where necessary), challenging sexist stereotypes and privacy for all. All these points will feed through to FBU negotiations.

Listening to this discussion, and then answering questions on these and other issues, was our good friend Ruth Winters the then FBU President, Barbara Riddell (LFB Director of Resources), Roy Bishop (Deputy Commissioner LFB) and Ron Dobson (AC with responsibility for Equalities).

Thanks are due to the Brigade representatives for coming along and taking a bit of heat themselves – and for the excellently organised school, London Education Officer Linda Smith, who together with Sally Harper and Sian Griffiths secured the sponsorship of the FBU. Thanks also to LFB, who paid for Brenda's attendance, and the GLA. And last but not least to another two most welcome attendees: Sue Batten: first London (and UK) woman firefighter, visiting from Avon, and to Dany Cotton, now an Area Manager, heaven help her.

The event was remarkable for the warmth and confidence of those attending. I'm already looking forward to the next one. And, as always, it was refreshing to have young children around – who remind us that once none of us had any hesitation in making our voices heard.

# Editors' letter



**Hi Sisters! Welcome to this Spring issue of Siren.**

First, we must start by acknowledging International Women's day, which was March 8, and send sororal greetings to all. Hope you marked the occasion by doing something relevant!

We have to thank Sister Gail Banks, Region 13 rep for her support and involvement in the work of the committee and wish her the best for the future. Women's meetings will be held in all brigades in the region during March and April to discuss the future organisation and representation of women in the region. So if you're in the

**Some articles in this issue of Siren may be quite challenging – but FBU women don't shy away from a decent debate**

**South West, look out for details and we hope to see you then.**

This issue reports on the progress the National Women' Committee (NWC) are making on your behalf. If there are ideas you have for issues to be covered in future, then let us know and we'll put them to the editorial board. If you have any problems or concerns locally, please get in touch with your regional rep or the NWC officials (details on the back page or on our website at [www.nwcfbu.org.uk](http://www.nwcfbu.org.uk)) and we'll do what we can to help.

Some articles may be quite challenging in this issue. But as you know, FBU women don't shy away from a decent debate. It is time for us all to get involved. FBU annual conference is just around the corner (9-11 May at the Floral Hall, Southport).

Finally, don't forget our Annual FBU Women's School, which is being held at Wortley Hall, near Sheffield on 13-15 April. You should have received applications forms at your home addresses by now.

Enjoy the read.

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



# CAMPAIGN NEWS

## In brief

◆ The National Women's Committee thank Sister Val Salmon for her contribution over the years to the equality agenda both within the FBU and society as a whole. As well as her role as EC member for all emergency fire control staff, Val is a committed trade unionist, has always worked hard and has been visible in her support for equality. We wish her well for the future. We welcome Sister Sharon Eames as EC Member for control staff, who took up office in December and we look forward to our committees continuing to work together.



◆ As Siren went to press, FBU women were to call at the WTUC in Scarborough, 14–16 March, for affiliates to assist millions of women in Zimbabwe who are without safe affordable sanitary products and face an increase in vaginal infections, infertility and depression. FBU women will also be raising our serious concerns about the TUC General Council decision not to expand the current childcare provisions for TUC conferences.

◆ 40 years after the 1967 Abortion Act, MPs, Peers, doctors, nurses, sexual health organisations, trade unions, students and pro-choice supporters have joined Abortion Rights in a push for a modern abortion law that would see: women, not doctors, making the abortion decision in the first three months; an end to unacceptable delays in service provision; and an end to attacks on current rights. More info: [www.abortionrights.org.uk](http://www.abortionrights.org.uk)

## Research will aid policies on retention and progression

### RECRUITMENT & RETENTION

The Department of Communities and Local Government has commissioned ICM, an independent research company, to undertake research among firefighters in England.

The project will investigate the workplace experiences of whole-time and retained duty system firefighters both serving and those who have recently left the service. The purpose of the research is to support the service in the development of effective policies and practical approaches to tackle key workforce issues such as recruitment, retention and progression in the coming years.

### Independent

ICM has been conducting independent research for more than 20 years and will be conducting this project under the Market Research Society's guidelines. As a result, ICM guarantees absolute confidenti-



Trainee firefighter  
Emma Pass at Tamworth Fire  
Station in Staffordshire

ality to anyone taking part in the research, be that by attending a focus group or completing a questionnaire. ICM guarantees that no-one will be able to be identified should they take part in the project.

The project has the full support of all the fire and rescue service stakeholders including the FBU Women's Committee. It is anticipated that the research

findings will be published by the summer of 2007.

### Point of contact

The FBU Women's Committee would urge everyone who is invited to take part in the survey to complete and return their questionnaire.

There will be a point of contact at ICM for those invited to take part.

## Do your bit for women's future

### INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY

On 8 March every year women's organisations and some governments around the world celebrate International Women's Day (IWD) by holding events that honour women's advancement and serve to remind women of the continued need for action to ensure women's equality is gained and the eternal vigilance that is required to maintain any gains around women's equality in all aspects of life.

IWD has grown to become a global day of recognition and celebration across developed and developing countries alike. IWD has grown from strength to strength annually and for many years the United Nations has held an annual IWD conference to coordinate international efforts for women's rights and participation in social, political and economic processes. In this new millennium, with more women in the boardroom, greater

equality in legislative rights, and an increased critical mass of women's visibility as impressive role models in every aspect of life, one could think that women have gained true equality. The unfortunate fact is that women are still not paid equally to that of their male counterparts, women still are not present in equal numbers in business, politics or the trade union movement, and globally women's education, health and the violence against them is worse than that of men.

### Celebration

Many unions, including the FBU and the T&G, are calling for International Women's Day to become an additional bank holiday for all workers in the UK in line with many other countries across the world. So make a difference, think globally and act locally! Make every day International Women's Day. Do your bit to ensure that the future for women and girls is bright, equal, safe and rewarding.



DAVID BURROWS

# Sophie will feel the heat

## INTEGRATED CLOTHING PROJECT

Following years of campaigning by women in the FBU, asking for a female form manikin to test fire kit worn by women, *Siren* can reveal that the UK fire and rescue service has finally recognised that women firefighters should receive the same level of health and safety protection as their male counterparts.

Sally Harper, who represents the National Women's Committee on the FBU National Health and Safety Committee, hopes the new fire kit that is currently under development within the integrated clothing project is going to be tested on a female form manikin.

## Years of campaigning

She says: "Even though women have been firefighters for the past 25 years, it is only now, in 2007, following years of campaigning by women members for women's fire kit, that personal protective equipment (PPE) is to be tested on a female manikin.

"We have reached the point where testing can now take place.

Using manikins to test for burn patterns is not a new idea. BTTG Fire Technology Services has been evaluating heat and flame protective clothing using heat-sensing male manikins since 1992.

"There are three generations of the RALPH (Research Aim Longer Protection against Heat) male form manikin.

## Delighted

"I am delighted to report that there now is a first generation female form manikin SOPHIE (System Objective Protection against Heat In Emergencies). This manikin will be used in the very near future in testing for burn patterns and the level of protection that PPE gives to operational women firefighters when carrying out their duties."

All fire kit has to be tested to the standard EN469 2005. Unbelievably, Annex E of this states that the testing for burn patterns on a manikin is optional and is not part of the standard.

Sally Harper will be attending the testing session on behalf of women members.



## RUTH WINTERS

FBU President  
(September 2003–February 2007)

## Building the Union

Sisters, it has been a pleasure to preside over the FBU during such a progressive period for women members. In my view, the NWC has taken the union from strength to strength on all issues that are relevant and specific to our women members in a union that has always claimed to represent us fully.

Since the National Women's Committee's inception we have seen for the first time a maternity policy, radiation policy and facilities policy. I could go on. They were all developed in consultation with and for the betterment of women, our conditions, safety and health and welfare.

It does, however, seem that at our annual conference this year, some are determined to reduce the impact and recognition of what has and could continue to be achieved for our Union, by way of removing votes from elected women representatives at some or all levels of this union in the future.

It would in my view be a great

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shame. The day that non-unionised or networking organisations have more impact with ministers, the DCLG, managers and CFOs – because they maintain status and recognition with their member bases when potentially the FBU will not – will be a sad one.

By reducing internally the value we give to minority voices, we must recognise that this will not be missed on others watching us. Comrades, sisters and brothers, let's look forward and continue to progress, not revert back and regress. Think about the long game, look after our union, fight for it, support it, strengthen it and ensure you have a union to be proud of representing fully the voices of all.

Wishing you all the very best of luck for the future.

Comment



# our vote

## What does it really

**O**n the right is a description of a union with no equality structures and an expression of a view that the problems facing members are all the same and a union rep needs no guidance, support, advice or experience to deal with the diverse issues that, in reality, workers face.

It does not recognise that political breadth and clarity within a union comes from reflecting its membership and according all minorities in membership a meaningful voice.

Looking at the agenda for the forthcoming annual conference, this seems to be the position to which some members of the FBU would like to return – a position that accepts the status quo in society, that believes that straight white men are either aware of all equality issues, or that they don't matter,

**Proportionately, there are very few women in the fire service. However, where they do work, representation is regardless of sex. The National Executive Member for control staff is a woman.**

FBU statement on the position of women in the union, 1986

and that we've got one girl on the Executive Council, well what more do you want?

Motion 30 proposed by Nottinghamshire states that "every member should have an equal voice" and that voting rights for the equality sections "compromises" this. Perhaps a useful way of reminding ourselves of the meaning of equality is in thinking of it in terms of solidarity and accountability: remember the extremely effective advertisement used a

couple of years ago by Unison – lots of little fish being preyed upon by big fish, until they group together and see the big fish off. This is not to liken FBU men to the employers faced by Unison, but to remind us all that a collective voice is more representative and effective than singular ones – or is that the fear?

Similarly, motion 12 proposed by Northern Ireland says that "the voting entitlement of representatives of the equality sections may result in a distorted reflection of the overall membership's intent". How so? And if so, why seek to abolish only the voting entitlement of the equality reps? What if the direction of the union is 'distorted' by the control staff rep, or the retained rep? What if the voting voice of Wales begins to reflect a 'distorted' view of the interests of the rest of the union? Given the



1912: London, woman demand the vote on a London street. 2006: Members of the National Women's Committee discuss the issues ahead of a vote at the Southport recall conference. The future?

heart of the interests of other reps. Who is going to raise and pursue with vigour the question of PPE and uniforms that don't fit the average woman firefighter? Who's going to enquire as to why the ethnicity of the fire service in many inner cities doesn't reflect their population? To whom is homophobic bullying at work a key issue?

The FBU was late in recognising the need for authoritative voices to promote equality at work in the Union for all members. But the changes, when they came, were comprehensive and effective. The opportunity for a guaranteed place for the voice of equalities at the highest level in the Union has changed its public face and brought it respect across the movement.

The structures to give voices to under-represented sections developed by unions over the 1980s and 1990s were varied – tailored to the needs and history of each organisation. So it's not only unions with an under-representation of women and BME people in membership for example that took steps – large unions with a majority of women in membership also had to examine their way of working.

Unions do not work in a vacuum – they live and function in our society – a society in which women are under-represented in all hierarchies, which exhibits a shifting racism in all areas, and in which homophobia is rife.

A union working in this environment can take one of four approaches:

- 1) We are not political so this is the world we live in and we accept it;
- 2) We hate black people and gays and women should stay out of men's jobs;
- 3) It will be alright come the glorious revolution brother;
- 4) We need to use the strength and experience of all our members and therefore find ways to

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include all and ensure all have a meaningful voice.

The motivation of the movers of motion 12 and 30 could be any of 1 to 3 – we don't know. But for a progressive union it is a step backwards.

What would be the impact of abolishing the voting power of the equality reps? It would be seen as a statement of resentment, of tokenism. It makes us wonder if the movers really want to abolish the sections altogether but are either too mealy-mouthed or unsure of the current climate to do so. Straight white men must rule? One thing's for sure you seldom hear the one-legged man calling for the survival of the fittest!

In the context of changes to governmental equality organisations (the abolition of the Race Relations Commission, the Equal Opportunities Commission and the Disability Rights Commission) and the creation of an overarching equality commission with reduced government funding to support its work, now is not the time to be undermining our own structures. For the movers to begin, as they both do, by recognising the contribution, and to end, as they both do, by attempting to abolish the vote that expresses respect for that contribution, is sad.

# mean?

arithmetic (13 regions, one officers' rep, one control, one retained, three equality reps) it hardly seems likely!

What of course might be the case is that equality reps raise issues that are not at the

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PAUL HERRMANN



## DENISE CHRISTIE FBU WOMEN'S REP LOTHIAN AND BORDERS

When I started as women's rep for Lothian and Borders Fire and Rescue Service (LBRFS), I felt I had to earn the trust of women members and prove to them that a women's rep in our brigade was a good idea. This I achieved through work on facilities, and uniform and personal protective equipment (PPE).

Local media has suggested LBRFS has a very good record on sex equality, since it employs over a third of all uniformed women fire and rescue service personnel in Scotland. However, as I have pointed out to brigade management, provisions have to be put in place first to accommodate these women. Poor facilities can mean poor retention figures and if LBRFS is committed to promoting

**I can now see just how effective a women's committee can be when it progresses and resolves issues constantly raised by women members**

the fire service to women then it must have adequate facilities in place first.

I took this up with women members initially by contacting them all to ask if they had any concerns regarding their facilities in their workplaces. The response was good. And most highlighted the same concerns. These were then raised at the Equal Employment Opportunities Working Group and, as a result, the brigade's project manager, who is in charge of new builds and renovations of existing workplaces, has been asked to these

meetings. I aim to be included in the initial consultations with him.

I also asked L&B women members for their comments on the uniform and PPE they currently receive and what, if any, improvements they would like to see. Some of the concerns were ill-fitting sizes, poor quality and "make do" men's sizes.

At a meeting with the procurement manager, I negotiated that samples would be issued first to some members for evaluation. Then we agreed that the appropriate amount of correct sizes for women would be purchased and that, if any of these sizes needed adjustment the brigade seamstress would do this.

### Change

The uniform and PPE is now currently going through a process of change and I am now invited to procurement meetings to give input on what our members would like to see.

My aim now is to encourage more women to become involved with the FBU, especially around issues such as these, which concern women. I also want to gain more knowledge of the Union by, for example, attending courses, while gaining experience dealing with issues in my brigade.

Today I can say, through experience, that when women members see that you take their concerns seriously and actually get results, they realise that a women's section is a good thing and is not divisive.

Two years down the road from becoming women's rep in L&B, I can now see just how effective a women's committee can be when it progresses and resolves issues that are constantly being raised by women members.

## Contacts

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**Ring the FBU free confidential stress and support hotline 0800 783 4778**

### FBU FREEPHONE LEGAL ADVICE LINE

**0808 100 6061**

The line provides advice for **personal injury, family law, wills, conveyancing, personal finance and consumer issues**. For disciplinary and employment-related queries contact your local FBU representative.



**I'm a rep**