

Siren

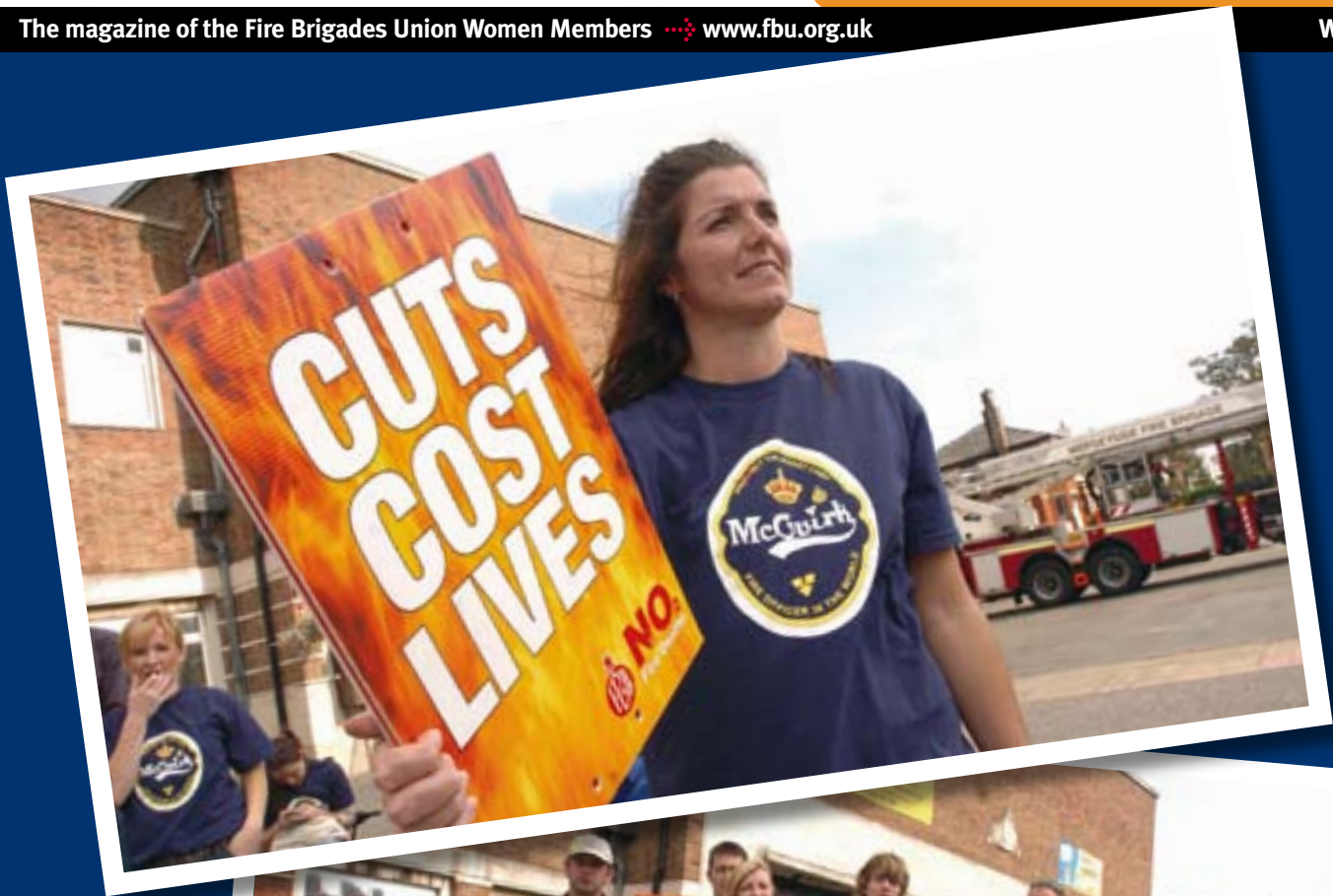
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Union gets lift
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women unite



The magazine of the Fire Brigades Union Women Members ❖ www.fbu.org.uk

Winter 2006/07



Standing proud in Merseyside

Defending jobs, the service and the Union



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Sisters are getting organised in Oz

It is always heartening to see sisters getting organised, whether here in the UK or further afield. Over 10,000 miles away, women in the fire services are doing just that, coming together within their union, the United Firefighters Union Australia (UFU).

The UFU has established a National Women's Network and held its first meeting in September. Meetings of the Network are also being organised in every state and territory. Among their initiatives is

a survey to go out to all 400 women members, out of about 13,000 "permanent" and retained members nationally.

The Network will be looking at matters including fairer recruitment processes, and issues, like family friendly provisions, which will also affect many male members.

UFU National Secretary Peter Marshall says many women firefighters have had a difficult path to walk in becoming firefighters.

"While women firefighters do not

The United Firefighters Union Australia has established a National Women's network

Comment



want to be treated differently to male firefighters there is no doubt that many have suffered harassment or discrimination during their careers with the various fire services, despite being welcomed by most male colleagues.

“This is unacceptable and as a union we have to do better. However, there are other key issues apart from whether uniforms fit or whether adequate facilities are provided.

“Why don't more women apply to be firefighters? Can the recruitment processes be fairer to women, without affecting standards? In a world where all workers expect more flexibility to deal with family matters – whether children or aging parents – how do we accommodate these needs without compromising our

10/14 roster arrangements?

“These are issues that the Network will look at and make recommendations to the Executive and National Committee. It is an exciting development for the union.”

National Women's Committee Secretary Kerry Baigent has written to the UFU offering “the full support of the FBU National Women's Committee to all members of the UFU, but in particular to the women who are putting themselves forward to be a part of the Womens Network.

“It is not an easy task but I promise you it is a very rewarding one. The National Womens Committee has had to learn a lot on our feet and if we can help you to organise and to avoid any of the obstacles that we faced then we will be delighted to do so.”

Bush fire

Editors' letter



Hi sisters! We hope you really enjoy this edition of Siren.

We hope that it will give you a taste of the many issues and events that we have been working on, on your behalf, since the summer edition.

It has been a busy time for members and officials alike. Several new brigade women's committees have been established, and there are new women officials and activists.

The following have contributed to our ever increasing workload: industrial disputes (see Merseyside article), new equality initiatives, working with brigades and regions, the TUC, Department of Communities and Local Government and so on around the equality and women's agenda. And all this culminated in a meeting in October with the Fire Minister Angela Smith to discuss issues affecting you, the women in fire and rescue service.

Our workload is also ongoing with **Come to the FBU women's school 13-15 April 2007** – apply soon for Trade Union leave to attend

regard to Continuous Professional Development payments, the Select Committee report into the UK fire and rescue service, and the Control Regionalisation campaign. We are also ensuring that women's education and information, flexible working and maternity provisions are not neglected.

We will continue to report back on progress as and when it happens and please sisters, engage in the consultation process, either at branch or brigade and regional women's committee levels. Without your involvement, women in the fire and rescue service cannot be fully represented.

Lastly sisters, remember to take advantage of the FBU women's school on 13 to 15 April 2007. There will be plenty of useful sessions/workshops, guest speakers and, of course, a creche. Apply soon for Trade Union leave to attend (ask your women's rep or brigade officials) and we look forward to seeing you there. Bye for now **Vicky Knight Executive Council member, Women Kerry Baigent, Secretary, NWC**

In brief

◆ A number of fire brigades are rethinking plans to introduce unisex toilets in new fire stations following objections made by the FBU National Women's Committee (NWC). The NWC has been raising this issue for a sustained period of time and women members continue to make it clear to FBU reps that they are not comfortable with the use of unisex toilet and/or shower facilities. The FBU National Women's Committee has produced a minimum facilities document, which was written by women in the fire and rescue service using the regulations as guidance.

◆ The FBU NWC will be calling at the STUC Women's Conference 13-14 November for support from fellow women trade unionists in giving the FBU a leading role in finding solutions to a recently completed "cultural" audit of the fire service in Scotland which included issues such as opportunities, diversity and equal treatment. Our all-woman delegation will also be calling for childcare to become an integral part of the planning and organisation of any conference, seminar or schools organised by the STUC.

Don't dilute targets, urges NWC

They should remain for women firefighters otherwise the pressure is off

SELECT COMMITTEE

The Select Committee findings regarding equality and diversity are largely supported by the National Womens Committee (NWC), as reported in Firefighter magazine.

One area that wasn't reported on was the Select Committee findings on targets, which stated that: 'We consider that it is necessary to make a distinction between uniformed and non uniformed staff as the need to increase diversity amongst non-uniformed staff is less pressing. A diversity target covering the entire workforce could take the pressure off FRA's to increase diversity amongst uniformed staff.'

The FBU NWC supports the committees' findings in this regard and have been concerned at the growing discussion amongst various stakeholders, especially at chief fire officer level,

to alter the targets in terms of the constituent group that is targeted.

Targets are produced for areas where recruitment and retention is a problem and as such targets should remain for women firefighters to ensure that every effort is applied by FRS to retain and recruit women.

The target set by former home secretary Jack Straw in 2000 was that by 2009 15% of all firefighters would be women. The current figure is just 2.5% in England and Wales, according to figures released by the Department for Communities and Local Government 2005. For a brief outline of the initial response from the FBU's equality sections to the equality and diversity aspects of the House of Commons Select Committee report into the UK fire and rescue service see Firefighter magazine (October issue, page 5).

Sian Griffiths (left), chair of FBU London's Women's Action Committee, together with colleagues



WESTERN SAHARA CAMPAIGN

TUC steps up support for Saharawi

The TUC is stepping up support to the Saharawi people, following a successful trade union delegation to the Western Sahara in May that included FBU President Ruth Winters. The Saharawi people are campaigning for self-determination and an end to the illegal occupation by Morocco, which annexed Western Sahara in 1975. The visit, the result of the FBU resolution to TUC Congress 2005, took in two refugee camps, three hospitals, a school, a computer training workshop, a farm and the homes of members of the UGTSARIO trade union. Some 80-85% of the working age population of Western Sahara's four refugee camps are women with women's committees and women elected to other democratic structures playing a key role in the administration of the camps and a leading role in the political structures. Gender equality is notably greater than some other parts of the Arab region. Malnutrition is a major problem, following a reduction in food aid from international agencies. Following the visit, the TUC agreed among other things to: organise a fringe meeting at the TUC Congress in September (which was a subsequent success); explore action through the International Labour Office to assist UGTSARIO; and reiterate its concerns about the failure to move forwards towards a referendum on independence from Morocco. More info: www.tuc.org.uk/international



NWC presses Angela Smith

MEETING THE MINISTER

The National Women's Committee joined an FBU Equality delegation to the Minister for fire Angela Smith on 11th October 2006 and raised a range of issues of importance to women in the UK fire and rescue service. The Minister was presented with a "top ten" priority list – developed out of discussions with women firefighters and control staff – of issues to tackle and based on these, the NWC made the following recommendations for action:

- 1 That the targets for diversity remain focused on specific problem areas in terms of recruitment and retention.
- 2 That the targets for diversity remain challenging for the FRS
- 3 That the Government monitor better the causes for women resigning or retiring from the FRS
- 4 That equality stops being used falsely to make changes that impact negatively on the working conditions of others
- 5 That all FRS workplaces (Including temporary) provide adequate facilities for women
- 6 That Point of Entry Selection tests

are adhered to correctly and are in place in all FRS's. Government to monitor

- 7 That good policies are recognised for their value in retaining and recruiting women and are highlighted by Government to other FRS; for example, London's Maternity Policy
- 8 That the FBU is given a seat on the Diversity Happens Programme Board
- 9 That fire authority members are given appropriate training on equality and diversity
- 10 That Government initiates a full scope equality and diversity review of the FRS
- 11 That better commitment is shown by Government on the area of equality and diversity which will lead to a positive change in the FRS for the future.

The meeting was positive and the minister expressed her commitment to equality by stating that she had an expectation for the FBU to meet regularly with officials in her department to work on policy and initiatives. The Minister also agreed to hold another meeting with the FBU Equality Groups in the New Year to discuss progress and next steps.



TAMSIN WALKOWIAK

Secretary, Hereford Women's Rep

Building the Union

In February 2006, three women met Helen Harrison (Region 7 Women's Rep) at a pensions meeting – and were persuaded to attend this years women's school. We loved it and became motivated to get more involved in the FBU Women's section, particularly as Hereford & Worcester (H&W) didn't have an active women's section at the time.

The three of us have had varied fire service careers. I have been a firefighter since 2001 and am currently a temporary leading firefighter at Bromsgrove. During my 6 years I have gone from loving it, to hating it, to thoroughly enjoying it! I am now H&W's women's rep and secretary of the brigade's newly formed women's committee. Kate Baer, also a firefighter since 2001, is committee chair. Kate likes to be busy. As well as having an active role in the women's committee, she has

We want to find out what H&W women members want and need

recently been elected as Bromsgrove station FBU rep, not to mention looking after her family. The third member is Becki Valender. In addition to working full-time at a nursery, Becki has been a retained firefighter at Pershore for two years – and loved every minute of it! Committee vice-chair, she got involved because she wanted to help set up a support network for women in the fire service.

Since meeting Helen, things have snowballed. We formed the committee in May, published our first newsletter in August and held our first – well-attended – event in September. The committee is involved in the Fairness at Work Action Group and our priorities are: an improved and updated maternity policy, improved facilities for women and a larger brigade FBU women's section. Above all we want to find out what H&W women members want and need – and try to get it!

Sisters doing it...

Standing proud

Joanne Winrow-Jones* reports on a dispute where women were once again used to help push through job cuts and detrimental changes to working conditions

The plan was to drastically reduce the number of firefighters and control staff, downgrade 4 pumps from wholetime cover to retained or recall to duty and introduce a continuous 96 hour shift system on what they describe as Low Level Activity and Risk (LLAR) stations. These factors alone were enough to ensure the resounding 71% 'Yes' vote in the ballot. But ask any FBU member on Merseyside and they'll tell you their anger runs deeper than these proposals.

In a mission to divide the FBU membership, chief fire officer Tony McGuirk spent the 18 months prior to the strike enticing members to act outside Union policy and participate in 96 hour wholetime/retained duties and co-responding – surprisingly for very little extra money. 'Part-time' contracts were introduced. An unusual description when you consider that it is worked on top of the existing 48 hours, but paid at flat rate. More like extremely cheap

I thank my sisters from around the country who have kept a constant flow of letters, texts and phone calls coming in, visited picket lines and have been here to support us on the days we walked out

overtime. Volunteers didn't always come forward in sufficient numbers. So imposition became necessary. Take LLAR shifts: those who refused to sign up on their stations were posted to the other side of the county. A bullying style of management has become the norm here but Mr McGuirk pushed too hard this time guaranteeing further 'Yes' votes.

Bewilderingly, an Equality Impact Assessment translated into cuts in the Emergency Fire Control. All in the name of equality and the need for 'family friendly' working. Women are again being used to pursue a 'modernisation' agenda – something the National Women's Committee has repeatedly raised as insulting and divisive. Apparently the current 2/2/3 shift pattern is a barrier to women joining the service and working in our predominantly female staffed control room! Interestingly, no Equality Impact Assessments have been carried out on LLAR shifts, 96 hour wholetime/retained shifts or part time contracts. Mr McGuirk does,

however, believe that working a continuous 96 hours is 'family friendly' as he will be paying men enough money for their wives to leave work and stay at home to look after the children. That was my 'Yes' vote sealed!

In comments to union officials in New Zealand in October 2005 Mr McGuirk declared his determination to smash the FBU on Merseyside and described how he planned to achieve that. Merseyside FBU has a proud legacy of defending the fire service. There can be only one reason for destroying the FBU. And that is to enable Mr McGuirk to destroy the fire service.

In 2001 under Malcolm Saunders we took strike action against two-tier entry at station commander level. While the forces provided fire cover from barracks we stood together with management on picket lines against these proposals and won. This time those managers, together with many who aspire to be them, provided the fire cover and turned out across our picket lines under blue lights. Joining them,

Sisters from Merseyside and further afield at the national demo





after only a couple of days training, were the Clerk to the Fire Authority and others who have never trained to be firefighters.

I am proud to have voted 'Yes' and I stood proudly on the picket line, my integrity intact. We recognised that withdrawing our labour was not enough to win this dispute and most were involved in daily campaigning. Leafleting, getting petitions signed, visiting councillors and MPs and speaking to sister trade unions kept us all busy and positive. Mr McGuirk must look on in wonder as to how our brigade officials have managed to mobilise what he recently described in a letter to a Fire Authority member, as a workforce with poor 'performance, standards and attitude'.

Public support was tremendous. But for me it was the support from our comrades around the country which has been most appreciated. Letters continued to pour in after our ballot began. Knowing that people have taken that time and are thinking of you is a real boost. It was also a delight to welcome visiting FBU members to our picket lines, some

Women's picket line (top), visiting Colombian Senator Gloria Ramirez with Merseyside strikers (above left) plus member clapping speakers on the day of the National Demo

of whom had incredible round trip journeys in one day. The financial support was very generous.

We on Merseyside believed we were fighting to defend both the national fire service and the national FBU and are thankful this was recognised. I thank my sisters from around the country who kept a constant flow of letters, texts and phone calls coming in, visited picket lines and were here to support us on the days we walked out.

Apparently the sun shines on the righteous. And so it did on Friday 15th September, the day of our national demonstration. Walking towards the meeting point for the march, I was amazed to see so many blue shirts, t-shirts and fire tunics advertising different brigades from across the UK. The drum band began to play and the carnival atmosphere was set. The walk across the city of Liverpool ended on St Georges Plateau with many speakers pledging their support and receiving cheers of thanks. The many Merseyside members who turned out that day were heartened by the knowledge that the support was widespread.

As Siren went to press, the FBU came to an agreement with Merseyside employers. For more see Firefighter magazine.

→ *Region 5 Women's Rep

Bewilderingly, an equality impact assessment translated into cuts to jobs in the emergency fire control

Lisa (far right) with colleagues at the FBU Merseyside women's committee



LISA SMETHURST MERSEYSIDE FBU WOMEN'S REP

Having a father and grandfather who were both passionate union members throughout their adult lives has always had a strong influence on me. As a child I could not understand why they felt the need to be a part of such organisations. Was it the security or just the social aspect?

It is only since joining the fire service that I have come to realise the importance of being part of a union. I joined the FBU during my recruit course, following my dad's advice and have never regretted it. My childhood thoughts were right. It does give you security, knowing you have a union behind you offering support. And the social side is good too, along with

I want to encourage others to get involved and hopefully I will be able to achieve that now

many other aspects. It is up to you how much you want to get involved.

I have gained both strength of mind and knowledge from the FBU and having met so many like minded people who support each other in their views, I can understand how my father and grandfather must have felt. I want to encourage others to get involved and hopefully I will be able to achieve that now I have taken on the role of the women's union rep in Merseyside.

When I was posted to my first station, although I was keen to go along to my branch union meetings, I was reluctant to get involved with the women's section as I felt the need to fit in to my watch and a male

dominated organisation. I felt that splitting the union up into sections may create a divide. I settled into my new environment quickly and would tell my colleagues about any forthcoming meetings or information I would receive from the women's section. This would sometimes provoke interesting reactions, such as 'we don't have a men's section' or 'you will have to wear your dungarees'.

We would laugh it off and I would avoid going to such meetings as I felt that they were not comfortable with me getting involved. But as time went on and I went to more and more branch meetings where I found it hard to raise questions as everyone else seemed to have a lot more knowledge than I did and I felt that my questions may sound stupid.

So I decided to go along to one of the women's union meetings where I felt able to ask my questions. The meetings were more relaxed and they are more of a discussion session than a Q&A session. As I have gained more knowledge and confidence at those meetings, I have felt able to go back to my branch and air my views. Each time I go to a women's meeting now some of my colleagues will ask me how it went. And I will discuss with them issues that were brought up - well most of them! This seems to have made them realise that we are all still in the same union and that we are not plotting behind their backs.

I have a lot to learn and was therefore reluctant to take on this new role. But with the support of my fellow members, I feel we can achieve great things.

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I'm a rep