

WOMEN'S STUC CONFERENCE REPORT

Lessons of the past and planning the way forward

by Linda Shanahan

THE annual Women's Conference of the Scottish Trades Union Council took place in Perth in November of 2001. The FBU was represented by Linda Shanahan, Regional Fairness at Work Officer and Fife Brigade Secretary who was the Vice Chair of the conference, Franca Cianni from Central Brigade, Karen Hunt from Lothian and Borders Fire Brigade and Susan Morrison also from Fife Fire Brigade.

The theme of this year's conference was on reviewing lessons of the past and planning the way forward.

The conference is always well attended and as well as getting on with the business of setting an agenda for the Women's Committee in the year ahead, provides the opportunity for delegates, new and old, to develop their public speaking skills in an open and supportive atmosphere.

It was pleasing to note that many of the new delegates had progressed through their unions to be a delegate to the conference after attending many of the weekend schools organised by the Women's Committee the previous year.

The afternoon prior to the conference delegates took to the streets to petition for universal free school meals to be provided by the Scottish Parliament. The campaign had been set up a few months previously by the Women's Committee and at time of writing is due to be presented to the Scottish Parliament.

SEX DISCRIMINATION ACT

At the conference itself, delegates discussed the planned changes to Sex Discrimination Act and resolved to continue to support and work closely with Scottish women campaigning for a 50/50 gender balance in representation at all levels in Scotland, including the Scottish Parliament and Local Government. Although Scotland currently has the highest percentage of women in its Parliament this still stands at just over a third of the membership when the population is currently around 52% female. Conference supported the view that it is crucial that women are encouraged to participate in political life and stand as candidates in elections.

AFGHANISTAN

On behalf of the Women's Committee, Linda Shanahan made a statement in relation to Afghanistan which condemned the bombings on 11 September in which workers were indiscriminately murdered and called for any diplomatic effort to

replace the Taliban to have as its guiding principle, the establishment of an administration that respects human rights, specifically women's rights and is democratically based.

FBU delegates as always were never far from the rostrum and took an active part in all the proceedings of conference.

ASYLUM

Motions from the FBU included Asylum Seekers and the Voucher System and the unfair discrimination of women under the system who have to cope with buying sanitary goods, nappies, clothing, babies bottles and necessary equipment. Asylum seekers currently get 70% of Social Security allowances as no calculations exist to take into account the needs of individuals. Conference unanimously accepted the motion, which was moved by Linda Shanahan.

WORKPLACE FACILITIES

The other FBU motion related to workplace facilities for women calling on all employers in Scotland, particularly in male dominated industries when planning new buildings to take into account the need for facilities designed for women. For too long women have had to adapt to conditions designed for men which have often meant that there is no privacy for anyone whatever their gender in the workplace. Some sisters in the rail unions graphically described some of the conditions women are currently suffering due to the inability of managers to take into account needs of their workers in relation to toilets, showers, etc. Again this motion, which was moved by Franca Cianni was resoundingly carried.

The other delegates managed to second or support motions on Bullying and Harassment – calling employers to adopt the Equal Opportunities recommendations on informing employees on what constitutes harassment and procedures for dealing with it when it occurs and asking that the Women's Committee continue to highlight best practice to employers in Scotland; Health and Safety Implications on Injuries to breasts and the link with cancer; Women and Public Life denouncing the recent appointments to the Scottish judiciary which had all been male despite the fact that there had been an abundance of high calibre women candidates; and Violence against women in Iran where women are being stoned, tortured and given the death penalty for menial crimes.



The Scottish delegation

CHILD PROSTITUTION

Child prostitution was high on the agenda of conference this year and a motion calling for local authorities to make efforts to use greater rigour not only in the pursuit of adults who exploit children in this way but to take effective steps to counter the mounting evidence that many "looked- after" children are involved in this outrageous exploitation.

DATE RAPE

The other hot issue of the conference was Date Rape and its definition following a recent ruling by a High Court judge in Aberdeen that for a charge of rape to be proved there had to be evidence of force or the threat of force being used. This definition differs greatly from the definition used in England and has implications for women who have been rendered unconscious either through drink, drugs or natural sleep.

Conference unanimously supported the motion calling for the Women's Committee to lobby the Scottish Parliament for guidelines and training to be given to judges and to lobby for necessary protection to be given to women in Scotland should the interpretation by the judge be upheld.

As conference ended Linda Shanahan was appointed Chair of the Women's Committee for the coming year and by implication Chair of next year's conference. This is the first time an FBU activist has been appointed Chair. I am sure with the support of the Women's Committee and the FBU Region 1 Women's Committee it will be a year to remember and hopefully the first of many FBU achievements in the future.

Fire Brigades Union Gay & Lesbian Support Group

www.fbu.org.uk/sections/ngl.html



email us at:

gal01@fbu-ho.org.uk

write to: NGLC

(national gay and lesbian committee)

PO Box 10555

London N1 8XT

Phone: 0800 7834778

The trade union movement represents ALL working people, regardless of their sex, race, religious belief, sexuality or disability.

All FBU members are entitled to the full rights and benefits of Union membership. The FBU believes in Fairness at Work for everyone and is committed to the elimination of all forms of discrimination, both at work and within the community.

The group was set up by gay and lesbian firefighters and control staff who are 'out' in the workplace and felt they were in a position to help others within the UK fire service. Within the groups five year existence, we have achieved official recognition with the FBU, as well as representing the FBU in forums which were once untouched. We also have an extensive network to support and advise gay, lesbian and bisexual members who may feel isolated or harassed.

The group is run on a strictly confidential basis and accepts the rules, constitution and democracy of the Fire Brigades Union.

Our main aims are:

- ★ Ensuring gay and lesbian members have a voice within the FBU, and making sure we are not left out in equality issues at Brigade, Regional and National level.
- ★ Providing support to gay, lesbian and bisexual members in ALL regions of the FBU.
- ★ Identifying and dealing with any issues/problems faced by our members.
- ★ Providing members with the opportunity to talk/meet with other members.
- ★ Distribute information concerning gay and lesbian issues to members.

Any gay, lesbian or bisexual FBU member contacting the group will only be dealt with by a group member. All information will be protected and NOT made available to any official unless the member gives his/her permission.



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