

## FOREIGN DISPATCH

# My trip to Kazakhstan

**Lorene Fabian, a member of Amicus and TUC tutor, has been guiding us at our National Women's School for a number of years, helping Marilyn to keep us in check and to help our National Women's Committee make sure that it is always a success. It was at Wortley Hall that Lorene first talked about her visit to Kazakhstan, so I asked her if she would mind writing for us when she got back, she said she didn't, so when she got back she did...**



**Lorene Fabian (centre) with Kazakhstan women**

ARRIVING in the City of Almaty 10 August, (temperature 108 degrees) you are immediately struck by the enormous mountains surrounding three sides of the city, which separates Kazakhstan from China.

After a rest and a cup of tea, a colleague and I strolled around the extremely cosmopolitan centre which offered an abundance of street cafes, bars etc. There are over 100 different ethnic people in Kazakhstan who all appear to assimilate very well.

Soon after this I met the women trade unionists involved in the course. These women had been selected from ten different regions around the country and they were all involved in a project financed by Europe and the Foreign Office, which was promoting some very basic trade union education.

The project was assisting in progressing procedures to be used at their place of work based on British trade union methods, such as grievance and disciplinary procedures, sexual harassment and bullying and harassment procedures, and equality issues.

We also looked at networking methods and areas of working in workshops together, such as role plays and case studies. All very similar to what trade union tutors like myself would do in the UK.

It was very interesting to listen to their views on the state of their country, which was formerly part of the Soviet Union.

All of them were educated to an extremely high level and many had been professors, scientists, chemists and teachers before the enormous upheaval had taken place.



Unfortunately, they are suffering an extreme form of capitalism and many were out of work and we know as much as anyone the problems that can bring.

However, the majority of those on this course were working, but not in areas they had been used to. Some were as market traders, in local gymnasiums, or local schools and two worked for non-government organisations.

The problems they face are overwhelming. They go for long periods without being paid and it is a continual struggle to survive.

They now have to face issues that before were taken care of by the State. For instance, they receive no help whatsoever with family members who have disabilities. Older people have been particularly hit and now receive hardly any assistance from the State at all. All of this of course impacts greatly on women who are the main carers, as in the UK.

Although they still have free education up to the age of 16, higher education is now costly. The women I met were extremely concerned about poverty and old age because, although men retire at 63 and women can retire at 58, as I said earlier, the State pension is non-existent



and the amount of old people begging in the street is heartbreaking.

Other issues such as housing and transport are of great concern to them as well.

The women of Kazakhstan are determined and strong and will take what we term as industrial action and indeed have done so on many occasions.

One of the areas they feel they are lacking in workplace procedures and collective workplace agreements. They wish to instigate equality issues at the workplace.

This was part of the reason I was there: not to preach and certainly not to say our way is best, because that would have been patronising and false, but to explain how we could perhaps, in partnership, start to build up a strong women's structure within any new union formation.

I would say they were not enamoured about the past (some would be of course), but were concerned about the future.

As you can imagine, in that area of the world, they are aware of and still discuss the Second World War, with passion, which led them to bombard me with questions about the UK's attitude towards America and President Bush and of wars and possible wars in countries not too far

distant from them.

I was of course happy at this point to tell them about the NAW (National Assembly of Women) and Sisters magazine, which they all thought was wonderful.

If I am lucky enough to visit them again, I will take some of our journals and some of our badges. International issues were close to their hearts and also the suffering of women and children. They felt like us – because the children rely on the women of this world – then the women of this world have to get it right.

The women of Kazakhstan are determined to be at the forefront of the organisations within their own country and to influence Government policies where possible.

Many of the issues we discussed were familiar to you and me, such as reserved seats for women on trade unions, 50/50 in Government (Kazak women are 53% of the population) and also positive discrimination. As you would expect, there were many disagreements during discussions, but it was all done in a friendly, comfortable environment.

While we were there, we were told money had been awarded to the women workers involved in the project for them to run workshops within their own communities and workplaces on “a women's role within the social structure.”

With this in mind, on the last day of the course, we produced leaflets and agendas promoting the workshops and seminars on many issues such as Women in Work and Women in Leadership Roles, where issues such as pension rights, promotion and sexual harassment would be discussed, and where women activists could start to assist other women and assert themselves.

I feel I must be honest and say that I could not possibly understand all of the background to the country's recent history. They have a President who is unpopular and exerts extreme power. There is no proper opposition to this Government, which is of great concern to them. Their President has decreed that any new Party must have 50,000 members before it can register

and take part in an election. As you can imagine this is almost impossible. There is danger for those who stand up and oppose and as you can imagine they operate in a climate we would not understand.

One of the problems is that there are State Unions who own vast amounts of property which was theirs in Soviet times and who sign national agreements I am told, with foreign investors and the Government, often to the detriment of their workers.

The women I worked with represented the independent trade unions who wanted to negotiate locally and stamp their authority at their workplaces.

However it seems (and I was there for only eight days) that you are peeling an onion when trying to get information. This isn't because they don't wish to talk about political issues, but because it is extremely complex and I cannot claim to understand the issues totally.

Many of them of course, wish to tell you different things and as you would expect, have differing views from each other, so I cannot in all honesty claim to understand all of the impacts of the upheaval.

I also fear the upheaval is not over yet. Everything is bubbling away under the surface, which makes for a very volatile situation. I think it is important to point out that I did not feel unsafe or threatened in any way myself and was very well looked after by the Kazaks.

This article is not an in-depth analysis of Kazakhstan society today. It is only a small picture I have gleaned from my stay as an observer of the women of Kazakhstan and I have tried to be honest.

What I can say is that the women I met were passionate about their rightful place in society, passionate about the rights of women and children in other countries and determined to fight for those rights. And just as when we meet, they love a social evening and enjoy eating, drinking, dancing and singing. I was treated with the utmost sisterly respect and their interest in the women in the UK was never-ending.

**Lorene Fabian** is a TUC tutor and a member of Amicus