

This year's annual FBU Women's School was held at Wortley Hall on the 8th to the 10th April. It was attended by approximately 50 women from all around the country and from all parts and sections of the union. One of the reasons for the success of the school was the childcare provided by the union. The crèche was once again excellent and provided care and supervision for about 35 children, a major contributor to why we can get so many women to attend. There is no doubt that that is positive for the union! FBU President Ruth Winters reports



Who attended and why?

There was a mix of firefighters who work the wholetime and retained duty systems as well as firefighter (control) staff who all had varying reasons for attending.

Also we were privileged to have two women officials from ASLEF, Sharon Allen and Pauline Cawood, as well as a women official from the RMT, Janine Booth, who came along to see how we work and also so we could learn from them. I know they enjoyed the experience, as we did having them there.

We started with a session that discussed what women's expectations of the school would be.

This ranged from wanting to find out more about the union as well as women in the union; gaining more knowledge about the union and other brigades and regions; wanting more information about campaigning issues such as pensions and regionalisation of controls; getting confidence and learning from shared experiences; to learn how to get a positive change for women within the fire service; learning how to apply their knowledge; support and help for problems ongoing at the present time; and, last but by no means least, women wishing to make their own minds up about the school and section and what it does.

So, as you can see, not everyone came along with the same expectations but hopefully we managed to meet them all. Again no doubt that if we do, it is positive for the union!

Why is the School su

Who runs the school?

It is devised and run by the National Women's Committee and women officials of the union supported by head office and the executive council. The National Women's Committee work and plan the school months in advance and, where possible, we utilise women officials to run the sessions and workshops, as well as leading them. This is not done to keep men out, rather it is done to use the obvious talent and commitment that exists amongst our FBU women. We also utilised outside experts: Gayle Hayes and Maggie Williams from WHISC, Ivan Walker from Thompsons and trade union tutors Loren Fabian and Julie Weekes. We must thank them all for their time and skills.



e FBU Women's uch a success?*

Once again no doubt that this is positive for the union!

What did we do all weekend?

We did what all good union schools do: we covered key issues in terms of the union as a whole as well as women specific workshops and some international input. We aspired to give as much choice as we possibly could in offering a range of workshops on day two of the school which were allocated by self-selection of the women themselves.

The workshops available were as follows:

Stage 1 – FBU Structures – This was a basic “How does our union work?” session, not just on the equality struc-

tures, but the whole union.

Stage 2 – “Be active in the FBU” – This dealt with developing and practising the skills needed to take part in FBU meetings, running meetings and gaining a better understanding of how the equality structures work.

“Find your voice” – this session dealt with building confidence and/or skills when speaking in public, developing research skills as well as getting your message across.

“Harassment and bullying in the workplace” – this included skills needed to identify and deal with bullying and harassment in the workplace. This included dealing with it and hopefully resolving it.

“Pensions – LGPS and FPS” – Public pension schemes are currently under attack and this workshop was designed to assist members to understand our current pensions arrangements and to fully understand any consequences of any changes being proposed. This session was run by Ivan Walker from Thompson’s Solicitors, who apparently made a pensions session fun!

“Women’s Health” – This dealt with health issues that affect women such as menopause, self examination, maintaining a healthy lifestyle, identifying and dealing with stress and its causes.

All of these issues need to be dealt with, as a good trade union; therefore all must be positive for the union!

Did anyone from head office turn up to tell us what’s going on?

Yes, I did! I was there for the whole school, not just because I’m the President of the union but I am a woman member and official.

If you think it is easier for a woman official in a male-dominated union then think again!

Where prejudice exists it always finds a way to rear its ugly head. You only have to listen to the absolutely ridiculous rumours that have gone around about the Long Service Increment in the dispute.

Apparently I personally negotiated that increment away to forward “my equalities agenda”!

True? NO! Then why do they say it? Because it’s easy to link it to me because I’m a woman and if you want to discredit a woman in a male dominated arena, it is often this twisted anti-equality tactic that is utilised.

In my session on the “state of the union” I tried to give a realistic and honest overview as to where we were post dispute and what we had to do to progress this union and its aims and campaigns. There is no doubt that the control campaign is at the top of the union’s agenda and I once again gave the commitment of head office and the Executive Council to support and participate in opposing the closure of our fire controls and any job losses being proposed.

Let’s be very clear that our reasons for doing so are not just because of the jobs, although that is extremely important, but because the reasons for the regionalisation are wrong in their essence and will not improve the service our firefighters (control) already provide to a spectacular standard.

So I gave an update on the political work done both by head office and the regions. But you out there have to involve yourselves in this campaign – our members in control deserve no less. This is not a new fight – it has just been brought to the fore once again and once again we must fight it.

I also talked about the attacks not just on our pensions but on all pensions and particularly in the public sector. We have worked closely with other unions and totally support a united fight on this issue. But we also must listen to our members and inform our members of the effect of any positive changes as well as the detrimental changes.

In doing this, we can best produce effective strategies for fighting these proposals, for fight them we must. Never forget pensions are not just something in the far off future they are your pay, they have always been your pay and they will always be part of your pay. This is not a new fight – it’s just been brought to the fore once again



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And let’s not forget fire cover, an issue that we hear about on a daily basis. I also dealt with that in explaining the union’s national strategy to regain a national framework for fire cover.

We sometimes have to remind ourselves of the policies we actually have. We do have a policy that supports risk based fire cover and have done for some years, but that is not what brigades are giving us with local Integrated Risk Management Plans. They are not, in our view, assessing the risk properly or safely.

We discussed the new research on the physiological effect of firefighting on firefighters and the startling results, specifically how this could affect attendance to incidents – who we send and when we send them.

Obviously there are the attacks on jobs and posts at fire stations: this is without doubt an issue that cannot be ignored. However, jobs and posts have always been an issue and to say anything different is like burying our heads in the sand.

If we look at what happened under the section 19 arrangements that very, very rarely saved jobs. The only way to do that is the tried and tested way and that is to do something about it which, yes, ultimately may include industrial action.

It was sadly the only way before and may still – while authorities are not using risk assessment properly – be the only way.

In covering these three main issues the union is facing at the moment, I hope that the position of the national union was made clear for everyone there, and that can only be a positive thing for the union!

What did you talk about when you were all together?

We discussed many things, firstly we had a speaker from the Western Sahara, Fatimetou Mahfud Sidi Alla, who explained her people’s long fight for their own state.

After years of war, negotiation and struggle for their right to self determination she explained how, in particular, the women of the Western Sahara have built the refugee camps in very difficult terrain and circumstances and how they have survived and developed in an environment that no human being should have to endure.

Danielle van Brunt Smith informed us of the Sandblast project, to which the FBU is signed up, and how they plan to heighten our awareness of the situation through an arts and culture festival next year. They are truly amazing women and an amazing people.

Brian Amos from B&EMM gave a presentation and showed the B&EMM film. If anyone in this union ever wants to be reminded or know why this section started and what our members faced then and, yes, now, then get a copy of this film, show it at brigade committees and branch meetings.

Stewart Brown from the Gay and Lesbian section gave us a very informative and educational session on the subject of HIV, the Disability Discrimination Act (1995) regulations that came into effect in October last year and what they may mean for us.

He also discussed the pandemic around the world in terms of the disease and reinforced what we can actually do to help as well as reiterating why we should.

For any further information please contact the FBU G&L website (www.fbu.org.uk/aboutus/sections/gnl/).



What was the main FBU campaign discussed at the school?

Without doubt it was the proposed regionalisation of fire controls. I'm sure it may have warranted more time but we had debate and workshops to discuss, not the rights and wrongs, but what we could actually do as members of a trade union.

The session was led by Val Salmon and Sue Offland from the CSNC. They gave an update on where we were with the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister and with Regional Management Boards. There is no doubt we have had more success with the second group than the first. We discussed why this was not just a control issue but a regional fire service issue and how that affected us all.

Within the workshops it became clear that, once again, some firefighters do not know enough about what control staff do and that we have to change that.

Where they do know, they have to be motivated as do our firefighter (control) staff. There are, of course, many that are and do participate, but we have to keep building on that.

We also discussed the need for head office and the Executive Council to be more prominent and visible in this campaign. A message we will not let fall on deaf ears. Please visit the FBU website and the link to the ControlCare website for information and lobbying materials. In featuring this issue we are defending our members' jobs and conditions, and that can only be a positive thing for the union!



So did you just talk all weekend or did anything constructive come out of it?

Well, yes we did talk all weekend but that's how you communicate! We also devised action plans and practical ones that were arranged in regions. We wanted to ensure that each region could tailor their plan to their needs and were full of achievable aims. Those plans were developed and have all been taken back into the union to be acted upon.

We also got the women to fill in a monitoring form to find out what worked and what didn't so we can build for the future. We assessed that if the school had met the expectations of the women drawn up at the beginning of the school – and I have to say that almost all of them were met – that is the key to a successful school: to achieve the aims of the people who organised it and who attended it.

Thanks to the National Women's Committee and all the speakers and tutors who assisted them, you did a brilliant job.

I make a plea to all FBU women out there who have never been to a women's school before: apply next year, come along, find out for yourselves. I really don't think you'll be disappointed. I know I have never been. I also make a plea to all the men in the FBU out there: encourage women in your workplace to attend the women's school next year. You and they have nothing to fear or worry about. As I've said all through this article, it can only be a positive thing for the union!

*** Answer: because it is relevant, and it can only be a positive thing for this trade union!**

