



sertuc

US exchange
report 2009

SERTUC

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of the TUC

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foreword

I will begin by thanking Jo Morris, former Senior Policy Officer in the TUC's equalities team. In November 2007 she emailed me to ask if SERTUC would be interested in being the UK trade union partner in a project to develop an international research network around the theme of women and trade union leadership development.

I jumped at the chance and the rest, as they say, is history.

So thanks Jo. Because of you, ten SERTUC women have had the opportunity to participate in exchange visits with trade unionists in the USA. This booklet will give a flavour of experiences shared, friends made, what they contributed, and what they gained.

about the project

The project was led by Dr Gill Kirton and Professor Geraldine Healy (both based at the Centre for Research in Equality and Diversity at Queen Mary, University of London) and was funded by the Leverhulme Trust.

The objectives of the project were fourfold:

- to facilitate an international exchange of ideas and experiences on women's trade union leadership development, with a special focus on the role of women's separate

organising for advancing internal gender equality and democracy;

- to contribute to global research on women and trade unions by providing a cross-national comparison theorised by an international research team;
- to engage women union leaders in the discussion and analysis via the establishment of an international e-network; and
- to disseminate findings to the UK and US trade union movements and academic community via a project report and academic workshops and publications.

The partners were Queen Mary's Centre for Research in Equality and Diversity, the Centre for Women and Work at Rutgers University in New Jersey, the Institute for Women and Work at Cornell University in New York, SERTUC, and the New Jersey State AFL-CIO.

So this was to be a larger academic project (see page 23 for Gill and Geraldine's outline of their future work), but for the SERTUC women it meant the opportunity to participate in two separate weeks of activities with AFL-CIO colleagues – one week in the US and one in London.

selection process

A joint SERTUC/QMU panel developed a stringent and formal process for selection. We were determined that the SERTUC delegation would reflect the diversity of women trade unionists within the Region. Difficult decisions had to be made, but the final delegation included the age range, diversity of ethnic background, white/blue collar, private/public sector, lay and full time, that is SERTUC!

This booklet contains brief reports from each of our delegates. For them the project began with an informal reception in January 2009 where they met for the first time. This was followed by the first week (in New Jersey) in March, and then a second week in June when the AFL-CIO sisters came to London.

A formal programme was developed for the

London week, based heavily on the TUC's Women's Summer School, and here enormous thanks should be given to unionlearn.

Unionlearn Trade Union Education Manager Liz Rees gave her full support from the start, and Angela Perry (from SERTUC unionlearn) and Julie Weekes (TUC Tutor) delivered the week's activities. This included sessions led by TUC experts, including DGS Frances O'Grady, and Sarah Veale, head of Equality and Employment Rights.

During the London week the work didn't end at 5pm of course – a networking event at Queen Mary, to which a wider group were invited, had the privilege of hearing not only Debby King, from the Service Employees International Union, but also Terry Marsland, former Deputy General Secretary of the Tobacco Workers' Union – both of whom spoke inspirationally on women's leadership in the trade union movement with reference to their own experiences.

Thanks are also due to Laurel Brennan, the first woman to be elected as Secretary-Treasurer of the New Jersey AFL-CIO – we were delighted that she was able to join delegates for many of the London week's events – and this included her informative update on current developments in US labour law at a round table event in Congress House organised by the TUC's international department.

More thanks to Unison Colchester Health branch who paid for a celebratory "women of Whitechapel" walk around the East End, as well as contributing to the final meal!

A big thankyou also to Jenny Murphy, admin assistant at QMU, for her extraordinary efforts in ensuring both the March and June events ran smoothly.

However, most thanks are due to the SERTUC participants – I hope their brief accounts on the following pages give you some flavour of their experience.

Megan Dobney *SERTUC Regional Secretary*

contents

Participants

Alexis Chase, Unite
Tahera Chatur, PCS
Linda Durrant, Unison
Jenny Edwards, Unison
Sarah Friday, Unison
Heather Hampson, PCS
Mary Hanson, CWU
Jacqueline Nicholls, PCS
Sharon Simmonds, TSSA
Beverley Woodburn, GMB

Afterword (and the next steps)

Gill Kirton and Geraldine Healy
Queen Mary, University of London

Alexis Chase

Unite



I am Alexis Chase, a mother of three, black woman feminist and trade union activist. I was born in 1964 so I guess I could be called a baby boomer. I was 15 when Margaret Thatcher came to power and I can remember being excited at the prospect of a woman prime minister. I was naïve, forgive me. She didn't put me off women in positions of power, only Tories and Tory women in positions of power.

I work for a local branch of Unison running the Branch Office. Without doubt this is the hardest job I have ever had. I have learned a

great deal in the seven and a half years I have been doing this job and this helped me in terms of this project. For me my main contribution has to be myself. Forty five years of being a black female; daughter, mother, worker and trade unionist gives me an experience of this world that is unique and yet not unique when put in the context of being black.

The most profound difference for me was that anything negotiated by the trade unions in America only benefited the members. I so wish this was the case for us in the UK.

I know our American sisters found it quite astounding that our collective bargaining system benefited union and non-union members alike. The other reality check for me was the lack of employment rights US workers have. When we were there in March a hospital closed its doors because it was not making enough money. When staff went to work the doors were locked. They had had no advance warning they were losing their jobs.

Speaking selfishly (and glad to be so) I have received a level of encouragement and support I have not experienced in my professional working in life in the last 10 years. This project has been my salvation. I have felt overworked, undervalued and generally put upon – my British and American sisters have given me faith in myself again. I now take the approach at work that I will push on and try different things regardless of how they might be received. I have been actively supporting the reigniting of the Branch's Black Members Group by organising meetings, bringing people together to attend the meetings and we are now working on holding a Health Fair for Black Workers in October. I have helped motivate black women who also feel devalued and overworked but somehow we are finding the time to get this self organised group off the ground again – I am immensely proud of myself and them as well. I'm not sure I would have bothered to pursue this if it hadn't been for the exchange project.

The higher echelons of the trade union world are ruled and dominated by white men. More often or not anyone succeeding in breaking into that world is a white woman. We are present in terms of being members but our absence is significant in terms of exercising any power or influence. This has to change. My view is that black and minority ethnic women have to fight for power in order to influence, not sometime in the future, but now. I will no longer be tactful

about espousing this view. I don't know if I will ever work at a senior level in a trade union – but I do know I still want to serve my members well and make a difference. This is just as important to me.

Tahera Chatur

PCS



My name is Tahera Chatur. I was born in Uganda. My family comes from India. I moved to the UK in 1972. I have studied and worked in the UK and Sweden. I work for the Valuation Office Agency and am the Branch Secretary for PCS London North Branch. I have been a committee member for PCS HMRC's Disabled Members Advisory Committee.

The key thing I feel that I was able to contribute in discussion was regarding employment law, DDA and sharing my experiences. I made suggestions during group activities relating to problems facing women in trade unions.

I have found the two weeks extremely interesting as I knew nothing about the

unions in the US. I also learned a lot about the other UK unions too. I felt that our meeting in the US was a real confidence booster as we could relate to one another so easily and understood each other so well. The issues were the same and how we reacted to these issues seem to me to be no different. The Labor Department seems to work so well with US unions and brought about the family leave for the residents of New Jersey State. I felt it that it showed a positive aspect of the union's partnership with state legislators. From a personal and selfish point I have to say that the ladies were so considerate and giving to me as an unspoken understanding had developed without having to say where I need help or support.

I am Visually Impaired and the course and the trip to the US were a challenge for me. Orientation and managing to find everything that I needed as well as reading course materials and participating in activities resolved itself through the support of my sisters and the organisers of the course.

The course reinforced my views on the role I play as a rep. I always felt alone and management's attitude to me is that I am too radical and they have tried to sway the members in their support. I found that I was tame compared to my sisters and it gives me the courage to stand for the rights of members and follow legislation where it concerns my members' health & safety and the protection of jobs and pay. I also feel that I have come away from self doubt and now

have taken on the role of Branch Secretary without doubt. I have made an application for a course in dealing with personal cases also. I have assisted in personal cases in the last two years and prepared the casework for my national rep. I have given support to members throughout the case period. Most of these cases have been successful and I now feel it is time to build on this by attending the course to see what I can learn and maybe represent the member at a hearing. I have gained enough confidence to assist the office secretaries in their roles as they are very new in their posts and both of them are women so they are finding it hard to balance their duties at work and carry out their union duties too.



left to right: women in London – Alexis Chase (SERTUC), Karen Bellamy-Lewis (NJ), Beverley Woodburn (SERTUC), Joyce Alston and Kathy Kim Campbell (NJ)

Linda Durrant

Unison



I am the Regional Women's Officer, Unison Eastern Region and have held this post since 1992. During that time much has changed in the world of work and employment but also much has stayed the same for women.

I applied to be part of this research project to learn more about other women's experiences; particularly the US perspective and I have not been disappointed.

I had a number of misconceptions about the US trade union movement and US employment-related legislation. Whilst there is much to be worked for in the UK, I would not trade our UK legislative framework for the US model which is sparse and gives fewer rights to employees. The concept of an 'at will' employee was new and shocking to me. An 'at will' employee has no employment protection and can be dismissed with only an hour's notice, irrespective of their length of service.

Only when an employee has a trade union negotiated contract does the employer have to show 'just cause' to dismiss or dispense with the employee's services. There is no statutory right to recognition of the trade union and this is currently being campaigned on via the Employee Free Choice Bill.

In the UK we have greater levels of proactive legislation; the fact that we have not properly educated our members on their rights and opportunities leaves us with great challenges for our future. I also now believe that the US is more willing and proactive in honouring its women who make a contribution to trade unionism and society.

Our UK/US group joined with Laurel Brennan (Secretary and Treasurer of New Jersey AFL-CIO) when she received the Wynona M Lipman Leadership Award for her contribution to trade unionism and women's development and leadership. The award was presented by Jon Corzine, New Jersey Governor at his Executive Mansion, Drumthwacket, Princeton NJ.

Outside of the formal exchange sessions I attended a trade union protest in Trenton, New Jersey. This emergency protest rally was announced with only 14 hours notice to public service employees. Over 500 trade union members from a variety of trade union locals attended a loud and exuberant protest outside of the HR building protesting the forced implementation of furloughs. 500 people organised, kitted out in trade union jackets, caps, banners, whistles and leaflets in less than 14 hours! It was amazing to be part of it and leaves me with many questions of how we can replicate that enthusiasm and loyalty. Their merchandising and

branding is also far superior to ours – we have a lot to learn.

Trade union women that I met from the US have an intense loyalty to their local and their trade union; it becomes part of their family; they were passionate in its defence and proud of their union's role and activities. I don't know how we can transport that loyalty and passion across the Atlantic into our unions, but I know that we need to.

I was surprised that the US trade union women that we engaged with had no experiences or knowledge of rule-driven positive action strategies such as self organisation, proportionality or fair representation. I was also surprised that the US trade union locals do not engage in broader societal campaigns engaging with voluntary sector organisations and by women for women services on joint or collaborative work in the way that Unison does to bring societal improvement beyond the workplace.

Since I have completed the two exchange project weeks:

- I have made presentations to my regional staff conferences on my experiences, actively promoting the project and encouraging further exchanges and collaborative working.

- I have actively participated in the electronic social network site created for our group by one of our UK delegates Heather Hampson. In developing this way of working I have created a members-only electronic social network for the Regional Women's Committee in Unison Eastern Region (the women that I primarily work with). I am using this to encourage greater participation and engagement through the network for debate and education on women's issues.

- I have created a women's history PowerPoint presentation that shows over the years women's strikes and protests – in order to raise our members' levels of awareness of our history in the trade union movement.

- I find myself frequently considering my actions in campaigns and development work and pondering if the US women had that situation how exactly would they be tackling the issue.

The whole experience has prompted me to consider new and different ways to recruit, organise, politicise and educate women within Unison. I am grateful for the experience and knowledge gained so far. I look forward to returning to New Jersey in 2010 to continue our collaborative working.

Jenny Edwards

Unison



My name is Jenny Edwards, and at the time of applying for the project I was a Steward and the Women's Officer for a small health branch in Essex called 'Essex Rivers Healthcare'.

I am 46 years old and have been a member of unions since I was 18 when I joined a 'closed shop' union for mechanical workers at the MOD establishment where I completed my four year apprenticeship. Since then I have been a member of various unions applicable to my employment including the Civil Service – where I manned a picket from 5am to stop the postal workers crossing the line, NALGO where I was the Women's Officer for Portsmouth City branch and helped to organise a week of events in 1997 to celebrate International Women's Week, and Unison where I am now the Women's/Equalities/Membership Officer for 'Colchester Health'.

I believe I was able to contribute a real perspective from the grassroots activist point of view. I am a Steward and in a voluntary capacity help to run the branch by performing admin tasks, mailings etc. I was the only representative on the UK delegation to come from a health background and as such was sought out by various members of the US delegation for information and clarity on various healthcare issues.

I learnt from the project that the US unions wield a lot of power within certain industries as they actually negotiate for and allocate the work, which also makes them susceptible to corruption.

I also liked the idea of ticketing at conferences (as introduced by some US unions), where you put your delegates ticket

in a box at the end of the session/meeting/ seminar and it is counted. If you do not attend more than a certain amount of the conference (ie. 75%) then you have to pay back all your subsistence, fuel allowance etc!

The paid employees of the US unions are on amazing contracts where they get a new car every three years, and have their expenses paid including lunch!

I found other women's roles and responsibilities interesting. Full-time facility time featured a lot in the US women's union roles whereas I feel we have to fight for every hour from our employers.

Subsequent to the project I have negotiated 7 hours (1 shift) of facility time, am overseeing the Branch change its name to 'Colchester Health' and am planning a launch party with Unison partner stands, merchandise and gifts of discount cards for all our members. My renewed vigour I put down to taking part in the project and meeting the most inspirational women and gaining confidence through dialogue and understanding of not only workplace but worldwide issues that women can be influential in changing if they just believe in themselves!

Sarah Friday

Unison



I'm Sarah Friday. I work for Camden Council, but I am currently on full time release for trade union duties with Camden Unison – covering health and safety, life long learning and organising and representing (when necessary) our members who work for services that have been contracted out to private sector companies.

I have been a trade union member since leaving school in 1982 and became a trade union activist (taking up branch officer duties and then lay elected positions) in the mid 1990s in the rail industry, and have been active in one way or another in the trade union movement since then.

There were a couple of key things I was able to contribute to the exchange visit. Firstly my experiences of being a woman worker in a male dominated workplace and trade union (NUR/ASLEF/RMT) trade unions and then a female dominated union (Unison).

Secondly, my interest in health and safety,

particularly women's occupational health issues. I made valuable contributions to debate about this issue that often gets overlooked, but is so important to many women workers – particularly those that are trapped in low paid, low skilled work.

The New Jersey WILD Women conference (Women in Trade Union Leadership Development) was interesting. It was a networking event – similar to that the businesswomen in this country hold. From what I could work out the trade unions in the US do not have so much in terms of proportionality, reserved seats etc. as our trade unions. It would have been interesting to find out how this impacts on 'women in leadership' statistics. At the conference we learnt about the fantastic history of women organising in the workplace and US trade unions.

What was interesting (but probably not surprising) to learn from the exchange was that many of the UK and US women had had very similar experiences of discrimination in their workplaces and when they tried to get active in their trade unions.

What was special for me was the tremendous pride the US women had in their trade unions. Perhaps this was because the organisation they have in New Jersey is exceptional compared with the rest of the US.

The US women gave all UK women a Rosie the Riveter 'a woman's place is in her union' T shirt. I was particularly pleased with this as the label inside of the garment said it was made by trade union labour. Why don't we campaign for this to be done in this country? Everything made by or processed by trade

union organised labour should say so on the goods.

I got very special – but quite different – experiences from the US and the UK part of the exchange, as these were very different in their content. For the US part of the exchange we were out and about a lot. We were taken to a workplace (Twinkies bakery) and on a number of other trips – for example to meet their local councillors and the State Governor. By the end of the trip we had a good understanding of how New Jersey trade unions fit and work alongside various different levels of the NJ legislature.

The UK part of the visit was more classroom based. This gave us the opportunity to listen to some of the TUC experts on issues such as employment law and equality. This was very useful; I very much doubt I would have had the chance to meet them otherwise. We also had a visit to 10 Downing Street. So many times have I seen that front door, what a great experience to get inside!

As part of taking part in the exchange we all had to agree to do an interview for the academics. I really enjoyed doing this – it made me think about my experiences as a woman trade union activist in the workplace and my involvement in the trade union movement. Going back to my early days when I started working on the railway as a young woman – this brought some memories and started me thinking about how things have been made easier for me in the workplace and in the trade union. It also got me thinking about what I understand by “women in trade union leadership”. Of course it is about getting women into senior positions in trade unions, but as important – if not more so – is encouraging them to get active in the workplace. I think women bring something very special to that role.

In terms of how it has helped me in my everyday trade union work – that’s hard to say. I am on full time release and much of my work is reactive. I have dealt with a couple of

cases of harassment since the exchange visits – and I hope that I have been able to deal with these more sensitively because of the exchange. I feel that the experience will stay with me for many years to come. These days my trade union work is mostly about encouraging others to get active in their workplaces. My experience from the exchange visit will encourage me to put special effort into getting more women active.

In conclusion this was a unique experience. It came about at a very special time – both the US and UK nose diving into a recession. Obviously a worldwide recession but exacerbated in both countries for very similar reasons – years of neoliberal politics. But for the US women, with the election of a progressive administration in the White House, there was still a lot of hope about what could be achieved. For UK women there was much more doom and gloom – looking forward to what seem to be the inevitable election of the Tories and fear about what will be in store for us as a result. What we don’t know is how workers will react to having to take the can for the recession. The UK part of the exchange took part at the same time as the second part of the Lindsey oil workers’ dispute. How will other workers learn from their example of direct action? If they do learn I think women workers will be at the forefront of this. Those women involved in disputes in the ‘winter of discontent’, members of NUPE – the forerunner of my current union, Unison – showed what women trade unionists are capable of once roused. I hope that they will wake up and do the same when the inevitable onslaught on their job, terms and conditions come in the next few years. I hope to be part of this struggle and what I have learnt from this exchange will help me to do this.

Heather Hampson

PCS



New Jersey

I was intrigued when I first heard about the programme because in my past experiences of solidarity work and link-building in UK trade unions, the USA has never been a country that has come into the equation. I have to admit, I didn't really know much about US trade unions and prior to the exchange programme I presumed they were quite weak and had low membership.

These assumptions were soon dashed when I met the women trade unionists from New Jersey.

On the first evening of our trip I spoke to Gail, who was a representative from a public service union in the US. As a civil servant myself I was really interested to hear about what it was like for US public sector workers. I was really surprised to hear that their experiences are almost identical to those in the UK – the continuous threat of job cuts, demonisation by the press etc.

The next morning we got to talk to the US sisters more and as I spoke to women from

different employment sectors I have to admit I was initially extremely confused by all the talk of 'locals' and 'business agents'.

It was really interesting to meet the US women who worked in more manual trades – whereas our group was dominated by women from the public service, some of the US women were employed in traditionally male-dominated fields, or more unskilled labour. I gradually began to understand that US unions were, in fact, far more intertwined with the industries they organise for. For example, one woman who was an electrician told me how it's the union that actually allocates jobs to workers, so you have to be a union member to get decent work.

I couldn't believe this at first, it certainly puts US unions in a much stronger position than our unions!

But despite all these differences, what we did have in common is that women face the same problems in rising to positions of power on both sides of the Atlantic. When we talked about why we thought this was, we tended to come up with the same reasons – insufficient support for childcare, instilled lack of confidence etc.

In the afternoon of the first day we went to Drakes Cakes factory. The US sisters told us this was a great example of unionised manufacturing. I was actually quite shocked when I was in the factory at the working conditions – it was extremely hot, noisy and generally oppressive and the work was repetitive and menial. It was not my idea of 'manufacturing' either. I found it interesting the way the factory workers talked about the actual process of making these mass-produced, low cost cakes as well. They seemed to think this was proper 'baking',

whereas in the UK I think we still think of 'baking' as making cakes at home. Although I've always thought the US was far more accepting of mass production and commercialism, I was still surprised by the enthusiasm with which it is accepted there.

The next day we went to AFL-CIO New Jersey offices, and then the state senate and the Governor of New Jersey's awards. This certainly provided me with a real insight into how local politics in the US works. And what surprised me most was how close unionists are to politicians. We were even told that sometimes the New Jersey AFL will support Republican candidates to the local senate! It is inconceivable in the UK that union leaders would be such happy bedfellows with MPs, or that any union would support a Tory candidate – most unions won't even support Labour candidates any more!

On the way to the Governor's mansion, I had an interesting discussion with Fran, who organised for the NJ Turnpike Toll workers union. It became apparent that whilst US unions do seem to be in more powerful position than UK unions, they are far less political.

London

When the US women came to London, we talked more about how our unions work and the issues they are facing. A big issue for the US women was healthcare. Some of the stories they told us about the difficulties working class Americans face were shocking. So it's been interesting to read about the debate Obama's healthcare plan has caused. They were also surprised and envious of how good our sick pay, annual leave and maternity pay is.

We heard some interesting speakers at Congress House, including a very inspiring talk by Frances O'Grady. And I learnt that while the issues we face as women in unions and the labour market are largely the same, more progress is being made in the UK in terms of getting equal pay and making it

easier for women to have a family as well as a career (there's still a long way to go though even if the legislation is starting to be put in place!). For the US sisters, they still have so many basic things to fight for, like better holiday provision, better maternity pay, and of course cheaper access to healthcare.

Another interesting discussion I had with the US sisters was about far-right politics in the UK and US. Again, it seems that the political landscape is so vastly different to the UK that is almost incomparable. The US sisters didn't use the term 'fascism', except for extremely fringe neo-Nazi groups. The bulk of the extreme right is in fact accommodated in the Republican Party, whereas in the UK the centre right and extreme right are not as united.

Overall, the exchange programme really highlighted how different the US is to the UK, and how unions are operating in a totally different political atmosphere. Sadly, it seems, however different the political landscape is, women are still getting a raw deal. I hope we can continue to work with our US sisters by sharing our experiences and supporting and promoting their campaigns. I am also interested in finding out more about US politics and why our countries have come to be so different.

Mary Hanson

CWU



I have been active in the labour and trade union movement since I was 16. I am a member of CWU Central London Branch and I work for the branch as a full time organiser. I am also the Branch Political Officer.

The UK/US exchange was a brilliant opportunity to meet and share ideas with women trade unionists, particularly around the issue of getting working women organised. We found that women here and in the US are faced with the same issues both at work and in their trade unions. As an organiser it was interesting to learn that organising campaigns in the US are statistically more likely to be won where there are women organisers and also where the membership is predominantly female – which was greatly encouraging.

On the political front, although the AFL/CIO is not formally affiliated to a political party, the US women were very aware of the link between rights at work and the political system and they are very much involved in politics. We had some really good informal discussions about our experience as trade unionists when the Labour government was elected here and their expectations from Obama.

It was a fantastic opportunity to spend time together both here and in the US and I think we all learnt a lot. It was inspiring to know that there are such committed women trade unionists and I think we will all stay in contact and work to build more links with working women internationally.



Jacqueline Nicholls

PCS



I work at NATS Swanwick Centre in Hampshire, one of the largest and most advanced air traffic control centres in the world, as a communications specialist. I am also the lay Assistant Secretary for the PCS Aviation Group Executive Committee. This is a national position, and much of the business of my day-to-day involvement is spent dealing with members' issues with management. Although my work as Assistant Secretary is the integral part of my role within the union, I am also a Union Learning Rep, Branch Equality Rep and the Chairperson of the Aviation Group Organising and Learning Committee.

During the exchange I critically discussed and evaluated policy decisions that affect women in order to try and find the best practical approaches to improving women's positions in the workplace. I was particularly keen to compare and contrast the differences in employees' terms and conditions in our respective countries. I was able to share my experiences as Women's Officer as this role has given me a well-rounded knowledge of issues that women face in the workplace (childcare, maternity leave, bullying, lack of opportunity, discrimination and relocation). I also highlighted the work being done in the UK to further education opportunities through Union Learning Reps and stressed how education can have/has had a positive impact on women's lives.

I was amazed at the amount of energy, drive and determination the women in US unions possess to fight for their rights. I was also concerned about the relative lack of legislative protection for employees in the State of New Jersey and throughout the rest of the country. On a positive note, it was good to see that so many of our American sisters hold leadership positions within their respective unions.

Taking part in this exchange has enabled me to build on my knowledge and gain a wider understanding and appreciation of the role of women in trade unions in an international context. It has also helped me to formulate strategies that I can apply to my roles, particularly as PCS Assistant Secretary in NATS, and to actively promote the important part that women play in the trade union movement. Forming lasting links with women activists in the UK and USA has given

me the opportunity to exchange experiences and ideas about tackling issues of equality of opportunity for women.

I am also very pleased to have recently been awarded a scholarship from PCS to study Industrial Relations with Keele University. I believe that taking part in this project has helped me to achieve this and the experience gained will be extremely valuable for my studies.

In closing, I would like to express how privileged I feel to have had the opportunity to take part in this international exchange. I look forward to continuing to work with our US sisters, as I believe the work we started during this project is of immense value to the union movement in both countries.



Sharon Simmonds

TSSA



Sharon Simmonds, born and raised in London and now living in Islington. I work for Tube Lines and am based in Stratford and Canary Wharf.

Having been a TSSA member for more than 10 years and letting the men lead in all official aspects of my branch I became disheartened at how it was being run. I felt members needed more and I knew it would take a woman to organise branch activities and membership effectively so I offered to look after the administration of membership, set up regular meetings and communicate with members. This proved successful and our membership numbers swelled.

The ever increasing membership led to a high volume of case work and so I accepted the

position of Industrial Relations Rep in February 2008.

Within a few months I got involved with the Self Organised Groups. I am a member of the disability group called Disability Working Group, the ethnic minorities group called EMix and the women's group which is called Women in Focus. I am also the main contact for Women in Focus.

Being a fairly new active trade unionist I am keen to fight injustice and enthusiastic about everything I do in order to achieve this.

My interest in women's issues has increased so much since becoming more active within TSSA especially since attending a women's course designed by TSSA's Val Stansfield.

I was able to contribute my enthusiasm in this area and my dedication to learn and share information with others in the group to the programme.

When we visited New Jersey we stayed at the Hilton Hotel and were given extremely preferential rates. This is because the hotel was unionised and we were all trade unionists. It seems that in America trade unionists look after and support other trade unionists in this way. I also noticed that trade union promotional goods were made by unionised companies. I've never seen that level of support in the UK.

I found it interesting that the US delegates were fascinated that UK trade unions can have self organised groups for the different strands and what the different unions achieve through these groups, especially a women's group. They have considered taking this idea back to their own unions. Of course the UK delegates will be available for any support and advice they may require.

I was probably the least experienced trade union rep of both the UK and US delegates however during my short time as a rep I have achieved so much through my enthusiasm and eagerness to improve things. Meeting with UK reps from different unions and learning about trade unionism and from the US delegates has fuelled my interest in women's issues on an international level, not just in the US, and different campaigns such as Dignity! Period. I find myself almost preaching about the injustice women face in trade unionism and in other ways at the expense of men and encourage everyone to join a trade union, especially TSSA if they are in the transport industry, and help in the fight for equality.

Beverley Woodburn

GMB



I am Beverley Woodburn and I am the GMB/UCU staff Union Learning Rep, and London Organiser for UCU. I have been a trade union activist within the labour movement all my working life.

My confidence was given a well deserved boost when, in the autumn of last year, I applied and was chosen to participate in the Women in Trade Union Leadership Exchange. Nine other women trade unionists and lay activists from across the SERTUC region took part in the pioneering comparative research study looking at women's leadership in UK and US unions.

I have been a trade union activist for more years than I care to remember. Not many things phase me about the situation for women in the movement. Under-represented – yeah; the movement is pale, male and stale, yeah, yeah, yawn! I've heard it all before. However, I was at once pleasantly surprised both by some of the findings thrown up by the academics running the project and by the exchange of experiences and ideas between the women here and with the Jersey Girls.

For example, in this country, while overall union density is highest for Black or Black

British people (29.4% compared with 28.3% for White people), Black women have the greatest propensity to join unions than any other ethnic group (Mercer and Notley 2008). This being the case then the question begs why isn't this reflected in similar rates for activism and leadership? Hopefully the study can throw light on this aspect and come up with some likely answers.

We flew over to the US in March. The number one issue occupying a good chunk of the time of the New Jersey State AFL-CIO was paid family leave insurance. As of the 1 July, for the first time, most New Jersey workers will now receive insurance benefits when they take time off to care for newborn and newly adopted children or sick family members. This represents a huge step forward particularly for women who are, in the main, the caregivers in most societies.

A visit to Drakes Bakeries was arranged by Joyce Alston president of Local 50 of the Bakery, Confectionery, Tobacco Workers and Grain Millers International Union (BCTGM). Joyce had worked at the plant, on the factory floor, for over 10 years. She played an integral role in getting the plant unionised and improving the pay and conditions of fellow workers. I for one felt honoured that Joyce allowed us around her old stomping ground.

Later in the week we were all invited for tea at Drumthwacket, the official residence of Jon Corzine, Governor of New Jersey. It was while in the governor's office that I came across a framed photo of young Paul Robeson who attended the nearby Rutgers University. It was Rutgers who co-hosted another highlight of the visit – the 6th annual Women in Leadership Development (WILD) conference. The conference kicked off with a most amazing presentation by our 10 Jersey Girls called 'We were There' – a short narrative of US women's labour history through song and slides. Useful sessions were had on tackling domestic violence, public speaking and dislocated workers.

One of the best parts for me of the London leg of the exchange was when some of New Jersey and London Women came here was an impromptu visit to where I work. Showing the sisters, what I do and introducing them to work colleagues made me feel proud of what I do and how I do it.

The project would not have been possible if it wasn't for a number of factors. Firstly, the Leverhulme Trust that provided the funding for the research. Secondly, the academics from their respective universities namely Rutgers, Cornell, and Queen Mary. And finally the co-operation of the trade union bodies involved and can-do approach of the individuals who head them, namely, Laurel Brennan (Secretary Treasurer AFL/CIO) and Megan Dobney Regional Secretary of SERTUC. Thanks to you all.



afterword (and the next steps)

We hope that the participants found the exchange programme worthwhile and we trust that the e-network that the group has subsequently set up (<http://ukanduswomeninunions.ning.com/>) will grow to include many more trade union women in the UK, USA and beyond. We will watch its development with great interest.

Ongoing research

However, our work on this project is not over. For the academic team, the exchange programme was just one, albeit very significant, element of a two year research project investigating women's trade union leadership development in the UK and USA. During the first year, at the same time as organising the two exchange visits, we also conducted one-to-one interviews and roundtable discussions with a larger group of women activists and officers in the SERTUC region and in New Jersey and New York. We owe an enormous debt of gratitude to all the women on both sides of the pond who so willingly and generously participated. Their experiences and insights range from the depressing (with examples of old gender struggles and obstacles getting in their way) to the truly inspirational (women moving forward, getting on and supporting one another).

Dissemination plans

It is in the second year of the project, starting in October 2009, that we will carry out our

analysis and organise dissemination of our findings. Our plan is to disseminate our findings within the trade union movement in both the UK and USA via reports, articles and workshops. Our hope is that our cross-national comparison will generate fresh insights and promote new ideas. Please see our project website for further details of dissemination outputs:
<http://hosted.busman.qmul.ac.uk/wtul/index.html>.

Over the next year or so, we aim to share our research participants' individual and collective experiences with the objective of stimulating discussion about how the trade union movement can develop women's leadership in such a way as to benefit both present and future generations of trade unionists, both female and male. There can be no doubt that this is a critical period for trade unions in both the UK and USA and our research leaves us in no doubt that women leaders at workplace, branch, regional and national levels MUST be part of their future.

Gill Kirton and Geraldine Healy
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the sertuc region

The Southern and Eastern Regional Council of the Trades Union Congress represents TUC affiliated trade unions in London, the South East and the East of England. SERTUC directly represents the interest of those unions' two million plus members who live and work in this region, and works on behalf of all working people and their families.

Unions and County Associations of Trades Councils nominate delegates to the Regional Council, which meets quarterly to discuss both how to achieve policy determined at the national Trades Union Congress, and to make specific policies on regional issues.

The SERTUC Annual General Meeting elects an Executive Committee that meets monthly, and officers – a President, two Vice-Presidents (one of whom must be a woman), and a Treasurer.

SERTUC has a number of policy sub-groups (to which unions and trades councils send delegates) that advise the Regional Council.

Each union is entitled to nominate a number of delegates (the exact number relates to the union's size) to these sub-groups. County Associations of Trades Councils may each nominate two delegates.

These sub-groups are either equality or industry based and are an excellent opportunity for trade union officials and lay members to involve themselves in both policy and leadership positions within the broader trade union movement.

Each sub-group determines its own agenda and activities that will include campaigning, education and training events.

Has your union nominated its full quota of delegates?

- Women's Rights Committee
- Race Relations Committee
- Construction Campaign Task Group
- Creative and Leisure Industries Committee
- Disabilities Network
- International Affairs Committee
- LGBT Network
- Pensioners Network
- Public Service Committee
- Transport Industries Network
- Young Members Network

Contact the SERTUC office to find out:
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