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TUC WOMEN'S
CONFERENCE



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celebrating our **sisters**

Val Duncan

VICKI GILBERT RECOUNTS THE STORY OF VAL DUNCAN'S POLITICAL LIFE VAL WAS THE NAW'S SECRETARY FROM 2006 UNTIL SHE DIED ON 5 NOVEMBER 2011

MY dear friend Val grew up with two major influences on her life: her mother who influenced Val to become a feminist, a feminist socialist; and then, her father who was a strong NALGO trade unionist and who took Val, when she was very young, to attend trade union meetings at his workplace. This was to have a lasting influence on her life for once Val grew up, she became an active member of the engineers' union TASS/MSF.

At school, Val campaigned against 6th Form students having to wear the school uniform and led a successful petition to have the rule changed. Then, after winning the fight, she saw the other side of the argument and the value of wearing a uniform to limit the fashion competition amongst students. However, typical of Val she kept quiet about her change of view.

After leaving school Val trained as an engineer. At the age of 23, Val completed her Master's Degree MA where the subject was *Women into Science and Engineering*.

As a lifelong socialist, Val held a number of positions in both the Labour Party and the trade union which I will now list.

She was Regional Secretary for the TASS/MSF trade union in the Milton Keynes area and was responsible for administration of the union in that area and was heavily involved with its women's committee.

She joined the National Assembly of Women and in 2006 she became that organisation's national secretary and represented them at major women's conferences and meetings both at home and abroad.

When Val moved to North Tyneside she became secretary to the Tyne-mouth Branch Labour Party, of which she had been a member since her youth and from which she resigned in 2003 over the Labour Party's role in the invasion of Iraq.

Soon after she came to the North East she joined the Labour History Group and very soon became its secretary for the North East, and was much missed for her reliable precise skills with people and administration when she resigned at the start of her illness.

Val then helped to form and became secretary of the Coastal Anti War



Group. This was a cross party alliance based around the late Paddy Cosgrove and whose membership contained the Chairs of the Conservative and the Lib Dem Parties as well as Labour Party members opposed to the continued occupation of Iraq by Britain and USA.

In 2007 and along with her friend, Liz Henderson and I, Val helped form the socialist choir called *Making Waves* which rewrites popular songs to focus on the threat to the environment and the social damage of living in such an unequal society. The choir still performs one of Val's best songs, a reworking of the Carole King Hit *It might As Well Rain Until September*.

In 2009, Val became an active member of *Keep Metro Public* the campaign to stop the Tyne & Wear Metro being privatised and where she was responsible for organising the letters to MPs and councillors and for collating statistics and other data for the campaign groups.

Recently, in 2009, Val and I identified that there was no public provision or space such as a youth club for young people in Cullercoats. So, after holding a Co-op Fair Trade Coffee Morning for the teaching staff at Marden High School, we devised and agreed a number of teaching sessions with the objective of engaging and helping the pupils to develop models of their ideal youth centre. Once completed, the students presented their project to the Mayor of North Tyneside and Cabinet Office.

My friend Val loved ballroom dancing and regularly attended the sessions held every Friday night at the Seaton Delaval Social Club with her late father who also loved ballroom dancing. Here, she made many friends and like her late father will be sadly missed by those members who knew them both. Val also enjoyed line dancing and belonged to two groups with her friend Carol.

She worked part-time at a local post

office with her friends, particularly Kath, who became one of her closest friends, supporting her and the family throughout her illness.

Val was also a part of our reading group and chose the latest book which sadly, she never got to read: *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*.

We swam together every Thursday morning for several years until her illness prevented her and I find it hard to write about the loss of my dear friend: A wonderful, loyal, kind, gentle, compassionate woman – the only person I knew of whom no one had a critical word to say. I will also miss her balanced and creative political advice as well as her personal support, as that of the sisters we never had.

Solidarity to the NAW

Tuesday 22 November 2011

Dear Friends in the National Assembly of Women

On behalf of the WIDF I want to express our deepest sadness with the death of Val Duncan, the Secretary of the NAW, on 5 November 2011.

Val, always helpful with WIDF and for her dedication to the struggle of women's rights, will certainly be missed by all.

Our grief and solidarity to the NAW and Val's family.

Marcia Campos

President of the WIDF
Women's International Democratic Federation



50 years!

CONGRATULATIONS to Barbara and Frank White!

On 17 January 2012 Barbara and Frank celebrated their golden wedding anniversary (yes 50 years!). Barbara admits proudly "yes I was a teenage bride".

So, as they didn't want this grand achievement to pass unnoticed they decided to have a party. Family and friends met in the Golf Club in Wanstead Park Road, Ilford and there was no shortage of music as both Barbara and Frank and many of their friends are musicians and Barbara is also a singer. Sisters who attended reported that a great time was had by all!



Joyce Woodward

CONGRATULATIONS and Happy Birthday to Joyce Woodward on her 80th Birthday.

Joyce has been a member of the NAW for many years and she was joined at the celebration at Wortley Hall on 13 November 2011 by family, friends and colleagues.

Terry Marsland

ON 24 November 2012 many friends, comrades and family of Terry Marsland gathered together in the Jubilee Room at the House of Commons, to celebrate and pay tribute to Terry, a long standing member of the National Assembly of Women and a past President as well as being a life time campaigner for women's rights, peace and internationalism.

Our thanks go to Kelvin Hopkins MP (for Luton North), for kindly sponsoring the room for us. I am sure Terry would have basked in the atmosphere in the room that afternoon, if not a little humbled by the contribution made by the speakers who covered all parts of her life.

I welcomed everyone, especially Terry's daughters Alison and Michele, and said that although everyone in the room had their own personal knowledge of Terry, we would all probably learn more that afternoon.

First speaker was past President Barbara Switzer who spoke about Terry's life before she became a trade union official and her struggles with family life including the loss of her son to cot death and further miscarriages.

The next speaker was Anita Wright



LEFT PIC: ALICE (TERRY'S GRANDDAUGHTER), ALISON AND MICHELE (DAUGHTERS) AND LUIGI (SON IN LAW)

who spoke about Terry's involvement with the Communist Party as well as her personal knowledge of Terry.

She was followed by Ann Henderson of Abortion Rights. She spoke about Terry's long standing link with Abortion Rights, and reminded us that Terry moved the first motion on Abortion Rights at the Women's TUC.

The final speaker was Sarah Veale from the TUC, who covered the time Terry sat on the TUC Women's Committee.

Everyone then stood and sang *The Internationale*.

The time that afternoon just flew by and before we knew it we had to depart from the Jubilee Room as there was another event booked. We re-convened at a local watering hole to raise a glass and continue to share our stories of Terry.

Whilst there we learnt that Terry's first great grandson had been born at 6.45pm and would be called Angus. Congratulations to Rowan and Jenny.

The beginning of a New Chapter for the Marsland family had begun.

DONA FELTHAM, NAW PRESIDENT

caring for our future

CARING FOR OUR FUTURE: PAM FLYNN, NAW EC MEMBER, OUTLINES THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY OF WOMEN'S RESPONSE TO THE GOVERNMENT'S PAPER ON THE FUTURE OF SOCIAL CARE

CARE and support is something that affects us all. We all know someone, a family member or friend, who needs additional care or support to lead a full and active life. It might be because they are getting older, have developed an illness or disability, or have lived with a disability from birth. In fact, most of us will require care and support services at some point in our lives.

Caring for our future is the name of the government's programme to consider the future of social care. In the autumn there was a large scale 'engagement exercise', a new term for consultation. For more information and to contribute to the debate via the blogs, it's well worth taking a look at <http://caringforourfuture.dh.gov.uk/about/>. There is an interesting short video there, made shortly after the consultation closed, featuring Paul Burstow, the Minister responsible.

NAW submitted a response. Paragraphs below cover the same topics as the consultation headings.

Our first comment on all the questions throughout this engagement exercise is that they are skewed towards the assumption that individual personal choice, funded via mechanisms that serve a (private) competitive market, is the best option through-out a reformed system of social care.

The NAW challenges this relentless belief in the supremacy of the market. We wish to see a high quality integrated national Care/Health service funded by the state through taxation.

We are aware that Ministers in the government and representatives of all the leading parties consider this impossible. It is our view that funding via taxation is a matter of social priorities. There is an option to cut expenditure on the replacement of Trident and the building of new nuclear power stations and to redirect the savings towards social care provision.

Having stated our principled position, we recognise that the current mood within the government and the parliamentary opposition is not with us. We therefore offer some comments on points which we consider to be most important.

promoting improved quality and developing the future workforce

Dignity should be a keystone concept in all thinking about the promotion of quality.

A quality service is one which is defined as meeting the outcomes that the service user wants. It is essential to

get the definition right down to the individual user rather than defined by organisations. Proper, careful needs assessments, carried out by trained and qualified professionals are crucial in this.

Who is going to monitor the way that quality care is given in the light of the devastating reports from EHRC and others on the care of Older People?

External supervision, oversight and scrutiny are vital to securing and ensuring the continuance of high quality provision. The Care Quality Commission has a vital role to play. We are very concerned about recent press coverage suggesting that the CQC is no longer fit for purpose, even as its remit is being widened to take in domestic social care settings.

increased personalisation and choice

While we recognise that there is demand amongst many service users for increased personalisation we are also concerned that there is insufficient recognition of the risks to quality outcomes and risks to delivery systems.

Much health and social care is irreducible, even though it is highly complex and costly – concepts of innovation, efficiency, nimbleness of response, could well founder.

Risks include:

- Risk of abuse by relatives who may be commissioned to provide the personal service.
- Dangers of sectionalisation, isolation for the service purchaser and of increased chronic conditions going unspotted or not acted upon by the care provider.
- Risks attaching to the individual as employer
- Risks associated with passing additional responsibilities onto already vulnerable people
- Risks associated with highly complex cases, such as elderly alcohol or other substance abusers who need social care
- Risks associated with diminution of social care professionalism
- Risks associated with diminution of workforce development

integration

NAW sees considerable risk in the automatic assumption that integration between health and social care would provide better outcomes than at present. We have substantial mistrust of the financial arrangements and we are concerned that remodelling, restructuring and funds transfers without a guaranteed ring-fence to ensure that such funds will be spent on social care is, in essence, a massive gamble. The environment for the planning and pro-

vision of social care has to be stable; at present there is a great risk of too much instability and fluidity.

Continuing budget reductions in local authorities and the NHS threaten the viability of any proposed reform. Integration of social care and health care is a task of daunting scale and complexity. We have no indication and little reassurance that new commissioning agencies – whether they are GP led, private or third sector led, or derived somehow from previous commissioning bodies – have the experience and expertise to cope.

a diverse and responsive care market

We are concerned about the emphasis on diversity of supply, and innovation in the market. We know that private sector providers can fail, often leaving the public sector to pick up the bill. The independent sector is not altruistic; it's in the game for the money. We see dangers of block contracts being placed without break clauses. We are also concerned that there may be seepage of work and resources away from NHS/local authority provision, with an accompanying corrosion of a public service ethos.

the role of the financial services sector

We have a clear view that unregulated markets are abhorrent. We do not see the financial services industry as having the benevolent role outlined in the examples given in your questions. Raising awareness of the care and support system is a role for DoH. Provision of information and advice needs to be independently assured, for example by trusted third sector organisations (AgeUK?). We are concerned that the financial services industry is defined by profiteering, exploitation, and mis-selling, cheating and complex definitions of eligibility criteria.

Despite this wariness and deep suspicion of a sector with a very poor reputation, we support the concept of life planning, which might include planning for the longer term as elders. We can see a role for careful equity release to bring this about.

We now await publication of the government's White Paper this spring.

This edition of *sisters* has been edited by Janette Ferguson

the NHS: it's up to us



Along with millions of others, have unfortunately suffered from ill health which on some occasions required further attention and when that happens we are looking to be treated with care, attention and professionalism by the doctors, nurses and support staff within our NHS.

First contact would be your GP who should make time to listen with patience (sadly that is not always the case), while we try to explain what the symptoms are and how it is affecting us, then make a diagnosis and prescribe a treatment, with return visits on a regular basis if required. If the prescribed treatment does not work then your GP should not hesitate to refer you on to your local hospital to see a doctor or consultant, which could result in a stay in hospital, and operation, or outpatient treatment and support services.

The nurses I have met in hospital have been caring professionals who studied hard for years, to be able to provide the best care they could for their patients, whether it was in medical, surgical, maternity, psychiatry etc, the service was second to none. But now because of low wages, successive governments de-valuing their role within the NHS, job cuts, they are demoralised and feel because of all the changes in the NHS they are not allowed to care for their patients in the way they did even a few years ago and it gets worse every year. The feeling is, if they knew then what they know now, about the cut backs, lack of support, cuts in staffing levels sometimes to dangerous levels, they would probably have chosen a different career.

Those feelings are spread across the spectrum of the NHS from nurses, doctors, GPs, paramedics, physiotherapists, social services, district nurses, counsellors etc, there has been in the last number of years a trend of devaluation throughout our NHS.

And now this government has come up with the idea that the only way to solve all of these issues is to privatise and put all the responsibility for finance etc firmly on the shoulders of our GPs and while I think it is a good

idea to take responsibility away from managers who have no medical training what-so-ever, surely the aim should be to stop careering headlong into privatisation and focus instead on the "real issues" namely, improving safety, efficiency and the quality of patient care. After all we already have one experience of privatisation in the NHS with our cleaning services (which have to go to tender every year) and we have had a mountain of infections to deal with.

From the content of the letter which was published recently in the *Daily Telegraph*, on the same day the government was preparing to table a series of amendments designed to prevent a cross party revolt, our GPs think the same way.

A warning is outlined in a letter signed by 365 GPs, specialists and health academics, urging the government to ditch the Health and Social Care Bill, which they say will "derail and fragment" the NHS. It says "the Clinical Commissioning Group Leaders, who have backed the bill do not represent the majority of GPs who believe the bill will seriously damage patient care". It adds "the NHS is NOT in peril if these reforms DON'T go ahead". On the contrary, it is the Bill that threatens to derail and fragment the NHS into a collection of competing private providers. The Bill will result in hundreds of different organisations pulling against each other, leading to fragmentation, chaos, damage to the quality and availability of patient care. By dropping the Bill the government could save over £1 billion next year and allow the NHS to focus on the real issues.

Aneurin Bevan said

"The NHS will last as long as there are folk left with the faith to fight for it".

So, it is up to us (whether as an individual or as part of a larger group) to fight for our NHS because it is us who will suffer and because it is worth fighting for. This government has got to be made to realise that when someone is ill and requires medical intervention, they want caring professionals free to concentrate on them, nurses and doctors who are paying more attention to x-rays and test results than accounts, bank statements and balance sheets. The word CARE has got to be put back into the NHS and be everyone's top priority.

There are a couple of websites available to keep up to date with what is happening: "Drop the Bill" is one of them "NHS Alert" is another.

JANETTE FERGUSON
NAW EC MEMBER

[HTTP://WWW.DROPTHEBILL.COM/](http://www.dropthebill.com/)
[HTTP://NHSALERT.ORG.UK/](http://nhsalert.org.uk/)

nursing homes



THE age profile of residents in nursing homes has risen in line with life expectancy. However, most of those residents admitted to the home

have multiple needs that encompass the spectrum of care. Alongside those needs, education and continuous training for all carers has increased the awareness and necessity of documentation for all aspects of management and accountability.

In many cases, those increased levels of care are to be given with the addition of work such as floor cleaning, care of the laundry, and other areas of domesticity that while benefiting the residents, takes attention away from them. There is no doubt that the needs must be balanced against the 'other' work that is expected. For example, the cleaning can be seen; a drink not taken cannot be seen until it is too late.

Finally, the near overall practice of a 12-hour shift in the majority of nursing homes is counterproductive to required levels of best care over that period. This is more so when many carers are at work for many days. I have known carers to be at work every day for up to two weeks and more because of their own financial circumstances as well as the shortage of staff in the home in which they are employed.

The news of lack of essential personal care is the result of many aspects of cause and result. While expert care can be appreciated, the everyday care, the personal care and the bedside care remains vocational and needs time for people who are frail and cannot champion their own cause.

ALIFT HAREWOOD
NAW MEMBER

TUC women's conference 2012



THE TUC Women's Conference takes place 14-16 March 2012 at Congress House, in London.

The NAW has always worked closely with the TUC women and also have a stall there every year, to provide information and literature about the NAW. This year the Chair of the conference will be **Max Hyde** (NUT). So, *sisters* asked Max about her past experiences and what the main theme of the conference will be. This is what she said:

Education changed my life chances. I was the first in my family to take exams and go to university – to be a molecular scientist. I have been a teacher of Physics and Chemistry since 1977 and have worked all my life to pass on something of my love of science to young people. I am a Science Ambassador and I still work encouraging them to study STEM subjects – we need the best scientists and mathe-

maticians, not just those who are rich enough to afford to go to university.

I joined the National Union of Teachers whilst doing my PGCE year and quickly became and remain a local lay activist. I was elected to the NUT National Executive in 1996, and have held a number of posts including chair of our gender advisory committee. Recently I have been elected as junior vice-president of the NUT (though I feel too old to be called junior) and will be NUT president in 2014.

I have served on the TUC Women's Committee since 2003 and am a very proud woman to be chairing the TUC Women's Conference this year of all years.

There has been an enormous attack on women by the Coalition Government; women are literally paying the price for an economic crisis that was not of their making – 72 per cent of the price despite not having equal pay, the pay gap, often precarious work, and millions of pounds worth of unpaid caring responsibilities. To add insult to injury, the cuts have a disproportionately negative impact on women from the cradle to the grave, especially black and minority ethnic women, disabled women and vulnerable women. There has been no attempt by government or the Treasury to acknowledge let alone rectify this.

But we are women and are not just meekly giving in to this unfair and unjust onslaught. Women are fighting back.

The wave of outrage against the cuts

and the attack on pensions was a woman's fight. 67 per cent of those taking action on pensions on 30 November last year were women. The fight continues and the agenda of the Women's Conference is filled with motions that expose and challenge unnecessary cuts and the serious impact that they have on women. There is no public/private sector divide, women have a very strong sense of fairness for all; this is an agenda about women under attack and fighting back.

An important part of this is to highlight the impact of cuts in services on the safety of women and there will be a panel discussion on the theme of "Every woman safe everywhere." We know that evidence shows that in times of pressure domestic violence increases, yet the vital services that provide support and refuge to women and children are being cut. Safe abortion services are under renewed threat. Coherent social care provision and benefits are both threatened and vilified at the same time. Women pensioners are almost being blamed for living too long. Cuts in public transport, lighting and numerous other services used by women make them less safe.

And we do not forget women, our sisters, across the world and their struggles. Trade union solidarity has no national boundaries.

Many thanks to NAW for talking to me, and thanks to all of you for the excellent work that you do. Women united are formidable!

abortion rights

THE Abortion Rights AGM and conference takes place on 24 March 2012 at Unite headquarters, London and as this looks like being another busy year for them with this government's cutbacks, and interfering with or cutting off vital services for vulnerable women, *sisters* asked Abortion Rights campaign co-ordinator **Darinka Aleksic** about some of the issues they will be campaigning on. This is what she said:

Abortion Rights is working on a number of campaigns at the moment, with the help of members and affiliates, particularly around abortion counselling and anti-choice activity, as well as their ongoing campaign against NHS cuts, closures and reforms which threaten access to abortion and sexual health services.

On the counselling issue, the Department of Health will shortly pub-

lish its consultation paper on the future of abortion counselling regulations, amid reports that ministers are planning to press ahead with changes to the current system proposed by Nadine Dorries MP, despite a Commons vote rejecting them last year. Abortion Rights has been campaigning vigorously to ensure that women facing unplanned pregnancy are not subjected to misleading or judgemental advice from anti-choice and faith-based advice groups. When the consultation is published it will be calling on supporters to voice their objections to the misguided proposals which threaten access to abortion services.

The past 18 months has seen an increase in anti-choice activity around the country, particularly in protests outside abortion clinics. Anti-abortion activists, often backed by evangelical Christian churches and lobbying

groups, are adopting more hardline tactics and are staging intrusive pickets. Abortion Rights is currently working to stop one unpleasant group, Abort67, from harassing and intimidating women trying to use the BPAS abortion clinic in Brighton. An email campaign is underway aimed at persuading the local church, which is backing the group financially and spiritually, to withdraw its support.

Both these issues, as well as the campaign to highlight the need to protect NHS abortion services from cuts, will be on the agenda at the Abortion Rights AGM. All members and supporters are welcome.

FOR MORE INFORMATION ON ABORTION RIGHTS' WORK, OR TO ADD YOUR VOICE TO THE CAMPAIGN AGAINST CLINIC HARASSMENT AND FOR DETAILS OF MEMBERSHIP AND THE AGM VISIT WWW.ABORTIONRIGHTS.ORG.UK OR CONTACT THE OFFICE ON CHOICE@ABORTIONRIGHTS.ORG.UK

scottish women workers speak up



THE 84th annual STUC Women's Conference, chaired by Natasha Gerson of actors' union Equity, met in Glasgow in November 2011. Over 120 delegates, joined by many guests, visitors and a range of speakers, and spent two days discussing topics raised by women and their workplace representatives. The NAW was also there, with our usual stall, letting the women of Scotland know who we are and what we campaign for.

Impressive speeches from delegates reminded conference of the shared responsibility to speak up against injustice, and to listen to, and learn from, each other. For many delegates, Women's Conference is the first time a speech has to be prepared and delivered to a large audience. The STUC Women's Committee runs a training programme on *Conference Skills* throughout the year for women trade unionists, and it is always encouraging to see some of these women going up to the rostrum to speak to conference.

This year many speeches focussed on the impact of the economic recession on women's lives. A freezing of vacancies in the NHS in Scotland is hampering the implementation of previously agreed family friendly working policies, and the expectation that the same level of service can be delivered with fewer staff is leading to an increase in stress and bad health in the workplace.

Conference made clear its opposition to cuts in public expenditure,

highlighting that the private sector was also losing out as public sector contracts disappear. Many women who wish to work full time have only been able to find part time work, or have had their hours reduced, and the forthcoming changes in the tax credit and benefit system will see households struggling again to make ends meet. A number of speeches highlighted women's experiences as carers, both within their families and in the workforce.

The Women's Conference took place just before the Pensions Justice Campaign Day of Action on 30 November so provided an excellent opportunity to share information across different unions, and to speak up for women's pension entitlements. Many women spoke of the real levels of pensions payable to lower paid public sector workers, and the importance of defending those entitlements. Subsequently the 30 November demonstrations across Scotland certainly reflected women organising in their workplaces and communities, with thousands of women, and their families, joining all the actions on that day.

Conference always provides an opportunity to hear from guest speakers, and delegates were proud to welcome Baroness May Blood, who spoke with passion of her own working life experience in the textile mills in the north of Ireland, and the contribution she has made to involving women in

the peace process, the Good Friday agreement, and in politics. This was also a chance to hear more of the crucial debates in the House of Lords, as peers worked to reject some of the worst aspects of the Welfare Reform Bill.

A young school student from Cumbernauld, Kathleen Walker, gave an inspirational speech in favour of women's rights, and the Scottish Government Deputy First Minister Nicola Sturgeon MSP spoke to Conference too. Conference had agreed an emergency motion condemning the UK Borders Agency for recent dawn raids in Glasgow, terrifying experiences for women and their children, and we were pleased to hear the Scottish Government giving its endorsement to our views and campaigns on this.

Women's Conference also turned its attention to international issues. We continue to work with women's cooperatives in Gaza and in Bethlehem, whereby goods are made there and then sold in Scotland, with designs developed by the STUC women. This year an emergency motion focussed conference's attention on the plight of political prisoners in Colombia, and we will be working with the Justice for Colombia campaign in the year ahead.

FOR MORE INFORMATION ON THE STUC WOMEN'S COMMITTEE AND ITS WORK, CONTACT ANN HENDERSON, STUC ASSISTANT SECRETARY, AT AHENDERSON@STUC.ORG.UK OR VISIT WWW.STUC.ORG.UK/WOMEN

PHOTO: LOUIS FLOOD

naw history in the 1990s

IT was with great joy the women of the National Assembly of Women celebrated, alongside their South African sisters, the release of Nelson Mandela from his 27 years' incarceration on Robben Island, the defeat of apartheid, and in 1994 the first elections for all South Africans. In the pages of *sisters* (Sisters in Solidarity to End Racism and Sexism), the journal of the NAW, appeals were made for funds to help finance technological assistance in that election, and for helping in establishing and running nurseries and schools. A highlight of the NAW celebrations was a reception, jointly sponsored by the NAW, the Anti-apartheid Women's Committee and the new Manufacturing Science and Finance Union's Women's Committee, at which sisters were privileged to have Winnie Mandela as the guest of honour. A National Assembly of Women delegation to the United Nations 4th World Conference of Women in Beijing in 1995 was just one of a series of meetings between women of the two countries. Some controversy surrounded the decision to host the meeting in China, and despite some reservations about China's human rights record, the National Assembly of Women fully supported the decision that it would be positive rather than negative. Amongst the conference objectives was to review the advancement of women in the last decade and to adopt a platform for action around key issues:

- to identify and remove obstacles, to allow women full participation in development in all spheres of life
- to ensure equality of access to education, health care and employment

■ sharing of power and decision making

- to promote women's human rights and eliminate violence against women
- to determine priorities for action 1996 to 2001.

The report of the NAW delegates gives eloquent testimony to the passionate discussions, which took place among the delegates, representing every area of the world. What was clear then and remains so today, is that women the world over, despite huge differences between the developed and undeveloped countries are affected in common by the lack of equality with men. Following the meeting, the TUC's Women's Committee (also represented at the conference) made the proposal to concentrate on three priorities:

- introduction of a national minimum wage to deal with the increasing burden of poverty on women
- equalisation of statutory and contractual rights of part-time workers and an end to the discrimination in the benefits system faced by women on low wages.
- achieving a gender balance in government bodies and committees, quangos, judiciary and representation of men and women in government and public administrative positions.

In 1991 the NAW had sent its first delegation to China. Following the conference in 1996 a further delegation went to China at the invitation of the All China Women's Federation (ACWF) and a return delegation was hosted by the NAW in 1997. During this visit the delegates had discussions with the Women's National Commission and the members of the TUC Women's Committee as well as experiencing

some of our culture. These visits played an important role in developing further relations between the two women's organisations. In April 1998, a delegation from NAW attended the International Meeting of Solidarity between women in Cuba. They met almost 3,000 other delegates from 89 countries to "work with energy and determination to identify the problems of globalisation of capital and neo-liberalism, with its accompanying globalisation of poverty and ill-health and to seek to strategise for working against their dreadful impact". As the head of the Federation of Cuban Women said in welcoming the delegates, "Poverty is not the problem; poverty is the manifestation. The problem is inequality of the distribution of wealth". As well as hearing about these problems from delegates, they were able to experience at first-hand some of the effects of these policies in the form of the illegal and inhumane United States blockade.

The election of a Labour government in 1997 gave women hope that finally the differences still existing between women's and men's pay would be overcome. Unfortunately, that has not happened.

In 1998 the NAW became actively involved in the World March of Women, an initiative taken by the Quebec Women's Federation following the Beijing Conference. Its theme was the elimination of Poverty and Violence Against Women. The objective was two years of campaigning, culminating in a World March in New York on 17 October 2000, United Nations Day, for the Elimination of Poverty.

JANETTE FERGUSON, EDITOR

naw meets with **Japanese women**

ON Sunday 18 September 2011, a lovely sunny afternoon, Barbara Switzer, Pam Flynn, Lydia Meryll, and Ute Navidi met with a large delegation from the Japanese women's organisation FUDANREN – like the National Assembly of Women, also a member of the Women's International Democratic Federation – in London. The NAW was pleased to be able to engage with our Japanese colleagues and meet and discuss a wide range of questions including

- Education – especially the kind of changes affecting early childhood education and secondary school
- Medical care – eg. the current situation and problems of the NHS
- Gender equality – such as the wage

inequality between men and women

- Election system – our thoughts on the British system
- Pension scheme – the challenges of the current state of the British pension scheme
- NAW itself – our history and activities.

Clearly this agenda could have filled a whole day (or more) of discussion and dialogue, but we had to compress it into a short session due to their delayed arrival from the Lake District. Lydia's presentation on nuclear power generated a lively debate, and there were lots more questions following the panel contributions by Barbara, Pam and Ute.

We were showered with gifts which

we will display at the NAW AGM.

Watch out for more detailed reports on the discussions in the next issues of *sisters*. Meanwhile, Ute will be meeting with some FUDANREN representatives including Yuri Horie during her forthcoming trip to Japan.

DR UTE NAVIDI, NAW MEMBER



was the agenda. Every motion listed called for changes in society, both nationally and internationally that would benefit working people, and in particular women. The depth of knowledge these sisters had was incredible. Older women (even older than me) were so enlightening in the debate and I am a firm believer in something I once heard Terry Marsland say "You need to understand your history before moving forward".

The other item which grabbed my attention and interest was the international slot. Every year, we discussed at least one issue affecting women in other countries and often we have had an international speaker. There is so much to learn from these sisters. Of course, as you can imagine, inequality between men and women is global.

One thing I like about the NAW is the fact that we are not insular. We invite all manner of women to participate at our AGM, Abortion Rights, the National Union of Students, Green Party activists and women trade unionists from around the UK.

I cannot speak highly enough of the work the NAW undertakes and I believe it enables those who participate to bring another depth of knowledge to their various organisations. I do know that when I was active within Unite the union until my retirement three years ago, I often felt confident on issues that had been discussed at the NAW AGM when discussing them in the wider trade union arena.

Good luck for 2012!

LORENE FABIAN, NAW MEMBER

WHEN Janette asked me to put some of my thoughts down on paper for *sisters*, as to why I was drawn to the National Assembly of Women, I didn't have to think about it for too long.

Quite simply, I was drawn to the NAW, not just because I had heard about their progressive stand on issues affecting women, but because many friends of mine, who I admired and listened to, were members. So I thought to myself "this can't be bad" and when their 1999 Annual General Meeting came along, I decided to attend.

I must be truthful, the thought of spending a weekend at Wortley Hall with good friends, listening to issues close to my heart, and sharing a tipple or two in the bar was the over-riding factor. However, the icing on the cake

IN the lead up to the International Conference on Afghanistan in Bonn on 5 December 2011, where world leaders met to discuss Afghanistan's future, a petition of 22,000 signatures in support of the rights of Afghan women was handed to the UK government.

On the day of the conference, the Afghan Women's Network (AWN) issued a declaration outlining their recommendations on Bonn and beyond. Members of the AWN met with foreign ministers, UN officials and journalists to discuss the issues outlined in the declaration. Selay Ghaffer executive director of Humanitarian Assistance for Women and Children of Afghanistan (HAWCA), was one of only two civil society representatives selected to speak at the official conference and highlighted the needs and concerns of the women of Afghanistan.

Thanks to the efforts of Ghaffer, AWN, members of civil society and supportive government delegates, the outcome document from the conference states that the constitution, including the rights of women must be respected in the peace and reconciliation process. However, it is not clear what actions will be taken to include women in transition talks, or how these commitments will be implemented.

A few days before the conference the Afghan government reduced the number of women in its delegation from 13 to 11, that is an increase from 0 per cent to 28 per cent, considering there were no women on the Afghan delegation at the London delegation in 2010.

Going into the conference, Afghan women expressed their appreciation for the efforts of activists in the UK to show support for Afghan women's rights activists. "It is inspiring, absolutely inspiring, to know that there are so many kindred spirits around the globe who support women's rights in our country and insist they be upheld".

JANETTE FERGUSON, EDITOR

Women Power & Politics

The empowerment of women; Witches to Parliament

A day conference organised by the Sheffield Branch of the National Assembly of Women Saturday 10 March 2012, Sheffield

Witches Ann Munsey and Pat Peters NAW

Women in Parliament Angela Smith MP

Role of women in the trade union movement

Megan Dobney TUC

Women and the EU

Linda McAven MEP and Martha Jean Baker

Attendance fee £5 individuals, £10 organisations

NAW, 57 Pearson Place, Sheffield S8 9DE peterspat@blueyonder.co.uk

Sponsored by Unite the Union Sheffield No.1 Branch

CLAIMING DATE

The National Assembly of Women will be celebrating our Diamond Anniversary by holding a women's conference at Wortley Hall, near Sheffield

Thursday 5 and Friday 6 July 2012

Two major themes:

Women in Europe, and in Africa and the Middle East

Details of speakers, subjects and guests will be posted on the website www.sisters.org.uk and also included in the next issue of *sisters*

diary dates

Women, Power & Politics conference, Saturday 10 March, Sheffield, see page 9

TUC Women's Conference, 14 to 16 March, London

NAW Executive Committee meeting, Saturday 24 March, London (members are welcome to attend, but please let the acting secretary know at anitawright@breathe.com)

WIDF Congress, April, Brazilia, Brazil

NAW Annual General Meeting, Saturday 28 April, Wortley Hall, Sheffield

join the NAW now!

*I would like to join the NAW. Here is £15 for the annual subscription (£5 unwaged) which includes my subscription to **sisters**, the journal of the NAW.*

Our organisation would like to affiliate to the NAW. Enclosed is: £15 (local organisation/NAW branch), £30 (regional organisation), £45 (national)

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