

## THE AFFILIATION OF NUPE TO WOMENS FIGHTBACK

In a composite resolution, the annual conference of NUPE overwhelmingly agreed to instruct the Executive Council to affiliate to Womens Fightback organisation and to circulate a trial copy of the newspaper to each branch.

There can be no doubt that this offers a real opportunity to WF/B to find avenues to reach the thousands of working class women that union. The question is how do we realise this potential, what steps do we make as an organisation to develop links further than the executive affiliation and a notice raised in union branches.

A number of questions have to be answered:

- 1) How do we put pressure on the executive so that they will carry out conference policy. It was well over six months after the last NUPE conference agreed to sponsor the Right to Work March that they even contacted Right to Work, and then the decision was reversed at the next conference.
- 2) What should be the content of the newspaper circulated to each branch.
- 3) Are we intent on establishing WFB caucusses in the union, or do we want to develop the tenuous 'Women in NUPE' groupings that functioned on an ad hoc basis around the conference. What would Fightback's relationship be to a future broad left.
- 4) Fightback's relationship to other campaigns, Health Workers for the Full Claim, National Childcare Campaign, Lancashire school meals campaign, Rank and File Mobilising Committee, Defence of TU rights etc - the latter two having had a long-term relationship with NUPE.
- 5) Are we going to concentrate on individual campaigns orientating towards sections of women in NUPE, e.g. on school meals, nursery provision, health workers pay, or
- 6) Concentrate on broader campaigns on the role of women in the union, representation, the role of regional womens advisory committees, national womens advisory committees, the full-time womens office, sexism in male NUPE members, women's participation in meetings (at every level of the union) and for example broaden educational and fights against Tebbits anti-union laws.

In order to answer some of these questions, it is necessary to say a bit about the union itself. NUPE is a newly developing union with a massive increase in membership in the late 50s and the 60s, mainly of part-time married women with children. The women in the union are mainly to be found in services such as cleaners, cooks and in schools, homes, hospitals, swimming pools, laundries, nurseries, lavatory attendants, there are a small but increasing number of women ambulance staff, road sweepers, drivers. They are women most at risk from this government's policies - low waged, married therefore won't show up on statistics when the jobs lost, they are the most difficult to organise as they have children to look after in the evenings, no history or experience of trade unions and they do care about the people they look after and they can be taken advantage of by employers and by the bureaucracy. They probably rank as some of the most exploited of women workers, doing work a direct extension of the home, doing some of the filthiest hardest work around for the lowest pay, and working in the sweatshops of school kitchens at unbelievable speed-up. They are undoubtedly willing to fight, they know what further speed-up and demands on time means for overworked housewives who don't have enough hours in the day as it is and they know what cuts mean in terms of suffering and extra burdens on them at home. Many NUPE women have the potential to be excellent organisers, the running and organisation of their homes and jobs training them daily and they have little tolerance of inefficiency. But they, critically, have no confidence in themselves, especially in formal meetings, negotiations, union conferences in writing letters etc. Many have not been educated beyond 16. In their work situation they know what needs doing but see "the union" as the officers, the national leadership with authority who what what is going on, who will put it down on paper and see to it. This is essentially how the bureaucracy keep control, the full-time officials who have in practice a major say in the direction and policies of the local branch. These women see trade unions and politics as their husbands' concern, I've often had said to me, "We women have got enough to worry about, without getting involved in politics".

The bureaucracy in NUPE is an interesting mixture. It is very dominated by Stalinists - most full-time officials are often militants culled from the workplace and processed through Ruskin College, many, for example, ex-miners



or are bright graduates from Warwick University, most have never had to work in the conditions and for the wages that the members who their wages do. The vast majority are white, male, young middle-aged with a lot of left talk. They are making a career out of one of the up and coming unions. Their influence is magnified by their determination to keep the membership ignorant.

In the campaigning leaflet, 6 good reasons why you should join NUPE, point no. 3 says, NUPE has a very democratic structure. Members as a group can make their views known to the Branch District Committee, the Area Committee and National Committees and up to the Executive Council.

Though you can't generalise, most NUPE branches are not exemplary models of democracy. This is especially true of local authority branches with a mass (some branches up to 6,000 members!) membership of part-time workers scattered in small sections of two or three. Branch secretaries are on a commission which can work out pretty lucrative, so many hold on to the post and try to do as little as possible for it. It is easy for them to blame the inefficiency of a branch on membership's apathy. The membership being accused of not wanting to attend meetings that they usually have never heard of.

I have spent the last 5 years in my branch mainly just fighting for basic democracy, proper elections, notification of meetings, functioning BDC, properly conducted meetings. Many branches just do not even meet, except for the AGM, blatantly flouting the rule book. Of course part-time women workers are extremely difficult to organise.

- 1) The difficulty for women to attend meetings, if they are held outside working hours, the conflict with their home responsibilities, the very reason women work part-time in the first place.
- 2) The union membership fee can be a disproportionately large slice out of a part-time wage. NUPE has a lower rate for part-timers, but it means lower benefit provision.

But instead of the branch leadership fighting tooth and nail to help them participate, it obviously pays them to keep the members an undemanding mass who haven't a clue what is going on in their union, ignorant of their rights and what the union leadership should be doing on their behalf.

With the exception of the two women officers in Belfast, I haven't met a full-time officer who isn't contemptible of his women membership.

In local authorities, where a great many NUPE members work in schools, the branch secretary and certainly most of the stewards are school caretakers, but very rarely the female school caretakers. Caretakers are very powerful (though noticeably very rarely use this power), in a position to close down schools, county halls, polytechnics, CFEs etc, and have a large number of staff women NUPE members under them.

In the NHS branches I'm not so certain of, but I'm sure the patterns repeat themselves, the male porters, nurses, maintenance holding the offices and rarely the female domestics and auxiliaries.

I mentioned earlier the left image NUPE has (certainly clear in the present NHS dispute). It is heavily influenced by Stalinism (note several circulars explaining national funding for the Morning Star). The bureaucracy, especially the full-timers, because of among other things training at Ruskin are extremely conscious of Trotskyism. They are adept at confusing the membership with very good left rhetoric that is certainly hard to match, but hate us (Trotskyists) for coming in and deflating their blown up militancy by specific requests for action; by trying to carefully tie them down and thereby clearly showing them up to the membership for being unable to come up with the goods.

I don't think anyone seriously fighting on behalf of and wishing to give a lead to the very exploited women members of NUPE can afford to be 'soft' on these leaders. Their record is so terrible: this present bureaucracy has presided over 37,000 jobs lost in local authorities, closures of many major hospitals, old people's homes, nurseries, hundreds of school canteens, massive cuts in wages of all its members giving no lead to local authority members to fight. It has been party to dragging out demoralising, wearing out its NHS members where it had a unanimous conference decision for all-out action. It has been party to, indeed arguing for, massive rate and rent increases in local labour-controlled



authorities, and of course was central in Healey's election to deputy leader of the Labour party, again in contradiction of conference policy.

The union leadership uses the standard excuses to cover up its unwillingness to fight by blaming the membership for its apathy, ignorance and lack of militancy. We all know that the membership are willing to fight, even the bureaucratized layers of the NUPE conference reflects this. But it is clearly shown in the NHS dispute, the four all-out strikes in school meals, nursery and hospital occupations etc.

So, back to the questions, how do we reach this membership. It is obvious as soon as we start being effective, showing the members the way to fight the attacks on their jobs, wages, working conditions, rights, we are going to be a direct challenge to the bureaucracy - it is precisely because we offer the lead and direction for the working class which they don't and won't and can't that they attack us. If NUPE women listen to us because what we say is directly relevant to them, we will be challenging the bureaucracy's control. So they will attempt to stop us, already they are seriously worried by the affiliation, and must be somewhat surprised we are not pursuing it more rigorously.

So suggestions on ways to use the the affiliation:

- 1) Firstly, where we have NUPE members or contacts, we must get resolutions in the branches to invite a WFB speaker and get the branch to write to the executive asking what they are doing on the affiliation. Already this has started: in Birmingham Social Services Branch have invited me to speak at the quarterly stewards meeting on WFB experience on fighting the cuts. We should also attempt to be invited to NUPE meetings at every levels, division, NC etc.
- 2) We have a situation at the moment which is ripe for development, with the national action around the NHS dispute - NUPE WFB members, esp M/I Cardiff and A/C Man should speak at set up joint NUPE/WFB meetings. Though it is a genuine problem to establish any other meetings when we are trying to establish HWFC.

We do need a special WFB Bulletin on the NHS dispute, which should not only be directed at NHS workers on how to carry through the fight but also to other women on why it is essential to support the action (it was very noticeable at the demonstration how few women local authority workers were on the march in the NUPE delegation, I saw no delegations from school meals, cleaners or old peoples homes). We should sell this bulletin on picket lines and estates.

The great thing about the affiliation to NUPE is that every single town, village, city, has NUPE members who are easy to find in the schools, old peoples homes, hospitals etc. This is especially important for one of the ways of reaching the most neglected, most attacked and most exploited of all NUPE women - those women in school meals. At the NUPE conference the anger and frustration of school meals staff from all over the country was explosive. It is still staggering to me that the local authority N.C. managed to contain them.

The attacks on school meals are profound, thousands of jobs lost, the bureaucracy having done deals to allow school meals sections to be picked off, and fighting in isolation. WFB's role in fighting school meals attacks could be unique.

1. We have the experience - the only organised campaign on school meals - the LSMC is run by our comrades. We also have my limited experience in Oxford.
2. The bureaucracy have not lifted one finger to fight the cuts, blaming the women for refusing to fight. Conditions in the past six months have radically altered. There have been four whole counties on all out strike over cuts. Now Gloucestershire is on strike. It is essential to hold a WFB meeting on school meals cuts, linking this to the fight on NHS pay. We can leaflet school canteens. School meals women are very eager to listen, read, get any advice on action, leaflets, who to put pressure and demands on. We must have a very basic WFB handbook on school meals basing itself on LSMC booklet, but with direction on how to fight, suggested leaflets etc.
3. It is an important issue to get women in the home active upon. By leafletting schools, through PTAs. The price rises affect them directly - they are angry about reduced quality in food or extra work from making packed lunches - many thousands of women on low incomes have lost their children's free school meal entitlement.
4. It is an excellent area for linking about the struggles in the Labour party and the struggles in the union. Sue C from London has had a good response to a



local SO leaflet.

5. It is essential to fight on a women's right to work. More jobs have been lost in school meals than in the steel industry. We have to fight to extend the action for a national response to the attacks on school meals.

6. It is essential for women's confidence within NUPE. School meals and women are ignored - at the conference Wandsworth just got well over 45 minutes, to Kent school meals' 5 minutes.

For us as socialists school meals is important because it raises the issues around the politics of food - subsidy of communal eating - how much of women's lives are embroiled in the individual preparation and serving of food. We should be fighting for the services to be extended to pensioners, homeless, playgroups etc. It is also an area ripe for investigation into open the books, the money being made out of school meals by food contractors, advertising now of junk food.

On the question of nursery and childcare provision: Every year the conference pays its regular lip service to the care of the under fives, children's play facilities etc. Again we are in a unique position to organise with our experiences in defence of childcare provision (nursery occupations), our work on the National Childcare Campaign. We must build links using Reg Race (NUPE sponsored MP), on demands on the Labour Party - again making the links at local and national level. Nursery nurses and assistants are a rapidly diminishing group in NUPE - when their conditions of work and pay came up at the very end of the local authority section at the NUPE conference, delegates walked out to get their tea. Like home helps, there is nothing in NUPE publications about them except the occasional token printing of the TUC charter on the underfives. It is essential to make links to campaign against Rayner.

On the question of women's representation within NUPE. At the women's Fight-back TU conference we established a Women in NUPE group (I don't know who took down the list of names, though I know Jenny Webber had a copy). At the conference we had two meetings - one was very large in which WFB played an important role organising on the composite resolution and ensuring it was taken by constantly intervening on standing orders, challenging sexism in the conference, discussing the functioning of the advisory committees. Since the conference, the women in NUPE group has not functioned. It was a different group from the WFB meeting at the conference which had more school meals, home help workers etc, but it is a very important group of women in NUPE including all layers eg 2 NC women. I discussed with Jenny Webber and am trying to get the list of names so we can use them to circulate. I think we should be central in organising this group to come to a meeting to discuss how to implement the composite resolution on women (which includes the WFB motion) and also current struggles, and use them to get WFB to speak at the women's advisory committees. The group are a source of important information about what is going on in the union and has valuable contacts, some of them are politically very conscious and are determined to isolate WFB. We must be seen, as we have been, to play a leading role in challenging the blatant sexism in NUPE, but we have to do it in a way that brings the women membership with us to back us.

There are many arenas I have not covered - very possible areas of work. There is special potential in taking up the question of gay rights and gay oppression in NUPE. It has been raised in a conference resolution, passed by a substantial majority in 1981. It was taken up this year in opposition to having the conference at Scarborough, whose council had refused the CHE conference and attacked gay couples.

NUPE has also participated in a very limited way in defending Susan Schell covering the story in the paper but by no means circulating the branches. The other area of work which WFB must raise and develop, is on the question of Ireland where NUPE has a substantial number of women members. We have a real responsibility to relate to those members, in the paper covering sensitively the class questions of the fight against British imperialism, harassment from troops, unemployment, poverty, housing conditions, the question of abortion rights, birth control, gay rights.

I am very excited about the developments we can make with this affiliation, not only for WFB but for our whole movement. We have got to tackle it seriously



and systematically. I've put forward a lot of ideas, all of which it is probably not possible to do. Essentially we require a full discussion of the womens commission - to convene as well a NUPE faction, because the other NUPE members in the organisation no doubt have ideas but must be organised to activate the affiliation in the local branches. We must have a full NC discussion so that every area can be committed to realising the potential. Above all if we can simply, clearly in WFB paper cover issues that for women in NUPE are burning issues on their independent livelihood, their fight to work, their wages, their conditions at work, write to earn their respect and interest, to relate to them and provide guidelines on how to fight, showing them that an essential part of that fight is their participation in the union; the fight for democracy, the fight against the reformism and sexism of the present leadership, giving them confidence, then we will be able to relate and draw close to us the mass of working class women in NUPE, the only way to defend ourselves from the bureaucracy will be by the mass women membership fighting for us - knowing they need us, want us, that we are necessary for them.

If NUPE women find WFB perhaps interesting but not all that relevant to them, or essential to equip them in their daily fights - then it will be a tragedy and bodes ill for our ability ever to reach out and provide a leadership to working class women.