

'The only way is Essex' – Gender, union and mobilisation among fire service control room staff

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Abstract

This contribution to *On the Front Line* records a dialogue between two female Fire Brigades Union (FBU) representatives in the Essex Emergency Control Room who led industrial action over the imposition of a shift system that stretched their work-life balance to breaking point and constrained their ability to work full-time. Their testimony reveals how male members were mobilised in the interests of predominantly female control staff. Kate and Lynne's discussion illuminates the interaction of gender and class interests and identities in the union and in the lives of its women members. It provides insight into the efficacy of trade unions for women's collective action.

Keywords

gender, industrial action, strikes, trade unions, work-life balance

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Through dialogue between two Fire Brigades Union (FBU) representatives working in the emergency control room in Essex, this contribution provides sociological insight into the dynamic interaction between gender and class in the lives of a group of women workers and how these are operationalised in the context of a significant episode of industrial action (Pearson et al., 2010; Pollert, 1981). Consequently, the first-hand narratives deliver understanding of problematics that transcends the boundaries of this particular case, illuminating the conditions under which unions can be 'effective vehicles for female collective action and empowerment' (Cobble, 1990: 520).

The piece represents a slight departure from the conventional format of *On the Front Line* (Taylor and Connolly, 2009; Taylor et al., 2009) in presenting a compelling slice of dialogue between the two respondents, Kate and Lynne. The interchange comes from a wider project on the history of the FBU designed to coincide with the union's centenary in 2018. Kate and Lynne were interviewed together, rather than individually, because of constraints on their time. Serendipitously, though, this necessity turned into a virtue, for the interaction between them, it is suggested, enhances the authenticity of the account. The semi-structured schedule provided only a starting point for the free-flowing discussion which was recorded and transcribed. Arguably, this dialogue delivered greater insight into the gender-based collectivism that was a principal driver of the dispute, than might have been delivered by a single testimony. The dynamic exchange captured more successfully the discussions, experiences and tensions that underlay the process of worker mobilisation (Kelly, 1997).

The older of the women, Lynne, following college, had first worked in a control room in the north of England in 1990, then left after six years to join the police and resumed employment with the fire service in Essex in 2005 after a career break. Former nursery nurse Kate, joined the service in 2008, hearing about the control room post from her husband, who had recently transitioned from a retained to a full firefighter role. While both saw themselves as staunch union members, they described contrasting pathways to that shared commitment. Lynne reported that she had 'always been a union girl'; it was something that 'everybody did' in the fire service because of the need for protection. Kate signed up to the union a year after being employed, mainly, she explained, because her husband was a member, but also because the brigade was issuing new contracts that were provoking a local dispute over overtime payments. She later 'stepped up' to become a rep when Lynne was forced to go sick for a period.

Here, Kate and Lynne give accounts of recent local industrial action against imposed new shift patterns that they and their women colleagues, especially, perceived as threatening their working lives. The significance of their action is twofold. Firstly, it represented a dispute over the substantive issue of work-life balance. Secondly, it is a conspicuous case of strike action led by women and supported by male workers within an industrial union¹ (Seifert and Sibley, 2005).

The details are as follows. From January to September 2015, FBU members in the Essex Fire and Rescue Service took 30 days of strike action against attempts by the Fire Authority to impose reductions in staffing levels and fire cover, particularly affecting night working, following a review of shift systems and terms and conditions (T&Cs).

The wider context was an evaluation of the Essex service prompted by local authority budget constraints driven by central government cuts, with local managers choosing to remove fire cover to invest in other parts of the service. The more immediate background was the relocation of the control centre where emergency calls are received and the introduction of a new mobilising (IT) system of call allocation and distribution. The key trigger was the imposition on 44 emergency control staff, the majority being women, of a 12-hour shift system and wholesale changes to operational and supervisory staffing levels. Significantly, these entailed an enforced move from a nine-hour day shift and 15-hour night shift (9 a.m. to 6 p.m. / 6 p.m. to 9 a.m.) of two days and two nights on and four days off, to 12-hour shifts (7 a.m. to 7 p.m. / 7 p.m. to 7 a.m.) over two days and two nights, followed by four days off. The 15-hour night shift had allowed control members rest periods, part of national T&Cs, during a stand-down (12 p.m. to 7 a.m.) dependent on calls covered by the remaining shift members. The new building had no rest areas. The 12-hour shift pattern was regarded as a locally imposed, detrimental change to national T&Cs.

Recent disputes over changes to junior doctors' contracts (Brook et al., 2016), and weekend night services on the London Underground, suggest that extended working hours jeopardising work-life balance may be an increasing source of grievance for workers and are not exclusively a 'women's issue'. However, Kate and Lynne describe how 12-hour shifts led to members being forced to leave full-time employment and to reduce working hours to care for children, facing pay reductions that they could ill afford and finding themselves in the female low-pay trap of part-time work (Warren, 2010). Previously, they had just about been able to balance work with childcare, sometimes in conjunction with the complementary shifts of firefighter partners. Rest periods had allowed workers with children to function the following day. The control room women had constructed complex, indeed precarious, routines of childcare, barely managing a work-life balance already stretched to breaking point.

The shift changes threatened to eliminate the final semblance of 'balance'. An FBU press release (26 February 2015) emphasised the 'physical and emotional stresses on member's family and work lives'. The local union officers saw the employer as picking on the 'least unionised, smallest membership - women members - to actually break the nut'.² [AQ: 1] It was believed that, once imposed, the new shift system could be extended to all Essex firefighters, and enforced in other areas of the UK. Women were thus 'on the frontline' of resisting changes that had implications for firefighters locally and for brigades nationally. Of further salience to the union/class and gender dynamic is the fact that the partners of a number of control room women were firefighters, so their work and home lives and interests intersected with those of male firefighters, adding personal dimensions to their solidarity.

With the new system to go live in December 2014, a strike ballot of all Essex FBU members was called on four issues, including staffing levels, T&Cs, fire cover and the formal issue of 'an unworkable work life/home life balance' for control staff. The ballot spanned three weeks from 31 October with branch officers organising 67 member meetings. They noted the historic difficulties in mobilising control staff, surrounded in headquarters by senior management and isolated from firefighters.

Across the service – control room staff *and* firefighters – 64 per cent voted in favour of action. The union employed the tactic of pulling different sections out at different times, while the minimum notification required by law was given for each day of strike action (rather than as a block), creating a ‘staggered surprise’ effect. In January 2015, all members struck for three days, followed by two days in March, and then control staff taking 10 days of action. The union then pulled out retained firefighters and station-based watch managers, with control members taking six further days in August, sometimes alongside these colleagues. Negotiations began in spring 2014 and the dispute was finally settled in May 2017 with the withdrawal of the 12-hour shifts in emergency control in favour of a 10-hour day 14-hour night pattern and the restoration of rest periods and facilities. In addition, it was agreed to restore 48 firefighter jobs, increasing staffing on watches, and there was an assurance of no unilateral change to duty systems. The strikes thus secured major concessions.

The strike indicates the capacity and preparedness of a union dominated by male workers to support the interests of a minority of women members, a nuanced interpretation embracing the understanding that the resistance of the control room staff was seen to be in the interests of all members of the union. As an industrial union, the FBU reflects the vertical organisation of workers in one industry, regardless of ‘skill’, so that all are represented (McIlroy, 1995). Historically, industrial unionism involved a rejection of exclusive male craft unionism which was seen as placing ideological and organisational barriers to the mobilisation of women (Cobble, 1990: 519). Industrial union structures closed gaps between craft and unskilled workers (Peterson, 1981) and were seen as more conducive to female participation, although not necessarily to female leadership (Cobble, 1990). The FBU represents all uniformed occupations in the fire service, including control staff and retained firefighters, and coordinates bargaining under one national agreement – the Grey Book.

Although female FBU membership dates to the Second World War, with women in the Auxiliary Fire Service as drivers and dispatch riders, in control rooms but also, more controversially, in firefighting (Segars, 1992), women account for only 5 per cent of whole-time and 4.1 per cent of retained firefighters in England and are predominantly control room based (77% of women) (Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG), 2015). Efforts to recruit more female firefighters have been hindered by cuts to the service, particularly since 2010. In gender-segregated industries, including the fire service, the interests of minorities of women workers may be marginalised. Indeed, this presumption is confirmed by an FBU historian, who linked masculine solidarity to radicalism. Bailey argued on the working conditions of firemen [sic]: ‘the shared workspace and male camaraderie together with the high level of team work enforced by a dangerous job all nurtured a strong group solidarity ... the very consciousness of a separate identity from other workers’, which ‘disposed firemen towards industrial and political radicalism’ (1992: 10).

More recently, the FBU has led challenges to inequality, discrimination and harassment, both in the service (HM Fire Service Inspectorate, 1999) and among its own membership, through changes to rules on the representation of members accused of harassment, and through self-organised structures for black and ethnic minority, women and LGBT members (FBU, 2000, 2015). Some measures have been controversial internally and have generated tensions between minority identity-based

self-organisation and class-based solidaristic traditions of trade unionism, heightened in this male-dominated industrial union (McGhee, 2011). Nevertheless, crucially, as testimony reveals, the industrial union and male members were mobilised in the interests of predominantly female control staff.

Kirton (2005) argues that women must see trade unions as representing their interests and believe that collective representation is effective for them. Kate and Lynne discuss the underlying grievances and their experiences of taking strike action. While women are now proportionately more likely to be union members and have been central to much strike action in recent decades, in national public sector disputes and at British Airways (2009–2011) (Taylor and Moore, 2015), there are few contemporary accounts of the inter-relationship of gender and union or class in industrial action. This omission is peculiar considering the current preoccupation with identity and intersectional identities. Exceptions are Shelley Winter's *On the Front Line* narrative of the Magnet Dispute (McBride et al., 2013) and Pearson et al.'s account of Asian women's leadership at Grunwick in 1976–1978 and Gate Gourmet in 2005. The latter explore how gender, ethnicity and class intersected 'to catalyse industrial action in each of these two workplaces' (Pearson et al., 2010: 409). They focus on the labour process and how technical and managerial changes to production processes were 'internalised by women workers', inlayed by existing experience and subjectivities leading to withdrawal of labour (Pearson et al., 2010: 412). Resistance comes from experience of the labour process, but intersected with class, ethnic and gender identities, which informed notions of dignity and justice.

The articulation of gender may be as elusive as class in trade union disputes. Feminist ideas may encourage or constrain women's participation in unions and, particularly, through separate organisation, but as Kirton (2005) stresses, gendered experiences may not be politicised or seen as issues for solidaristic action or subject to gender conscious discourses. There may be a reluctance to self-identify as feminist despite more abstract influences of feminist beliefs and values (Kirton, 2005). Potential contradictions are evident in Essex in the promotion of 'Mother's Day' to gain publicity and support, an initiative potentially seen as reinforcing traditional gender relations, but simultaneously advocating women's full-time work to a wider audience. The narratives seem to confirm that union women use some, but not all, aspects of feminist ideology to legitimise the assertion of workplace rights (Hartman-Strom, 1983). In their discussion, Kate and Lynne reflect on the causes and effects of their dispute, focusing on the following themes: tipping the precarious work-life balance, mobilisation and women, the action and, finally, politicisation as the 'Dagenham Girls'. The latter reflects the historic fight for equal pay by women machinists at Ford in Dagenham, Essex (Gilbert, 2012), which had resonance for Kate and Lynne, perhaps because of its popularisation through the film *Made in Dagenham*.

Tipping the precarious work-life balance

Kate:

Well, we were going through a consultation, which was, to be honest, a farce. Yes, we attended meetings, yes we put a lot of work into consulting the members of control, asking them what they wanted, seeing what we could come up with, shift

pattern-wise that would keep the £241,000 savings – because that was the driving force. That’s what they said we need to save. We gave them offers of different ways of doing it without too much hardship. All the members said they preferred to keep the nine-hour days, the shorter days and the longer nights. Whether that be a nine-hour or a ten-hour day, but they didn’t want to do 12-hour days and nights, they were adamant about that. A lot of control staff have partners within the service, have children, and the implications that they were proposing were – for me personally – unreasonable because I don’t have childcare at 7 in the morning.

Lynne:

5 a.m. it would have to be, because we had to move watches, so I would have to find childcare at 5 a.m.

Kate:

And my child has already spent a night or two away from me a week because, for my night shifts, it would incur four nights a week – it’s unreasonable just to sustain a job. So that was me, personally, but then there’s an awful lot within the control with young families.

Lynne:

Either I don’t see my children for two days, two full days, because I leave at 5.30, 6, in the morning, get home at 8 – and they’re in bed by then.

Kate:

I had to go to job-share because my partner, or my husband now, is in the job, he’s a firefighter doing the same shifts. And it just didn’t – the changeover times were horrendous, so I had to either go job-share or do flexible work. But, to be honest with you, I didn’t want to work there! It sounds horrible now, I didn’t want to work there; I wanted to be there part-time because of the way I was being treated, I was just stressed out with it all. So, I couldn’t really afford to go job-share but I needed to, so obviously after nine months I had to go back full-time, which was a big struggle for me.

Lynne:

I was going to say, it’s all a matter of money isn’t it?

Kate:

That’s what it is, I wouldn’t be there otherwise. I love the job, don’t get me wrong, and I never thought of going job-share because I just love the job. But there are four people now on job-share.

Lynne:

I put in for flexible working because I couldn’t possibly start at 7 because of childcare, so I started at 9.30, I reduced hours. So there were girls I was working with, Karen for instance, luckily her mum lives round the corner, but her kids go to her mum’s two days a week, so they have to stay overnight. She says otherwise I have to get them up at 5 and then wake my parents up to say, ‘Can you take the kids because I need to get

to work?'. So it's unreasonable, but they're struggling through and that's a word I'd use is 'they're struggling through' at the moment. But the amount of people that have had to take flexible working now, or job-share ...

Kate:

They shouldn't have had to do it. The big issue for control was that the days are too long, people going home so tired.

Lynne:

Exhausted.

Kate:

So tired; 6 p.m. used to be the time you finished, it used to be great, leave a bit of time, extra time if people wanted to do a bit of flexible working, wanted to start a bit later.

Lynne:

But you can have an evening can't you?

Kate:

You can have an evening; you can see your kids.

Lynne:

You can put your kids to bed, if you want to go out and meet friends in the evening you can, but now, by the time you get home it's 9 p.m.

Women and mobilisation

Lynne:

The firefighters were balloted for strike action and they did support us, but it was the way that our union, a very strategic way of placing just a section of the workforce [on strike], I thought that was brilliant, it was brilliant that they just called out this specific section of the workforce. And actually they went on further after control went back in, they pulled out just the officers and I think it had ...

Kate: They didn't know what we were gonna do next.

Lynne:

It had a dramatic effect on the powers that be because they were like oh, oh, this has never been done ...

Kate:

What's gonna happen now!

Lynne:

This has never been done before, it's usually one out, all out. And I think it was quite an eye-opener for them - what will they do next? And there's things that could be done next and probably will be done next, but I don't think it's got to that point yet.

Kate: No – nice response!

Lynne:

Like I say, it's not normal if we're not called out and there were times when we hadn't been called out because we weren't part of their ballot when it came to pensions. And it didn't sit well with me personally.

Kate:

And when we was on strike and the firefighters weren't, it made it worse that they were balloted so they could be on strike if they pulled them out. And a lot of them actually wanted to be on strike with us, they wanted to do it, they felt so uncomfortable.

Lynne:

Oh, yes, like we felt uncomfortable when the boot was on the other foot.

Kate:

We had so much support on the picket line because they was, like, yeah, we should all be out, why aren't we all out? But then they didn't understand the logistics, they weren't informed because not a lot of people are, it's just the reps that kind of kept up to date, we've got to keep it to ourselves.

Lynne:

And you've got to get that information filtered down. But it's very hard, it's not a natural thing to cross someone else's picket line when you are a union person and there was quite a lot refused point blank – we're not crossing your picket line. It was quite disruptive for a period of time wasn't it?

Kate:

But then luckily they were told, if you want to go and work somewhere else that's fine. So, in that way management kind of knew, understood that the men wouldn't cross our picket line and said in that case you're not just gonna have a day off work, go and work from Gray's fire station or somewhere else.

Lynne:

I think they thought we was gonna be a pushover, we're gonna do some changes to the service but we'll start with control because they're a small group of women.

Kate:

They're a smaller group, yeah.

Lynne:

They won't put up a fight, they want their jobs you know; they don't have time to fight.

Kate: Firefighters obviously make up the majority of the FBU so if they picked on the firefighter section it would be quite a huge lot to pick on.

Lynne:

Whereas if they pick on control no firefighters are gonna stand up for control, so they thought, they're only a tiny section. But they were wrong, we had the biggest fight, I think, in - well I don't know if it's in history, but it sure brought a hell of a lot of attention to Essex.

The action - 'This is ours'

Kate:

We took strike action on the date of the move over. So it was the 15th of January. I think we were likened to the miners by the Chief Officer weren't we? Because the firefighters, some were meant to be on a training course and they wouldn't cross our picket line. So there was a queue of traffic backing up, wasn't there?

Lynne:

Blocking the A12, which is not one of the best roads to be blocking.

Kate:

And the firefighters were saying, 'No, I'm not crossing your picket line, we're not crossing your picket line'.

Lynne:

We were saying to them, 'No, you go on the course, we don't want you in trouble, this is ours. Come and support us at lunchtime, bring us a cup of tea or something.' They were like, 'No, we don't want to do it'.

Kate:

So there was a few days where there was heavy police presence and obviously a lot of the firefighters not wanting to - well most of them, the majority - just wouldn't cross our picket line.

Lynne:

Media vans as well, the photographer vans, so they was all blocking the driveway.

Kate:

So I think one of the senior managers phoned the union and I think the word had got out that the Chief likened us to the miners' strike - that's why we had the police presence.

Lynne:

We did. As women, what do they expect us to do? They had to call the police in; they set up a police patrol and saw us turn up, and they walked up to us. It was like, 'Oh, we was told there would be a hundred of you. You're not gonna cause trouble are you?'.

Kate:

'Do we look like we're gonna cause trouble! We're actually on a demonstration.'

Lynne:

If we was to cause trouble we'd lose our blooming jobs anyway so, no, we're not gonna cause trouble.

Kate: After two days I think they decided that they'd just leave us.

Lynne:

It was a waste of time for them. And they used to wave at us in the end didn't they! Hi, we're still here! Alright, yeah. That was all of us [picketing] wasn't it, 20, that's control staff plus you had firefighters as well. It was really good because we was all there, showing unity, and because they wasn't expecting us, that's it, it was the first time there had been a picket line outside headquarters.

Kate:

Which they didn't like.

Lynne:

They didn't expect it because they thought, Oh, it's the A12, it's a busy road, they're not gonna be allowed to do it.

Kate:

And they're not allowed on our property so they can't park anywhere, but there's ways and means.

Lynne:

Just shows how strong we were.

Kate:

And you know none of this, let's be solemn on the picket line, we were in good spirits and they hated it.

Lynne:

They did hate it, yeah. We were jolly.

Kate:

We said, because you have to let them know seven days before don't you, we're gonna go on strike for two days. Oh right, ok ... for two days and then the day after we're gonna have another day. And then it got to nine days and it was like how is this gonna stop? And they actually said in the press, the Chief Officer said, 'Oh, they're gonna be out for 10 days' and it got to nine days and we didn't put a tenth day in so he looked stupid. I think he thought are they gonna do 10 days?

Lynne:

And of course it just happened to go over Mother's Day as well, so of course the majority of us women, it really was quite poignant at the time.

Kate:

We had a special mention from Frances O'Grady [woman General Secretary of the Trades Union Congress - TUC].

Lynne:

Yes, it came from the Women's TUC Conference.

Kate:

We went there, we walked in didn't we, and they all stood up, we just was like, 'We'll go in the back'; we went in the back door - 'Oh, the Essex girls are here', and they all stood up and cheered. It was like, 'Oh my god! That was embarrassing.' 'Where are they - Oh, there they are!' [AQ: 2]

Lynne:

It was overwhelming, I didn't realise the level of support, never been down to the Women's TUC before.

Kate:

And we stood with buckets didn't we, collection buckets to help support the fund and everyone was giving like fivers, tenners, it was great.

Lynne:

It was honestly overwhelming, just didn't know what we were expecting when we got there.

Kate:

I was just expecting to be this little person at the back, it was really good.

Politicisation - The 'Dagenham girls' of control

Kate:

I think it's [the dispute's that] brought me out of myself more, it's made me realise that if you fight for things you will get it. It's not always, oh you're told to do this so you do it. It sometimes makes me think hmm, really? I don't think that's right actually, let me just discuss this with you, or - is there a better option? And a lot of people don't like it.

Lynne:

Have a look at the bigger picture because there's always different options that can be taken and sometimes you just need to think outside the box and say, well, people have opinions, why don't you listen to other people? And take that and ask for a majority instead of more of a dictatorship - you will do as I say.

Kate:

At the beginning, no one really on the management board knew me and I think, now, I kind of see them around and they're kind of - 'Oh, hello, how are you?'. I think they've gained more respect for me because they know that - I'm watching them, not always watching them, I'm not like some people ...

Lynne:

But they do need watching!

Kate:

Yeah, I do though! I think they've realised you know that I'm not a walkover and I may be small and quiet and whatnot but ...

Lynne: You're not quiet, Kate!

Kate: Yeah, I didn't know anything, I was literally just - didn't know anything about politics or anything but - I love it, I do love it, the whole thing.

Lynne:

I think it's opened my eyes into the political world and the knock-on effect from the Government that's fed down, because obviously the Essex Fire Authority is made up of MPs and whatnot. And how the influence comes down the line into the Essex Fire Authority to the senior management team and the knock-on effects onto us guys, when actually there are different options and it's very much as a union how they are trodden on these days in the political sense. It's a case of they despise us and, yet, all we're doing is looking out for the workers' rights. We don't want to just sit back and accept what anyone else says when there's different options out there if somebody will just sit there and listen and open their eyes and their ears and say, ok, yeah, I can see what you're saying.

Kate:

Then, on the other hand, with our control dispute, a lot of the time, if not all control were out alone and then - they became more, oh actually, had a bit more respect for us, actually they are willing to just go out and not get paid.

Lynne:

I think it was an eye-opener for them. We did, was it eight days straight?

Kate:

It's been mentioned to me a lot by different firefighters and also our Regional Secretary, Riccardo, he said you don't know how many people have said to me how much they look up to you now and how the wheels have changed because of the fact that we're all strong women. It was all in the papers wasn't it? All these 'Dagenham girls of control' and you think, wow! We're only standing up for what we believe in and because we are the majority women, aren't we, and a couple of men or one man in tow at the minute, we just thought it was what we should do. We didn't do it for

press coverage and we can't believe the amount we got that was excellent and how many people were interested. But, yeah, that's all we were doing and the firefighters really appreciated that.

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Notes

1. Seifert and Sibley characterise the FBU as 'a closed craft union', but concede that it has some of the elements of industrial unionism (2005: 36).
2. Interview with the regional FBU officer.

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