

Advisor

**B&EMM School:
Inspirational,
empowering –
and way over
subscribed**
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The magazine of the Fire Brigades Union Black and Ethnic Minority Members www.fbu.org.uk

March 2009



YES WE CAN!

Obama victory inspires BME in the fire service



Foreword

I hope the New Year is finding you all healthy in mind and body.

This edition details another busy period for us since the last summer edition of the *Advisor*.

We now have to welcome two new members to our national committee. Lud Ramsey returns representing Region 1 (Scotland) and Colin Jarret Region 7 (West Midlands) has replaced our colleague Warren Simpson. This means that the National Committee is now 10-strong.

As ever the B&EMM school is top of our agenda and with last October's event yet again over-subscribed (more on page 6), I recommend that for this year's school, on October 9-11 2009, that leave is booked ASAP.

Black History Month saw B&EMM members across the UK engaging with management and communities celebrating our history and recognising our heritage. It is a credit to our members that following on from the 2007 celebrations for the abolition of slavery we are positively moving forward, progressing our issues and ensuring the work of those before us does not go unnoticed.

But black history cannot and should not be recognised as just one month of the year. So if there are further events which require support drop me a line so we can highlight them.

A little effort from all goes a long way to achieving the change we want to see.

Staying on Black History, we have seen a momentous and truly historic event in recent months: Barack Obama won the US presidential race. Whatever your personal feelings about the election across the Atlantic, one thing is clear. From being a real outsider, Obama has risen to hold the most powerful position in the US, the richest nation on earth.

For all his efforts, it required others to get involved in the process, to get up and vote. A little effort from all goes a long way to achieving the change we want to see.

As you can read elsewhere (see page 4), Obama's victory has already inspired an important initiative in the fire service about what we can achieve.

We welcome your comments on this inspirational change and indeed on any other matter raised in *Advisor*. As you can see our letters page is busy this edition. Feedback is always welcome. So thanks, and keep it coming.

Brian Amos, B&EMM rep, Wales



Your letters

Voice of solidarity the BNP was deaf

STOP THE BNP
B&EMM reps Dulon Powell, Nottinghamshire, and Ludwig Ramsey, Lichfield & Borders, along with Dave Green, Executive Council member for East Midlands (region 6) took part on 18 August in the march against a British National Party festival in the village of Codnor Derbyshire. It was the second year that the three day 'festival' has been held in the village, joining forces with other trade unions, activists, families and people from all cultures, an estimated 400 people marched through the village shouting "Keep the BNP out". Dulon Powell, said the voice of solidarity was deafening. "As we marched through the village toward the main entrance we were stopped short by the police who only allowed



A dog decked out with the BNP's colours. "Brothers in this race! Let's back our own team on."

Don't let them steal the flag

The picture of the Jack Russell dog captioned as "being decked out with the BNP's colours" (*Advisor* Autumn 2008, page 5) concerns me as all I can see is the Union Jack flag attached to its collar. I share B&EMM's concerns about the BNP, but I also feel frustrated by a constant campaign to associate the flag of my country of Great Britain with racism. Surely it's time to distance the Union Jack and racism?

I'm sure this is an oversight. Or perhaps you have evidence that the Jack Russell pictured is actually racist, and this is why the dog's true identity is obscured by a hand?

FF Steve Bailey
Red Watch, Beaconsfield,
Buckinghamshire

FBU FAMILY HELPS SEND A MESSAGE TO SCOTLAND

Fourteen year-old Jennifer Robertson joined dad Roddy, FBU Executive Council member for Scotland, and others from the FBU at the Scottish TUC's annual St Andrew's Day Anti-Racism March and Rally in Glasgow at the end of November.

She says: "Unlike my usual Saturdays I wasn't in my bed all morning. I got up early and

against
ening

In t



with the BNP's colours at one of its
and states we can ill afford to let
it go unchallenged. It will be
and we have to be ready to take

I wouldn't be surprised if a BNP supporter were to see this *Advisor* it would be with a smug smile on their face.

I would imagine that the BNP do class the union flag as their own but I for one wholly disagree. I am not a feverish flag waver but I am keen to distinguish any link between our country's national flag and a racist, far right party. I would like to see it returned to being just a flag of the United Kingdom. But this is not going to just happen left to chance.

Government has taken steps to attempt to re-identify the nation's flag as a unifying symbol and not the opposite. Flags promote great emotion from people from all nations. Ours is not alone. They are sensitive symbols in which a great deal can be associated with.

The BNP do not deserve to be near a flag which has been long associated through many years with the battle made by many against fascism and extremism. People from all of the Commonwealth, of many colours and creeds, have fought and died under this flag, defeating fascists and the Nazis for us all.

Steven Howlett
FBU London

took part in the St Andrew's day march against racism. I was happy to, as it is my generation that have to make the choice that now is the time for change and have the courage to speak up for the equality of everyone in the world.

"Many of us gathered at the St Andrew's in the Square centre on what was a typical cold Scottish winter morning.

"We were sending a message to Scotland to make sure they know that we are ready for a change, and that with effort we can make it happen."

There may be others from the same brigade or even the same station whose experiences in the workplace and life are different

Raymond Khumalo Crew Manager from Lothian & Borders FRS is not, as stated, the only black operational firefighter in Lothian & Borders (Advancement, Autumn 2007, *Advisor*). We wish to apologise for this error, which is the responsibility of the editor.

This error was highlighted in a letter from another Lothian and Borders B&EMM and we thank this member for this.

We have chosen not to print this letter, but to make some general comments about articles that appear in *Advisor*, and those who take the time to express their personal thoughts and feelings for others to read in *Advisor*.

Members often open themselves up to criticism and sometimes resentment when they express their personal experiences, feelings and perceptions in *Advisor*.

We will protect and support these B&EMM members. All those who read the *Advisor* need to understand that there may be others who will be from the same brigade – or even the same station as them – whose experiences in the workplace and life are different from theirs.

You may not agree with their opinion or you may not have realised that that person felt that way. But that does not negate the fact that that person had those personal feelings and perceptions.

Thank you again to all of those who take time out to contribute to *Advisor* – please continue to support your FBU B&EMM magazine.

Samantha Samuels
B&EMM National Secretary

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Meet Rosalie Jones, a crew manager at Lewisham Fire Station in south London

Cover pictures Stefano Cagnoni; PA Photos

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CAMPAIGN NEWS

In brief

◆ B&EMM has expressed “complete shock” at the tragic news that Daniel De-Gale passed away on 8 October. The plight facing Daniel, who suffered from leukaemia, came to the attention of B&EMM in 1997 and since then B&EMM has developed an ever-closer association with Daniel’s family, who established the African Caribbean Leukaemia Trust (ACLT). In 1999, Daniel received the bone marrow he so desperately needed. His final health complications were not related to his previous condition. More on Daniel and the ACLT in the next issue of *Advisor*.



STEFANO CASINONI

◆ The increase in the representation of ethnic minorities in England’s fire services continues at a snail’s pace. At 31 March 2008, 3.4% of all staff (1,894 out of 55,537) were from ethnic minorities, compared with 2.7% in 2005, according to the Department for Communities and Local Government. Among top earners (top 5%) BEM accounted for 2.2%, down from 2.4% a year earlier. More info: www.communities.gov.uk/fire/researchandstatistics/firestatistics/firerescue/

◆ The Union is running two three-day courses designed to help FBU officials “improve their skills, update their knowledge and gain confidence when taking part in local consultations and negotiations and will be of assistance when dealing with employers’ proposals and procedures for equality impact assessments.” They are to be held 8-10 July in Wortley Hall, Sheffield and 22-24 July in Glasgow.

◆ Over 400 politicians, trade unionists, Muslim, Jewish, black and Asian community groups, lesbian and gay organisations, anti-fascists and anti-racists gathered at the Unite Against Fascism national conference in February, to sound the alarm bell of the real danger that the British National Party (BNP) could gain seats in the European Parliament unless a colossal campaign is mounted to stop them. More info: www.uaf.org.uk

◆ MPs have supported the launch of a campaign by the group, Voice4Change England. The group aims to boost political recognition of the role black organisations play in promoting equality and community cohesion. Early Day Motion 620 VOICE4CHANGE has been tabled in Westminster. More info: <http://tinyurl.com/cs8kq4>



LESSONS FOR THE FIRE SERVICE

What better way to celebrate Barack Obama’s historic victory than to use his “Yes We Can” campaign slogan to inspire black and ethnic minority (BME) fire service staff in the UK to achieve their best.

That’s what Michael Nicholas and other BME colleagues in the fire service decided to do with a day-long conference in late January.

“One of the impressive things about Obama’s campaign was bringing together different groups who are working for the same goal. So we thought we’d do the same in London and apply lessons learned from the campaign to the fire service,” says Michael.

Trade unionists from black and ethnic minority FBU members (B&EMM) in London joined colleagues from FAIRNESS – London Fire Brigade’s support group for BME staff – and AFSA, the independent London-based Asian Fire Service Association to thrash out a strategy.

“What the organisations have in common is that they want to see black people employed in

the fire service progress,” said Michael Nicholas, the FBU’s B&EMM national executive member. “Obama’s victory has inspired and motivated many of us. The idea behind the day was a vision for the progression and development of BME people within the fire service – not just in their own careers but in our communities.”

Speakers at the conference in the Houses of Parliament on 30 January included Elisha Deol, who had helped out on Obama’s campaign in America. Elisha, daughter of a B&EMM member, gave a presentation on the winning campaign strategy. London B&EMM member Richard Reid, picked as one of the 20 best black role models in Britain, (see story right) spoke about his role in the REACH project and how fire service staff can link to their communities and raise aspirations among the disaffected young.

John McGhee, FBU national official and Gordon Fielden, the Union’s London regional chair, were among the 60 people at the conference, where the possibilities of advancing progress through informal networking and mentoring were explored.

London B&EMM firefighter Richard Reid (highlighted, right, with Gordon Brown) is one of 20 people selected from 200 applicants to a new national role model programme (REACH) for black boys and young black men. He met Prime Minister Gordon Brown and Communities Secretary Hazel Blears in December. "The range of work, volunteering and mentoring he has done to help young people in his community" and the fact that he had "facilitated sessions at LFB open days to encourage more BME individuals and women to consider the Fire Service as a career" impressed the REACH panel. The programme selects on the basis of candidates' "outstanding abilities to inspire, lead and connect with young black boys." Richard said: "I volunteered to become a REACH role model because I have a hunger and determination to let young people know that they have options and can change their lives."



B&EMM keep up support at 10th annual march

UNITED FRIENDS & FAMILY CAMPAIGN

FBU black and ethnic minority members (B&EMM) and officials joined other trade unionists on the tenth annual protest march against death in custody, prisons and mental health institutions, organised by the United Families and Friends Campaign (UFFC).

Since records began there have been over 1,000 deaths in custody.

The UFFC was founded in 1997 to support the families of victims who struggle for recognition and justice over the loss of their loved ones.

The silent march, held on Saturday 25 October, began in Trafalgar Square and ended with a protest at the gates of Downing Street where the signatures

of the bereaved and supporters were handed in to No.10. All attending were asked to dress in black as a mark of respect.

B&EMM and the TUC race relations committee organised a pre-march breakfast at TUC headquarters in Congress House, London, to meet and listen to some of the relatives fighting for justice.

Wales B&EMM rep Brian Amos, who was among those in B&EMM who attended, said: "B&EMM has long supported this campaign with our members from across the UK making a special effort to attend every year on the last Saturday of our Black History Month.

"Whilst promises have been made to improve the system, deaths in custody still continue and, to date, no police officer has ever been convicted – even when unlawful killing verdicts have been returned at inquests.

"The UFFC has made a significant impact since it was established. But the campaign believes that nothing less than the prosecution of the killers will do."

→ To support the campaign, encourage your branch or region to make a donation to the United Friends & Families Campaign, c/o INQUEST, 89 – 93 Fonthill Road, London N4 3JH.



ANDRE FERNANDEZ

B&EMM rep, Region 12

Wearing two hats

Andre Fernandez wears two union rep hats – as branch rep for Slough and B&EMM rep for Region 12. This covers five FRSs – from Oxfordshire to the Isle of Wight, taking in Bucks, Berks and Hants.

As a life long believer in race equality and opponent of the racist far right, it's a position he's proud to hold. Andre, who joined the fire service "at the ripe old age of 36," soon got involved with the Union and has not looked back.

Andre started out helping a colleague at Slough station on B&EMM-related activities. Then he stood as FBU branch rep, where he can help advance equality for all members regardless of ethnicity, gender or sexual orientation.

"We have some brilliant people who protect communities," he says, "but there are still some pockets of racism, sexism and homophobia." Andre's passion for equality and fair and respectful treatment for everyone on the payroll and beyond springs from personal experience early in life.

"I was born to immigrant parents in 1965 and spent most of my childhood struggling in run-down South London housing estates. Racism was a very big feature in my life as I grew up. My father was black, from the Seychelles, and my mother was white and from Ireland. Having parents of mixed background meant I was the living proof that black and white people are capable of loving each other – something the far-right despise."

With his B&EMM rep hat on, Andre is working his way round the region meeting fire chiefs in charge of equality and diversity, as well as "doing lots of stuff under the radar" to advance the cause.

As a committed trade unionist and branch rep, he is not only fighting on equality and diversity issues. "We have to fight to keep stations open and against regional control centres. There's not much point trying to tell black people and ethnic minorities that the fire service is fantastic – you should join – if pensions are being cut and stations closed. I've got to push in both directions." Like all good reps, Andre would like more people to get involved.

i'm a rep

Inspirational, empowering – and way, way over-subscribed

B&EMM school, held at Wortley Hall near Sheffield, has become a key fixture in the FBU calendar, providing a much-needed forum where black and ethnic minority members can learn, bond, network and swap experiences. For activists and those wanting to get more involved in B&EMM, it has become the hottest ticket around. And it's not hard to see why

The school, held in “the Workers’ Stately home” over the second weekend in October, is both challenging and uplifting. There’s a packed timetable during the day, events in the evening, and late-night conversations or even strolls through the grounds. For many who attend, it can be a time for personal growth and goal setting.

But the B&EMM school has an impact far beyond the men and women who attend, because the B&EMM agenda encourages members to look outwards as well as inwards – to, as Ghandi put it “Become the change you want to see.” Once school is over, it’s back to watches, shifts and communities. The hope is that the ever-growing

number of B&EMM school “graduates” return home refreshed and fired up to help make a difference. Many do so in a workplace culture that is not always respectful of difference and still predominantly white, male and heterosexual.

This stereotypical image does not, of course, tell the whole story about life in the fire service as those who work in it know. But it can deter people who don’t tick all three



Jona Olsson, Volunteer Fire Chief from Latir, New Mexico: Opponents use racism and homophobia to divide communities

boxes – white, male, straight – from joining. Last year, the school challenged this head on – with a spirited celebration of “Women in Colour” – and a look at what can stop women and other minority groups within the service, and the wider world, from progressing as they should.

Strong women speakers gave all school attendees an insight into the double discrimination black women often face because of their race and gender. And black lesbians can find themselves facing triple discrimination if they are open about their sexuality.

Phyllis Opoku-Gyimah, a member of the PCS civil service union, knows this from personal experience – as she shared with the school in an emotionally charged presentation explaining how “coming out” changed her life. She was shunned by family, friends and church. But by setting up UK Black Pride, Phyllis turned disadvantage to advantage. She’s been elected to the TUC’s race relations committee, organises civil partnerships and does outreach work, helping other black lesbian women be true to themselves and to go on to achieve in the face of prejudice.

Donna Fraser, Olympic athlete, who has not let injuries or name-calling hold her back, advised B&EMM members to set themselves goals and be prepared to make sacrifices. Jona Olsson, Volunteer Fire Chief from Latir, New Mexico, in the USA, spoke of how opponents use racism and

Students take part in brainstorming sessions





PICTURES: MARTIN JENKINSON

WHAT'S SO GOOD ABOUT B&EMM SCHOOL? STUDENTS SPEAK OUT

When I go to work I'm in the minority. At B&EMM school I'm in the majority. And that's absolutely fantastic – a very inclusive feeling.

Stella James, crew manager, Hertfordshire

It's my first time, there's no-one else from my region and I've never felt so welcome. It's great to meet people from other areas, and learn from them. It's been inspirational.

Lee Brown, North East B&EMM rep

The camaraderie's great. But we must make sure we get new blood to get out there and get active. There were two first-timers from my region this time – a 200 per cent increase on last year.

Carole Brown, Southern Region, (Region 11) B&EMM rep

I'd been doing voluntary work for years but I realised I could also get involved through the brigade. Everyone should get a chance to go. It's like the customer service cliché – you get good service – you tell other people about it. That's how I feel about B&EMM school.

Richard Reid, firefighter and young people's mentor. (See article Richard at 10 Downing Street on page 5)

homophobia to divide communities. The speakers were followed by a workshop on how to combat victimisation and discrimination.

School attendees – including 22 first-timers – found themselves exploring lazy myths which hold back equality. And, more pointedly, why workers might be reluctant to challenge unacceptable behaviour. Reasons ranged from lack of management support, to fear of reprisals to not wanting to be seen as a trouble-maker and not wanting to rock the boat.

Book early to avoid disappointment this October

who don't protest about unacceptable behaviour can be seen to be tacitly endorsing it by keeping quiet. Like all the best-led workshops and group activities, it prompted a dose of self-scrutiny that could lead those taking part to change for the better. In this case, having the courage to speak out.

B&EMM school is not all brainstorming, speeches and networking. Last October, there was Saturday night entertainment with "They Get Mobile Phones Don't They?" Banner Theatre's timely exploration of the kind of prejudice refugees and asylum seekers face in the UK.

On Sunday, Samantha Samuels hosted her now-traditional women's breakfast for the eight FBU women attending the school, followed by regional networking and feedback.

A moving re-enactment of Rosa Parks' refusal to give up her seat on a Montgomery bus in 1955 was staged by children from the school crèche – a fitting end to a productive, stimulating and exhausting weekend. And if you want to know what happens at a B&EMM school closed session – last year's minutes record it was "heated and passionate" – you'll just have to make sure you get along in the second weekend in October this year. Book early to avoid disappointment.

B&EMM has always been a focal point for advice and support for members facing discrimination or harassment. The workshop prompted some soul-searching and what emerged reminded people that those



Students listening and learning



Samantha Samuels (left) and Donna Fraser



Velma Simms (B&EMM) and Phyllis Opoku-Gyimah (PCS and UK Black Pride)



JESS HURD/REPORTDIGITAL.CO.UK

ROSALIE JONES, CREW MANAGER, LEWISHAM FIRE STATION, LONDON

Rosalie Jones works as one of the crew managers at Lewisham Fire Station in south London. She rides in charge of the fire rescue unit. It's a job she relishes and certainly one where black female firefighters are not over-represented. And it's a job she would recommend to ambitious young black men and women who think they would enjoy working in what some call the "SAS" of the fire service.

Rosalie has been in the service since 1990, and used to be a driver as well as a frontline firefighter. She had always quite liked the idea of working on FRUs – and got the chance when posted to Clerkenwell station in central London after training as a crew manager. Two years ago, while she was on maternity leave, the station was earmarked to have an FRU. "When I got back to work I went on an intensive five-week course where we learned how to use heavy cutting gear and lots of other equipment not found on the

'I'm glad I didn't leave – I love the job now'

front line appliances," says Rosalie. "It was very hard work and quite challenging six months after having a baby – and childcare cost £40 a day. I paid with blood sweat and tears to do the course. Nonetheless, I was very happy to be doing it. In my heart I'd always wanted to have the FRU skill, but never taken any positive steps to getting there. I have really embraced the work I get when on the FRU. They make me have to stop and think, I am very lucky to work with a very experienced old-school FRU crew".

Rosalie started her career in South London – the only black person and the only female firefighter on the station. She was on the brink of

leaving while at Southwark Training Centre when another female firefighter was sacked after she was heard by others using the "N" word when referring to Rosalie.

"She didn't say it to my face and the sacking didn't really help my position. I was already feeling isolated, and was told the job is not for me as I represented no one. I hated it. It was horrible.

"Though a documentary about racism had put me off joining the army, I didn't think I would have such problems in the fire service. But for the first five years, at two south London stations, I was quite miserable and completely lost my self confidence. If I met people outside work, I wouldn't tell them I was a firefighter because I didn't have anything positive to say about it – just negative stuff. I'd say I was a cleaner or a lift engineer instead.

"Things got a 100 per cent better when I moved to Acton (west London) Fire Station, I started to relax, be myself and enjoy being at work. I'm glad I didn't leave – I love the job now. My dream was simply to come to work, do my job and be happy at work, and I've achieved that. I'm a single mother with two daughters – one 20 and one two – and an eight-month-old grandson. I transferred to Lewisham to be nearer to my eldest daughter and her son.

"I love my job and enjoy going to BE&MM school and women's school when I can. It's good to return to Southern command. Some FRU crew members go on and train for USAR, but it's not for me – not when I have a young family to bring up on my own. I would like to be a watch manager at some stage. It's important not to be held back by negative stereotypes – or other people's prejudice but to follow your dream and be true to yourself."

Personal

BIRTHS

- Michael Ogilvie (London) and partner Jen – on the birth of son Ethan Ross

CONDOLENCES

- Wole Adesymoye (London) – on the passing of his father

CONGRATS

- Richard Reid (London) – on being selected for the Government National Role Model Scheme. 20 were chosen from nearly 400 applicants. A great achievement!
- Les Bowman (London) – on receiving a community award from the 'Not Another Drop' organisation for his commitment to BME community issues. Well deserved.
- Wole Adesymoye (London) for winning the BBC's 'Last Man Standing' series. Well done.
- Pierre Marsh (London) on his nuptials in November 2008 – congratulations!
- David Reid (London) on his marriage since our last edition – our best wishes and congratulations
- Neil Simms & family (London) celebrating grandmother's 100th birthday

PROMOTIONS

- Lee Brown (Co Durham) – Watch Manager
- Carole Brown (Kent) – Watch Manager (Control)

IN THE NEWS

- Craig Abbott (London) – BBC's 'Extreme Dreams' broadcast 12-16 Jan 2009
- Pam Oparaocha (London) – BBC's 'Ready, Steady, Cook' broadcast 12 Feb 2009
- Asian B&EMM – BBC Asian Network broadcast – 29 Jan 2009 from London TC
- London B&EMM 'Yes We Can' Event at House Of Commons – 30 Jan 2009

If members have news of congrats and promotions don't be shy about it – please get in touch. Your progress is an inspiration to us all.

Contact B&EMM Executive Council member Michael Nicholas: mickn@fbu.org.uk

DIARY DATES 2009

- 24–26 April 2009**
TUC Black Workers Conference – Scarborough
- 12–14 May 2009**
FBU Annual Conference – Scarborough
- June 2009**
B&EMM National Committee Meeting
- 9–11 October 2009**
B&EMM School – Wortley Hall

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