



1st May Message 2009

Movement of Christian Workers



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REVIEW

Issue 39 April 2009

Signs of Hope in Discerning the Winners and Losers

“The Priority of Labour Over Capital”-The Same Rights for All Workers!

The worst global economic crisis since 1929 has many consequences for workers and their families in every country of the world. Every day we see and hear about factory closures, job losses, redundancies, relocations, and a growth of unemployment.

Contrast this with the trillions of US\$ of public funds paid into banks to save them from bankruptcy, who then pay their chief executives huge bonuses, while the IMF is calling for cuts in public spending to pay for this!! There is clearly something wrong with the values on which our current political and economic system is built. It is a system where Human Dignity is not respected, where migrant workers are often the first to be hired, but the first to be fired, where the right to organise collectively can be an excuse to dismiss a worker activist, or relocate the company. It is a system that puts profit before people.

As a movement of Christian workers we recall a principle that has always been taught by the Church: **the principle of the priority of labour over capital***. In the current context, this demands that we stand side by side with workers in their struggle for justice to earn their “daily bread”!

We in the World Movement of Christian Workers (WMCW) believe in the capacity of workers to resist collectively against injustice. On a daily basis we see that workers are reacting to the current injustices, with strikes and demonstrations in all continents to demand justice and equality and for satisfying human need, not greed! These actions of solidarity are a sign of hope for workers everywhere.

Solidarity among and between workers in the north and the south is indispensable for the creation and promotion of dignified work for all, where all workers enjoy the same rights.

Nourished by our faith in Jesus Christ, we want to contribute to the establishment of a new society, where all workers who are members of the one race, ‘The Human Race’, work together to create an alternative world based on practicing solidarity to build peace and respect for human dignity and the human rights of all.

The WMCW is an international organisation of solidarity. On the first of May we join with all those working women and men struggling for a more just and better world, those of faith and those with none to demonstrate our commitment to the liberation of all workers from the injustices caused by an unfettered free market economy.

Together in solidarity, we can and we will create a new and better world.

Executive Council WMCW

*Laborem Exercens 1981 Pope John Paul II

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Publisher: National Executive Committee

Editor: Paul Edwards

Movement of Christian Workers, St Joseph’s, off St Joseph’s Grove, London, NW4 4TY

Tel: 020 8203 6290 Email:mcworkers@aol.com. Website www.mcworkers.org

The WMCW May Day Message contrasts in general terms the winners and losers from the global economic crisis, what is commonly being referred to in these islands as the ‘credit crunch’. The starting point of the May Message is, as a result of the crisis, the disparity between the experience of ordinary workers and their families compared with that of many, bonus receiving, CEOs and board members. Some ‘well to do’ people have made losses themselves but were more likely to have been in the position of the decision making which has helped bring about the crisis anyway. Globalisation and flexible working not too long ago was elevated as the panacea to opening up employment opportunities for all; higher GDPs for countries with employment and good incomes for the people.

The MCW’s ‘Reclaiming Time’ Report (2006) highlighted however that many working people had, or were in danger of, being the losers rather than those that gained through the ‘freeing’ of markets on a global scale to assist the flow of capital and goods. Our report noted that in fact this ‘freeing’ of the market had been built on the back of low pay, casualisation and contracting out of services. Particularly hard hit was the service sector workers, many of who would be women, for example cleaners, carers and caterers. The theme of our report was the long and many hours being worked during days and weekends. However a recent analysis has demonstrated that the longer hours worked in the UK can be more specifically attributed to weekend working. Nevertheless the message remains the same; people had to work harder and longer to make ends meet. Recent articles and books have given credence to our report findings and add weight to the May Day Message.

Polly Toynbee in a Guardian article (3rd February 2009) adds to this theme by noting that ‘... In the good times globalisation increased GDP and we were meant to be proud. But who was feeling

good? In the last few good years official figures show that 80% of earners saw very little real extra growth, with most winners in the top 10%.’ She argues that the changes and freeing of the market was ‘artificially tilted’ so that it was the employer who was more likely to benefit. For Toynbee, working longer and harder simply disguised the inequalities which existed: ‘The poor get globalised, the rich reap the reward.’

‘The Spirit Level’ (Wilkinson & Pickett 2009) is the title of a recent book whose authors argue that every social problem whether it be crime, drugs, mental ill health or obesity has one ‘root cause’: inequality. A simplified summary using one sentence from this book reads ‘In states [50 US] where income differentials were greatest, so were the social problems and lack of cohesion.’ The overall message of this book is that it is not only the deprived that lose out but so do the better off. The loss here we suspect is of an entirely different degree and character but presumably is indicating that there is still an impact to be felt by all where an unequal society or unequal world exists.

In some way our Spirit level carries a similar significant meaning and belief in that to be holy we need to be whole and whilst some of our sisters and brothers are suffering then we cannot be truly whole. It remains our responsibility to engage and work for change.

This Review as in our last edition contributes to a tribute to Jean Marie Leuwers. He made an enormous contribution to our Movement and will always be remembered for his short reflections about the signs of hope. He has devoted his life to working alongside and supporting individuals and communities who are more likely to be the losers.

Many of our MCW enquiries, regardless of the topic, have asked; who are the winners and who are the losers in this situation? This edition of the MCW Review brings this same question to the

fore. Its importance lies just as much in the asking as in the answering.

By inviting the question we recognise the need to consider all the wider implications and the effects of both the everyday events which affect our lives and the wider context in which our lives and those of others are situated.

The answering of the question becomes the springboard in trying to understand the related issues as best and as deeply as possible. It is a

springboard because, in trying to understand the issues, it is likely that more will be revealed spurring us on to a greater insight and appreciation of the differing and varied aspects involved.

Thus the significance of discovering the signs of hope in every encounter and engagement emerges and is almost ever present as we seek to discover who are the losers, raise awareness of why there are winners and losers and make our commitment of involvement for those signs of hope to be realised.

Sixty Years A Priest with and For the Workers - A Sign of Hope for the World by Paul Edwards



In recent years Lille is best known for being the European Capital of Culture in 2004 whilst its history shows that it was the centre of the French textile industry. As well as a long labour and trades union history it has a Catholic worker action tradition dating back to the publication of Rerum Novarum by Pope Leo XIII in 1891.

There is also an extensive history of exchange between the MCW in England and the Action Catholic Ouvrière (Catholic Labour Action ACO). In particular this contact has been with a priest called Jean Marie Leuwers, who in the autumn of 2008 celebrated his 60th anniversary as a priest. For 58 of those years Jean Marie has dedicated his priestly ministry to working class people and their collective struggles for a more just and fairer world for workers and their families.

Born in 1924 the son of a baker in the area of Armentières, he would have been considered as coming from a middle class family. The training he received in the seminary would have given some emphasis to the social apostolate, not least because the YCW was already well established in France, but also because it took place under Nazi occupation. Nevertheless, when he was ordained as a priest in

1948, it would have been highly unlikely, given his family background that anyone would have expected that Jean Marie would be dedicating his life as a priest to the workers.

As a student Jean Marie had been spotted as someone with a significant intellectual capacity and was very soon returned to seminary life as a professor of philosophy at the seminary of Merville. In preparation for this role he was sent to study philosophy in Paris, where he encountered the ACO and the founder of the French YCW Father Guerin. This experience was to have a profound affect on the young priest, and on his return to the diocese of Lille he soon found himself becoming a chaplain to a local base group of the ACO.

In 1960, Jean Marie became the chaplain for the region of Lille for the ACO. From 1966 to 1974 he moved to Paris to become the National Chaplain of the ACO France. He became the International Chaplain of the World Movement of Christian Workers (WMCW) from 1975 to 1979.

It was during his time as International Chaplain that Jean Marie came to England and continued to return on a regular basis. He participated at various

levels of the MCW from sharing in review of life meetings with local groups to attending national conferences. He will always be remembered for his short reflections about the signs of hope. In spite of the difficulties that workers were experiencing both as individuals and collectively, Jean Marie could always identify the signs of hope in the actions carried out by workers and their organisations. He would often say that these signs of hope were signs of Jesus Christ present with working people in their daily struggles.

On 31st August 2008 Jean Marie held a celebration of his 60th anniversary in the working class neighbourhood of Lille called Moulin, where he had been a curate since ending his term with WMCW. I had the privilege of participating in this celebration which began with mass attended by members of the parish. Over 200 people squeezed into the chapel in the basement of a former textile factory. He invited three lay people to give their testimony answering the following question, "What does the 60th anniversary of Jean Marie, say to you about the place of the priest amongst the people of God today?" The three people who spoke were his niece, a migrant worker from central Africa and myself.

In making my intervention I brought the greetings and solidarity of the English Movement. I tried to answer the question by giving an example of what Jean Marie might have said to a review of life group following a sharing of life and action. "Here in these events you see the risen Jesus with you in your daily struggles, because Jesus came to show us that leaders of the Temple of Israel had

forgotten what God wants. He wants each and every person, be they a poor person, a worker or someone who has been marginalised in society, to be able to discover his or her liberation, and by your political and trades union engagement you participate in the creation of the Kingdom of God here today. "

For me, Jean Marie, through this form of reflection makes the Gospel alive and he lives his mission as a priest by encouraging and supporting the active engagement of lay people in the world today. For me such a priest is a sign of hope for the church and I pray that one day his fellow priests will follow his example.

Jean Marie said to me "The social world and engagement in it has to be the preoccupation of the Church, and the Church needs to be close to the workers, it is in trouble if it is not." I am not sure if he realised how prophetic his words would be!

A few days after his celebrations, Jean Marie was also awarded the 'Medal of Honour by the City of Lille for his thirty years pastoral work in the neighbourhood of Moulin and in particular his contribution to researching the local history of Moulin, its people and their struggles. In accepting this award Jean Marie said: "I took root in this neighbourhood and its inhabitants have given me so much which is rich: their solidarity, their warmth and their rich previous history, I am leaving the area, but I remain attached to it, and I shall return from time to time as there is still much research to do, either about the trades unions, or the factories of the area".

Workers Memorial Day – 28th April 2009

'WMD in global trade union speak stands for Workers Memorial Day. The sad fact is that every year more people are killed at work than in wars. The vast majority don't die of some mystery ailment, or in tragic "accidents". They die because an employer did not take enough care or decided their safety just wasn't that important a priority. Workers Memorial Day commemorates those workers and is held on 28th April every year.

The day is also intended to serve as a rallying cry to "remember the dead, but to fight for the living", remembering that the vast majority of workplace fatalities are not only preventable, but are also preceded by a series of near misses. Vigilance, good H&S culture, training and commitment to health, safety and welfare can help ensure that our members and fellow workers do not become part of the shameful statistic of workplace deaths.'

(Extract from the Foodworker, Health & Safety Bulletin, Spring 2009)