



REVIEW

Issue 45 August 2011

Movement of Christian Workers

Does Protest Matter?



Recent demonstrations, marches and even riots have seen people protesting about loss of pension rights, reduction of wages and terms & conditions of employment.

These events have sharply divided opinion about the validity of such actions when it is perceived that the country is in debt and needs to make cuts in public expenditure.

However, most people agree that the banks behaved in a seriously irresponsible way causing the global financial crisis and having to be bailed out with taxpayers' money. And yet, despite some recovery in their profits it appears the banks are not putting anything back into public funds. It is easy to see how all of this can lead to frustration and feelings of powerlessness.

People do want and have a need to make their feelings known because hard won rights

are being taken away and they and their families will suffer as a result. A number of protesters have been interviewed on television saying "this is the first time I have done this", "this is my first rally" or "I have never been on a march before". There is clearly a real feeling of injustice that cuts are not being equally felt.

It is also true that there is a significant minority of people in this country who will have little entitlement to a pension based on their employment and rely heavily on the state pension and are thus in danger of earning their own poverty. Some would say the aim of government policy should be to assist this group in particular to increase their incomes in older age rather than seek to drop most people's income and terms & conditions to the lowest common denominator.

In the general spirit of Catholic Social Teaching the benchmark for the social value of any policy is the effect it has on the poorest and most vulnerable in society. If any policy has a negative effect on this group it is to be regarded as unchristian.

The articles in this issue all share a related theme of powerlessness. There is an interesting summary of a presentation David McLoughlin gave in the House of Commons as well as a short feedback on how the money raised for our Haiti appeal has been spent.

The Challenge to Change – An extract from David McLoughlin’s Presentation at an MCW event in the House of Commons

The results of archaeological work in Palestine in the last 100 years have led to an explosion of knowledge about this part of the world. We know more about the political, social, economic and religious context of Jesus’ time than any generation since the end of the first century.

This work, much of it secular, has given a new resonance to the teaching of Jesus which can be seen in its original context. It reveals a world undergoing major political and economic transformation within the power play of Roman Imperial policy. The Romans applied principles of control and economic coercion hidden by collaboration with the local authorities in Jerusalem.

Luke’s Gospel (2:1-2) starts with a census. This is followed by the imposition of an indiscriminate new head/poll tax.

Roman policy was effectively controlling by manipulating mass debt and patronage through an oppressive system of taxation using local officers to bear the brunt of the local populace’s hate (role of tax-collectors Mk 2:13; Lk 19:1-10).

This was social engineering on an international scale as

imposed taxes created debt and the dispossession of land.

As a result many became day labourers (Workers in the Vineyard Mth. 20:1-15) whilst their land became part of large estates under the control of wealthy absentee landowners.

Stewards managed local affairs collecting produce and dues. Texts from the time tell how the estates were run. The Gospels tell us exactly how Jesus saw this whole



process (Luke 12:42; 16:1-9) and their masters’ practice. From this economic map of His world you have a whole social analysis on the part of

Jesus and an alternative vision and praxis which he summarises as the Kingdom of God. Jesus’ stories are not the creation of a fertile mind but the observation of the brutal social reality around him.

These stories are part of an ongoing critique at the heart of the gospel of a political, religious and economic order that is undermining the rule or Kingdom of God and is destructive of the dignity of God’s children.

Some taxes at the time: •Direct 25% of produce •Indirect 5% from customs & tolls (VAT!) •Temple Taxes • Priest’s Tithe • Tithe for Jerusalem

Read against this background the gospels become a radical provocation to engagement in an equivalent analysis, decision making and community building.

Within this changing world there is clearly a loss of solidarity (Workers in the Vineyard) and a turning inward to a purer national identity, ritual and religious practice.

Jesus deliberately sits at table with those who cannot practice ritual purity and so are permanently in debt to the temple for religious fines (Mark 2:15-16).

Thus Jesus brings a message about a God who is not primarily interested in rules of the Sabbath, rituals of the Temple, the demands of purity laws or racial identity. Basic human need takes precedence over religious rules in Jesus' teaching and practices hence his healing of the sick on the Sabbath.

In thinking about Debt in the last 10 years this is now much clearer to me. Jesus' teaching about the lifting of debt and of the central importance of the powerless has to do with his understanding of the real nature of God. The reason we are to work to eradicate debt is because it is an affront to the creator God who has

created us for life, not limit. Any system, religious or secular, that upholds debt as a

controlling mechanism is essentially idolatrous. Its God is an idol and idols are ineffectual.

In this context Jesus tells his stories about the kingdom of God being like freedom from debt (Mth 18:23ff). He is preaching against the economic practices of his time which keep the poor, poor; the powerless, powerless and alienates rich and poor from the living source of their identity – the liberating God of a liberated people.

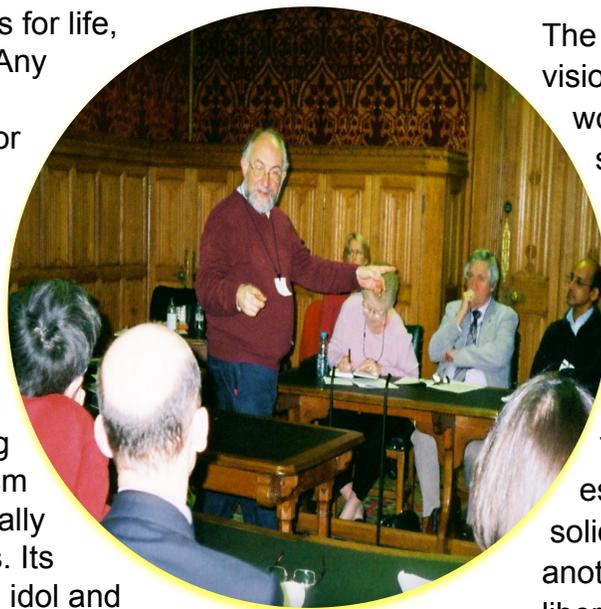
The movement He initiates "the kingdom of God" has to have the powerless at its centre if it is to be truly of God. This is the solidarity which the much vaunted subsidiary of the Big Society cannot work without but the technicians of the Big Society do not know what solidarity is. It is alien to even their vocabulary. True worship of the living God transforms the individuals and communities who participate in it.

Jesus asks them to see differently and change (Luke expresses this as paradidonai; to handover). Our Society may be free but until it respects and places at its centre the lives of the frail, the powerless, and the oppressed, it will always find ways of desecrating the image of God in those it values least.

The MCW and YCW bears witness to this vision and practice of Jesus in the world of work. It calls us to come together in solidarity and mutual respect to make a difference in places of work, on the dole, in making the values of the kingdom of God real in the everyday, and ordinary, in the political and economic context of our time.

The gospel mission of Jesus is essentially dynamic, a movement of solidarity, out through one human life to another: A movement that is the sign of the liberating God coming close – the Kingdom.

Participating in these Movements' Review of Life method and effective spirituality has challenged and enabled us to become mature and effective disciples in the reality of our daily lives. It is a great privilege to share some of this with you this evening.





A very big thank you to all who donated to the Haiti appeal

The Movement of Christian Workers, the ACO of Haiti with the help of some older members was in the process of rebuilding and restructuring when the earthquake struck and reversed everything. The secretariat with all the archives was completely destroyed.

In 2010 the WMCW launched a solidarity campaign to help in the reconstruction of the Haitian movement. Since the earthquake in Haiti, nothing has changed. International aid promised for the reconstruction has either not arrived or has been misappropriated. The population is still living in tents. Some people camp in front of their destroyed houses afraid of losing what they still have because they cannot prove that they own the property when all the documents are lost in the earthquake, and the land registry was destroyed!

There was a great response from member Movements around the world. This solidarity enabled the general secretariat of the WMCW to organise a training session for the Haitian Movement. The catastrophic situation in Haiti, particularly in Port Au Prince where cholera was rife, forced the secretariat to organise this meeting in Santiago in the Dominican Republic

The session was held from the 25th to the 30th October 2010 the participants were the general secretary and treasurer of the WMCW, representatives of the ACO of Haiti, the MTC of the Dominican Republic and the MTC of Nicaragua. The aim was to establish an action plan for the reconstruction of the ACO and to reinforce the links with other movements in the region and in particular the MTC of the Dominican Republic (two countries sharing the same island).

A support plan for the Haiti ACO was agreed. Communication is a priority and the WMCW has purchased a laptop with access to the Internet via a solar powered battery. A second priority is to support existing groups in a re-launch programme based on establishing groups using the See, Judge, Act Method. Everyone was struck by the courage, determination and faith of the members of the ACO and was confident that they will lead the re-development of their Movement. Thank you to everyone who contributed to this Haiti appeal.

The MCW is privileged to be hosting the annual Seminar of the European Christian Worker Movements (ECWM) at All Saints Pastoral Centre, London Colney from
27th to 30th October 2011.

We are looking for volunteers who have transport for meeting and greeting duties either at the point of arrival e.g. Luton, Stansted, Heathrow airports or at the conference centre itself. Delegates will be arriving on Thursday 27th October and leaving on Sunday 30th October.

Should anyone be interested in helping please contact Jo O'Brien at Headquarters on
020 8203 6290 or email mcworkers@aol.com

The views expressed by contributors to MCW Review do not necessarily represent the views of the MCW.

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