



Movement of Christian Workers

# REVIEW

Issue 52 March 2014

## Election Special

What will you be doing on Thursday 22<sup>nd</sup> May 2014? It is our hope, if you are aged 18 or over and entitled to vote, that you will be doing exactly that: Exercising your right to vote in both the Local as well as the European Election. But not just putting a cross anywhere, rather than placing it on an option that has been thought through and purposefully considered.



We all depend on the services of our local councils. Yet local councils, of all public services, have been the ones to face the most severe monetary cuts by central government. A recent report (Nov 2013) from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) entitled 'Coping with the cuts? Local government & poorer communities' alerts us to the very clear reality that the more deprived local authorities are facing significantly larger percentage cuts in their budgets. Whilst making "savings" or "cuts" can be dismissed as pure semantics between councils of different hues there is a world of difference in experience for those areas with the 'larger concentration of the poorest people' (JRF Report p50).

Voting in the local elections challenges us to take on the responsibility of engaging in some harsh realities and taking options for those more disadvantaged than ourselves. However, perhaps being confronted with the European elections is even greater and more demanding in our assessment of understanding the issues and what our stance should be. It is worth remembering that for many years most

local communities have actually benefited from European funding & grants.

Yes it is true that we can appreciate and sympathise with those who just walk away or certainly don't walk towards the polling booths because they believe councillors and politicians are all the same, or only out for what they can get themselves. For those who are facing the greatest impact and worst consequences of all the austerity measures who can blame them. It is hard to hear any political voice raised in their defence or fighting their corner. However, if there is an opportunity to persuade or cajole those with this frame of mind then please let's take it.

Coaxing, doing more ourselves to understand the issues, raising our voices to protect the vulnerable, none are easy options, but in the MCW's view remains our responsibility.

In this issue several MCW members write about their involvement in the forthcoming elections along with an enquiry/Gospel reflection to help us meet the challenge of voting.

At Christmas we celebrated the birth of Christ. He was born into a time divided by tensions of a structural nature, social, political and economic – Jews/Gentile, rich/poor. There are no answers in the Gospels to the immediate social problems of our age but there is inspiration to engage, reflect and act as we try to walk the same path: So no answers, but provocation to engage critically with society, religion and to act in solidarity so as to prompt some envisioning of alternatives. Maybe a considered vote can be one stage.

## Why stand as a local councillor in the forthcoming local elections?

The MCW Review asked Paul Edwards (seen here canvassing) why he has decided to stand for the first time as a local councillor.

“I have been an activist in my work role and the trade union movement since my teenage years, firstly in the YCW and then as an adult supported by the MCW. My decision to become a candidate in these local elections is because it is important to me that working-class people are represented and particularly now because they are the very people who are suffering the most in these times of austerity.

Those with the least resources appear to me to be experiencing the greatest hardship for a crisis that was not of their making. I think that the Labour Party needs more ordinary activists to represent them.

For me it is essential that local councils and local councillors work more closely with their constituents, they need to engage with people about their local concerns and issues and encourage them to participate. It is not about being elected and then you'll see us next year, it is about the continual service and needs being met. Don't get me wrong, this is not a one way process. As a candidate I too have a responsibility to raise awareness about issues and concerns on the doorstep; to try and explain, explore and challenge some of the simplistic rhetoric that the mass media present as the reasons for our problems and difficulties.

This is why for me knocking on doors, interacting with those behind them is crucial to my campaign. The people who

live in the Ward see me, know my name, who I am, what I stand for and why; I need to go out and make contact. My time in the MCW, reflections and reviews of life have all instilled in me

that to be part of any transformative action you cannot do it alone, you have to take people with you. My way of working, creating local dialogue is not always easy, but it is interesting and necessary.

For me there needs to be stronger voices locally criticising national governments. The reality of local government in recent years is that national governments have created

huge legal responsibilities for them to abide by and yet no extra resources, indeed even cuts, to carry out their legal requirements. This means they have increasingly become convenient scapegoats.

There is a real need to champion proper, appropriate and necessary resources and finance within local government. In my view it is essential to challenge the increasing responsibility that is being placed on them without the wherewithal to meet these demands. I also want to contest the use of the economic crisis of 2008 as a platform to privatise and promote the changing role of the state.

The MCW Review asked me, why do you want to be a candidate, what are your values? No one ever asks this question. For me this is the essence of why I am putting myself forward. Ask your prospective candidates, what values do you hold; what are your core values; what do you want to change in society so as to make a difference?



## Why it is important to vote in the European Elections? By Judith Kirton-Darling, Perspective North-East (NE) Labour European Candidate



Investment, jobs and rights depend on your European vote. European elections are often ignored by the majority of people. In 2009, we had the lowest turnout in Europe, and the

North-East had the lowest turnout in the country.

Even in our NE area with a proud anti-fascist tradition and no elected BNP councillor the BNP got their second highest proportion of the vote in the last European elections here in this region. We must remain forever vigilant for there are always those on the Right agitating against the weakest in society. Across Europe people are angry and looking where to channel that anger. This election threatens to bring a wave of far Right and xenophobic parties into the European Parliament in larger numbers; Greece's Golden Dawn; Hungary's, Jobbik; France's National Front and Netherlands' Wilders. All are parties which set one worker against another and espouse views which hark back to the 1930s. UKIP wants to join this wave of anger and come first in May 2014.

In addition rights extended to British workers by the Labour government (1998): working time limits; 4 weeks paid holiday; rights for part-time workers; equal treatment at work, information and consultation etc. are being attacked as 'red-tape' which need cutting. Yet, many of the concerns that people have about precariousness at work are not because these rights are too 'rigid' as the CBI and Institute of Directors claim but that they are not enforced properly. Shouldn't the defence of working

people's rights be where we concentrate our energy? If you agree then only by voting is there any possibility.

Investment is critically needed. Public sector investment levers the private sector to a great degree, but as more money and opportunities are channelled to the South East and Shire counties European money is becoming as critical as it was during the 1980s. It is worth asking how much over the years your area has gained in structural and regional funding, supporting of infrastructure, business development and skills and training programmes before criticising the EU.

Support and initiatives for working people are possible. One example is the European Labour Party with the ETUC leading on the development of the European Youth Guarantee: A good job, good training or an apprenticeship for every young person unemployed for longer than 4 months. Although the proposal was adopted at EU level with £6bn allocated (not enough but something) it has been blocked by the UK government who refuse to implement it. Such a rejection denies opportunities for our young people.

Rather than repatriating employment and social policies, we need to address the weaknesses of our economy by tackling precarious work, halting the rise of zero hours contracts and ensuring free movement of workers and services along with protection for workers and respect for their terms and conditions. For all these reasons, it's essential that working people vote in these elections. There is a lot at stake: our investment, jobs and rights at work. In these elections every vote matters and so I encourage you to use yours and vote for MEPs working for the benefit of and not undermining your regions.

## Facing the challenge of voting

Many people complain about the state of the country and blame 'the government' or particular Governments. Indeed those in office usually blame the previous administration for the ill and woes being faced, even after many years have passed!

Over time there has been a pattern of less people using their right to vote. Although a few may make a definite decision not to participate, generally it appears to be attributable to either apathy or cynicism: "I can't be bothered; voting won't make any difference, they're all the same." It seems to be particularly difficult in time of recession or austerity to 'choose' or see any difference between the major political parties.

Now and again a new voice emerges onto the scene. They may be saying something which seems to provide 'the answer' to our problems. This then takes on its own momentum, way beyond its significance, as the other political parties try to emulate or surpass these same views to 'show' that they too are in tune with 'the' people's issues.

Where does all this leave us? What is our responsibility? Is it different because we are people of faith? Do we take the easy option and shrug our shoulders or address the harder alternative of engaging with the process? Is it incumbent on us to look for the underlying political values that will make a difference to the dignity of our and other people's lives and to vote accordingly?

Was the world economic crisis really due to an incompetent government or the finance & banking industry, sub-prime lending and lack of regulation?

Are Jeremy Paxman and Russell Brand right in accepting the argument for not voting or without using our right to vote could things get much worse?

Does it matter that our most basic right to vote has been a hard long battle for ordinary working men and women, some who gave up their lives for their right to participate in elections?

Do we blame the migrants and settlers for undercutting wages or should we consider the employers who do not pay a decent, living, income?

Is it true that the policies of austerity show that we are all in it together or do some of the population have to carry a greater burden?

How do the values of the Gospel inform our questions, analysis and actions in terms of participating in any forthcoming election?

What are or should be the priorities which determine our vote?

Did you know that most social security entitlement goes on pensions and subsidising those in work who are on low wages? Only 3% of welfare goes on the unemployed with 0.7% on fraudulent claims.



Can we make or take opportunities to share our thoughts and views so that we all gain a fuller understanding of the issues that matter?

## MCW Enquiry: Election Special



### See

- Can we say if we usually vote in elections or not?
- Does it make any difference as to what election it is e.g. MEP, MP, Local Councillor, TU rep or chair etc.
- Do we know how many of our friends, relations, colleagues, vote in an election?
- What are the reasons for not voting?
- What are the reasons for why we should vote?
- Are the poor less likely to vote and more likely to be disengaged than those better off? If so, why?
- Where do people get their information when deciding who to vote for?
- Which policies/issues seem to be dominating the run-up to the European and Council elections?
- Which policies do we think should be the dominate issues to be considered for the forthcoming elections?



### Judge

- What are the consequences if people do not vote?
- What are the consequences if only those who are better off vote?
- How important is the media in these European and Local elections?
- What is the best way to make up your mind about the political views expressed by the different parties?
- Should single issues decide about who we do or don't vote for?
- How do we determine the underlying philosophy of the parties rather than this or that policy?
- Do we think that Church leaders say enough about what policies political parties pursue?

- What are the important policy changes we would like to see included in manifestos?
- How do the policies being promoted by the various parties relate to the Christian values we each hold?
- How do the views and ideas promoted by the MCW relate to the policies of the political parties? For example, full employment, a living income for all, decent work, fairer treatment for the countries of the South, a fair, just & sustainable society.

See page 6 for a reflection on Luke's Gospel Ch18:1-8. What does this say to us in relation to our enquiry review, participation in elections and MCW activism?



### Act

- Can we engage with others (friend, relations, colleagues etc) in our discussions and findings from this enquiry?
- Is it possible to organise, join or attend a local meeting to discuss with candidates in our area what their views are on those issues that we think are important in relation to the forthcoming elections?
- If we think it is important, how can we encourage those we know who are eligible to vote to exercise their right and use it responsibly?
- Is there any other actions we can think of that would be appropriate and worth sharing with others?

The MCW Review would be pleased to hear from individuals or groups about any outcomes arising from this enquiry.



## **One Woman's effective action aka the parable of the Unjust Judge (Lk.18:1-8) By David McLoughlin**

Luke remembers this story of Jesus in a time when the church was struggling and he sees it as a call to persistent prayer even when things seem against us. But I'd like to reflect on it in the context of Jesus' time when a more radical message emerges for those of us engaged in action for change.

Widows were vulnerable in Jesus' society. They were among the powerless ones like the orphaned children and foreign workers that Jesus calls "the little ones". Jesus' story presumes the woman is without support or worse that her family have undermined her inheritance rights by bribing the local judge. A woman had to be represented in court by a man usually of her immediate family. But Jesus tells us she is alone, her prospects are not hopeful. The Hebrew scriptures have beautiful texts that state God will always hear the cry of the powerless widow (Ex. 22:21-24) and demand God's people respect and care for widows. But there are so many of these texts in Deuteronomy and the Prophets that it is clear such compassionate practice was often abandoned.

Jesus' story assumes the Widow's claims are just, but that she has no means to bribe the Judge to act affirmatively on her behalf. The presumption is the Judge has already been bribed to find against her. Jesus tells us the Judge is so corrupt that he "neither fears God nor respects human beings". This is already clear as he deals with her case alone instead of, by right, demand a tribunal; so bribes have already perverted the Law. The Jewish Talmud will later call such officials "Robber Judges" "willing to pervert justice for a dish of meat" i.e. a good meal! This is a Judge who has colluded with the methods of the Roman forces of occupation and their systematic alienation of the local masses from their means of support and survival, creating a culture of debt and dependency.

But the Woman does not give up. She sees clearly what is happening, she knows what her rights are and she works out an effective strategy to bring about the justice of which the system has deprived her. She does not appeal to the court, as the local justice system has been clearly undermined. She identifies the key figure who can change things and targets him – the unjust Judge. She goes public. She appears day after day at the town gate where the men of influence gather and cries out against him: One Woman's voice raised repeatedly calling for justice. She speaks the truth and many there will recognise it as truth. She makes public the barely hidden corruption of the Law which should serve all. Notice her emphasis is on calling him to do justice. She is calling him to account in public. And it is this voice crying for justice, emerging day by day from the generalised collusion with corruption, which makes a difference and wears him down. He can only take a certain amount of shame beyond which his own authority will be undermined.

In Jesus' story the judge eventually says "she will wear me out with her continual bruising" (literally punches to the face!). Unable to appeal to honour or compassion she has taken an untypical role of assertive action. She makes it not worth his while to continue; if he loses too much status his wealthy backers may no longer have use for him. In the end the victim calling for justice, saying it as it is, becomes the powerful voice calling the corrupt system to account. Her refusal to lie down, to collude and accept the system that oppresses opens up an alternative possibility. Jesus gives us a model of a thoughtful and creative woman whose unorthodox action, beyond the norms of gender and status, gains the just verdict that appeal to the compromised system could never have achieved. As a piece of sustained grass roots activism it has a lot to teach us.

## Young Workers Speak Out



Phil Callaghan, YCW National President, met at Westminster with Veronica Bennett, a Parliamentary Candidate, to discuss the findings of their current campaign 'Good Work'. Veronica also gave advice about collaborating with others who are looking at similar employment issues in relation to both young and older workers.

Through the YCW's network of groups and contacts, they discovered during the 'See' phase of their Good Work campaign that "young people are feeling helpless and isolated as they struggle to find work". This campaign, following the See, Judge and Act method, will run until May 2015; the month in which the UK will go to the ballot box for the General Election.



Their findings mirror a recent YouGov poll report by the Princes' Trust (01/01/14) which is described as being "peppered" with statistics about young people's lack of confidence and ambition because of the recession. Furthermore, the YouGov findings indicate that serious alarm bells should be ringing as they highlighted that '40% of jobless young people have experienced symptoms of mental illness ...' (The Guardian 02/01/14). It was commented on during a television news programme that this was not just an economic issue but also a public health issue.

Veronica is standing as a Parliamentary Candidate for South Ribble and is a supporter of the YCW Campaign because of her own experience. "I come to this issue unashamedly lugging my own baggage. It was the last Labour government that lifted me out of unemployment. The Future Jobs Fund gave me a minimum wage job, without which I would have remained under-experienced and unemployed. Labour recognised that in a bleak economic climate there needs to be direct intervention to create jobs. They put a scheme in place to invest in the long-term unemployed when we needed it most. This Coalition Government scrapped the only scheme that really was helping unemployed young people and then proceeded to blame [young people] for having no work: told us simply .. we just lack grit. Tell this to the young man I met in Penwortham. He was on an 8-hour a week contract and got a text each day telling him whether or not to come to work. He took it because that's all there was: a job in which he didn't know day to day or week to week what work there would be. This uncertainty isn't what he studied for or what he hoped for. Because he couldn't do better did he lack grit? When I couldn't afford the bus fare for six months and walked the hour and twenty minutes each way to my Future Jobs Fund did I lack grit because I was relying on the government for help? We don't lack grit, we lack jobs. I wasn't chased ... with sanctions and warning letters .. I went because it was paid work. The evidence is that the vast, vast majority, of job seekers are the same. So fine, blame people and sanction people who don't take work when there are enough jobs for them. But there aren't. So don't."

When the YCW National Team joined those at the MCW AGM for lunch and shared their own experiences and that of those who had so far taken part in the campaign they paralleled the realities of which Veronica described above.

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Please do let us know if you would prefer to receive an electronic copy of your MCW Review via email rather than being posted to your home address. Simply contact Jo O'Brien to let her know your email address. Jo's contact details are: Movement of Christian Workers, St Joseph's, off St Joseph's Grove, London, NW4 4TY

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### The MCW 2014 Appeal

The MCW is a self-financing movement. All our income comes from members and supporters. We are proposing to organise an appeal during May 2014. There is increasing interest in the MCW and to respond to this we are planning to up-grade our website as well as produce more training materials. We would be very grateful for your generous response when the time comes.

### European Co-ordination Meeting

Jim Dearlove was recently elected to the European Co-ordination of the European Christian Workers' Movement (ECWM). He attended his first meeting which took place in Leuven at the end of January 2014.

The Co-ordination group were invited to take part in a seminar on Decent Work organised by the European Parliament in Brussels. In addition to participating in the discussion it was also an opportunity to speak about the actions which various movements in Europe had carried out to mark 'World Day for Decent Work' on 7<sup>th</sup> October 2013. (The MCW issued a Press Release, see September 2013 MCW Review 51.)



One particularly interesting action, carried out by the Portuguese Movement, was to distribute cards printed with the words, "Decent Work means to me .....", which their members then completed. These cards were presented to the European Member of Parliament who was chairing the seminar. It made for a striking

photograph (see above) and helped to bring the discussion to a much more human, rather than just academic, level. This was a really positive action which received good publicity and showed the way for possible future campaigns.

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

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