

National J&P signs up to 'Close the Gap'

Ellen Teague

More than 300 Justice and Peace activists attending last weekend's annual conference of the National Justice and Peace Network (NJPN) in Derbyshire agreed to help 'Close the Gap' between the richest and the poorest in UK society. Anne Peacey, Chair of the NJPN, signed onto the campaign organised by Church Action on Poverty (www.church-poverty.org.uk). 'Close the Gap' aims to reduce levels of poverty and inequality in the UK, to speak out where Government policy adversely affects the most vulnerable, and to promote fair working conditions for the poorest so that low-paid workers have dignified, life-enhancing employment.

One example of inequality is in the area of tax. According to Church Action on Poverty figures, the lowest-earning 10% of people in the UK pay 39% of their incomes in tax, while the top 10% pay just 35%. Although high earners pay higher rates of income tax, taxes like VAT and fuel tax account for a higher proportion of expenditure for lower earners. In addition, the government has chosen to tackle the deficit mainly by cutting spending rather than by taxing those who can afford to pay. They raised VAT to 20% but intend to scrap the new 50% income tax band, which is bringing in a good amount of revenue and only affects the richest 0.5% of the population. Wealthy individuals and corporations can also avoid paying much of their tax altogether. Some of this takes place as illegal tax evasion, but huge amounts are lost through legal tax avoidance. An estimated £45-£100 billion is lost each year. Every pound avoided in tax is a pound less to spend on [childcare](#), social care, health or education. By comparison, just £1.5 billion is lost each year through benefit fraud.

The 33rd annual conference of the National Justice and Peace Network (NJPN) raised awareness of working conditions in today's economy and modern society. A keynote speaker was the deputy general secretary of the Trades Union Congress (TUC), Frances O'Grady. She quoted Catholic Social Teaching to say that "Catholic teaching recognises that the relationship between an employer and a worker is a fundamentally unequal one and that therefore unions have an important role at work and in society, building solidarity and providing a voice for working people". She pointed out that faith groups have worked with trade unions on many issues such as the 'Living Wage' campaigns and should now work together to challenge public spending cuts which hit poor communities the hardest. This was picked up by former member of parliament John Battle, who highlighted that papal teaching on 'Work' encourages trade union membership. He also pointed out that the papal document 'Rerum Novarum' of 1891 was the first document to mention the term 'living wage'.

Jon Cruddas MP suggested that the current scandal involving Rupert Murdoch and News International has highlighted the role of the Murdoch empire in undermining unions and labour rights while seemingly having unlimited access to power. He hoped that the UK's poorest people would not be the ones paying the price for economic recession and that the issue of the dignity of labour would be priority for the churches. It was possible, he noted, that the growth in 'green' jobs and fair pensions would offer more opportunities to those on low incomes in the future.