

Close the Gap Pledge at J&P Conference

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 signed a pledge to 'Close the Gap' between the richest and the poorest in UK society. Anne Peacey, Chair of the NJPN, signed onto the campaign organised by Manchester-based Church Action on Poverty. '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.

The 33rd annual conference of the National Justice and Peace Network (NJPN) raised awareness of working conditions in today's economy and modern society. It was titled, 'JUSTICE AT WORK - A place of safety, fulfilment and growth? The conference brought together diocesan Justice and Peace workers, religious orders such as the Jesuits and Columbans, and caring agencies including CAFOD, Progressio, Pax Christi, Church Action on Poverty and Housing Justice. Bishop William Kenney, auxiliary in Birmingham and member of the Birmingham Diocesan Justice and Peace commission was lead celebrant at the main conference mass on the Saturday evening and chaired a panel discussion afterwards on 'A Question of Work'.

A keynote speaker was the deputy general secretary of the Trades Union Congress (TUC), Frances O'Grady. Raised a Catholic, 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 said that the papal document 'Rerum Novarum' of 1891 was the first document to mention the term 'living wage', and quoted from the latest papal encyclical, 'Caritas in Veritate', which affirmed work for justice and peace. It says, "awareness of God's undying love sustains us in our laborious and stimulating work for justice and the development of peoples, amid successes and failures, in the ceaseless pursuit of a just ordering of human affairs".

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. Phil Callaghan, National President of the Young Christian Workers, called for decent jobs and training for young people, urging support for young people who protest peacefully on the streets against rising tuition fees. An international perspective was given by CAFOD partner Sheila Kambobe, Deputy Director of the Jesuit Center for Theological Reflection in Zambia, who reported that eighty percent of Zambians work in agriculture, but incomes are very low – about £6 a month - and they receive little government help. For those who work in mining, many copper mines are being taken over by Chinese companies which offer poor working conditions, low wages and human rights abuses. The Jesuit centre has been involved in monitoring the areas of 'Work' and 'Food prices' and campaigning for more help for small farmers and mine workers.