

DIALOGUE AND DEMONSTRATION AT THE ARMY FAIR

I couldn't quite believe it. Here I was at the army recruitment fair, having a discussion with one of the organisers about the punitive measures in the Armed Forces Bill currently going through Parliament, measures which could mean conscientious objectors in the forces being sent to prison for life, and he was trying to sell it to me on the grounds that it's "better than the death penalty." What sort of an argument is that? It's like defending the maiming of children in Iraq on the grounds that it's better than killing them. I came home and did some research. Maybe I was wrong to have been so surprised. The death penalty has only been officially abolished in the forces for three years. Although it's longer since desertion was a capital offence, five others - misconduct in action; assisting the enemy; obstructing operations with intent to assist the enemy; mutiny; and failure to suppress mutiny with intent to assist the enemy - were on the statute books until 2003. This is when the UK abolished the death penalty under all circumstances, five years after the Human Rights Act came into force. Aren't we civilised!

Since the Iraq war started, the number of soldiers going AWOL (absent without leave) has remained steady at 3,000 per year give or take a couple of hundred, but the number who stay AWOL has tripled. The measures in the Armed Forces Bill are intended to act as a deterrent to future refuseniks, broadening the definition of desertion to include those who go AWOL and who, whatever their reasons, intend to refuse to take part in a military occupation of a foreign country or territory. The Armed Forces Bill is in conflict with the spirit and letter of the Nuremberg Charter, an international law under which every individual is deemed to be personally responsible for his or her actions. To obey illegal and immoral orders is to break this international law. In future, British soldiers may be faced with a choice between life imprisonment and prosecution for war crimes. The Armed Forces Bill has sailed through the Commons with barely a murmur of dissent. Fewer than 20 Members of Parliament voted for the amendment which would have removed this measure from the Act; our local MSP Ian Lucas and Martyn Jones weren't among them - no surprises there.

With so little media coverage of the Bill, one of our aims at the recent "Dragon's March" army recruitment fair in Chirk was to inform as many young people as possible of these new rules, and some of the other small print terms and conditions in army contracts which recruits often don't find out about until it's too late. The Army pays for the coaches which deliver the children from their schools to the recruitment extravaganza. We decided to stop these coaches on the approach road, offer the teachers on board informative leaflets about army rules and the Armed Forces Bill and urge them to share this information with their pupils. This worked well on day one of the two day event. Most of the coaches stopped and we were able to hand over our leaflets while the children looked out of the windows at our display of banners and placards, taking pictures on their mobile phones. If nothing else, they were made aware of another point of view about the desirability of a career in the forces. Utilising a phrase much favoured by Wrexham young people, we advertised, under a print of a coffin-shaped Union Jack: ARMY JOBS: DEAD GOOD!

Other placards showed a soldier dragging a body bag and another in a typical macho recruitment pose, pointing a gun; all were accompanied by suitable slogans.



Placard advertises the At-Ease web site

On the second day, we arrived after lunch and, having eventually secured our placards and banners in the stiff breeze, decided to leaflet the coaches leaving the fair. I stood in the road with my peace flag, waving for the first coach to stop so we could offer teachers our leaflets. The coach accelerated. I stood my ground, waving the flag and smiling. The coach continued to come towards me. The driver glared. She obviously had no intention of stopping. With about a metre to go, I chose life and jumped out of the way. If that's the sort of thing that happens when you expose an adult to killing culture for just one day, you can see why we should be worried about the effect on impressionable young people. We decided that it would be safer to stay on the pavement.

The police pulled up to tell us that there was "concern" over our DYING TO JOIN OR JOINING TO DIE? banner. We asked what sort of concern. Last year, this banner had been removed from the bridge on the grounds that it might distract drivers and cause an accident. Given that there was a big army truck parked on the roundabout advertising the event, I didn't see how they could use this excuse again. They didn't. "Some people have been upset by your banner. That's why we've come to talk to you. That's why we're concerned." We explained in detail why WE were upset about the army targeting their recruitment efforts towards children. All children (up to the age of 18) are supposed to be protected by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, but when signing up with the army, young recruits are denied several of these fundamental rights, including the right to say what they think, the right to be protected from working in places or conditions likely to damage their health, and the right not to be punished in a way that humiliates or hurts them. The UK is the only country in Western Europe that allows under 18s (who should be protected by the Convention) to take part in active



service on the battlefield. We asked whether the police officers would perhaps like to go and tell the army about how upset we were about their event and maybe suggest to them that they should close the recruitment fair so that we wouldn't be upset any more. They laughed. "Fat chance." We agreed; the army is big, powerful and establishment. They went off to confer with their sergeant, and our banner was allowed to stay. I took a photo of one of them by his car and he launched into an explanation about how they're allowed to park on double yellow lines in the course of duty. Our turn to laugh.

On the evening of the second day, the recruitment fair was open to members of the public. Three of us returned just before 6pm. The wind had dropped so we managed to plant all our placards safely in the verge, just as well as there weren't enough of us to hold them all. I put our big new banner: WAR IS NOT FAMILY ENTERTAINMENT on the bridge. Although it was facing away from the A483, drivers coming from the Wrexham direction had just driven past the army truck advert and must have realised it was some form of protest. There were lots of beeps and waves, so I hung the JOINING TO DIE banner facing the road for them. Back down on the approach road, the flow of cars to the event was slow – the fair really wasn't that popular. Most of the cars contained children; some waved at us, but others appeared to have been told to avoid eye contact.

Once the passing traffic had virtually petered out, we decided to visit the event again. The previous day we had been escorted from the site by some recruiting officers who had taken exception to the information leaflet we were distributing. Claiming to be puzzled about our reasons for protesting, they told us that the army was all about building schools and hospitals in far off lands, but it looked to me like most of the stands were about weapons and fighting.

"If that's what your job is, why do you need all these tanks and guns?" I asked.

"You know nothing about politics!"

The police backed up our eviction by pretending that the footpath we had used to enter the site was closed. When we tried to drive onto the site on the second day, we were instantly surrounded by uniforms. The police stood in front of the van and asked the army if they wanted us to come in. No. OK. We reversed, parked up outside the event and used the "closed" footpath access again. The fair didn't look very exciting to us. Lots of mud and queues of kids waiting for their turn to shoot paint at vaguely humanoid targets, do a pretend parachute jump or look round a tank. Oh, and there was an assault course where potential recruits could try out the army's latest individual personnel transportation system – the spacehopper!

The shamelessly pro-Army report in the *Evening Leader* mentioned how amazed the young people visiting the fair had been at the scale of the display, which included the 70-tonne Challenger II tank. Challenger II tanks fire

depleted uranium rounds, radioactive shells which have caused British soldiers (and countless civilian victims) to suffer long term health problems including cancers. The babies of men and women exposed to depleted uranium may be born with deformities, tumours and a whole range of other illnesses. Presumably the army didn't mention these things to their "amazed" young visitors. As we passed one tank, a very small girl was standing on top. It was an incongruous and disturbing image.



Small girl on huge war machine

We wandered round the event observed but unchallenged and no attempt was made to evict us. This gave us a chance to engage in conversation with punters and recruiting officers. Wherever possible, we made sure potential recruits were aware of the new Armed Forces Bill and the rules preventing them from leaving the army if they changed their minds about signing up. We were taking the officer to task over his recruiters' ignorance of the Armed Forces Bill when he came out with the gem about the death penalty. When we continued to argue with him, he turned tail and stalked off huffily.

For me, the most valuable part of the two days was the time we spent engaging in conversation with squaddies, would-be recruits, yes and even that officer. If there had been more of us, we could have been many times more effective, just by being there and asking questions, sharing information which the army neglects to give its new recruits, exposing some of the lies, showing that there are other points of view.

WPJF members wrote to all high schools in Wrexham before the event, urging them not to participate. Several members also wrote letters to local newspapers, and a long letter which fourteen of us sent to protest about the *Evening Leader's* appalling coverage was printed in full. A letter has also been sent to the head of governors at every high school in Wrexham. We hope that in time it will become politically unacceptable for the army to show its face in schools, and that schools will stop colluding in the recruitment of children to this killing business.