

Wales Peace Festival

Phil Steele

Gwyl Heddwch Cymru 2008, the Wales Peace Festival, took place on the wet and windy weekend of 18-19 October in Bangor. This annual conference had previously been held in Aberystwyth and Caernarfon, and this year was hosted by the Bangor and Ynys Môn Peace and Justice Group.



Busy 'Forum' area at the Peace Festival

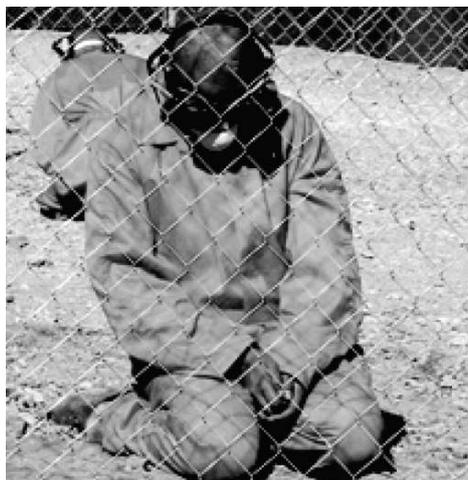
Crunch Time in Bangor

Recent peace festivals have been held during the height of public anger against the policies of Bush and Blair, and the corrosive interventions by western powers in the Middle East still permeated the festival agenda this year. However there was a sense of change in the air. These were the dying days of the Bush presidency, although the Obama succession was as yet unresolved. There was growing realisation that the 'credit crunch' was heralding something more fundamental, a major convulsion of capitalist economics. The rapid advance of climate change too was already impacting dramatically on global politics. All these issues were interlinked, as many speakers made clear.

Speaking out

Stephen Thomas of the Welsh Centre for International Affairs, after an interview on Radio Cymru, kicked off the first day with a lucid discussion of peace building, credibility and reform within the United Nations. Jill Evans MEP, Chair of CND Cymru, raised issues of nuclear proliferation and security in the Middle East, with special reference to Palestine. She floated the idea of founding a Wales Peace Institute, a proposal which

received support from the floor. Disappointingly, the next scheduled speaker, author Mark Curtis, was unable to attend through illness, but co-editor of Peace News Milan Rai stepped into the breach at the last minute with an interesting discussion on activism in relation to the theories of Noam Chomsky. A further delay was bridged with a film showing and debate led by Jonathan Ervine of Bangor University, before Moazzam Begg arrived. This former Baghram and Guantanamo detainee launched immediately into a brilliantly inspired, moving and energetic talk on his personal experiences, on human rights and international law, on rendition and illegal detention. He spoke for the campaigning organisation *Cageprisoners*.



The next day's sessions began with Greg Muttitt of *Platform*, a leader of the *Hands Off Iraqi Oil* campaign. He detailed the rapacious wheelings and dealings of the international oil companies, supported by the USA and the IMF, now circling Iraq's prime asset like vultures. He described the persecution and harassment of Iraq's (illegal) oil workers' union. However, their prolonged resistance and that of many ordinary Iraqis to privatisation and re-colonisation was a heartening story.

Sunday's second speaker was Mary Compton from Powys, a former president of the National Union of Teachers and a longstanding campaigner for Palestine, serving as an international observer at the 2006 election won by Hamas. Mary gave a graphic account of everyday life on the West Bank, along with a concise introduction to the history of the occupation, and insights into global educational issues.

The final speaker of the conference was Dr Bianca Ambrose-Oji, formerly of Bangor University's Arid Zones/ Natural Resources unit. In an information-packed session, Bianca focused on the African continent and the impact of climate change, discussing ecology, resources, population, society, armed conflict and governance.

Forums for change

Workshops during the conference included the following: the latest developments in the campaign against a Wylfa B nuclear power station, led by Dylan Morgan of PAWB; James Maiden discussed the St Athan military academy campaign; Rev Guto Prys ap Gwynfor debated religion and the causes of war; Jonathan Ervine ran a cinema workshop; other sessions were held on activism (Milan Rai) and Africa (Bianca Ambrose-Oji with Nick Jewitt).

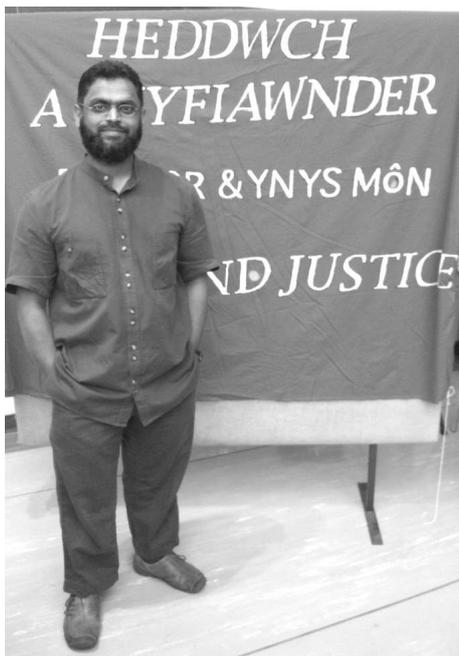
The busy central forum of the conference included a wide range of stalls from CND Cymru, Wales Nicaragua Solidarity, Cymru-Cuba,

Where do we go from here?

UNICEF & the cluster bombs campaign, the Quakers, the Communist Party, the Socialist Party, Aberystwyth Network and Climate Change Wales, calling for a Wales Climate Camp in 2009, the Socialist Labour Party, Christian Aid, Peacewords, Cymru Cuba, Cymdeithas y Cymod, Wrexham Diocese; Trio Naatyashwora, highlighting victims of oppression in Nepal; Bangor & Ynys Môn Peace & Justice; Wrexham Peace & Justice Forum.

Joint sponsors were CND Cymru, Cynefin y Werin and Cymdeithas y Cymod, to whom we all owe a huge thank you. Music was provided by Bangor Community Choir and a memorable evening gig with DJ Hippyad, Trnstone and Bandabacana was held in Menai Bridge.

Funds were raised for the Bustaan Qaraq permaculture and community project, started near Bethlehem by four former Bangor-based student activists (one of whom, Nick Mycroft, was assaulted and arrested by Israeli police during the festival weekend). Postcard campaigns were launched for Guantanamo detainee Binyam Mohamed, and for Palestinian students prevented from leaving Gaza to study overseas, notably Zohair Abu Shaban.



*Moazzam Begg
at the Peace festival*

Where do we go from here?

The atmosphere of the festival was very friendly and constructive, the content and clarity of the talks was excellent, and everyone seemed to enjoy themselves. Attendance was fair, but in view of the intensive publicity it would have been nice to see more students and more allied campaigning groups turning out and

joining in. An *ad hoc* committee met before the Saturday gig and discussed the ways forward: the future role of Cynefin y Werin; the widening of remit, especially with regard to environment and climate change issues; the renaming of the festival to include justice as well as peace; funding and communications. It was agreed that these issues could be addressed at a public meeting in Aberystwyth in the New Year.

An exhibition of snapshots and cuttings at the festival traced the history of protest in north west Wales over the last three decades: spot the faces at May Day trade union marches, CND rallies and festivals, Poll Tax campaigns, Cymdeithas yr Iaith, the miners' strike and the Ffestiniog quarrymen's dispute, protests over many years at Wylfa and RAF Valley, Gwynedd's Central America Group, Cymru-Cuba, anti-Apartheid actions, anti-racism campaigns.

With such a powerful and consistent history of activism in north west Wales, there is no doubt that the struggle for peace and justice will go on. But we do need all our old friends – and plenty of new friends – to be active in the next few years. It looks like we're going to need them...

Trio Naatyashwora in Wrexham

Genny Bove reports on the visit by Nepali musicians, Trio Naatyashwora, to Wrexham on 23 October.



Children from Hafod-y-Wern Junior school learn about traditional Nepali instruments

It was a pleasure to welcome Trio Naatyashwora, Ram Prasad Kadel, Director of the Music Museum of Nepal, along with their host, Norma Blackstock, to Wrexham as part of the musicians' tour of Wales.

We met the musicians at Hafod-y-Wern Junior school, where they performed some traditional Nepali music before inviting the children to try out the instruments themselves. The conch shell in particular was a big hit, with some of the children managing to produce very impressive sounds!

The musicians were then invited to spend the afternoon with Rev. Stan Walker at St. Mark's Vicarage, where they rested before the evening performance and shared a meal.

The evening event at St. Mark's Church in Caia Park was well-attended by local people as well as those coming from further afield. I found it fascinating to note the similarities between Eastern and Western folk music traditions; the tunes weren't as 'different' as I had expected, and the unamplified music had a beautifully clear and simple quality, perfectly delivered by these virtuoso musicians.

The event was supported by the Arts Council of Wales Night Out scheme. After the fees had been paid, we were left with £20 surplus; this will be donated to Ram's charity, which supports impoverished musicians in Nepal with bursaries and medical treatment.