

A VOLUNTEER PEACE FORCE FOR WALES?



*A Peace Brigades International volunteer
in Colombia*

The all Wales peace and justice network *Cynefin y Werin* recently completed a feasibility study into setting up a Volunteer Peace Service in Wales. The study showed that despite growing interest in volunteering to contribute to the nonviolent ending of conflict, there is currently no Welsh group which focuses on nonviolent intervention in conflict.

Pacifists and antimilitarists are often portrayed by their detractors as passive, appeasing groups whose only answer to conflict is to 'do nothing'. In fact however, the peace and leftwing movements have a long history of creative responses to violent conflict, including mass protest, strikes and boycotts, symbolic action and disobedience. This tradition is strong in Wales, with close links between the labour and pacifist movements, a tradition of solidarity organisations, and a strong strand of pacifism in the nationalist movement.

Since the end of the Cold War, conflicts including those in former Yugoslavia, Palestine and Iraq have been marked by attempts at nonviolent intervention by peace movement activists from outside the country of conflict. This has included bringing aid and support to local peace movements; mediation and reconciliation work; human shields; protecting individuals, for example by escorting ambulances; and direct action such as blockading bulldozers attempting to destroy civilian houses or property.

However, despite the growing number of people involved in this type of peace work, there are very few organisations which promote and develop knowledge and understanding of nonviolent intervention techniques. Peace Brigades International is probably the best known and highly respected – it recruits around 17 people a year, although it receives applications from many more. Nonviolent Peaceforce was established four years ago to train and pay teams of peace workers. Its first team of 10 peaceworkers are now in Sri Lanka, and it aims to recruit 40 more next year.

Peace building of course requires long term commitment to economic and political justice, human rights, education for peace, and care for the environment. Intervention at the point of violent conflict is just one tool which peacemakers can use. However, as the numbers quoted

above show, it is an underdeveloped tool when compared with the numbers of volunteers, projects and organisations tackling poverty and human rights internationally.

The feasibility study looked at peace groups in Scotland and Ireland (Northern Ireland and the Republic) which root their work in local / national tradition. Some of those interviewed felt that this gave their movement a particular strength and vitality, and this view was echoed by a substantial number of the people in Wales approached for their views on a volunteer peace service. There was a feeling among some that a volunteer peace service rooted in Wales could not only promote itself more successfully among the people of Wales, but also contribute to developing a culture of peace within Wales.

Full copies of the feasibility study are available from the Temple of Peace (at the e-mail address below) but the main recommendations were that a volunteer peace service in Wales should initially

- develop training in nonviolent intervention methods
- provide a forum for people with experience of intervention in different conflicts to share their experience and learn from successes and failures
- publicise and promote nonviolent intervention, especially to schools and young people

The feasibility study consulted many experienced activists in Wales – many of whom acknowledged what a big task setting up a group such as this will be. However, the attitude was overwhelmingly positive – we in the peace movement have achieved many difficult things before, and will no doubt do so again! Encouragingly, a number of Welsh cultural and youth organisations also showed an interest in the work.

The role of a volunteer peace service is still in a stage of development. A working committee of people interested in contributing to the running of the organisation is being formed. A public event to launch the volunteer peace service and involve more people in its work is planned for later in the year. If you or a group you are involved in would like to be kept in touch with the volunteer peace service, please contact

clairesainleyberry@wcia.org.uk

Other Peace Forces:

Peace Brigades International:
www.peacebrigades.org

Nonviolent Peaceforce:
www.nonviolentpeaceforce.org

"One day we must come to see that peace is not merely a distant goal we seek, but that it is a means by which we arrive at that goal. We must pursue peaceful ends through peaceful means."

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.