

# BAGHDAD 2004: A PORTRAIT OF POVERTY

## WELSH ACTIVIST PAINTS A PICTURE OF CHILD LABOUR, POVERTY AND EXPLOITATION IN "LIBERATED" IRAQ

Kevin Williams, of Newport, Gwent, visited Wrexham on Monday 14th June to speak about his work with street children in Baghdad, and about the terrible conditions endured by whole families, including young children, who live and work in some of Iraq's factories.

Kevin addressed all the children of St. Christopher's Special School at Assembly on Monday morning, following this up with two workshops with pupils aged 11-14. In the afternoon, he worked with classes of Year 9 and Year 10 children at Ysgol Clywedog.

Pupils at both schools learned about the plight of children who have become separated from their families in Baghdad and who have ended up on the streets, existing by begging, street crime and prostitution. With official unemployment figures at 75% and wages of many jobs being reduced dramatically, families are under great pressure and many disintegrate, leaving children destitute. Many young boys are sent to Baghdad to find work to support their extended families, and are too ashamed to return home when there is none. Street children often attempt to escape from their misery with cheap drugs such as paint thinners, which they inhale and drink with disastrous effects on their health. While Kevin was in Baghdad, he and his partner Helen set up a shelter offering safe accommodation to 23 young people.

More recently, Helen, who is still in Baghdad, has been visiting nearby factories. Some of these were owned by Saddam's cousin, who after the invasion handed them over to friends who still operate them. The factory owners make large profits at the expense of the workers who are whole families living and working in the factory compounds.



*Whole families, including young children, work in terrible conditions for low wages*

A skilled male worker might earn up to £24 per week, but the same cannot be said for the rest of his family. Kevin showed video footage of women and children as young as 5 working in the factories, which are polluted, noisy, dusty and dangerous places. One woman said she earned £4-6 for an 84 hour week, while a nine year



*Kevin explains conditions in Baghdad to local schoolchildren*

old child worked 66 hours for less than £1 per week. There are no schools and no medical facilities in the factories. Kevin argued that the factories should be repossessed by the new Iraqi Government and run co-operatively for the benefit of the workers, without child labour and with profits shared fairly.

On Monday evening, Kevin addressed Wrexham Peace & Justice Forum's Public Meeting at Trinity Church in King Street, showing the whole of his video which includes footage of roadside bombings in Baghdad, the conditions in the factories and scenes from Fallujah. Helen and other peace activists entered Fallujah during the violence in April, helping people leave and ferrying the injured to hospital. The footage included distressing scenes of people who had been shot by US snipers being operated on without proper facilities. Ambulances clearly displaying red crosses were also fired on and damaged.

Following Kevin's talk, the audience donated a total of £166 which will be used for getting medical help to families in the factories. Kevin has since written to thank us for the donation:

*"I would like to extend a big thank you to all involved in the Wrexham Peace and Justice Forum, for the organisation and the wonderful hospitality that I received on my recent visit... Thank you very much for your kind donation. ALL of this money will go to helping the Iraqis. The money is used in a number of ways: helping street children and youths, poor families and supplying medical assistance... Helen intends to return to the factories with a Doctor ... [to] treat eye and throat complaints, physical injuries as well as other 'minor' ailments."*

Kevin and Helen are developing a web site, at [www.welshhumanshields.co.uk](http://www.welshhumanshields.co.uk). Check it out soon.



*Kevin addresses WPJF Public Meeting*