

Network for Peace AGM 2013, The Well at Willen, Milton Keynes

Network for Peace continues to operate on a shoestring: its income being derived entirely from membership subscriptions and donations. Co-ordinator Claire Poyner, employed for only 6 hours per week, is limited in what she can do but is managing to cope with the essentials. With more members and more money she could expand NfP's work: existing members should encourage other organisations to join. New members of the management committee would be welcome (not a big commitment), as would a treasurer.

Present at the meeting was Milton Keynes Councillor Brian White, due to be installed as Mayor on 15 May (CO Day). His chosen mayoral charity is an anti-landmine one and he will be launching 'The Milton Keynes Charter on Landmines', inviting every UK city to sign up and actively support. Milton Keynes is also a member of Mayors for Peace and Brian plans to revitalise this commitment during his term of office.

In the general discussion, reference was made to a statement about Remembrance on the British Legion's website to the effect that the best way to honour the dead is to prevent war. A look at their schools learning pack also reveals, "Remembrance is an opportunity to ... above all reflect on the human cost of war and the importance of working for peace"

MARCHING ORDERS FOR THE MILITARY ETHOS: A CULTURE OF PEACE VS A CULTURE OF WAR

How and why the government is planning to increase military influence in our schools, and society as a whole

This followed the AGM. Speakers were Sam Walton, Quaker Peace and Social Witness, and Emma Sangster, Forces Watch. Their talks complemented one another and some of the key points are combined here. Some points were repeated by both speakers.

Sam Walton. The old cultural militarism that we have all become accustomed to is now being developed with new features following 9/11 and the recent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq wars. This is a response to the weakening of public support for the military because of the nature of these recent wars and the fact that soldiers are dying in a cause which is uncertain. Recruitment to the armed forces is more difficult.

The [2008 Report](http://www.ppu.org.uk/militarism/recognition_of_our_armed_forces.pdf) of Inquiry into National Recognition of Armed Forces (which can be seen at http://www.ppu.org.uk/militarism/recognition_of_our_armed_forces.pdf) gave 40 recommendations for increasing public awareness of and support for the military. The government endorsed this report in its entirety, accepting all recommendations.

The new elements include Armed Forces Day which takes place in late June. This is used to promote the military, raise funds particularly for wounded soldiers and support for army families. Military jingoism has also increased around Remembrance Day - more drum beating and the promotion of funding in the name of 'Help for heroes'. In a sense this is a subversion of Remembrance Day which should not be concerned with heroism but with the sentiment that 'war should never be allowed to happen again'.

Other features include the increased frequency of returning parades of soldiers through military towns, soldiers being told to wear their uniforms more in public. Special privileges are being given by councils such as access to health and other services and the fast-tracking of children in service families into schools.

There is also more political rhetoric which is self-reinforcing. Politicians see reference to the work of armed forces as 'motherhood and apple pie' statements which boost the quality of their profile with the electorate.

Sam also expressed concern about increasing military affiliations with other organisations such as livery companies and the way cadet forces are being promoted in schools and colleges. It is Government policy to develop the number of cadet forces. There was even talk of military academies and the employment of the military ethos in schools with discipline problems. (These points were developed by Emma below.)

Reference was also made to the involvement of the military in the 2012 Olympic Games. Servicemen and women were involved in all medal ceremonies and the military were called in when the G4S security company failed to meet its commitments. Both these will have promoted the role the military can play in domestic affairs

Sam ended with a call for these developments to be proactively addressed by the peace movement, drawing attention to the dangers involved. Several people made supporting statements from the floor and emphasised the importance of the peace movement's involvement with education in school. It was important to campaign against military recruitment in schools and colleges. Reference was also made to the problems experienced by returning and retired servicemen such as suicide and crimes leading to their imprisonment.

Emma Sangster. Emma made reference to the Armed Forces Community Covenant published by the Government in 2012 - another outcome of the 2008 report - not a party political issue because the initial report was prepared under the last Labour Government. It complements, at a local level, the armed forces covenant, which outlines the moral obligation between the nation, the government and the armed forces. The aim of the community covenant is to encourage local communities to support the service community in their area and promote understanding and awareness among the public of issues affecting the armed forces community. Since its launch, some 150 local authorities across the UK have pledged their support and signed up, including cities such as London, Edinburgh and Liverpool. The Government has also made £30 million available for communities to establish their own projects.

Many people have become involved in supporting the service community through service charities, or more recently by participating in Armed Forces Day. They have shown their support through fundraising, military celebrations, attending homecoming parades and repatriation ceremonies and offering commercial discounts. Even simple demonstrations of support, such as displaying the Armed Forces window sticker in cars and businesses, have been used to boost the morale of our armed forces.

The armed forces visit a significant proportion of schools in the UK each year. They offer school presentation teams, youth teams and careers advisors, and lessons plans. The Department for Education and the MoD are working together (with the approval of the Shadow Education Minister) to promote the military ethos and skills programme which comprises a number of initiatives, including the expansion of cadet forces within state schools to encourage the military “spirit”. Other developments could see schools being run exclusively by ex-forces personnel or sponsored by the MoD and the armed forces.

The Department for Education recently published a statement on their website outlining their ambition to promote a military ethos in schools across the country. Through developing projects such as Troops to Teachers and expanding schemes such as the cadets and other alternative military provision in schools, the government is now actively encouraging schools, especially newer Academies and Free Schools which tend to exist in more disadvantaged areas, to foster military ethos.

This is about narratives and related to saving dysfunctional communities for which the military ethos is seen as a solution. Yet there seems to be no evaluation of why military activities are better than non-military ones.

The particular questions this raises are as follows. Should the armed forces be given access to children within schools and colleges? Is the military’s agenda and the development of a ‘military ethos’ appropriate within education?

Statistics were given on the number of students who come in contact with the military in schools and emphasis placed on the increasing military involvement in career fairs. All this amounts to a drip-drip engagement to influence the opinions of young people. It has been estimated that some 900,000 children a year come into contact with the military in one way or another. The official line is that the military does not recruit in schools: Forces Watch, with its remit to look at the issue from a perspective of informed choice, is trying to challenge that.

Emma also referred to the legislative framework within which all this operates. The Education Act 1996 states that there should be a balanced discussion on all social and moral issues in schools. The UN Rights of the Child requires a similar consideration. Schools have a duty of care.

Tony Kempster

(with contributions from Hilary Evans)