

the 'fwenu' phenomenon

In 1982, a unique meeting on unemployment took place in the European Community headquarters in Brussels. Unemployed people from around Europe, gathered to share among themselves their experiences. This meeting was initiated by the "European Contact Group" (E.C.G), a group of protestant pastors in industry, who were concerned with the massive effects of unemployment. The Brussels meeting was such a success that it was decided to continue the process. It was hoped that the sharing of experiences would lead to an effective network of unemployed people. At the '84 conference, again held in Brussels, the group acquired its name, FWENU, - the First West European Network of the Unemployed.



The September '88 conference in Hannover was the fifth such conference, funded for the most part by the E.E.C., with a small subsidy from both the E.C.G. and Dutch church foundations. About 40 representatives from England, Wales, Belgium, Holland, France, Germany, Austria, Spain and Ireland were present. There were 6 Irish present, and two of them - Mike Allen, executive secretary of the Irish National Organisation of the Unemployed, and Kenny McAdams also of the I.N.O.U., will represent Ireland on the steering group of FWENU.

A central concern of the conference was the question of how best to organise among the unemployed. While the activities - welfare rights information, education for the unemployed

seemed to overlap, some centres emphasised one aspect of their work more than another. The "Zusammen" (Together) group in Austria saw their work exclusively in campaigning: a year ago, October 1987, the largest demonstration since the 1950's was organised by this group in Vienna. Also, throughout the week-long conference, there were repeated calls for strengthening the solidarity between the unemployed and in particular the Trade Union movement, which was seen to be a natural ally of the unemployed.

One delegate, Jackie from Wales, offered the following reflection on organising - "People have a need and they are aware of their need, and if they feel that there is a hope of doing something about it - that is the biggest incentive." Jackie's reflection came from the success of a tenants' association in Leeds in campaigning for improvement to the housing in a 1,500-dwelling council estate. Today £17,500 is being spent on each council house in that estate. Murray, a community worker in the estate added - "So, the tenants identified the most important problem for them, and organised themselves around this issue with the expectation of winning". The Leeds' success serves to highlight - precisely because it involved a localised one-issue campaign with relatively short-term visible goals - both the main theme of the conference and the difficulty in forming an effective european-wide network of the unemployed. In comparison the Leeds' instance seems so easy!

The week was an important event. Above all, it reaffirmed the need and the resolve to work steadily together to strengthen the movement of the unemployed. In the near future we should see the first bulletin of FWENU, which will give us more concrete information of the situation of the unemployed in various countries in Europe. Next year too we look forward to the conference taking place in Ireland.

WORKING NOTES carries information and analysis of the unemployment situation and related issues. We welcome feedback and dialogue on material covered in the bulletin. Use these working notes in any way you like, but please acknowledge the source if