

## News and background

### Community unionism in a global city

The City of London is the richest region in Europe, but London also has hundreds of thousands of low-paid workers, often recent immigrants from countries such as Ghana and Nigeria. While unemployment remains the most important cause of poverty, over one in three children living in poverty reside in households where at least one person works (Evans *et al.* 2005).

The East London Communities Organisation (Telco) has campaigned successfully for living wages in the expanding local service economy. Telco is a coalition of over 40 churches, mosques, trade union branches, schools, student unions, hospitals and other organisations, founded in 1995. Collectively, these organisations represent at least 50 000 members (Wills 2004).

Similar coalitions have been set up in other parts of London, under the umbrella organisation London Citizens, as well as in Birmingham. These Citizens organisations not only campaign for better wages, but also for issues such as affordable houses, safer and cleaner neighbourhoods and a humane treatment of asylum-seekers. According to many, an important characteristic of these coalitions is the commitment to a long-term, sustainable alliance, rather than ad hoc collaboration on specific issues.

Telco is based in East London, a poor and ethnically diverse part of the city. In the background, one can see the prestigious

office buildings at Canary Wharf. Banks such as HSBC and Barclays have their headquarters here, marking the stark contrast between rich and poor.

East London is a neighbourhood with a rich history of social activism, explained Andrew Crossley, an organiser at Telco. Suffragettes campaigned for women's voting rights, churches protested against anti-semitism and dockers founded the first trade unions. Fittingly, Telco staged its 2002 Living Wage March along Mile End Road, which had earlier seen protests of suffragettes as well as the match girls strike, resulting in the first female workers' union.

In November 2005, a delegation of the Netherlands Trade Union Confederation FNV met with a number of people involved with Telco and attended a TUC conference on community unionism.

#### Living wage campaign

In 2001, Telco started a living wage campaign, aimed at securing decent wages and conditions for low-paid workers in East London. Following some initial research, the campaign started by targeting the wages and conditions of cleaners who work in hospitals, and the banking headquarters at the prestigious Canary Wharf complex. Pressure was built by mass attendance at hospital board meetings, demonstrations outside hospitals, a three-day strike at a hospital, demonstrations and shareholder

## News and background

attendance at HSBC's Annual General Meetings, as well as the occupation of an HSBC branch in the City. The campaign gained support from the Mayor of London, Ken Livingstone, who has set up a living wage unit.

An important new phase in the campaign has been the involvement with the London bid to host the 2012 Olympics. 'Often with such large projects, people complain afterwards that the local community has not benefited', explained Andrew Crossley. 'In this case, we wanted to get involved at an early stage, in order to make sure that the local community does benefit.'

The efforts of London Citizens resulted in a letter of intent from the Mayor of London. If London were to win the bid, he would promote the use of local labour; ensure that workers are paid a living wage; train local residents for these jobs, especially in construction; build at least 4 500 affordable houses; and improve local services.

At that time, the Olympic bid chairman indicated that this commitment to the local community made the London bid 'eminently more winnable' (London Citizens Newsletter, Nov/Dec 2004). Last summer, London did indeed win the bid.

Research in the USA suggests that a crucial challenge to living wage campaigns is to see to it that commitments are actually enforced (Luce 2004). Professor Jane Wills of Queen Mary, University of London, explained that London Citizens is well-positioned to monitor the enforcement of the Olympics Charter, since it will be working with the procurement office and have access to the contracting process.

According to estimates by Professor Wills, some 1 000 cleaners in hospitals as well as

several hundreds cleaners at Canary Wharf and other sites are now on target to receive a living wage as a result of the campaign. The Olympic Charter may raise this number by several thousand.

Of course, these numbers are still relatively small compared to the hundreds of thousands of London workers receiving less than the living wage. In order to improve their pay, trade unions should more enthusiastically act on the opportunities created by the living wage campaign, Professor Wills argued.

Further government regulation may be needed as well. A financial analyst said to the *Guardian* newspaper (8 December 2003) that banks are looking for 'low-lying fruit': relatively cheap corporate social responsibility with maximum impact. 'A donation to a well-known charity might qualify; better pay for 100 cleaners does not.' The analyst suggested that the government should perhaps introduce a regional minimum wage reflecting the higher cost of living in London, thus creating a level playing field.

## Coalitions

A recent study found that 22% of London's low-paid workers were members of a trade union, while two-fifths claimed to be active in a faith-based organisation (Evans *et al.* 2005). This suggests that coalitions with churches and mosques may enlarge the impact of trade unions' organising efforts.

Coalitions with community organisations may have other advantages as well. For example, board members of hospitals may be members of churches and mosques affiliated to Telco. 'Once these community organisations get involved, the whole

dynamic changes', explained Andrew Crossley. 'It is no longer just workers versus management.'

Collaboration with faith organisations is not entirely uncontroversial among trade unionists. Some fear that achievements on women's and gay and lesbian rights may be compromised. However, other trade unionists say that unions are afraid to lose control when they work with other organisations.

Public sector union Unison has worked with Telco organising in the health sector, while banking sector union UNIFI supported the campaign at Canary Wharf. The collaboration with T&G was somewhat difficult at first, but has improved, and a number of T&G branches have recently affiliated to Telco. T&G is actively organising cleaners in London. This is being done in collaboration with the US service employees' union SEIU, famous for its Justice for Janitors campaign.

The Citizens coalitions include not only faith organisations and unions, but also for example schools. Schoolchildren participated in the Living Wage March as part of their citizenship classes. Concern for street crime around schools was one of the reasons for Telco to get involved in campaigns for safer and cleaner neighbourhoods.

### Holding politicians accountable

London Citizens regularly organises meetings, typically attended by around 500 members of affiliated organisations, in order to hold politicians accountable. These politicians are presented with a 'people's agenda', a short list of concrete demands set by the members, and asked to say yes or no to them. The large atten-

dance makes it difficult for politicians to turn down the demands, especially since the attendees tend to be politically involved citizens, who are likely to vote. If politicians say yes to the demands, whether they actually deliver will be monitored. For example, London Citizens has been holding regular meetings with Mayor Ken Livingstone after his 2004 re-election, in order to hold him to the commitments he had made prior to the elections.

### Research

Recently, the Geography Department at Queen Mary, University of London formally affiliated to Telco. In a way, this can be seen as formalising a situation that already existed in practice. Queen Mary, conveniently located at a 15 minute walk from the Telco office, has done a lot of research for the coalition. Besides doing research, students have been involved as activists in Telco campaigns, including a demonstration at Queen Mary demanding better wages for cleaners at the university.

The TUC also values ties with the academic community. At the conference on community unionism, TUC general secretary Brendan Barber announced that the TUC will create a Union Ideas Network, in order to strengthen the ties with researchers and policy-makers. One of the sources of inspiration for this initiative was the collaboration as it has developed in London.

Besides commissioning academic research to support its campaigns, London Citizens also sets up public hearings and citizens' enquiries. An example is a recent enquiry into Lunar House, the institution immigrants must turn to in order to apply for asylum or citizenship.

Responding to complaints about service quality, South London Citizens parked a

## News and background

caravan at the entrance to collect evidence from service users. In addition, statements from staff were collected and a public hearing was organised. In sum, testimonies were given by 350 individuals and 50 organisations.

The report found that clients had to wait outside the office for four to six hours, sometimes in bad weather. Facilities for parents with babies were inadequate, and there were many complaints about insufficient or contradictory information being provided. However, the report did find that some improvements had been introduced (Back *et al.* 2005). The Immigration and Nationality Directorate has indicated that it will discuss with South London Citizens how to follow up on the recommendations.

### Lessons from London?

Community unionism, while hardly new to London (Wills 2002), is now being reinvented as a means to deal with the impact of globalisation on the local labour market. As in other 'global cities', there is a growth of flexible, low-paid jobs in the service economy and an increasing reliance on immigrant labour (Sassen 2000).

While trade unions and community organisations in London may not have a definitive answer to these developments, they have made some very real achievements. The FNV is facing the need to rethink its involvement at the local level (Klooster-

boer 2005), and we suppose this may be the case in other countries as well. The successes achieved by coalitions such as Telco suggest that it may be worthwhile to try out similar approaches in other European cities.

### References

- Back, L., B. Farrell and E. Vandermaas (2005) *South London Citizens enquiry into service provision by the Immigration and Nationality Directorate at Lunar House*, South London Citizens.
- Evans, Y., J. Herbert, K. Datta, J. May, C. McIlwaine and J. Wills (2005) *Making the city work: Low paid employment in London*, Queen Mary, University of London.  
[www.geog.qmul.ac.uk/globalcities/Report2.pdf](http://www.geog.qmul.ac.uk/globalcities/Report2.pdf).
- Kloosterboer, D. (2005) 'Trade unions and local developments in the Netherlands', *Transfer*, 5 (1), 113-117.
- Luce, S. (2004) *Fighting for a living wage*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Sassen, S. (2000) *Cities in a world economy* (second edition), Thousand Oaks: Pine Forge.
- Wills, J. (2002) *Union futures: Building networked trade unionism in the UK*, London: Fabian Society.
- Wills, J. (2004) 'Organising the low paid: East London's living wage campaign', in G. Healy, E. Heery, P. Taylor and W. Brown (eds.) *The future of worker representation*, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 264-282.

### Dirk Kloosterboer and Piet Göbbels

Netherlands Trade Union  
Confederation FNV  
Local Policy and Services Department  
([www.fnv.nl/lokaal](http://www.fnv.nl/lokaal))