



Movement of Christian Workers

# REVIEW

Issue 65 June 2018

## Unworkable workplaces



Back in September 2014 the MCW Review featured an article by a Primary School Teacher and her colleagues sharing their experiences of working life. It describes how some had chosen to go part-time just so that they didn't have to work weekends which is what the result of full-time teaching actually meant in practice. The demands of work time and balancing family life meant exhausted teachers. Now, 4 years later newspaper headlines point to the fact that there is an "out flux" of teachers lining up to leave (Guardian Education, 10<sup>th</sup> April 2018). This June edition mirrors the same phenomena, albeit highlighting how the demands of the workplace are affecting the health of workers.

Various political parties have supported quotas being introduced into public services and contracted-out services; companies have set up exacting timescales of service provision, delivery and response times which have met with general popular approval. As a result, expectations have risen within the general population. However, these populist measures when introduced failed to acknowledge that whilst we are customers, travellers, students, patients, we are also the workers who have to provide and maintain this same level of immediate service demand. Individuals can allocate themselves or be allocated into particular compartments where they become at odds with each other and themselves particularly when, simultaneously, funding and resources are cut for a variety of reasons. Unsustainable and unworkable are words repeated as article after article in various newspapers refer to the widespread recognition of work-related stress. Long hours; not in control of how the job or role is carried out; no input into how the job could be improved; working towards goals and quotas that are more quantifiable than qualitative; all contribute to the stress factors being identified in too many places of work.

The statistics from the Health & Safety Executive reported in this edition underlies the presentation contents given at the various meetings marking International Workers' Memorial Day. The lost working days because of work demands demonstrate the conditions, pressure and obligations being made on and met by workers. Elizabeth, a young woman, set on being a good doctor and looking after those who needed health care could only come to one conclusion to save her own sanity: to leave; to walk away. Her article is telling in many ways. It highlights how, when pushed to step up and speak out; to stand up for yourself and those around you it results in a blame game. Consequently, solidarity is lost and the individual is isolated as if it is only their problem. Thus, any fundamental issue shaping all their lives gets lost and at the very least the workplace is fractured or, at worst, broken. Dr Caroline Elton is author of "Also Human: The inner Lives of Doctors". One reviewer of this book, Rosie McConachie, seems to capture and sum up exactly the issues which Elizabeth was conveying, "the book looks at the ways the system fails doctors and medical students and to some extent the ways some doctors fail one another."

The MCW welcomed Otto Meier and Toni Santamaria in preparation for the European Seminar taking place in Birmingham during October 2018. With the theme Digital Work, anytime, anywhere and its impact on workers and their families the experiences in this edition, although not specifically about digitalisation, are more than likely to be replicated and will inevitably beg the question how we can protect the rights of all workers.

## **I didn't train as a doctor to prop up a struggling NHS – so I quit** **Elizabeth Cummings Murray**

I sat in the office of a counsellor, the third in five years, in another attempt to “learn how to cope” with the working life of a junior doctor. My stethoscope had become a noose around my neck. The storm had been brewing since my early days. I was blossoming: five years at university and six in acute specialities, building a CV shining with national prizes and publications. However, a crumbling NHS, forcing doctors to compromise care and the inflexible path for mothers in part-time training, led to my departure. After battling for six years, I faced burnout and was directed to a counsellor to help me, in the words of senior male colleagues, “toughen up and comply with the system”.

Efficiency measures, increasing patient demands and a lack of social care mean there is not enough staff, beds, or provision to meet current needs. I faced two options: Comply and lower my standards or fight the system and stay a little longer, working a little harder to maintain the level of care I trained to provide. But the latter comes with a personal sacrifice and often results in burnout; mental health problems within the profession are rife, but seldom discussed.

There were nights when 3 doctors were on call for over 1,200 medical patients, if the patient wasn't nearing cardiac arrest, they weren't sick enough to be seen.

There were days when I was solely responsible for a list of 50 patients and had to manage the ward round. This was not unexceptional. I fought for more senior cover and to change the system. However, I was handed the number for occupational health; it was my problem for being unable to cope with no acknowledgment of a desperately failing system.

After having a child and going part-time, I decided to move into general practice. Yet I was unable to get appropriate

training. I was experienced in A&E and obstetrics; I needed more in psychiatry, elderly care and paediatrics. Instead my training provider sent me to A&E again where there was most need. Despite being part-time with a 1-year old child and a husband training in a hospital 50 miles away, I was expected to work the full range of shifts and weekends. Due to doctor shortages, working part-time wasn't an option: I was pressured to work longer hours than I felt able, or face moving 50 miles away from my family. The stress of this unsupportive environment left me close to emotional burnout and revisiting a counsellor to find out “what was wrong with me” and why I couldn't mould my attitude to the requirements of the service. Sitting in her office and reflecting, I realised that wanting to care for patients and do the job I had trained for was normal; wanting to live with my family, raise my own child and work part-time wasn't far-fetched. That's when I decide to quit. The sense of relief in that moment far outweighed any guilt for abandoning the sinking ship.

The current climate within the NHS and doctors' training is dire. Training needs to be more flexible to encourage a balanced approach for working mothers and to reflect the needs of trainee GPs, not acute hospital staff shortages. The situation is not sustainable and compromised care is a burden on patients and doctors alike. I have swapped by stethoscope for paintbrushes and school runs as I build my own art business and continue being a mum and wife. Leaving was the hardest decision of my life. Recently a former patient thanked me for my care. I can at least walk away knowing that my time as a doctor was not wasted. I was good at what I did but the fight of being a doctor in a struggling NHS is not what I trained to do.

**Caution**

**“Remember the Dead and fight for the Living”** !

April 28<sup>th</sup> is the date designated as International Workers’ Memorial Day. This year as in years past Trades Unions, Trades Councils and TUC sponsored workers Memorial Day events were held all over the country. Although “relatively few” workers die in the workplace there were still 137 workers killed whilst at work in 2016/2017. One death is, of course, too many as a life is cut short and a family bereaved. Many more suffer injuries and work-related ill health. For the same period, 2016/17 it is estimated that 13,000 deaths each year are linked to past exposure at work, primarily to chemicals or dust. There are 1.3 million workers suffering from work related ill health. Approximately 526,000 workers are suffering from work-related stress, depression, or anxiety (new or long standing) with 12.5 million working days lost due to the same conditions. [www.hse.gov.uk](http://www.hse.gov.uk) “Three in four Britons have been so stressed at least once over the past year that they felt overwhelmed or unable to cope” according to research by YouGov for the Mental Health Foundation.



This year’s specific theme, ‘Union workplaces are safer workplaces!’ reflects the fact that workplaces where there are active trade union safety reps it is twice as safe as those without. If health and safety (H&S) is not taken seriously then workers are more likely to be injured or suffer permanent ill-health sooner or later. The event held in Birmingham was an important reminder that workers along with their trades unions have long fought for their H&S rights which resulted, 44 years

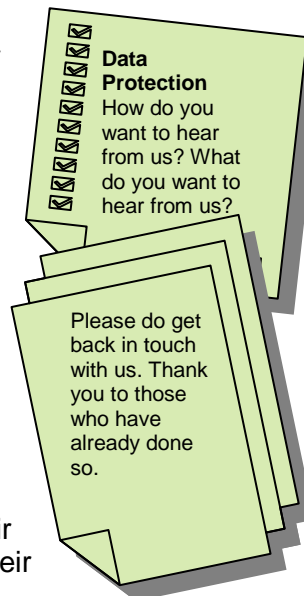
ago, in the 1974 H&S at Work Act. This achievement is to be celebrated. However, nothing can be taken for granted and certainly it is not a right guaranteed to all workers as indeed it should be. An Act alone does not protect; what is required is to oversee its implementation and enforcement and to continually fight for it being put into practice in each particular place of work, day in day out. The “gig” economy where there is a grey area between being or not being an employee can

create vulnerable workers often forced to endure unhealthy working conditions in order to simply meet quotas, keep to timetables, secure contracts or simply keep their jobs. The MCW believes that if the rights of one worker are compromised then so are the rights of all workers. This kind of message was certainly relayed at the Birmingham Memorial event held in the grounds of St Philips Anglican Cathedral. The various speakers’ encouragement to fight for the living ended with a minute’s silence in remembrance of the dead.

**Data Protection & Membership**

The MCW needs to meet the new Data Protection Legislation for us to keep in touch. We are checking how you would like us to have contact with you and for what reasons. If you have not had a letter from us requesting this information then please do contact Jo O’Brien via email: [mcworkers@aol.com](mailto:mcworkers@aol.com) or post to MCW, 337 Clay Lane, South Yardley, Birmingham, B26 1ES

**Membership is still only an annual minimum of £12.00.** It can be paid once a year by sending a cheque payable to ‘MCW’, by standing order or via bank transfers BACS. For more information contact Jo O’Brien, details as above.



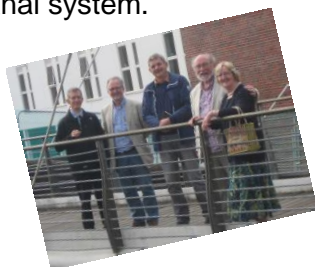
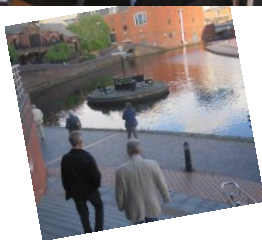
## European Seminar 2018

The 2018 European Seminar will take place during October. It will be held in the NASUWT Hillscourt Conference Centre, Rednal, south west of Birmingham. The theme of the seminar is: "Digital Work – working anytime, anywhere – the impact on workers, families and society".

Otto Meier, President of the European Christian Workers Movement (ECWM) and Toni Santamaria, ECWM Coordinator, visited Birmingham in May to make the various arrangements necessary in preparation for the seminar. Thanks are due to David McLoughlin and Ann Smith who provided the transport around the area for Otto and Toni. Special thanks are also due to James Wilkinson who volunteered to spend the two days with us as a Spanish translator for Toni. Toni (left) Otto (centre) trying out some English refreshment with Jim Dearlove



after seeing some of the delights of the central Birmingham canal system.



## Digital Work

The B45 MCW group met as usual to celebrate May 1<sup>st</sup> the feast of St. Joseph the Worker and International Workers' Day. Hosted and chaired by Ann Smith those present shared their experiences and that of those they know in relation to digital technology.

Please do tell us your experiences, positive and negative, of digital technology. How it is affecting your life and the lives of family and friends whether in work, leisure, or home life? This will help the MCW delegates to prepare for their participation in the forthcoming seminar.

Email [mcworkers@aol.com](mailto:mcworkers@aol.com) or write to MCW, 337 Clay Lane, South Yardley, Birmingham B26 1ES.

It doesn't have to be a long piece just words, sentences that give us some understanding of your encounters that are shaping, impinging, or changing your life and that of those you know.

**We really would welcome, appreciate and value your input.**

From the left, Toni, James, Otto, David & Ann

**Peter Hammond RIP** It is with great sadness that we have heard of the death of Peter who over a good number of years has been the MCW's Independent Examiner of our accounts. Peter undertook this role as a volunteer conscientiously and with diligence and he always donated his honorarium to charities of his choice. Jo O'Brien represented the MCW at his funeral and our donation was given to the Salvation Army's work against human trafficking. Susan, Peter's wife, has written a lovely letter to Jo thanking her for attending the celebration of Peter's life and the MCW's monetary gift. Peter will be sadly missed.

*The views expressed by contributors of the MCW Review do not necessarily represent the views of the MCW*

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