

Strength in Numbers

Frances Murphy

On 30 October, the Westfield Shopping Centre in West London opened its doors to give Londoners the first glimpse of the 300-plus shops and restaurants under its roof. The Westfield Group, who own the complex, are the largest retail property group in the world, with 118 sites in their portfolio. How did a grassroots organisation manage to convince them to pay all of their employees at the White City site more than the legal requirement?

Who are West London Citizens?

The organisation in question is West London Citizens, a body made up of faith groups, schools, unions, charities and other civic bodies who work together to tackle the issues that affect the everyday lives of the citizens in their local area. West London Citizens (WLC) currently has 30 membership organisations, each with varying numbers of members and participants in turn, all of whom meet at an annual assembly to renew their commitment to WLC and the values it embodies. London Citizens is a people's organisation first and foremost, it is about communities working for the common good. Their mission is rooted in the belief that building relationships between institutions brings the power to act for a safer, fairer, more humane, more just London.

West London Citizens, one of the branches of the London Citizens alliance along with South London Citizens and TELCO, the East London Communities Organisation. (A steering group looking at the formation of a North London division of London Citizens has now been formed.) The branches work and are governed very much independently, but are nonetheless part of London Citizens and while some campaigns and actions fall under this wider umbrella, the main focus of each branch's work is in their locality.

Membership is not free – each annual assembly begins with the member organisations presenting their cheques. “It is important for people to put their money where their mouth is” explains Valerie Voak, a parishioner of the Servite Parish of Our Lady of Dolours in Fulham. “There has to be a real engagement from all



of the members in order for West London Citizens to work. If people are going to pay to join but then not participate then they might as well keep their money.”

Our Lady of Dolours was one of the founder members of West London Citizens when it was formed just 3 years ago, two years after South London Citizens and nine years after TELCO. The diversity of ages, races, backgrounds and concerns of active participants in WLC is wide,

within the parish and within the alliance as a whole. The youth presence within WLC is one of its great strengths – Cardinal Wiseman School in Greenford managed a turnout of some 85 students for the third annual assembly in October 2008, which opened with the presentation of a video project about WLC by students at St Charles' Sixth Form College. Young people not only enrich the organisation with their enthusiasm and vitality, but they themselves are clearly enriched through their participation. As each member organisation presented their fees at the beginning of the annual assembly, they were asked to say briefly why they are members of WLC – the statement from one student that it is an organisation in which “young voices are heard” is a testament to the inclusiveness that WLC embodies.

Living Wage Campaign

The campaign that targeted the Westfield Group is part of a larger, ongoing campaign that London Citizens have been actively pursuing for many years. Valerie Voak has been heavily involved in the campaign for the Living Wage – the *real* minimum wage which allows an employee to ensure a decent living

standard for themselves and their family, currently £7.45 in London as opposed to the national minimum wage of £5.35 – which has also had great success through its actions on behalf of underpaid hotel workers.

Valerie explains, “The Living Wage campaign was started by TELCO, who worked very hard in the early stages to hit banks and city firms who were paying their domestic workers poorly, in some cases less than the minimum wage, and not allowing them holidays or benefits. It took six years of campaigning to bring one of the big banks to account for their treatment of their workers, and on the back of this success we began a campaign to encourage the Hilton hotel group to commit to the London Living Wage for their staff. A young man who joined WLC was employed through an agency to work for the Hilton and offered first hand testimony to the unacceptable conditions of employment. Big businesses often hire staff through agencies and then relinquish responsibility for their fair treatment, but this should not be tolerated.”

When WLC originally tried to contact the Hilton to speak to them about this issue nobody would speak to them. “It took several actions including protests outside hotels before anybody was willing to talk to us” recalls Valerie. “The first meeting was very patronising; the hotel tried to pass us off as a bunch of do-gooders, so WLC organised more actions such as marches with placards, which of course the hotel were not thrilled about! We protested outside a charity function at the Hilton, and also managed to get some of our people into the function room to talk to the guests and make them aware of the situation. Guests were asked how much they thought cleaners get paid and were wildly overestimating their wages – the truth is that some workers only get paid by the room, and when the rooms are in a terrible mess and take a long time to clean they end up getting paid far less than they should.”

“After several more actions and wrangling with the people at the Hilton, we were able to finally have another meeting with them. Since then progress has been made – they still don’t pay the Living Wage but a lot of things came to light through their discussions with WLC and they are reviewing their staffing policies.” The story was picked up by a number of catering magazines and the momentum of the campaign is carrying forward to allow Valerie and her

colleagues to target other hotels. “This is especially important as we look forward to the Olympics when the hotel industry in London will be under the spotlight” she says. “Boris Johnson has already claimed that he will make this industry as respectable as possible before the 2012 Games.”

Westfield

Westfield Shopping Centre is also a target of the Living Wage campaign, and the campaign so far has been a big triumph according to Valerie. “It took a long while to get an opportunity to talk to the Westfield Group – we had to make and send them a DVD in order to get an appointment! Our concern was that there are some very poor areas around White City, where the complex is located, and we want this development to benefit the local people. Over the past two and a half years, we managed to convince them that they should pay the Living Wage to everyone employed directly by the Westfield Group at the site. There will be an ongoing relationship with Westfield – the first stage, getting the developers to commit to the Living Wage, has now come to an end but there will be a second phase of asking the retailers to do the same. It is good to have set the precedent with the centre itself.”

An important part of London Citizens’ campaigning is to acknowledge their achievements, and those of the groups that they work with. Employers who commit to the Living Wage are given Living Wage Employer status – at the recent WLC assembly, Westfield’s Corporate Affairs Director, Simon Holberton was presented with an award in recognition of the group’s commitment. It is hoped that organisations with this status will champion this cause and its benefits, encouraging others to follow suit.

London Citizens

It is not just the business world that London Citizens’ campaigns are geared towards. Other recent successes in the Living Wage campaign include Ealing Council’s decision to include a clause in the contracts they offer to catering companies, which insists on school dinner ladies being paid the London Living Wage. This was a direct result of discussions with WLC, and they are now pursuing Ealing Hospital to ask them to pay their cleaners and porters fairly.

Before this year's mayoral elections in London, London Citizens held an assembly of 2000 people and invited the mayoral candidates, who answered questions devised from consultation with London Citizens focus groups. They asked each of them what their main concerns for London were, and presented them with London Citizens' own ideas of how to change London for the better. They asked the candidates to sign up to their initiatives – to “meet with their hopes before they could count on their votes” – and they did so there and then. For example, all four signed up to the ‘CitySafe’ initiative, which St Charles’ Sixth Form College in Kensington strongly support, which aims to tackle crime and fear of crime in the capital.

London Citizens have had the ear of London's mayor on more than one occasion. Ken Livingstone made promises to London Citizens with regard to building affordable housing, which he didn't fulfil, so they decided to take action to draw his attention to his lack of action: London Citizens members set up tents on Potters Field and made a tent city outside City Hall. It worked – land for affordable housing was identified straight away. The Living Wage campaign has also struck a chord in the mayoral office: Boris Johnson this year raised the London Living Wage and promised to apply it to all Transport for London and Greater London Authority employees. Additionally, he wrote to the five London Premier League football clubs to urge them to pay all of their staff the Living Wage, in response to a survey which revealed that their lowest-paid workers were earning just over the minimum wage. Johnson also made waves earlier this year when he called for an amnesty for illegal immigrants, in accordance with the London Citizens' *Strangers Into Citizens* campaign – but counter to the line taken by his party.

Faith in Action

Of the 30 groups who are currently members of WLC, 27 are based in faith communities. Why is it that people of faith are more likely to feel strongly about and act on the issues that WLC campaigns for?

“London Citizens is a good way to get involved in politics with a small ‘p’” explains Valerie. “Faith groups are always the groups that are least likely to use their ‘power’ – we need to understand that it is not a dirty word. London Citizens teaches them how to use

it. Also, faith groups all have ideals of service to one's neighbour, which London Citizens helps fulfil.

“My personal choice to get involved with WLC was based on my faith. It just seemed like such an opportunity. All your life you hear about this superb thing that is Catholic Social Teaching, but I wanted to actually get involved! Lay people should be active in representing the Church and its values in public life, but I never knew how to do this: I didn't want to join a political party, and justice and peace groups tend to be very much focussed on overseas work. There didn't seem to be any way of becoming involved with or concerned for justice for us as citizens of London. I just fell upon London Citizens and I thought it was wonderful. I had always been involved in various things in the Church but Catholic parishes can sometimes be insular, very inward-looking; this was a way of using time in a different way and looking at things on a wider scale, really helping people in a way that cannot be done alone.”

London Citizens are a grassroots organisation aimed at strengthening the community and improving the services and opportunities offered, and this is evident in the emphasis placed on training its members. People are trained in how to work together and how to lead. Training can take the form of evening, half-day, weekend and residential courses during which one-to-one, large group and public leadership can be covered. This training is essential to London Citizens' way of working and their identity; their achievements are all a result of their commitment to increasing social capital through training people and building relationships. In working for a better London, its member groups are strengthened in themselves, as groups and individuals, something which Valerie has seen in Our Lady of Dolours' parish.

“I was very aware of what a powerful growth this was for a group of Catholics together, being challenged in their faith. ‘Love your neighbour as yourself’ is great social teaching – but how do you get your teeth into it? London Citizens offers a way of doing that, and it becomes what makes you tick. It is very humbling.”

Frances Murphy is Deputy Editor of Thinking Faith.

With thanks to Valerie Voak for her assistance in the writing of this article.