Resisting Military Taxation

In September 2001, shortly after the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, the WRI Council issued its “Say No!” statement, urging “all those who pay tax demand that your taxes are used for peace, withheld the proportion of tax used for war, say No!” Back from the meeting the then WRI staff decided to practice what WRI was calling for, and asked the WRI Executive (as employers) to withhold the proportion of their income tax used to fund war. This was implemented from January 2002 on – and continues until today.

In a letter to the Inland Revenue WRI’s staff explained why they had to take this action: “But the legal argument is only one part. More important to us are ethical issues: We stand in the tradition of War Resisters’ International’s founding statement: “War is a crime against humanity. I am therefore determined not to support any kind of war, and to strive for the removal of all causes of war.” Paying the proportion of tax which is used to fund war would effectively constitute a support to that war, and contradicts our ethical convictions.

We – the staff of War Resisters’ International – come from different parts of the world: Chile, Germany, and Belgium. We come from different traditions of nonviolent resistance to war and human rights violations, and refusing to pay the portion of tax used to fund war is an important aspect of putting our ethical convictions into practice. In doing so, we follow the tradition of important nonviolent theoreticians and activists: Etienne de la Boetie, Henry David Thoreau, Tolstoi, Bart de Ligt, Mohandas K. Gandhi.”

This was – unfortunately – basically the end of the debate with the Inland Revenue. Taken to court in 2003 and again in 2004, the courts too did not really enter into the debate on the legality and legitimacy of WRI’s tax refusal – a sign that the debate of tax resistance as a human right similar to conscientious objection is still at a very early stage (see Derek Brett’s article). WRI continues to withhold a part of its taxes – and sees this as an important part to act according to its own declaration – not to support any kind of war.

Thoreau, Tolstoi, Bart de Ligt, Mohandas K. Gandhi.

Editorial

Welcome to issue 62 of The Broken Rifle on war tax resistance. While war tax resistance is not the main focus of WRI’s work, it certainly is an issue WRI groups have been involved with for a very long time. Henry David Thoreau’s classical text On Civil Disobedience, written in 1849, is centred around Thoreau’s own refusal to pay war tax, for which he spent one day in prison. This form of conscientious objection to military taxation can take different forms, as the different articles in this issue show – a debate of total objection or legal recognition and alternative “taxation” can be identified, very similar to the debate on total objection or substitute service.

Since January 2002, War Resisters’ International itself withholding a portion of WRI staff’s income tax, and thus practices tax resistance. As a result, WRI has been taken to court twice, and has been visited by tax collectors twice, who took cash equivalent to the outstanding tax. This issue of The Broken Rifle also explains WRI’s reasons for withholding tax. We hope that other peace organisations – especially WRI affiliates – might follow this example, and in doing so might further the debate on conscientious objection to military taxation. If this should lead to legal recognition, or is mainly seen as an antimilitarist action is for you to decide.

Andreas Speck
WRI Office Coordinator
The Broken Rifle

The Broken Rifle is the newsletter of War Resisters’ International, and is usually published in English, Spanish, French and German. This is issue 62, September 2004. This issue of The Broken Rifle was produced with the help of Ely Speck, with help from Objection Fiscal, QUNO, and many others, who provided the information used in this issue. This issue was made possible through the financial support of the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust.

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Spanish war tax resistance in other languages

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