

## Taxes for peace, not for war !

At a time when conscientious objection progressively gains universal recognition, a legitimate question arises: can conscientious objection apply as well to military budgets and war taxes?

Ethically speaking, there is no doubt that preparing or waging war, or paying others to prepare or to wage war, is not significantly different, at least for a person who refuses to kill or to solve conflict by violent means. There is little difference between actually killing another person and paying someone else to do so. Therefore, more and more, people refuse to pay war taxes or the part of the budget going to military purposes<sup>1</sup>. They would rather have their money used for peace building<sup>2</sup>.

In Switzerland, the debate is not new<sup>3</sup>. The old military tax (the current tax on exemption from the obligation to serve in the military or in the civil service) was rejected by numerous conscientious objectors, which had then been sentenced for not paying to a week-long or even more prison terms, each year, to the seizure of the required sum as well and to the payment of the fees<sup>4</sup>. The introduction of the civil service in the 90's and the modifications of the military tax law (particularly the replacement of the prison term by the payment of a fine) have somehow put an end to the debate along these lines.

Nevertheless, several reasons justify the re-launch of the cause.

First, the exemption tax was subject to a severe and unanimous judgment by the European Court of Human Rights for the discrimination of handicapped people. The judgment established that the army and the civil service ought to accept, whenever possible, the individuals – even if unfit for service or lightly handicapped – who would rather serve than pay the tax. However, Switzerland does not seem in much of a hurry to implement this judgment<sup>5</sup>. Under these circumstances, for many people, manifesting against or refusing the payment of this tax will be nothing but legitimate<sup>6</sup>.

Secondly, the annual budget allocated specifically to the promotion of peace by Switzerland<sup>7</sup> remains proportionally ridiculous in comparison to the army budget, respectively 60 million CHF for peace promotion (circa 40 millions €) and 4,5 billion (3 billion € ~) for the army. Percentage-wise it means a 0.13 for peace<sup>8</sup>. These funds for peace, voted every four years, will be discussed again at the end of 2011 or some time in 2012. There are good reasons and a fair opportunity there to let the Parliament know that the population wants an increase in the budget for the promotion of peace.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Conscientious\\_objection\\_to\\_military\\_taxation](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Conscientious_objection_to_military_taxation)

<sup>2</sup> [www.cpti.ws](http://www.cpti.ws) and links to local organizations websites.

<sup>3</sup> Since World War 1: <http://perso.unige.ch/~manuel/biofr.htm>.

<sup>4</sup> For historical details see: Anne-Catherine Ménétreay, Pierre Chastelain, etc. « Objection, votre honneur! ». Éditions d'En Bas et CMLK, 1979, page 169.

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.gssa.ch/spip/spip.php?article143>

<sup>6</sup> While waiting for the judgment to be implemented, however slow, there is though little use to start a procedure that could be costly and worthless in a few months.

<sup>7</sup> This is a special fund specifically dedicated to the promotion of peace (better than nothing !). It does not include contributions to international organizations, nor to aid and development organizations, which are much more consistent and do have indeed some allocations for peace building and other peace matters in their respective budgets. We may also briefly mention here that last year, the Confederation saved 105 million, due to the massive increase of the number of conscientious objectors serving on the civil service due to a change of the admittance policy to the service (112 million for the army minus the 7 million extra-costs for the civil service itself), that is much more than what this particular fund gets.

<sup>8</sup> 1.30 franc for peace for a 1,000 francs for the army

Finally, there isn't any major military threat worldwide while basic human needs are not yet met for a large part of humanity<sup>9</sup>. Nevertheless, war expenses in the world reached last year an "as high as ever" level. It is so forth desirable to bring humanity and its deciding elites to a choice: security for the whole planet and all its inhabitants by meeting all basic needs and by practicing softer methods of conflict prevention and management, instead of security by military power and the use of force.

So what can be done to prepare and achieve this necessary reallocation of resources?

Nonviolent methods start by dialogue and information. One could consider therefore, first, to attach a letter to their tax-sheet report or to include a note therein requesting that the percentage directed to the military budget be reallocated to other State activities<sup>10</sup>. Consequently, one can then put pressure on the Members of the Parliament (and especially regarding the next quarterly budget allocated to the promotion of peace, on which we will keep you updated). Federal elections are also due next year. Electing MPs who favor spending more funds – and say it! – for the promotion of peace is logical. It comes almost without saying that the more people voice their support to peace tax, the greater the possibilities will be to be heard.

Conscientiously objecting to a part of the general budget is a conscience decision, eminently personal. But it is also a decision which would not have much sense, any reach or possibility of success unless the authorities, the public and consequently the media give it sufficient attention. Refusing (or encouraging) to pay the part of the budget allocated to the army<sup>11</sup>, paying this elsewhere (i.e. to a peace promoting organization), or transferring the sum to a blocked account (escrow) would imply punishment for withholding a part of the due taxes. The fine would be proportional to the amount due and range from 3 times less to 3 times more<sup>12</sup>. Knowing that this tax is mainly levied on rather well-off households and that at the start the amount due is very low, there is a great possibility for low middle-class or middle class individuals to take the risk, for greater goals, of being subject to such fines.

It would be nice if the people who demand for such a reallocation for peace would be heard before they resort to such extremes.

Wishing you a great summer,

Christophe Barbey, 9<sup>th</sup> of July 2010

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<sup>9</sup> Military expenses worldwide estimate for 2009 is 1531 billions, a 6% increase since 2008. Between 150 and 200 billions are needed annually in order to cover the costs of the Development Millenium Goals, costs that are in fact not covered.

<sup>10</sup> I did not turn in my tax statement yet, so I will include such a message.

<sup>11</sup> National defense amounts to 7.8% of the federal budget.

[http://www.efv.admin.ch/f/downloads/finanzberichterstattung/bufi/R\\_Bufi\\_2009\\_f.pdf](http://www.efv.admin.ch/f/downloads/finanzberichterstattung/bufi/R_Bufi_2009_f.pdf), p. 10. But the federal income tax only covers 23.3% of all taxes collected by the Confederation (p.7). However, it is clearly too difficult to work out exactly how much does each payer contribute with which tax, to the defense budget alone.

<sup>12</sup> [http://www.admin.ch/ch/f/rs/642\\_11/index.html#id-6](http://www.admin.ch/ch/f/rs/642_11/index.html#id-6)