

14TH INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE OF WAR TAX RESISTANCE AND PEACE TAX CAMPAIGNS

February 2013 in Bogota, Colombia

Report by David Gross

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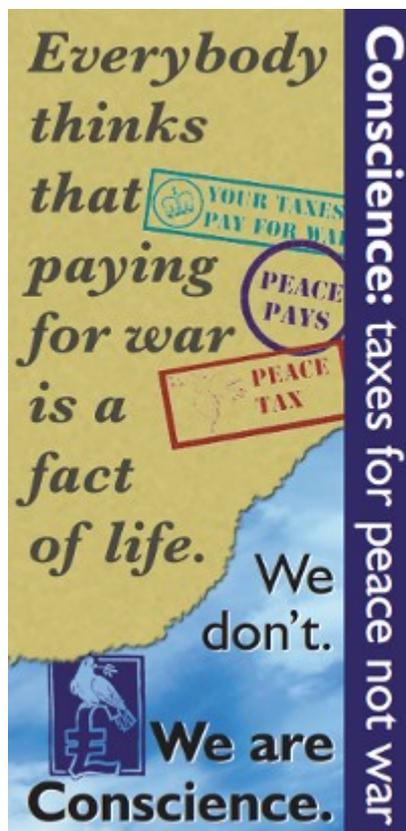
23 February 2013

Conference report, part 1: The State of the COMT Movement

[The 14th International Conference on War Tax Resistance and Peace Tax Campaigns](#) gave conscientious objectors to military taxation from around the world a chance to compare notes on activities in their countries.

Many groups reported a greying, shrinking movement that struggles to maintain enthusiasm or to make significant headway on primary goals. There were a few bits of news that I thought were especially worthy of note:

Conscience UK's Market Analysis and Message Revamp



[Conscience UK](#) took the step of asking a professional consultant to do a market analysis. They identified a market segment that is particularly susceptible to the COMT message, and also learned that their messaging was flawed: the new generation identifies the term “conscientious objector” as being archaic and not relevant to them.

Conscience UK has responded to this by recharacterizing its campaign from one that supports conscientious objection to military spending into one that promotes [nonmilitary security solutions](#) and wants to give citizens the option to fund them instead of the military. It is collecting examples of successful nonviolent conflict prevention/resolution groups and actions, which it hopes to promote in a “Meet the Real Peacekeepers” campaign. It is also developing a strategy game (tentatively titled “Spend & Defend”) which it hopes to use to

highlight how using nonviolent conflict prevention/resolution tactics is more effective and less costly than relying on military solutions.

The Norwegian Peace Fund

Another innovative idea comes from Norway. Activists there are forming what they call the [Norges Fredsfond](#) (Norwegian Peace Fund) and are soliciting taxpayers to donate to the fund. When they reach a critical mass of contributors the fund will gain tax-exempt status, and so these donations will reduce the contributors' taxes at their marginal tax rate (typically 28%, according to Fund promotor Øystein Øgaard — which means that, at least from one way of looking at it, an objector can offset his or her war tax by contributing about three times the amount of the tax to the fund).

The fund is being designed as though it were a government-run peace tax fund accepting tax dollars that would then fund peace-promoting projects. They hope that by laying the groundwork of creating and running such a fund, they will be better able to convince the government to legalize COMT and absorb the fund as the lawful COMT alternative fund.

Peace Tax Funds

Other than the Norwegian proposal (which is just getting off the ground), there is little new to report on the Peace Tax front. There are many organizations in many countries working for this, and one international group nominally devoted to the same task, but none are making any headway or reporting any big changes in their approaches. Belgium's campaign is dormant for lack of activist support, and Germany has suspended lobbying activity after their lobbying campaign resulted in negligible results.

Those of you who are following [the U.S. version of the legislation](#) can be assured that it will be introduced again this year, without any anticipated changes. The number of cosponsors for the House bill shrunk to eight last year, and four of those have now moved on from the House (the bill was not introduced in the Senate), so this is a challenge. The National Campaign for a Peace Tax Fund has set a goal of 19 cosponsors in the House and a sponsor in the Senate this year.

Tactical Innovation

I gave a presentation on the variety of tactics used by tax resistance campaigns throughout history and around the world to augment their campaigns, and tried to explain how reviewing these tactics and those campaigns might help us craft our campaigns to be more successful. You can find [the slides I used in this presentation](#) on-line if you'd like a better idea of what I was talking about.

David Gross

<http://sniggle.net/Experiment/index5.php?entry=24Feb13>

24 February 2013

Colombia

Today I'll try to convey what I heard about the state of Colombia at the conference. I'm no expert on the country or the region, my Spanish is iffy, and in such a short time I'm sure I only got an incomplete story, but here goes:

Militarism in Colombia

Colombians have been suffering from a long armed conflict featuring multiple guerrilla/paramilitary groups, the Colombian military, and private armed security forces. Colombia has the highest military spending in the region (by percentage of gross domestic product), and has a larger army than Brazil (which dwarfs Colombia in population and land area). And that doesn't count the spending and personnel of non-government military actors.

This militarism has infected civil society by promoting the idea that security means superior force of arms, and by increasing armed violence in the cities in the form of street gangs and organized crime. In addition, the expansion of the military has come alongside a shrinking of social welfare spending as Colombia has adopted neoliberal policies, with the result that people now can most effectively get needed government benefits by joining the military (and this in turn has meant an increase in families with at least one member in the military, which tends to boost public support for militarist policies).



Colombian street artist [Toxicomano](#) (I think) decorated many of the planters along Bogotá's Avenida Septima with antimilitarist messages: "The sound of weapons does not allow for listening to ideas," "nothing won," "We don't want to learn to kill!!"

Some parts of Colombia, including at least one entire department (state) are under martial law, with the civil government subordinated to military rulers sometimes to the extent of its near irrelevance.

The U.S. government sees Colombia as its regional partner in expanding its own military influence... something like a multi-level marketing scheme. Colombia has bases that function like the U.S. [School of the Americas](#), where military figures from countries around the region

and beyond come to get training from U.S. and Colombian forces on how to use the latest techniques and gadgets the military industrial complex is selling.

The expert speakers at the conference were by and large cynical about the ongoing peace talks between the government and the guerrilla group called [FARC](#). This was for several reasons, such as:

- the talks do not include all of the armed factions fighting in Colombia (which means, among other things, that FARC, rather than dissolving or disarming, may just be absorbed by another faction)
- the talks do not address the social justice issues and in particular the war on drugs which fuel the conflict
- the talks do not involve representatives of Colombian society in general but only the belligerents and so are likely to result in a necessarily political resolution but one that evades political accountability or transparency

Some speakers emphasized that militarism has so degraded the ethics of society that nothing short of a grassroots revolution of cultural values will be sufficient to implement a real peace in Colombia. Former Colombian constitutional court justice and presidential candidate [Carlos Gaviria Díaz](#) addressed the conference and said that he feels “the central problem of Colombia is ethical character.”



Carlos Gaviria Díaz addresses the conference

Conscientious Objection in Colombia

The [Constitutional Court of Colombia](#), the nation’s highest authority on the interpretation of the Colombian constitution (similar to the role of the U.S. Supreme Court in this regard) decided in 2010 that conscientious objection to military service is protected by the constitution.

However, the legislature has not implemented a law to govern the process draftees must follow to be designated conscientious objectors. The military also has not implemented its own process. Under the Colombian governmental establishment, the military and the courts are co-equal branches of government, so the courts cannot command the military to institute any particular process for dealing with conscientious objectors. The result of this “*vacío jurídico*” (legal vacuum) is that every objector who is drafted has to sue in court to be released, and must rely on the vicissitudes of individual, often hostile judges to win conscientious objector status.

In a future post, I’ll write about some of the efforts being made to improve this situation, and how conference participants helped in this campaign.

Press Gangs in Colombia



an anti-*batida* propaganda poster I saw at the [ACOOO](#) headquarters in Bogotá

There is an ongoing draft in Colombia that effects males of a certain age. There are grounds for exemption (being an only child, being disabled, etc.) but those who are exempted must pay [a tax in lieu of military service](#). Upon serving, being exempted and paying your tax, or not being one of those selected in the draft, you are given a military ID card. You must carry this ID on your person at all times, and it is also required for things like getting a job in the above-ground economy, being granted a university degree, getting a passport, or owning property.

That said, this is a very leaky system: young men or their families can buy a card at a sliding scale (this is extralegal but commonplace), and one conscientious objector I heard about even traded a t-shirt for an ID card from a sympathetic official.

The military frequently conducts round-ups of military-aged men — swooping in quickly and detaining everybody, then taking anyone who does not have a card or whose card indicates that they have neither served nor been granted an exemption to the induction center to be immediately drafted. These round-ups are illegal but there seems to be no political will or power to stop them. These round-ups are called “*batidas*” in Colombia, and [ACCOOC](#) says they have received reports of 45 different *batidas* from around the country in the last four months alone, and that the organization gets about 10–20 calls a day complaining about the practice.

Police sometimes collaborate with the military — seizing ID cards from young men and then turning them over to the military who induct them under the excuse that they were found without a card.

Offenses committed by members of the military in Colombia (such as, say, unlawful detentions like these) are by law prosecuted in military, never civil, courts. This means impunity in cases like these (and much worse cases — the military has done similar round-ups in the past called “[false positives](#)” in which it has massacred those it rounded up and then declared them to have been guerrillas in order to boost its body count).

ACCOOC, working with [War Resisters International](#), has created a standardized form that it and other groups working in this area can use to carefully document reports of *batidas* so that these reports will be maximally credible to the relevant human rights authorities.

A second campaign is trying to eliminate the requirement to have and carry a military ID card. This campaign is using a public awareness campaign, is lobbying universities to work to remove the ID requirement for graduation, and is also asking foreign companies with offices in Colombia not to require the IDs from those they hire.

Peace Communities

There are about a dozen “[peace communities](#)” in Colombia’s war zones that are trying to adopt and defend a policy of neutrality and grassroots demilitarization. I think I have heard that this has included refusing to pay war taxes to guerrilla/paramilitary groups. These communities are being assisted by [International Fellowship of Reconciliation](#) (IFOR) volunteer consultants and observers. Derek Brett, the IFOR’s UN representative (who has also worked there on behalf of Conscience & Peace Tax International), tells me that these communities have some of the highest casualty rates in the war. In one notorious case, one of the outspoken leaders of the movement was tortured and killed along with his family.

David Gross

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25 February 2013

ACOOOC's Strategy and Conference Activity

Acción Colectiva de Objectoras y Objetores de Conciencia (ACOOOC), our conference host, is struggling with some of the problems Colombia is facing, particularly with *batidas* and with its confused conscientious objection policy (see [yesterday's Picket Line](#) for details).

Before the conference started, I met with the remarkably energetic, enthusiastic, and personable Milena Romero of ACOOC at the group's headquarters in Bogotá, and she filled me in on what the group is doing.

ACOOOC is run out of a small set of offices that also includes a small café, a conference room for rent, a print shop, and a computer refurbishing center. These help make the organization financially self-sustaining.



“Staffed by objectors” reads the mural outside the ACOOC café and print shop

When I was there, there were eight or ten other people on-site, some brainstorming a video and/or direct action project. They were all about as young as the youngest person at a typical war tax resistance gathering in the United States, but perhaps this is to be expected as there is an ongoing military draft in Colombia, and so the issue hits young men viscerally.

It is a tribute to the open-mindedness and curiosity of the group that they hosted this conference, since their own urgent focus is on protecting conscripts and conscientious objectors. Tax resistance isn't really on the radar here yet, being mostly crowded out by these priorities. The group hoped that the conference could help them, and other activists with a similar focus, to learn about war tax resistance. They also wanted to use the opportunity to confer with other activists about the status of the struggle to legalize conscientious objection

to military service, and to capitalize on the gravitas of an “international conference” to add weight to their lobbying efforts.

ACOOOC’s Strategies

The group has designed and is vigorously implementing a set of strategies:

- document *batidas*, and be a credible source of information about them for the press and for human rights authorities
- push for legislation that would regulate in a predictable and beneficent fashion the process of applying for conscientious objector status
- help conscientious objectors who have been drafted to navigate the judicial system in the absence of such a law
- erode the military ID requirement

ACOOOC is also trying to win a public relations struggle. Because of years of trouble with paramilitaries, guerrillas, and the drug war, people in Colombia tend to prioritize security and in particular security through superior force of arms. Public opinion is not very sympathetic to arguments for principled nonviolence. So ACOOC is moving slowly and trying to make conscientious objection non-threatening to a security-focused society. At the same time they’re also trying to satisfy the radical wing of conscientious objectors who are attracted to their cause and who want to make sure they won’t be left out in the cold by compromise.

Proposed Legislation Legalizing Conscientious Objection

A bill that would formally legalize the conscientious objection process is working its way through the legislature. It passed the Colombian Senate unanimously, but the military is hostile to it and it is expected to face serious opposition in the House. The Constitutional Court is also expected to weigh in at some point (apparently, unlike in the U.S., that court sometimes reviews proposed legislation for constitutionality *before* the legislation passes through the legislature).



Conferees (wearing simultaneous-translation headsets) listen to Ciro Roldán, Alan Vargas, and Nicolás Navas from the Universidad Nacional de Colombia discuss the state of conscientious objection to military service in Colombia on the opening day of the conference.

Part of ACOOC's strategy regarding this legislation has involved walking a fine line on the issue of abortion. Abortion is illegal in Colombia, but the courts have ruled that it is permissible in the case of rape, severe fetal deformity, or danger to the life of the mother. Conscientious objectors to abortion in the medical profession have sought legislative protection of their right not to participate in such abortions, and sections that permit such conscientious objection are wrapped into the conscientious objection to military service bill. ACOOC has been working with a women's rights group to make sure the bill doesn't go so far in this area as to lead to opposition from the abortion rights movement. This part of the bill may be key to gaining sufficient support from Catholic conservatives in the House to pass the bill over broader conservative opposition.

ACOOC has also had to strike a balance between the sort of compromise that has a chance of passing in the legislature and the concerns of some of its more radical base, many of whom are skeptical of government outreach or believe the legislation does not offer sufficient protection to conscientious objectors. Even the anarchists I spoke with, however, were willing to hold their noses and speak politely with the politicians they needed to lobby, saying they could put their politics aside temporarily in the hopes that the legislation would offer concrete help to draftees.

The law would require conscientious objectors to do 15 months of alternative service. Some of this might be in civil defense agencies also run by the ministry of defense (such as agencies roughly equivalent to FEMA in the U.S.). Some objectors balk at such service (the same was true in the U.S. where some drafted objectors felt okay about joining civilian service camps to do alternative service, and some refused).

ACOOC is not completely happy with the legislation, and has a list of changes that it hopes to implement, either by additional legislation or by means of judicial challenges, after the bill passes, but it feels that the best way forward at this point is to try to pass the legislation as written.

The military has been lobbying to change the legislation in hostile ways: for instance with provisions that would force objectors to apply for conscientious objector status before a panel made up only of people representing the defense department, or that would force objectors to pay a fine in order to get conscientious objector status.

ACOOC is lobbying to water down the first of these proposals, insisting on a civilian representative on the panel. It's keeping more quiet about the second proposal, though, recognizing that in the court of public opinion the military has a strong argument that if a non-objector may be forced to risk his life, a conscientious objector ought to be forced to put some skin in the game. However they are aware of the case of Alfredo Díaz Bustos in Bolivia (a regional human rights body ruled that Díaz could not be forced to pay a fine there in order to get conscientious objector status) and expect that if the second provision passes they may be able to challenge it on similar grounds.

Executing an Outreach and Lobby Plan

At the conference we heard of much about the efforts to get this bill passed (and about ACOOC's other strategies), and we also helped to implement some of it. One afternoon, conferees broke up into three groups to plan visits (two each) the following day to the following:

1. the office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights in Colombia
2. the Defensoría Del Pueblo (ombudsman) in Bogotá
3. the Ministry of Defense's Human Rights Office
4. the headquarters of the *Polo* (left-wing coalition) Democratic Party
5. the office of Green Party congressional representative Alfonso Prada Gil
6. the government's director of human rights & the district secretary

For participants in each of these meetings, ACOOC had prepared a sheet in English and Spanish briefly describing why they considered it important to communicate with that particular office, and what specifically the offices should be asked to do about ACOOC's concerns. Our teams met to discuss our strategies for the meetings, and the next morning went out to the previously-arranged appointments.

The following day, each team reported to the group at large about the results of the meeting, both telling us the "feeling" they had about how the meeting went, and any specific action items or promises agreed to by each side.

This I felt was very well-designed and -executed and seems likely to have practical results.

I was part of the group that met with [Clara López](#), former mayor of Bogotá and now head of (and presidential candidate of) the *Polo* Democratic Party. She promised her party's support for the upcoming conscientious objection legislation, and also told us that she'd been at Radcliffe in the U.S. during the Vietnam War and had been active with Students for a Democratic Society working to protect draft evaders and to chase ROTC out of Harvard back in the day. She told us she had been a war tax resister for a few years but relented in the face of ruinous fines. Now, as a wealthy Colombian, she pays a "*patrimonio*" tax that is explicitly labeled a "war tax."



The team meeting with Clara López at the *Polo* Democratic Party headquarters in Bogotá (she's second from the left in the front row).

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<http://sniggle.net/Experiment/index5.php?entry=27Feb13>

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Miscellaneous Conference Notes

Next Meeting

The 15th international conference will likely be held in Geneva. Rather than looking for a local group in Geneva to act as a host and sponsor, a committee of conferees will work together to plan the conference themselves.

Social Media

A number of the regional groups and campaigns reported that they were making attempts to experiment with social media outreach, but they largely felt out of their depth in this area. Some groups noted that because of the demographics of their membership, social media (or even email) was ineffective for in-group outreach. In one case, a group reported that three-quarters of its members do not use email at all, so for them a printed and snail-mailed newsletter is essential for keeping them informed and involved.

Bringing COMT/WTR to a New Audience

The Colombian antimilitarist movement is so urgently concerned with stopping *batidas* and protecting the rights of conscientious objectors to military service that the issue of war tax resistance has not been a priority. This conference did a good job of putting that issue on the radar here among the people most likely to adopt it.

Statements of Conscience

Conferees, led by Dan Jenkins and Jens Braun, spent several hours over two days trying to better articulate the conscientious motives that lead them to conscientious objection and/or tax resistance. It can be difficult to come up with a good “[elevator pitch](#)” to explain to people we meet why we resist (and why maybe they should too), and this is crucial to the growth and thriving of our movement. If we can better articulate how we became war tax resisters, we can more clearly point out the path for other people to follow.



a conference participant reads from her distilled statement of conscience

What is conscience? What does it tell us? What helps us to listen to conscience and follow its advice? Can you sum up in one or two sentences your motivation for your resistance?

Speakers

We were treated to several speakers on a variety of topics related to conscience, the situation in Colombia, and the prospects for demilitarization.

Alan Vargas and Nicolás Navas gave us a status report on the state of conscientious objection in Colombia. They are particularly concerned about the way the law puts a burden of proof on the objector to show that his objection is long-held and demonstrable in his past actions. This prevents the law from recognizing an “objector via epiphany” and is particularly inappropriate since draftees are very young men, who rarely have any history of grappling with issues of conscience and nonviolence and who are likely to be in the process of forming their characters rather than having any fixed characters to demonstrate.



Alan Vargas and Nicolás Navas talk about legal strategies for expanding the rights of conscientious objection to military service in Colombia, and Ciro Roldán gives us the philosophical and historical background in which the concept of conscientious objection has evolved.

Philosophy professor Ciro Roldán recapitulated the philosophical history of conscientious objection, from [Antigone](#) to the protestant reformation to relatively new concept of “freedom of conscience” and through to the modern Hegelians. He argued ([as has Juan Carlos Rois](#) in Spain) that rather than arguing that some people ought to have the freedom of conscience to object to military service, we really should be arguing that everybody has a right not to kill or be put in the line of fire against his will. It’s not so much that conscientious people ought to be exempt from the draft, but that the government ought not to be in the drafting business at all. Pursuing a right of conscientious objection puts the objectors on the defensive; instead, we should put the state on the defensive.

[Javier Garate](#) of [War Resisters International](#) and the [Global Day of Action against Military Spending](#) addressed the conference via Skype about the pillars of militarism and how to attack them (using [Gene Sharp](#)’s nonviolent action framework).

[Clara López](#) told us of her days as a Students for a Democratic Society radical at Radcliffe during the Vietnam war (she’s a politician today: former mayor of Bogotá and now a presidential candidate and head of a left coalition political party) and of her views about how addressing urban violence and resolving the drug war are essential to a genuine peace process.

Alberto Yepes, coordinator of the [Human Rights Observatory](#), gave us the context and consequences of the militarization of Colombian society in recent decades, and how this is linked with inequality in Colombia, with corruption and theft of public resources, and with Colombia being seen as an important franchise of the U.S. military-industrial complex.

Professor Carlos Mario Perea spoke of how urban violence is the undernoted but exceptionally important counterpart of the guerrilla wars in Colombia, and how the two feed on one another and need a common resolution.

Former constitutional court justice and presidential candidate [Carlos Gaviria](#) advocated a peace process that would result in the eventual abolition of the Colombian military. He thought that economic inequality and political reform must be part of the peace process, and that since any results of that process would necessarily be political in nature, the process ought to be transparent and open to participation by political representatives, and not just behind-closed-doors negotiations between the warring factions. He was cynical about the current peace talks, but thought they might have symbolic value and could prompt the wider society to begin a crucial revolution of ethical values.

[Ricardo Esquivia](#), who has been fighting for conscientious objection in Colombia for over two decades, spoke about conscience and memory. His text was Romans 12:2 (“And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God.”) He highlighted how the many small ethical transgressions that have become commonplace have poisoned society and help to provide cover for larger horrors (he related a Colombian proverb about public works projects which is that you should always add in a little extra in your bid so that you have enough money left over after the bribes and kickbacks to do the job). It’s not so much that we need to develop a “new ethics” as that we need to more seriously engage with the ethics we’re all familiar with. Nonviolent activists, he says, because we do not have the discipline, practice, and professionalism of our military counterparts, are often overmatched— we need to take our activism more seriously and put our backs into it in the same way soldiers are expected to. Why was there only one conscientious objector in prison in Colombia? If there were five, ten, fifteen... that might be all it took for outrage and rebellion to begin.

[Peter Newton](#) is trying to revive the tradition of utopian world federalism that was so central to the peace movement 150 years or so ago. That movement died out in the wake of the failures of the League of Nations and the horrors of utopian movements with world-spanning ambitions like totalitarian communism, but Newton believes its time has come again. People are not naturally violent, he says, and governments are not necessarily corrupt: We could come together to build large-scale political structures that make the world more peaceful and more free if we put aside our cynicism and got down to it.

David Gross

<http://sniggle.net/Experiment/index5.php?entry=26Feb13>

26 February 2013

Conscience & Peace Tax International

The 14th International Conference on War Tax Resistance and Peace Tax Campaigns in Bogotá coincided with the biennial meeting of the general membership of [Conscience & Peace Tax International](#) (CPTI), and most of the international conferees were either individual members of CPTI, were representing a member organization, or were carrying one or more voting proxies from members.

CPTI is a group nominally devoted to advancing the legal right to conscientious objection to military taxation (COMT) on the international level (such as at the UN). I say nominally because I saw almost *no* evidence of this at the gathering.



Dan Jenkins passes the mic at the CPTI general assembly

I heard a lot about CPTI at the conference but everything I heard about CPTI was *about CPTI*—that is, about what their bylaws did or should read, who among its board ought to be exercising what powers, where its headquarters ought to be located, how its internal conflicts ought to be resolved, and so forth. It is the most narcissistic organization I have ever seen. We had several hours of sessions of official and unofficial meetings of CPTI, along with much chatter in between other sessions (as well as downright lobbying and intrigue... I not uncommonly came upon people having hushed conversations in corridors who looked up at me suspiciously and stopped their conversation for fear that I might be a spy for the other side!), and exactly *none* of it had anything at all to do with advancing the cause of COMT.

On a number of occasions I asked individual CPTI members and board members if they could tell me what things CPTI is most proud of accomplishing for conscientious objectors to military taxation over its almost twenty-year existence. They had a devil of a time coming up with anything. Mostly they responded that they'd managed to win UN "special consultative status." I then would ask what had this status helped them to accomplish for conscientious objectors for military taxation. I would be told that this allows them to put papers on important desks, to make presentations in UN conference rooms, to attend sessions of UN

bodies... stuff like that. And what has any of *that* done to help conscientious objectors to military taxation? Nothing *yet*, would be the answer, but we hope if we keep at it...

In short, I saw no evidence of anything substantially productive that had come out of CPTI's two decades of work, and nothing approaching a concrete, specific plan to advance the recognition of COMT on the international stage.

But CPTI didn't seem to want to talk about any of that anyway. What they mostly talked about was whether they should be based in Belgium or England, whether their by-laws had been translated correctly (or possibly deliberately deceptively!), whether member organizations that are not formally incorporated ought to be expelled from membership, and so forth.

The [organization's by-laws](#) are intricate and legalistic to an absurd extent, especially when measured up against the budget and size of the group (this is, I was asked to understand, somehow a strict requirement of the laws of Belgium), but even so they are so clumsily written that the board members could not even answer basic questions like "do we need a two-thirds majority of the quorum to pass this proposal, or a majority of non-abstaining voters when a quorum is present?" or "for the two-thirds vote do we round up or down?" or "which voting rule applies to this proposal?" There was talk of consulting a lawyer just so that CPTI could get clarity as to the meaning of its own by-laws!

CPTI held what was to be a two-and-a-half hour General Assembly with 18 agenda items. It took them that long to get through the 10 non-controversial ones (1. Welcome, 2. Quorum confirmation, 3. Agenda review, 4. review of the 2010 minutes, 5. review of the 2011 minutes... and we're behind schedule already). Partially this was because the board is so bitterly divided and the general assembly has become so partisan that they had to reach outside CPTI entirely to choose a neutral chairperson for the meeting — who was chosen almost as the meeting began, who was unfamiliar with the by-laws and process of the group, and so who necessarily had to continually ask for clarification as to how he ought to be doing his job.

The meeting transformed a group of earnest COMT activists into a tense, hostile assembly of distrust and pain. If only it were the case that CPTI were simply incapable of accomplishing anything! Instead, it accomplishes the sowing of discord among COMT activists and the wasting of their time and energy. The hours we spent at the CPTI assembly, at the hastily-scheduled supplemental meeting the previous day, and at the various conspiratorial side conversations that made me feel like I was in the Hells of Congress... what might we who had traveled so far to come to the conference have *accomplished* with those hours if we hadn't been distracted by CPTI?

The contrast couldn't have been greater between the focused, practical, strategic activity led by ACOOC (see [yesterday's Picket Line](#)) and the narcissistic and counterproductive flailing of CPTI. It was an embarrassment to the COMT movement.



Wolfgang Steuer reads from a commemorative book being presented to outgoing CPTI board member Dirk Panhuis

The good news is that at the “conclusion” of the meeting (at item 11 of the agenda after which they finally gave up) the assembly voted to begin the process of disbanding CPTI. The bad news is that they plan to resurrect it like a vampire in England (the dissolution applies to the current Belgian-based organization). The occasion instead calls for a wooden stake through the heart. The COMT movement would be better-off simply disbanding CPTI and leaving it at that. CPTI is a toxic organization and people devoted to furthering the COMT cause should consider it an obstacle at best and an enemy at worst (by which I absolutely do *not* mean to say that any of its members or board members as individuals should be considered that way).

Many of those involved in CPTI hope that the move to England and the opportunity to rewrite the bylaws will permit the organization to reform into something worthwhile. Few saw wisdom in my advice to simply disband and move on to more productive activities (most citing the hard-won [golden apple](#) of UN special consultative status as their reason for wanting to keep CPTI alive in spite of its dysfunction). My advice, though, would be to approach even a newly-reformed CPTI with a garlic wreath around your neck and a silver cross in hand.

David Gross

On The Picket Line:

How I live up to my values by resisting federal taxes

Like most Americans, I supported the government and its wars — I can look at an old W2 form to see just how much. I didn't *want* to, but my opposition was only an opinion while my support was in dollars and cents.

Finally I decided that refusing moral support isn't enough. I have to put my money where my mouth is.

When the U.S. invaded Iraq in March, 2003, I stopped paying federal income tax and started working for my values instead of against them. I quit my job and deliberately reduced my income to the point where I no longer owe any federal income tax. I transformed my life, concentrating on what really matters, so that I can live well and securely on a lower income. (As it turns out, my lower-income lifestyle turned out to be more fun, fulfilling, and interesting than the one I had before.)

I take a practical approach, learning about the tax laws and about how to live well by being down-to-earth and sensibly frugal. I'm learning how to live within my means without paying federal income tax — honestly, peacefully, and legally — and how to avoid paying other taxes as well.

I think we have to *earn* a country that we can be proud of — with hard work and practical changes, and not with complaints or wishful thinking or voting. We have to start by putting all of our effort on the side of our values, instead of allowing so much of our effort to be stolen by the tax collector and used in ways that shame us.

On this blog, I write about this experiment in living my beliefs — why I chose this path and what I'm learning along the way.

— David Gross

