

May 15,2000 The International Conscientious Objectors Day

A CONSCIENTIOUS

In 1983, May 15 was proclaimed the International Conscientious Objectors' Day at an International Conscientious Objectors Meeting (ICOM). Yet, it was only in the year 2000 that the antimilitarist network, consisting of NGOs from many towns in Serbia and Montenegro, organized, a commemoration of this day. The commemoration took place in 17 towns simultaneously. In most towns, basic activities consisted of handing out leaflets and postering. However, even such modest actions were not allowed in some places by the police.

For example, in Kraljevo, the activist who went to register the action was told that "sticks will be beating" if anybody tries to distribute or post anything. He was told that "the state is going to be even more militarist," that "everybody will have to carry a gun, whether they want to or not," and that they will be walking in front of him (in front of the one who has forbidden the action), that "we should defend the exhausted Serbia, instead of doing suspicious things sponsored by the West." Of course, police didn't forget to mention that "it is all the same as Otpor/Resistance". Still, the highlight was when, while reading out loud the text of the leaflet, the policeman said: "Conscientious objection is refusal of military service for PHILOLOGICAL reasons." Because of the outstandingly aggressive attitude of the police, the action in Kraljevo was cancelled.

Luckily, such problems did not occur everywhere. Actions performed in other towns may be considered successful. In Pancevo, the activists of Movement for Peace in Pancevo publicly commemorated May 15. The local magazine "Pancevac" announced the action for May 15 already on May 12 in their column "Activities of NGOs." The action took place at the corner of Corso and YNA Street, where the activists of Movement for Peace in Pancevo distributed over 600 leaflets and posters. Although the action was planned to last for two hours, citizens of Pancevo were very interested in the brochures, so everything was distributed in only half an hour. The following day in Pancevo's student house, there were lectures presenting Group for Peace in Pancevo, Group for Peace actions "M" and, ad-hoc initiative "Antiwar campaign."

In Novi Pazar, the group "Urban-in" organized a lecture called "Conscientious Objection - What is That?" in the Open Club. The lecturers introduced the positive and the negative examples of law regulations concerning military service and the right to conscientious objection in the states of the territory of ex-Yugoslavia. The problem of definition of military service and right to conscientious objection in the constitution of FRY and in the Yugoslav Army Code provoked a special warning and a discussion.

The Association of women "Cilim" from Pirot had the following actions to commemorate the International Conscientious Objectors' Day: on May 10, there was a radio program on Radio-Pirot that announced the distribution of leaflets on May 15. The audience was informed about conscientious objection, and the statement from the Conscientious Objectors meeting in Studenica was read. On May 15, in Pirot, as well as in Babusnica and Dimitrovgrad, leaflets and posters were distributed. TV Pirot showed a ten-minute report on this action in the program, "Daily Chronicles".

In Leskovac, the commemoration of May 15 was organized by the People's parliament, but also joined by the members of other NGOs. The action with the posters also took place without problems in Kragujevac, Novi Sad, Belgrade, Svilajnac, Vrbas, Vranje, Zrenjanin, and Sombor. In Cacak, in the night between May 14 and 15, the Military barracks was covered with the posters. In Zajecar and Bor, campaign leaflets with the main message of our action, "I refuse war, I refuse violence - I want conscientious objection," were distributed in some schools.

In Njick, because of extenuating circumstances, the commemoration took place several days after the International Conscientious Objectors' Day. The activists of the SOS hotline for women and children victims of violence and the Roma Centre cooperated with the Women in Black from Belgrade on activities here. Although the action was announced to the police, the police did not cause any problems. The policemen observed the action, but they didn't have any complaints.

Generally, with the exception of one passer-by who commented "Who's paying you?", all the citizens' reactions were completely positive. Only in one cafe the owner refused display the poster, with the explanation that they don't display any posters in the cafe. Others accepted the posters out any reserve, some of them insisting that we put the posters in the most visible spots so that as many people as possible could see them. SOS Niksic and WIB from Belgrade announced action with a common statement that played on the independent local station "Montena" many times day.

In Valjevo, the action was to be organized by the activists of the Civil Parliament, but considering the fact that police repression was raised against certain NGOs that day in Valjevo, they eventually gave it up because the aim is not to intensify conflicts with anybody, but to resolve them.

In this action, 20,000 leaflets and stickers and 10,000 posters were distributed. This action was made possible by the solidarity and support of the Connection e.V. from Germany.

Reported by Igor Seke

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Announcement

IN FAVOUR OF Â CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTION, FOR Â DEMILITARIZATION

A signature collection campaign aimed at changing a Yugoslav Army law to shorten military service to seven months and to provide for conÂ-scientious objection (i.e. a civilian military service) started in December 2000.

Legal experts of the Yugoslav Committee of Lawyers for Human Rights - YUCOM are the authors of this legislative initiative.

Â Â Â Â Â Women in Black launched a campaign joined by dozens of groups active in the conscientious objectors networkÂ i over twenty towns all over the country. This is yet another coordinated action of the network that reaffirms the political and cultural choices of civil society activists. These activists choose to make a tangible contribution to the demilitarization of society in order to build relations based on peace, non-violence, and

Antimilitarism, and to organize joint actions based on mutual support and solidarity.

We consider conscientious objection a basic human right and a precondition for our country to join the European integration processes. Conscientious objection is not a personal, family, or invisible problem, but a political and social problem that ought to become visible and to be solved as such. This is but one in a series of concrete actions within a long-term and particularly important process of demilitarization. Other initiatives and actions will also be organized in the hope that the times of war have forever ended.

On this occasion, we repeatedly condemn the attacks of Albanian armed groups in the south of Serbia, as well as the subversive activities of Serbia's former regime. Both sides are trying to maintain their positions by generating hatred and conflicts. In our opinion, it is only by means of negotiations and non-violence that this problem can be solved.

Also, on this occasion, we express our support and our solidarity with Women in Black from Israel, who, since January, have been protesting the aggressive policy of the Israeli government against the Palestinian civilian population. We express our admiration and sisterhood with the Israeli and Palestinian pacifists that organize joint actions and thus create space for cooperation, dialogue and peace under difficult circumstances of armed conflicts, violence, and intolerance in the Middle East.

Signature collection will be organized for the fourth time, on

January 10, 2001 from 3 to 4 p.m. on Republic Square. We call upon all citizens and

groups to join us.

Belgrade, January 8, 2001

Women in Black