

Hell No: Draft Resistance and WRL

By Andy Mager

At WRL's 1981 conference I met men who had refused to fight in World War II, Korea and Vietnam, scores of long-time women activists and five public nonregistrants who were my peers. During the course of the conference, I overcame my lingering fears and publicly declared my refusal to register for the draft in an interview near the end of the conference, a step that eventually landed me in federal prison.

My journey to resistance had begun a year and a half earlier when I leaped into organizing work to oppose President Jimmy Carter's call to reinstitute draft registration. At a regional conference I attended an organizing workshop facilitated by WRL New England staffer Joanne Sheehan. Eighteen years later I still have my copious notes and have used many of her suggestions in the intervening period.

Draft resistance in history

Draft resistance dates back to at least 295 CE, when a man named Maximilianus refused service in the Roman army in North Africa. Like most early war resisters, he acted on religious beliefs--Christian in his case. Centuries later, from the start of European colonization in North America, religious pacifists refused to serve in militias and armies. It took a 24-22 vote of the first U.S. Congress to strike the phrase "no person religiously scrupulous shall be compelled to bear arms" from the original draft of the Second Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. In the mid-19th century, Adin Ballou of the New England Non-Resistance Society began to outline a secular pacifist position.

By World War I, both strands of resistance were well articulated. After my indictment for registration resistance I received a note of support from 95-year-old WWI conscientious objector Howard Moore. Imprisoned during the war, Moore was thrown out of a second-story window, was beaten unconscious and endured 31 days of solitary confinement during which he was shackled in a standing position for nine hours daily. Twice he participated in long hunger strikes and twice rejected offers for conditional release; of one such offer, he wrote:

In July the commandant of the post came to the compound and read us a message from Secretary Baker, stating that any of the COs who would agree to accept the commandant's orders would be discharged in two weeks. He added, "Now you men know you are a nuisance to the War Department, and if you agree to accept my orders, I'll agree not to give you any." Thus the issue of accepting the status of soldier became a mere technicality. About 20 men agreed... There were only 36 of us left.

Of the 4,000 WWI conscientious objectors, 500 faced similar harsh conditions in military prisons. Seventeen were sentenced to death, and 142 to life in prison. Although none were executed and all the sentences were eventually commuted, 17 resisters died as a result of their brutal treatment.

WRL is Born

In 1923, WRL was formed to unite COs~secular and religious~with the goal of preventing war. Abe Kaufman was hired as the League's first staff person in 1928, and by the mid-'30s, more than 12,000 people had signed its pledge "not to support any kind of war."

WRL continued to grow as the war in Europe spread. The League's 11th annual conference in May 1940 was the largest up to that point and featured WWI COs sharing their experiences and advising future

resisters. Responding to the pending conscription law, WRL National Chairman Frank Olmstead wrote that summer, "We must all of us refuse to fight." WRL's membership rose by more than 700 during 1940, reaching nearly 19,000 by the end of the year.

While WRL was one of the few groups to call openly for draft resistance, the organization also supported those who sought legal recognition as COs. In September 1940, 600 people attended a WRL-organized test tribunal to help COs prepare for the bureaucratic hurdles ahead. The following month, while most COs cooperated with the mass registration, eight Union Theological Seminary students were among at least 46 who resisted at this first step. Their widely-circulated statement, published by WRL and others, read in part:

The war method perpetuates and compounds the evils it purports to overcome. It is impossible, as history reveals, to overcome evil with evil. The last World War is a notorious case of the failure of the war system, and there is no evidence to believe that this war will be any different.

As the number of imprisoned COs rose, WRL played a key role in supporting them. A fund to help families of those imprisoned was established, and WRL's CO Problems Committee provided wide-ranging personal support.

Most of the pacifist movement focused on the Civilian Public Service camps that provided alternative service for COs. The camps were under government authority but were financed and administered by the traditional peace churches. Preeminent peace agitator A.J. Muste wrote of the origins of Civilian Public Service, "The sufferings which the COs endured in WWI... are largely responsible for the fact that fairly liberal provisions for COs were made in WWII."

Two events in 1941 highlight differences between the WWII era and our own. At the League's annual conference, members discussed what to do if the U.S. entered the war and WRL was shut down by the government, a concern which certainly never emerged during Vietnam or the Gulf War. During WRL's weekly street meetings that summer (they were held from the late 1930s until the U.S. entered the war and began again in March 1946), the police helped keep hecklers from disrupting the pacifist meetings rather than arresting the anti-war activists.

The organization's response to the U.S. declaration of war after the bombing of Pearl Harbor further underscores those distinctions. "Under no circumstances, regardless of cost to ourselves, can we abandon our principles," wrote WRL's Executive Committee in December 1941. "Likewise, under no circumstances do we have any intention of obstructing or interfering with the civil or military officials." Beginning with open defiance of civil defense drills in 1955, WRL has organized many actions with the specific intent of obstructing civil and military authorities.

In the spring of 1942, pacifist debates on cooperating with Civilian Public Service escalated. In a controversial article in *The Conscientious Objector*, WRL Chairman Evan Thomas wrote, "The CPS camps are privilege bought with pacifist money. They represent a weak and ineffectual attempt to skirt the issue of conscription." A year later, a "hunger fast to death" by COs Lewis Taylor and Stanley Murphy prompted WRL to resign from the National Service Board for Religious Objectors. (Three WRL leaders resigned as a result, arguing for a united pacifist movement.) The divergent perceptions were evident one June day in 1943 when WRL received applications for membership from two men in CPS camps. Under occupation one wrote "work of national importance," while the other responded "slave."

CO Ralph DiGia~who had not yet been in touch with the League but later became a longtime WRL

staffer ~turned himself in to the U.S. Attorney on the day he was to report for induction. "He sent me to the WRL to get more information," DiGia recalls ironically. Incarcerated at Danbury Federal Prison, he participated in a 135 day work strike to desegregate the dining hall there; the strikers, he says, "got complete support from WRL. They wrote to the Department of Prisons and got [Harlem Congressional representative] Adam Clayton Powell involved."

As WWII ended, WRL led the call for complete universal amnesty. More than 6,000 resisters had been imprisoned during the war, while 12,000 had served in CPS camps. Many of these COs would continue their experiments with nonviolence, in the process birthing radical new direct action movements for civil rights and disarmament.

Birth of the Cold War

On February 12, 1947, more than 400 draft cards were burned or otherwise destroyed at coordinated actions in New York City and in Washington, DC. The actions, which involved key WRL activists such as Dave Dellinger, A.J. Muste and Bayard Rustin, were part of an unsuccessful campaign to prevent a peacetime conscription law. Passed in 1948, the law led to the arrest of 87 men within the first year, 42 of whom were imprisoned. WRL activist and WWII resister Larry Gara was imprisoned for "aiding and abetting" a registration resister the next year.

In April 1950, WRL News reported that, "For the first time in a decade, on the morning of February 27, for two hours there were no COs in jail." The imprisonment of Dr. Wirt Warren and Robert Michener later that day made it a short hiatus indeed.

WRL's support for resisters to the Korean War included raising funds for legal work, campaigning for reduced sentences and encouraging support for individual COs, with WRL News reporting regularly on those in prison. According to historian Milton Meltzer, there were proportionally more than three times as many COs during the Korean War as during WWII. Chicago activist Brad Lyttle, who spent nine months in prison for resisting the Korean War, recalls receiving "letters from people all over the world."

In its original statement on the Korean War, WRL had stated, "If these [Cold War] policies which are dividing the world are continued, Korea will be only the first of a series of ever more disastrous wars." Few knew how accurate that prediction would turn out to be.

The "Peace de Resistance"

The Vietnam War brought U.S. draft resistance to a pinnacle during the late 1960s and early 1970s. More than a million men resisted military service, including at least 570,000 who violated the draft laws. The resistance affected the government's ability to prosecute the war in a way never before equalled. "Draft resistance was absolutely primary to WRL's work against the Vietnam War," recalls WRL staffer David McReynolds.

In 1964 WRL was a primary sponsor of the first major demonstrations against the war in New York and San Francisco. Early in 1965 WRL initiated a campaign that quickly gathered 6,000 signatures on a declaration pledging "conscientious refusal to cooperate with the United States government in the prosecution of the war in Vietnam." Draft-eligible signatories to the powerful statement announced their refusal to serve, and all signatories encouraged resistance~also an illegal act.

The WRL office was swamped by people seeking information and draft counseling. McReynolds believes that such work became "too central," recalling that "for every person we got out of the draft

there was another from an urban ghetto or a poor white kid who took their place." However, he also notes that there was a slow shift in orientation from "I won't go, to we won't go, to no one should go." DiGia, who did a great deal of counseling, doesn't think WRL "could have turned people away," and like others, notes that WRL's counseling included more information about the resistance option than most other draft counselors, "that you could learn a great deal and survive in prison."

Draft resister Randy Kehler, whose subsequent battle for the Colrain, MA, home he shared with Betsy Corner became a rallying cry for war tax resisters, recalls that "WRL was the leader in direct action." Kehler was on the WRL West staff from October 1967 through February 1970 when he went to prison for refusing induction. In a gesture emblematic of the times, WRL offered Kehler the job while he was in jail for sitting in at the Oakland Induction Center during Stop the Draft Week. Randy was hired in October which was when Stop the Draft Week occurred. I didn't see the NVA piece by Bob Cooney and so don't know if it's the same Be-In, though Randy Kehler was quite certain that it occurred in December 67 and featured the Grateful Dead and Jefferson Airplane. I'm pretty certain he wasn't in California in Jan 67 Since San Francisco was a focal point for the counter-culture, WRL West tried to unite the political and cultural with a huge Be-In at Golden Gate Park in connection with the December 1967 civil disobedience at the Oakland Induction Center.

WRL provided key support at draft resistance trials in the Bay area, and worked hard to reach high school students with a call to resist registration. The League worked closely with The Resistance a decentralized national campaign which was initiated in the Bay area, and organized mass draft card turn-ins beginning in October 1967. David Harris, one of the core organizers, served on WRL's staff for a short time Examples of WRL's support for military resisters include organizing sanctuary for nine AWOL soldiers and supporting the 27 Presidio mutineers who revolted at a military base in the Bay area after a mentally ill soldier was shot. WRL's national office in New York also organized direct actions, including many at the Whitehall Street Induction Center and the massive Mayday Actions in which 13,500 people were arrested in Washington, DC, during three days in 1971.

"It's Only Registration"

When my generation faced President Carter's call for draft registration, WRL again reached out with information and experience. While many groups focused on draft counseling, WRL's niche was, not surprisingly, non-cooperation, and its Draft Resistance Packet was widely circulated. Most of the million-plus young men who initially refused to register weren't part of any movement, though they were affected by the general skepticism that carried over from Vietnam.

As Ronald Reagan's policy of low-intensity conflict became the primary modus operandi of U.S. foreign policy, an outright draft became unnecessary. Many involved in organizing against registration quickly realized that we needed to expand our efforts to include counter-recruitment. Links were made with the growing nuclear disarmament and anti-intervention movements as well. WRL was one of the groups that, learning from feminists, helped foster dialogue about how men and women could work together as equals in a movement whose focus was supporting male resisters.

But after the flurry of activity responding to the reinstatement of draft registration and then the organizing in support of individual non-registrants who were prosecuted (only 19), registration appeared to become an accepted right of passage for most young men. However, as the NVA went to press, an AP article reported that compliance had slipped to 90 percent. The government had clearly learned from Vietnam that it would be difficult to conduct prolonged wars, and anything that required a draft would be particularly risky.

Diverse Group Resists Gulf War

George Bush's threats of war with Iraq in August 1990 forced many young soldiers and military reservists to face the fact that they had enlisted to gain economic and educational benefits and didn't really want to fight a war. In the ensuing months, more than 2500 U.S. soldiers filed for CO discharges. African-Americans constituted the largest ethnic group, though the spectrum of the U.S. population was well represented, a situation markedly different from the past.

Beginning in Hawaii with Marine Jeff Patterson's refusal to board a plane bound for Saudi Arabia, the military saw resistance within its ranks grow rapidly. By late November, more than 50 service people or reservists had declared their refusal to fight. WRL's New York office received more than 400 phone calls from soldiers.

Reservist Colleen Gallagher was among those who turned to WRL. "I was doing my own form of resistance. It didn't have a name and I didn't have any support. Once I got connected with WRL it was like a big wind swept me off my feet and into the movement." WRL staffer Michael Marsh worked day and night providing military counseling, legal and personal support to scores of resisters. Nationally, WRL worked with other organizations to publicize the plight of resisters and rally public support. Nearly 100 women and men were eventually imprisoned for refusing orders, with some serving up to 18 months in military prisons.

Resistance 2000

Since it appears that future wars will require fewer and fewer soldiers, how should draft resistance fit into WRL's program for the 21st century? The question of individual participation in and support for war-making will remain with humanity~whether in the form of conscription, taxation, work for military corporations or otherwise. Organizing so that we awaken the consciences of the increasingly diverse people who will face these issues is one of the central questions before us, though it is also one with no simple answers.

Former NVA staffer Andy Mager drew on his unpublished manuscript *Fighting The Flow: A War Resister During The Reagan Era* for parts of this article. He welcomes publishing suggestions: magcap@bigfoot.com

