

# **What does the refusal of military service mean?**

Ferdinand Domela Nieuwenhuis

1893

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## Foreword

The following speech, given by F. Domela Nieuwenhuis at a time when the spirit of the working people began to turn more and more revolutionary, should have found resonance in hearts and minds — not only in those of the leaders of the workers — but also of the workers of that time themselves.

Had the workers heeded the spirit which resonates from the following speech, certainly the government gang, of whatever country, would not have been able to lead the masses to a slaughter like the current war.

And when I had, over three years ago, the “insolence” to remind the demagogue P. J. Troelstra, in a public gathering in Leeuwarden, of the proposal of Domela Nieuwenhuis, made at an international workers congress and he got away with making matters easy for himself by saying “the ideas of Nieuwenhuis have, after 25 years, proven to be a utopia”, since then the thought remained with me to rescue the opinion of Ferdinand Domela Nieuwenhuis from oblivion.

By reading this speech — to which Nieuwenhuis has added a postscript — the new generation will perceive how politicians have subordinated the interests of the people to their party and personal interests. Hopefully the people may see this and no longer be led astray.

Leeuwarden 13-1-1918. C. Bonnet.

## What does the refusal of military service mean?

### **Speech of F. Domela Nieuwenhuis given in 1893 to the Soc.-Dem. soldiers union**

The resolution, proposed at the international congress at Zurich reads:

“The congress decides to maintain the international workers party in readiness to answer a declaration of war by the rulers of the countries involved, with the refusal of conscripts to carry out military service and an international labour strike of those professions that have a direct connection to the war effort.”

As it turns out, many people have misunderstood its intent, either because they interpret it differently than was originally intended or because they try to make the proposal look ridiculous; as such it is necessary to put it as clearly and simply as possible.

The intent is that people finally stop producing phrases and nice statements about aversion to war because that doesn't help anyone. One does not stop cannonballs with paper protests and if one does not use force, it only makes the rulers smile.

They have portrayed it as if we wish all youths of military age to refuse to draw lots and to take their place in the ranks but that is not the case. We only talk about the case of war; the response to one revolutionary action can only be another revolutionary action.

It can never do harm to have some military training, to learn to fire and handle weapons, especially when it is at the state's expense; a time could come in which this would be very useful, even if not in the way that was intended.

Maybe the time will come when this complete refusal of conscription and service can be put into practice but at the moment this is neither intended nor practical.

There exists, as one knows, a big difference between an army in peacetime and wartime. In our country one is under arms for seven years, that is to say, for seven years one can be called upon to do service at any time.

One is, after finishing training, a soldier on a long furlough.

The army that is under arms is not that big and thus with that one can not do much. So that power rests not with the army that is in the barracks and so under arms. No, our hope lies with those soldiers who are home on their long furlough.

Suppose that an order of mobilization is issued and all those men on leave must report to a certain place as quickly as possible. We want them not to go but to remain quietly at home. In every village there are for example ten people who refuse to go.

When such an example is given it will be shown how contagious that is; after all, nothing is hated more than being a soldier, especially in times when one is at risk of being shot.

The goal is, as such, to prevent mobilization on both sides. What will they do with these refusers? Will they arrest and imprison them? But who would do that? Would the local police take charge of that? But they are entirely powerless. So few men couldn't do anything to ten refusers. Where would they lock them up? In prison? But those are already chock-full, to such an extent even that 2200 people can't serve their sentences because there is no room for them in prison. They will take a few and, to make a horrifying example, shoot them. They wouldn't dare to commit such atrocities because that would mean civil war. And behold that is exactly must be done. Each country will be so busy with their own soldiers that war can't be conceived of.

For socialists the choice can't be hard if they have to choose between civil war and war between countries.

Civil war, that is the war of the proletariat against their true enemy, capitalism. And the war between nations, which is the

### **Murder of fellow workers for the entertainment of the rulers**

Thus the last would be stupid, very stupid.

A civil war always leaves room for an ideal, is a war of the oppressed against their oppressors, of justice against arbitrariness and for that enthusiasm can exist. But isn't it useless to desire the people to perceive as enemies people who haven't done anything to them, who don't even know each other, merely because they live on the other side of some river or mountain range? The well known French writer Chateaubriand had already written so profoundly in his book entitled *The revolution of July 1830*:

“Perhaps the time shall come that a new society shall take the place of the current social order, that war shall disappear as a monstrous incongruity, that its beginning will not be understood.

But we are not yet there. In armed conflict one finds philanthropists who distinguish kinds [of conflict] and and only feel bad at the words: CIVIL WAR. Countrymen killing each other! Brothers, fathers, sons, standing against each other! Certainly, that is very sad. Yet a people is often reborn in internal dissension. Never has a people perished due to civil war yet one has often disappeared through war with foreigners...

It is regrettable to be obliged to destroy one's neighbour's property, to see one's fireside bloodied by that neighbor but honestly speaking, is it really much more human to kill a German farmers' family you never knew, who never had anything to do with you and who you can rob and kill without reproach, whose wife and

and daughters you can defile with a clean conscience, because it is war? Say what one likes, civil wars are less unjust, less shocking and more natural than war with strangers because these aren't undertaken to save national independence. Civil wars originate from individuals' views, from well recognized and known aversions: they are duels in which the opponents know why they carry the dagger. If the passion doesn't justify the evil, it excuses it, it explains it, it makes one see why it exists. How is war against foreigners justifiable? Nations usually fight each other because a king is bored, because a glory seeker want to find glory for himself, because a minister tries to to supplant a colleague. It is about time to practice justice towards the collective spots of sensitiveness better understood among poets than historians."

The true oppressors of the people are those in power and thus a victory over them is a liberation from oppressors. Who is the enemy of the Dutch worker? Certainly not the German, Belgian, French or English worker? No, the workers are one another's friends because their interests don't conflict. The Dutch capitalist is as much the enemy of the Dutch workers as the German capitalist is the enemy of the German worker. On the other hand the workers of all countries are one another's friends. Therefore one must prefer civil war over war between countries.

In this case the socialists must be forerunners in breaking with the antiquated concepts of patriotism, as if a person, in the country he lives in, is treated like a child by his father; of nationality, as if not all men are equal; and in removing a multitude of prejudices, which are forced down the people's throat.

One understands what would otherwise be the case.

Suppose that, on both sides, the people answer the call to arms. Suppose that they do it, though protesting, and though they claim that all responsibility for history and humanity lays with the villainous rulers, who started the war, what would happen then? Those suspected of socialism are placed in the front line — and they know very well who those are — on both sides, the result will be that socialists kill each other as a crude trick to administer a bloodletting to the socialists.

### **So by fulfilling military service one marches to certain death.**

Suppose on the contrary that they refuse, then one is at worst at risk of being shot but the people would rather wage civil war than let that happen. The question would be on what side victory would fall.

### **So by refusing, a possible but uncertain death awaits.**

Which does one choose: certain death in war or highly likely death for refusal?

It has been often said that such a summons in the case of war would be dangerous for the leaders of the workers movement. Certainly it will, don't they know that after a declaration of war those leaders are always in danger?

Did they not, at the beginning of the Franco-German War of 1870, immediately arrest Bebel and Liebknecht and accuse them of high treason? And that without such a summons!

One can already guess what will happen, in either case.

[Suppose that] no such summons as we have proposed is promulgated but a protest against the war, to put the blame for history and humanity on the rulers. The [worker's] leaders are

imprisoned for fear of [civil] war but the workers all go to war, while at most protesting and shooting each other, all the while protesting.

[Alternatively] A call to refuse military service is promulgated or so much propaganda has been made in favour of this notion, that each knows what he must do and thus no separate proclamation is needed. The leaders are arrested but the workers remain at home and refuse to serve which causes great confusion and possibly civil war. Then the chance arises that the people open the prison doors for their leaders.

Thus in both cases the leaders are taken out but in one the workers murder each other, in the other, war between two nations is made impossible.

Can this choice even be hard?

Moreover a strike among the railway staff will make travel impossible if it is carried out energetically, and if they do this in both warring countries than they will cause the greatest possible confusion, so that going to war is impossible.

### **The essential is that we must make war impossible by all means available to us.**

Because through war the people never profit.

So make war on war, that we can do only by denying the means which make war possible. Make propaganda for the notion of refusal of military service, and in a few years it will have been so firmly established in the hearts and minds of potential conscripts that conscription will no longer be possible.

### **It will bring the socialists eternal honor if they elevate the war on war to action.**

Soldiers, who have until now been led like animals to a slaughterhouse; soldiers who get bullets while their officers get ribbons and crosses, they have only to turn around to make men like their decorated officers turn pale with fright.

As seeds have to be sown for them to ever produce fruit, so ideas have to be spread for them to make headway among the people.

“If my soldiers began to think, not one would remain in the ranks” — so said Frederick the Great. Thus the policy of the monarchs is to keep the people ignorant so that they let themselves be used as will-less instruments and shot as cannon fodder. As opposed to that the policy of the people[s of the world] must be to get people to think. Then barbarism will be over. The triumph of labour is the triumph of peace! Therefore those who want to fool you into believing that it is good, on the orders of whoever, to shoot your kinsmen, your brothers, your parents are our enemies.

Listen not to them but unite to call to order those who profit when the people fight amongst themselves, when division is sown among peoples.

Enough words! Enough phrases! The time for deeds has come. And refusal of military service in the case of war is the first act whereby the awakened people will show that they will no longer be used by others, but think and act themselves.

## Postscript

This speech was given at a congress in 1893 of the then existing Social Democratic Soldiers League. It contains primarily the core of the speech I gave at the International Socialist Congress at Zürich which one can find in the "*Almanach de la Question Sociale*", which was published, back in the day, by our friend P. Argyriades in Paris.

It is twenty-five years old, but I believe, that when I reread it, it has lost nothing of its topicality, on the contrary, it has become more topical than ever. i

Yes, it seems to me that, had we started spreading this notion immediately with lively and powerful propaganda we would have made a lot more progress. A utopia, they called it, but it wouldn't be the first time that the utopia of yesterday is the reality of tomorrow. Isn't it the brave conscientious objectors who prepare the ideals described here? Haven't they given much in an attempt to prevent the terrible war we are experiencing now? Our primary goal is to make mobilisation impossible. Once the army has mobilised, it is much more difficult to, successfully, do anything. Does one want to do something? Than one has to do something in this direction, even if it is not exactly the same as described here.

Certainly, it is worthwhile to consider and seriously discuss the ideas described in this work. If one detests war and wants to make it impossible then one's goal will not be brought about by big words and big sounding phrases, no, something will have to be done. As no start was made [in spreading anti-war ideas] one should not be amazed that, once again, this war started as before.

We have, in those 25 years, made some progress as regarding refusal of military service. If it keeps going as it does now, one should not be amazed if, on a good day, an entire company refuses, because out of personal refusal of military service grows, slowly but steadily, mass refusal. A snowball keeps growing as it rolls. However, one must have some patience, as big ideas only penetrate the consciousness of the masses slowly. The first calls weigh the heaviest and who knows how we will feel about it in 25 years? So keep hope and don't grow timid.

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