

*In the Spirit of  
Gabriel & Nan,  
Nat Turner,  
Solomon Northup,  
Madison Washington,  
John Brown,  
Mary Bowser,  
Elizabeth Van Lew,  
John Mitchell Jr.,  
Barbara Johns,  
Oliver Hill & all who  
struggle for Justice.*

# D

# The Virginia DEFENDER

FREE

#VirginiaDefender

**A statewide quarterly newspaper published by the Virginia Defenders for Freedom, Justice & Equality**

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**Winter 2020**

## Cathy's Camp exposes Richmond's housing crisis

**By Phil Wilayto**

It started with a few tents, a place for people without homes to get in out of Richmond's winter weather. At least it was dry, and with some blankets and enough clothing, it was bearable. And as the number of tents and homeless people grew, it was safer than trying to find a place to sleep alone outside.

At its height, what is called Cathy's Camp had about 125 tents housing around 130 people. It's named after Cathy Davis, a volunteer with the nonprofit group Blessing Warriors RVA, which has been supplying tents, food and other support.

Ms. Davis played a central role in organizing the camp. Some years ago she had had a stroke, and on Dec. 28 she died of congestive heart failure. Her spirit lives on in the camp.

The ironic thing is that what has grown into a sizable tent city is set up right behind the city's cold weather shelter, the building once known as the Conrad Center and now called the Annie Giles Community Resource Center. It's on Oliver Hill



Photo by Phil Wilayto

**More than 100 homeless people have found refuge from the elements at Cathy's Camp, a tent city set up behind Richmond's cold weather shelter, which is only open when the temperature dips below 40 degrees.**

Way in Shockoe Valley, right across the street from the city jail.

According to rules laid down by Richmond City Council, the city shelter can only be opened when the weather drops below 40 degrees. It doesn't matter if it's raining or if the area, which is in a flood zone, is flooding. If it's 40 degrees or warmer, the shelter stays closed.

The property the tents are pitched on, an open grassy area, belongs to Virginia Commonwealth University, a state institution, which has been letting the people stay there. But in early January, Rhonda Sneed, director of Blessing Warriors, received a letter from a city official telling her she needed to shut down the camp.

**See CATHY'S on page 4**



## regional & national news

### Kaine & Warner sign onto bill that could gut Medicare, Medicaid, food stamps & more

Virginia senators Tim Kaine and Mark Warner, both Democrats, have joined forces with Republicans to advance sweeping budget legislation that could trigger trillions of dollars in cuts to Medicare, Medicaid food stamps and other social programs - and potentially hobble the agenda of the next president.

The Bipartisan Congressional Budget Reform Act (S.2765), authored by Sens. Sheldon Whitehouse (D-R.I.) and Mike Enzi (R-Wyo.), passed out of the Senate Budget Committee on Nov. 6. The legislation is co-sponsored by five members of the Senate Democratic caucus: Whitehouse, Kaine, Warner, Chris Coons (Del.) and Angus King (I-Maine).

Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.), the ranking member of the Senate Budget Committee and a 2020 Democratic presidential candidate, issued a statement opposing the legislation.

"This new proposed process comes less than two years after Republicans on this Committee showed no hesitation in adding \$2 trillion to the deficit in order to pass the Trump tax cuts for the wealthiest families and the

most profitable corporations in America," said Sanders.

Title IV of S.2765 "would create an automatic process to slash potentially trillions of dollars from programs like Medicare, Medicaid, food stamps, and Obamacare subsidies," according to David Dayen of The American Prospect, a liberal quarterly magazine and online daily based in Washington, D.C.

According to the bill, a budget resolution would pass in the first year of a new Congress. The next year, on Feb. 15, the Congressional Budget Office would compare the debt/GDP ratio projected in the budget resolution to a new projection that incorporates the evidence of the past year. If the new projection exceeds the budget resolution's, that would trigger a special, automatic "reconciliation" process to effectively wipe out that gap.

For the most part, cuts would have to come out of mandatory programs, like health spending and nutrition assistance for the poor. (Social Security is protected from reconciliation and could not be cut.)

### Report: High number of youth open to voting socialist

According to the fourth annual report "U.S. Attitudes Toward Socialism, Communism, and Collectivism" released last October by the fiercely anti-socialist organization Victims of Communism Memorial Foundation, young people are increasingly open to socialism, and even communism.

The vote to advance S.2765 out of the Senate Budget Committee came after House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) said Democrats must commit to so-called "pay-go" rules, which require all new spending to be offset with budget cuts or tax increases.

Progressives have warned that adherence to conservative pay-go rules would completely undermine any possibility of Medicare for All, a Green New Deal and other ambitious goals.

"Any left-wing president will have to deal with the Pelosi problem: the existence of powerful Democrats who are too wedded to big money to accept an ambitious program," The Nation's Jeet Heer wrote.

*Editor's note: Information in this story comes from an article published by Common Dreams, as well as our own independent research.*

The data show that 64 percent of Gen Z (the generation born between the mid-1990s and early to mid-2010s) and 70 percent of millennials (those born from 1981 to 1996) say they're likely to vote for a socialist.

And, in findings that must have establishment figures quaking in their wingtips, 15 percent of millennials think the world would be better off if the Soviet Union still existed; 20 percent think the Communist Manifesto "better guarantees freedom and equality" than the Declaration of Independence; 22 percent think "society would be better if all private property was abolished;" 35 percent view Marxism favorably; and 36 percent more millennials viewed communism favorably in 2019 as opposed to a year before.

Meanwhile, according to the report, about a quarter of U.S. Americans of all ages view Donald Trump as a bigger threat to world peace than the leaders of Russia, China, North Korea or Venezuela.

The survey was conducted by YouGov, a British international Internet-based market research and data analytics firm, which surveyed 2,100 U.S. Americans.

# THE DEFENDERS: WHO WE ARE & WHAT WE BELIEVE

## WHAT WE BELIEVE

### We believe in Freedom

We believe that all people must be free to develop to their full potential as human beings. We must be free from hunger, from preventable diseases, from homelessness, from ignorance. We must be free to work and to provide for ourselves and our families. We must be free to pursue our education and to develop ourselves culturally and spiritually. We must be free from fear of the arbitrary use of police power and from the physical and cultural attacks of white-supremacist organizations. Women must be free from physical, cultural and emotional oppression. Children must be free from dangers like lead poisoning, asthma and sexual exploitation. Our youths must be free both from police harassment and the mindless violence of the streets. We must all be free from unjust wars fought in the interest of the wealthy few at the expense of the struggling many.

### We believe in Justice

We believe that every human being has the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. And we believe that these rights are meaningless unless we also have the right to a job at a living wage, to decent housing, to adequate health care, to a meaningful education. We believe that all people have the right to stand equally before the law, to equal and fair treatment by the police, by the court system and in jails and prisons. And we believe that the death penalty is the ultimate exercise in injustice.

### We believe in Equality

We live in the richest country in the world. But it's a country that owes its tremendous wealth to the barbaric oppression of Black labor on a historic scale, the theft of American Indian and Mexican lands, the cruel exploitation of Asian labor and the labor of waves of poor European immigrants.

This country does not belong to the wealthy few who have claimed it for their own. As human beings, we all have an equal right to its resources. As descendants of those whose blood, sweat and tears paid cruelly for its development, we have

a right to collective reparations. And as people who struggle every day with ongoing inequality, we have the right to affirmative action.

We believe that for any one of us to be free, we must all be free. We believe that for any one of us to have justice, we must all have justice. We believe that equality for anyone is impossible without equality for everyone.

As members of the Defenders, we pledge ourselves to defend our community, its men, its women and especially its children, from all forms of oppression.

We pledge to fight for a world where all people can live in dignity, freedom and peace.

## THE VIRGINIA DEFENDERS for Freedom, Justice & Equality

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The Defenders for Freedom, Justice & Equality is an all-volunteer organization of Virginia residents working for the survival of our communities through education and social justice actions.

We started out in June 2002. Many of us had relatives in the Richmond City Jail or state prisons and were concerned about the physical conditions of the institutions.

As we worked around these issues, we learned more and more about the connections between jails, jobs, poverty, racism, sexism, class, war and political representation. We began to organize around these issues as well.

We have a statewide quarterly newspaper, The Virginia Defender, that has been publishing since 2005. We are affiliated with the Richmond Coalition for Peace, Justice, and Jobs; Virginia Coalition for Human Rights; Virginia Prison Justice Network; and the Virginia People's Assembly for Jobs, Peace & Justice.

If you agree with the principles below and want to work to make these ideals a reality, we invite you to join us.

Together, we can make a real difference in the life of our communities.

# Creighton Court Update

By Phil Wilayto

At the same time that more than 100 homeless people are taking shelter in tents outside to the city's cold weather shelter, less than two miles away the Richmond Redevelopment and Housing Authority is taking steps to demolish more than 500 public housing apartments

On Jan. 15, the RRHA Board of Commissioners, without any discussion or public input, unanimously endorsed demolishing the Creighton Court public housing complex in Richmond's East End. The board approved CEO Damon E. Duncan's request to raze 192 of the 504 units.

According to the board's resolution, Duncan can now ask for HUD approval to demolish the remaining 312 units, without needing another board vote.

"We're talking about 500 units of affordable housing being demolished," said Omari Al-Qadafi, a housing organizer with the Legal Aid Justice Center.

New construction is expected to start on the site in 2021 or 2022, but there are no guarantees that any of the current residents will be allowed or could afford to move to any new housing there.

Shortly after Duncan took over the housing authority last April, he halted leasing at Creighton. And by October, 52 families there were facing eviction, some for being as little as \$50 behind in their rent. About one in four of the apartments are now vacant.

In response to pressure from legal aid organizations, concerned ministers and others in the city, RRHA announced there

would be no more evictions until after Jan. 1. That deadline was then extended to the end of January, and then again until after May 1.

Central Virginia Legal Aid, the Legal Aid Justice Center and the Virginia Poverty Law Center have been working together on a special project to address evictions in the area. One result, Al-Qadafi told the Defender, is an agreement with RRHA to work with tenants who are behind in their rent. Under the agreement, tenants, based on their income, would continue to pay their monthly rent, plus up to 10 percent of their monthly income to pay off what they owe.

"That would bring them into good standing in terms of applying for vouchers," Al-Qadafi said. If tenants have any questions, he said, they should contact Legal Aid, "... to see if they need to start the grievance process with the housing authority."

Meanwhile, there are plans for workshops at all of the six major RRHA housing communities to teach tenants about their legal rights.

"We'll be doing some 'Know Your Rights' forums at each of the sites," said Daryl Hayott, an attorney with the Virginia Poverty Law Center. "We'll be doing an outline of the repayment plan and what legal remedies tenants have."

The forums will be held every week beginning in March, Hayott said.

"As far as the evictions go, [RRHA] seems to be coming to the table to try and make things right," Hayott told the Defender. "But this is just a beginning. There's a lot of work to do, and I'm optimistic we can get something."



Photo by Lyra Bartell

Despite fierce support from Richmond Mayor Levar Stoney, Dominion Energy and its corporate partners failed to win City Council support for their \$1.5 billion development plan for downtown Richmond. The public evidently favors schools over corporate profits. Above, opponents make their presence felt at the Feb. 10 council meeting.

## Richmond Gas Works customers get break on bills

City of Richmond's natural gas utility customers should see savings on monthly bill

Beginning with their January utility bills, Richmond Gas Works customers should have seen a savings on their monthly natural gas bill.

According to a Jan. 6 City of Richmond media advisory, the cost for purchased natural gas was to decrease from its previous \$0.50 per 100 cubic feet to \$0.425 per 100 cubic feet, an estimated savings of \$5.25 monthly for the average natural gas customer.


"By law, we pass along the cost of natural gas purchased and delivered to customers, dollar for dollar, without any markup," DPU Director Calvin D. Farr, Jr. said.

At the date of the advisory, the distribution charge of \$0.590 per 100 cubic feet and monthly customer charge of \$13.87 were unchanged.

"The City offers free information and programs year-round to help customers manage their utility bills and seek assistance before bills become unmanageable," the release stated. "Utility customers are encouraged to enroll in the Equal Monthly Payment Plan (EMPP), a program designed to spread payments out evenly each month or to apply for the MetroCare Heat Program, a heating bill payment assistance program for those who qualify."

Information about EMPP and other programs is available by emailing [dpucustserv@RichmondGov.com](mailto:dpucustserv@RichmondGov.com), calling (804) 646-4646 or visiting:

<http://www.richmondgov.com/PublicUtilities/>

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# is there a master plan to remove the poor from richmond?

## CATHY'S

Continued from page 1

Sneed refused.

"Where are the people supposed to go?" she asked.

The city's news media began covering the situation, and public outrage grew. The camp is in the city's 6th District, and on Feb. 5 the council's representative, Ellen Robertson, called a public meeting at the Giles Center. She said she wanted to present the city's plan to deal with homelessness to people directly affected by the problem.

More than 200 people showed up, most of them not homeless themselves. They were members of the public outraged by the news that the city wanted the camp closed. They wanted assurances that the camp would be left alone until its residents could find permanent housing. The mood was serious, and insistent.

Over the past year homelessness in Richmond has risen 10 percent. It's been widely reported that the city has the second highest eviction rate in the entire country.

Meanwhile, Richmond Redevelopment & Housing Authority is planning to demolish all 4,000 public housing apartments and replace them with "mixed-income" housing, with no guarantee that the present residents will be able to move into the new units.

At the end of the one-hour meeting, Councilwoman Robertson was escorted out by security.

For now, the city says it has no plans to shut down the camp and is trying to work with the residents to help find them housing and other services.

As of Feb. 27, Rhonda said the camp was down to 81 tents.

"Some people have been housed, some have gone into shelters, some have just moved on," she said. "More people are asking for tents, but we tell them to look for the services. I'm giving the City an opportunity."

She said the city has set up a process to provide help and would have people at the Giles Center for the following four Wednesdays, from 9 a.m to 3 p.m.

"I will be there also, to try and encourage the people to get the help, especially the mental health that is needed," Ms. Sneed said. "They trust me, I can kind of talk with most of them."

So, for now, Cathy's Camp remains a community, and a visible reminder that Richmond has a severe housing crisis.

What will happen after the camp is gone remains an open question.

## An interview with DAVID HENDERSON

David Henderson was staying at Camp Cathy before there was a Camp Cathy.

"I was parked here before the camp started. I was sleeping in my car," he told the Defender on a chilly day in late February. He was standing in the parking lot of the Annie Giles Community Resource Center, formerly known as the Conrad Center, at 1400 Oliver Hill Way.

"I noticed the guy come by and he brought some tents," Mr. Henderson said. "So I went and helped him put em up, me and another guy named Al. We started with maybe five, 10 tents. Now we're up to maybe 100."

Mr. Henderson, 67, a retired HVAC worker, is one of the people responsible for the day-to-day running of the camp. He's not originally from Richmond, but says he has lived here about 15 years. Formerly homeless himself, he had found a place to stay a few weeks before, but still comes back to the camp every day to help out.

"So I don't understand why, y'know, there's a problem with it, because a lot of people need this. And the city is constantly trying to come with ideas how to remove it. And I cannot agree. Because I know the whole story, the peoples' story, I know everything they're talking about, and these are not bad people. But they are in trouble and they need help.

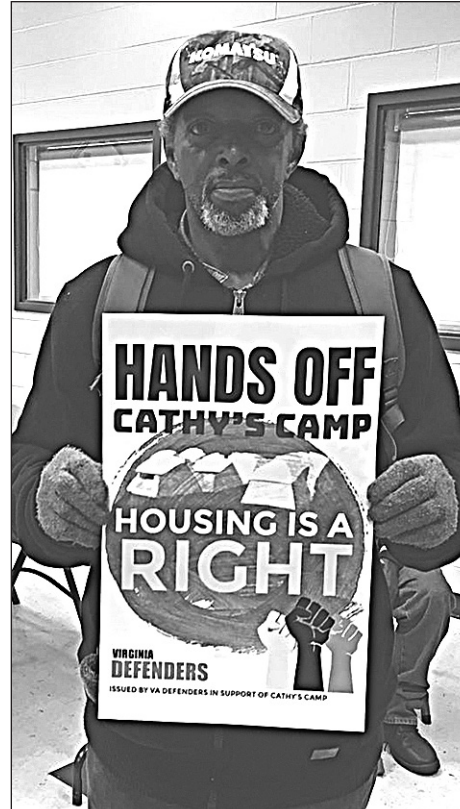
"The money is here," he said. "I can feel that the money is here. So why is it that you're going to disrupt these people, don't give them an answer, and yet you feel like you're doing the right thing? I don't understand it. You see what I'm saying? So you disrupt all these people, what are they supposed to do? Go back on the streets, lay up on the streets all over Richmond? That's better?"

Mr. Henderson said there are other encampments around the city, "but this one right here is full of people. It's stationery. Why uproot 'em? At all?"

"I don't know what the solution would be by moving the tents. The solution would be for the city to direct more money toward getting these people homes or places to live so that they don't have to be in the tents, and if they can't do that they should come with an idea that works. They got buildings all over Richmond. They could open buildings. They could make it more possible for people to have a more convenient way to get back on their feet."

The first tents went up last August, he said.

"And the people are still here. A large



Photos by Phil Wilayto

**A resident of Cathy's Camp holds a sign at City Councilwoman Ellen Robertson's Feb. 5 meeting on homelessness in Richmond.**

amount of them are still here since they first came up, so it's necessary for all of the people here, you see what I'm saying?

"And we keep the tent area nice, we keep it clean. We even clean up the parking lot and stuff so it doesn't be an eyesore, it's just tents. And whoever doesn't understand that needs to come out and spend a couple days with us, y'know, maybe go in a tent and stay a couple days and understand why it's better than layin' on the street or going in a building that's going to put you out the next morning.

"And it's safe," he said. "We don't have any problems here. There's no problems. We don't have any crimes going on. The police are not really coming by for any particular reason, y'know what I'm sayin, we're not really causing attention to ourselves in that way. So I don't understand the problem why it's such a pain in the city's butt other than you can see the tents which, hey, tent cities are all over the United States, so it's nothing new? It's visible. And visibility means there's a lot of people that need help.

"And that's the visible part I see. If you

## An interview with REGGIE GORDON

Reggie Gordon is Deputy Chief of the Administrative Office for Human Services, which oversees Social Services for the City of Richmond.

He's also the guy who sent Rhonda Sneed the letter telling her she had to shut down Cathy's Camp.

This is an interview he gave to the Defender on Feb. 27.

**GORDON:** Beginning in December, we began receiving information from security that a camp was set up, which was interesting, but it was on VCU land. When the camp went up, people who were sleeping in front of the shelter disappeared.

Then information came from our team and Catholic Charities [Editor: which runs the cold weather shelter for the city] that a man came out and exposed himself and the police arrested him. We heard there was some prostitution and some drug use. Then on Dec. 29, the team said a man had overdosed at the camp and had died. So the letter was to Rhonda, please take down the tent city, we're here to help, we have a whole system ready to help.

When I called Rhonda, she said I was lying. I called the chief of police, asked for the date and name of the person who died. He did, the time was 10:45 am, he died on the 29th.

So we said it's going to be more complicated, with all the people gravitating toward the camp, homeless, it would create a dangerous situation. And people in the shelter were complaining about activities in the parking lot.

**DEFENDER:** Where did you expect people to go?

**GORDON:** That's a really good question. In the letter I sent to Rhonda, I said my mother was talking to a woman who goes to a church nearby who was taking care of her grandson. The grandson said he was going to leave and go live in the tent city. She later found out the grandmother went down to the camp, she had a picture of her son, and the people said he was there but had left.

I don't know if the person who had died had left their home to go to the tent city. I don't know how many people may have done this.

want look at the tents and say it's an eyesore, well, there's people in those tents. We have to understand that each tent represents a person. You think a person is an eyesore? Because that's what you're saying.

"Because they need this. They don't have anywhere they can go."



## a master plan to remove the poor?



This is one of several “No Trespassing” signs the City of Richmond has erected at Cathy’s Camp. The property is actually owned by Virginia Commonwealth University, a state institution.

And a woman there now who is blind, and her payee [Editor: A person who handles someone else’s finances for them, like receiving a Social Security check] dropped her off at the tent city. That’s criminal to me that people who are getting \$1,500 or more are dropping people off. We tried to coax the blind woman to come to the shelter, but she said no.

**DEFENDER:** So what’s your solution to the situation?

**GORDON:** My suggestion is to go tent by tent, talk to the people there, ask them do they have housing, an income, find out who had no resources, people who have jobs, but don’t want to stay in a shelter. Since the camp opened, we have offered them 10 shelter beds. Some people, not all, say they choose to stay in the tents.

The shelter is a hypothermia overflow shelter. It opens when the temperature is below 40 degrees. In a lot of cities it’s 32, in Richmond it’s 40. When the hypothermia shelter was in the city’s old Public Safety building on North 9th Street, people would spend the night sitting

in chairs.

**DEFENDER:** What about the day, it was a Thursday, Jan. 30, I think, when the temperature was over 40 degrees, but it was raining, with winds at 56 miles an hour, the camp was flooded, tents had been blown down and the shelter wasn’t opened until 8:45 p.m.?

**GORDON:** The weather parameters for shelter are set by council. There are other conditions, they’re not pleasant, but the way it’s been designed is so no one freezes to death. On that day, since the governor declared a state of emergency, we were able to say it was a dangerous weather crisis, so we were able to open the shelter.

This has been going for on a long time. The city council, it has to do with the budget, here’s how much money there is to deal with the hypothermia shelter. And the city shelter isn’t the only option. There are also shelters run by Caritas, the Salvation Army, the Healing Place, Home Again.

As for the letter he sent to Ms. Sneed, Mr. Gordon said he felt there was a real danger at the camp, that he had been made aware of two instances that required first responders; that he had asked Ms. Sneed “to cease your program right away,” that the city had received information about “drug abuse, indecent exposure and prostitution” and that “we must work to resolve this chaotic situation.”

Mr. Gordon said the letter did not give a date by which the camp had to be shut down, and said the city had no plans to remove the tents by force.

**GORDON:** The letter said, OK, Rhonda, you have to shut down. But no date was ever set.”

He said the letter was dated Dec. 30.

That was two days after Blessing Warriors volunteer Cathy Davis, a key organizer of the camp, had died of congestive heart failure.

**GORDON:** What Rhonda has done, to her credit, she’s been able to collect them, and they are visible. ... The compassionate thing is to learn what the story is of everyone there, if they have a family member they can go to, who are the people who need medical care? What about the people who have SSI? Are they receiving money for housing? Do they just have the wrong payee, someone who is just taking their money?

You may have 85 individuals, with 85 different situations. Giving food is OK, but this requires an in-depth, one-on-one approach. And I don’t think Richmond has the determination to go all the way in.

## Behind the ‘Master Plan’

**H. Lewis Salomonsky** is a dependable donor to the political campaigns of many local politicians, including Mayor Levar Stoney. He’s also Shockoe Bottom’s biggest real estate owner. With his partner David White, he was behind the plan to build a baseball stadium there, in the heart of the former slave-trading district.

The project actually had nothing to do with baseball. The Bottom is in a flood plain, and Salomonsky wanted the stadium because it would come with a concourse, or road, over which emergency vehicles could access the area in case of a flood. That was a legal requirement for the 500 high-rent apartments he and White wanted to build around the stadium.

Salomonsky is also the guy who in 2003 was convicted of bribing then-City Council member Gwen Hedgepeth on a development-related issue. When he got out of prison, his civil rights were quickly restored by then-Gov. Bob McDonnell, allowing him to go back to “developing.” He later again became the subject of controversy when his questionable attempt to qualify for millions of dollars in historic tax abatements for one of his Shockoe Bottom projects caused City Council to change the rules for that program.

Salomonsky has a real passion for building high-rent apartments, and not much interest in low-income folks.

In fact, he’d really like it if they would leave the city altogether.

On May 10, 2013, WRIR’s “Open Source” host Chris Dovi asked the developer about his views on Richmond’s problems. This is how he answered:

**“Right now we have a ghetto of people making between 30,000 and 50,000 a year and we have a dearth of people making from 50,000 to 100,000 a year. And we need that higher level of education and employment to balance the city.”**

And how would Richmond get that “balance”?

He said it would come with a future **“metamorphosis of minorities moving to the counties for better schools, the empty nesters, both older and younger moving into the city, with no children and the decline in the school system, you will eventually see the city’s tax rate below that of the counties. And on that day the city will be, let’s say 25 to 40 years from now, infinitely wealthier than the counties, but we – it’s still a foot race to get there.”**

Get it? Richmond has too many people making less than \$50,000 a year.

The children of these “minorities” fill the public schools, which keeps property taxes high. Get rid of the “minorities” and you can shrink the school system and attract a lot more childless homeowners and high-end renters.

Now, Salomonsky didn’t say anything about actually *forcing* poor people to leave Richmond, he just thinks it would be a great idea. But forcing poor people out is exactly what is happening.

This is why we think the mayor doesn’t want to improve the schools. Why RRHA wants tear down 4,000 units of public housing. Why GTRC cut back bus routes in poor neighborhoods. Why the RPD can’t seem to solve the problem of violent street crime. Sooner or later, poor folks just can’t take it anymore and leave for the counties.

And as long as the misery is invisible, most people don’t have to think about it.

Which is why Cathy’s Camp is so important and why the City wants to shut it down: It has made the misery visible.

## our working lives



## In Md., D.C., Giant agreement near, but Safeway workers announce March 5 strike vote

By Phil Wilayto

In Virginia, the land of almost no unions, there's one supermarket chain whose workers are covered by a collective bargaining contract. The chain is Kroger, and the union is United Food & Commercial Workers (UFCW) Local 400.

The local covers workers in Virginia, Maryland and Washington, D.C. And in Maryland and D.C., there's been some hard contract bargaining.

The union reports that it has reached a tentative agreement with the Giant supermarket chain. A meeting is set for March 5 for union members to review the details and vote on the proposed contract.

But it's another story over at Safeway. That company has made an offer, but the union is recommending its members reject it and authorize a strike.

As with most labor contracts, the issues include wages, health care and scheduling, but this time the main sticking point is pensions.

The union is charging that Safeway is refusing to fully fund the pension fund, even though it says the company is legally bound to do so under its contract. The last negotiating session was on Feb. 25, and the union says no progress was made.

March 5 will also be the day for Safeway union members to meet and decide to accept or reject the company's latest offer, and whether to vote to strike.

"Given Safeway's refusal to uphold its commitments relating to our members' pension, we are continuing to prepare for a strike," the union stated in a Feb. 26 press release. "We are continuing to distribute letters to neighboring businesses at shopping centers to ask for their support and to inform them that picket lines will appear in front of Safeway stores."

The union has also held training sessions for members on how to organize the picket lines.

## Virginia is the Wild, Wild West for predatory lending

An Opinion Piece by the Rev. Rodney Hunter

Predatory lending is personal to me. I've pastored in the Richmond area for more than 30 years. Many members of my congregations and surrounding communities have found themselves locked into predatory loans that they struggle to repay. They become trapped in a debt cycle that harms them for years.

Although each story is different, the outcome is similar. Usually, a worker earning poverty wages has an unexpected expense – a tire needs replacing, a child goes to the emergency room, the person needs to make an unexpected trip to see family, or some other relatively normal life situation occurs. The person is living close to the edge financially and they don't have that extra \$300, \$500 or \$1,000 in savings, and their credit card is already maxed out.

People are embarrassed that they can't make ends meet. They see the advertisements about car title loans or payday loans and they apply – fully expecting to pay the money back quickly. Few of us read the complex and often confusing fine print in loan documents and so most folks don't realize how exorbitant the interest rates will be. And again, they fully expect to pay their loan off quickly.

But life happens. There are more expenses and it is hard to keep up with the payments, usually because people are already living close to the edge.

If people come to the church before they've taken out one of these predatory loans, we can usually find ways to assist them or refer them to better lending options. But more often, people only turn to the church for help once they have fallen victim to terribly abusive predatory loan companies and they see no other alternatives. They are mired in debt and locked in an abusive lending system.

The typical title loan borrower takes out a loan of \$1,116, but has to repay more than \$2,700. Sometimes people lose their cars, because Virginia has one of the highest vehicle title loan repossession rates in the nation. A typical line of credit loan of \$500, paid back over 12 months, will ultimately cost close to \$2,000.

Virginia is the Wild, Wild West for predatory lending. We allow lending companies to charge 299 percent, plus fees, on lines of

credit for smaller loans and unlimited interest on loans above \$2,500. And it doesn't have to be this way. Lenders charge Virginia residents three times more than the same companies charge people in other states. If lenders are regulated, then borrowers could get a loan with reasonable interest rates and the lender could still make a profit.

In the 2020 General Assembly, we must find ways to curtail this unscrupulous lending sector. With more than two dozen predatory lenders in the Richmond area, legislators who turn a blind eye to the problem are harming my congregants and countless others.

Thankfully, Sen. Mamie Locke (D-2nd) introduced a comprehensive predatory lending reform bill designed to cap interest rates, place limits on the percentage of one's paycheck that can be used for repayment and allow borrowers to spread payments out over time. These reasonable reforms would put more than \$100 million back in the pockets of Virginia families every year. Because most of Virginia's payday lenders are out-of-state companies, the dollars they take from Virginians don't help Virginia. If borrowers could keep those dollars, they would be spent in Virginia and would stimulate our economy.

I join many other faith leaders across Virginia who are working with advocates like the Virginia Poverty Law Center and the Virginia Interfaith Center for Public Policy to support legislation to regulate predatory lending in the General Assembly.

I call upon the members of the General Assembly to support this important legislation.

As a pastor, I am praying that our Commonwealth will do more to alleviate this unending cycle of debt that robs people of financial stability. Virginia needs to help my congregants and all Virginians address the predatory lending crisis. Now is the time.

**The Rev. Rodney Hunter** is pastor, Wesley Memorial United Methodist Church, Mechanicsville, and former co-director of the Virginia Interfaith Center for Public Policy

CONTACT: rmhpreach@aol.com 804-502-2335.

**In the event of a strike at SAFEWAY supermarkets in D.C. and Maryland, THE VIRGINIA DEFENDER urges all our readers to respect the union picket lines and shop elsewhere. "An Injury to One is an Injury to All!"**



# no hay fronteras en la lucha de los obreros

## Trump's DHS to send 'SWAT' teams to sanctuary cities

Defying the vicious, anti-immigrant offensive of the Trump administration, a total of 182 U.S. cities, counties and states have declared themselves "sanctuary cities," refusing to cooperate with federal immigration agents.

In response, the Department of Homeland Security is now planning to send Border Patrol "SWAT" teams to these jurisdictions to track down undocumented immigrants that benefit from policies forbidding local law enforcement from assisting the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency, ICE.

That assistance is usually in the form of a "detainer," which is a request by ICE for local law enforcement to hold an individual who has a deportation order and is already in local custody until ICE can pick them up for deportation. Sanctuary cities obstruct ICE's efforts by forbidding local police agencies from turning over undocumented immigrants in their custody to ICE.

DHS acting Secretary Chad Wolf, speaking on the online Full Court Press program, said Border Patrol Tactical Unit (BORTAC) teams would be deployed to a number of sanctuary cities across the country.

"The issue that we have with sanctuary cities," Wolf said, "is instead of having one officer going in a jail setting and picking up an illegal alien (sic) who has a final order

individual or a set of individuals.

"So, we need more than one or two officers to do that," he continued. "So, as sanctuary cities continue to pop up, we

Service detention facilities.

The teams are also meant to have a "global response capability," including taking part in "Operation Iraqi Freedom" - the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq - and "Operation Enduring Freedom," the official U.S. government name for the endless war on terrorism.

Among the "intense training" BORTAC teams receive are "operational planning, advanced weapon skills, defensive tactics and airmobile operations."

Great preparation for knocking on doors in immigrant neighborhoods.

Asked whether the DHS had any safety concerns about sending tactical teams out to do routine law enforcement, the DHS spokesperson said they had "no concerns."

Cities where BORTAC agents are expected to be deployed to include Atlanta, Boston, Chicago, Detroit, Houston, Los Angeles, Newark, New Orleans, New York and San Francisco, according to The New York Times, which cited two unnamed officials who are familiar with the operation.

Some of the cities are known as sanctuary cities, while others are barred from enforcing sanctuary laws because of state legislation.



of removal, sanctuary cities don't allow us to do that. They release that alien (sic) into the community and now we have to send a team of agents to go into the community, to knock on doors and try to locate an

continue to need more resources to go into these communities."

BORTAC teams were created in 1984 to serve as response units following rebellions at legacy Immigration and Naturalization

## COMMUNITY CALENDAR

### THE VIRGINIA DEFENDER

is published quarterly. Information for the Community Calendar must include the name of the event, the event sponsor, contact information, time, date, place and any admission charge.

To place a display ad with more information, or for events with an admission charge of more than \$10, please contact our advertising department at 804-644-5834 or e-mail DefendersFJE@hotmail.com.

Readers: Be sure to call ahead to make sure the information listed is still current.

Note: Listing of an event does not necessarily imply an endorsement by this newspaper.

### RICHMOND – ONGOING

#### RICHMOND BRANCH NAACP MEETING

– Membership meetings on the fourth Tuesday of each month. 7 pm, Club 533, 700 N. 3rd St. Information: 804-505-0083.

#### RICHMOND CRUSADE FOR VOTERS

– Membership meetings on the third Tuesday of each month. 7 pm. Information: rcfv1956@gmail.com

**RICHMOND FOOD NOT BOMBS** – Serving free meals to anyone who wants one. Sundays at 4 pm at Monroe Park. Volunteers always needed. For more information, see FNB's Facebook page.

**WMMT'S CALLS FROM HOME** – Every Monday, 7-9 pm, at WMMT Hot 88.7 FM. This radio station records messages for prisoners in Appalachian Kentucky and Virginia state prisons from 7-9 pm and then broadcasts the messages from 9-10 pm. Call 888-396-1208 to leave a message. Information: wmmmt.org/callsfromhome

### RICHMOND – EVENTS

Tues., March 3 - **SUPER TUESDAY** - Virginia and 13 other states and American Samoa hold primaries to select a Democratic Party candidate for president.

Sat., March 21 - **A FAMILY AFFAIR: TRACING FAMILY TIES THAT BIND** - with Viola Baskerville. 2 - 4:30 pm, Black History Museum & Cultural Center of Virginia, 122 W. Leigh St. Information: info@blackhistorymuseum.org or (804) 780-9093.

### BLACKSBURG – EVENTS

Fri., April 24 - **SYMPOSIUM ON MASS INCARCERATION, COMMUNITIES & FAMILIES** - Keynote speaker, Kemba Smith, founder of the Kemba Smith Foundation. Also Kimberly Jenkins-Snodgrass of IAHR, among

other panelists. 8 am - 5 pm, Inn at Virginia Tech & Skelton Conference Center. Free. Sponsored by a wide range of organizations, including the Coalition for Justice. Information: arditti@vt.edu.

### ROANOKE – EVENTS

Sat., April 25 - **2020 TEEN PEACE JAM** - 9 am - 4 pm, Unitarian Universalist Church. Hosted by the Plowshare Peace & Justice Center. Information: (540) 492-3582.

### NATIONAL – EVENTS

Mon., July 13 - **MASS MARCH ON THE DEMOCRATIC NATIONAL CONVENTION IN MILWAUKEE**

Mon., Aug. 24 - Thurs., Aug. 27 - **MASS PROTESTS AROUND THE REPUBLICAN NATIONAL CONVENTION IN CHARLOTTE**

## cops, courts &amp; prisons



Photo by Phil Wilayto

**Lynetta Thompson, a leading member of the Richmond VAPJN chapter, addresses the 3rd Annual Virginia Prison Justice Rally Jan. 20 at Capitol Square.**

## Prisoner-led network presses fight for Prison Justice

By Lynetta Thompson

The 3rd Annual Virginia Prison Justice Rally, sponsored by the Virginia Prison Justice Network, was held Jan. 11, 2020, on the grounds of the Virginia State Capitol. This year's rally was preceded the day before by a press conference, held in the briefing room of the General Assembly building and covered by TV stations CBS-6, ABC-8 and NBC-12, as well as several newspaper outlets.

The purpose of the press conference was to draw attention to the rally and highlight the different bills our partnering organization are advocating for to bring about prison justice reform, and to draw attention to the many injustices that exist within our prison laws and policies.

Addressing the media were representatives from the ACLU of Virginia; Resource, Information, Help for the Disadvantaged & Disenfranchised (RIHD); Rise for Youth; Bridging the Gap Virginia; Humanization Project; and the Coalition to End Solitary Confinement. In addition, statements were read from Askari Danso and Hassan Shabazz, longtime prisoners and co-founders of the VAPJN and Prisoner of Conscience.

The Jan. 11 rally gathered approximately

200 supporters. There was great diversity in the crowd, with ages ranging from young teens to those well into their 70s or more, with Muslims, Latinx, Blacks and whites showing support. The majority were family members of prisoners housed at the various correctional centers throughout Virginia.

Written statements from 12 different facilities were mailed to the Prison Justice Network. A total of 10 letters were read, each with a minute-and-a-half time frame, followed by an open mic for persons formerly incarcerated and family members who wanted to speak or read a letter from their loved one. These speakers were also given a minute and-a-half to speak.

Partnering advocacy organizations were given one minute each to speak on the bills they are presenting to the General Assembly to harness support for committee hearings on that proposed bill. In this way, a large number of people were able to address the crowd, with the emphasis on statements by prisoners, former prisoners and families of those incarcerated.

After the rally, about 30 people attended a meeting at Second Baptist Church in the nearby Randolph neighborhood to exchange more information and discuss lobbying at the General Assembly.

Founded in 2018, the Virginia Prison

## General Assembly tackles prison reform, but much left to do

Staff Report

The 2020 Virginia General Assembly, in which the Democrats hold a majority of seats in both the Senate and House of Delegates, has been promoting a number of bills that may bring a measure of justice to some of the state's 38,000 prisoners - and will likely disappoint many others.

Margaret Breslau, a co-founder of the Virginia Prison Justice Network, was quoted in The Washington Post as saying "she was accustomed to seeing prison reform bills summarily dismissed during years of Republican control in the state legislature, so she had big expectations when Democrats took over. Instead, she's seen small steps, but not the kind of progress she hoped for, she said. 'You don't just need reform here and there. You need to transform an entire system,' she said."

One big issue is parole, which in Virginia was abolished back in 1995. We are hearing that many prisoners were under the mistaken impression that parole would be brought back, for all prisoners, as soon as the GA opened on Jan. 8.

Justice Network is an all-volunteer, prisoner-led coalition working for justice in the Virginia prison and criminal justice systems. The VAPJN has a website (<https://vapjn.wordpress.com>) and a printed newsletter that reaches virtually all Virginia prison facilities. The network has sponsored local Speak-Outs for Prison Justice in Hampton, Richmond and Roanoke; supported prisoner-activists facing repression for their activism; and developed a coordinated plan to address legislation in the Virginia General Assembly.

We are always looking for volunteers to host local Speak-Outs or to help strengthen the network with your media or administrative skills.

For more information, contact the VAPJN: Phone/Text: 804-644-5834 - Email: [VirginiaPrisonjusticenetwork@gmail.com](mailto:VirginiaPrisonjusticenetwork@gmail.com).

**Lynetta Thompson** is an activist with Community Unity in Action and a leading member of the Richmond chapter of VAPJN.

Unfortunately, that's not true. In a complicated process, every bill must pass both the House and Senate and then be signed by the governor. Even then, new bills won't take effect until July 1.

There is no bill in the GA promoting parole for all prisoners. There are a few bills that would offer the possibility of parole for certain prisoners, but even those prisoners would still have to go before the Parole Board and argue their case. And they can always be turned down.

However, there is some hope for change. Several affiliates of the Virginia Prison Justice Network (VAPJN) have been following bills that deal with geriatric and juvenile parole; solitary confinement; expungement of records; and the so-called Fishback cases, in which juries were not told that parole had been abolished and so imposed long sentences under the mistaken impression that prisoners would not serve the entire sentence.

One of the best sources of information about the status of current bills in the GA is the Virginia Prison Justice Newsletter website: <https://vapjn.wordpress.com/2018-bills/> The network has information about bills dealing with the following areas: Fishback, parole, sentencing, solitary confinement, grand larceny threshold, fines/costs, prisoner health/well-being, juvenile justice, prison labor and the death penalty

Another excellent source is the Virginia Prison Justice Newsletter, published monthly by the (Blacksburg) Coalition for Justice. The newsletter is free to prisoners. To get on their mailing list, write: Coalition for Justice, PO Box 299, Blacksburg, VA 24063.

Another great source is Lillie "Ms. K" Branch Kennedy at Resource, Information, Help for the Disadvantaged & Disenfranchised, or R.I.H.D. at <https://rihd.org>.

We have reason to believe that there will be some real improvement in Virginia's criminal justice and prison systems, but there will also be many disappointments and much more work to be done.

Fortunately, we have more than begun.



# cops, courts & prisons

## New DOC rules limit number of visitors

In a new Department of Corrections policy, Virginia's roughly 38,000 state prisoners are now allowed no more than 10 people on their visitors lists.

The policy, described as a way to reduce drugs and other contraband from being smuggled into correctional facilities, went into effect this past Jan. 15.

Further, prisoners will only be able to change who is on their visitation list twice a year. Under the previous policy, they could change their visitation list at any time.

As of last September, between 4,000 and 5,000 prisoners had a visitor's list, according to secretary of public safety and homeland security Brian Moran. Of those, just 363 had more than 10 people on their list.

According to the Virginian Pilot newspaper, Moran said exceptions to the 10-visitor rule would be made for people with large families. Children, reporters and lawyers are excluded from the new limit.

According to the figures quoted in the above news item, fully 87 percent of all Virginia prisoners have no one on their visitors list.

## Riverside, again

Riverside Regional Jail was in the news again Feb. 21, when Fred Lavigne, 53, of Chesterfield County, was found unresponsive in his cell. According to jail spokeswoman Charlene R. Jones, suicide is suspected, but the state medical examiner's office will determine the official cause of death.

The week before, the jail's superintendent, superintendent, Carmen DeSadier, resigned after less than 10 months on the job.

According to a report by Channel 12 news, DeSadier left behind a more-than-100-page summary of concerns.

"My biggest concern is for the inmates, because their basic needs are not being met," the report quoted her as saying.

Riverside experienced two prisoner deaths in 2017, causing the state to put the jail on probation for three years.

## Free Jermaine!

Regular readers of the Defender should be familiar with the case of Jermaine Doss of Norfolk, who was sent to prison in 2000 in connection with the shooting death of Norfolk businessman James Webb.

Doss was charged with murder-for-hire, but the jury acquitted him of that charge. Instead, he was convicted of murder, which the judge instructed the jury was what is called a "lesser-included offense." Doss contends that the judge was mistaken, and makes a good legal argument to back up his position.

Further, the only evidence against Doss was the testimony of the admitted murderer, Nathaniel McGee. McGee has since stated in a letter to Doss, an affidavit and in court testimony that he lied about Jermaine's involvement because prosecutors had threatened him with the death penalty if he did not.

The police officer who arrested McGee and then pursued the case against Jermaine was the notorious former Norfolk detective Robert Glenn Ford, now serving a sentence of 12.5 years for extorting defendants and then lying about it to the FBI.

Jermaine's working-class parents, Willie Mae and Ray Doss, have spent the last 20 years hiring lawyers, attending hearings, circulating petitions, organizing rallies and press conferences and more in an effort to help free their son.

A petition for a governor's pardon has languished in the office of the Secretary of the Commonwealth for nearly six years, without a response. (On Nov. 28, the Richmond Times Dispatch ran a front-page, above-the-fold story about this titled "Family's hopes for pardon from Virginia governor languish for years.")



Photo courtesy the Doss family

**Jermaine Doss, in center, with his brother Jabbar and sister Felcia. The photo was taken at Sussex II State Prison in Waverly, Va.**

The latest attempt at judicial relief - a habeas corpus brief filed last fall in U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Virginia by attorney Bryan J. Jones of Charlottesville asking that Jermaine be released from prison - has yet to receive a response.

For this issue of the Defender, we asked Jermaine to tell us in his own words what he is feeling about what thousands of people now believe is a blatant miscarriage of justice.

This is his statement:

I just want to say it has been kind of frustrating know that I have been wrongfully convicted of not only a crime I absolutely had nothing to do with, or even having any knowledge of McGee's (the killer) intent. But what is upsetting to my family and me even more is the fact that I was acquitted of the crime (capital murder for hire) I stood charged with and was on trial for.

But due to a judge overreaching his judicial powers by giving an unlawful, uncharged additional crime (of first degree murder) that under Virginia law does NOT

constitute a lesser-included offense to the jury of my trial has made the jury verdict of acquittal meaningless. And this major Constitutional error not only is a black eye to the Virginia criminal justice system, it violated my Constitutional rights of due process, notification and a right to even present a defense that ALL American citizens have under the Constitution.

So to be having to wait almost six years for having my request for clemency granted by the governor for such a great injustice corrected sometimes becomes upsetting for my family, the thousands of supporters and me to understand.

And the fact that the killer has recanted multiple times, that he had lied and gave perjured testimony during my February 2000 jury trial due in part that he had been threatened by the Norfolk police detectives, and prosecutors. And the fact that the first judge overseeing my first trial had already ruled that McGee was not credible when testifying on behalf of the prosecution. And then to have the second judge overseeing my jury trial not believe McGee's trial testimony, which

is supported by the judge's actions to add an additional charge of a crime I was not charged with speaks volumes of itself!

But no one can explain why I remain in prison unlawfully to this day.

Restoring Parole [www.rhd.org](http://www.rhd.org) RIHD INC  
 Sentence Reform RIHD INC  
**RIHD INC**  
 Reentry Help Virginia  
 Mobile Justice Tour  
[www.rhd.org](http://www.rhd.org)  
 Information RIHD INC  
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Fighting  
 Mass  
 Incarceration  
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## Richmond Reproductive Freedom Project

Abortion support in VA

[rrfp.net](http://rrfp.net)



1-888-847-1593



# our sacred ground



Photo by Phil Wilayto

**More than 250 attendees listen as University of Washington history professor Dr. Midori Takagi speaks by Zoom on industrial slavery in pre-Civil War Richmond.**

## Hundreds attend Shockoe Bottom symposium, but Stoney still refuses to endorse Memorial Park

### Staff Report

In the largest event ever held about Shockoe Bottom, and one of the last events in Virginia to mark the 400th anniversary of the arrival of captive Africans, more than 250 people attended an all-day symposium Dec. 7 at the Library of Virginia that examined the history of Black people in the state, with an emphasis on the downtown Richmond district that once was the epicenter of the U.S. domestic slave trade.

“Truth & Conciliation in the 400th Year: A Shockoe Bottom Public History Symposium” was co-sponsored by the state library and the Sacred Ground Historical Reclamation Project of the Virginia Defenders for Freedom, Justice & Equality, which since 2002 has been working to reclaim and properly memorialize this sacred ground.

Presenters at the event included 22 scholars and advocates, 13 of whom hold doctorates in their fields, and three very talented cultural workers.

Among those who spoke were Elvatrice Belsches, an author, filmmaker and researcher for the film “Lincoln;” Dr. Michael Blakey, the anthropologist who led the examination of human remains found at New York City’s African Burial Ground; Dr. Christy Coleman, CEO of the American Civil War Museum in Richmond; Ana Edwards, chair of the Sacred Ground Project; Dr. Douglas Egerton, author

of “Gabriel’s Rebellion: The Virginia Slave Conspiracies of 1800 and 1802”; Dr. Gregg Kimball, director of Public Services and Outreach at the Library of Virginia; Dr. Midori Takagi, author of “Rearing Wolves to Our Own Destruction: Slavery in Richmond, Virginia, 1782-1865”; Dr. Shawn O. Utsey, chair of the Department of African American Studies at Virginia Commonwealth University; and Phil Wilayto, editor of The Virginia Defender newspaper. (A complete list of participants is posted at [www.dec7symposium.org](http://www.dec7symposium.org).)

Stirring presentations were made by cultural workers Valerie Davis, Nickey McMullen and Joseph Sharif Hakim Rogers.

The symposium also received greetings from Askari Danso and Hassan Shabazz, incarcerated co-founders of the Virginia Prison Justice Network, who traced the present system of mass incarceration to the slave jails of Shockoe Bottom.

Two of the most moving presentations came from Dr. Laurant Lee, professor of history at the University of Richmond, and Lenora McQueen, an independent researcher from San Antonio, Texas.

At times weeping, Lee described the trauma of enslaved children’s lives as victims of physical abuse and being torn away from mothers and fathers through sale. From the trafficking of Black children in the 19th century, she drew a line to the trafficking in

children from Richmond today.

McQueen read a letter written by the woman who owned her four-times-great grandmother, Kitty Cary, to her sister about Mrs. Cary’s last moments before her death, and then stated she was buried in the burial ground most associated with the Medical College of Virginia’s practice of body snatching for anatomical study. This practice was described in a later session as part of the presentation by Rhonda Keyes Pleasants about the East Marshall Street Well Project.

The symposium was intended to raise the collective understanding of the history of enslaved and free Black life, struggles, achievements and legacies from the city’s earliest years, centering on the role of Shockoe Bottom.

A late addition to the program was Richmond Mayor Levar Stoney, who had been invited to attend and declare his support for a nine-acre Shockoe Bottom Memorial Park, a community-generated proposal that has won overwhelming popular support. The proposed park would include Richmond’s African Burial Ground; the sites of many auction houses; and at least four slave jails, including the particularly notorious Devil’s Half-Acre; as well as several slave trader offices and supporting businesses.

The plan is opposed by local real estate developers who want the land for profit-making projects, and by corporate leaders who do not want Richmond’s public image associated with the city’s central role in the domestic slave trade.

Unfortunately, Mayor Stoney did not declare his support for the memorial park, instead opting to express general support for memorializing the local history. When challenged by a member of the audience to take a clear stand on the park proposal, the mayor first said he would discuss the matter “after the meeting” and then, when others also spoke out, fell back to asking how the park would be funded.

In fact, with support from the Sacred Ground Project, the nonprofit organization Preservation Virginia had received a \$75,000 grant from the National Trust for Historic Preservation to arrange for an economic study of the economic benefits of a memorial park to the city as a whole and its Black community in particular. The mayor’s office had been sent a copy of the study’s report. (See story on page 11.)

The overwhelming consensus of those attending the symposium was that it had been a tremendously important, enlightening and inspiring event that greatly increased public support for the memorial park proposal.

The Sacred Ground Project and its allies are now planning a community meeting to discuss several action proposals for the next steps in

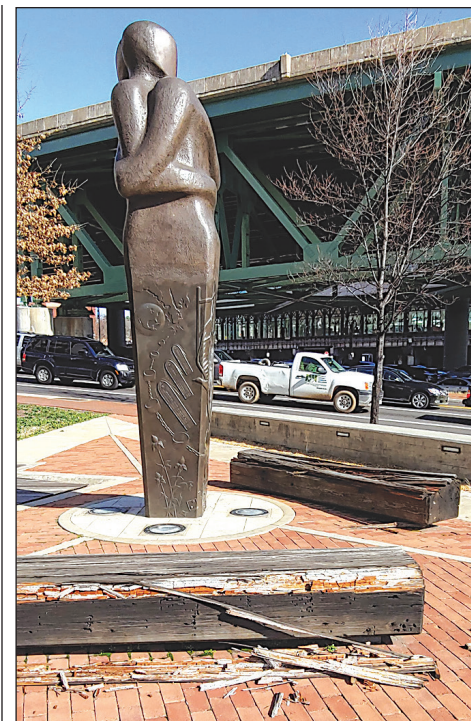


Photo by Phil Wilayto

**This apparent vandalism to the Reconciliation Statue site went unaddressed for more than a week, until the Defenders brought it to the City’s attention.**

## Statue damage ignored by both City & State

### By Phil Wilayto

A few days after the massive Jan. 20 gun rights rally at Capitol Square, I heard there had been some vandalism around the Reconciliation Statue, the anti-slavery memorial at the northwest corner of 15th and East Main streets in downtown Richmond.

**See STATUE on Page 11**

the ongoing struggle to reclaim and properly memorialize this sacred ground.

Videos of the symposium are posted at <https://www.facebook.com/watchparty/436702803897186>, [https://www.facebook.com/sacredgroundproject/videos/2764209483600532/?hc\\_location=ufi](https://www.facebook.com/sacredgroundproject/videos/2764209483600532/?hc_location=ufi) and [www.dec7symposium.org](http://www.dec7symposium.org).

For more information on the Shockoe Bottom struggle, visit [www.sacredgroundproject.net](http://www.sacredgroundproject.net) or contact the Sacred Ground Historical Reclamation Project at [DefendersFJE@hotmail.com](mailto:DefendersFJE@hotmail.com) or call or text 804.644.5834.



## our sacred ground

### STATUE Continued from page 10

This reportedly happened on the day of the rally. The damage was to two of the site's three wooden benches, which look like large railroad ties. It appeared that someone had repeatedly kicked or struck the benches, spreading debris on the ground.

A week later, not only had the damage not been repaired, but the debris was still lying next to the benches.

On Jan. 29, I called the Richmond Police Department to ask if an investigation had been opened. I was told the site was actually state property, and was referred to the Virginia Department of General Services.

When I called the DGS, I was told the site belonged to the city.

I then called 6th District Councilmember Ellen Robertson. The site used to be in her district, but the district lines were changed a few years ago and the site is now in the 7th.

Ms. Robertson said she was not aware of the situation, but said she would ask the Department of Public Works to look into it.

I also emailed Delegate Delores McQuinn, chair of the city's Slave Trail Commission, which put up the Reconciliation Statue in 2007, and Sharon North, communications person for the DPW, to alert them to the situation.

Neither responded to the emails.

That evening, Ana Edwards and I stopped by the site again, about 10 p.m. The damaged benches were still there, but the debris had been cleaned up.

As of Feb. 28 - five weeks after the initial damage - the two benches had still not been replaced or repaired.

So one problem is that, at least one week after the damage, no city or state department had cleaned up the site, repaired the damage or begun an investigation into the apparent vandalism. And then another month went by with no repairs.

But what seems worse is the fact that there has been no public outcry over the desecration of this site or the failure of city or state government to address it. The police told me they had received just one other call about the damage to the benches.

If Richmond is going to reclaim and properly memorialize its sacred sites, all of us will have to start paying a lot more attention.

## Study: Big economic benefits from Memorial Park

By Ana Edwards

A study of the economic ramifications of the community-generated proposal for a nine-acre Shockoe Bottom Memorial Park addresses some fundamental questions about the project:

How much would it cost, and how would it benefit the city, especially its Black community?

The study, "Shockoe Bottom Memorialization: Community and Economic Impacts," released this past October, was conducted by the VCU Center for Urban and Regional Analysis (CURA).

It's the first part of a two-part study titled "A Future for Shockoe: A vision for equitable development," a joint project between Preservation Virginia, the National Trust for Historic Preservation and the Sacred Ground Historical Reclamation Project. The two-part study was funded by a \$75,000 grant from the African American Cultural Heritage Action Fund of the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

The study assumes a landscaped park that includes an interpretive center or museum. The models used in the study indicate the following economic impact:

\* For a one-time \$8.7 million investment, memorial park visitor spending in the city would generate between \$3.7 and 7.7 million in total economic activity in Richmond **each year**, supporting 43 to 85 jobs.

\* For a one-time \$35.2 million investment, museum visitor spending on-site and in the city as a whole would generate a total of \$28.4 million in economic activity **each year**, supporting a total of 316 jobs.

\$8.7 million invested in the construction of the memorial park would result in an immediate, one-time economic impact of \$11.5 million. Of that, \$4.5 million would be labor costs in the form of 75 jobs and money spent on supplies, housing, meals, transportation, and entertainment in the Richmond area.

However, once built, the Memorial Park experience could result in tourism spending ranging from \$3.6 to \$7.6 million annually - spending on accommodations, parking, gas, meals, entertainment and retail shopping.

This means that an \$8.7 million investment over 20 years could result in anywhere from

## take 'em down - NOW!



**TAKE 'EM DOWN!** - More than 175 people rally Jan. 8 on the steps of the State Capitol to support legislation that would allow local governments to take down "war memorials," including those honoring slavery-defending Confederate figures. The rally was sponsored by Monumental Justice Virginia, a statewide coalition that includes the Defenders.

Photo by Phil Wilayto

\$72 to \$152 million in economic impact to the Richmond region. If you deduct 20 years of operating costs over that same period - \$9.7 million - the net gain would be \$62.3 to \$142.3 million.

And that's just the memorial park. The study's models confirm that the addition of a \$26.8 million museum or interpretive center would result in a short-term economic impact of \$35.2 million in the region. Once built, factoring in annual operations costs of \$3.1 million, the net benefit of total visitor spending annually would be \$25.2 million. Over 20 years: \$504 million.

The second part of the study deals with models for equitable economic redevelopment - in other words, how the memorial park could be paid for and how it could benefit the Black community. We'll cover that part in the next Defender.

The entire study can be found here:

[preservationvirginia.org/our-work/shockoe](http://preservationvirginia.org/our-work/shockoe)

The Community Proposal for a Shockoe Bottom Memorial Park is an economical investment in the present and future of our city, and a demonstration of the value of making visible what has been invisible: the truth of Richmond's history that can at long last put into context the mountains climbed in the on-going pursuit of a just society.

**Ana Edwards chairs the Defenders' Sacred Ground Historical Reclamation Project, which developed the community proposal for a nine-acre Shockoe Bottom Memorial Park.**

## New Yorker spotlights Shockoe Bottom

The Feb. 3 edition of The New Yorker (circulation 1.3 million) carried a major article titled "The Fight to Preserve African-American History" that includes the long struggle to reclaim Shockoe Bottom.

The piece highlights the work of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, which has played an important role in focusing national attention on the site of what was once the epicenter of the U.S. domestic slave trade.

After describing other sites where local governments have embraced preservation efforts, the article notes that:

"Not all sites move from the margins to the mainstream so smoothly. At Shockoe Bottom, the Defenders are still fighting to commemorate the legacy of Gabriel's rebellion and the memory of all the other African-Americans who were sold and buried there. ...

"After the Trust included Shockoe Bottom on its most-endangered-places list, the city proposed preserving a single small area, the so-called Devil's Half Acre, on which the slave trader Robert Lumpkin ran a jail.

"The Defenders are advocating for a nine-acre memorial park centered on the burial ground. They point to an economic study commissioned by the Trust, which found that an \$8.7-million investment in that park would generate \$11.5 million in jobs."

# In our opinion

## Cathy's Camp

Back in 1859, a guy named Charles Dickens wrote a book called "A Tale of Two Cities." That would make a good title for a book about Richmond.

On the one hand, we have RVA: young, hip, vibrant, artsy and doing pretty well for itself.

On the other, we have Richmond, where one out of every five people is poor, where misery swirls around people's ankles like a flooded campground and which, for the most part, is invisible.

And then something unusual happens, and what was invisible bursts into view.

The truly courageous women and men who have taken up residence in the tent city called Cathy's Camp have exposed the ugly truth that deliberate housing policies have resulted in a 10 percent increase in homelessness over the past year. And their refusal to be cowed by the City's eviction notice, along with the resulting mass outpouring of support from their housed sisters and brothers has created a political crisis for the City.

One frightening day in January, a terrible storm hit the Richmond area. Rain was pouring down in sheets, winds were more than 50 miles an hour and tents at Cathy's Camp were being blown away.

And yet the city's "hypothermia" shelter, just yards from the tent city, was locked shut.

Why? Because the temperature hadn't dropped below the magic number of 40 degrees.

(The trigger temp for opening the shelter used to be 32, until some years ago when the activist group Richmond Food Not Bombs raised hell and embarrassed the city into raising it to 40.)

We believe city officials when they say they care about homeless people. Some of them have spent their entire lives trying to help.

But we also believe that the wealthy 1 percent that runs this town would very much like the 21.9 percent who live in poverty to just leave. And they're willing to let the misery increase until it convinces the poor to do just that.

Please take the time to read all the stories in this issue of the Defender dealing with the question, "Is there a Master Plan to remove the poor from Richmond?" You may learn something about how this city really works.

And whether you are part of Richmond or RVA, a basic sense of humanity should inspire you to get involved.

Like the old Union slogan put it, "An Injury to One is an Injury to All!"

# Letters to the Editor

## Concerning gun control

Throughout the history of America, gun control laws have always been used against people of color to deny them their rights, as well as their ability to defend themselves and their communities from racist terror attacks. Both political parties have been equally guilty of this.

After the Civil War, it was Democratic politicians that passed Jim Crow era laws prohibiting gun ownership by Black Americans in Virginia as well as throughout the south.

And in 1968 it was Republican politicians in California who passed what was known as the Mulford Act which prohibited the legal open carry of firearms. It was done as a response to the Black Panther Party carrying firearms while they peacefully conducted community patrols in city neighborhoods to protect people from police harassment, brutality and murder. The act was signed into law by no other than then governor Ronald Reagan who went on to be elected president in 1980.

Now, our state Democratic politicians are simply following the agenda of presidential candidate Mike Bloomberg who donated generously to their political campaigns. The same Mike Bloomberg who funds elections and gun control organizations throughout America is the same person who had Black and Brown people targeted with the racist, unconstitutional policy of police harassment called "stop and frisk" while he was the mayor of New York City.

Virginia has one of the lowest crime rates in the country, and now these politicians want gun control laws passed while claiming that it's for public safety.

If these laws are passed, it will be people and communities of color that will be targeted first by law enforcement as we've always been. With the

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increase in domestic terrorism and the rapid growth of White supremacist groups, these laws will also put us in more danger by hindering our ability to protect ourselves if need be.

We are at a time in America's history where political instability due to demographic change is increasing. We don't need any more restrictions on our civil, constitutional, human rights to self-defense.

If these politicians really cared

about public safety they'd fix our mental health system and improve security at our government buildings especially our schools.

Rather than more unnecessary laws what we really need is actual justice. The many unresolved issues with our justice system must be addressed and fixed first.

Al Misa  
RICHMOND

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*Editor's Note: On Jan. 20, an estimated 22,000 gun rights advocates, many of them armed, massed in and around Capitol Square. Among them were members of white supremacist organizations.*

*Gov. Ralph Northam had declared a State of Emergency and banned all private firearms from the Capitol grounds. Most gun control advocates stayed away. And most Richmnders seemed to assume that all those opposing gun control were racist extremists.*

*The Virginia Defender circulated this Open Letter laying out our view of the issues. Someone posted it on the internal blog of the Virginia Citizens Defense League, the group that had called for the mobilization. We reprint it again here in hopes that it will reach more of the people for whom it was intended.*



Photo by Phil Wilayto

**An estimated 6,000 gun rights supporters rallied Jan. 20 at Virginia's Capitol Square, while another 16,000 mostly armed advocates milled around outside the grounds.**

## An Open Letter to Gun Rights Supporters

My name is Phil Wilayto, and I'm the editor of The Virginia Defender, a community newspaper based here in Richmond. We cover issues of interest to working-class folks from all communities.

I'm also a gun owner who's opposed to some of the laws being proposed in the 2020 General Assembly.

And I'm a Richmonder who's concerned about what might happen in my town on Monday.

The Virginia Citizens Defense League, the organization that has called for lobbying and a rally on Jan. 20th at Capitol Square, that says as many as 50,000 people may show up. They wanted to come armed - Virginia is an open-carry state, but Gov. Ralph Northam has declared a state of emergency and banned civilians from carrying firearms on the Capitol grounds.

Nobody knows just what to expect, and tensions are running high. Some normally open downtown businesses plan to close on Monday. Some non-gun lobbying groups have canceled their plans to come to Richmond. Virginia Commonwealth University is advising its more than 31,000 students to stay away from the downtown area. The VCU Health System's emergency room has tripled its staff to be prepared for possible mass casualties. And the cops are gearing up for trouble.

Some liberals view all gun rights activists as racist, right-wing yahoos, lumping them in with the extremist organizations that try to infiltrate the gun rights movement for recruitment

purposes. And the FBI arrests on Jan. 16 of three neo-Nazis who supposedly put together a homemade machine gun and bought more than 1,500 rounds of ammo as part of their plans to join the Richmond rally didn't do much to calm anyone's nerves. We've heard rumors that white supremacist organizations like the Proud Boys and League of the South are coming to Richmond. These kind of thugs are not your friends. Far from it.

I believe that people have a right to own guns: for sport, for hunting, for self-defense. I agree that guns don't kill people, people kill people - although they often do it with guns. And that's what scares non-gun owners.

In 2017, the most recent year for which there are figures, nearly 40,000 people died from gun-related injuries in this country. More than half the deaths were actually suicides, which raises the question if those people would have killed themselves if they didn't have a gun at hand.

Then there are the senseless killings by mostly young men in poor city communities. We lost 66 people to homicides last year here in Richmond. So there are good reasons why some people think there are too many guns in too many hands.

But it's also true that you could ban all the guns in this country and we would still have people killing people. The real reason for the mass shootings and the endless fatal individual

killings is that this society is addicted to violence.

It's true. We promote it in our movies, TV shows and video games. Our police departments are armed to the teeth with "surplus" military equipment. We make violence the basis of our foreign policy. This country was born in violence against indigenous and enslaved people, and that culture of violence has continued to define us as a country. Banning guns does nothing to address that.

What I'm really worried about is that, with the liberal Democrats acting like anyone who owns a gun is suspect, the average person who has a gun for legitimate reasons will be more open to right-wing arguments and possible recruitment. That would be a disaster for all working people.

You have to understand that, while you might see your movement as just against government overreach, it can come across as something else altogether. The idea that thousands - maybe tens of thousands - of armed, mostly white men are coming to Richmond on Monday is not a good "optic," as they say. It sets off deep historical memories.

I know the VCDL states on its website that, "We are not there to push any other agenda. Our total focus is on protecting our right to keep and bear (sic) arms. Period. This is not about flags, statues, history, etc. Just guns."

We appreciate that. People with very

different political views on other issues can still agree that people have the right to self-defense.

Of course, picking Jan. 20th as a gun rights lobby day is already a pretty bad optic. It's the federal holiday honoring the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., a man of peace brought down a gun. The VCDL might have picked a better day.

Plus, it means the schools are out, and there may be a lot of kids in the area.

And with Northam banning civilians from having guns on the Capitol grounds, that means thousands of armed people roaming the downtown area. And this includes some openly right-wing groups that have a whole

other agenda.

I'd like to point out here that the right to self-defense is not a "white" issue. The old Black Panther Party stood for the right to armed self-defense against police brutality. The Southern-based Deacons for Defense provided armed security for many civil rights events. And today people who live in crime-plagued neighborhoods have a legitimate interest in being able to protect themselves and their families. And if unreasonable gun laws are passed, they're likely to be enforced in the same racially discriminatory ways as other laws already are.

In other words, there are other possible allies out there. So there are all kinds of reasons to make sure your movement isn't hijacked by extremist groups promoting division and hatred.

I think most gun owners don't hold grudges against other people because of their race, creed or color. They just want to be able to protect themselves and their families, and they have a right to do this without unreasonable interference from the government.

But if this movement is going to be successful, it needs to consciously exclude those right-wing elements that would attempt to infiltrate this movement and subvert it for their own twisted agendas.

People who respect Adolf Hitler will never respect democracy. They're not our friends. In fact, they're our enemies. And they should have no place in a real gun-ownership movement.

So welcome to Richmond. Be safe, watch each others' backs and be sensitive to the people who live here. They'll be here long after you're gone.

**Phil Wilayto**

Editor, The Virginia Defender



## international &amp; antiwar news

# On Relations Between Iran & the United States

By Sanaz Ghodsi

Western media outlets sell a very particular narrative to the American people about Iran, and I'm sure that there are many people in the United States who truly believe that Iran is the rogue nation that it is painted to be.

By pushing this depiction of Iran, American politicians seek to convince the American people and the rest of the international community that the United States is right to threaten military intervention with Iran and to

impose 40 years of sanctions that have severely affected the livelihood of the Iranian people.

As an Iranian-American, I have been following the politics and the history of Iran for 10 years now, and have gone to Iran many times. I have studied the religious and political philosophies that contributed to the creation of the Islamic Republic and have gone to many lectures by Iranian academics. With this, I can say one thing for certain:

The Iranian people have an excellent memory. The animosity between Iran and the

United States goes back much farther than the 1979 Islamic Revolution.

Walk in the streets of Iran and ask the people living there of the legacy of the United States in Iran, and they will likely begin with Operation Ajax in 1953. That was the CIA-coordinated military coup that overthrew democratically elected Prime Minister Dr. Mohammad Mossadegh.

Why? Because he had just nationalized the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, taking back Iran's own oil resources from Great Britain, a close U.S. ally.

As a result, the brutal Mohammad Reza Pahlavi was reinstalled as Shah.

A long 26 years later, the Shah was overthrown and was granted asylum in the United States, where his son and family continue to live a life of luxury with money stolen from Iran. This provoked Iranian students to take over the U.S. embassy in Tehran, which was referred to as "a den of espionage," and compile and publish all the documents containing evidence of U.S. deceit and manipulation of Iran.

Not long after the 1979 Revolution, Iraq's Saddam Hussein attacked Iran, beginning an eight-year war that resulted in the deaths of hundreds of thousands on both sides. The chemical weapons Saddam used on Iran were sold to him by the United States, as the U.S. is notorious for profiting off of weapons sales to anyone who will buy them.

The war is deeply felt in Iran even to this day. Visiting my father's high school in Iran, I was able to see a mural of his classmates who were martyred during the war.

Iranians also remember the United States shooting down an Iranian airplane, Iran Air Flight 655 in 1988, killing all 290 passengers, who were mostly women and children. Then Vice President George H.W. Bush responded to the downing of the aircraft by saying, "I will never apologize for the United States - I don't care what the facts are ... I'm not an apologize-for-America kind of guy."

I also want to explain to readers the significance of economic sanctions. Iran has been heavily sanctioned by the United States for more than 40 years. Sanctions have crippled the Iranian economy

to the point of mass inflation.

Under sanctions, Iran was not allowed to receive any humanitarian aid when it suffered two earthquakes in 2017 in Kermanshah. Iran also cannot import lifesaving chemotherapy drugs to treat cancer patients. And since Iran cannot enrich its own oil under sanctions, the country has resorted to purchasing low-quality fuel from the black market. The resulting exhaust fills the air, causing increased rates of lung cancer. Iran cannot have technologies to purify the pollution produced by its factories, contributing to the pollution.

I encourage the American people to educate themselves, not only on the legacy of the United States in Iran and the rest of the region, but in the rest of the world. Regime-change wars and imperialism by the United States have also affected Latin American, African, South Asian and East Asian nations as well.

Anytime a nation wants to rid itself of the imperialism of the United States, it conveniently needs a regime-change war headed by Western powers that will install a puppet dictator who will appease Western corporations and oil executives.

Iran is one of many countries that have suffered severely due to Western greed. However, not all have successfully resisted attempts of foreign infiltration like Iran has. I'm sure further escalations will occur in the future, and Iran will continue to stand strong.

Iran was one of the world's first countries and contains a civilization and history that goes back millennia. Decades of hostility by the United States are but a thorn on the bottom of the shoe of Iran and I know that Iran will prevail, no matter what.

**Sanaz Ghodsi** is a local Iranian American who follows the interests of her people and family in Iran.



Photo by Phil Wilayto

Organizers of the "Al Helm: Martin Luther King in Palestine" film showing, from left: Dr. Neal Holmes, Imam Michael Abdul-Hakim, Myra Salaam, Nancy Wein, Adeeb Abed and Tangles Raooof. The event was held at Masjid Bilal in Richmond's East End.

## Solidarity with Palestine

It was a packed house Feb. 9 for a film showing of "Al Helm: Martin Luther King in Palestine" at the Masjid Bilal in Richmond's East End.

The film, released in 2013, tells of the experiences of a U.S. Black gospel choir that provided the chorus for a Palestinian play on the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. on tour in the West Bank.

The film showing was co-sponsored by Masjid Bilal, Wesley Memorial United Methodist Church, Richmonders for Peace in Israel and Palestine, the Arab American Association of Central Virginia and Voices from the Holy Land.

The film can be viewed online at: <https://vimeo.com/ondemand/alhelm>



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## international &amp; antiwar news



Photo by Phil Wilayto

Dozens of mostly young people take to the streets in Richmond as part of an "Global Day of Action: No War on Iran!"



Photo courtesy

Activists in downtown Norfolk hold lightboards spelling out "#NO WAR" and "PEACE."

## Threat of war on Iran sparks protests, new coalitions across Virginia

### Staff Report

On Jan. 3, a U.S. drone strike near Baghdad International Airport ordered by President Donald Trump targeted and killed Iranian Gen. Qasem Soleimani of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). Soleimani was commander of the elite Quds Force and was considered the second most powerful person in Iran next to Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. Gen. Soleimani reportedly was in Iraq to bring the government a proposal to reduce tensions with U.S.-backed Saudi Arabia.

The reaction across the world was immediate. Protests broke out in many countries, especially in Iraq and Iran. The world held its breath to see how Iran would react, and if the confrontation would escalate into all-out war. Antiwar organizations called for a Global Day of Action on Jan. 25 to demand "No War on Iran!" Activists responded in more than 200 U.S. cities and in 20 other countries.

Here in Virginia, protests were held in Blacksburg, Harrisonburg, Norfolk and Richmond. Members of the Plowshare Peace Center in Roanoke travelled to Washington, D.C., to join a regional march and rally. At the Defenders' suggestion, solidarity greetings were exchanged among the organizers and read at the protests.

In Richmond, more than 50 people turned out to demand "No War on Iran," "Stop the Endless Wars" and "Money for Jobs, Education & People's Needs, not War!" Starting with a

rally outside the federal courthouse on East Broad Street, the overwhelmingly young crowd marched a mile to Monroe Park, a traditional site of protests, where an open-mic Speak-Out was held.

The Richmond action was organized by local chapters of the Democratic Socialists of America, Food Not Bombs and the Industrial Workers of the World and the Virginia Defenders for Freedom, Justice & Equality.

Earlier in the month, Food Not Bombs held a march of about 50 people near the State Capitol. Another action was held by unaffiliated activists on Jan. 11.

In Norfolk, a heavily militarized area and home to the largest Naval base in the world, protesters gathered at Town Point Park and marched through downtown. That action was called by Disrupt The Elite Virginia, Mothers Out Front Hampton Roads, Tidewater DSA, Tidewater Food Not Bombs and the Tidewater Solidarity Collective.

In both cities, organizers decided to form new coalitions to continue antiwar work in their areas.

The Richmond Coalition for Peace, Justice, and Jobs, which includes the four groups that protested on Jan. 25, is based on five principles: opposition to all U.S. wars and interventions; respect for the right of self-determination for oppressed peoples; drawing the connections between international and domestic issues; a democratic decision-making

process; and political independence from both the Democratic and Republican parties.

The coalition is now developing its leadership and decision-making structure and is planning to hold a public forum on antiwar and domestic issues in late March.

In Norfolk, the Hampton Roads Peace & Planet Coalition includes the Hampton Roads Green Party, Norfolk Catholic Worker, Tidewater DSA and Young DSA at Old Dominion University.

That coalition's unifying principles are similar to those of Richmond's: opposition to all U.S. wars and interventions; respect for the right to self-determination of oppressed peoples; and political independence from "parties of war and fossil fuels." The Hampton Roads coalition has a specific position opposing "environmental destruction" and endorses a strategy of "nonviolent opposition."

The Virginia coalitions and antiwar organizations can be reached through their pages on Facebook:

**Richmond Coalition for Peace, Justice, and Jobs**

**Hampton Roads Peace & Planet Coalition**

**Plowshare Peace Center**

**Shenandoah Valley Antiwar Coalition**

**Blacksburg:** (This action was organized by individuals; we have not yet received permission to publicize their names.)



At the Iranian Interests Section, from left: Virginia Defender Editor Phil Wilayto, Interests Section Director Mehdi Atefat and Section staff member Manouchehr Jafarzadeh.

## At an Iranian celebration of its Revolution

By Phil Wilayto

On Feb. 7, I had the privilege of attending a reception at the Interests Section of the Islamic Republic of Iran in Washington, D.C. an event held to celebrate the 41st anniversary of the 1979 revolution. The U.S. and Iran do not have diplomatic relations, so the Interests Section serves some of the functions of an embassy for Iran in this country.

I have attended several such events in the past, but this was the first time there was a hostile protest outside, creating a gauntlet that guests had to walk through to get into the building.

Although the placards spoke of "freedom" and "democracy," the protest was organized by the People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran, or Mojahedin-e Khalq (MEK). This is a reactionary paramilitary organization that allied with Iraq during that country's eight-year war against Iran and still carries out armed attacks within Iran.

It was only recently removed from the U.S. State Department's list of terrorist organizations, due in part to the MEK's practice of giving hefty "honorariums" for speaking at its events to influential U.S. figures including Rudolph Giuliani, John Bolton, Joe Lieberman and Howard Dean.

The highlight of the evening was an address by the section's director, Mehdi Atefat. While he spoke, you could hear the protesters yelling outside.



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