

*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.*

# THE VIRGINIA DEFENDER

FREE

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

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**Winter 2022**

## ***'We demand justice for Va. prisoners!'***

**By Phil Wilayto**

There's a quote at the bottom of this page by the famous Russian novelist Dostoevski: "The degree of civilization in a society can be judged by entering its prisons."

More people should visit Virginia's prisons and jails.

Virginia has seen mentally ill people held in solitary confinement for years on end. Racist guards taunting Black prisoners while spitting in their food. Attack dogs being sicced on Muslim prisoners because they were saying their prayers. Rapes. Beatings. Deaths by medical neglect.

There are dozens of organizations working to bring some measure of justice to Virginia's prisons. Many were started by former prisoners determined to help those they left behind.

And every January since 2018, just as the General Assembly opens its annual session, the Virginia Prison Justice Network holds a rally in Richmond to bring public attention to these issues.

This Jan. 22, despite the pandemic and dire weather forecasts, nearly 90 people turned out for a rally at Richmond's Monroe Park. They stood together in the

snow and listened to advocates, almost all of them former prisoners or relatives of prisoners.

And after they spoke, we read statements from 13 women and men confined in the state's prisons. On that day, prisoners spoke for themselves - and they were heard, at the rally and later on the news.

This year the rally focused on restoring parole,

make real change today and preparing for the day tomorrow when we can not only end injustice inside the walls, but tear down those walls altogether.

If you aren't already involved with the Virginia Prison Justice Network, see the back page of this Defender, get in touch and let's work together to make some real change!

which was ended in Virginia in 1995; banning solitary confinement, which the state says it has abolished but which it still practices under other names; establishing independent outside oversight of the prisons and jails; and creating a system for courts to take a second look at long prison sentences.

All these issues and more are being addressed by bills in the General Assembly. Some are good, some not so good, and some may not make it to the governor's desk in any form.

What's important is that we continue to build the movement for Prison Justice. The strength of the VAPJN is the unity that is being built between those inside and outside, working together to



Photo by Ana Edwards

**The lead banner at the 5th Annual Virginia Prison Justice Rally proclaims the four main demands of this year's gathering, held in Richmond's Monroe Park. The rally was the largest of several mobilizations around this year's General Assembly.**

**SEE STORY ON PAGES 8-9.**

"The degree of civilization in a society can be judged by entering its prisons." - Fyodor Dostoevsky, Russian author & novelist - Nov. 11, 1821 - Feb. 9, 1881

## regional &amp; national news

## New national coalition supports opening COINTELPRO files

A newly formed coalition of more than 30 activists and advocacy groups is promoting a federal bill that would force the FBI to allow full disclosure of COINTELPRO, the FBI's program that targeted civil rights, antiwar and leftist organizations with the aim of disrupting their activities, no matter how legal and Constitutionally protected they might be.

The bill, titled the HR COINTELPRO Full Disclosure Act, was introduced in Congress last May by Rep. Bobby Rush, Democrat from Illinois, to, according to the coalition, "require disclosure of the FBI's COINTELPRO program which targeted organizations such as the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the anti-Vietnam War movement, and individuals such as Martin Luther King, Jr., Imam Jamil Al-Amin aka H. Rap Brown, Elijah Muhammad, Max Stanford, Malcolm X, Abbey Hoffman."

Rep. Rush was a co-founder of the Illinois chapter of the Black Panther Party, a leading target of the FBI program.

As of December 31, the bill had 24 co-sponsors.

According to the Encyclopedia Britannica, COINTELPRO, short for Counterintelligence Program, was "conducted by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) from 1956 to 1971 to discredit and neutralize organizations considered subversive to U.S. political stability.

It was covert and often used extralegal means to criminalize various forms of political struggle and derail several social movements, such as those for civil rights and Puerto Rican independence."

In 1975, the program was investigated by the U.S. Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities, known as the "Church Committee" for its chairman, Sen. Frank Church of Idaho. However, millions of pages of documents remain unreleased, and many released documents are heavily censored.

For now, the coalition is concentrating on encouraging more members of Congress to sign onto the bill. Later, delegations will meet with representatives.

As of Feb. 1, coalition members included former political prisoner and Black Panther Dhoruba bin Wahad; Black Workers For Justice; Black Panther Party Alumni; Imam Jamil Action Network; Jericho Movement; Muslims for Social Justice; National Alliance Against Racism and Political Repression; and Phil Wilayto, Editor, The Virginia Defender.

For more information: Hena Zuberi or Ruqayya Ali at [ruqayya@justiceforall.org](mailto:ruqayya@justiceforall.org) or Bilal Sunni-Ali or Shafeah M'Balia at **883-999-IJAN**.

## Malcolm X's prison cell now the first of 1,000 'Freedom Libraries'

The prison cell where Malcolm X was confined back in the 1940s has been transformed into the first of 1,000 projected "Freedom Libraries," thanks to the vision and hard work of another former-prisoner-turned-activist, Reginald Dwayne Betts.

Betts, now an attorney and poet who last September won a MacArthur "genius" grant worth \$625,000, was jailed after being tried as an adult for a carjacking he committed at the age of 16. He spent the next nine years in prison, "writing every day, reading every day, imagining that words would give me the freedom to understand what got me in prison," because "when you're trapped in a cell, literally, words are your only lifeline."

Betts and his charity, Freedom Reads, with support from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, have a goal of setting up 1,000 micro-libraries in prisons across the country.

The first Freedom Library opened in December at the Massachusetts Correctional Institution at Norfolk, or MCI-Norfolk, a medium-security prison in Norfolk, Mass. The library is located in the cell that Malcolm X is believed to have occupied after being convicted of robbery before he became political.

At that time, the prison was known as the Norfolk Prison Colony and had a reputation for sponsoring educational programs with ties to local area colleges, including Harvard, Emerson, and Boston University.

While there, Malcom X, future world-famous revolutionary intellectual and organizer, spent his time reading, studying the dictionary and participating in the Norfolk Prison Debating Society, which he called his "baptism into public speaking."

According to a story in the Dec. 7 (UK) Guardian, the idea to locate the library in Malcolm X's cell actually came from the prison's superintendent, Nelson Alves.

"I've worked in prisons 25 years," Alves said, "and I've never seen anything beautiful here."

And so Betts set out to build something beautiful.

"When you hear Malcolm X talk about it," Betts said, "and understand it's a prison in the 40s - he talks about it as a place where people valued education, where people valued knowledge.

"He got a chance to be a leader of an intellectual community. So a project like this, what better place to put it to begin?"

## Do you want to fight for Freedom, Justice & Equality? JOIN THE DEFENDERS!

### VIRGINIA DEFENDERS for Freedom, Justice & Equality

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[odessasolidaritycampaign.org](http://odessasolidaritycampaign.org)

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

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 these 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 now sponsor the Virginia Defender quarterly newspaper and the Sacred Ground Historical Reclamation Project and are affiliated with the Virginia Prison Justice Network, which we co-founded.

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.

### 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.



## community news

## The triple whammy: Pandemic, poverty & public policy

By Delaney Jooris

The COVID-19 pandemic has shed new light on Richmond's housing crisis even as it has exacerbated it.

Despite both the continuing spread of the virus and the persistence of housing issues, temporary protections meant to alleviate the pandemic's effects are coming to an end. If delays in terminating these protections do not culminate in structural change to address root causes, Richmonders will continue to suffer the consequences - and those consequences won't be evenly distributed. The city's most vulnerable will feel the harshest effects and Black and poor Richmonders will continue to be driven out of the city limits.

As costs of living continue to rise, opportunities to escape the rental cycle through home ownership are becoming few and far between, especially for Black Virginians.

A recent statewide housing study by HousingForward Virginia found that "homeowners in the Commonwealth are older, more affluent, and more white" compared to the average Virginian. Close to three out of four white Virginians are homeowners, compared to less than half of Black Virginians. The study attributes this trend to a variety of factors, including a dwindling supply of low-price "starter homes" and historically racist housing policies.

Richmonders that do achieve home ownership will be burdened with increasing taxes. Despite skyrocketing property values leading homeowners to owe more in taxes, Richmond City Council in November voted down a 6.5 cent rollback. The effects will be felt most by low-income and Black and Brown Richmonders, who are disproportionately cost-burdened homeowners.

Meanwhile, renters in the Greater Rich-

mond area continue to face major challenges.

In Chesterfield County, those who need rent relief may be left without it. The county will use an additional \$3.8 million in rent relief funds to attempt to cover a 3,900-household backlog from last fall and is no longer accepting new applications. Although rent relief is still widely available through the state, Chesterfield residents cannot apply, as the county opted to receive its own federal funding for rent relief.

Residents of Richmond's public housing particularly are facing a crisis. Redevelopment plans continue to be approved without the promise of a one-to-one replacement effort, meaning that demolished units can be replaced with more expensive and profitable ones.

In addition to this, the developer responsible for renovating two former public housing communities has displaced families and violated fair housing laws, according to a federal complaint made by the Legal Aid Justice Center. The complaint alleges that The Michaels Organization's actions had a disparate impact on single Black mothers living with their children.

One resident, Shaneqa Thomas, reports that she was displaced from her apartment for 69 days. She and her two children were moved to a hotel room without a fully functional kitchen and only one bed. The complaint seeks to bar The Michaels Organization, which purchased the former public housing properties from RRHA last year, from participating in other redevelopment projects.

In January, 1,100 residents in Richmond's public housing were facing possible eviction. After pressure from advocates, the Housing Authority's Board of Commissioners directed staff to delay taking legal action against residents - but households that do not enter into payment plans or receive rent relief may face eviction proceedings as early

as mid-February.

It's likely that many of these households include children. Federal data reports that three out of five RRHA households are headed by women with children. According to RRHA, tenants cited virtual schooling as one reason for their inability to pay rent. Without in-person schooling, mothers must find accessible and affordable childcare. Those who can't are left with an impossible decision: either leave the kids home alone and go to work, or stay home and possibly lose their jobs.

Housing instability profoundly affects children, and is most evident in academic outcomes. According to the RVA Eviction Lab, "Majority-minority schools and those with high percentages of chronic absences are also located in high eviction rate neighborhoods."

Although RVA Eviction Lab's third quarter report for 2021 shows a decrease in eviction filings in Richmond from the second quarter, projected filings match or slightly exceed the second quarter findings. In its report, it is noted that although the number of evictions in the state remains relatively low compared to pre-pandemic levels, "eviction filings and judgements have steadily increased since Spring of 2021."

The report attributes the slow growth in eviction rates to advocates working to prevent evictions and a state law requiring landlords to apply for rent relief before evicting tenants for non-payment.

A once majority-Black city, Richmond is steadily becoming both whiter and wealthier. If policies enacted to alleviate conditions of the housing crisis during the pandemic are not made permanent, the city could see a mass eviction of its most vulnerable populations - as soon as June, when the state eviction moratorium is set to expire.

This would only strengthen ongoing demographic trends in the city, where Black, Brown and impoverished people are pushed out of the city limits and into the surrounding counties.

## Southwood Apartments under scrutiny

By Delaney Jooris

A Richmond Times-Dispatch investigation has found that residents of the Southwood Apartments complex on Richmond's South Side have been living in unsafe and uninhabitable conditions. The management of the complex has blamed these conditions on the residents' so-called "poor housekeeping."

With 1,296 units, the 62-year-old complex is Richmond's largest Latino/a neighborhood.

In a survey of 100 Southwood residents conducted by the advocacy nonprofit organization New Virginia Majority, more than half of respondents reported having rodents and roaches in their apartments. About 60 percent said there was mold and reported that ceilings, doors, floors or walls were in bad condition.

Melany Sura, a Southwood resident, reports spending \$200 a month on cleaning supplies she uses to keep her apartment free of mold.

After visiting the complex, City inspectors labeled two units uninhabitable. Residents had to be relocated until management addressed the violations.

Many residents report that Southwood's management is habitually unresponsive to service requests. However, Carol Steele, the complex's property manager, tells a different story. In her response to inquiries from the Times-Dispatch, Steele said the residents of Southwood themselves are responsible for the poor living conditions.

"A vast majority of our residents are very easy to work with and have little to no complaints," she wrote. "We do have some residents from third-world countries that have poor housekeeping issues and have brought the pest control issues with them upon moving into their apartment."

In alignment with Steele's logic, Southwood's management will be offering weekly "Housekeeping 101" classes to residents and providing them with free cleaning supplies.

In January, the office of Virginia Attorney General Mark Herring launched a housing discrimination investigation of Southwood's management. However, after newly-elected AG Jason S. Miyares took over the office, he ordered the firing of 30 employees, including 17 attorneys, one of whom was Helen Hardimann, the lawyer investigating Southwood's conditions.

A spokesperson for Miyares said the investigation would nevertheless continue.



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## community news

## New Black-owned bookstore opens in Shockoe Slip

By Ana Edwards

On Saturday, Feb. 5, The Book Bar, a new Black-owned, woman-owned bookstore, will open in Richmond's Shockoe Slip at 1311 E. Main St.

Book Bar owner Krystle Dandridge is a New Jersey-born, Henrico-based therapist and lover of fantasy books. She'd always dreamed of owning a bookstore, but it took the pandemic shutdown to give her the time to figure out that she longed for "a bookstore that centered authors that look like me and characters I could relate to."

The Book Bar specializes in BIPOC authors and subjects and features a subscription book club, comfy seating, an outlet for local vendors and a selection of wines for tasting and take-home.

Launched as an online shop in 2021, Dandridge already has a following. Her vision for the space is "to see culture, feel culture, and experience community" the minute you walk in.

According to the African American Literature Book Club ([www.aalbc.com](http://www.aalbc.com)), which maintains an up-to-date online database, there are only five other Black-owned bookstores in Virginia: in Alexandria, Martinsville, Norfolk, Virginia Beach and Chesapeake. The last Black-owned bookstore in Richmond, One Force Books, closed in the early 2000s.

[www.rvabookbar.com](http://www.rvabookbar.com)  
[www.bookshop.org/rvabookbar](http://www.bookshop.org/rvabookbar)

### news u can use

#### FREE HOME COVID TESTS -

The Postal Service is delivering one shipment of four COVID tests per residential address. Enter your name, address and email at [www.usps.com/covidtest](http://www.usps.com/covidtest) to request a shipment.

**TESTING THE JAMES** - Richmond has the James River, and the river has a problem: the city's ancient sewer system frequently floods, sending raw sewage into the James, making it unsafe for people. To help navigate this problem, the Department of Public Utilities has created a map that shows whether any pipes have overflowed and which parts of the river are unsafe: **BLU-X CSO Map Notification Web Application**

## Omari's case resolved; no time

By Phil Wilayto

A guilty plea, but no jail time.

That's how things worked out for Richmond community organizer Omari Al-Qadafi, who was sentenced Jan. 18 to 30 days in jail on two misdemeanor counts, but with all time suspended. The 41-year-old was also placed on probation.

The charges resulted from an anti-eviction protest held July 1, 2020, outside the John Marshall Courts Building in downtown Richmond. About 75 people had gathered to demand the courts suspend evictions during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Toward the end of the protest, Al-Qadafi, a housing rights advocate with the Legal Aid Justice Center, entered the courthouse, intending, he said, to sit in on eviction hearings scheduled that day.

Within minutes, he was pinned to the lobby floor by several sheriff's deputies, prompting the crowd outside to bang on the lobby windows and call for his release. A plate glass window was shattered.

Al-Qadafi, who is Black, was charged with two felony counts of assault and battery of a law enforcement officer and two misdemeanor counts of trespassing and obstruction. Irena Schunn, a white woman arrested with Al-Qadafi, received only the lesser charges. According to online records, Schunn's charges were later dismissed.

In October, Al-Qadafi pleaded guilty to the misdemeanor charges and was sentenced to 180 days in jail, with at least 120 days suspended. He appealed that sentence, resulting in the Jan. 18 hearing.

In handing down the sentence, Circuit Court Judge David F. Pugh said he was impressed with the many letters of support people had written for Al-Qadafi. Pugh, a retired Newport News Circuit Court judge, had been assigned to hear the case after Richmond's Circuit Court judges recused themselves.

In 2016, the research organizations Eviction Lab listed Richmond as having the second-highest rate of evictions among U.S. cities. Also making the Top Ten list were Hampton (#3), Newport News (#4), Norfolk (#6) and Chesapeake (#10).

## Defenders in the News

**Richmond Free Press** - In a Jan. 13 story about a City Council meeting, Joseph Rogers was quoted concerning the Confederate statues on Monument Avenue. Ana Edwards and Phil Wilayto were quoted raising concerns about how money is being spent on memorializing Shockoe Bottom. The paper's Dec. 16 edition ran a letter from Phil objecting to the way Gov. Northam had ordered the removal of Richmond's Lee pedestal without consulting the community.

**Richmond Times-Dispatch** - Joseph was featured in a Dec. 3 column by Michael Paul Williams concerning his new position as the first manager of partnerships and community engagement at the Virginia Museum of History and Culture as that once pro-Confederate institution reshapes itself into a more inclusive teller of the Virginia story.

**The Washington Post** - Ana was quoted in a Dec. 11 story about the taking down of the Lee statue in Richmond.

**Newsweek** - Ana was quoted in a Dec. 30 story about Richmond's Confederate statues.

**IRIB News** (official TV station of the Islamic Republic of Iran) - Along with antiwar activists Cindy Sheehan and Sara Flounders, Phil was featured in a news report about an Open Letter signed by 3,500 intellectuals from 47 countries demanding the lifting of sanctions on Iran.

## 'Defenders Radio Hour' coming Feb. 24!

On Feb. 24, the Virginia Defenders, in collaboration with Sunny Gardener Productions, will be launching a new project: a monthly, one-hour program on the community-sponsored radio station WRIR.

Sunny Gardener hosts two programs: a half-hour weekly show called "Lightly on the Ground," or LOTG, which airs each Wednesday at noon; and "Groundswell," an hour-long program that airs on the second and fourth Thursday at 11 a.m.

Sunny has graciously freed up the fourth Thursday of the month for the new program, "Defenders Radio Hour," to be co-hosted by Defenders Ana Edwards, Taimir Gore and Joseph Rogers.

WRIR can be found in the Richmond area at 97.3 FM and everywhere online at [wrir.org](http://wrir.org). Stay tuned!



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## community news

## United Black Birth Collective growing 'slowly and with intention'

By Ana Edwards

"Since I was a girl, I wanted to be a midwife."

Weluna Finley is one of a group of Black mothers, birth workers, mental health professionals and healers who decided to look after the health and well-being of Black families by working to ensure safe and healthy birth experiences.

An August 2021 report from the National Institutes for Health showed that Black maternal mortality rates are 3.5 times higher than those for white American women and that, very often, insensitive or dismissive health care received by Black women from the white or non-Black medical establishment can be a risk factor.

The Kaiser Family Foundation in California reported similar mortality rates for American Indian and Alaska Natives (AIAN) and Native Hawaiians and other Pacific Islanders (NHOPI), making this a pervasive challenge for communities of color.

The Richmond-based United Black Birth Collective was founded by Finley and her colleagues in January 2020 and has served more than 40 women of color with birthing education, home births, midwifery, doula and birth assistance with a cultural consciousness.

Her own experience with a home birth while in the care of a midwife and birth assistant led to her get to know the Black women who, by working in their own communities, knew long before the studies were conducted the risks faced by Black mothers and their families.

In 2018 Finley began taking classes, but it was her bonding with her midwife in conversations about what their community needed that led to her writing a Black Birth Manifesto and the decision to create a Black-family-centered collective with the mission to "protect the sanctity of black life one birth at a time."

Finley emphasized that this holistic approach, working as often as possible with

mother and father and elders, was essential to success.

She also described the importance of honoring the women who were practicing midwifery and birth assistance long before such services were recognized or sanctioned by the medical establishment – women such as Shafiah Monroe and Jenny Joseph who set and raised the bar for services available in at-risk, usually low-income communities. The UBBC created a council of local elder women who help the collective train and mentor new practitioners of color who have encountered barriers to their development in birth work as their vocation.

I asked if the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the work.

"To some degree it has," Finley said. "We established protocols and are more cautious, but we still go out to give the face-to-face care. You have to have that."

Concerns about the virus actually led to an increase in calls from people seeking alternatives to group settings like hospitals and birthing centers.

"Other service providers have dropped off and the level of isolation for mothers has increased and so we try to continue to give that same level of treatment," she said.

UBBC is a membership organization with an application and review process. Its website lists four practitioners, including Finley. They train and support other Black birth workers because "It is SO difficult to enter into the field of birth work, to become those professionals and be able to sustain themselves."

Two of the biggest barriers, she said, are the cost of education and the inaccessibility of qualified preceptors (someone to understudy with.) The field has been dominated by white women, and with so many practices (nurse midwives, CPN midwives, licenced midwives) vying for preeminence, finding spaces where Black women are not just included but supported is very difficult.

Finley is passionate about the field and the organization. Their strength is that they are unified in purpose and direction.

"We are growing," she said, "slowly and with intention. It is very important that we keep our philosophy, our values and our integrity intact as we grow."

You can learn more about the United Black Birth Collective at:

[www.ubbconnect.com](http://www.ubbconnect.com)



Photo by Phil Wilayto

This roadside memorial has stood since October 2020 at the intersection of Jahnke and German School roads in South Richmond. It was on Oct. 20 that a car turning right onto German School ran into a car turning left onto the same street, sending that car into the intersection, where 16-year-old Aajah Rosemond was walking on the crosswalk on her way to the nearby supermarket. She died right there. Her family constructed this memorial with the message, "Drive as if a life depends on it." The memorial is lit at night by battery-powered red and green lamps, a poignant reminder that lives are at stake when we drive.

## INFORMATION IS POWER!

You can help bring Power to the People by helping distribute **The Virginia Defender** in your neighborhood, at school, in your workplace or place of worship. Interested? Then drop us a line at [virginiadefendernews@gmail.com](mailto:virginiadefendernews@gmail.com) or call or text **804-644-5834**. And thanks!



## our working lives



Photo by Phil Wilayto

**USWA Local 8888 members attach signs and flags to their vehicles as they get ready for their car caravan Nov. 10. A key union demand in contract negotiations has been recognition of the shipyard workers as “essential” during the pandemic.**

## Newport News shipyard union to vote on new contract proposal

By Phil Wilayto

After voting down an earlier contract agreement late last year, members of United Steelworkers Local 8888 will be voting soon on a new deal with their employer, Newport News Shipbuilding. And this time the proposed contract may meet a key union demand: recognizing shipyard workers as “essential.”

An article in the Jan. 29 Daily Press quoted a union spokesperson as saying the new agreement includes annual pay agreements, pension enhancements, a cap on health care costs union members pay and the first domestic partners benefit. Like the rejected contract, it would run for 60 months.

But according to a Jan. 31 report by ABC Channel 13, a union spokesperson also said the deal included recognition of employees as essential workers for working through the pandemic.

That had been a key bone of contention between the company and the union, according to union members the Defender spoke with last Nov. 10, when the union staged a car caravan outside the massive shipyard while members of its negotiating team were meeting with management.

“Grocery workers, hospital workers are

considered essential, and they get hazard pay because of the COVID,” one worker, a welder, told the Defender. “They tell us we’re essential too, but where’s our hazard pay?”

Details of the new agreement will first be shared at a series of briefings to the 12,000 shipbuilders in the union’s collective bargaining unit; then members will vote on it.

The shipyard workers have been laboring under the old contract, which expired last year, but said that, if necessary, they were prepared to strike. If that happened, it would be the first strike since the union went out for 17 weeks in 1999.

Before that, the only other strike had been in 1979, during the organizing drive that resulted in the workers winning the union.

Newport News Shipbuilding, a division of Huntington Ingalls Industries, is the largest industrial employer in Virginia and sole designer, builder and refueler of U.S. Navy aircraft carriers, as well as one of two providers of Navy submarines.

*In 1979, Phil Wilayto was a shop steward with the Carpenters & Joiners union in Norfolk. He helped organize support for the 1979 strike and wrote the union’s official strike song, “Organize the South!”*

## Workers’ Power shakes up Richmond’s Diversity Thrift

By Kat McNeal

In November 2021, workers at Richmond’s Diversity Thrift used-goods store went on strike. After a whirlwind nine-day campaign, they won higher wages, staffing changes, and new store policies regarding sexual harassment.

Diversity Thrift was founded in 1999 to benefit Diversity Richmond, the city’s LG-BTQ community center. On Nov. 6, all 10 of the store’s non-supervisory staff, plus a salaried ally from the center, asked Diversity’s president and executive director, Bill Harrison to close the store in order to meet with them. The workers’ concerns were primarily related to low pay, chronic understaffing and how management handled an alleged incident of sexual harassment of an employee by two managers.

Harrison refused, and the strike was on.

For three days, the striking workers and community supporters demonstrated outside the store, distributing leaflets outlining their demands and holding signs urging passers-by not to donate to or buy from the store.

On the evening of Nov. 9, the 11 met with the executive committee of Diversity Richmond’s board of directors. The largest crowd yet - more than 120 - waited outside, chanting and cheering.

After nearly five hours, the strikers emerged with the news: the executive committee, which said it had been unaware of dysfunctions at the store, had agreed to substantial changes: Raising employee base pay from \$11 to \$15 an hour, changing policy regarding sexual harassment, and more. All workers that had participated in the strike were invited back to their positions, with back pay. The next day Diversity announced that Harrison, who strikers demanded be removed from leadership, had retired.

This article is a shortened version of longer coverage published on our website. For the full version, visit:

<https://bit.ly/div1407>

## Richmond joins growing national movement to unionize Starbucks

By Kat McNeal

Workers at two Richmond-area Starbucks stores, one at 6980 Forest Hill Avenue in the city and the other at 11136 Midlothian Turnpike in Chesterfield County, have filed petitions with the National Labor Relations Board for recognition of their union, Workers United, an affiliate of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU).

According to local news reports, the workers’ primary grievances are low wages, seniority pay issues and COVID-19 safety problems.

They are the first Starbucks locations to organize in Virginia, part of a growing movement at Starbucks stores across the country.

Starbucks is the world’s largest coffee chain, with more than 15,000 locations in the U.S. alone. Of its roughly 9,000 company-owned locations across the country, workers in around 50 shops have taken steps to unionize, including in Buffalo; Boston; Knoxville; Tallahassee; Chicago; Cleveland; Seattle; Mesa, Ariz.; Eugene, Ore.; Hopewell, N.J.; and Superior, Colo.

Contract negotiations at the first Starbucks store to unionize, in Buffalo, began Jan. 31.

Workers United formed in its current structure in 2009. It traces its history to the storied International Ladies Garment Workers Union, once one of the largest unions in the United States.

**The whole country is seeing a big upsurge in labor actions, and Virginia is no exception.**

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## our working lives

### Richmond City Council considers two public sector bargaining ordinances for city workers

By Kat McNeal

In May 2021, a change to state law came into effect that allows local governments and school boards to bargain collectively with their workers.

Richmond City Council now has two bills to consider on this topic. Both are on the agenda of the Feb. 7 meeting of council's Organizational Development Committee.

The first bill, proposed by Mayor Levar Stoney's office, would restrict collective bargaining rights to only certain employees in the Departments of Public Utilities and Public Works. As reported by the Richmond Times-Dispatch on Jan. 27, Stoney described this measure as a "pilot initiative."

The second, put forward by council representatives Kristen N. Larson (4th District) and Reva Trammell (8th District), would permit most city workers to bargain.

With collective bargaining a possibility in the near future, the Service Employees International Union's (SEIU) Local 512 has launched a campaign to organize public workers in Richmond. Local 512 already represents public workers in Fairfax and Loudon.

### First in state, Richmond teachers win collective bargaining rights!

By Kat McNeal

On Dec. 6, Richmond became the first locality in Virginia to approve collective bargaining for its teachers and other public school employees.

Collective bargaining is a process by which workers, organized into bargaining units, are able to negotiate the terms of their work with their employer and receive a legally-binding contract.

Teachers in Virginia have not had collective bargaining rights since 1977, when the state's Supreme Court ruled that school districts lacked the authority to enter into agreements with unions. A 1993 amendment to the Code of Virginia explicitly prohibited government entities from recognizing their employees' unions or professional associations for the purposes of contract negotiations.

In 2020, the General Assembly passed a bill, sponsored by Delegate Elizabeth R. Guzman (D-Woodbridge) to let towns, counties and school boards pass ordinances allowing public sector collective bargaining. Notably, this bill did not lift the prohibition against public sector workers striking.

Last September, three members of the Richmond School Board - Chair Shonda Harris-Muhammad (6th District), Vice Chair Kenya Gibson (3rd District) and Stephanie Rizzi (5th District), worked with the Richmond Education Association to draw up a proposed collective bargaining resolution.

Gibson, Rizzi and Harris-Muhammad are the board's most progressive members. All were supported in their elections by the grassroots organization Richmond for All, for which Gibson is a volunteer staff member and member of its governing board.

Their proposal moved to an ad hoc committee chaired by Harris-Muhammad. Gibson and Rizzi published the proposed resolution on Gibson's blog, along with a compelling editorial that reviewed the history of the repression of organized labor in the South and the link between anti-labor policies and racism. (You can view the original proposal and the editorial at: <https://bit.ly/35tnuZL>)

In committee, the document was reviewed, discussed and altered by the board's lawyer. Among the most notable changes was limiting the number of negotiable items for the first contract period to two per party, unless expanded by mutual agreement.

While there are far more items of immediate concern to workers at the overburdened public school system, this stipulation will be lifted for the second contract negotiation, which could take place in as little as three years.

The resolution passed 8-1, with only Jonathan Young (4th District) voting no. Young, the only white man on the board and a right-libertarian-leaning Independent who previously opposed changing the names of schools honoring Confederate leaders, said collective bargaining was an unneeded "arcane, hierarchical, bureaucratic process" and that the board instead should focus on reducing the number of administrators.

To collectively bargain and secure a contract, school workers will have to certify a union to act as their bargaining agent. REA, which many educators and staff already belong to, has launched a campaign to make this happen. For details, see: [https://richmondeducators.org/resolution\\_faqs](https://richmondeducators.org/resolution_faqs)

### D.C.: Politics & Prose unionizes with Local 400

By Kat McNeal

Politics and Prose, an independent bookstore with three locations in Washington, D.C., is the first bookstore in the district to unionize. The approximately 100 workers are now represented by United Food and Commercial Workers Local 400.

The Virginia Defender spoke to Isa Salazar of the Politics and Prose Workers Union Organizing Committee about the process of getting organized.

Salazar, 30, is a subscription coordinator and bookseller who has worked at the store since August 2020. She described the workers' primary grievances as pay issues, understaffing and insufficient COVID-19 safety measures.

"There had always been talks about unionizing, ever since I started," Salazar said. "There have been problems typical of a small retail store." Those discussions renewed in January 2021, after "a big COVID scare" caused the store to close for a week, but then died down again.

This successful attempt began with informal conversations in October 2021, which quickly grew into a larger meeting. Workers at the Den, the coffeeshop at the store's main Connecticut Avenue NW location, also participated. Salazar recalled that a coworker happened to know someone at UFCW and invited them in.

"That was really one of the least complicated parts. Having them with us has been great," she said.

Early last December, the Politics and Prose Workers Union had over half the employees on board and approached owners Bradley Graham and Lissa Muscatine to ask that the store voluntarily recognize their union, so that collective bargaining could proceed.

Salazar said that Graham and Muscatine initially refused, which she said didn't come as a surprise, but the workers weren't discouraged.

"From the get-go, we were prepared to rise to the challenge," she said.

The workers then filed for an election with the National Labor Relations Board, which is the other means of securing union recognition from an employer. The Politics and Prose Workers Union then went public on Twitter. Salazar says that they were met with an outpouring of support - and some unexpected information.

"We found out that this had actually been attempted before in 1995."

Before the end of the month, the owners changed their minds. The bookstore workers were expecting to enter their first contract negotiation near the end of January.

### Augusta County: Union organizing at Hershey plant

By Kat McNeal

Workers at the Hershey Chocolate plant in Stuarts Draft, Va., filed a petition with the National Labor Relations Board Jan. 18 to be represented by the Bakery, Confectionery, Tobacco Workers and Grain Millers' International Union (BCTGM). According to the Staunton News Leader, workers say the main

issues are a lack of time off, disrespect on the job and frequent changes that are poorly communicated by management.

The plant in Augusta County employs 1,100 people and makes candies, including Reese's Peanut Butter Cups, Almond Joys and Mr. Goodbars.

The workers began their campaign in early 2021 when they linked up BCTGM, which also represents a Hershey plant and country club in Pennsylvania. The Virginia plant would be represented by Local 358, which went on strike this past summer at a Mondelez factory in Henrico County, joining five other

locations around the country and winning important gains in their new contract.

Someone - presumably Labor Relations Institute, a private consulting company hired by Hershey, launched a website last October to persuade workers at the Stuarts Draft facility not to sign union cards.

"To be clear, we do not want a union at Stuart's [sic] Draft," the site repeatedly states.

But in mid-February, it will be the Hershey workers who will have their say when they vote whether or not to have union representation.

Stay tuned.



Rally Co-chair Christa Ellison, Executive Director, Freedom Over Everything.



Rally Co-chair Kat McNeal, Virginia Defenders for Freedom, Justice & Equality.



Shakil Ali, Freedom Over Everything.



Natasha White, Operations Manager/Coordinator, Virginia Coalition on Solitary Confinement.



David Smith, Chair, Virginia Coalition on Solitary Confinement.

Photos by Phil Wilayto

# Prisoners, ex-prisoners & advocates speak out for Prison Justice

By Phil Wilayto

Despite threatening weather forecasts, cold temperatures and the continuing COVID-19 pandemic, nearly 90 people still turned out Jan. 22 for the 5th Annual Virginia Prison Justice Rally.

This year's event was held at Richmond's Monroe Park, a traditional site for protests, where the organizers were free to arrange for our own sound system and portajohns, things that are not allowed at Capitol Square, where the first three rallies were held.

In 2021, due to the pandemic, we opted for a car caravan, which drew 50 vehicles. Plans for another caravan this year were called off due to icy roads, but the rally went on as scheduled.

In addition to the speakers pictured above, written statements were read from other scheduled speakers who were unable to attend due to illness or weather conditions. Those were Shantia Nance of Sistah in Prison Reform and Azeem Majeed of the Coalition for Justice.

State Sen. Joe Morrissey, who was scheduled to speak on bringing back parole, did not attend or send a statement.

The entire rally was livestreamed on Facebook and can be viewed at:

<https://fb.me/e/1BX1qc6QC>

Following remarks by the scheduled speakers, written statements were read from 13 prisoners, from Dillwyn, Fluvanna, Greensville, Lunenburg and River North.

The following are the statements from the three incarcerated members of the VAPJN Steering Committee:

**HASSAN SHABAZZ**

**VAPJN Co-founder & Steering Committee Member  
Dillwyn Correctional Center**

Peace and Solidarity to the People,

First I would like to thank everyone who worked long and hard to make the 5th annual Prison Justice Rally a success, and I would also like to thank everyone who braved the cold weather to support the cause of prison justice. The men on the inside salute you all for sacrificing your time and energy to show support. There is no progress without struggle and this proverb we know all too well.

It took us 26 years to make some of the smallest dents in mass incarceration in Virginia, so we have to realize that there will be no quick fixes in this war for prison justice. I have said before that, "There will be no microwave solutions to problems that require an oven of activism."

For 23 years my life has been enveloped in the fight for freedom, justice, and equality behind the walls of prison. Now, as I fastly approach my release, I see that struggle as a part of an even greater struggle for liberation from slavery, suffering, and death wherever it may appear.

No man/woman is an island unto himself/herself. We are all connected and if we fail to see it then those who stand to benefit from our inabilities to do so will proceed to remain in positions of control that keep us oppressed. Let us do better, be better, work harder, and work smarter to bring about the change that we seek. Once again, thank you all for your participation and I look forward to seeing you all in the very near future. I leave you as I came, in Peace and Solidarity.

**CHANELL BURNETTE**

**VAPJN Steering Committee  
Fluvanna Women's  
Correctional Center**

I can say with certainty that having been incarcerated for the past 16 years of my life, would not have occurred if the eligibility for parole still existed. Throughout my incarceration I have faced many challenges, yet, overcame many obstacles necessary for personal growth. And while I am grateful for this period of incarceration for the betterment of myself, had I been given the chance some time ago, I could have helped orchestrate the movement which could keep people either out of prison or not returning to prison.

Recidivism rates soar as people do not have the knowledge, support of resources for a smooth transition back out into society. True change must come from within and those of us who have made wise use of our time in incarceration deserve the opportunity to step out there and lend a hand to another in need.

Each one, teach one.

**ASKARI LUMUMBA**

**VAPJN Co-founder & Steering Committee Member  
River North Correctional Center**

Our goal when organizing the first Virginia Prison Justice Rally in January of 2018 was to communicate to Virginians that the system of Mass Incarceration and all of its constituents was active in Virginia.

During that time, the anti-Mass Incarceration forces here in Virginia were too weak to move the pro-Mass Incarceration forces back. In fact, there had been nearly 25 years of essentially unabated advancement by the opposition. So our idea to begin the rally was to build momentum for, and raise awareness around, Prison Justice here in Virginia.

Until that time, pro-Mass Incarceration forces were successful in communicating to the public that criminals were inherently evil and undeserving of dignity or second chances. Since the early 90's, the narrative around crime and punishment among both liberals and conservatives was that "nothing works" but being tough on crime! As a result, Virgin-

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**Kimberly Jenkins-Snodgrass, Senior Advisor Criminal Justice, Interfaith Action for Human Rights.**



**Richard Walker, Founder and CEO, Bridging the Gap in Virginia.**



**Lillie (Ms. K) Branch-Kennedy, Executive Director, Resource, Information, Help for the Disadvantaged and Disenfranchised.**



**Phil Wilayto, Co-founder and Steering Committee Member, Virginia Prison Justice Network.**



**Ana Edwards, livestreaming, Chair, Sacred Ground Historical Reclamation Project.**

Photo by Ana Edwards

ia went from a prison population of roughly 19,000 in 1995 to over 40,000 prisoners by 2012.

Since that rally in 2018, the anti-Mass Incarceration forces have successfully won several reforms to Virginia's criminal legal system. Still, we haven't come nearly as close to the transformative change we truly desire to Virginia's criminal legal system. Not to mention that the campaign messaging of Governor-elect Glen Youngkin and Attorney General-elect Jason Miyares shows us that the pro-Mass Incarceration forces want to reverse the progress we've made while reducing the momentum we've built.

Now more than ever we have to unify and organize our forces in resistance to the assaults they will attempt to mount over the next four years. Our demands for reinstatement of parole, sentencing reform, ending solitary confinement, and development of in-

dependent oversight committees are essential to restorative justice here in Virginia.

We are in a critical stage of the anti-Mass Incarceration struggle here in Virginia and we must be more committed and devoted than ever. Without the support of a General Assembly powered by the Virginia Democratic Party, we have to rely more on grassroots political power and our ability to obstruct the opposition's efforts.

We mustn't be reactionary to the opposition's actions, but rather proactive by attacking their plans. Nor should we ever confuse the ideas in our head for the reality that we live - meaning, either we're resisting oppression or we're complying with it!

Please help us to continue dismantling Virginia's Criminal Legal System and participate in the 5th Annual Virginia Prison Justice Network Rally. There are no easy victories!!

## Red Onion prisoner dies; commonwealth's attorney's office contacted by DOC

By Phil Wilayto

A prisoner at Red Onion State Prison in Wise County has died after being found unresponsive in his cell, according to a spokesperson for the Virginia Department of Corrections. Anwar Phillips was found in the early morning of Jan. 3, according to DOC representative Benjamin Jarvela.

According to a story published Jan. 14 in the Richmond Times-Dispatch,

the medical examiner had not yet determined a cause of death. Jarvela said DOC investigators had contacted the commonwealth's attorney's office about the death.

The Times-Dispatch story was picked up by the Associated Press and carried by The Washington Post.

## Mother of Anwar Phillips appeals for funds to bury her son

Vernetta Phillips, the mother of the man who recently died at Red Onion State Prison, has started a GoFundMe appeal to "help me bury and get justice for my son Anwar."

The appeal is at:

<https://www.gofundme.com/f/Sending-my-son-Anwar-home>

## New online journal

The Coalition for Justice of Blacksburg, a co-founder of the Virginia Prison Justice Network, is working with the Virginia Tech Center for Humanities to create an online journal of art, writing, spoken word and reflections on prison life.

Journal organizers are calling for submissions for art (drawings and photos of or by people behind bars), pre-incarcerated or incarceration photos or recorded spoken word.

"We want to give a name and face to those behind the walls," the organizers said.

A modest honorarium will be provided.

To share your work or photos, contact: [justiceburg@gmail.com](mailto:justiceburg@gmail.com)



Photo by Phil Wilayto

Most of those attending the VAPJN rally came from the Greater Richmond area, but some had traveled from as far away as Buckingham County, Lynchburg, Newport News, Staunton and Washington, D.C.



## reclaiming our sacred ground

# Why we support the memorialization of Shockoe Bottom, but are opposed to spending \$220 million on a legacy museum

*Note: This statement was sent Jan. 9, 2022, to all members of Richmond City Council and local, national and international media. We believe it is a good argument about why, yes, there needs to be a slavery/slave trade museum or interpretive center in Shockoe Bottom, but why it doesn't need to be a \$220 million legacy project for people who have played a very mixed role in the ongoing struggle to reclaim and properly memorialize what once was the epicenter of the U.S. domestic slave trade.*

*We invite you to read the statement and make up your own minds.*

To: The Honorable Members of Richmond City Council:

At its regular meeting on January 10, 2022, Richmond City Council is expected to approve two ordinances dealing with funding for Shockoe Bottom, Richmond's downtown district that once was the epicenter of the U.S. domestic slave trade.

The ordinances are:

Number 2021-270, which would add "\$1 million to the Heritage Campus for the purpose of procuring design services and associated community engagement."

And Number 2021-337, which would give "\$300,000 to the National Slavery Museum Foundation for the support of planning and fundraising activities for the establishment of a national slavery museum at the Lumpkin's Slave Jail / Devil's Half-Acre site in Richmond."

We have not come here tonight to oppose this funding. Rather, we applaud the fact that the City is posed to finally begin the concrete work of reclaiming and properly memorializing the sacred ground of Shockoe Bottom, something we have spent the past 20 years trying to encourage the city government to do.

But we do have some concerns, and some suggestions for addressing those concerns.

Let's first address the \$1 million intended for the Heritage Campus.

We have spent the last two years actively and in good faith participating in the Shockoe Alliance, a collaborative process

initiated by Mayor Stoney that produced a "small area plan" for Shockoe Bottom that is supposed to guide future development of the area.

That plan for a 10-block Heritage Campus incorporates the community-generated proposal for a nine-acre memorial park that would include the Devil's Half-Acre, site of Robert Lumpkin's slave jail; the African Burial Ground, once covered by a state-owned parking lot; and two more blocks east of the CSX railroad tracks where slave jails owned by Silas Omohundro, William Goodwin and other slave traders once stood, along with many trader offices and supporting businesses.

The Heritage Campus would be much more than just a much-needed urban park with landscaping and walking paths. Proposed ideas include a museum or interpretive center, public art, interactive kiosks, genealogy center, conference and performance spaces, a symbolic recreation of Shockoe Creek and more, as money becomes available.

Thanks to the relentless advocacy work carried out by dozens of organizations and hundreds of individuals, it is now well-known that so many people were sold out of the 40-50 auction houses of Shockoe Bottom that today the majority of African-Americans could likely trace some ancestry to this small historic area. There are few places in the country that could claim to be as important to understanding the history of today's Black community and, indeed, the United States as a whole - and few places that could draw more tourists to explore this story.

That is why we are deeply concerned that the City's attention could turn away from the Heritage Campus proposed by the Shockoe Alliance to an up-to-\$220 million national slavery museum being promoted by a private foundation about which the public knows very little.

In July of 2020, Mayor Stoney held a press conference to announce that he had \$3.5 million available for moving ahead with developing the nine-acre Shockoe Bottom Memorial Park, the proposal for which came out of an open community process sponsored by our organization, the Sacred Ground Historical

Reclamation Project of the Virginia Defenders for Freedom, Justice & Equality.

It later came out that the amount available was actually \$1.7 million, and that was to go for procuring the privately-owned lots located within the proposed nine-acre memorial park. Now we have recently learned that that money was never spent and the privately owned lots were never acquired.

As advocates, we have been left to first applaud the announcement of the \$3.5 million, then express concern that that amount was reduced to \$1.7 million, and now to state our further concern that the private lots have not yet been acquired. This is not an example of municipal transparency and does not lay the groundwork for community trust going forward.

Further, the \$1 million now being proposed is to go "to the Department of Parks, Recreation and Community Facilities' Enslaved African Heritage Campus project ... for the purpose of procuring design services and associated community engagement."

Procuring design services from what entity? Another virtually all-white company like SmithGroup JJR that has received most of the money already spent on design for the slavery museum?

And what kind of community engagement? The same kind of previous public meetings that allowed residents to express opinions but without any real decision-making power?

Then there is the issue of the National Slavery Museum Foundation.

This entity was founded in 2011 by a few executive board members of City Council's Slave Trail Commission. Sometime in 2019, without public notice or input, those board members dissolved the commission, leaving Richmond, for the first time in decades, without an official body tasked with preserving local sites related to slavery and the slave trade.

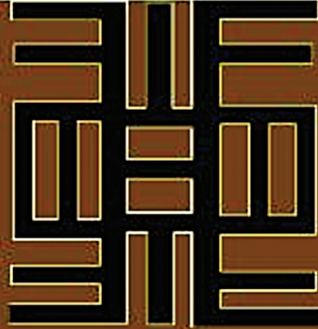
The commission itself had operated for years without producing legally required meeting minutes or detailed financial reports. It refused to process applications from people asking to join the commission. In the end, all its few remain-

ing members had exceeded their term limits as laid out by the City.

As for the museum foundation, after its first few years it was "suspended" by the IRS for failing to file tax returns. Today the foundation seems to have no online presence, no public list of its board of directors - if there is one - or any financial reports. This is not a record of openness, transparency or competency.

The only thing we know for certain is that the foundation's three directors were members of the former Slave Trail Commission's executive board, and that its president is the former commission chair - the same chair who previously promoted putting a baseball stadium in Shockoe Bottom.

The foundation's stated mission is to design, build and operate a slavery museum on the site of Lumpkin's jail, known as the Devil's Half-Acre, one of a half-dozen similar jails once located in Shockoe Bottom. Neither the Slave Trail Commission nor the foundation have shown any interest in memorializing the rest of Shockoe



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## reclaiming our sacred ground

Bottom. In fact, to this day, a decade after a long community struggle resulted in reclaiming the African Burial Ground, that site still has no protective zoning.

The proposed museum was originally estimated to cost \$100 million. That's \$30 million more than the International African American Museum being built in Charleston, South Carolina, to explore that city's central role in the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. Now we are told that the actual cost of the Richmond museum will be between \$180 and \$220 million, because someone finally remembered that the museum is to be built in a floodplain - something that advocates have been pointing out for years.

The private, for-profit company chosen by the City to come up with a plan for the proposed museum is SmithGroup JJR. Museum promoters have touted the fact that SmithGroup worked on the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, D.C. What they don't mention is that SmithGroup was one of four companies that worked on that project, and while the other three are Black-owned, SmithGroup is a virtually all-white company.

In fact, out of 49 principals listed on its website, only one is African-American. One. This demonstrated lack of commitment to internal diversity and inclusion alone should have been enough to disqualify the company from leading the effort to tell the story of slavery and the slave trade. Instead it has already received more than \$2.5 million in City money, and is poised to receive much more.

We want to make it clear that we are not opposed to creating a museum in Shockoe Bottom devoted to exploring the city's role in the domestic slave trade. What we are questioning is both the cost of the proposed museum and its location.

No one denies that memorializing the site of Lumpkin's jail, which after Emancipation became the first meeting place for the school that would eventually become the HBCU Virginia Union University, must be an important part of any Shockoe Bottom memorialization. The Smithsonian Magazine called its discovery in 2008 the most important archeological find in the country in a decade. The proposal to remove the fill now covering the site in order to reveal the still-intact stone foundation is a good one and should be a significant part of the Heritage Campus.

But that does not mean the site re-

quires a \$220 million structure, built in a floodplain.

Both the museum proponents and the Shockoe Alliance small-area plan call for an interim "interpretive center" or museum to be constructed in the Main Street Station Train Shed, which already exists within the footprint of the Heritage Campus.

The Train Shed was part of the \$51 million federally-funded project that in 2003 renovated the Main Street Station. It's a majestic building that provides a panoramic view of the proposed memorial area and overlooks the Devil's Half-Acre. The City describes it as "Richmond's premier venue, an expanse of steel and glass that's two football fields in length." It's a beautiful space that can accommodate thousands of guests, and the City has yet to assign it any permanent use.

And it's already elevated above the floodplain.

On Nov. 16, 2021, NSMF board members Rev. Ben Campbell and Rev. Sylvester Turner made a presentation about their museum project to the Virginia House of Delegates Appropriations Committee, whose membership includes NSMF chair Delegate Delores McQuinn. In their presentation, Campbell and Turner included the estimated cost of "the development of pilot and experimental exhibitions which can be sited in the Main Street Station in advance of the construction of the museum building."

Their estimate? \$350,000 - \$700,000.

As of the end of 2021, SmithGroup JJR had already received more than \$2.5 million in contracts for just the "pre-design" stage of the museum project.

It seems obvious that the Main Street Station Train Shed would be the best permanent site for any museum or interpretive center, starting modestly and expanding as public and private funding becomes available.

And in public meeting after public meeting, the community's clear preference has been for an expanded memorial site, not a single museum building.

At the Appropriations Committee meeting, a handout made available to the committee members stated that "The Smith Group was hired to lead us through a process for development of the Lumpkin Jail Site, over 500 people from every community group engaged in a series of workshops and focus groups. (sic) The overwhelming consensus was that we should build a museum."

That assertion is a total misrepresentation of public opinion on this matter.

Beginning in 2015, five organizations held more than 20 public hearings on the future of Shockoe Bottom. First were the five public meetings hosted by the Sacred Ground Historical Reclamation Project of the Virginia Defenders for Freedom, Justice & Equality, a process that produced - by unanimous vote - the proposal for a nine-acre memorial park. Then another series of meetings was held under the name of Richmond Speaks, organized by then-Mayor Dwight Jones. Then came the hearings sponsored by the Rose Fellowship at the request of Mayor Stoney; the meetings held by the Center for Design Engagement, associated with the University of Massachusetts-Amherst; and finally the meetings held by SmithGroup JJR.

We attended virtually all of these meetings, and in not one - including those organized by SmithGroup - was there "overwhelming consensus" for a museum. Instead, concerns were raised about the cost, the floodplain and competition for visitors and funding with existing Richmond museums, especially the nearby Black History Museum and Cultural Center of Virginia.

Rather, the overwhelming sentiment was for the community-generated proposal for the nine-acre Shockoe Bottom Memorial Park. The popular view was that the City should acquire the nine acres, impose protective zoning, landscape the site and then move to create the other park features as money became available.

This still seems to us to be a reasonable plan, expanded to the 10-block Heritage Campus proposed by the Shockoe Alliance.

These are our proposals for addressing what we view as serious flaws in the present process for memorializing Shockoe Bottom:

**First: Going forward, there must be complete public transparency about what decisions are being made, how they are being made and who is benefiting from them.**

**Second: There must be a formal mechanism for meaningful participation in the decision-making process by representatives of the Black community and its allies who have demonstrated a long-time commitment to the reclamation and proper memorialization of Shockoe Bottom.**

**And third: There must be a firm commitment that any financial benefits to be realized from the planning, construction and operation of a physical memorial in Shockoe Bottom - contracts, construction jobs, operational jobs, internships, marketing opportunities, etc. - go primarily to the descendant community.**

We applaud Mayor Stoney, City Council President Cynthia Newbille and former Slave Trail Commission Chair Delores McQuinn for finally, in July 2020, endorsing the community proposal for a nine-acre Shockoe Bottom Memorial Park. We recognize the leading role that the former Slave Trail Commission played in the construction of the Richmond Slave Trail (which advocates refer to as the Trail of Enslaved Africans); in the erection of the Reconciliation Statue at 15th and East Main streets; and especially the excavation of the Devil's Half-Acre.

However, it also must be remembered that some of these same former members of the commission, including its chair, regrettably worked to undermine the long community struggle that ultimately succeeded in forcing Virginia Commonwealth University to remove its parking lot that desecrated the African Burial Ground; actively promoted Mayor Jones' proposal to build a commercial baseball stadium on the site of slave jails in Shockoe Bottom; and for years ignored the community demand for a nine-acre memorial park.

While these individuals deserve a place at the table, the future of Shockoe Bottom cannot be left solely in their hands.

We respectfully ask members of council to consider our concerns and our proposals for addressing them. Together, we can ensure that future generations will applaud our collective efforts to reclaim and properly memorialize one of the most important and as yet undeveloped sites in the entire country, not only for the Black community, but for the country as a whole.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

**ANA EDWARDS** - Chair, Sacred Ground Historical Reclamation Project of the Virginia Defenders for Freedom, Justice & Equality

**PHIL WILAYTO** - Editor, The Virginia Defender newspaper



## In our opinion

### Not even close

This is not the Winter of our Discontent.

Actually, mere discontentment would be a big improvement. This is the winter of our anxiety. Our apprehension. Our growing fear.

We're nearly two years into the pandemic. There have been 890,000 deaths in this country alone and 5.7 million worldwide. Even so, we are ALL so profoundly tired of isolating, wearing masks, getting jabs and feeling permanently worried sick about our children and our elders.

Global warming? Is there really anybody left who doesn't think that's a real thing? The biggest this in history, the worst that, the coldest the other, the hottest ... Mother Nature is not pleased, and she's showing it.

And just wait till the Atlantic rises enough to drown Virginia Beach and salinate the James River. You know, the one we get our water from. Maybe then the skeptics will come around?

And in the political field?

The most disgusting person ever to hold the presidency - and sure, there have been lots worse, but Trump is still the human incarnation of a steaming pile of fresh dog poop - just had two comeback rallies, one in Arizona, the other in Texas. People lined up for hours to get in. Media reports put each crowd at about 15,000.

And this is AFTER the openly racist, misogynist, pathologically narcissistic, feral excuse for a human being egged on - at the very least - a mob of thousands of violent fanatics who stormed Congress in an open attempt to overturn a presidential election.

Discontent? Not even close.

Between the ongoing pandemic, accelerating global warming and a growing right-wing mass movement, there's a lot to be anxious about. Throw in inflation, a new COVID "variant" and a crumbling for-profit health care system and it's no wonder they're trying to distract us with talk of another war.

Folks, this is no time to give up. Take a break. Go to the woods or the beach. Walk around a park. Hang out with your honey.

But then come back, roll up your sleeves and get back to work building the mass, independent, multiracial, multigender, multi-issue movement that is the only thing that can get us out of this growing crisis.

OK?

Good.

See you on the barricades.

## Letters to the Editor

Ask everyone to close their eyes, imagine it's Xmas & the only sense of happiness we can have is calling our loved ones to spread a lil holiday cheer. Then the lights cut out due to the staff not coming to work to b with their family. This carries on for the next 2 days.

My door suddenly opens & she says get dressed u have a video visit. I said what? If my fiancé would've never called up here I would've b stuck in the cell by staff who don't care about family, rehabilitation, or recidivism - they care about that 10,000 signing bonus. When ever single day they work it's a portrayal of a cracker. Who cracks the whip/discipline will b handed out if u don't walk the gun line. A 200 series charge could take away 17+ days of good time/even more for a simple infraction. But their is no incentive of being charge free. Their is no way of earning 17 days off our release date. & once u loose this time u can't get the days back. For a petty infraction. Well we talk of who is the criminal right?

On Dec. 28th at 10:30 am me as well as 13 other inmates were not fed breakfast or lunch. & was told by them same agents fuck us, write up the paperwork, we go home every night. When we r behind a door behind y'all wanting to shop at Blk Friday, the least u all could do is feed us.

But these r the people who y'all r giving raises to/hiring. When their r 2 laws in VA which allows some to go home after a fair amount of time is served & may have rehabilitated, reincarnated, vindicated theirselves. Which was put into effect to mass incarcerate the super predators. Which all them lawmakers apologized from destruction of the Blk family.

Now we reward the prison profiteers for handing out higher #'s. When the same people u vote for r setting up trust funds for their grandchildren, from handing down slaves.

This must end. Defund the prison system. Refund our tax \$ for education so these men & women don't have to come back.

Brandon Seward  
GREENVILLE



Photo by Phil Wilayto

This sign marked the site of the Devil's Half-Acre in Richmond's Shockoe Bottom, where the notorious slave trader Robert Lumpkin once operated a jail, tavern and hotel. The bent sign, thought to be an act of vandalism, stayed in this condition for at least several weeks until it finally was removed by the Richmond Department of Parks, Recreation and Community Facilities, one of three government entities responsible for maintaining the site. The display sign in the lower part of the photo was simply leaned up against and secured to the wooden posts. Is it any wonder that the Defenders are concerned about the City's stewardship of this sacred ground?

## The Virginia Defender

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## **Book Review:** **The Life & Legacy** **of Enslaved Virginian** **Emily Winfree**

**By Ana Edwards**

The Life & Legacy of Enslaved Virginian Emily Winfree - Dr. Jan Meck and Virginia Refo The History Press, 2021; 158 pages; \$21.99

The book that Jan Meck and Virginia Refo have written is the first study of the life of Emily Winfree, a Virginia-born African woman who lived from 1834 to 1865 enslaved in Petersburg and Chesterfield County and, after Emancipation, in Manchester until her death in 1919. Five of her children are attributed to Dr. David C. Winfree of Chesterfield, who purchased Emily Winfree and her two young daughters in 1860. After Emancipation, he gave her a house and property in town and 109 acres of land he owned in Chesterfield before dying in 1867. It was this property that gave Emily Winfree - a domestic worker who could not read - the little stability she could maintain for her children in their free life.

Using a combination of primary records, interviews with Ms. Winfree's descendants and imagined conversations, Meck and Refo have compiled an empathetic biography with a great deal of detail about Ms. Winfree's attempts to leverage the property to secure her family finances. The authors also chose to envelope Ms. Winfree's struggles in a well-researched history of the rise and fall of Reconstruction in Virginia and how it impacted what opportunities were actually available to newly-freed Black people like Ms. Winfree. Land ownership could make all the difference from a life of impoverished laboring, but it was not a guarantee. In this reader's opinion one of the strongest themes is that of charting the progress of each generation of Ms. Winfree's descendants - from illiteracy to educated, from laboring to educators and entrepreneurs. From a single woman, generations of

# **The many faces of mental health behind the wire**

**By Shaka Shakur**

Within the context of a prison, i.e. penal facility, mental health both manifests and displays itself in many forms.

A lot of Us who enter into the Prison Industrial Complex (P.I.C.) come from the lower socio-economic strata of society and arrive with some form of existing psycho-socio issues, whether they hide/conceal themselves behind that of substance abuse, sexual abuse, etc.

A lot of times it is these underlying issues that often lead Us into the P.I.C. in the first place and go unacknowledged by the Criminal Judicial System. In fact the kriminal (in)justice system has become a substitute and replacement for the many mental health institutions and mental health treatment programs that have been closed down due to lack of funding, lack of caring and outright indifference.

So people who should be receiving some type of mental health treatment or intervention are now being warehoused in the prison system, while mental institutions are being closed down.

Mental Health issues and "conduct" are now being kriminalized and placed into that context, and the responses of the state and its agents is to that of a kriminal and not someone with mental illness. This triggers the full weight of the oppressive and repressive state. This also triggers more abuse, brutalization, solitary confinement, verbal abuse, beatings, manhandling, disrespect and disregard by people who are often untrained, overworked, underpaid and ill-equipped to deal with such mental illness or mental health issues.

So someone hearing voices, who is delusional, who might have PTSD, anger or rage issues, doesn't take care of their hygiene, suffers paranoia, etc., becomes a "disciplinary problem" to be further controlled and repressed. Hidden away in segregation units, isolation units, placed into camera cells on suicide watch while stripped naked and clothed in suicide prevention smocks, only to have their good time taken, sentences extended - while adding another layer of job security for the employees of the state.

Then these same employees become resentful, hateful and vindictive because of having or choosing to work in an already high-stress-level environment, and this isn't what they signed up for. I've seen prison guards and prisonrats commit some of the most vicious abuse and treatment of those who really needed proper medication or mental health treatment, and then laugh and joke about it.

The flip side of this is those of Us who came into the system after suffering from issues that We have never been diagnosed for, or those of Us who have grown up in communities or environments that are war zones or where civil wars are raging over so-called "beefs," territory and/or markets connected to the underground economy, where we have witnessed or seen a body before the age of 13, have lost childhood friends to violence, have lost a parent(s) to the drug game or P.I.C.

It has always angered me to hear government officials and other agencies talk about military veterans coming back from foreign wars who have PTSD and/or other mental health issues because of what they have witnessed or experienced, and yet we got children in Our communities witnessing school shootings, and street souljahs who have been involved in shooting wars, have buried friends and families or have bodies under their belts.

Ain't no Red Cross for Us, ain't no Veteran Affairs/Benefits for Us, ain't no military courts for Us where convictions and felonies get deferred or mediated. The only thing left for Us is

life sentences, extended aggravated sentences and a slow death.

The same applies to those of Us who have fallen victim to the government campaigns of chemical warfare raging in Our communities. Don't talk to Us about weapons of mass destruction hidden in the Middle East when we got Meth, Crack, Heroin and every illicit drug known to man saturating Our communities.

Where We grow up on it in order to escape the deplorable and harsh reality, we often have to find ways to either cope or escape, only to end up in the Prison Industrial Complex. Where the side effects or aftereffects of years of drug abuse get misdiagnosed or not diagnosed at all. Where such is again looked upon as a disciplinary issue, when in fact some of these youngsters have been traumatized in the ghetto colonies of amerika and have been smoking embalming fluid and experimenting with all kinds of chemical cocktails or have suffered all kinds of mental health issues that go untreated.

If we aren't cutting on Ourselves (some do), or aren't threatening suicide (some do), We don't get treatment. And if we're fortunate enough to get into a program, many of them are racially and culturally biased and not grounded or rooted in a reality that many of Us come from or plan to return back to.

Many of these programs, including Re-Entry, do nothing to adequately prepare Us to return back to society and not recidivate. In some systems, in fact, it is just another way/scheme to get federal funding/dollars for programs that have no real substance. So once again, many of Us are shoved through the cracks in the system, only to get trapped in the vicious cycle of catch, release and return - caught in the cycle of carrying these mental health issues into Our communities, only to exacerbate already existing social ills and issues. A never ending cycle of Genocide!!!

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## international &amp; antiwar news

## Russia, Ukraine &amp; the U.S. - The background they're not telling you

By Phil Wilayto

In the winter of 2022, the news is dominated by growing tensions between Russia and Ukraine. Reports that Russia has amassed some 100,000 troops on its border with neighboring Ukraine have brought charges from the United States and NATO that Russia is planning to invade its neighbor, with whom it has had increasingly tense relations.

Will Russia invade Ukraine? And if it does, how will the United States and NATO react? Already, the U.S. and its allies are threatening new sanctions against Russia, sending massive amounts of military equipment to Ukraine and beefing up their military presence in bordering countries.

How close are we to war in the region? And how would the U.S. be involved?

### BACKGROUND TO THE PRESENT CRISIS

It's impossible to understand anything about present Russian-Ukrainian relations without going back at least to late 2013, when mass demonstrations broke out against then-Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovych.

Ukraine was trying to decide if it wanted closer economic relations with Russia, its traditional major trading partner, or with the wealthier European Union. The country's parliament, or Rada, was pro-EU, while Yanukovych favored Russia. At the time - as now - many of the country's politicians were corrupt, including Yanukovych, so there already was popular resentment against him. When he decided to oppose the Rada over trade agreements, mass protests took place in Maidan Nezalezhnosti (Independence Square) in the capital city of Kiev.

But what began as peaceful, even celebratory gatherings were quickly taken over by right-wing paramilitary organizations modeled after WWII-era Ukrainian militias allied with the Nazi occupiers. Violence followed and Yanukovych fled the country. He was replaced by acting president Oleksandr Turchynov, and then the pro-U.S., pro-EU, pro-NATO Petro Poroshenko.

The movement that came to be known as

Maidan was an illegal, unconstitutional, violent coup - and it was backed to the hilt by the U.S. government and many countries in the European Union.

Then-Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs Victoria Nuland, who personally cheered on the Maidan protesters in Independence Square, later bragged about the role the U.S. had played in laying the groundwork for 2014. This is how she described that effort in a December 2013 speech to the U.S.-Ukraine Foundation, a non-governmental organization:

"Since Ukraine's independence in 1991, the United States has supported Ukrainians as they build democratic skills and institutions, as they promote civic participation and good governance, all of which are preconditions for Ukraine to achieve its European aspirations. We've invested over \$5 billion to assist Ukraine in these and other goals that will ensure a secure and prosperous and democratic Ukraine."

Translation: The U.S. spent \$5 billion intervening in the internal affairs of Ukraine to help steer it away from Russia and toward an

alliance with the West, an alliance that would financially benefit the West, while further isolating Russia.

Neo-liberal George Soros' Open Society Foundation also played a major role, as it explains on its website:

"The International Renaissance Foundation, part of the Open Society family of foundations, has supported civil society in Ukraine since 1990. For 25 years, the International Renaissance Foundation has worked with civil society organizations ... helping to facilitate Ukraine's European integration. The International Renaissance Foundation played an important role supporting civil society during the Euromaidan protests."

### AFTERMATH OF THE COUP

The coup split the country along the lines of ethnicity and politics and had devastating consequences for Ukraine, a fragile nation that has only been an independent country since 1991. Before that it was part of the Soviet Union, and before that it was long a contested region dominated by a series of other forces: Vikings,

Mongols, Lithuanians, Russians, Poles, Austrians and more. The name Ukraine itself means "borderland."

Today 17.3 percent of Ukraine's population is made up of ethnic Russians, who live mainly in the eastern part of the country, which borders Russia. Many more speak Russian as their primary language. And they tend to identify with the Soviet victory over the Nazi occupation of Ukraine.

During Soviet times, both Russian and Ukrainian were official state languages. One of the first acts of the new coup government was to declare that the only official language would be Ukrainian. It also quickly went about banning symbols of the Soviet era, replacing them with memorials to Nazi collaborators. Meanwhile, the neo-Nazi organizations active in the Maidan coup grew in membership and aggressiveness.

Shortly after the coup, fears of domination by an anti-Russian, pro-fascist central government led the people of Crimea to hold a referendum in which the majority voted to reunite with Russia. (Crimea had been part of Soviet Russia until 1954,

when it was administratively transferred to Soviet Ukraine.) Russia agreed, and annexed the region. This was the "invasion" denounced by Kiev and the West. Curiously, no one died in that "invasion."

Meanwhile, fighting broke out in Donbass, a heavily industrialized and largely ethnic Russian region of southeastern Ukraine that borders Russia, with local leftists declaring independence from Ukraine. This sparked a fierce Ukrainian opposition and fighting that to date has cost some 14,000 lives.

And in the historically Russian-oriented city of Odessa, a movement emerged that demanded a federal system in which local governors would be locally elected, not appointed by the central government as they are now. On May 2, 2014, at least 42 activists promoting this view were massacred at the House of Trade Unions when a fascist-led mob set it on fire. (See [www.odessasolidaritycampaign.org](http://www.odessasolidaritycampaign.org))

All this would make the national situation difficult enough, but these crises took place within the international context of rising tensions between the U.S.-led West and Russia.



This graphic shows how, ever since its founding in 1949, NATO has steadily expanded eastward toward Russia. Is there any reason why Russia shouldn't see the U.S. and NATO as the aggressor?



## international &amp; antiwar news

**WHAT DOES RUSSIA WANT?**

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the U.S.-led North Atlantic Treaty Organization, or NATO, has been recruiting the former Soviet republics into its anti-Russian alliance.

Ukraine is not yet a NATO member, but it operates as such in all but name. The U.S. and other Western countries train and supply its soldiers, help build its bases and conduct regular massive land, sea and air military exercises with Ukraine, which has a 1,200-mile land border with Russia and with which it shares the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov.

From Russia's point of view, it's NATO that is the aggressor. President Vladimir Putin has demanded a guarantee that NATO will not recruit Ukraine into its military alliance; an end to deploying NATO weapons near Russian borders; and an end to U.S.-NATO military exercises in Eastern Europe; all of which Russia views as serious threats to its security.

Let's look at the history: When NATO was founded on April 4, 1949, it had 12 members: the U.S., Canada and 10 Western European countries. By then the wartime cooperation with the Soviet Union was long over and NATO was essentially an anti-Soviet military/political alliance.

Six years later, as a counterbalance, the Soviet Union formed the nine-member Warsaw Pact, formally the Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance. That alliance was dismantled in 1991, 10 months before the formal dissolution of the Soviet Union. By then the U.S. had assured the Soviets that NATO would not be expanding eastward.

U.S. officials now deny that, but this is from the Los Angeles Times of May 30, 2016:

"In early February 1990, U.S. leaders made the Soviets an offer. According to transcripts of meetings in Moscow on Feb. 9, then-Secretary of State James Baker suggested that in exchange for cooperation on Germany, [the] U.S. could make 'iron-clad guarantees' that NATO would not expand 'one inch eastward.' Less than a week later, Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev agreed to begin reunification talks. No formal deal was struck, but from all the evidence, the quid pro quo was clear: Gorbachev acceded to Germany's western alignment and the U.S. would limit NATO's expansion."

But far from limiting NATO's expansion, the U.S. vigorously promoted it.

In 1999, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland were admitted into NATO. In 2004, Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia all became NATO members, followed in 2009 by Albania, Croatia and Montenegro, and then North Macedonia in March 2020.

So today NATO has expanded to 30 mem-

ber countries, with 14 - nearly half - either former members of the Soviet bloc or part of the former socialist state of Yugoslavia.

All new members admitted into NATO since the collapse of the Soviet Union are in Central or Eastern Europe. From a North American and Western European alliance, it has become a North American and European force that has moved steadily eastward right up to Russia's borders.

In NATO, the United States, United Kingdom and France together possess a total of 7,315 nuclear weapons. Russia is believed to have about 7,000. But in terms of overall military power, Russia's military budget in 2016 was just over 8 percent of the combined total of all NATO countries, and just over 11 percent of the U.S. alone.

This is important, because one of NATO's founding principles is that an attack on any one member country is to be considered an attack on all NATO members.

Today Russia is faced with a massive military and political alliance that includes Estonia and Latvia, two of the six countries on its western and southern borders.

In the present crisis, the U.S. and NATO are accusing Russia of planning to invade Ukraine, pointing to Russia's mobilization of what it says are 100,000 troops on its border with Ukraine. Meanwhile, the U.S. and its allies are sending massive amounts of military aid to Ukraine and are preparing to send their own troops to neighboring countries, to "support" Ukraine.

And ominously, Russia has accused Ukraine of deploying 125,000 troops to Donbass, raising fears that the government may be planning to try and retake the break-away region, in effect daring Russia to militarily intervene.

But as for a Russian invasion? Some key figures are expressing doubt. This is from a Jan. 26 report by the Associated Press:

"[Ukrainian] National Security and Defense Council Secretary Oleksiy Danilov sounded a similar note, arguing that the wave of Russian troops amassed at Ukraine's border 'is not news.' 'As of today, we don't see any grounds for statements about a full-scale offensive on our country,' Danilov added on Monday, according to the AP."

And this is from the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), on Jan. 23:

"The head of the German navy has resigned over controversial comments he made over Ukraine. Kay-Achim Schönbach said the idea that Russia wanted to invade Ukraine was nonsense. He added that all President Vladimir Putin wanted was respect. Mr Schönbach said on Saturday that he had resigned from his role 'with immediate effect' in order to 'avert further damage'.

**Virginia Defenders Statement on Yemen**

Jan. 26, 2022

On Jan. 21, the United Arab Emirates, as a part of the U.S.-backed Saudi war on Yemen, launched a military attack, targeting civilian homes, hospitals, sports facilities and a detention center, resulting in more than 300 casualties. In a deliberate attempt to prevent international media coverage of the assault, the UAE also destroyed Yemen's Internet cables, creating a nationwide Internet blackout that has yet to end.

The Virginia Defenders for Freedom, Justice & Equality stands in solidarity with the besieged Yemeni people. Through its multibillion dollar arms deals with oil-rich Saudi Arabia, the United States government is criminally complicit in the ongoing slaughter.

In March of 2021, President Biden announced that the United States would cut its support for offensive operations in Yemen. And yet, the Jan. 21 attack came just one month after the U.S. Senate approved a \$650 million arms sale to Saudi Arabia. In response to this recent assault on Yemen, Secretary of State Antony Blinken spoke to Saudi Arabia's foreign minister,

committing to further support for the Saudi coalition's "defense" against Yemen, while declining to comment on the UAE's attacks on Yemen.

According to the U.N. humanitarian office, over a quarter-million Yemenis have been killed in the Saudi-led war. According to UNICEF, 10,000 children have been killed or wounded. In the debris of the destroyed detention center where 82 civilians were killed, rescuers discovered a missile fragment with the manufacturer cage code for American defense contractor Raytheon.

The Virginia Defenders demand, in accordance with the Biden administration's own promises, that the U.S. government end its military support for the war on Yemen and end its support for the Saudi blockade, which prevents humanitarian aid from entering the country.

We uphold our commitment to the right of the oppressed peoples of the world to self-defense, and encourage our friends and allies to continue to raise their voices against the barbaric U.S.-backed war against Yemen.

**WHAT WASHINGTON WANTS**

Is war with Russia a real possibility? Yes. It could come to that, most likely as a result of miscalculations by one side or the other operating in a high-tension, high-risk military situation.

But Washington's real goal is not to destroy Russia, but to dominate it - to turn it into another neo-colony whose role would be to supply the Empire with raw materials, cheap labor and a captive consumer market, just as it has done to Eastern European countries like Poland and Hungary and for much longer in Asia, Africa and Latin America. Increasingly, Ukraine is becoming a central battleground in this global campaign for U.S. hegemony.

And what's the strategy? In the late 1990s, the U.S. basically spent the Soviet Union under the table by forcing it to spend its limited resources on matching the U.S. in what was called the Arms Race. The result was growing demoralization among the Soviet people, who ultimately did not mount any mass resistance to the collapse of their country and economic system. The present increasing Western military threat and economic sanctions against Russia seems to be coming from the same playbook.

Further threatening the goal of U.S. world

hegemony is the growing alliance between Russia, with its 7,000 nuclear weapons, and China, another nuclear power and the world's largest economy, after the United States. Breaking up that alliance by bringing Russia to heel is likely another central goal of the propaganda campaign against Russia.

There's also the matter of the \$11 billion Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline, which, if implemented, would double the amount of gas flowing directly from Russia to Germany, bypassing the traditional route through Ukraine, depriving it of billions in transit fees. The pipeline is most likely one reason Germany has so far refused to send military equipment to Ukraine.

However the present crisis is resolved, we must remember that working and oppressed people in the West have nothing to gain from this dangerous situation, and everything to lose if war against Russia were actually to break out.

The antiwar movement and its allies must speak out forcefully against U.S. and NATO aggression. We must demand that the massive amounts of tax dollars being spent on war and war preparations instead be used for the good of the people here at home and reparations for the crimes Washington and NATO have committed abroad.



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