

*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

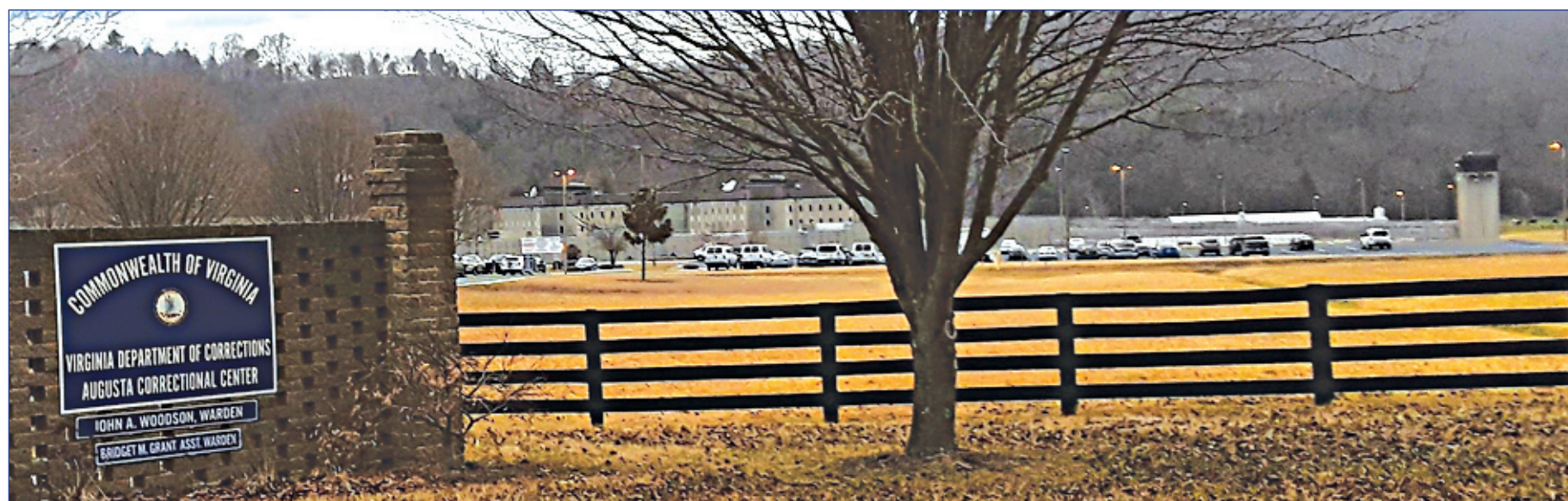
Publishing since 2005 - Now serving 14 Virginia cities and counties

Vol. 18, No. 4, Issue 70

15,000 copies

Online at virginiadefender.org

Autumn 2022



The Augusta Correctional Center near Craigsville in Augusta County is one of 40 prisons administered by the Virginia Department of Corrections. The system confines some 24,000 women and men.

Photo by Phil Wilayto

What's really going on inside Virginia's prisons?

On Saturday, Jan. 14, the Virginia Prison Justice Network will hold its 6th Annual Virginia Prison Justice Rally, when prisoners, their families and supporters will raise issues that need to be addressed by the 2023

Virginia General Assembly. This edition of The Virginia Defender is dedicated to educating the public about those issues. For time and place, see the ad on the back page. And plan to join us at the rally!

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The Rally Program**

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The Rally Demands**

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Suggestions from
prisoners, formerly
incarcerated,
families & supporters**

"Don't be shocked when I say I was in prison. You're still in prison. That's what America means: prison." — Malcolm X — May 19, 1925 - Feb. 21, 1965

community news

PROGRAM for the 6th ANNUAL VIRGINIA PRISON JUSTICE RALLY

Co-Chairs

LYNETTA THOMPSON
Co-Founder, Community Unity in Action (CUIA)

JENNIFER DALTON
Founder & Executive Director, Ignite Justice

Speakers

BRING BACK PAROLE: NADIR SALAAM,
Co-founder, Freedom Over Everything

**REINSTATE ENHANCED EARNED SENTENCE CREDIT
FOR EVERYONE:** Representative, Forty Strong

END SOLITARY CONFINEMENT: NATASHA WHITE
Coordinator, Va. Coalition on Solitary Confinement

INDEPENDENT OUTSIDE OVERSIGHT to end
inhumane conditions in Virginia's prisons:

HASSAN SHABAZZ
Co-Founder & Steering Committee Member, VAPJN

Solidarity Messages

**KEITH BRAGG, President, Bakery, Confectionery,
Tobacco Workers & Grain Millers (BCTGM) Local 358**

**REV. RODNEY, Pastor, Wesley Memorial
United Methodist Church**

**STEVE BAGGARLY, Norfolk Catholic Worker,
Virginia's antiwar movement**

BUILD THE VIRGINIA PRISON JUSTICE NETWORK!

**MARGARET BRESLAU, Co-Founder & Steering
Committee Member, VAPJN; editor, VAPJN Newsletter**

**PHIL WILAYTO, Co-Founder & Steering Committee
Member, VAPJN; editor, The Virginia Defender**

OPEN MIC

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

THE VIRGINIA DEFENDERS for Freedom, Justice & Equality

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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.

cops, courts & prisons



Photo by Phil Wilayto

Virginia Defenders Charles Brown and Kat McNeal hold the VAPJN banner at the 2020 Virginia Prison Justice Rally, held outside the Virginia Capitol in Richmond.

Join us at the 6th Annual Virginia Prison Justice Rally

1 pm - Sat., Jan. 14 - Richmond's Monroe Park

These are the 4 main demands:

BRING BACK PAROLE!

"Parole" refers to the release of a prisoner before the completion of their sentence. There are two types: "mandatory," when a person is released after they have served a set amount of their sentence, and "discretionary," when a person is granted release by a panel known as a Parole Board. Discretionary is what most people mean when they use the word parole.

Virginia created parole in 1942. The thinking, supposedly, was that the possibility of an early release would be an incentive for good behavior and self-rehabilitation in prison. That assumed that people were capable of improving themselves. And this was during World War II, when men were needed to be drafted into the military, so that also may have been a factor. (Puerto Ricans were "granted" U.S. citizenship in 1917, just in time to be drafted for World War I.)

But Virginia abolished parole in 1995,

instituting "Truth in Sentencing" as part of a wave of tough-on-crime measures that right-wing politicians were promoting as a way to get votes. This time, the thinking was that the only effective incentive for good behavior, in or out of prison, was the possibility of harsh punishments. The hope of early release was replaced by the fear of longer sentences.

The system got even crueler after 1995, when judges were not telling juries that parole had been abolished. As a result, juries continued to recommend long sentences, thinking that prisoners wouldn't be serving the entire sentence. Over the next five years, 549 people, around 2 percent of the state's prison population, were given these longer sentences.

Then, in 2000, in a case brought by a prisoner named Richard David Fishback, the Virginia Supreme Court ruled that juries must be told that parole had been abolished. That was an important improvement, but it didn't affect the hundreds who had been sentenced in the

previous five years.

Then, in 2015, the Governor's Commission on Parole Review recommended that the so-called "Fishback" prisoners get an opportunity for discretionary parole.

But it took another five years, until April 2020, for a bill to be passed providing for the possibility of parole for the Fishback prisoners. That session of the General Assembly also expanded parole eligibility to people who had been convicted of crimes committed as juveniles and who had served more than 20 years of their sentences.

So today, only the following prisoners are eligible for parole:

- those sentenced before 1995;
- those sentenced between 1995 and 2000 - the "Fishback" prisoners;
- those who were sentenced for crimes committed as juveniles and who have served more than 20 years of their sentence;
- those who qualify for geriatric (old age) parole.

In practice, very few people up for parole actually get it. Of the more than 17,000 Virginia cases considered from 2013 to 2019, only about 6 percent received parole.

Why bring back parole?

First of all, it would be a recognition that all prisoners are human beings and, as such, deserve the right to second chances.

And if that simple humanitarian concern is too much for the politicians to wrap their heads around, try this:

The projected VADOC budget for 2023 is \$1,500,668,914.00. That's \$1.5 billion, plus.

As of March 2022, the average number of people incarcerated by the VADOC was 23,730, including 46 prisoners from other states. (VADOC figures.)

Divide the VADOC budget by the number of prisoners and you get \$63,362.14 per prisoner.

Bringing back parole would allow for more prisoners being released, thus saving Virginia taxpayers a lot of money. It would provide some hope for those who have had many years and even decades to turn their lives around. It would help reconnect families, return mothers and fathers to their children, women and men to their elderly parents and (the money, again) turn dependent wards of the state into productive, tax-paying Virginians.

But for whatever reason moves you, it's way past time for Virginia to do the right thing, and bring back parole.

REINSTATE THE EXPANDED EARNED SENTENCE CREDIT

Earned Sentence Credit is "enhanced good time" that a prisoner can earn by showing "good behavior" and participating in rehabilitation programs. The credit can then be applied to the person's sentence, thus reducing their time. In the past, prisoners could earn up to 4.5 days per month.

In 2020, the Virginia General Assembly passed a law that expanded this provision, allowing prisoners to earn credits for up to 15 days per month. The good time would only apply to sentences for nonviolent crimes, but those convicted of both violent and nonviolent crimes could still earn credit to reduce their sentences for the nonviolent offenses. The law was important, because in Virginia very few prisoners are eligible for parole.

The new law took effect on July 1 of this year, and about 560 prisoners were told they were going to be released in the first 60 days of the program. Thousands more would eventually benefit.

But then the good Gov. Glenn Youngkin proposed an amendment to the state budget that would eliminate any prisoners from the program who had both violent and nonviolent offenses. The amendment was adopted by the General Assembly, mostly by Republicans, but with some Democrats supporting it.

According to The Virginian-Pilot, "A spokesman for the Department of Corrections confirmed that about 8,000 inmates will now be ineligible for the expanded credits."

The effect of the amendment was devastating, especially for the prisoners who were told they were going to be released. Many reported suffering severe depression. Families were traumatized.

The United States is notorious for imposing longer prison sentences than most other countries in the world. That's a major reason why, with less than 5 percent of the global population, the U.S. holds more than 20 percent of the world's prisoners, according to the ACLU.

Simple common sense would dictate that providing a means for prisoners to reduce their sentences through "good behavior" and rehabilitative programs would make for both more effective rehabilitation and less violent prisons. And that applies to ALL prisoners.

The General Assembly needs to reinstate the enhanced earned sentence credit, now, for everyone.

See **DEMANDS** on page 4

cops, courts & prisons

DEMANDS continued from page 3

END SOLITARY CONFINEMENT!

Here's how the Code of Virginia defines solitary confinement: "... isolation of a prisoner from the general population through confinement to a cell or other place for 22 or more hours within a 24-hour period."

VADOC claims it no longer uses solitary confinement, but that's because it now calls it by another name: "Restorative Housing." But whatever you call it, it still means keeping someone in a cell for 22 or more hours a day.

VADOC calls its solitary "restorative" because it has what it calls a "Step-Down" program, in which participants "... have the opportunity to progress to a general population setting with the use of interactive journaling, therapeutic modules, and programming that is done individually and in group settings." (Adoption of Restorative Housing in the Virginia Department of Corrections, FY2022 Report, by Harold W. Clarke, VADOC Director.)

Sounds promising, right? So here's how it worked out for a prisoner named Nicolas Reyes.

Reyes, from El Salvador, was held in solitary confinement at Virginia's Red Onion supermax prison. The Step-Down program was available to him, but it required him to be able to read and write in English. Reyes wasn't even able to read and write in his native Spanish. He also suffered from mental illness, which got worse the longer he was held in solitary.

He was held in solitary confinement for 12 years.

Twelve years.

According to a lawsuit filed in 2018 by the MacArthur Justice Center, Reyes deteriorated to the point where he would suffer hallucinations and often couldn't even identify the prison he was in.

Twelve years.

In January 2021, "Virginia agreed to pay Reyes \$115,000 and set up a system for ensuring that non-English-speakers in the prison system are not isolated for lack of ability to communicate," according to the Washington Post.

Another lawsuit settled in 2021 involved Tyquine Lee, a Black prisoner from Portsmouth, also with a history of mental illness, who was placed in solitary at Red Onion on May 26, 2016.

He was released 600 days later.

By that time, according to the lawsuit, he had lost more than 30 pounds, the ability to speak, recognize his mother or even remember his own name.

He had been spending more than 22 hours a day in an 80-square-foot concrete cell behind a steel door. "His only regular time outside of the cell was for showers three times a week and an hour of recreation each day alone in a cage the size of a parking space," according to the lawsuit.

That case was settled with a \$150,000 settlement and a transfer to a New Jersey prison so he could be closer to his mother.

By way of context, the United Nations and various human rights organizations consider the use of solitary confinement for any period longer than 15 consecutive days to be torture.

And remember, the same people in charge of VADOC during these cases are still in charge of it now.

End this inhuman practice, NOW!

INDEPENDENT OUTSIDE OVERSIGHT OF THE DOC!

When an entity doesn't follow its own rules and regulations, it becomes a law unto itself, without any checks or balances.

The Virginia Department of Corrections, VADOC, is in need of an Independent Oversight Committee that is separate from the Virginia Ombudsman Department or the Special Investigations Unit (S.I.U.) and has its own autonomy; its own research and investigative powers and capabilities; its own access to the VADOC's internal policies and operating procedures; and security clearance that allows it to do "on-site" inspections when receiving complaints of abuses or complaints about conditions of confinement or non-compliance with the Virginia Code, statutes of the Commonwealth and policies or Operating Procedures of the VADOC.

This security clearance should clear the path for any committee members to have unfettered access to be able to interview any inmate confined within the VADOC as it pertains to any complaint filed or investigative matter that is being pursued within the context and boundaries of the Oversight Committee.

An Oversight Committee provides an extra layer of protection to safeguarding the human and constitutional rights of prisoners, while also cutting costs and providing an actual layer of protection for VADOC personnel and staff against false or frivolous complaints and lawsuits that take up valuable or limited resources to investigate or litigate.

Currently, we believe that the mechanisms that have been put in place by the VADOC, such as the Ombudsman Bureau, the S.I.U., etc., are inadequate for enforcing certain rules, regulations and policies and have in fact acted as buffers in preventing more thorough and serious independent investiga-

tions into serious abuses, such as: allegations of use of excessive force; outright beatings of inmates or targeted/orchestrated assaults; improper use of K-9 attack dogs where they have been allowed to bite and maim inmates in non-life-threatening situations; racially motivated attacks; bribing or manipulating prisoner-on-prisoner assaults against jailhouse lawyers, alleged sex offenders or so-called informants who expose or file complaints about conditions or unconstitutional treatment of the inmate population.

While this committee may have no outright enforcement powers, it should be allowed to give testimony and make recommendations to various legislative committees responsible for providing funding to the VADOC that are responsible for regulating the policies and operating procedures of the VADOC. This committee should be able to annually submit a fact-finding investigative report that existing bodies within the department should be required to respond to in front of a legislative fact-finding body/committee, with suggested changes, corrections and resolutions submitted before this same body.

'CALLS FROM HOME' TO PRISONERS IN SW VIRGINIA

Call in: 7-9 pm

Broadcast: 9-10 pm

Phone: 1-888-396-1208

Every Monday, the WMMT "Calls from Home" radio show broadcasts brief messages from friends & family, faith-based communities & advocates to incarcerated people in Va. prisons, jails & federal facilities in SW Appalachia.



*Wesley Memorial
United Methodist Church*

**R. M. HUNTER
Pastor**

**1720 Mechanicsville Pike
Richmond, VA 23223
Church (804) 644-5830
Residence (804) 329-1375**

**11 am Sunday Worship
7 pm Wednesday Bible Study**



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Suggestions from prisoners, formerly incarcerated, family members & supporters for issues to be raised at the 6th Annual Virginia Prison Justice Rally

BRING BACK PAROLE!

RED ONION (Spouse): My husband is incarcerated at red onion state prison. I think that parole for the general population should be spotlighted at the upcoming rally.

LUNENBURG: Bring parole back for all offenders and stop discriminating laws to benefit a budget or an agenda. Parole is not privilege to everyone which is why it shouldn't be a problem to implement it back into the system, especially with the new parole board and their method of evaluation.

BUCKINGHAM: We've been fighting to bring parole back to Virginia for a long time and we continue to be sold a bad bill of goods by our politicians. They seek our support and vote and once they're elected or re-elected our interest is then ignored. I believe we need to take a new approach and that's allow the people of Virginia to decide. Parole should be placed on the next ballot.

RIVER NORTH: Parole: That's self-explanatory. The opportunity needs to be extended to all prisoners, not just Fishback, old law, and juvenile. The messaging needs to be much stronger. A narrative has been created and hijacked by far-right conservatives. We must take it back by finding a popular, prominent voice to extol the virtues of parole eligibility.

RIVER NORTH: I have been in prison for almost 24 years. Now I am 54 years old. I think the biggest thing I would like to see changed is that parole would be reinstated. It makes no kind of sense that we do not have a review process in place for inmates to be evaluated for early release. Simply evaluating inmates who have in some cases served decades in prison for potential release should not threaten public safety. Virginia has thousands of aging inmates 50 and older. Many of these men like myself have been in prison for 20 years or more.

GREENSVILLE: We also have to demand this PB is NOT CONFIRMED by that Democratic Senate in the State Capitol. These members aren't releasing guys and are un-

dermining the Dems agenda and they need to explain to their "constituency" what they are planning to do to protect their legislative POLICIES underpinning FISHBACK and Juvenile parole!

GERIATRIC PAROLE

RIVER NORTH: I would like to see the age of eligibility for geriatric parole lowered from 60 to 55 if the inmate has served at least 15 or 20 years of their sentence. Releasing someone at 55 as opposed to 60 or older gives that person far more employment opportunities. It's much harder for reintegration into society the older a person grows sitting in prison, especially when these inmates are least likely to reoffend and their health care costs are the highest and statistics show we are the least likely to offend when released. Not only that, but the 50 and older demographic is the most vulnerable group of inmates. We are often mixed in with the younger, more violent, gang-affiliated guys who are coming into prison with lengthy sentences and no incentive for good behavior. Parole eligibility creates both an incentive for positive reform-oriented behavior, as well as an education process for earned early second chance.

JUVENILE SENTENCES

GREEN ROCK: As an adolescent, I made a series of life altering mistakes. Even more unfortunate it is that lives other than my own were altered. To say I have matured is to speak of maturation as if it is some extraordinary occurrence along the teenager's path to adulthood. It is reasonable to expect that an adult should see, clearly, the feebleness that marked the thought processes of their youth - undeveloped brain. (Our laws should reflect - in understanding - this reality.) This growth, for me and for most others alike, was not overnight. Nor is it, at any point, without difficulty, under these circumstances. I cannot bypass, without emphatic mention, how incredibly difficult this process (maturation) is in this environment. Though I have lived closing in on half of my life in confinement (15 yrs), I have served not nearly enough time

- under current legislation - to qualify for any alternative conclusion to leaving prison with very few years of productivity left, further burdening the state. As long as prison is a primary option for our children, we will know a great deal of shame; and, ultimately, we will continue failing to know the highest levels of our potential.

REINSTATE EXPANDED EARNED SENTENCE CREDIT - FOR EVERYONE!

[Relative]: I would like to see if they can revisit the good time law that our Governor went back on when he got into office. I think that was wrong after it was approved.

KEEN MOUNTAIN: All long term prisoners in Virginia serving a life sentence or a lot of time would like to see a bill that would help us to earn some benefits for good behavior that has meaning toward our sentence where we will one day have a chance to get out of prison.

LUNENBURG: The first issue of course is the good time bill, because we can't let up on that even though Republicans are against. We need good time for all felons (violent and nonviolent) or at least honor what it was at first with the mix charges just to be fair, because we all have to earn it anyway.

RACISM IN PRISON CLOSINGS & RESOURCE ALLOCATION

RIVER NORTH: Why is it that the only areas where prisons are closed or partially shut down are in the eastern or central region? Could it be an issue of race? The western region employs predominately white staff, while the eastern and central employ mostly African American staff. Because of these closings, prisoners are being funneled into the west region and placed in prisons like River North where staffing shortages are rampant. In the last twelve months this security level four prison has never provided the minimum of eight hours of "out of cell activity" mandated by VaDoc for all sL4 prisons. Religious programming is restricted to twice monthly

instead of weekly. Outside rec is provided three days out of the week at best, unless you reside in a P.B.U. The administration has provided every excuse, from covid restrictions to staffing shortages. We spend on average 19 hrs in the cell, 18 hrs on a good day. It should be 16 hrs maximum. This prison is labeled a correctional center, but is run like a state prison. Prisoners have tried to address these issues to no avail. The admin does not take our requests seriously.

There is an ongoing investigation into the beatings and K9 assaults, at the hands of officers, of multiple mentally ill prisoners this year. Why does this prison get to stay open? Does the DOC allocate the same amount of money to the other regions as they do the western? Does River North have to perform to a certain standard to qualify for these funds? Is Keen Mountain underperforming also? These are serious questions that must be answered in the interest of equality and fair treatment by the Va Doc, not only of prisoners, but of staff of color in other regions. Maybe former officers from all regions can enlighten us. Thank you for listening and may someone do something.

PRISON LABOR

KEEN MOUNTAIN: There have been 5 states this November on the ballot to Abolish the 13th Amendment to the Us Constitution, which ended slavery. When it was ratified in 1865, states: "Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction." The exception highlighted in the 13th Amendment created a loophole allowing for involuntary servitude for those in prison. On November 8, 2022, Alabama, Louisiana, Oregon, Tennessee and Vermont decided whether to remove this punishment exception for involuntary servitude from their state constitutions. All prisoners in the Va system would like for this to be considered in our state of Virginia as well.

See **SUGGESTIONS** on page 6

cops, courts & prisons

SUGGESTIONS

from page 5

AUGUSTA [Spouse]: My husband is currently incarcerated at Augusta correctional center in VA . He has been incarcerated almost 3 years out of a 10 year sentence. He works every day in the tailor shop, sometimes 10 hour days, and only earns 37 cents an hour. This is below slave wages. Thank you for everything you do.

LUNENBURG: Also, the same issues you have been fighting for all the time, which is our pay. We have to be able to take care of ourselves and as fathers and husbands we should be able to provide some form of income to help support our loved ones. We're living on Slave wages in prison, because of the constitutional mindset of involuntary servitude in exchange for punishment. That is inhumane and our labor should not be an alternative for our crime. The judge sentenced each one of us as payment for what the crime deserves. We shouldn't be punished twice for the same crime. Incentives or work for pay is a part of rehabilitation which is supposed to be rewarded and expanded according to your work, skills and progress. There hasn't been a raise in inmate pay since the 1950's and yet they believe programming and education will prevent criminal behavior. We are living below the poverty rate when poverty is already the ingredient to depression, crime and violence. This is an issue that should never end until something is done about it in the entire VADOC.

WOMEN'S PRISONS

VIRGINIA CORRECTIONAL CENTER FOR WOMEN: As you may know, there are many issues plaguing us on the inside. Much too many to name. However, speaking for the incarcerated women, our voices are not heard often enough. So I speak to amplify them. At times we women feel that our carceral experience does not parallel that of the incarcerated man. There are not nearly enough resources for us as there are for our male counterparts. We are left to fend for ourselves while on the inside, as well as upon release and re-entry into a society that paints us unfit. Let me assure you, we are not unfit. We are the mothers, daughters, aunts and sisters that have been cast aside and seemingly forgotten. So I ask each of you to keep us in your thoughts when considering changes for our next legislative agenda. Thank you, and have a nice day!

OK, that's my statement. Here are the

concerns:

- 1 - Racist Correctional Officers toward Black people.
- 2 - Not providing supplies such as hair care and make-up for different ethnicities.
- 3 - Why does the justice system seem harder on women than men?
- 4 - Why do women have less rights, resources and opportunities than men?
- 5 - Why do addicts entering the system receive no help medically?
- 6 - Why do drug addicts receive harsher sentences than sex offenders?
- 7 - Formulary vs. non-formulary medications.
- 8 - Women do not have places to go or other resources available to them to help with their children upon release.

HEALTH CARE

NOTTOWAY: The medical situation is the worst, and their go-to is they don't have anyone in certain positions. Like for example, I haven't had my teeth cleaned since before the covid hit.

MENTAL HEALTH

GREENSVILLE: i think there should be a focus on better mental health care for prisoners. i'm realizing that the d*ug use is on epidemic levels. Truth in Sentencing is weighing on guys. i've never seen so many guys involved in heavy d*ug use in here. The state isn't considering the consequence of having so many prisoners with addiction issues. The long and short term effects. i'd bet anything s*icide and attempted s*icide rates have increased over the last 10 years. Look man, this generation is medicating their pain with d*ugs. They are apolitical and nihilistic! The focus has to be healing the mind and heart of brothers so that they can become aware that they are under attack and have a duty to resist. How you fight the revolution doped up? So we demand:

A recognition by the state that being a given and serving a long term (10+ years) sentence is traumatic.

Social & Mental health programing and treatment around issues of PTSD, Depression, Anxiety, hypervigilance and antisocial personality. (For example, Family Day events, more visitation time and a more humane setting, more jobs, education (specifically cultural), and recreation opportunities, phones on tablets, g*ng intervention programs with incentives to leave the g*ng and

mandatory victim impact programming. i really believe we have to challenge the state to be less Draconian with their penology and get them to explain why they're so draconian inside the prisons.

MENTAL HEALTH FUNDING

RIVER NORTH: Mental health care funding: In the western region, mental health staff only meet with prisoners if they are suicidal or diagnosed with a serious mental health condition. If you struggle with more minor issues (depression, anxiety, etc), you will be mostly ignored. They are understaffed, so it takes weeks even months to be seen by a QMHP. They can not give real treatment/sessions, they mostly pass out worksheets, tell you to "toughen up" and expect you to figure it out. There needs to be more funding to hire more staff and to provide daily mental health group classes and distance learning (institutional programming).

RIVER NORTH: Prisoner morale in the western region has been low for years. The heightened level of security (k9, guns, etc) and constant micro-aggressions naturally wear down the human psyche. Alcohol consumption and substance abuse are what prisoners engage in to battle depression, hopelessness and suicidal thoughts. Prisoners are witnessing other prisoners overdosing, and still take the same substance, gambling with their lives. What does that tell you?

DRUG OVERDOSES

BUCKINGHAM: There is a serious problem that the citizens of Virginia isn't being made aware of, and that is prisoner overdose. I've spoke with different members of the D.O.C admins. and they too agree that it's a problem, but no one is willing to step up. If we can get some outside help in teaching CPR to a group of offenders, who are truly the first responders to an overdose, then i believe we will reduce the cause of death, and with these classes having a drug counselor come in. The Department needs to acknowledge that it's a problem and also offer offenders a detox program without any punishment.

JAIL TIME VS. PRISON TIME

KEEN MOUNTAIN: There is a policy that Doc has concerning prisoners in Va that has 40 years or more must serve 20 years on a level 4 prison before they can move down

levels, and as it stands right now, their jail time does not count towards the 20 years, but we get our state numbers while we are in jail. So we would ask that the time we serve in jail would be counted towards our 20 years. Waiting to go to DOC because you have prisoners who sit in jail sometimes years waiting to go to DOC and that's not fair to the prisoners because this is out of his or her control.

PRISON MAIL

[Relative]: You can put five sheets 8x11 in mail for one stamp, 1 oz. The DOC changed mail to inmates to three sheets per envelope, one side of sheet left blank. Costs double to send a five page letter. How do you get Clark and Roberson fired.

200-MILE RULE

[Relative]: Change the 200 mile rule for special visits to 150 or 100 miles. Maybe all disabled people can have special visits, no mileage.

BACKSCATTER X-RAY SCANNERS FOR VISITORS

[Relative]: I would like to see highlighted the use of backscatter x-ray scanners in prisons to scan visitors. These scanners create detailed images of a person unclothed and are used to scan children. Pictures are saved indefinitely in the system, from what staff has said, and can be viewed by anyone with access. I believe these scanners must be removed from use as they were found to be too invasive for airports, but are somehow ok for prison visitors.

TABLETS

LUNENBURG: The tablets that we have are outdated and Virginia needs to get in tune with technology. It's already a proposal for (rfp 3262-1) contract that will allow us to use our tablets for phone calls, ebooks, legal research, movies, banking and more. However, Virginia is as always dragging their feet when it comes to incentives for us. All they have to do is apply for the federal funding (Digital Equity) so that the vadoc can expand their internet protocol for reliable communication services. This will eliminate a lot of unnecessary violence and conflict between prisoners, especially for those with long sentences.

See **SUGGESTIONS** on page 7

Bro. Olmec El
(757) 314-1943

community news



The Bon Secours healthcare system displays its pride in Richmond Community Hospital with this colorful banner outside the facility in Richmond's impoverished East End. Maybe it's true: Pride really does cometh before the fall. Photo by Kat McNeal

Bad Help: Bon Secours & Richmond's East End

By Melinda Lewis

Richmond Community Hospital does not have an intensive care unit. It does not have a maternity ward. It no longer has kidney or lung specialists. Its cardiologists have long since gone. Its air conditioning sometimes breaks down. Standard medical instruments can be hard to find.

And yet, it's the most profitable among Bon Secours' Richmond hospitals. As The New York Times and the Richmond Times-Dispatch have recently reported, there is a reason: selling drugs.

A federal program created in the 1990s, called 340B after its section of federal law, allows hospitals that serve low-income communities to purchase drugs at greatly discounted prices, with the idea that they can then reinvest the savings into those communities.

In this case, Bon Secours qualified to purchase the discounted drugs because it owns Richmond Community Hospital, which serves Richmond's largely impoverished East End. But instead of investing the savings back into that hospital, Bon Secours sells the discounted drugs at higher prices to wealthier patients around Greater Richmond, pocketing the difference.

Investing the savings into Richmond Community could have made a real difference for health care in the surrounding neighborhoods. Maternity wards might have served them better, given the maternal death rates of these communities, which are not just low-income, but predominantly Black. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Black women

are three times more likely to die from pregnancy-related causes than white women.

Intensive care units might better serve low-income communities, especially given the impact of COVID-19. Research by the National Institutes of Health shows that communities with a high African-American density have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic.

Richmond Community Hospital is owned by Bon Secours Mercy Health, one of the largest healthcare systems in the U.S., made up of 50 Mercy Health and Bon Secours hospitals and more than 1,000 care sites across seven states, plus five in Ireland. The system has more than 60,000 employees and a "pro forma net operating revenue of approximately \$10 billion," according to its website.

In 2020, according to the NYT, the system paid its chief executive officer \$6 million in compensation.

Bon Secours (the name is French for "good help") is a Catholic healthcare system that says its mission is "to extend the compassionate ministry of Jesus by improving the health and well-being of our communities and bring good help to those in need, especially people who are poor, dying and underserved."

"Underserved" is the issue, and Bon Secours has underserved the East End, a community that, according to the NYT, is "home to Richmond's largest black population" and "lacks some basic services." The area only recently got a full-service grocery store.

Richmond Community could have been the focus of better serving this community. A hospital with a full range of services would have told

the community that Bon Secours really wanted to improve its "health and well-being." While Bon Secours touts that Richmond Community patients can easily use the services of its other hospitals, in reality that is difficult for many patients with spotty transportation, limited bus service and Bon Secours' seeming reluctance to open those other beds to them, as reported by the NYT and RTD.

On the other hand, patients at Bon Secours' St. Mary's hospital in Richmond's West End are well-served. That surrounding community, according to data from the 2021 American Community Survey of the Census Bureau for the 23226 zip code, has a median income of \$62,696. It's also 90 percent white.

St. Mary's has the full range of a hospital's services, with a cancer institute; a top cardiovascular practice; high rankings for emergency medicine, critical care, stroke and the place to have a baby in Richmond, as Bon Secours says on its website.

Just as West End Richmond wants a St. Mary's in its community, East End Richmond does as well. Rather than that, a program that should have provided them a St. Mary's did not.

By making their other hospitals subsidiaries of Richmond Community, Bon Secours can use its savings from the 340B program to build clinics for those hospitals, as it has done with at least 10 such clinics, according to the RTD. As the RTD also has reported, Bon Secours is sending some of its Richmond profits to the system's Ohio headquarters: in 2019, "for every dollar the not-for-profit made in revenue, 28 cents left the state and went to Ohio."

What remains at Richmond Community is in some ways worse than the hospital that was founded in 1907 by Black doctors who could not work in hospitals in the West End. As Bon Secours notes on its website, Sarah Garland Jones, M.D., the first woman to pass the examination by the Virginia Board of Medicine, is credited with pioneering the early vision for Richmond Community.

The hospital is descended from the first African-American patient care facility in Virginia. Some of the doctors who worked there were so committed, according to the NYT, that one of them mortgaged his house to help pay to expand the hospital.

Insurance changed things, chasing away the patients, as the NYT has noted. The Black doctors then sold the hospital to Bon Secours. Insurance should have changed things again for Richmond Community with the 340B program. The hospital should have gotten all it needed: its patients back, an ICU, maternity ward, specialists. After all, it's making the most money. It just isn't keeping it.

While the 340B program is not working as it was intended, it could if Congress required it. The provisions of the program, in the Code of Federal Regulations, are lean by federal statutory standards: a few definitions, the ceiling

price for the drugs and a process for dispute resolution. There is nothing in the law that says hospitals have to reinvest their profits — nothing. If that was the hope, it was not expressed. While many have touted those reinvestments as the objective of the program, the law does not say so.

The 340B program can work that way and many free clinics and community health centers have used it to do so, as reported by the RTD. Daily Planet Health Services pays its outreach workers with the savings it receives from the 340B program. While these clinics and health centers may be a small percentage of the program, as noted by Colleen Meiman in the RTD, they can show the way. These clinics and health centers provide critical drugs and outreach services for their patients, the poorest in the region, just like those around Richmond Community.

If the 340B program is to work that way, changes will have to be made. At a minimum, a reporting requirement could be added to the law. Participants in the program would have to report how much they have saved under the program and how they used those savings.

The program also could include an income requirement to define eligible patients, which it does not. Those changes might pressure participants in the program to use their savings for the communities that need it.

While Congress needs to make these changes to the program, organizations such as the newly formed Richmond Coalition for Healthcare Equity are pressuring Bon Secours to make changes itself, including investing all of its profits in low-income communities.

The money is there in the program to help the poorest in the region. As reported in the RTD, Virginia Commonwealth University wanted to buy Richmond Community, but Bon Secours declined. It apparently has no interest in getting rid of its cash cow.

The original Sept. 24 New York Times story, titled "Profits Over Patients," has received wide media coverage in Virginia. In a statement to VPM News, Bon Secours Mercy Health spokesperson Jenna Green wrote that "Richmond Community Hospital maintains rigorous internal oversight of the 340B program so that we can continue to provide accessible, affordable, high-quality care through this and other programs that improve the well-being of the greater Richmond community."

Ms. Green was contacted again for this story to ask whether Bon Secours plans to use the funds from the 340B program differently given the concerns raised in the community and whether Bon Secours had any additional services and/or improvements planned for Richmond Community.

Ms. Green had not responded by the time this story went to print.

If Richmond Community got a little of the funds funneled away from it, maybe it at least could have reliable air conditioning — and maybe some good help.

community news



Photo by Kat McNeal

Forestbrooke Apartments tenants and their supporters protest outside the owners' office to demand better maintenance at the complex on Richmond's South Side.

Forestbrooke Apartments tenants demand better maintenance

Staff report

More than 40 tenants and supporters along with housing activists with the nonprofit group Virginia Organizing marched on Dec. 10 to the downtown Richmond offices of Amurcon Realty to deliver a holiday present of coal.

The company, with headquarters on East Main Street, owns Forestbrooke Apartments, a low-income complex on the city's South Side located off Warwick Boulevard between Midlothian Turnpike and Hull Street Road.

Tenants say the management at Forestbrooke has long been unresponsive to safety and habitability concerns.

"They treat their tenants like inmates," said Melanie Taylor-Carden, a resident of seven years.

Kim Taylor-Carden, a Forestbrooke resident for three decades, says her family's unit has a number of serious problems that management refuses to appropriately address, including mold, defective appliances, a large hole in the ceiling and a

hole in the wall of the bathroom that allows mice to enter.

Among the tenants' demands are that all ground-floor doors and windows be repaired so they lock, and that requests for other maintenance issues be addressed in a timely manner.

Also supporting the protest was Richmond City Council member Michael Jones (9th District), whose letter supporting the tenants was read at the demonstration.

Amurcon Realty owns more than 4,000 rental units in Virginia.

According to its website, "Amurcon Realty Company markets and manages multi-family housing in Virginia, including about 4,400 units of conventional housing, tax credit properties, rental retirement communities, assisted living apartments for the elderly, subsidized rental apartments, and apartments for the disabled."

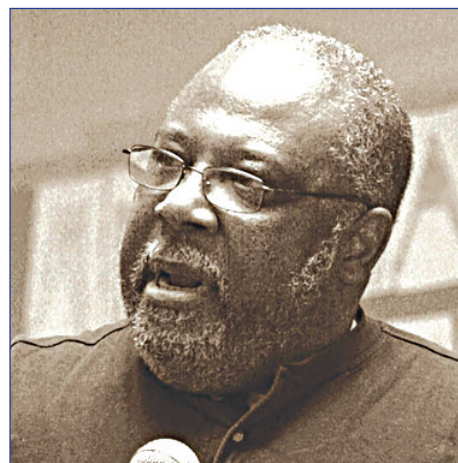
The Defender called Amurcon Realty on Dec. 13 to ask if the company would like to comment on the protest.

The person who answered the phone said, "No comment," and hung up.

Bonner Ctr. honors Ana Defenders in the news

Ana Edwards, chair of the Sacred Ground Historical Reclamation Project and Education Program Manager at the American Civil War Museum, was recognized Sept. 16 with a Community Educator Award by the University of Richmond's Bonner Center for Civic Engagement.

The last few months have been an interesting time for the Defenders, media-wise. There have been interviews with PBS (deaths in Virginia prisons), Virginia Public Media (reclaiming Shockoe Bottom), the AP (the new marriage protection act), PressTV-Iran (the U.S. midterm elections)



Saladin Muhammad

April 3, 1946 - Sept. 19, 2022

Born in Philadelphia, Pa., Saladin Muhammad was a leader in the workers rights movement in North Carolina and beyond. He co-founded Black Workers for Justice, N.C. Public Service Workers Union (UE 150), Muslims for Social Justice and the Southern Workers Assembly. A self-described "communist of the Black Nation," his theoretical writings and strategic planning influenced generations of activists of all races. More at <http://theblm.net/saladin/>

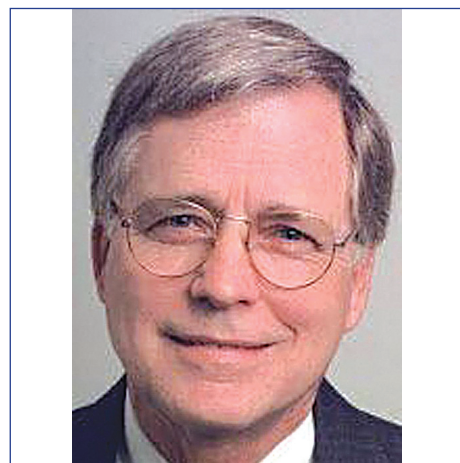


Colia Clark

July 21, 1940 - Nov. 4, 2022

Colia Liddell Lafayette Clark was born in Mississippi, attended Tougaloo College, joined the NAACP and served as field secretary for the SNCC Black Belt Alabama Voter Project. Twice a Green Party candidate for U.S. Senate in New York, she was a fierce advocate on behalf of the Haitian people. More at <https://bit.ly/3uMbBHR>

and By Any Means Necessary-Sputnik (Youngkin's Operation Bold Blue Line Initiative.) And of course, we were mentioned



John Moeser

Nov. 3, 1942 - Oct. 17, 2022

Born in Colorado City, Texas, John V. Moeser was an educator and anti-racist scholar. He authored several books and taught for 30 years at Virginia Commonwealth University, helping to found its Department of Urban Studies and Planning, and then for 12 years taught at University of Richmond's Bonner Center for Civic Engagement. In 2011, he helped create "Unpacking the Census," a mapping project about race, class and jurisdiction in the Richmond area. More at <https://unpackingthecensus.org/>



Tim Schermerhorn

1954 - Sept. 11, 2022

Born in Brooklyn, N.Y., Tim Schermerhorn was a New York City subway train operator, rank-and-file activist during the 1980 Transit Workers Strike, leader in Transport Workers Union Local 100 and founder of the Hell on Wheels newsletter. A socialist, he organized classes on W.E.B. DuBois' "Black Reconstruction" at the Brecht Forum, a Marxist study center, and was an editor of Labor Notes.

several times in The Virginia Defender, Virginia's leading source for anti-racist, working-class news and analysis.

reclaiming our sacred ground

Shockoe Bottom Memorial Update: More study must be done before anything concrete can happen

By Ana Edwards

While Richmond's city government seems committed to constructing its planned 10-block "Heritage Campus" in Shockoe Bottom, once the epicenter of the U.S. domestic slave trade, it looks like a lot of work - and study - needs to be done before the first shovelful of soil is turned.

Plans for the campus that includes the Shockoe Bottom African Burial Ground and a possible National Slavery Museum at the Devil's Half-Acre can't begin until more information is gathered about the impact of building in the city's oldest district, which sits in a floodplain. To obtain that information, Richmond's Department of Public Works has contracted with the engineering firm Greely and Hansen to conduct a three-part study to determine exactly what can and cannot be

built in any part of the area.

According to the city's Stormwater Management website page, building in floodplains is discouraged. The most applicable reason in the case of the Lumpkin's Jail / Devil's Half-Acre site, where proponents of the slavery museum want to build, is that, "New development can change the amount of impervious area that does not absorb rain. This increase in water running across the surface of the ground can cause streams and rivers to become overtopped when historically they did not before new buildings and parking lots were built."

Runoff affects nearby waterways, but in this case it would first affect streets and street-level residential and commercial buildings, creating particular and expensive challenges for any new construction - such as a large museum, which already is projected to cost between \$180 and \$220 million.

This concern also affects the Shockoe Bottom African Burial Ground, the 3-acre parcel north of East Broad Street, because any structures built there to support visitors or public art installations - even if far smaller than those planned for the proposed museum site - also will need to comply with certain weight and density criteria.

In addition, very little is known about how the design of the Burial Ground area will need to be created in concert with planned upgrades to the City's combined sewer-stormwater system. Shockoe Creek became a key channel in that system in the 1920s when it was converted into a culvert that runs underground within the African Burial Ground and Lumpkin's Jail footprints south along with Gillies Creek to the James River.

"Currently, DPW is leading the study on

the floodplain and floodway to determine what is buildable in the study area," said Burt Pinnoch, a Richmond-based architect who has designed several local memorial projects. "I'm not sure what agencies will be involved in the planning. I'm not aware of a current contract for the planning, because the scope cannot be accurately defined until the environmental impact work is completed."

The bottom line is that the city "wants to get [the study] done before engaging anybody to do anything down there."

At this point it seems unlikely that the City would want to renege on its commitment to properly memorialize Shockoe Bottom, but exactly what will happen, and when, is still unclear.

And so the struggle continues.

Still waiting for some answers

By Phil Wilayto

After more than 20 years of sustained community struggle, Richmond city government finally has publicly committed to memorializing Shockoe Bottom, the downtown district that once was the epicenter of the U.S. domestic slave trade.

The Defenders are proud to have played a leading role in this struggle. Going forward, we see our role as promoting three things: transparency, community input and ensuring that financial benefits from the project primarily go to the descendant community.

On July 20, we emailed a series of questions to Virginia state Delegate Delores McQuinn, who heads up the National Slavery Museum Foundation, which has taken on the task of creating a national slavery museum on the site of the Devil's Half-Acre (Lumpkin's jail) in Shockoe Bottom.

The museum originally was projected to cost \$100 million in public and private funds, but that figure has since ballooned to up to \$220 million. (The reason: After several years and millions of dollars spent on design work, someone apparently remembered that the site is located in a floodplain.)

We emailed Delegate McQuinn again on July 25, but by presstime the following day

still had not received any response.

As of Dec. 13, there still has been no response.

Once again, these are the questions:

- Does the National Slavery Museum Foundation have a website or any other online presence?
- Does the foundation have a board of directors? If so, who are the members?
- Does the foundation have a director? If so, who is it?
- What is the current estimate for the cost of designing and building the museum?
- What is the current estimate for the annual cost of operating the museum?
- How much money has the foundation raised to date? What amount has been allocated by the City of Richmond? By the state of Virginia? How much has been raised from private sources?
- What expenses has the foundation paid for to date? How much, and to what entities or individuals?
- What is the timeline for creating the museum?
- Are any public meetings about the museum scheduled at this time?



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reclaiming our sacred ground



This light projection declaring solidarity with the great slave rebellion leader was a collaboration between Recontextualizing Richmond and the Sacred Ground Project. Photos by Phil Wilayto



Defender and Rastafarian elder Janet "Queen Nzinga" Taylor addresses the crowd after performing a libation ceremony following the acknowledgement of Indigenous People's Day.

20th Annual Gabriel Gathering was largest ever

Staff report

Close to 200 people turned out Oct. 10 at the African Burial Ground in Richmond's Shockoe Bottom for the 20th Annual Gabriel Gathering.

"We gather to honor Gabriel and all those who gave their lives in the cause of freedom; to celebrate more than 20 years of learning the history of this sacred ground; and to rededicate ourselves to reclaiming and properly memorializing Shockoe Bottom, once the epicenter of the U.S. domestic slave trade," explained Ana Edwards, chair of the Defenders' Sacred Ground Historical Reclamation Project, which

sponsors the annual event.

Oct. 10 was the date in 1800 when the great slave rebellion leader Gabriel was executed at this site. The 24-year-old literate blacksmith led the secret, mass organizing that came close to ending slavery in Virginia.

This year, Oct. 10 also was Indigenous People's Day, and so the evening's program began with remarks by Vanessa Bolin, founder of the Richmond Indigenous Society.

Defender and Rastafarian elder Janet "Queen Nzinga" Taylor then performed a libation ceremony, after which she shared her thoughts on the meaning of the day.

Other speakers and the topics they addressed were:

Pamela Bingham, a direct descendent of Gabriel, speaking on "The Legacy of Gabriel."

Ryan Doherty, historian, addressing "Tracing Enslaved Women's Void in Gabriel's Uprising."

Hassan Shabazz, Defender and prisoner rights activist, on "Shockoe Bottom as one of the first examples of mass incarceration."

Charles Brown, Defender and organizer with the national office of the United Electrical Workers, speaking on "The continuing exploitation of Black labor."

Ram Bhagat, Ph.D., an educator, community healer and founder of the Drums No Guns Foundation, speaking on "Massive Resilience

- A Tribute for Gabriel."

Phil Wilayto, editor of The Virginia Defender, on "What's next in the struggle to reclaim Shockoe Bottom?"

Solidarity Letters were read from Michael Blakey, Ph.D., Director of the Institute for Historical Biology at the College of William & Mary; Elizabeth Kostelny, CEO of Preservation Virginia; and Braden Paynter of the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience.

There also were cultural presentations by Ram Bhagat (drumming); J. Ron Fleming, Jr., an actor with the recently concluded, sold-out run of "Gabriel" at Richmond's Firehouse Theater; and Hassan Shabazz, who performed an original rap about Shockoe Bottom.

The program concluded with an open mic session, during which many of those present shared their thoughts and feelings on the various subjects explored during the program.

The program was co-chaired by Ana Edwards and Joseph S.H. Rogers, a Defender, public historian and descendant of James Apostle Fields, a man born into slavery and later elected to the Virginia General Assembly.

And there were the light installations!

This year, the Sacred Ground Project collaborated with several organizations to present light shows that illustrated the history of the area and the struggle to reclaim it.

"We Are Gabriel," a video projection on the tunnel connecting the African Burial

Ground with the Devil's Half-Acre, illustrated the history of the Shockoe Bottom struggle and the story of Gabriel, while "Raising Shockoe Creek" was a light and botanical installation that symbolized the creek that once ran through the burial ground. Both projects were co-designed by Recontextualizing Richmond and Sacred Ground.

"Praise Your Mother / Ama a la Mamá," a neon LED installation by artists Sandy Williams IV and Mariana Parisca, was a bilingual meditation on the feminine forces that birth and nurture us.

Networked Public Space was a research project of the University of Virginia Next Cities Institute which brought environmental issues into visibility through sensors that respond to sound and air pollution, changing their lighting patterns on site in real-time and visualizing the data online.

And "Gabriel's Ascension" was a "community come up and portal keepers experience" by Untold RVA "Keepers of the Light."

The 20th Annual Gabriel Gathering was hosted by the Sacred Ground Historical Reclamation Project of the Virginia Defenders for Freedom, Justice & Equality

The entire program was live streamed and recorded by Defender Ayame Rogers and is available on the Sacred Ground Historical Reclamation Project Facebook page, <https://www.facebook.com/sacredgroundproject>



In our opinion

Gov. Y & anti-Semitism

Virginia Gov. Glenn Youngkin has a slick trick he uses to slip a moderate cover over a reactionary proposal. Like when he pounced on Terry McAuliffe when the Democrats' 2021 gubernatorial candidate blurted out in a debate that, "I don't think parents should be telling schools what they should teach." Once in office, Youngkin moved to white-wash the way public schools teach U.S. history.

In a similar way, the second-string presidential candidate and sometime-governor has come out strongly against anti-Semitism, a critical issue as attacks on Jewish people in the United States reach an all-time high.

Youngkin's Commission to Combat Antisemitism, which he created on his first day in office, has issued a report calling for, according to The Washington Post, "... a series of actions to combat antisemitism in Virginia, including increasing education in schools about the Holocaust and stepping up law enforcement against hate crimes."

The Post also notes that Youngkin himself has "... faced criticism for hobnobbing with right-wing figures who have been accused of making antisemitic statements, such as former Maine governor Paul LePage, who once said that most of Democrats' money comes from Jewish people. During last year's campaign, Youngkin appeared on the radio show of Sebastian Gorka, a former Trump administration official with ties to antisemitic groups in his native Hungary."

So a spotty record, at best.

What's dangerous about the commission's report is what seems to be its equation of anti-Semitism, a dangerous racial and religious bigotry, with anti-Zionism, a political stance against a political movement. Among other recommendations, the commission calls for the governor to "... issue an executive order prohibiting colleges and universities from academic boycotts of foreign countries, except those classified as terrorist states."

This is an obvious reference to the Palestinian-led Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions campaign.

Israel, which regularly commits terrorist acts against Palestinians, is not classified as a terrorist state, at least by the U.S., which itself has a sordid history of terrorist attacks against other peoples. (See "Indigenous genocide," "Trans-Atlantic slave trade" and "Hiroshima," for starters.)

Anti-Zionism is not anti-Semitism.

The Jewish people have been around for thousands of years. Zionism is a new phenomenon, dating back to its founding as an organized movement in 1897 by Theodor Herzl, an Austro-Hungarian journalist, playwright, political activist and writer. Its original goal was to establish a homeland – not a country – for the Jewish people. Uganda was under consideration before the movement decided on Palestine.

The growth of Zionism caused real divisions within the Jewish community. There were fierce political battles between Zionists and leftists in progressive U.S. unions like the Furriers in New York City.

Today not all Zionists are Jews and not all Jews are Zionists. In fact, some of the most outspoken anti-Zionists are Israeli Jews, outraged over their government's treatment of Palestinians.

But those who support Israel purposely blur the difference.

If being progressive means anything, it means opposing all forms of racism, including both anti-Semitism and Zionism.

Letters to the Editor

Is racism the reason?

Why is it that the only area where prisons are closed or partially shut down is the Eastern or Central regions? Could it be an issue of race?

The Western region employs predominantly white staff, while the Eastern and Central employ mostly African American staff. Because of these closings, prisoners are being funneled into the West region and placed in prisons like River North, where staffing shortages are rampant.

In the last 12 months, this Security Level 4 prison has never provided the minimum of eight hours of "out of cell activity" mandated by VADOC for all SL4 prisons. Religious programming is restricted to twice monthly, instead of weekly. Outside rec is provided three days out of the week at best, unless you reside in a P.B.U.

The administration has provided every excuse, from COVID restrictions to staffing shortages. We spend on average 19 hrs in the cell, 18 hrs on a good day. It should be 16 hrs minimum.

This prison is labeled a correctional center, but is run like a state prison. Prisoners have tried to address these issues, to no avail. The admin does not take our requests seriously.

There is an ongoing investigation into the beatings and K9 assaults, at the hands of officers, of multiple mentally ill prisoners this year. Why does this prison get to stay open? Does the DOC allocate the same amount of money to the other regions as they do the Western? Does River North have to perform to a certain standard to qualify for these funds? Is Keen Mountain underperforming also?

These are serious questions that must be answered in the interest of equality and fair treatment by the VADOC, not only of prisoners but of staff of color in other regions. Maybe former officers from all regions can enlighten us.

Thank you for listening, and may someone do something.

Sincerely,

Phillip Daniel
RIVER NORTH CORR.CENTER



The Defenders' Sacred Ground Project logo is projected on the wall of the Shockoe Bottom tunnel during the 20th Annual Gabriel Gathering on Oct. 10. Story and more photos on page 11.

Photo by Phil Wilayto

Life for a prisoner with ID?

I just don't understand why the political leaders aren't doing anything to help those with Intellectual Disabilities who are cast away in prison.

I feel like those who have intellectual disabilities (the mind of juveniles) should be afforded the chance of being paroled just as the regular juveniles do, because

people with I.D. meet the same requirements that juveniles do concerning their lesser culpability, and numerous others. Most inmates with I.D. are in prison for crimes that they were pressured and wrongfully influenced into committing, which was easily done because of their feebleness of mind. The system is so corrupted that they will not even afford the

See **LETTERS** on page 13

The Virginia Defender

A statewide quarterly newspaper published by the
VIRGINIA DEFENDERS FOR FREEDOM, JUSTICE & EQUALITY

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Subscription rates: \$12/year general, \$35 for institutions.

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Free the People, Free the Plant

By Kwame Binta

How long will the Black descendants of enslaved Africans continue to accept crumbs from the Government of the USA?

President Joe Biden's pardon of thousands of people with federal convictions for simple possession of cannabis is really a slap in the face to anyone ever arrested for simple possession, intent to distribute or for selling the cannabis plant. In 2021, there were 149 cannabis prisoners in the Federal Bureau of Prisons. Of the 29 convicted in the 4th Circuit Court of Virginia, 20 are Black (ida.ussc.gov).

The Afghanistan War is not the USA's longest war, it's the third. The war on Indigenous nations is the longest. The second longest is the war on the Black family. The 13th Amendment did not end slavery in the USA. The Black Codes, sharecropping, segregation, Jim Crow and the New Jim Crow allowed slavery to continue.

Joe Biden, testifying in front of Congress in 1993, said it doesn't matter if the child was deprived as a youth. He doesn't care if the child didn't have the social background to become socialized into the fabric of society. It doesn't matter if they are victims of society, he said. They must be taken off the streets.

He went on to say that, unless we do something to that cadre of young people, tens of thousands of them will be born out of wedlock, without parents, without supervision, without structure, without any conscious development. He even admitted to creating this cadre, and that now they must be taken off the streets (CNN).

Referring to Biden's pardoning of those convicted in federal court, former Rep. Carlos Curbelo (R-Florida) said, "It's a good policy ... people's lives have been ruined, just for simple possession maybe 10, 20 years ago," (MSNBC). But there's been no talk about helping to repair the lives ruined by the USA Gov-

ernment's racist cannabis prohibition laws.

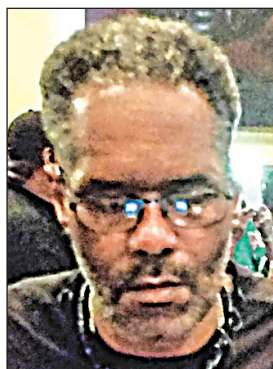
The fact that they continue to use the Spanish word "marijuana" instead of "cannabis" shows the racist component of the 1937 Marihuana Tax Act.

If you read the testimony when they passed that bill, you will learn that race was used to pass it. And critical to its passage was the infamous Federal Bureau of Narcotics Commissioner Harry Anslinger, who fed the Hearst newspaper chain false sensational stories to demonize the plant and the people who used it.

But racism was not the only reason why Wall Street and the Bankers wanted to make it very hard to grow this miracle plant.

The hemp decorticator machine, created in 1917, made it less labor-intensive to harvest the plant. That would have threatened the timber, oil, pharmaceutical and other industries, because the plant has more than 50,000 known beneficial uses that can replace most nature-killing products. A 1938 Popular Mechanics magazine article about the cannabis plant was titled "New Billion Dollar Crop." This plant could meet all the world's energy needs.

The government of the USA must do more than issue pardons if it wants to right the harm cannabis prohibition has caused. Today, many people who survived for years selling cannabis responsibly have lost a very large part of their business, due to legal cannabis dispensaries, owned and controlled by white men making millions from the plant. Some longtime sellers probably have been arrested and had their as-



LETTERS Continued from page 12

I.D. inmate with representation after the direct appeal process, even though such individuals have substantial claims. Such individuals in such circumstances normally don't fight their cases in post-conviction matters, because they are mentally inadequate to do so and are mentally inadequate to ask another inmate to help them.

So what is it for an Intellectual Disability (mentally retarded) person to do in such circumstances? It is morally wrong to give an I.D. inmate life or practical life without the possibility of parole for a crime that he was more than likely wrongfully pressured and influenced into committing, or committed because of something that mentally startled such an individual because of his mental disability and lack of judgment, which is no fault of his own.

How could society look upon such an individual as an animal and throw such an individual away to prison where jungle-like animals take pride in exploiting such individuals (I.D. inmates) because of their feebleness of mind? I don't understand it, do you? What are your comments to such circumstances?

sets seized, and in many states they can't even get a job in the legal industry because of the prior conviction.

The plant is still illegal under federal law and people are still being denied their freedom behind the razor wire. We are asking that the Government end this component of its war on the Black family, help repair the damage it has caused, free the people and free the plant.

To learn more about how you can help end this component of the war, contact us on Twitter at @4peace2b or by email at 4peace2b@gmail.com. For more information, visit www.hempheals.us.

Kwame Binta is a founding member of UNIA & ACL Gabriel-Walker Division #456, Personal Fitness Trainer and Wealth Builder, working for a free and united Africa and to end the USA colonial capitalist wars of conquest at home and abroad.

Such matters really do bother me.

Taybronnie White
RED ONION STATE PRISON

Current events thru my eyes

(* Focused on finding answers, I foreclosed on my past life. Ready to bring to light all my truth from this sovereign mic. Staring out these barred windows, many t.v's on but the lights are out. I've outgrew the penitentiary, no more procrastination, the time is now. *)

Social Engineering and politics, keeping the kids mass shooting. Coverage of drone strikes in Iraq, and inflation got my people moving. Ten thousand black annual homicides, business interests just screaming "lock em up." Supremacists storm the capital, escape untouched, "they voted for trump."

Monkeypox introduction, Covid is on its fourth shot. Kentucky flooding killed about 40, the infrastructure's in a dry rot. Lobbying contributions at nearly 50 million. Cerebral Inc. psych-med salesman, valuation is now 4 billion.

Contracts for all prisoners is monopolized extortion. You think that's overreach? The Republicans just took abortions! Reaping a fortune, the human rights act is only corporate. Where's our N.I.L. money when our mugshots lead railroads to court? What's a Habeas Corpus for an immigrant detainee? All screaming about budgets, but print money at the Treasury.

Our people becoming ancestors in Buffalo supermarkets. Hundreds killed in Chicago streets, Rest in peace to the 21 in Uvalde. What is our representatives solving? Taxpayer money is just political toys. How is democratic party money supporting the opposition's radical decoys.

When Fox Elementary's burning, Americans drowning in the land of the free. Over 3 million incarcerated, wildfires from the west to the east. When can we breathe?

Just so tired of being deceived. It is my belief that indifference in this time of action is a disease.

Tevin McGougan
GREENSVILLE CORR. CTR.

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international & antiwar news

How, & why, the Defenders got involved in Ukraine

By Phil Wilayto

The Virginia Defenders have always been involved in the antiwar movement. That's because we believe that, while we fight for freedom, justice and equality here at home, it's also important to pay attention to what the government is doing in our name in other countries. That's why we promote the slogan "Stop the Wars at Home & Abroad!"

Back in 2016, we were asked by the United National Antiwar Coalition to represent it at an international social justice conference in Wroclaw, Poland. There we met representatives of an organization from Odessa, Ukraine, called the Council of Mothers of May 2. These were relatives and supporters of dozens of people who were murdered by a right-wing mob in their city on May 2, 2014.

In February of 2014, a violent coup had driven out Ukraine's president and replaced him with a government that wanted closer ties with the U.S. and NATO. That's the North American-European military alliance that the U.S. heads. Washington was up to its eyeballs in supporting, if not leading, the coup.

That coup was followed by clashes around the country between right-wing organizations that supported the coup and activists who op-



On May 2, 2016, 4,000 people defied fascist threats to gather at the site of the Odessa Massacre and renew their call for an international investigation. Photos by Phil Wilayto

posed it. In Odessa, on May 2, a few hundred of the activists were driven by a much larger crowd led by fascist organizations into the five-story House of Trade Unions in Kulikovo square. The mob then set the building on fire. At least 42 activists died from the flames, smoke or by jumping from windows to escape the fire. To this date, the Ukrainian government has never allowed an independent investigation into what has come to be known as the Odessa Massacre.

When we asked the people from Odessa what we could do to help, they said they were planning to hold a memorial on the second anniversary of the massacre, and some of the same right-wing organizations that had taken part in the massacre were openly threatening to attack them, with machine guns. They asked if we would come to Odessa as international observers. The hope was that the presence of people from other countries, especially the U.S., might influence the Ukrainian government to hold back the fascists.

So we put together a three-person delegation: Bruce Gagnon of the Global Network Against Weapons and Nuclear Power in Space; independent videographer Regis Tremblay; and myself, editor of The Virginia Defender. We also organized an international campaign to put pressure on the Ukrainian government to hold back the fascist groups, and on the U.S. government to hold back the Ukrainian government.

The memorial was a huge success. Hun-

dreds of fascists did show up, but so did thousands of ordinary people; young, old, families, World War II vets, religious groups. They stayed from the early morning till late at night. The next day, I was asked by the Council of Mothers to travel to Brussels, Belgium, to report to a committee meeting of the European Parliament on what I had seen in Odessa.

We were deeply moved by the courage of the people of Odessa, and when we got home the Defenders started the Odessa Solidarity Campaign. Each year on May 2 we promote local actions to support the demand for an international investigation of the massacre. And we've been spreading the word about the increasing rightwing repression in Ukraine.

Things have gotten much worse since the Russian intervention on Feb. 24. Today, most of the people we met in Odessa have had to leave the country, have been arrested or have gone underground. It's no longer possible to speak out against the Ukrainian government or the fascist organizations, not even on social media.

So we know something about Ukraine. And we know that the official narrative coming out of Washington and endlessly repeated by the mainstream media concerning the present war in Ukraine is a lie. We know about the role the U.S. played in the 2014 coup. We know how NATO has been steadily moving closer to Russia, encircling its western borders, threatening it with its endless military exercises. We know that this war was pro-

voked, and we know who provoked it.

And that's why we've been speaking out against the U.S. support for this war. That is why we've put together a statement that tries to explain what's really behind the war and the forces responsible for it.

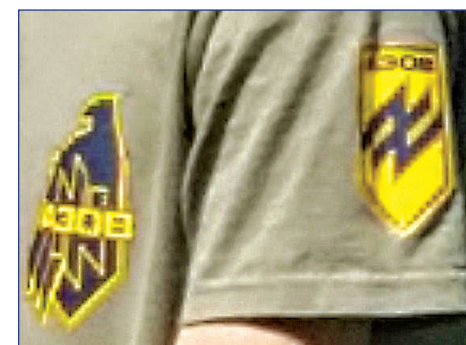
That statement, issued on Oct. 14 by the Odessa Solidarity Campaign, has been endorsed by more than 200 organizations and individuals in 22 countries. The statement is posted at odessasolidaritycampaign.org. We encourage you to read it and, if you agree, send us your endorsement.

Also on that website is our report on our experiences at the second anniversary memorial of the Odessa Massacre, as well as other information about Ukraine.

We don't expect to convince everyone that our view on Ukraine is right. But it would be enough if conscious folks would at least try and get back a little of that healthy skepticism we all used to have about what the government says it's doing in our name in other countries.



Above, some of the neo-Nazis at the 2016 memorial. Below, a close-up of the arm patch of the Azov Battalion. The symbol is based on one worn by Nazis in WW II.



One of a group of neo-Nazis jeering at the bus carrying relatives of the victims of May 2 to the the 2016 memorial.

international & antiwar news

From St. Louis to Berlin ...

Critics of the U.S./NATO role in Ukraine face repression

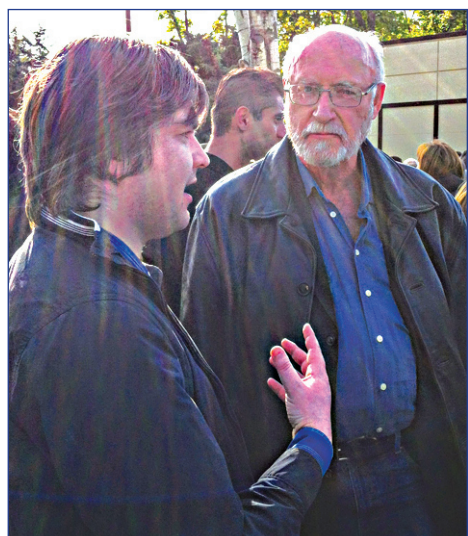
By Phil Wilayto

From St. Louis to Berlin, it's becoming increasingly difficult to speak out against U.S. and NATO support for Ukraine.

This past July 29, the FBI raided the offices of the African People's Socialist Party and its related Uhuru Movement in Florida and Missouri. In St. Louis, they broke into the home of APSP Chairman Omali Yeshitela and his wife, Deputy Chair Ona Zené Yeshitela.



Members of the Council of Mothers of May 2 at the 2016 memorial, wearing t-shirts bearing likenesses of their murdered sons.



Phil Wilayto, right, speaking at the 2016 memorial with Yuri Tkachev, editor of the Odessa online news media outlet Timer. On March 20, 2022, Yuri was arrested and falsely accused of terrorism. Timer apparently has been shut down.

Photo by a friend

The raid was reminiscent of police attacks on the Black Panther Party. At the Yeshitela's residence, the feds came at 5 a.m. and used a drone and flash-bang grenades to force their way in, after which they handcuffed the couple and moved them outside. Omali Yeshitela is 80 years old.

The APSP has been outspoken against U.S. support for Ukraine in its war with Russia, and the raids apparently were to search for any evidence linking the Pan-African organization to the Russian government. To date, no charges have been brought. (When the Defenders learned of the raid, we immediately called and emailed the APSP and offered our support.)

Now a German activist with whom we've been closely working also has been targeted.

The Defenders' Odessa Solidarity Campaign has initiated a statement that points out some inconvenient truths about the reasons for the present war: That the U.S.-led NATO military alliance has been steadily expanding eastward to the borders of Russia, something the Russians obviously see as threatening. And the fact that Washington supported the 2014 coup in Ukraine that brought an anti-Russian government to power with the open support of neo-Nazi organizations. And that, for months before the war, Russia had repeatedly called for negotiations with Ukraine to discuss Russia's security concerns.

As of Dec. 13, that statement, which is posted at odessasolidaritycampaign.org, has been endorsed by 233 organizations and individuals in 22 countries. The largest number

ODESSA SOLIDARITY CAMPAIGN

Supporting the anti-fascist people of Ukraine since 2016.

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odessasolidaritycampaign.org



'Stop the Wars at Home & Abroad!' — The Defenders take that antiwar message public by holding a teach-in in Richmond's Monroe Park and then a protest at a nearby busy intersection. The Oct. 22 actions were part of a national day of antiwar events called by the United National Antiwar Coalition.

Photo by Ana Edwards

are from Germany, the result of our partnering with an antiwar group in Berlin, the Coop Antiwar Cafe, a coffeehouse/bar and gathering place for political activists.

The cafe is now coming under increasing attack for its outspoken views on the war in Ukraine. A few weeks ago, someone smashed in the front windows. There have been anonymous threats. A street protest last month was physically threatened by opponents.

And now the leader of the cafe, longtime activist Heinrich Bücker, is under investigation, apparently for publicly stating that there are neo-Nazi organizations in Ukraine, a fact that was widely reported in the U.S. and other Western media before the Russian intervention on Feb. 24.

Bücker reports that, "According to a letter from the Berlin State Criminal Police Office dated October 19, 2022, a Berlin lawyer has accused me of having committed a crime. One refers to the § 140 StGB 'Reward and approval of criminal offenses.' This can be punished with imprisonment for up to three years or with a fine."

Bücker's offense seems to have been giving a speech on the anniversary of the German invasion of the Soviet Union during World War II and asking why Germany was now supporting neo-Nazi organizations in Ukraine.

"In Germany, we are currently experiencing a narrowing of the space for debate and massive restrictions on freedom of expression — caused by one-sided reporting in the mainstream-media," Heinrich writes.

"There are now a number of individuals who are in the focus of the German criminal investigation authorities. Similar tendencies are also reported from other EU countries."

Between 2016 and 2018, this writer had the opportunity to travel several times to Europe, representing U.S. antiwar organizations at various gatherings and protests. I visited nine countries in all, from Ireland to Ukraine. Activists I became friends with in Poland and Hungary now say it's dangerous to speak out against their governments. In Ukraine, it's virtually impossible. And now the political repression is spreading in Germany.

The Defenders and the Odessa Solidarity

Campaign will be reaching out to our friends and allies in the antiwar movement to find ways to support Heinrich and the Coop Antiwar Cafe, and anyone else who is targeted for questioning the official line on U.S. wars and other actions abroad.

And we will continue to question that line, with every ounce of energy we have.



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We are asking incarcerated & formally incarcerated people, family members and supporters to send suggestions for issues to spotlight.

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