

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

The Virginia DEFENDER

FREE



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What do Venezuela, Iran & Cuba have to do with the AFFORDABILITY CRISIS?



Graphic by @ministersofmonsters

See the editorial on page 12.

"The wicked become even worse when they are tolerated." — Leo Tolstoy- Russian novelist - Sept. 9, 1828 - Nov. 20, 1910

regional & national news

Interview: Minneapolis union leader on anti-ICE organizing

By Christopher Walker

Many of us can recall the immigration crackdown from the federal government last year. While DHS and ICE agents terrorized immigrant communities in Richmond and around the country, media attention focused on Minneapolis, where Operation Metro Surge dumped some 4,000 ICE and other immigration agents into the city to surveil, arrest and deport immigrant community members.

On Jan. 7, 2026, an ICE agent shot and killed Renee Good, one of thousands of Minneapolis residents who took to the streets to watch, report on, and protest ICE agents' violent and reckless behavior and tactics. Two weeks later, Alex Pretti was fatally shot by a U.S. Border Patrol agent.

These moments captured national media attention and left everyday people around the country wondering how community members in Minneapolis could respond. Democrat politicians made weak pleas to the Trump administration to pull ICE agents from the city, but seemingly refused to do more.

The Defender looked into how Minneapolis working people struck back.

On January 23 of this year, Ben Lewis, a graduate school student and worker at the University of Minnesota, participated in the "ICE OUT OF MN" day of "No Work, No School, No Shopping" that saw workers call out for the day, small businesses close and massive protest gatherings.

The goal of the event was to create an economic whiteout that would show politicians and their corporate backers

that workers have the power to stop the flow of money into their pockets.

Besides being a grad student and worker, Lewis is also the President of the University of Minnesota's Graduate Labor Union (GLU) Local 1105, which is affiliated with the United Electrical Workers union (UE). He got involved with the union when a classmate brought him along to a union meeting. From there he got involved with the collective bargaining process.

Lewis became a shop steward (a union member appointed to help fellow members with on-the-job disputes with management), then a member of the Local Executive Board. This year he was elected the local's president.

Lewis describes what brought him into the organized labor struggle: the opportunity and ability to meet workers' immediate needs through collective action.

He and other union members were able to apply the same principles of collective action to their action protesting ICE. Like in the workplace, our society requires us to go with the flow of the established order so that those that own the workplace – or in this case, those who own and oversee our major societal institutions like corporations, schools, transportation and more – can continue to profit from our work.

Lewis explained that rank-and-file union workers took the lead in the struggle against ICE, followed by the labor leadership.

Immigrant workers were especially

See **INTERVIEW** on page 10

'Antifa' trial in Texas threatens all activists

By Fern Diaz-Castro

On March 13, two judges, George W. Bush-appointed Reed O'Connor and Donald Trump-appointed Mark Pittman, sentenced nine protestors for their alleged involvement in an anti-ICE demonstration held July 4, 2025, outside the Prairieland Detention Center in Alvarado, Texas.

The protestors were denouncing the kidnappings and detentions of their neighbors by ICE and what they charged were inhumane conditions at the detention center.

During the demonstration, tensions rose, fireworks were set off and a police officer was shot and wounded. The protestors were accused of being part of an "antifa terror cell." On June 23, eight of the defendants received unusually harsh sentences ranging from 30 to 100 years. One defendant is still awaiting their sentence.

According to a Department of Justice press release, the charges included providing material support to "terrorists;" conspiracy to use and carry an explosive; attempted murder of officers; and conspiracy to conceal documents.

Daniel Sanchez Estrada, who was not present during the protest, is facing 30 years in prison for, after the protest, moving a box of his partner's personal items, which included antifascist zines and pamphlets.

Dylan Duke, a reporter with KERA radio, an NPR affiliate in Dallas, reported that "Benjamin Song claimed during his sentencing that he opened fire at the officer out of fear that protestors would be shot at. The judge barred Song's attorneys from arguing during the trial that Song shot at the officer in self-defense."

The National Lawyers Guild has called the sentences "a grave injustice and nothing short of malicious political persecution by the federal government" to "chill dissent and enable the Trump administration to act without accountability for its brutal treatment of immigrant communities."

FBI Director Kash Patel responded to the ruling stating, "Today's verdict shows the FBI remains committed to identifying, locating, and dismantling Antifa and its funding networks across the country." However, in National Security Memorandum 7, issued by President Trump in September 2025, the definition of domestic terrorism was adapted to target "the organized structures, networks, entities, organizations, funding sources" of people that hold anti-fascist, anti-capitalist, anti-Christian and anti-traditional values.

The same memorandum ordered prosecutors to prosecute those that fall under this category "to the maximum extent permissible by law."

Although the Prairieland 9 case is being seen as a "test case" given that it is the country's first federal indictment targeting "Antifa," more indictments against leftist "antifascist" protestors have followed.

On June 16, 15 people associated with Direct Action Minnesota (DAMN), an activist coalition, were charged with federal crimes ranging from "counts of interstate stalking" to "conspiracy to impede a federal officer" for their alleged involvement during the anti-ICE protests in Minneapolis held in response to Trump's "Operation Metro Surge." The operation led to more than 4,000 people being kidnapped by ICE and two community members being fatally shot by ICE agents.

The concern is that simply wearing all-black clothes, having encrypted messaging apps like Signal on your phone, wearing masks or owning political literature could be enough to charge someone with "domestic terrorism."

Attorney Sufia Khalid, who represents one of the Prairieland defendants, contrasted the charges against the Prairieland 9 with those faced by the January 6 rioters.

In an interview with "Democracy Now,"

See **PRAIRIELAND** on page 10

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

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The Virginia 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, LGBTQ+ oppression, class, war and political

representation. We began to organize around these issues as well.

We now sponsor The Virginia Defender quarterly newspaper, Sacred Ground Historical Reclamation Project, Odessa Solidarity Campaign 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 and the LGBTQ+ community 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 Indigenous 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. As people who struggle every day with ongoing inequality, we have the right to affirmative action. And all oppressed peoples have the right to self-determination.

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

news u can use

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Legal Aid offices across Virginia offer pro bono (free) help for low-income individuals facing civil (noncriminal) legal problems. Call 866-534-5243 to reach your local Legal Aid office and find out if you're eligible.

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A fond farewell to Chef MaMusu

By Ana Edwards

A Virginian from Liberia is returning home.

Ida Daniel, best known in Richmond as Chef MaMusu, opened Africanne on Main in 1995 and for 38 years has been the only spot in town serving the cuisine of her home country of Liberia, West Africa.

Africanne on Main food was a staple at annual cultural events such as the Second Street Festival, Elegba Folklore Society's Down Home Family Reunion and Kwanzaa Festival, as well as the Richmond Folk Festival.

On June 27, Ms. Daniel closed the restaurant's doors for the last time. As she said to a local TV reporter, "When it's time, it's time."

The beloved restaurant served vegetarians and omnivores alike. Her mixed greens, fried fish and plantains, curried chicken and oxtails were legendary.

In 2002, she started Chef MaMusu's Cultural Cooking School to pass her knowledge on to young girls, just as her elders had done for her in Monrovia, Liberia, where she was born and raised.

Free Black Virginians played a significant role in establishing the U.S. colony on the west coast of Africa during the American Colonization Movement. Chef Ida's own roots reach back to those Virginians through one of her grandmothers.

Her contributions as a restaurateur and educator as well as her welcoming personality made her a beloved and irreplaceable figure in Richmond's food community and a vital demonstration of the beauty of African cultural practices.

Before returning home to Monrovia for her retirement, Chef MaMusu will spend the rest of the year serving up Africanne on Main's best dishes at several of the festivals noted above.

More information about her cooking school and history can be found in an oral history recorded for the Southern Foodways Alliance at southernfoodways.org/interview/ida-ma-musu/.



Photo is from the RVA Community Fridge website.

RVA Community Fridges now operates at 15 sites in the Richmond area. This fridge and pantry is located at 3001 Meadowbridge Road in Richmond.

Community fridges offer free food to those in need

By Tommy O'Brien

RVA Community Fridges is providing a unique way for residents to share food with each other. Founded in 2021 by Taylor Scott, the program started with one refrigerator and a motto of "Take what you need and leave what you can."

Since its inception, the program has grown to 15 locations throughout the city.

The community fridges differ from your typical food bank options in that they are open 24/7, require no sign-ups or identification and allow residents of the city and surrounding areas to share food directly with each other.

The refrigerators are set up outside local businesses and community centers with no restrictions on who can access them for assistance. Most locations include a dry food pantry, along with a refrigerator to accommodate different food types.

The organization is volunteer-run, with a growing Discord chat of more than

1,000 people. Volunteers assist with home cooked meals; transporting and distributing donations from local farm partners and restaurants; maintenance and cleaning; and building infrastructure to house fridges.

Volunteers also coordinate for community cook days at Matchbox Mutual Aid, located in Richmond's Northside, which is home to RVA Community Fridges, Food Not Bombs, the Richmond Bail Fund and Richmond Reproductive Freedom Project.

Food donations can be made anytime to any refrigerator location with only a few guidelines, including no raw meat, alcohol, open/partially eaten food or unlabeled or expired food.

Homemade food is welcomed if labeled with a preparation date, ingredients and allergens.

Monetary donations made to the program are used to fund daily shoppers for the fridges, community cook days, refrigerator replacements and the shared kitchen space at Matchbox Mutual Aid.

With the rising cost of food, reductions in government assistance and overall increase in cost of living, the RVA Community Fridge program offers a way for the community to help one another.

In addition to providing a low barrier to share food, the program prevents food waste by giving 24/7 access to locations throughout the city for restaurants and local farms to donate excess food.

The community is encouraged to join the Discord chat to find out more about volunteering or get real time updates on the contents of any of the refrigerators for those looking for food. A link to join the Discord can be accessed on the programs Instagram account at [@rvacommunityfridges](https://www.instagram.com/rvacommunityfridges)

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community news



Members and friends of the Richmond Tatreez Circle. Photo courtesy of the Circle

Tatreez Circle helps preserve Palestinian culture

Since the winter of 2024, a group has been coming together once a month in Richmond to share their love of “tatreez,” a traditional Palestinian cross-stitching embroidery technique.

Hiba Chohan and Taqwa Abdallah were looking to create a space to practice and teach others the tradition. While they were aware of circles in Northern Virginia and D.C., there weren’t yet any meet-ups happening closer to home.

At the outset, the group was composed of a handful of folks who met casually in

coffee shops around the city, but attendance ballooned quickly and the Richmond Tatreez Circle now gathers at Sefton Coffee or at the Studio Two Three gymnasium. Attendees range from advanced stitchers who have practiced since childhood to more recent practitioners like Dionne DiBlasio, who started learning from the very first circle from Hiba and Taqwa.

These meet-ups are not just about stitching and socializing. The basic ethos of the circle is to preserve, celebrate and uplift Palestinian culture through the beauty of tatreez embroidery.

As Eman Abuzahrieh explains, Palestin-

ians were able to tell by a woman’s “thobe,” a tatreezed ankle-length dress, her marital status and the region she was from. For example, a Jerusalem thobe may have a cactus pattern stitched on it, as well as a motif depicting the walls of Jerusalem.

Tatreez is a visual language communicating a Palestinian’s identity and deep connection to the land. In 2021 it was officially added to UNESCO’s list of Intangible Cultural Heritage, emphasizing the important role it plays in Palestinian cultural identity, as well as offering protections for its historic preservation.

“Tatreez is also a form of resistance for Palestinians,” says Abuzahrieh. “We preserve our heritage and assert our identity by stitching our motifs and wearing thobes, to resist our erasure.”

For Gaza-born member Rasha Kamal, the circle provided a sense of support after October 7. “Being away from home during such an unbearable time, having a space where I could sit with people, stitch and just be present without having to hide who I am or where I’m from, was truly healing.

“People came together to learn and practice, and many were making pieces specifically to sell and raise funds for people in need in Gaza. Seeing that kind of generosity and solidarity, especially from people outside my own community, was deeply moving and inspiring.”

In addition to providing a space to preserve and share a craft crucial to Palestinian cultural identity, the Richmond Tatreez Circle has been able to directly support families in the occupied territories. Many members who had already been directly supporting

families in Gaza through selling embroidered pieces, found community in the circle to broaden and expand mutual aid/fundraising opportunities.

Gabrielle McClure had been fundraising for families in Gaza through an autonomous group of artists and advocates called Art Saves Collective.

“I first found out about tatreez from my friend Sohad in Gaza who had her own tatreez business before everything was destroyed in the war,” she explained.

Working alongside other members of the Richmond Tatreez Circle, McClure formed a mutual-aid fundraising initiative called RVA Mutual Aid for Palestine.

“[We] fundraise for families in Gaza with whom we communicate regularly,” she said. “It is some of the most important and meaningful work I’ve done as a creative person.”

Follow the Richmond Tatreez Circle on Instagram (@rvatatreezcircle) to find upcoming circle dates and locations, as well as information on pop-up events that support fundraising efforts.

Also, please support the folks at Sefton Coffee, who have been great friends to the local Palestinian and Palestinian-allied communities. In the shop you’ll find a variety of Palestinian-made products, essential texts for in-store reading on Palestine and the Israeli occupation and some of the best espresso drinks in the city of Richmond.

Danielle DiBlasio is a member of the Richmond Tatreez Circle and co-coordinates Palestinian support work for the Virginia Defenders.

Defenders Statement on Day of Transgender Remembrance

Editor’s note: Nov. 20 was the annual Trans Day of Remembrance. The following statement, written by Harley Salmen and Charlie Davis, was presented that evening by Harley at a Defenders public meeting.

Trans Day of Remembrance honors trans people who have lost their lives to anti-trans violence.

We are witnessing a moment we have seen countless times before: The dying U.S. empire seeks to create a villain to blame for the conditions of chaos and violence it’s created. The ruling class has decided to make one of those villains trans people.

As the ruling class loses its hold, it clings to maintaining its power through the dehumanization of marginalized populations, such as trans people and immigrants, pitting the workers against each other, moving our attention away from the people in power.

On Trans Day of Remembrance, we honor those who paved the way for Queer and Trans Liberation alongside other movements for liberation. We remember those who have been killed by anti-trans violence and by a system that was never built to care and protect them.

We see the threads that connect our struggles between Trans Liberation and the anti-imperialist movement. Imperialism attempts to control people, where they go, what they wear, who they love, because imperialism seeks to strip people of their land, their people, their movement and their self determination for the Empire’s benefit.

And moved by our grief, we remain committed to build a world where we can all move freely and be free of violence. We will take a moment of silence for those who have been murdered by anti-trans violence.

VCU Health turns its back on trans youth

By Harley Salmen

On July 29, 2025, VCU Health announced that, after reviewing federal and state directives, it had determined there were “no other viable options” but to end gender-affirming care for patients under the age of 19.

You might remember that, on Jan. 30, 2025, VCU Health, a public, taxpayer-supported system, paused all gender-affirming medications and surgical procedures for patients under 19 when advised to do so by the state after the “Protecting Children from Chemical and Surgical Mutilation” executive order was issued on Jan. 28 by President Trump.

Approximately a month later, the health system decided to resume gender-affirming care for existing patients, but said it would not be accepting any new patients.

Five months later, the system went back to its original decision to stop offering gen-

der-affirming care to patients under 19. This was followed by the University of Virginia announcing that it also would no longer offer gender-affirming care to patients under 19.

VCU Health is one of the largest health systems in Virginia and the largest in the Greater Richmond area. It’s also the largest safety-net provider in Virginia, seeing more patients of limited means, those who are uninsured or on Medicare, than any other health system in the state. This means that its decision to provide gender-affirming care to trans youth will fall especially hard on those who already have limited options.

The system also plays, in its own words, “an unparalleled role in training Virginia’s health care workforce.” This means that its eliminating gender-affirming care for trans youth not only limits care for those patients, but also sends a message to the workers it trains as well as its other patients that trans health care is not a priority and that trans life is not worth fighting for.

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our working lives



Photos by Phil Wilayto

A wide range of unions marched and rallied May 21 to protest Gov. Abigail Spanberger's veto of a bill that would have allowed collective bargaining for public workers, something she previously claimed she supported.

Unions protest Spanberger 'betrayal'

By Phil Wilayto

RICHMOND, May 21 -- Union members and their allies took to the streets today in Virginia's capital city to condemn Gov. Abigail Spanberger's veto of a bill that would have empowered unions to represent state workers in negotiating wages, benefits and working conditions.

Around 175 workers marched around Capitol Square, which includes the governor's mansion, chanting and holding signs and brightly colored banners with slogans like "United We Bargain, Divided We Beg," "Workers Over Billionaires" and "Collective Bargaining Now!"

Spanberger, a Democrat, had courted union support in her run for governor, in part by pledging to sign collective bargaining legislation. Her veto of such a bill in the 2026 General Assembly session was seen as a bitter blow.

"This is a betrayal of the working people who knocked on doors, made calls, who attended rallies, who testified before committees and entrusted that their voices would finally matter," said Virginia Education Association President Carol Bauer in a video statement on the VEA website.

"The move is a direct betrayal of her repeated pledges on the campaign trail to support workers," read a statement by the International Association of Fire Fighters.

In addition to the VEA and IAFF, other unions supporting today's action included AFSCME, AAUP, CWA, SEIU and UNITE Here.

As the workers prepared to begin their march, The Virginia Defender spoke with LaNoral Thomas, president of Service Employees International Union Virginia 512.

"The purpose of this gathering is for our labor coalition to come together and ensure that Gov. Spanberger is well aware that we are disappointed, but not deterred," President Thomas said. "We still intend to work with her to make sure that collective bargaining is expanded and that

a half a million public sector employees, including home care providers, are able to win collective bargaining rights.

"The governor in all of her interviews has said she believes in collective bargaining and she supports collective bargaining and she wants to work with us to get this done. And so we want to work with her. So we're ready to get to the table



From left: SEIU 512 President LaNoral Thomas and members Lauralyn Clark and Dana Scarlett.

and get to work, because we will blink and it will be time for the next session, and so we want to make sure we go into the next session with a bill that she will sign."

Spanberger, a former CIA intelligence officer who casts herself as a political moderate, has also alienated other supporters by vetoing bills that would have capped the cost of some expensive medicines; prohibited accepting the transfer of out-of-state prisoners to Virginia's notorious Red Onion State Prison; limited some ICE activity in the state; and created a legal, regulated market for buying and selling cannabis.

Editor's note: After initially vetoing the cannabis market bill, Gov. Spanberger later reached a compromise with legislators that would establish a legal, regulated market starting July 1, 2027. However, many cannabis advocates are not happy with the compromises in the agreement.



Photo by Danielle DiBlasio

Lewis Ginter workers stage a one-day strike June 25 at the botanical garden.

Lewis Ginter workers strike for a living wage

By Christopher Walker & Danielle DiBlasio

On June 25, workers at Richmond's Lewis Ginter Botanical Garden and supporters gathered at the garden's front gates and chanted, held signs, sang labor songs and waved to passing drivers to raise awareness about what they charged is management's unwillingness to meet the unionized workers' demands for better compensation.

This informational picket punctuated the one-day Unfair Labor Practice strike by Lewis Ginter Botanical Garden (LGBG) Workers United.

Workers said the strike posed serious challenges for management in the daily operations of the garden. Without the workers who create and maintain the garden, how will patrons be able to enjoy it?

The strike was the first of its kind for Lewis Ginter workers, but their collective effort for more money from management is not new. In November 2024, united around their need for better compensation and benefits, safer working conditions and a seat at the table, the workers voted to form a union. They affiliated with the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers (IAM) after receiving workplace organizing guidance and training from a Central Virginia Emergency Workplace Organizing Committee (EWOC), a local organization that provides resources for workers who want to unionize.

However, once workers win a vote to unionize, they must bargain a contract with their employer that puts pay, benefits, vacations, and rules about fairness and respect at work into a legal document that their employer must follow.

This process, known as collective bargaining, is often very challenging for workers, as employers can drag their feet about coming to a fair agreement. In this case, formal negotiations began in February 2025, meaning it has already been more than 500 days, exceeding the average time to reach a first contract.

Since then, the workers have only met with the garden management a total of four times. Management has reportedly been slow to respond and provide counter-offers that would greatly expedite the negotiation process.

Lewis Ginter workers have described how management has engaged in regressive bargaining tactics: Rather than make counteroffers to workers' reasonable proposals for pay and raises, management

has moved their offers further away from what workers want.

The garden's highest raise offer was 75 cents on the second pass and they have since changed that to 3% - an average of 52 cents for workers making the average hourly rate of \$17.52 in the bargaining unit and LESS than their second offer.

As a result, in April 2026 the IAM filed an Unfair Labor Practice (ULP) charge with the National Labor Relations Board that is currently under investigation. Even with the union's highest initial raise ask, workers would still be making FAR BELOW the living wage in Richmond.

However, Lewis Ginter workers are prepared to overcome these challenges. They have appealed to the Greater Richmond community, garden patrons and volunteers for support, creating a petition demanding that Lewis Ginter management bargain in good faith.

The June 25 picket was the workers' fifth informational picket, which have seen steady and rising attendance.

At the picket, workers said that the day of strike and protest was a success, with attendance at this picket tripling from previous turnouts. According to the reports they were hearing from inside the garden, patrons encountered long lines to purchase tickets, garden tours were cancelled for the day and upper-level management was forced to help direct traffic, lead summer camp and staff the butterflies exhibit.

Despite the frustrations of garden management not meeting worker demands - even as the Garden unveiled a \$31 million expansion in May of this year - workers remain motivated. They say that collective morale remains strong and, if necessary, they are ready to escalate their tactics of collective action to get the raises and respect they believe they need.

As the struggle for a contract with Lewis Ginter continues, workers encouraged community members to continue to show up to future pickets, sign their petition and even call the office of the CEO (804-262-9887 ext. 343) or email him directly (btrader@lewisginter.org).

Visitors to the garden are asked to wear union pins or vocalize support for the workers to any managers they may see. Folks can even earmark donations for employee wages if they choose to donate to the garden, as some patrons have been doing.

As this struggle continues, Richmonders are sure to keep their eye on Lewis Ginter to see and support how the unionized workers there fight their way to better pay.

Richmond teachers struggle for a new contract

By Christopher Walker

As Richmond teachers recuperate from the previous school year and prepare for the next, their struggle to get the compensation and work conditions they and their students need continues unabated.

The Richmond Education Association, the union that represents Richmond Public Schools teachers, is currently negotiating a new collective bargaining agreement with the RPS administration. This agreement will establish pay, benefits, raises, safety standards, workplace rules and expectations for teachers and RPS.

Richmond teachers won the right to collectively bargain in 2022. After the Virginia state government passed a law giving cities and counties the option to grant their employees collective bargaining rights, members of REA did the difficult organizing work to successfully demand that RPS agree to give them power to collectively negotiate for better compensation and safer work conditions for themselves and their students.

The first contract REA negotiated expired June 30 of this year, but teachers say they have hit a wall with their RPS counterparts at the negotiating table. Hannah Clayman, the lead negotiator for REA, was quoted by VPM News as saying that REA and RPS have only reached agreement on five of the 24 proposals from REA.

Among the contested issues are raises. Clayman says that RPS negotiators are only offering 2% salary raises for all teachers from 2026 to 2029, which is less than half the current inflation rate of 4.2%.

Teachers are also hoping for expanded protection at and out of school, such as guaranteed open planning periods; guaranteed workdays needed for English as a Second Language teachers to meet federally

no hay fronteras en la lucha de los obreros



ICE OUT OF RICHMOND! - More than 400 people turned out Jan. 18 for an emergency protest after reports that 400 more ICE agents were descending on Richmond. The rally, held in the city's Monroe Park, was called by the Defenders along with many other organizations. Photos by Phil Wilayto

mandated learning requirements with their students; progressive discipline for licensed and support educators; and a more flexible sick time system.

The budget RPS approved for 2026-2027 cut teachers' vision insurance, raised health insurance costs and forced the closure of Richmond Virtual Academy. On top of this, the Richmond School Board set limits on how many bargaining issues REA and RPS could bring to the bargaining table, and Clayman says RPS has not moved at the speed teachers would like to see to provide REA with counterproposals.

Per REA's collective bargaining agreement, the two parties have the chance to participate in four mediation sessions to solve bargaining impasses before the Richmond School Board can take authority to settle the disagreements. However, if all of these interventions are needed, Richmond teachers and support staff may go into the 2026-27 school year without a settled contract.

One thing is sure: No matter the behavior of RPS officials, REA members will - fight for what they and their students need and deserve.



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"4-5 law enforcement officers"
- A** CTIVITY/ACTIONS
"Knocking on someone's door"
- L** OCATION
"Richmond, at the intersection of W. 27th Street and Perry St."
- U** NIFORM/CLOTHES
"2 plainclothes officers, 3 wearing vests with ERO on the back, all of them masked"
- T** I M E
"Wednesday, February 11th at 3:32 PM"
- E** QUIPMENT/WEAPONS
"Ex: weapons, flexicuffs, dogs, door breakers, unmarked cars with federal license plates, etc"

NOT A USEFUL MESSAGE: "ICE SPOTTED IN SOUTHSIDE, RICHMOND!"

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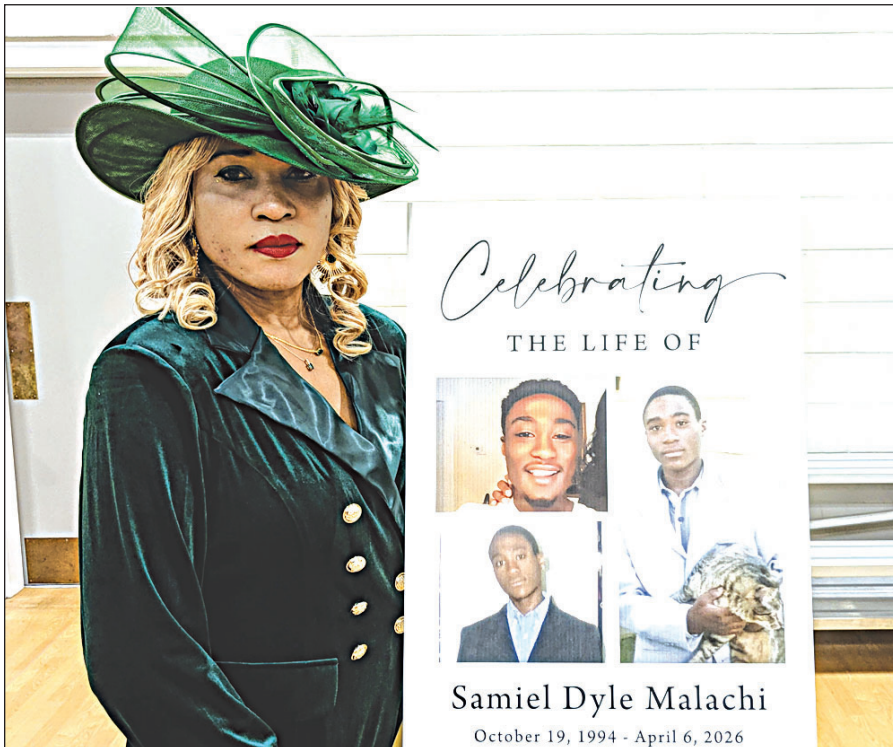


Photo by Ana Edwards

Gesina Charles, mother of Samiel Malachi, stands by a photo tribute to her son at the reception after his funeral, held June 6. Green was Samiel's favorite color.

'Mom, they're going to hurt me!' Questions surround death of Henrico jail inmate

By Phil Wilayto

About 9:45 p.m. on April 5 - Easter Sunday - Gesina Charles was speaking by phone with her son Samiel D. Malachi, who was being held at Henrico County Regional Jail West on DUI and parole violation charges.

Ms. Charles said her son had told her he was afraid for his life because someone was spreading rumors that he was a snitch.

"Mom, they're going to hurt me!" she said he told her.

Suddenly, Ms. Charles told the Defender, Samiel began making sounds as if he were choking. Then there was silence. But he hadn't hung up the phone.

At 4:20 the next morning, according to the Henrico County sheriff's office, Samiel was found unresponsive in his cell. The sheriff's office says guards tried to revive him, but arriving paramedics pronounced him dead.

The Henrico County Police Division opened an investigation, as is standard in inmate deaths.

On June 24, Ms. Charles received the autopsy report from the office of the Virginia Medical Examiner. The conclusion: Samiel, 31, had died from a drug overdose. The office said fentanyl, cocaine and xylazine were found in his system.

For Ms. Charles, that is not the end of the story.

"Samiel was afraid for his life," Ms. Charles told the Defender. "He said someone was spreading rumors that he was a snitch and some people were going to try and kill him." She said he wanted to be transferred to another jail.

There are questions. The following

information was given to the Defender by Ms. Charles, who says she has spoken with inmates in Samiel's cellblock and was able to view video of Samiel's cellblock taken the night he died.

No one has been able to explain how, if Samiel died from a drug overdose, he managed to get drugs while being held in the jail.

Samiel had recently been moved from a cell with two other men to a single-person cell. Unlike most of the other cells, this one didn't have a "panic button" that allows an inmate to call for help if no guard is around.

At 10:41 p.m., after Samiel's last call with his mother, a guard took the tablet he used to make calls.

A jail inmate, who asked not to be named, said that the night Samiel died he was banging on the walls.

She says that, about 3:22 a.m., Samuel was turning the light in his cell on and off, as if he were calling for help.

After being contacted by Ms. Charles, the Defender filed a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request with Henrico Sheriff Alisa A. Gregory asking a series of questions about Samiel's death. Sheriff Gregory responded by saying that she was unable to provide any information while the case was under investigation.

After the Medical Examiners office issued its report, the Defender emailed another list of questions to the sheriff's office and also left a message asking for a comment from the Henrico County police detective who has been investigating the case.

On June 29, we received a statement from Henrico County Public Safety Media Relations, which represents the coun-

ty's Police Division and Sheriff's Office.

According to the statement, Samiel had been found unresponsive in his cell around 4:30 on the morning of April 6. 911 was called and "Life-saving measures were provided, but the inmate, an adult male, was pronounced dead." The statement also repeated the Medical Examiner's conclusion that Samiel had died from an accidental drug overdose.

The statement ended by saying, "The Henrico County Sheriff's Office is conducting an internal investigation into the circumstances surrounding Mr. Malachi's death, which remains ongoing. Henrico Police Criminal Investigations Section detectives are providing support to the Sheriff's Office as needed. Further details about the investigation are not available at this time."

Regardless of how Samiel Malachi died, it's clear that Henrico County Regional Jail West has had some serious problems.

Between 2022 and 2024, seven inmates died in the jail. Lawsuits have been filed alleging that "systemic failures" caused at least some of these deaths.

In 2025, the family of a Hanover man filed a \$3 million lawsuit alleging that staff negligence had led to the man's death.

On March 8 of this year, inmate Michael Barrett, 45, died at a hospital after "potentially" harming himself in the jail.

And then there's the case of Irvo Ortieno, the 28-year-old Kenyan-born man who died on March 6, 2023, while being transferred from the Henrico jail to a state mental health facility. Seven sheriff's deputies and three Central State Hospital employees were charged with second-degree murder.

"According to prosecutors, Otieno was in handcuffs and leg irons and was held on the ground for 12 minutes by the seven deputies, smothering him to death," according to a statement by the civil rights attorney Ben Crump, who along with local attorney Mark Krudys represented the family.

Prosecutors later dropped all charges, but the family eventually reached an \$8.5 million civil settlement with the state of Virginia, Henrico County and Henrico Sheriff Gregory.

According to WWBT, "The sheriff's office says it has implemented new programs for addiction recovery ... and in 2024 was working under a compliance plan to improve safety protocols.



Shaka Shakur

Shaka Shakur Update

By Phil Wilayto

Shaka Shakur is a New Afrikan politically conscious prisoner with whom the Defenders have been in touch for several years. A native of Indiana, he was transferred to Virginia under the interstate Corrections Compact. During his more than two decades behind bars, he has been an outspoken advocate for prisoner rights.

Shaka is promoting his new book, "Manifestations of Thought: When the Dragon Comes," published by 1804 Books and available from his website, shakashakur.org.

"It's a collection of essays about the prison movement, the New Afrikan Freedom Campaign, its political line, history, with special commentary.

The book is about the New Afrikan national liberation struggle in the U.S."

Concerning his own case, Shaka has a new attorney, and says the immediate goal is to organize his case files and prepare to litigate the case.

Shaka will turn 60 on Aug. 19. In January he will have been in prison for 25 years. To support Shaka Shakur, visit his website and sign the petition calling for his freedom. (Type "petition" in the search field.)

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Kevin 'Rashid' Johnson

'People power sees me returned to Virginia ... once again.' (2026)

Editor's note: On June 24, the Defenders received this statement from Kevin "Rashid" Johnson, a noted prisoner author and activist whose writings have appeared many times in this newspaper.

On June 15, 2026, after a year in domestic exile in the South Carolina prison system, I was transferred back to my home state of Virginia.

I want to extend my love and appreciation to everyone who fought for my return. South Carolina was my sixth place sent outside of Virginia in 14 years by officials, in their efforts to suppress my role in exposing, organizing against, and resisting abuses inside these concentration camps.

I was transferred to South Carolina in the thick of my involvement in publicizing and challenging the abuses and lies of VDOC's prior administration, led by past Director Chadwick Dotson and Operations Chief Arnold David Robinson and public demand that they be fired. While exiled in South Carolina, I persisted in this work, in collaboration with various individuals and groups, especially UPROAR, which led to these officials and numerous others being successfully pushed out of office. I also worked to expand these support networks to South Carolina prisoners while I was there and will continue to.

In South Carolina my communication lines and organizing efforts were directly attacked, and not just by prison officials, but also agents working alongside them on the outside who have maneuvered to infiltrate, influence and take control of the prisoner support groups I had developed and those I work with. (More on this elsewhere.)

Because of the help of outside agents, these open attacks against my exposure and

An appeal to support Jermaine Doss

By Phil Wilayto

Jermaime Doss, a native of Norfolk, has been in prison since 2000 after being convicted of a crime the Defenders believe he did not commit.

One of the so-called Fishback prisoners, whose juries recommended long sentences under the mistaken belief that the defendant would be eligible for parole, Jermaime was sentenced life-plus 38 years.

His case has been reviewed by the Virginia Parole Board in each of the past five years. Each time he was turned down, despite the fact that he has never been convicted of committing a violent crime, has been infraction-free for more than 20 years, has a stable family situation to return to and has been such a model prisoner that a corrections officer who supervised him for 10 years testified on his behalf at his last two parole hearings.

Jermaime is asking that people who believe in justice write letters, send emails or call the Parole Board and ask that they finally grant him parole. This is a mostly new board, and hopes are high that this will be the year that Jermaime finally walks out of prison a free man.

Support messages can be sent to:

Virginia Parole Board
6900 Atmore Drive
Richmond, VA 23225
Fax: (804) 674-3284
Call (804) 674-3081
or use the online Contact Form at vpb.virginia.gov/contact

resistance of government abuse, came a sense of official confidence that their actions might go unchallenged. But they were challenged, with the comrades of UROAR leading the charge, resulting in my return to Virginia. This is my third time returning to Virginia from exile, under pressure of public protest and my resistance and organizing against abusive conditions in other states' prison systems.

Thank you again to all my supporters, comrades, friends and the people at large, for your efforts on my behalf that brought me back to my home state.

Dare to Struggle, Dare to Win!

All Power to the People!



Photo by Phil Wilayto

The Greensville Correctional Center in Jarratt is Virginia's largest state prison, occupying 1,005 acres. A medium-security facility, it was the site of Virginia's executions until the state abolished the death penalty in 2021.

Juneteenth celebrated at Greenville

Staff report

Defenders Ana Edwards and Phil Wilayto were the featured speakers at a Juneteenth program held June 18 at the Greensville Correctional Center in Greensville County, about an hour's drive south of Richmond. Their topic was the significance of Richmond's Shockoe Bottom and the more than 30-year community struggle to reclaim and properly memorialize the district that once was the epicenter of the U.S. domestic slave trade.

About 120 people attended the two-hour program, which highlighted the talents of nearly 20 inmates, including rappers, musicians and spoken word artists backed up by a keyboard, guitars and drums.

The event was was MC-ed by Carvona

"Righteous" Teasley, a longtime friend of the Defenders who had suggested inviting as speakers Edwards, chair of the Defenders Sacred Ground Historical Reclamation Project, and Wilayto, coordinator of the Defenders Prisoner Solidarity Committee and editor of The Virginia Defender newspaper, which is free to Virginia prisoners. The organization of the event was assisted by Elizabeth Carr, the prison's Institutional Program Manager.




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Fighting Mass Incarceration in Virginia

it was community struggle that reclaimed shockoe bottom



It took decades of protests, rallies, marches, arrests, media work and more to finally convince the politicians to agree to memorialize Shockoe Bottom, once the epicenter of the U.S. domestic slave trade. Photos by The Virginia Defender



Over and over, hundreds of people packed Richmond City Council meetings to force reclaiming the African Burial Ground, block the scheme for a Shockoe Bottom baseball stadium and demand a memorial park.



On April 12, 2011, the 150th anniversary of the Civil War, the Defenders organized a civil disobedience action that blocked the VCU parking lot desecrating the African Burial Ground. Under community pressure, VCU dropped the trespassing charges.



Over the years, many organizations and individuals from many different communities raised their voices to demand the reclamation and proper memorialization of the sacred ground of Shockoe Bottom. And this historic struggle is not yet over.

INTERVIEW Continued from page 2

important in the buildup to the “ICE OUT OF MN” day of action, as many are active in Lewis’ graduate workers union and other unions in the area, like SEIU Local 26, which organizes workers at the Minneapolis airport.

Workers from across many local unions teamed up for the day of action to impart the full effect of collective action, and the organizing energy spread to non-union workers and some local small businesses, too.

Workers used call-outs on Jan. 23 to leave their workplaces empty and instead filled the streets to signal to local, state and national politicians that they were dead-set on getting ICE out of their communities.

Lewis described the day of action as a major success. The Minneapolis population remained mobilized on the streets with consistent protest actions, and community members continued to patrol neighborhood streets to protect immigrant neighbors from ICE raids.

This energy, funneled into organization, produced meaningful results: ICE agents began to withdraw from city streets, and in February the Department of Homeland Security called off Operation Metro Surge.

Lewis pointed out that this success did not materialize out of nowhere. Minneapolis union workers and community members already had built connections and organizing experience during protests against the police murder of George Floyd.

During the Israeli genocide in Gaza, immigrant graduate workers experienced – and their peers with citizenship witnessed – visa revocations for speaking out in support of Palestine, which further inspired worker organizing.

PRAIRIELAND Continued from page 2

she said that, although the January 6 defendants were involved in rioting, carrying massive arsenals of weapons, discussions ahead of time about targeting law enforcement and wanting to kill members of Congress and storming the Capital - which resulted in the injury of 140 officers, the average sentence for those defendants was 26 months.

She added, “What happened in the court in Fort Worth was unconstitutional and should concern everybody in this country in the direction that it is taking us.”

To learn how you can support the Prairieland defendants, go to prairielanddefendants.com.

If you are in Richmond, you can attend a benefit show to be held at Bandido’s at 8 p.m. on July 4. Proceeds will go to the Prairieland defendants’ support funds.

To donate to the 15 anti-ICE protestors from the Twin Cities, visit: chuffed.org/project/186570-minnesota-15-legal-defense-fund

As Lewis pointed out, issues like ICE terror and deportations, repression for being pro-Palestine and anti-genocide, job insecurity with the rise of AI and unmissable capital accumulation for the richest and most powerful in our society have revealed to workers how disposable they are to their boss or employer.

This has driven workers like Lewis and workers from across communities in Minneapolis to draw on their power in numbers to hold onto each other and their humanity to fight for the city they want to live in.



Photo by Phil Wilayto

With a large symbolic check as a backdrop, Richmond Mayor Danny Avula acknowledges the receipt of \$850,000 in federal money to address stormwater issues in historic Shockoe Bottom, which sits in a floodplain.

Richmond gets \$850,000 to address stormwater issues in Shockoe Bottom

By Ana Edwards

Richmond has received \$850,000 in federal money to address the city’s stormwater and sewer issues. At a ceremony held June 1 in the lobby of the newly opened Shockoe Institute, a symbolic check was presented by Sen. Mark Warner and Rep. Jennifer McClellan to Mayor Danny Avula, along with City Council President Cynthia Newbille and state Delegates Delores McQuinn and Rae Cousins. Remarks by all the officials present spoke to the importance of addressing flooding

problems for the successful realization of The Shockoe Project.

The check’s presentation was followed by a one-hour meeting with Shockoe Bottom business owners, who shared with Sen. Warner and Mayor Avula their primary concerns for the downtown district: public safety, parking, a cohesive branding identity and incentives for local businesses. Many of the business owners expressed optimism for the increase in visitors - and customers - expected to result from The Shockoe Project as a national destination.

reclaiming our sacred ground

Shockoe Project Update: A very disturbing ‘pause’

By Ana Edwards

While celebrating the gift of \$850,000 in federal funds to Richmond for floodway remediation in Shockoe Bottom, the Shockoe Project’s schedule has changed.

The Shockoe Project is the result of decades of determined community struggle to reclaim and properly memorialize Richmond’s downtown district that was once the epicenter of the U.S. domestic slave trade. In the three decades before the Civil War, so many people were sold from the 50 or so auction houses in Shockoe Bottom that today somewhere between a quarter and half of all African-Americans could likely trace some ancestry to there.

In May, consultants working on the various phases of the project were directed by the City of Richmond to do the following (pardon the jargon):

1. “Modify the entire project scope so that all new development is outside of the floodway. (i.e. no earthwork/grading, no vertical elements in the floodway) and that any material change at current grade maintains or improves the friction coefficient.
2. “Modify the project scope for the North Memorial (Burial Ground) and North & South Campus to end at 100% design development and not continue into construction documents.
3. “Terminate the Marshall St Right-of-Way at 75% design development. No further work is required on this project.
4. “Lumpkin’s Slave Jail Pavilion will move forward into CD’s (construction documents) and construction.”

Technical jargon aside, what this means is that, except for Lumpkin’s Pavilion, all other projects are to be *designed* - but no construction documents are to be *prepared*. So, what is the new construction schedule

for the African Burial Ground, for North and South campuses?

Over the last year and a half, Shockoe Project designers and engineers have worked to design innovative structures, pathways and landscapes that integrate with floodplain and floodway conditions to stabilize a site which serves as a critical part of the city’s infrastructure and a major cultural destination--and major economic driver. To now be told that nothing can be built in the floodway at all is, as stated above, to “modify the entire project scope.”

So, how far back to the drawing board will the designers have to go? Was this decision based on a recent reevaluation of the conditions?

Or are some people in and out of government losing interest in having a truly impressive monument to the history of both the immense suffering and the heroic resistance that defines the Bottom?

Or could it have something to do with telling the truth about how slavery and the slave trade provided the capital that built this country? And how 246 years of unpaid wages cries out for reparations?

Or, is it about the money?

According to the city’s Shockoe Project webpage:

“Allocated funding for The Shockoe Project totals \$58 million and includes the recent additional \$10.1 million allocated in the City’s FY26 Adopted Budget and \$13.4 allocation from the Commonwealth of Virginia, General Assembly. The city received an \$11,000,000 Mellon Foundation grant to supplement the creation of the Shockoe Institute as part of The Shockoe Project, that grant is included in the aforementioned \$58 million.”

When the Shockoe Project started its work in 2024, \$46 million of the \$58 million was earmarked for the overall project - the North and South Memorial areas. In March of this year, Baskerville, the lead contracting architectural company, was notified that there was just \$18 million available.

That’s a difference of \$28 million, unaccounted for.

An explanation was requested. To date, the only comment was to the effect that no one ever said that money couldn’t be reallocated if something came up.

So did “something” else come up? Was the money reallocated? And if so, to what?

The Virginia Defender and the Sacred Ground Project have posed questions in the past about the stability of the funding: Is the money secure? Could it be moved away from the project? Is the City really committed to this?

According to Leonard Mantey, the city’s Shockoe Project liaison, “We are utilizing available funding to construct what we can afford now. The Shockoe Legacy Foundation has undertaken a feasibility study and also engaged a consultant to guide them on fundraising. We are very confident they will help raise funds for the rest of the project.”

And yet, here we are, wondering if any other shoes are about to drop.

Stay tuned - and stay ready. Mass struggle brought us this far, and mass struggle can make sure that what has been won can’t be taken away.



Photo by Phil Wilayto

Ana Edwards, chair of the Defenders’ Sacred Ground Historical Reclamation Project, examines one of the exhibits at the newly opened Shockoe Institute.

Shockoe Institute opens

By Ana Edwards

The Shockoe Institute, located on the first floor of the Main Street Station at 1500 East Main St. in Richmond’s Shockoe Bottom, is an interactive educational facility that explores the history and legacy of racial slavery in the United States.

The Institute opened in April by launching its permanent exhibit, “Expanding Freedom.” The exhibit is organized around seven themes that trace the origins of race and racism with the rise and fall of U.S. slavery as it was experienced in Virginia, first as a colony on Indigenous lands and then a state, with the emphasis on Richmond, its capital city and, in the 30 years leading up to the Civil War, the epicenter of the U.S. domestic slave trade.

The exhibit also traces the post-Emancipation struggles of Black people for social equality and political rights amidst the reaction of racist violence. You can follow the exhibit’s themes online at: library.shockoeinstitute.org/story.

The existence of an exhibit like “Expanding Freedom” is a mark of progress in Richmond’s challenge to address its awful history, and is a very good starting point for learning about the role of the slave trade in the making of Richmond, Virginia and the country as a whole, as well as the evolution of Black life in a white society that did not welcome people of African descent but could not exist without their labor.

The possibility of a Shockoe Institute and a Shockoe Project is part of that evolution: the result of the decades-long struggle of thousands of Richmonders and their allies who petitioned, rallied, marched, packed City Council meetings and engaged in civil disobedience, including arrests.

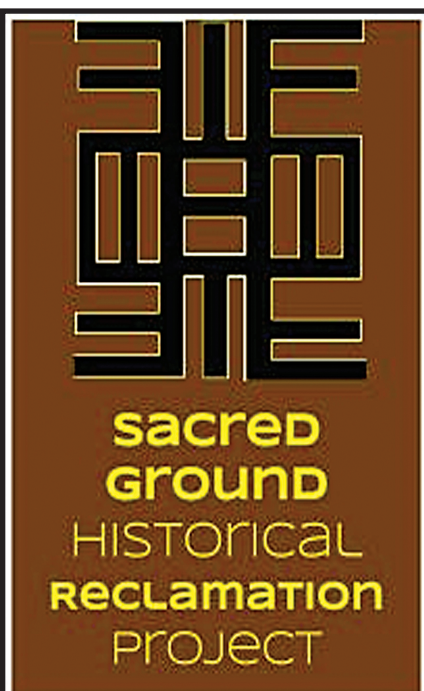
They refused to put up with Virginia Commonwealth operating a parking lot over the African Burial Ground. They fought and blocked the plan to put a baseball stadium in the Bottom and they developed the plan for a memorial park and built a powerful popular base that finally forced the elected officials - some of whom had actively opposed the reclamation and proper memorialization of Shockoe Bottom - to agree to bring this history into the visible public sphere.

One of the most impressive aspects of the interpretive center of the National African Burial Ground Monument in New York City is that it presents the visitor with the history of early 18th century New York, slavery and the cemetery which once held 15,000 burials, while at the same time choosing to uphold the more recent history of the Black community’s 15-year struggle to bring the monument into being.

Black people in New York asserted their right to be informed decision-makers, representing as a descendant community how their ancestors’ human remains were to be cared for, how their histories should be researched and interpreted, and how all of it should be memorialized.

The struggle for the New York African Burial Ground Memorial demonstrated the descendants’ claim to authority over their historical and cultural resources, including the scientific breakthroughs which changed anthropology, archeology and the treatment of human remains forever.

These stories need to be taught, because they demonstrate that people can fight and win in this moment as well as in the grander moments of the past. If not in the Shockoe Institute today, certainly through the 10-acre Shockoe Project, the history of community struggles that push us into future achievements must have its place.



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SAVE THE DATE: AUG. 30
 On the 226th anniversary of Gabriel’s Rebellion, the Virginia Department of Historic Resources and the Sacred Ground Historical Reclamation Project will unveil a new historical marker at the Shockoe Bottom African Burial Ground. Details TBA.

SAVE THE DATE: OCT. 10
 Join the Sacred Ground Historical Reclamation Project for the 24th Annual Gabriel Gathering at the Shockoe Bottom African Burial Ground. Details TBA.

In our opinion

Stop the Wars at Home & Abroad!

These are tough times, and all of us are feeling the pressure: rising food and gas prices, skyrocketing electric bills, all the political tensions. And the world situation is so depressing that a lot of folks are just deciding they can't handle following it.

As understandable as that may seem, it's a big mistake.

This country is still dealing with the fallout from the Vietnam War, which affected a whole generation and its children.

Back in the early '60s, most folks here had never heard of Vietnam. And if they had, they couldn't imagine it could have anything to do with their daily lives. But it did.

In the last four months, some 7,000 people have been killed in Iran and Lebanon by U.S. and Israeli bombs. But the main way people here think about it is that it costs more to fill up their gas tanks.

We've got to have a deeper understanding, and concern, about how what the U.S. government does in our name and with our tax dollars around the world is both wrong and also harmful to us here at home.

Here are some specifics:

Gas prices shot up because Iran closed the Strait of Hormuz after Trump and Netanyahu launched a totally unprovoked war. Before that war, about a fifth of all oil and liquified natural gas passed through the Strait.

Oil is used for all kinds of things, like lubricating machines, making plastic products and producing electricity. Gasoline powers the trucks that carry about three-quarters of all goods in this country. That's a big reason why prices are up for everything from clothes to furniture to toys.

Something else that passes through the Strait of Hormuz is fertilizer, so now the cost of growing food is up, and that's on top of the damage done by Trump's tariffs, making it harder for farmers to sell their products overseas.

Then there are the electric bills. That has to do with the incredible expansion of data centers, which not only use massive amounts of electricity, but also water, which is already in short supply because Virginia is one of the states suffering from droughts. It's also the place with more data centers than anywhere else in the world.

And the expansion of data centers is because of the corporate investment in artificial intelligence (AI), which the 1% of 1% that really runs this country hopes will keep the U.S. dominant in the world. As they say, "Information is Power," and they want to control the flow of information.

Then there are the cuts to Medicaid, SNAP benefits, federal support for rural hospitals and much more. That's all because the present administration wants to cut back on anything that isn't related to the military - any program that benefits working-class people.

Trump is now demanding \$1.5 trillion for the next military budget. Last year's budget was just shy of a trillion, so this is a 50% increase. It's completely unprecedented and is only meant to assure that the United States, which is losing its world dominance economically, wants to make sure it can still dominate militarily.

This is not in our interest. There's no reason why we have to control the world. We can live in peace with other countries, but we can't do it with a system based on putting profits over people.

We need to not only fight the Trump administration, we need to fight the system that he represents.

It's time to take a deep hard look at Capitalism, and ask, does it benefit the majority of the people, or just the privileged few?

Letters to the Editor

Honoring Shockoe Bottom

Recognizing that Land is the First Ancestor, the Afrikan Ancestral Chamber was founded to honor and preserve the memories of Ancestors and Sacred Spaces.

I can still hear the shouts of "Get your asphalt off our Ancestors!" From seeing the huge gatherings of people assembling to protest VCU's disrespect of the Afrikan Burial Grounds to seeing now, the reality of a monument taking shape to pay long overdue tribute and remembrance of our Ancestors' suffering and existence.

The memorial Tekhen is believed to be the first such monument built by Africans for Africans on public space in the U.S. Commonly known as an Obelisk, it is an ancient symbol signifying divine procreation and resurrection, often raised to the memory of Afrikan kings.

"This memorial stands as a reminder of African champions for liberty and ancient values that have stood the test of time. The interpretation of slavery is a sober reminder of one of most tragic times in American history, but does little to inform the public about African heritage before slavery and the future that is ours to create," said Nana Monica Esparza.

The Tekhen was erected in 2017 with a plaque that reads "To symbolize the spiritual resurrection of a liberated and inspired people."

We built the pyramids. This is a glorious way to pay tribute to our DNA and ancestors. The Tekhen will have a permanent physical connection to the African Burial Grounds of Richmond, Va., Lumpkins Jail, auction houses and the Devil's Half Acre. While these tragic memories are real and poignant and always sad, the AAC erected the Tekhen to honor the work and memory of Gabriel and his liberation army and the many nameless Freedom Fighters who always had ideas of self-determination.

Having recently visited Goree Island in Dakar and peering through the door of no return, attending meetings discussing the Shockoe Project / North Memorial has created more of a sense of urgency than ever. The Adinkra symbols, the flowing and still waters, the Hush Harbor all serve as reminders of the Great Afrikan Spirit that resides in each of us. She will not be crushed, She is longing to be FREE.

Queen Zakia Shabazz
CHESTERFIELD COUNTY



Photo by Phil Wilayto

Local activists turn out for the weekly antiwar protest in Richmond, which takes place at the intersection of Broad and Belvidere streets. The protests are held on Fridays from 8-9 a.m. and 5-6 p.m. Other regular antiwar protests take place across Virginia, including in Norfolk, Roanoke, Tysons, Virginia Beach and Williamsburg..



Photo by Phil Wilayto

This Tekhen at Richmond's African Burial Ground in Shockoe Bottom is the one that Queen Zakia Shabazz speaks about in her Letter to the Editor (to the left). The structure was created and installed by the Afrikan Ancestral Chamber.

The Virginia Defender

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VIRGINIA DEFENDERS FOR FREEDOM, JUSTICE & EQUALITY

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Photo by Fern Diaz-Castro

Cochiloco is a popular Mexican restaurant in Richmond's Scott's Addition.

Richmond police deploy chemical agent during World Cup watch party

By Fern Diaz-Castro

On the night of June 30, people in Richmond gathered at Cochiloco, a local Mexican restaurant, to watch the Mexico vs. Ecuador FIFA World Cup game. The restaurant's popular watch parties have consistently brought out large numbers of fans, with some reaching maximum capacity, leading people to gather outside the space.

On this night, a couple of fights broke out between a few of the people standing outside, attracting the attention of the Richmond Police Department. According to five witnesses, police used chemical agents to separate those fighting. No other attempt at de-escalation was enforced before the chemicals were sprayed.

Sources shared that the police then went into the restaurant and, without warning, sprayed the same chemical agents inside.

People have confirmed that there were children outside the restaurant and potentially others in the building. Videos circulating on social media show people trampling through Cochiloco's kitchen to reach the restaurant's back exit door in order to escape the fumes. Witnesses comment that others rushed out the front door, but that those closest to the bathrooms were "trapped" inside.

There has been public outcry and frustration regarding the police response to the fight. A local community member expressed this through a comment on Instagram saying, "If this was a bar on Grove Avenue full of only white people and there was a fight, this would NEVER happen. I've de-escalated a bar fight as a bartender- it can be done without a gun, a badge, or chemical gases. How appalling."

In a statement posted on its website, Cochiloco shared, "For the time being, we will

not be hosting big matches until further notice. We understand this was concerning for guests, nearby businesses, and the community. Our priority is the safety of our guests, staff, and neighbors, while continuing to be a place where families and everyone feels welcome."

Many are demanding answers from the city. The Defenders immediately reached out to the offices of the mayor and police chief, and on July 2 received this statement from the Office of Strategic Communications of the Richmond Police Department:

"The Mayor's Office, City Administration, and the Richmond Police Department are in regular communication regarding public safety matters across the city. As part of that routine information-sharing process, the Mayor was informed of this matter on July 1.

"The deployment of chemical agents is determined by the specific circumstances of each incident. In this case, the presence of a large crowd created safety concerns for patrons, community members, law enforcement officers, and other first responders. The chemical agent was not deployed inside the structure; it was deployed outside the building. While it is recognized that individuals exposed to the chemical agent may have entered the structure to seek relief from its effects, the deployment itself occurred exclusively outside.

"Officers are trained to use verbal commands as a means of de-escalating situations whenever possible. When verbal commands are ineffective, or when officers are outnumbered and safety concerns arise, they may employ other authorized response options. Officers are trained to use only the amount of force that is objectively reasonable and necessary to safely restore order."

Justice delayed is justice denied: Why Anthony Briley deserves parole under Virginia law

By LaTonya Roberson

In the late 1970s, America's criminal justice system was deeply shaped by fear, race and public pressure. Courtrooms were not insulated from racial bias, and young Black men accused of violent crimes were often treated as symbols rather than individuals.

It was in that climate that Anthony Ray Briley, a 21-year-old Black man from Richmond, Va., was sentenced to spend his life in prison for crimes he was never proven to have committed.

Nearly half a century later, Anthony Briley remains incarcerated. He is now 68 years old. His continued imprisonment demands an honest examination, not only of who he is today, but of the racial and legal realities that defined his sentence and the Virginia parole laws that exist precisely to address cases like his.

Anthony Briley's name has long been associated with his older brothers, Linwood and James Briley, who were convicted of murders in 1979 and later executed.

Anthony was not the triggerman. Prosecutors acknowledged there was no physical evidence that he killed anyone, planned any murders or ordered violence. Yet he received multiple life sentences, indistinguishable from those imposed on the men who took lives.

That outcome cannot be separated from the era in which it occurred.

In the 1970s, Black Americans made up approximately 11% of the U.S. population, but, by the end of the decade, nearly 45% of the prison population, according to U.S. Department of Justice data. Studies conducted during that period consistently showed that Black defendants were significantly more likely to receive the harshest possible sentences, especially in cases involving violent crimes and intense media attention.

A 1977 Law and Society Review study found that Black defendants convicted of violent felonies were far more likely than white defendants to receive life sentences, even when controlling for criminal history and offense severity.

Research by the NAACP Legal Defense Fund in the late 1970s further revealed that Black defendants were more than three times as likely to receive life or death sentences compared to white defendants charged under similar circumstances.

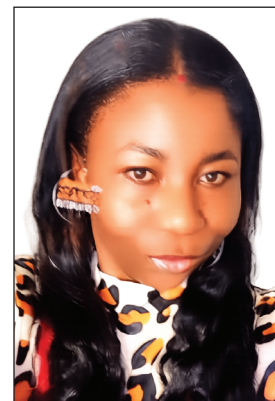
This was the reality of the courtroom Anthony Briley entered.

He was the youngest brother. He had no history of violent crime. He was 21 years old, an age now recognized by modern neuroscience as one of incomplete brain development, heightened impulsivity and susceptibility to influence. Yet the justice system did not evaluate him as an individual. He was judged by association, by last name and by the racial fear of the moment.

That is not justice. That is guilt by association magnified by race.

Virginia parole policy exists to correct precisely this kind of outcome. Under Virginia law, individuals convicted before 1995 are eligible for discretionary parole. Parole is not about retrying the case or minimizing the harm caused by crime. It is about

determining whether continued incarceration serves a legitimate purpose and whether release is compatible with public safety and the welfare of the individual.



Virginia Code §53.1-136 requires the Parole Board to consider an individual's history, institutional conduct, rehabilitation, mental and physical condition, age, attitude and reentry plan. The Board is also required to consider whether the goals of punishment, deterrence and rehabilitation have been met.

Anthony Briley meets and exceeds every one of those criteria.

For more than 40 consecutive years, he has maintained a clean disciplinary record. He has completed dozens of rehabilitative, vocational, cognitive behavioral, victim impact and faith-based programs. He has worked consistently, mentored others and lived peacefully within an environment not designed for growth.

National data from the Bureau of Justice Statistics confirms that individuals over the age of 60 have the lowest rates of recidivism, often below 2%. At 68 years old, Anthony Briley poses no threat to public safety. The purposes of incarceration have long since been fulfilled.

What remains now is not public protection, deterrence or rehabilitation. What remains is a sentence imposed during one of the most racially punitive eras in modern American history, carried forward without regard for change, maturity, or proportionality.

Granting parole to Anthony Briley would not erase the past. It would not diminish the pain suffered by victims' families. It would affirm a fundamental principle of justice that punishment must be individualized, that people can change and that the law must be applied as it exists today, not as it was distorted by racial fear decades ago.

Anthony Briley entered prison as a young Black man in 1979. He has spent nearly his entire adult life paying for proximity, not proof. If Virginia's parole system cannot recognize redemption in this case, then parole has lost its meaning altogether.

Justice is not supposed to remain frozen in the biases of the past. It is supposed to evolve toward fairness, humanity and truth.

After 46 years, justice requires that Anthony Briley be judged not by the racial climate of the 1970s, but by the man he has proven himself to be today.

Justice delayed is justice denied.

LaTonya Roberson is an advocate with Fighting 4 Freedom and works extensively on parole, pardon and reentry advocacy for incarcerated individuals in Virginia.



NEWS

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Venezuela - Greenland - Canada - Iran - Now Trump wants to take over

Cuba!

By Phil Wilayto

Some years ago, I spent time in Philadelphia helping to build for a national antiwar march in D.C. One day, I got to talking with a guy who ran a newspaper stand in the city's Germantown neighborhood. He was an older Black man, and I had a feeling he'd been involved in the Communist movement in his younger days.

We got to talking about Cuba. He said, "Yeah, the CIA's going to kill Fidel some day. Fidel's going to laugh himself to death. They've tried so many times to kill him, it's crazy. They even tried to get him to smoke an exploding cigar!

"But that Fidel, he's smart," the man said. "When they made the Revolution, they went out to the country and told the people, 'You've been working this land for generations, now it belongs to you. This is your land now!

"So when the CIA got the counter-revolutionary Cubans to attack at the Bay of Pigs, they said to the people. 'We're here to liberate you!' And the people said, 'Get off my land!'"

I thought that was a great way of explaining what had really happened in Cuba.

In 1959, revolutionaries led by Fidel Castro, his brother Raul, Che Guevara and other freedom fighters led their guerilla army into Havana, overthrowing the brutal dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista.

Batista was a loyal puppet of the U.S. government. He let U.S. corporations exploit the country and allowed organized crime to make Havana a place so decadent that the whole island became known as the "Brothel of the Caribbean."

I visited Cuba in 1992 with the U.S.-Cuba Labor Exchange. The idea was that union members from each country would visit the other one to learn about the people there. There have been a lot of delegations from the U.S., but Washington won't let the Cubans visit here.

Anyway, one of the other people on the trip was Henri, a Cajun guy who had spent his life at sea. He wound up being a ship captain and vice president of the

National Maritime Union, a left, racially mixed union.

Henri said he had been to Cuba around 50 times before the Revolution. He said back then the cops were just as brutal to U.S. sailors as they were to everybody else. People were so poor, they sent their kids out on the streets to beg. And because there was so much competition, some parents would actually deform their own children to make them look more pitiful.



In those days, the only jobs for Cuban women were domestic servants or prostitutes. The place was so racist that even Batista, who was part Black, wasn't allowed on some of the beaches.

So the people made a revolution. They nationalized the big farmlands and industries owned by U.S. corporations. They started a national literacy program so successful that in just one year almost all Cubans could read and write.

They provided free education up through universities. They built a health care system that's the envy of the developing world and send more doctors to other countries than the entire World Health Organization.

And the Cuban Revolution was never just about Cuba. It supported other liberation struggles in Asia, Africa and Latin America.

According to Nelson Mandela, Cuba was the first country to come to the aid of the African National Congress when it was fighting the South African apartheid state. Cuba sheltered Black leaders

fleeing political repression in the United States, like Assata Shakur.

When apartheid South Africa invaded Angola, Cuba sent hundreds of thousands of soldiers who helped beat back the invasion. One slogan in the international solidarity movement supporting Cuba is, "When Africa called out, Cuba answered."

We're told that Cuba is isolated in the world, but every year the United Nations General Assembly passes a resolu-

tion without it.

Cuba doesn't produce its own oil, so the Cuban people are lucky now if they get four hours of electricity a day. There's practically no gasoline for transportation. Many people are cooking on wood fires, which means they're cooking outside on the sidewalks because the smoke from wood fires would fill their homes.

The Cuban health system, which has been the shining star of their socialist system, is rapidly deteriorating for lack of essential supplies and energy. People aren't getting the life-saving medicines they need to counter severe health problems. This includes children and babies.

The U.S. blockade is literally killing people.

And why is all this happening? Why is Cuba in the crosshairs of the Trump administration? It's not a threat to the United States. It has no nuclear weapons, no huge military. It's a small island with fewer than 11 million people. That's smaller and with fewer people than North Carolina.

But Cuba has one thing that makes the right-wingers in Washington go bat-dung crazy: It sets a bad example.

The continued existence of a free, independent and socialist Cuba shows the world that it's possible to break away from U.S. domination and chart an independent course. It demonstrates that it's possible to build your own economic system, choose your own leaders, pick your own friends and decide for yourself who are your enemies.

It's a really "bad" example for the rest of the world.

That's why Cuba is being targeted. No one in the United States has anything to gain from this vicious aggression against Cuba except the obscenely wealthy corporations that want to get their tentacles back into the island. They want to see it become a Caribbean resort for the wealthy again. They want the rich agricultural land, worked by the cheap labor they once employed. They want to be in charge.

The Cuban people aren't having it. And we need to do all we can to support them in their time of need.

tion condemning the U.S. blockade.

Last October, 165 countries supported the resolution. Only seven opposed it, including the U.S., Ukraine and Israel.

The people of Cuba are patriotic. They love their country. They're proud to be free of the Colossus to the North. They're proud of the fact that they've been able to survive 66 years of a brutal blockade that makes it extremely difficult for them to import anything they can't produce themselves.

All the political pundits predicted that Cuba would fall apart after the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991. Now it's 2026, and Cuba is still free and independent. If Cuba were a terrible dictatorship like we're told, the people would have overthrown the government long ago.

Since the Revolution, every U.S. president has been hostile to Cuba. But now Trump has intensified the blockade, forbidding any country to provide the island with oil. Oil is essential for electricity, transportation, agriculture, industry and no country today can func-

international & antiwar news



Photo by Phil Wilayto

Defender Fern Diaz-Castro addresses the emergency protest held March 1 outside the federal courthouse in downtown Richmond to condemn the unprovoked U.S.-Israeli attack the day before on Iran.

Emergency protest condemns U.S.-Israeli war against Iran

Editor's note: The Virginia Defenders issued the following statement on Feb. 28, the day the U.S. and Israel launched their totally unprovoked attack against the Islamic Republic of Iran. The next day, more than 80 people attended the emergency protest in Richmond.

Virginia Defenders condemn US/Israeli attack on Iran & call for Emergency Protest on Sunday, March 1, in Richmond

Early this morning, the United States and Israel launched a massive attack against the Islamic Republic of Iran. Multiple cities have been hit in what is being called Operation Epic Fury, including the ancient cities of Esfahan, Shiraz, Qom and the country's capital, Tehran. The bombs are hitting both military and civilian targets, including an elementary school in the southern city of Minab,

killing at least 85 children.

This attack comes as the U.S. and Iran were in the middle of negotiations aimed at reducing tensions between the two countries, with more talks supposed to take place soon. And the attack is by Israel, still carrying out its genocidal war against the people of Gaza, and the U.S., fresh off its bombing of Venezuela and the abduction of President Nicolas Maduro and "First Combatant" Cilia Flores.

In a social media post, Trump said that today's attack was to ensure that Iran cannot build a nuclear weapon - something the United Nations' nuclear watchdog, the IAEA (International Atomic Energy Agency), says there is no evidence that it's doing. Trump further called on the Iranian people to rise up and overthrow their government.

Except in retaliation for being itself attacked, Iran hasn't attacked another country in some 250 years. For its part, the U.S. has been in

almost continuous wars since its founding, from its genocidal attacks on Indigenous people through its predatory wars in Latin America, the Caribbean, Asia and the Middle East. And it has been trying to bring down the Iranian government since its founding in 1979, through military attacks, cyber-warfare, sanctions, internal subversion and more.

Meanwhile, here at home, Trump has unleashed what amounts to his own private army - ICE - against immigrants and peaceful protesters in an attempt to make sure the U.S. remains a predominantly white country.

This attack - in violation of both U.S. and international law - isn't about nuclear weapons or any alleged threat to the United States. It's about taking down an independent country that has been an obstacle to the U.S. achieving complete control over the oil-rich Middle East. That, and eliminating what it considers to be a dangerous example: that, like Cuba and Venezuela, it's possible for a country to free itself from subservience to and exploitation by the U.S. and chart its own path among the countries of the world.

The Virginia Defenders for Freedom, Justice & Equality has a long history of educating the public about the true nature of Iran and U.S.-Iranian relations. In 2007 we organized a five-person delegation that traveled 1,200 miles through the country by van, meeting Iranians from all walks of life. Our book, "In Defense of Iran: Notes from a U.S. Peace Delegation's Journey through the Islamic Republic," played a major role in educating the U.S. antiwar movement about the reality of Iran and how that reality directly contradicts the lies of the U.S. government and media propaganda machine.

The Virginia Defenders condemn in the strongest possible terms this predatory and imperialistic war against Iran. We call for an immediate end to the bombings and an end to all hostility and aggression against Iran and any other country.

And we call on all Norfolk-based sailors, many of whom are now stationed on ships bombing Iran, to remember that they have the right and even the duty to refuse all illegal orders - and all illegal wars.

In response to today's attack on Iran, the Defenders are calling for an Emergency Protest at 2 p.m. Sunday, March 1, outside the Spottswood W. Robinson III and Robert R. Merhige, Jr. Federal Courthouse at 701 E. Broad Street in downtown Richmond.

STOP THE U.S./ISRAELI WAR AGAINST IRAN!

MONEY FOR JOBS & EDUCATION, NOT FOR WARS & OCCUPATION!

REGIME CHANGE AT HOME, NOT ABROAD!

BOLIVIA: Indigenous communities & workers demand president resign

By Fern Diaz-Castro

Bolivia remains in a state of unrest as members of Indigenous groups, farmers, miners, teachers and other sectors of Bolivia's working class demand the resignation of their Trump-backed president, Rodrigo Paz.

Bolivian Indigenous and working-class communities have long used road blockades to leverage their demands. Due to their strategic locations, these blockades have the power to halt major transportation of goods and services.

On June 20, after almost two months of road blockages in La Paz, Bolivia's capital and central government hub, and other main cities such as El Alto and Cochabamba, Paz declared a 90-day state of emergency that was then ratified by the legislature. While the military has now cleared a majority of the blockades, ABC News reports that some still continue in parts of the Cochabamba region, led by unions.

These protestors, many of whom helped put Paz in power less than a year ago, feel betrayed by his initial political moves and his inability to stabilize the economy. The breaking point was the enactment of Law 1720, which allows farmers to mortgage sections of their land. The worry is that this will lead to banks seizing more and more farmland to be used for their own corporate interests.

In response to the mass protests, Paz repealed the law, but the distrust in his government remains. People are also protesting the elimination of fuel subsidies, which has almost doubled the cost of a gallon of gas, according to AP News, as well as the bad quality of fuel that is damaging people's vehicles.

Other points of tension include the elimination of taxes on the very wealthy; political alignment with both the U.S. and Israel; and the fact that Paz didn't appoint Indigenous or working-class people to his cabinet or positions of power.

Rodrigo Paz ran under the Christian Democratic Party and is Bolivia's first conservative president in more than 20 years. He has received support from right-wing governments in Latin America, including those of Argentina, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Panama, Paraguay and Trinidad and Tobago.

While agreements have been made between Paz and the Bolivian Workers' Confederation (COB), the general discontent for his government remains amongst other unions.

The future of Bolivia is uncertain, but these Indigenous and working-class communities have made one thing clear: It is the strategic halt in business and production that will make profit-driven politicians listen!

Emails from Iran

As the U.S. and Israel were bombing Iran, the Defenders were receiving almost daily emails from our good friend Habib Ahmadzadeh, an author and documentary filmmaker we met on our visit there in 2007. Habib and his family live in Tehran, and his emails tell a gripping story of destruction, courage and resilience. You can find them at:

emailsfromiran.blogspot.com

Videos from Ukraine

Every year on May 2, the Defenders promote the remembrance of the Odessa Massacre of May 2, 2014, when dozens of progressive activists were murdered by a pro-government, fascist-led mob. This year we compiled a series of reports about life in Ukraine today, including videos showing government agents kidnapping people off the streets to force them into the Ukrainian military. You can find the full report at:

odessasolidaritycampaign.net

VIRGINIA PRISON JUSTICE NETWORK

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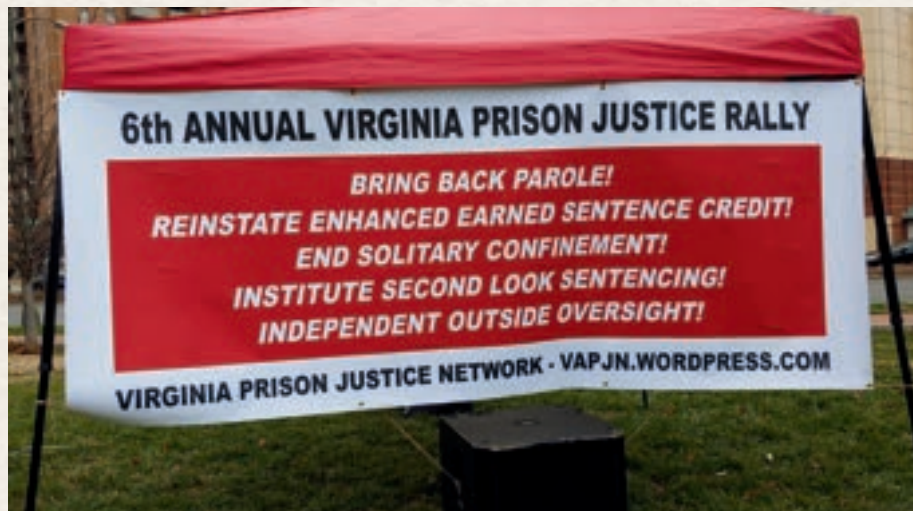
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- Counseling and nonlegal advice for prisoners. (We are not attorneys.)

- Legislative advocacy at the Virginia General Assembly.



- Grassroots organizing about prison issues.

- Building a statewide movement for Prison Justice in Virginia!

- RIHD Mobile Justice Torus to inform formerly incarcerated folks about their rights.

- Statewide reports in The Virginia Defender quarterly newspaper.

- A monthly newsletter published by the Coalition for Justice and sent to more than 2,000 prisoners in all state facilities.



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