

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

D The Virginia **DEFENDER**

FREE



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**An Open Letter to
Richmond Mayor Levar Stoney,
the City Council & School Board
& the people of Richmond:**

**A Proposal for how the
SHOCKOE BOTTOM
MEMORIAL PARK
can materially benefit
the Black community**

— See page 2 —

“Those who do not move, do not notice their chains.” — Rosa Luxemburg - Polish revolutionary, March 5, 1871 - Jan. 15, 1919

regional & national news

How the Shockoe Bottom memorial park can materially benefit the Black community

The decades-long struggle to reclaim and properly memorialize Shockoe Bottom, once the epicenter of the U.S. domestic slave trade, seems to be nearing its end.

Or is it?

Some serious money is now on the table: \$28 million in Richmond's current capital budget for what the City is calling the Enslaved Africans Heritage Campus (working title), and another \$11 million from the Mellon Foundation for the visitors center and interpretive center that is to go into the first floor of the Main Street Station train shed. And there's the money the Virginia General Assembly allocated for the memorialization of Shockoe Bottom, if it hasn't already been eaten up by the ill-conceived "national slavery museum."

(For updates on the Heritage Campus and interpretive center, see the reports on page 11.)

The Defenders have a proposal for how some of this money can directly benefit the Black community. But before we get to that, let's first go over a bit of the history about how we got to this point and why this small area of

land in downtown Richmond is so central to understanding Black history and the history of the country as a whole.

Let's start at the beginning of the struggle.

Three stages in the struggle

Some 30 years ago, two things happened: The organization Hope in the Cities began to publicize the existence of what has been called the Slave Trail. Present-day advocates call it the Night Walk of Enslaved Africans, the path that captured Africans were forced to walk, at night, from the Manchester Docks on the James River to the slave jails of Shockoe Bottom, and later, from those jails back to the docks to be transported to the slave-trading centers further south.

And at about the same time, Richmond historian Elizabeth Kambourian, while conducting research at the Library of Virginia for a book she was writing about the great slave rebellion leader Gabriel, came across an old city map that had the notation "Burial Ground for Negroes." It took her years, but she eventually was able to get the attention of others

in the city about the existence of one of this country's first municipal cemeteries for free and enslaved Black people.

In 2001, the Elegba Folklore Society incorporated the burial ground into its guided walk along the Trail of Enslaved Africans. The following week, the Richmond Free Press ran the city's first news story about the burial ground, written by staff reporter Phil Wilayto, now the editor of The Virginia Defender.

City Council member Sa'ad El-Amin, who at that time chaired council's Slave Trail Commission, began pressing the City to purchase the cemetery, which was covered by a private parking lot. Councilmember Delores McQuinn, now a state delegate, introduced a resolution for the City to do just that, but it was defeated.

At the time, the 3.1-acre site was valued at just \$600,000. Meanwhile, council authorized \$1.1 million to shore up the brick wall on the 25th Street side of St. Patrick's Church in near-by Church Hill, where Patrick Henry, an attorney who did legal work for Gabriel's owner, gave his famous (and very hypocritical) "Give me liberty or give me death" speech.

It took years of struggle - marches, rallies, petition campaigns, press conferences, packing city council meetings and a civil disobedience action organized by the Defenders, but finally, in 2011, the offending parking lot, then owned by Virginia Commonwealth University, a state institution, was removed and the area seeded in an effort arranged by King Salim Khalfani, then the executive director of the Virginia State Conference NAACP.

That was the first stage of the Shockoe Bottom struggle.

The second stage was the two-year fight to prevent former Mayor Dwight Jones and the Venture Richmond business organization from building a commercial baseball stadium in Shockoe Bottom. In 2014, under tremendous community pressure, Jones withdrew his proposal from consideration by city council. Many organizations and individuals took part in that campaign, Black, white, Latino, with the leading role being played by the Defenders' Sacred Ground Historical Reclamation Project.

The third stage began when the Defenders

See SHOCKOE on page 3

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

THE VIRGINIA DEFENDERS for Freedom, Justice & Equality

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

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

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

to organize around these issues as well.

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

If you agree with the principles below and want to work to make these ideals a reality, we invite you to join us. Together, we can make a real difference in the life of our communities.

WHAT WE BELIEVE

We believe in Freedom

We believe that all people must be free to develop to their full potential as human beings. We must be free from hunger, from preventable diseases, from homelessness, from ignorance. We must be free to work and to provide for ourselves and our families. We must be free to pursue our education and to develop ourselves culturally and spiritually. We must be free from fear of the arbitrary use of police power and from the physical and cultural attacks of white-

supremacist organizations. Women must be free from physical, cultural and emotional oppression. Children must be free from dangers like lead poisoning, asthma and sexual exploitation. Our youths must be free both from police harassment and the mindless violence of the streets. We must all be free from unjust wars fought in the interest of the wealthy few at the expense of the struggling many.

We believe in Justice

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

We believe in Equality

We live in the richest country in the world.

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

This country does not belong to the wealthy few who have claimed it for their own. As human beings, we all have an equal right to its resources. As descendants of those whose blood, sweat and tears paid cruelly for its development, we have a right to collective reparations. And as people who struggle every day with ongoing inequality, we have the right to affirmative action.

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

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

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

reclaiming our sacred ground

SHOCKOE Continued from page 8

led a citywide community consultation campaign that came up with the proposal for a nine-acre Shockoe Bottom Memorial Park, which would include what was now known as the Shockoe Bottom African Burial Ground; the nearby site of a notorious slave jail known as the Devil's Half-Acre; and two more blocks east of the CSX railroad tracks where other slave jails, slave trader offices and supporting businesses once stood. The idea was to create a memorial park large enough to prevent any more proposals for inappropriate development on this sacred ground.

City government, under the leadership of Mayor Levar Stoney, has finally embraced this proposal, partly because of the relentless community pressure, and partly because of the feedback the City was getting from organizations like Preservation Virginia; the National Trust for Historic Preservation; the Rose Fellowship, which deals with urban land issues; and even many members of the National Conference of Mayors, who were telling the City what a treasure it had in Shockoe Bottom, in terms of its potential for tourism.

It finally dawned on the politicians that Richmond was literally sitting on a gold mine.

So today, Mayor Stoney and the city council have fully committed to a 10-block Heritage Campus, which incorporates and builds

on the Defenders' proposal for the nine-acre memorial park.

So it looks like this long community struggle has finally succeeded in reclaiming and properly memorializing Shockoe Bottom. Right?

Well, not quite. There's the question of who's going to benefit from all this.

The economic significance of Shockoe Bottom

In the 30 years before the end of the Civil War, between 300,000 and 350,000 Africans and people of African descent were sold out of Virginia. Those figures are from the late noted VCU historian and author Philip J. Schwarz, who wrote about it in the first issue of this newspaper back in February of 2005. The newspaper was specifically started to educate the community about the history and importance of Shockoe Bottom. We also had a weekly radio program, DefendersLive, on WRIR 97.3 LP FM, 2005-2013, which played a big role in popularizing the struggle.

From 1830 to 1865, up to 10,000 people a year were being sold out of the Bottom. New Orleans had a larger slave market, but Richmond was the epicenter, the fountainhead of the U.S. domestic slave trade. It was the warehouse district that supplied the retail markets further south, such as New Orleans, Charleston, Savannah, Vicksburg and so many more.

Slavery was seen as necessary for labor-intensive agriculture to be sufficiently profitable. Yet, after the Haitian Revolution terrified Southern slave owners, Congress banned importing more Africans through participation in the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. But the Louisiana Purchase opened up a lot of rich farmland, which is why the domestic trade became so important. Richmond was surrounded by plantations with soil worn out by years of cotton farming, so the region had a "surplus" of enslaved laborers. And with its river, trains and access to the overland Fall Line Trail, Richmond became central to the booming domestic trade.

A center of Black suffering and resistance

That's the economic importance of Shockoe Bottom. Now for the human history.

Shockoe Bottom was where Solomon Northup, who wrote the book "Twelve Years a Slave," was held for a night while being transported to New Orleans. It's where Anthony Burns was held for months after fleeing Virginia, being captured in Boston and returned to Richmond to be cruelly punished for

his escape from bondage. It's where Madison Washington was held before getting put on the brig Creole headed to New Orleans. At sea, he led a successful revolt, took over the ship and sailed it to freedom in Nassau. Shockoe Bottom is the site of so many stories of suffering, torture, degradation, courage, resilience, resistance and ultimately redemption.

It's where, today, the majority of Black people in this country could likely trace some ancestry.

It truly is sacred ground.

And it's only because of decades of determined struggle by literally thousands of people that Shockoe Bottom is getting a memorial park, and not parking lots and a baseball stadium.

Who will benefit?

With all this history and all this struggle, why shouldn't the anticipated financial benefits of Shockoe Bottom's memorialization go primarily to the descendent community? To the Black community?

Black-owned firms should be first in line to get contracts to design and build the memorial park, visitors center and interpretive center. Black workers should be first to get the jobs. We have proposed an African Market where artists and craftspeople could sell their wares.

And the Black community as a whole should be first to receive the benefits of the increased sales tax revenue that the City will receive from the expected influx of tourists, who will stay at hotels, motels and Airbnbs; buy meals in restaurants; take local transportation; and visit other local attractions.

OUR PROPOSAL

The City government expects to reap a windfall from the increase in sales taxes generated by the increase in tourism as a result of the memorialization of Shockoe Bottom. This money would normally go into the general operating budget. And that's helpful, because former Mayor Jones, who promoted the stadium scheme in the Bottom, maxed out the City's credit, so there's very little money available to address Richmond's many structural issues, like the stormwater crisis.

The Defenders' Sacred Ground Historical Reclamation Project is proposing that a substantial portion of this increase in sales tax revenue go directly to the Black community, as a form of collective reparations for Richmond's central role in the domestic slave trade.

Years of attacks on affirmative action by racist, right-wing politicians have made direct racial set-asides illegal. But there's another way.

Richmond's public schools are in desperate need of money, for infrastructure upgrades to existing buildings, for new construction, for more teachers, custodians, bus drivers and counselors.

And 55% of Richmond public school students are Black. Another 19% are Latino, 3% are students of two or more races and 2% are Asian. 21% are white.

Earmarking a substantial portion of the increase in sales tax revenue for Richmond Public Schools would benefit all students, the vast majority of whom come from working-class families. But it would especially benefit Black students. And in both the short and long run, that would benefit the Black community as a whole.

There are many practical ways that this proposal could be put into action. One is simply to decide that a certain percentage of the increase in sales tax revenue be directed to Richmond Public Schools. It would have to be over and above what the City normally contributes, and not doing like the state lottery does, by saying lottery profits will go to the schools, but then reducing state aid to the schools to free up money for other "more important" things, like financial incentives to attract already wealthy out-of-state corporations.

Then there's the TIF taxing tool that was promoted as part of the ill-fated Navy Hill project.

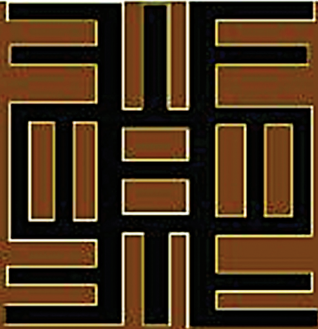
According to the U.S. Department of Transportation, "Tax Increment Financing (TIF) is a value capture revenue tool that uses taxes on future gains in real estate values to pay for new infrastructure improvements. TIFs are authorized by state law in nearly all 50 states and begin with the designation of a geographic area as a TIF district."

Once the Heritage Campus is up and running, property values in the surrounding neighborhoods and business district will shoot up. This wider area could be designated as a TIF district, with the taxes on future gains in real estate values earmarked for the schools.

Richmond has creative people. We're sure there are many ways to make this happen. But the first step is to acknowledge that what amounts to the commodification of Shockoe Bottom's history must primarily benefit the descendent community.

Otherwise, the decades of community struggle will have resulted in a hollow victory.

To discuss or support this proposal, please get in touch. Our contact information is on page 2. For updates on the Shockoe Bottom "Heritage Campus" and interpretive center, see page 11.



**sacred
ground**
HISTORICAL
RECLAMATION
PROJECT

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community news



Photo by Kat McNeal

This photo recently was taken at the corner of East Main and Old Main streets in Richmond's East End where the Union Army entered Richmond on April 3, 1865. A state historical highway marker at this site that was damaged in the spring of 2022 has yet to be replaced.

Richmond Liberation Marker to be replaced - but not just yet

By Phil Wilayto

As of this writing, in mid-March, Richmond historical institutions are getting ready to mark the anniversary of the day the city was liberated from Confederate rule and slavery: April 3, 1865. But the state historical marker that stood at the site where Union troops enter Richmond has now been missing for more than a year.

Marker SA-41, "Union Army Enters Richmond," stood on a grassy area overlooking the James River where East Main Street meets Old Main Street by Rocketts Landing in Richmond's East End. The marker read:

"Here Maj. Gen. Godfrey Weitzel, commander of the Army of the James, entered and took possession of Richmond at 8:15 A.M. on 3 April 1865 after receiving the surrender of the confederate [sic] capital from Mayor Joseph Mayo a few miles east. The first units of Weitzel's command to enter the city were six regiments from Brig. Gen. Edward H. Ripley's 1st Brigade of the XXIVth Army Corps, and U.S. Colored Troops from infan-

try and cavalry regiments of the XXVth Army Corps.

During the next twenty-four hours, the Union troops extinguished the fire that destroyed almost 40 blocks that extended along the river and north to Capitol Square, restored order, and occupied Confederate (sic) office buildings."

Last year, as the Defenders prepared a Richmond Liberation Day program to be held at the site on April 3, we looked into the whereabouts of the missing marker. Contacting the Virginia Department of Historic Resources, we reached Highway Marker Program Historian and Manager Jennifer Loux, who sent us this statement:

"DHR received a report on March 7 [2022] that the marker had been knocked down. Richmond Public Works retrieved the marker and determined that it was damaged beyond repair. We do not know whether the damage resulted from the marker being struck by a vehicle (the most common reason for markers to be knocked down) or whether it was a case of vandalism. This is the second time this particular marker has been damaged

in the last few years. We hope to replace it, but that will take some time."

It has. As of this writing, the marker still has not been replaced. And it is no longer listed on the DHR online database of state markers.

We decided to contact Manager Loux again, and received this statement:

"The Union Army Enters Richmond marker is currently # 8 in the queue of 44 Virginia markers that are on order at the foundry. The foundry has been contending with supply chain problems and other issues that have prevented it from completing orders in a timely manner. We expect the marker to be delivered later this spring, but can't say exactly when.

"We don't know the cause of the damage. Since this has happened twice, Richmond Public Works has approved a new, safer site for the marker in Great Shiplock Park.

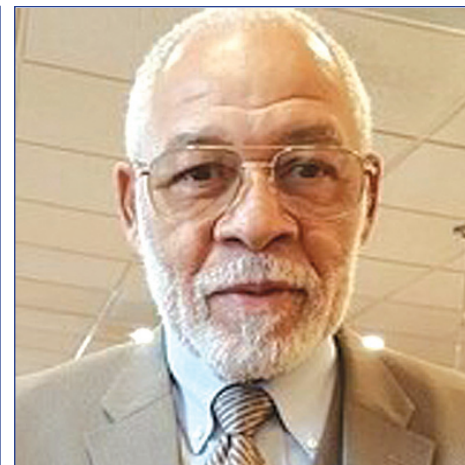
"When markers are no longer on the roadside, we temporarily remove them from our website. This marker will reappear on the site

when it is reinstalled."

So - the state of Virginia erected signage to mark one of the arguably most important historical sites in U.S. history - the liberation of the city that (briefly) was the capital of the slavery-defending Confederacy. The marker was damaged, or vandalized, twice in the last few years and had already been replaced once. Now the state plans to replace the marker a second time, but in a new, "safer" location - a mile away - not the site where the marker is intended to stand.

Thanks to Manager Loux for her detailed and quick responses to our inquiries. And thanks to the DHR for being committed to replacing the damaged - or vandalized - marker.

But, going forward, we would hope that the state government would not cede any more space to those who, apparently, are offended by reminders that the Confederacy was defeated and slavery abolished at the hands of Black and white troops united in a common struggle for justice.



Leroy Mason

March 24, 1939 - Jan. 24, 2023

In the summer of 1968, prisoners at Richmond's Spring Street Penitentiary went on strike, demanding an end to racial segregation and that they be paid a dollar a day for their labor making the state's license plates. Significantly, the white prisoners supported both demands. The strikers elected as their leader Leroy Mason, who had already filed a lawsuit against the segregation policy. In retaliation, he and other strike leaders were placed in solitary, on a diet of bread and water. The rest of the prisoners stayed on strike through the summer, despite being beaten and teargassed in their cells. Black and white community supporters quickly formed a coalition that kept up a 24/7 picketline outside the prison. Mason's lawsuit was successful, as was another he was a plaintiff in, *Landman vs. Royster*, which accused the prison administration of imposing cruel and unusual punishments.

Leroy Mason, presente!



Simin Royanian

Aug. 24, 1945 - March 4, 2023

Simin Royanian, of Burke, Va., a lifelong fighter for peace, racial justice and women's equality, passed on March 4. She was 77. Simin was born of Kurdish parents in Iran, where she was active in the revolutionary socialist movement against the Shah. After moving to the United States at the age of 21 to attend graduate school she became involved in the antiwar movement and many anti-racist struggles. After earning her doctorate in economics from the University of Maryland, she went to work for the Public Works Department of the City of Fairfax, where she became a shop steward and vice president of AFSCME Local 1924, which represented city workers. Simin was the founder of Women for Peace in Iran; a founding member of the D.C. Iraq Coalition; board member of the Pacifica radio station WPFW; member of the D.C. Labor Committee for Peace and Justice; member of the Northeast Feminist Scholars; and was a good friend to the Virginia Defenders.

Simin Royanian, presente!

community news

Waging War Against Systemic Racism

By T.A. White

Available on amazon.com
Kindle: \$9.95; paperback: \$14.44

From the author:

"A must read for anyone looking to employ nonviolent strategies to help combat systemic racism drawing from the wisdom of our civil rights predecessors.

The Com.pos.men.tis

By Michael W. Bryant

Published March 11, 2022

Available on amazon.com
Kindle: \$14.59; paperback: \$19.99

From the author:

"The Com.pos.me.tis is a book of poetic justice. It is not my story, but all our stories wrapped into one giant symphony of a life and humanity."

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RICHARD WALKER

THE PEOPLE'S DELEGATE



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our working lives



Photo courtesy Tidewater Workers Assembly

Members and supporters of the Tidewater Workers Assembly stage a protest outside the Lamberts Point coal yards in Norfolk in solidarity with railway workers around the country who face hazardous conditions on the job.

Va. solidarity with RR workers

Staff report

The Feb. 23 fiery derailment of a Norfolk Southern freight train in East Palestine, Ohio, has focused the country's attention on the issue of rail safety. The accident resulted in 38 cars carrying hazardous materials going off the tracks and catching fire. Responders intentionally burned toxic chemicals in some of the derailed cars to prevent an explosion, forcing half the town's roughly 5,000 residents to evacuate for several days.

On March 11, members of the Tidewater Workers Assembly, a chapter of the Southern Workers Assembly, staged a protest outside

the Lamberts Point coal yards in Norfolk to call out Norfolk Southern for what it called its dangerous practices. It was part of a national day of solidarity with railroad workers.

Lamberts Point was chosen because according to a TWA press release, "In Norfolk, VA (which is where NS was founded), the Lamberts Point neighborhood has suffered from air pollution for decades from the coal trains that deliver coal to and from the Norfolk Southern Lamberts Point (NSLP) railyard.

Norfolk Southern, one of the country's biggest railroads, has a history of frequent derailments, including 119 derailments last year alone, according to a report by the Associated Press.

LIVE BETTER - WORK UNION!

"Workers with union representation enjoy a significant pay premium compared to non-union workers. The Bureau of Labor Statistics reports non-union workers earn just 85 percent of what unionized workers earn."

-- U.S. Department of Labor

Kroger workers charge wage theft

By Kat McNeal

A group of Kroger workers in Virginia and West Virginia have filed a class action lawsuit against the giant grocery chain, charging that the company's payroll software has been systematically shorting workers their rightful pay.

The lawsuit, filed Jan. 19 in Richmond federal court, alleges that the problems with the payroll software MyTime began as soon as it was adopted, in the middle of the busy holiday season at the start of 2022. According to the suit, workers weren't paid for overtime that they worked; experienced weeks-long delays getting their paychecks or never got them at all; and reported problems such as incorrect pay and incorrect deductions for insurance and taxes.

According to the filing, the MyTime issues have caused workers to have to get second jobs or resort to risky high-interest loans to make ends meet.

One named plaintiff, from St. Albans, W.Va., said she was hired as a clerk in August 2022 and worked 79 hours, but was not paid at all. Unable to afford working for free, she had to quit after five weeks.

Wereached out to Kroger's Mid-Atlantic division, but were told the company is not commenting on the lawsuit.

Rachel Nadas, one of the lawyers who filed the suit, told the Defender that, while the legal team doesn't know exactly how much Kroger allegedly

wrongfully withheld from its workers, they believe the amount is at least \$5 million.

That \$5 million is just in Kroger's Mid-Atlantic region. A similar lawsuit was filed against Kroger in Ohio in November 2022. On the West Coast, where Kroger owns Ralphs, Quality Food Centers, King Soopers and other chains, workers have filed their own lawsuits in Oregon and Washington state over the MyTime wage issues.

Kroger is expected to respond to the complaint in court in July, Nadas said.

In the meantime, the union covering Kroger workers in this region, United Food and Commercial Workers Local 400, has submitted Unfair Labor Practice charges against the company with the National Labor Relations Board. UFCW Local 400 says that it has received, and continues to receive, hundreds of complaints about the MyTime software and pay issues.

According to its website, the Cincinnati-based Kroger Co. is one of the largest retailers in the country based on annual sales. It operates 2,750 grocery retail stores under a variety of banner names.

If you work for Kroger in Virginia or West Virginia and believe you were subjected to wage theft by the MyTime software, you can contact the law firm Handley Farah & Anderson of Washington, D.C., to learn about joining the lawsuit.

our working lives



Photo by Kat McNeal

This Tyson chicken processing plant in Glen Allen is slated to close May 12, costing nearly 700 workers their jobs.

Tyson consolidates away 600 jobs

By Kat McNeal

May 12, laying off all 692 workers.

Tyson Foods, the world's second-largest meat processing company, informed its workers' union on March 13 that it would be closing its plant in Glen Allen, Va. The company will permanently close the chicken hatching, broiler and processing plant on

According to a letter that Rick Nimrick, Vice President of Labor Relations at Tyson, sent to United Food and Commercial Workers Local 400, which represents workers at the plant, the closure is "part of the Company's business strategy to operate more efficiently."



United Food & Commercial Workers Local 400
 PRESIDENT Mark P. Federici • SECRETARY-TREASURER Christopher Hoffman • www.ufcw400.org

Tyson acquired the Glen Allen facility from another poultry company in the late 1980s. The meat processing giant operates another plant in Temperanceville, Va., and is building a new one in Danville. The Danville plant, which promises 376 new jobs, has received pledges of more than \$6 million in state grants, loans and other economic incentives. According to the Virginia Economic Development Partnership, because the closing of one plant is (supposedly) not related to the opening of the other, none of this public support is in jeopardy as a result of the mass layoffs.

The announcement came the same day that 34 workers, former employees and surviving family members from Tyson's home state of Arkansas filed a lawsuit against the food giant. The plaintiffs, who are associated with five plants in Arkansas, allege that

Tyson knew about the danger of COVID-19 early in the pandemic, but failed to provide masks, modify work to allow for appropriate distancing, practice contract tracing or allow quarantining. The lawsuit charges that these failures directly led to preventable illnesses and deaths.

Tyson will permanently close the Van Buren, Ark., plant, which employs 969 people, on the same day it will shutter the Glen Allen facility. The company, which made \$3.2 billion in profits last fiscal year, attributes both closures to "a need for consolidation."

UFCW Local 400 will be working to negotiate workforce transition matters such as severance and vacation payouts. Hanover County, where Glen Allen is located, has launched a website for any workers affected by the closure: www.hanovervirginia.com/about-us/tyson-plant-closure-information/

VCCW

Continued from page 8

received at FCCW, only to get here and be taken off of it abruptly. This is an unsafe practice as many medications have severe withdrawal effects and are meant to be tapered down.

Another woman's seizure medication had been changed to a cheaper brand upon arrival here and she began to experience epileptic fits as a result of such. This poses serious risks and detriment to one's health when all it sums up to be about is money. Are our lives of less value because we are temporarily housed at this facility?

The only other negative part of being housed here at VCCW is that many of the officers prefer to be rude to us, but when we step out of line, we are quickly met with a disciplinary infraction. It almost feels as if they relish in writing these minor infractions without stopping to think about how it could possibly affect our release dates. But I suppose that once again, it is summed up by the almighty dollar. The longer they can keep us incarcerated, the more money Virginia can make to house us, and these petty officers can remain employed.

Outside of that, this is a nice facility with beautiful grounds and a breathtaking view. It is also nice to look around and not feel so entrapped by fences to remind you of your whereabouts. There is no fence surrounding this facility as the late owner stipulated in her last will and testament.

So I will spend my last incarcerated year in pain here at VCCW, but will persevere through it because what does not kill you only makes you stronger.

Thank you for this opportunity to share my experience with you!

LETTERS

Continued from page 12

I'm an activist, mentor and public speaker from inside these walls, because I understand that practice motivates success.

My purpose is to continue to help others fight for justice and rehabilitate themselves from recidivism. This is why I'm trying to start a nonprofit organization that will allow me the opportunity to prevent the youth from coming to prison and to save lives after prison.

The name is called S.P.O.C., which stands for Serving & Protecting Our Communities.

My mission is: To build support groups inside our communities so that the youth and law enforcement can converse their issues on common ground in order to lesson neighborhood tension and prevent juvenile delinquency.

My Vision is: To lesson the burden of the government by building community centers or learning centers to provide a safe & healing environment for our community and police with any service that's needed to prevent crime and gun violence.

S.P.O.C was created when I decided to reform myself from living this so-called thug way of life to becoming a productive citizen. I had to learn the value of Fatherhood, which means to protect my home and my community.

Therefore, my goal is to "reverse" the negative way we see COPS, so that we All can come together and S.P.O.C (Serve & Protect Our Communities)!

If there's anyone who wants to support this cause, please contact me so that this idea can become a reality. Thank You!

From your brother in the struggle!

Cavonza Teasley #1129038

LUNENBURG CORR. CENTER

cops, courts & prisons

A Proposal for a PEOPLE'S TRIBUNAL ON VIRGINIA'S PRISONS & JAILS!

By Phil Wilayto
Editor, The Virginia Defender

For each of the last six years, the Virginia Prison Justice Network has sponsored a Prison Justice Rally in Richmond. Despite being held outside in January, the event has attracted anywhere from 90 to more than 300 people. The rallies always receive media attention, which helps put pressure on state legislators as they are lobbied by a wide range of nonprofits working on particular prison or criminal injustice issues.

It's obvious that advocates fare better when Democrats are in power, but the Democrats often water down the advocates' original proposals in order to attract votes from more conservative members. They talked a good game in 2020 when thousands of people were chanting "Black Lives Matter," but then pulled back when the protests died down. Bills like the Marcus Alert were gutted. This year, despite the best efforts of many advocates, the General Assembly passed a bill on solitary confinement that actually makes that situation even worse. In fact, none of the issues that we raised at the January rally have been adequately addressed.

For the 2023 rally, we reached out to prisoners across the state and asked them to send in suggestions for issues to be raised at the event. We received responses from more than a quarter of the state's prisons. When you look at all the suggestions together, you realize that there aren't just a few major issues that prisoners are concerned about - it's practically everything in the entire system.

In fact, it is the entire system, which historically grew out of the need for plantation owners and factory bosses to control and exploit Black labor, from slavery days to prison contract labor to today's prison industries.

Fifty years ago, there were around 200,000 people in U.S. state and federal prisons. That's when workers were needed on

the outside for the many factory jobs, which were often unionized and paid decent wages. Today, after the economy has fundamentally changed from one based on manufacturing to one based on information technology on the high end and service jobs on the low end, there isn't the same need for blue-collar workers. So rather than have millions of anxious and angry unemployed young men and women on the streets, the government came up with the War on Drugs. Today there are nearly two million U.S. prisoners - 10 times the number in 1973. (The number hit 2.1 million in 2019 and has declined somewhat since then.) If you include people under some kind of supervision, it's five million.

This situation is unique to the United States. No other country imprisons as many of its own people as the "Land of the Free." With just over 4 percent of the world's people, we hold 20 percent of the world's prisoners.

We need to do more to press for Prison Justice. We need to find a way to jump start our efforts. And this year offers a unique chance to change the balance of power.

In November, all the seats in the General Assembly will be up for election. Not only that, but because of retirements and redistricting, as many as a quarter of all seats in the House of Delegates and the Senate may change hands. We don't know what this will mean in terms of which party will control the legislature, but we do know there will be many new faces.

This is an opportunity for us to really influence the General Assembly by making Prison Justice a central issue in the coming election - and, in particular, in the campaigns leading up to the election: the debates, press conferences and many other opportunities to confront candidates. The goal isn't just to elect more Democrats, it's to put so much pressure on the legislators that they'll support Prison Justice no matter what party they belong to, or how liberal or conservative they may be.

So the idea is to make Virginia's prisons and jails an issue in the November elections. Right now, prisons and jails are not on the front burner. The way we promote social change is first to make something an issue in the public mind, and make that public awareness so powerful that the politicians are afraid to ignore it.

For a historical example: Richard Nixon was one of the most corrupt, right-wing presidents in U.S. history. But it was Nixon who established the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA); the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA); expanded Medicare; promoted money for sickle cell anemia research; created the Office of Minority Business Enterprise; called for the expansion of the U.S. Civil Rights code to include sex discrimination; appointed more women to the executive branch than all his predecessors; and, most significantly on the world scale, ordered the U.S. military out of Vietnam.

Nixon was a stone reactionary, but there were millions in the streets militantly demanding change. And that's what brought about change.

So we need to come up with a more powerful way to put pressure on the politicians. Instead of the annual rally in January, the Virginia Defenders are proposing to hold a major event in October, before the elections, at which we put the whole prison system on trial: a People's Tribunal on Virginia's Prisons & Jails.

This would be a well-publicized, high-profile public hearing, held at a prestigious venue, with testimony entered before a panel of distinguished judges on the whole range of issues facing prisoners in the state's prisons and jails. There would be written and oral testimony from incarcerated Virginians and oral testimony by formerly incarcerated people, their family members and advocates. To hear the testimony, there would be a panel of judges, people with prominence in the areas of law, academia, prison advocacy and more.

The whole event would be livestreamed, so people around the state - around the world - could watch.

After the hearing is completed, testimony would be organized and written up as a formal report that would be made public at a major press conference and delivered to every candidate for the General Assembly. Then we would challenge every candidate to take a position on Prison Justice.

We're suggesting that the People's Tribunal be held on Saturday, October 7, a month before the elections. Oct. 9 is Virginia Indigenous Day, so the Tribunal should be opened with a recognition that we are meeting on stolen Indigenous land.

Oct. 10 will be the 223rd anniversary of the execution of the great slave rebellion leader, Gabriel, when the Defenders hold an annual Gabriel Gathering. We could dedicate the tribunal to his memory. Before his execution in Shockoe Bottom, one of the country's first examples of mass incarceration, Gabriel was one of the first prisoners to be held at the now-closed Spring Street Penitentiary.

We're suggesting that the Tribunal be co-sponsored by the Virginia Defenders, who head up the organizing of the annual Prison Justice Rally, and the Virginia Prison Justice Network, the official sponsor of the annual Prison Justice rallies.

Logistically, the Defenders can take responsibility for organizing the tribunal, along with a broader committee we will put together, reaching out to the grassroots prison justice organizations run by the formerly incarcerated.

Financially, we estimate that promoting and holding the Tribunal will cost around \$10,000 - renting the venue and sound, providing lunch, publicity and printing the report. The Defenders would provide this funding from a grant we received to support our prison work.

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cops, courts & prisons

Malcolm's legacy lives on in Virginia's freedom libraries

By Melinda Lewis

"I have often reflected upon the new vistas that reading has opened to me. I knew right there in a prison that reading had changed forever the course of my life. As I see it today, the ability to read awoke inside me some long dormant craving to be mentally alive."
-- Malcolm X

For Malcolm X, his time in prison was transformative. Most would surmise that it was because of his introduction to the Muslim faith and the influence of Elijah Muhammed and the Nation of Islam. The time that he spent reading in prison, however, could arguably have been just as compelling.

Describing books as his "alma mater," Malcolm said he could spend the rest of his life reading. As his daughter Attallah Shabazz describes in her foreword to "The Autobiography of Malcolm X," Malcolm "found himself gravitating to the prison libraries after he was incarcerated." In fact, he "out-read the library stock."

Malcolm X's prison cell at Norfolk Prison in Massachusetts, where he read so much, is becoming a library itself due to the work of Reginald Dwayne Betts. The winner of a MacArthur "genius" grant, Betts was himself incarcerated and spent his nine years in prison writing and reading. He is now working to set up 1,000 micro-libraries through his charity Freedom Reads, according to the organization's website.

Just as Malcolm X did, many incarcerated folks spend their time reading, including

here in Virginia. As reported in Richmond Magazine, Shebri Stacy Dillon, a prisoner recently at Fluvanna Correctional Center for Women, was looking for a book suggested by Calvin Arey, one of the plaintiffs in *Landman v. Royster*. That was a landmark class-action lawsuit launched by prisoners at the Virginia State Penitentiary in 1969 which successfully challenged a century-old tradition, known as the "hands-off doctrine," in which courts treated prisoners as "slaves of the state" and deferred to prison officials in their treatment of prisoners.

The book Dillon was looking for was Chris Hedges' "Our Class," but she couldn't find it in the prison library. The book describes the degradations and dehumanizations of the U.S. prison system. After Arey mailed it to Dillon, she became the librarian and caretaker of many books, and a Freedom Library was born.

Dillon named the library after Albert Woodfox, a Black Panther who was wrongfully convicted of killing a prison guard and spent 44 years in solitary confinement at Louisiana's notorious Angola Prison before his release in 2016. His 2019 book "Solitary" is a part of the library's collection.

In every book, Dillon inscribes "Donated by Calvin Arey, who believes you are more than the worst thing you have ever done." It's a quote from Equal Justice Initiative Executive Director Bryan Stevenson's 2014 best-seller "Just Mercy: Story of Justice and Redemption."

Contacted for this article, Dillon shared

walk into the legislative building.

It will take the work of a lot of people and organizations to pull this off, so we're hoping to hear back from you as soon as possible. Do you like the proposal? Can you help? Will you endorse it, as an organization or as an individual?

For those of you behind bars, please write to us at: Defenders, PO Box 23202, Richmond, VA 23223.

For outside organizations and individual activists, call or text us at 804-644-5834 or email DefendersFJE@hotmail.com.

Together, we can win!

TRIBUNAL Continued from page 8

The next step would be to ask for endorsements, organize people to spread the word and recruit people to help solicit testimony.

This year, the People's Tribunal, would take the place of the annual Prison Justice Rally, held in January. Instead, we're suggesting we hold a demonstration at Capitol Square on the opening day of the 2024 General Assembly, Wednesday, Jan. 10. It's a weekday, so our turnout may be light, but we can expand our presence with very large banners. The point would be to keep up the pressure by having a physical presence as the legislators

how much the Albert Woodfox Mini Freedom Library has grown. She also shared how she has begun a library at the Virginia Correctional Center for Women in Goochland County, where she was recently transferred. The mini freedom library at Fluvanna has been left in the able hands of two other women.

Meanwhile, other freedom libraries have been started at the Augusta, Greenville and River North prisons, according to the Richmond Magazine article.

Freedom libraries can not only be a source of empowerment, education and aliveness, but also a relief, in many cases, to constrained prison budgets. Although the American Library Association sets Standards For Adult Correctional Institutions, many libraries around the country may not meet them.

Virginia's Department of Corrections' website does not indicate how much it spends on prison libraries. After contacting the department, Chief Financial Officer Louis Eacho indicated that the department currently has "twenty-three (23) Librarian and two (2) Librarian Assistant positions. In addition, \$144,000 in funding for books and subscriptions is provided to the libraries on an annual basis. The libraries are also open to receiving donations of appropriate materials."

Department staff also indicated that the funding has remained the same over the past couple of years.

Questioned about whether the department uses the American Library Association's Standards For Adult Correctional Institutions and whether it complies, department staff said they do use the standards and comply with them.

The Appalachian Prison Book Project is one of the organizations that donates books to prison libraries, including in Virginia. If their experience is any indication, prison library budgets and stock may need supplementing. As the organization notes, "prison populations continue to increase, but their library shelves continue to narrow."

Serving the six Appalachian states - Kentucky, Maryland, Ohio, Tennessee, Virginia and West Virginia, the Book Project says it receives requests from incarcerated individuals usually seeking "dictionaries, almanacs, mystery novels, biographies and more. Some

Inside the VCCW

By Chanell Burnette

My name is Chanell Burnette and I am currently incarcerated at Virginia Correctional Center for Women.

I am also a member of the Steering Committee for the Coalition for Justice. I am writing on behalf of the ladies here at VCCW.

While conditions here are favorable, we remain at a terrible disadvantage medically. Many of us women were recently transferred here from Fluvanna Correctional Center for Women. At FCCW, we were allowed to receive certain medications, only to arrive here at yet another DOC facility and be stripped of our medications because they do not offer them here.

Where does the difference lie if we are all DOC offenders and are covered under Medicaid? This facility houses less than half of the population of FCCW, so the issue of cost-effectiveness, or formulary vs. non-formulary medications, should be no issue at all.

This is very unfortunate for us, myself included, as many of us suffer debilitating health conditions and are forced to walk constantly, even in the inclement weather. I suffer from Fibromyalgia, among other things, and was prescribed Lyrica by my doctor at UVA's Pain Management Clinic, which I

See VCCW on page 7

requests are even from prison libraries themselves."

Students at Virginia Tech have a similar objective with their Prison Book Project, a satellite program of the Appalachian Prison Book Project. According to an article on its website, Brian Britt, a professor in the Department of Religion and director of the Prison Book Project, was contacted by the Appalachian Prison Book Project requesting religion books, "one of the most commonly requested genres through the project."

According to Britt, there's "a much higher level of awareness among young people these days about issues of mass incarceration, so they're very excited about this work." Responding to requests from across Virginia, usually at book wrapping parties where letters are read from incarcerated individuals, these students help create the "alma mater" Malcolm X so eloquently described.

Prisoners seeking books can write to the Appalachian Prison Book Project at: APBP, PO Box 601, Morgantown, WV 26507.

cops, courts & prisons



Photo by Phil Wilayto

Hassan Hussein, who spent 23.5 years in the Virginia prison system, speaks at the 6th Annual Virginia Prison Justice Rally Jan. 14 at Richmond's Monroe Park. With him are rally co-chairs Lynetta Thompson (left) of Community Unity in Action and Jennifer Dalton of Ignite Justice.

More than 100 attend 6th Annual Virginia Prison Justice Rally

Staff Report

By all accounts, from the organizers, those who attended and the media, the 6th Annual Virginia Prison Justice Rally was a great success!

Despite snow and temperatures in the low 30s, more than 100 people came out to Richmond's Monroe Park and stayed for the rally that lasted more than two hours. Some drove from as far away as Norfolk, Roanoke, Northern Virginia and even Charlotte, N.C. Most were formerly incarcerated folks and family members. Spirits were really high - and the free hot coffee and snacks helped.

The rally was sponsored by the Virginia Prison Justice Network, an alliance of nearly two dozen prison justice advocacy organizations.

The high points of the day were the taped messages sent in from prison by Nadir Saalam, co-founder of Freedom Over Everything (F.O.E.), who spoke on the rally demand to "Bring Back Parole;" and Courtney Henson, co-founder of the prisoner organization Forty Strong, who spoke on the rally demand to "Reinstate Enhanced Earned Sentence Credit - for Everyone!"

Other featured speakers were Natasha White, a formerly incarcerated person and coordinator of the Virginia Coalition on Solitary Confinement, who addressed "End Solitary Confinement;" Santia Nance, a family member and co-founder of Sistas in Prison, who spoke on the demand to "Institute Second Look Sentencing;" Hassan Shabazz, a formerly incarcerated person, VAPJN co-founder and steering committee member, speaking on

the demand for "Independent Outside Oversight;" and Phil Wilayto, VAPJN co-founder, steering committee member and editor of The Virginia Defender, speaking on "Building the Virginia Prison Justice Network."

Steve Baggarly, with the Norfolk Catholic Worker, gave a solidarity message from Virginia's antiwar movement.

The program began with an original spoken word piece by Hassan Shabazz and ended with an open mic, during which about 15 people took the opportunity to raise specific prisoner cases and causes, including the plight of trans prisoners.

The rally was co-chaired by Lynetta Thompson of Community Unity In Action and Jennifer Dalton, founder and director of Ignite Justice. The entire program was live streamed and is available for viewing on the Facebook page of the Virginia Defenders for Freedom, Justice & Equality: <https://www.facebook.com/defendersfje>

There also was very positive coverage by the Richmond Times-Dispatch and Channel 6 News (CBS)..

For more information on the Virginia Prison Justice Network, see:

vapjn.wordpress.com

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Do you have a loved one/friend in a faraway Va. prison - Keen Mt., Red Onion, Wallens Ridge or surrounding local jails & federal prisons? Every Monday, the WMMT "Calls from Home" radio show broadcasts brief messages from friends & family, faith-based communities & advocates to incarcerated people in Va. prisons, jails & federal facilities in SW Appalachia.

reclaiming our sacred ground

Updates on the Shockoe Bottom memorial park

The 'Heritage Campus'

By Ana Edwards

With \$28 million committed, a project team on board and the master planning for design and community engagement started, it would seem that the 2015 Alternate Proposal for Shockoe Bottom Development has come to fruition. And, considering that Mayor Stoney cannot run for re-election, breaking ground before the upcoming mayoral election in 2024 would seem to be a priority goal for his administration's legacy. Even as we remind our readers of what still needs to be done, the pace of activity finally being applied to the creation of the Shockoe Bottom Memorial Park (aka Enslaved African Heritage Campus) after 20+ years of struggle and advocacy is more than welcome.

How much money does the City have to create the campus?

\$28 million has been approved for the creation of the "Enslaved African Heritage Campus" in Shockoe Bottom. Identified on no less than five pages of the "2023-2027 Adopted Capital Improvement Projects Budget" (<https://www.rva.gov/budget-and-strategic-planning/budget-documents>) these funds are to be spent over the next five years.

Who is in overall charge of this project? Who else is involved? Who has been chosen as the chief designer? What is the advisory committee and who is on it?

The city hired Richmond's oldest architecture firm, Baskervill, led by board chairman and partner Burt Pinnock, FAIA and member of the National Organization of Minority Architects, to lead the architecture, project management and community engagement. With a well-established history in design, Pinnock's works include the Black History Museum & Cultural Center of Virginia, Virginia Civil Rights Monument, Reconciliation Statue plaza, Richmond Slave Trail markers, The Dwell-

ing at Richmond Hill and the Burying Ground at the University of Virginia. His most recently completed work, "Hearth: Memorial to the Enslaved," was unveiled on May 7, 2022, at the College of William & Mary. The two other Baskervill staff members are Anca Liban, project manager, and Luke Escobar, architect.

The project team includes staff from Richmond's Department of Public Works (Lynn Lancaster, deputy director of parking and mobility, and Jeannie Welliver, senior project manager) and Department of Economic Development (Kimberly Chen, senior manager, and Susan Glasser, secretary, Public Art Commission). The civil engineering will be handled by VHB. Water-street Studio is the landscape design firm.

A Curatorial Team was also established: Toni Wynn, independent writer, educator, interpretive planner, conflict resolution, <http://toniwynn.com>; Christy Coleman, executive director of Jamestown-Yorktown Foundation, former CEO of the American Civil War Museum; Loranett Lorraine Lee, historian, professor at the University of Richmond, co-founder of the Unknown No Longer database; Bryan Clark Green, architectural historian, director of historic preservation for Commonwealth Architects; Lynn Rainville, historian, inaugural director of institutional history at Washington and Lee University; and Ana Edwards, public historian, chair of the Virginia Defenders' Sacred Ground Historical Reclamation Project.

What do we know about the study to determine what can be built in Shockoe Bottom?

Civil engineering firm Greeley and Hansen conducted a study in 2022 to determine the flood and stormwater conditions present in Shockoe Bottom. The firm produced a 74-page report, "Shockoe Bottom Floodway Modeling And Planning Services" that clearly indicates challenges for the proposed museum and areas within Heritage Campus footprint:

The Interpretive Center

By Ana Edwards

How much money does the City have to create the interpretive center?

In January 2023, the city of Richmond announced it had been selected by the Mellon Foundation to receive \$11 million to fund the "Shockoe Heritage Campus Center: Transforming Richmond's Core Commemorative Landscape to support the planning, develop-

1) "Floodplain" - the regular and 100-year flood and stormwater levels will affect what can be built or planted in this area, and all areas are not the same.

2) "Creek Culvert" - Shockoe Creek was channeled into a concrete culvert in 1928 and sections of it passing through the Heritage Campus footprint run along the eastern edge of the Burial Ground hillside and under portions of the archaeological remains of the Lumpkin's Jail site. "Designs for the Campus should consider the conduit's footprint when planning the location of new buildings and their foundations."

3) "Easements & Utilities" is the section that refers to "the series of sewage and gas lines that criss-cross the Campus site that each have their own easements and setbacks" (areas around the lines that cannot be built within or upon).

What do we know about what the City has decided about the feasibility of building a slavery museum on the site of Lumpkin's jail?

To this point, the City has made no comment about the impact of the report on planning for the museum.

Is there a timeline for the project?

The 32-week master planning process kicked off at an all-day convening and orientation of the project team on March 7, which will result in a final design and the construction schedule. The administration's goal is to break ground in the fall of 2023.

ment, and initial operations of a cultural space located at the Shockoe Bottom train shed that memorializes and commemorates the history of slavery in Richmond." (Source: Mellon) The funding will cover all identified expenses for two years. This reporter has not found a record of any city money being put into this project.

The center's interpretive scope is to cover African and African American history; Pamunkey and other Indigenous history; Jewish history; Richmond's role in the domestic slave trade and its origins in the Trans-Atlantic trade and the U.S. nation's founding; labor; industry; the geography of the city's place in these histories; and serve as a connector to the key sites of the Devil's Half Acre, African Burial Ground, Trail of Enslaved Africans, Shockoe Hill African Burying Ground and a new Cemetery Trail.

Who is in overall charge of this project? Who else is involved? Who has been chosen as the chief director? The designer? Is there a timeline for the project?

The Shockoe Heritage Campus Center project (interpretive center) is overseen by the mayor's office but will be managed by Jeannie Welliver of the Department of Public Works. It is likely there will be coordination and even overlap with the team working on the Heritage Campus. Marland Buckner, former interim executive director of the Black History Museum, was hired to serve as executive director of the Center. As of this writing, no other staff has been hired and no timeline beyond that of the two years of Mellon funding has been announced.

For more information about Shockoe Bottom, its history, significance and the struggle to reclaim it, visit: sacredgroundproject.net

In our opinion

What is to be done?

The last few years have been difficult ones for many folks. The pandemic cost a lot of people their jobs and most of the temporary government support has ended.

The last pandemic supplemental SNAP benefits were issued in February. Pandemic Medicaid expansion is ending March 31. Food prices are up drastically from a year ago. There's the escalating eviction crisis.

In Richmond, residential property taxes, the highest in the region, are staying the same, but assessments are still going up, meaning higher taxes for homeowners and raised rent for renters.

Richmond Mayor Stoney's budget proposal for the 2023-2024 fiscal year included rate increases for natural gas, water, wastewater and stormwater costs. Those are regressive taxes that hit poor people the hardest.

Nationally, many people have exhausted their savings, Credit card debt is at an all-time high.

Despite multiple rate hikes by the Federal Reserve, inflation is still rising. The Fed blames low unemployment. If jobs are plentiful, workers don't have to compete with each other for jobs, and that leads to higher wages as bosses compete for workers. So the Fed's goal is to "slow" the economy, which means the economy falls on us like a ton of bricks. That's capitalism for you.

So all the objective problems caused by the pandemic - supply chain hold-ups, sickness, the deaths of one million people here - are being exacerbated by the government cutting programs and forcing us into a recession.

Add to that the banking crisis that has the world economy on the brink of disaster and the latest dire predictions about global warming, and what we get is a rising sense of impending doom.

All this has produced real emotional and mental health problems: increases in depression, anxiety, suicides, drug overdoses, street violence.

And this is happening as we head into the November General Assembly elections, and then the 2024 presidential elections. Will voters blame the Democrats and open the way to right-wing populism? Will they re-elect Democrats and then get angry when they don't deliver?

We're probably sounding like a broken record, because we always come back to the same solution: building the mass movement.

We don't only mean marching in the streets, although we need more of that. We mean breaking out of the suffocating nonprofit-industrial complex that has trapped so many good activists. We mean real "intersectionality," where we aren't afraid to take on more than one area of struggle. We especially mean understanding the organic relationship between the wars against us here at home and the wars against our sisters and brothers in other countries.

The Defenders are currently working in three areas: Prison Justice, the ongoing campaign to properly memorialize Shockoe Bottom and antiwar work. We could do more if we had more people.

If you're already doing good work, keep it up. If you want to get involved, let us know.

Times won't get any better if we don't fight to make it so.

Letters to the Editor

More than 'centering,' you must FIGHT!

How does one write a letter when your life's in danger? When being Black and trans puts you at the lowest point in society, against your will. When you and others like you are targeted by the state until it kills you.

My lens and lived experience are at the intersection where race and gender meet at the crossroads, so I cannot speak for every (white) trans person. As an identifying Black transfemme, my life is full of both joy and fear. Joy for who I am and fear for what may happen to me because of it.

Trans rights in Virginia are non-existent as more policies are attacking and criminalizing us as opposed to meeting our material needs. We are over-policed, over-surveilled, susceptible to violence and intimidation and continue to be dehumanized.

Nearly all transgender prisoners in the state of Virginia are housed according to our sex at birth, not our gender identity. This puts us most at risk for abuse that isn't just misgendering or strip searches. We are also the most likely out of any demographic to be incarcerated in our lifetimes. We are often left out of the narrative of many prison justice movements and continue to be silenced both behind bars and outside.

People who wish to stand in solidarity with us MUST listen and let us determine our paths toward liberation against a growing fascist state. You must do more than "center" us. You must FIGHT with us.

Look towards organizations like SONG-RVA or Equality Virginia. By doing this, we advance both Black women's liberation as well as the universal freedom of all African and oppressed people.

Black trans women and transfemmes have been and continue to be on every frontline of nearly every resistance movement within Amerikkka, you just have to find us.

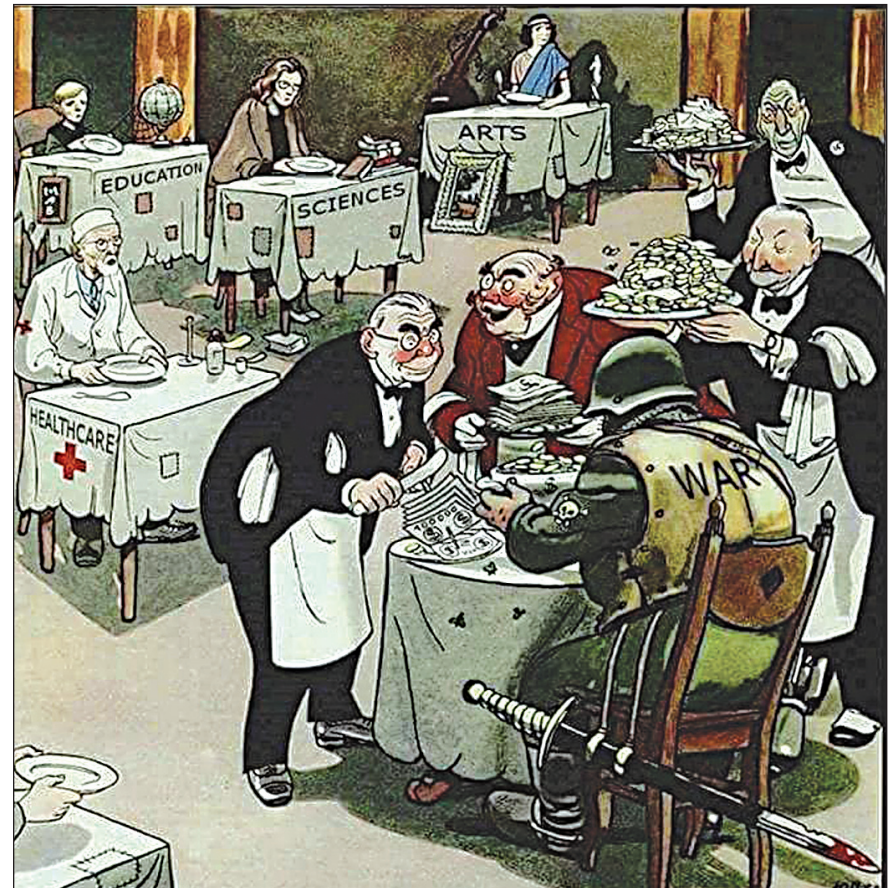
love & peace,

shawn
RICHMOND

Announcing S.P.O.C

My name is Cavonza Teasley. I'm currently residing at Lunenburg Correctional Center in Virginia.

See **LETTERS** on page 7



This cartoon, "This restaurant only serves one person," by Yuliy Ganf appeared in 1953 in the *Krokodif (Crocodile)*, a satirical magazine published in the Soviet Union.

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Our lives in Gaza

By Ahmed Nasser

My name is Ahmed. I am 23 years old. I live in occupied Palestine, specifically in the besieged Gaza Strip. My family consists of six people: my father, mother, me and three brothers. I am the eldest.

The Gaza Strip is very, very small, with an area of only 360 square kilometers. (Editor: That's about 140 square miles, or two-and-a-quarter the size of Richmond, with nine times as many people.) It has been besieged for more than 17 years. It is part of the Palestinian National Authority, but was separated in 2005. The blockade was imposed in early 2006. This is where the most severe forms of injustice are evident.

I was born in the year 2000, when Gaza witnessed many challenges and difficulties, including attacks and incursions. Killing and the policy of barriers and Israeli military control took place in 2006, when I was only six years old and in the first grade of elementary school. A strict siege was imposed on the Gaza Strip, separating and isolating it from any other part of the country.

In 2008 came the first attack after the imposition of the blockade. This attack was completely different from those that came before. This time, it was by warplanes, tanks and soldiers. An internationally prohibited weapon was used against us: phosphorus. It was fired by warplanes over our heads indiscriminately.

What resulted from this aggression was great damage to the infrastructure, the deaths of thousands of Palestinians and the destruction of thousands of homes over their inhabitants. My school and all UNRWA (United Nations Relief and Works Agency) schools were turned into shelters for residents who fled from their homes. I do not forget what I went through and witnessed from the crying of mothers, the destruction of homes, the sounds of shelling and fear.

The families who were displaced and their homes demolished were not able to rebuild them or remove the impact of the rubble. The occupation prevented the entry of any building materials into the sector. It was no less dangerous and devastating to the important cultural facilities.

There was no pressure on the occupation government to ease the siege, bring in goods and facilitate the movement of travelers, whether for patients inside the Strip, or for those who wish to study abroad or choose another place to live.

Since the age of 12, I had to help my father in work, but I did not allow this matter and the difficult living situation of the family to allow me to give up completing my studies. I worked in construction and in the olive harvest season. But the wages were very low, and work was not available at all times because of the paralysis of life and the prevention of entry of everything that would alleviate and create job opportunities for the Gazan people.

When I reached the age of 15, I went to work in agricultural lands, close to the border with what is called Israel. An occupation tank was on the other side and it started shooting at us, only to tamper with us, intimidate us and try to prevent us from harvesting the crops. This frightened the employer and he ordered us to return to our homes to avoid any of us being killed or injured.

People here depend on the goods that are allowed to be brought in and a little from local agriculture, but the blockade prevents the entry of many pesticides and large machines that would advance the sector and self-sufficiency. And above all this suffering, you are not allowed to leave and travel, except in great circumstances and financial costs that I cannot provide in light of the economic

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A view from the West Bank

By Dr. Ali Jawhar

Let me state right from the outset that the main conflict in the Middle East is not between Arabs and Jews, but rather between Palestinians and Zionists.

The Zionist entity that is called "Israel" is the most racist state on the face of the earth today. The evidence to support this is overwhelming. Since its inception in 1948, with the support of colonialist Britain, the Zionist entity has treated all non-Jews as second- and third-class citizens, or less.

By the time of its establishment or soon afterwards, the Zionist "Israeli" government had destroyed 531 Palestinian towns and villages, committed over 50 massacres and expelled nearly a million people. Many of these people sought refuge in neighboring countries such as Jordan, Syria and Lebanon. Others were scattered to refugee camps in the West Bank and Gaza. To this day, 75 years later, those people continue to languish in squalid camps that fail to provide them with protection from hot or cold weather. This is not to mention the horrific conditions they live in in general.

After seizing the West Bank and Gaza in 1967, "Israel" continued its horrendous practices against the defenseless Palestinians with the obvious aim of forcing them off their land. Hardly a day passes without "Israel" demolishing Palestinian homes, stealing their olive harvest, uprooting trees, arresting people without charges, and killing people in cold blood.

The most common means the Zionists use to seize Palestinian land is to first declare it a "military zone," and thus prevent its owners from using it. Within a short period after that, the occupation authorities take it over officially, under the pretext that its owners failed to use it. Of course, the Israelis were the reason for not using it in the first place. There are other illegal means which the Israelis employ to steal Palestinian land, but this article is too brief to enumerate them.

Another inhuman aspect of the Israeli occu-

pation of Palestine is the demolition of Palestinian homes. There are 60,000 to 70,000 homes that are threatened with destruction because they were built without permits, which are generally denied to Palestinians anyway. According to the Israeli Committee Against House Demolition, over 55,000 Palestinian structures were razed as of 2022.

Israeli racism permeates every aspect of Palestinian lives. There are more than 60 Israeli laws which discriminate against the Palestinians who survived the expulsions. Those laws cover all facets of life, including health, housing, jobs and education. To top everything else, in 2018 Israel passed Basic-Law: Israel - The Nation State of the Jewish People, which states that "the right to exercise self-determination in the state of Israel is unique to the Jewish people." To me, this is the epitome of racism.

The most vital question is how do we end the Palestinian-Zionist struggle in a just and peaceful way? A number of proposals have been advanced over the last 75 years, but without any success. Division of Palestine by the United Nations was simply abysmal and so unjust from the very beginning. The two-state solution which was alluded to following the '67 war and the Oslo Accords of 1993 was also unjust and unworkable because that would have rewarded the Zionist entity by legitimizing it over 78 percent of the land.

I, and many others, both Arabs and Jews, strongly believe that a secular, democratic state in all of historic Palestine is the only just solution to this festering and painful dilemma, which if left unsolved could spark a regional war or even a wider conflict.

To be complete, the solution must include the right of return to the Palestinian refugees. Israel's obstinacy to even consider this just solution stems from its vise grip on U.S. policy in the Middle East. It is no secret that nearly all Congress members in both houses fear the

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international & antiwar news

Why so much on Palestine?

In this issue of the Defender we're devoting a lot of space to the issue of Palestine, for two reasons:

On Feb 27, hundreds of Israeli settlers carried out a racist rampage through towns in the Palestinian West Bank. This Tulsa-like pogrom followed the installation of the most right-wing government in Israel's history.

Meanwhile, here in Virginia, the General Assembly has passed a bill that falsely equates criticism of Israel with antisemitism.

In response, we are running the following pieces:

- An op-ed piece by a West Bank Palestinian on what Palestinians face on a daily basis in the occupied West Bank.

- An op-ed by a Gazan Palestinian on what life is like in the occupied and blockaded Gaza Strip.

- A report on an action held in March in D.C. by anti-Zionist Jews protesting a visit by an Israeli extremist who is the new Israeli finance minister.

The Virginia Defenders are uncompromisingly opposed to all forms of racism, including Zionism and antisemitism. We will continue to speak against both, no matter what laws are passed.

GAZA Continued from page 13

situation at home. All this results in the great challenges of trying to complete my education or provide for the needs of my younger brothers and the family, of which I can hardly provide only a few.

Living in the Gaza Strip is one of the worst experiences a person can experience. We live in a besieged place that suffers from one of the highest rates of population density in the world and the most unemployment, where our childhood was not beautiful. We suffer from crises that do not pass in other countries. When I was a child, I lost friends who used to study with me at school, and when I returned, it turned out that they were killed in the bombing by the planes. I lost many of my extended family and cousins.

Living in the Gaza Strip makes you a man who takes responsibility from the age of infancy and makes you strong, so that the sound of planes no longer scares us. We have become accustomed to the sounds of planes since the softness of our nails.

The bitterness, the pain and the loss of opportunities that we, as Palestinians from Gaza, were born with, as if we made a mistake, as if we were burdened with sins and we pay for them every moment - who is responsible for burdening us with this guilt??!

Ahmed Nasser is a young Palestinian who was raised and lives in the Gaza Strip, a narrow strip of land along the Mediterranean Sea that has been militarily blockaded by Israel since 2006. At our request, he wrote this opinion piece for The Virginia Defender.

WEST BANK Continued from page 13

Israel Lobby, AIPAC and other Zionist organizations and thus submit to Israel's wishes even when they know that that is not in U.S. interests. Those who do not toe the Israeli line are forced to "correct" themselves or risk getting the ax in the next election.

I suggest a couple of excellent books to see the scope and depth of the Zionist Lobby's influence in Washington, D.C. One book is "The Zionist Connection," by Alfred Lilienthal, and the second is "They Dare to Speak out: People and Institutions Confront Israel's Lobby," by Paul Findly.

The Zionists are definitely mistaken if they believe that the Palestinians will surrender and give up their right to their homeland or their freedom. The Israelis have two choices before them: one, to continue their oppressive, apartheid policies with the Palestinians and thus ensure continued war for the foreseeable future until they are eventually defeated; and two, to abandon the racist philosophy of Zionism and join forces with Palestinians to establish a secular, democratic state in all of historic Palestine without discrimination against anyone on the basis of religion, color, gender or ethnicity.

I genuinely hope that our historical cousins opt for the second choice, because then and only then will they and us be able to live in peace, harmony and prosperity.

Dr. Ali Jawhar is "an American of Palestinian heritage. I spent most of my adult life teaching in Virginia. I am presently dividing my time between the U.S. and Palestine and yearn to see peace in the world."



Photo courtesy of Jamal Najjab

Close to 100 Jews, Palestinians and others brave a cold rain March 12 to protest the visit to Washington, D.C., by the extremist finance minister of Israel, Bezael Smotrich. "BDS" stands for the Boycott, Divest, Sanctions movement.

Jews & Palestinians protest racist Israeli minister in D.C.

Staff report

The D.C.-Metro chapter of Jewish Voices for Peace held a protest March 12 outside a D.C. hotel where Israeli Finance Minister Bezael Smotrich, an extremist settler leader, was speaking to the Israel Bonds' leadership.

"Despite the cold and rain, approximately 90 people attended the demonstration," according to a report by JVP member Jamal Najjab. "The crowd was overwhelmingly made up of Jewish Americans, pro-Palestinian Americans, Palestinian Americans and Palestinians. They held signs attacking Smotrich, in support of the Palestinians and the divestment of Israeli bonds. Everyone joined in as chants were called out."

Several other organizations, mainly Jewish, also held anti-Smotrich protests outside

the hotel. Altogether, hundreds took part in the various actions.

According to a report by NBC News, Smotrich, who leads the far-right, ultranationalist Religious Zionist Party, told a journalist with Israel's 13 News that he thought "the village of Hawara needs to be erased" and that "the state of Israel needs to do it."

His comments came after two Israelis were fatally shot in an Israeli settlement about 5 miles from Hawara. Following Smotrich's remarks, "Hundreds of settlers, some carrying knives and guns, then tore through Hawara, setting homes and businesses ablaze," according to NBC. "A 37-year-old Palestinian man, Sameh Hamdallah Mahmoud Aqtash, was killed by Israeli fire, according to the Palestinian Health Ministry."

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Feb. 19 vs. March 18: Which way for the antiwar movement?

By Phil Wilayto

An interesting thing has happened in the U.S. antiwar movement. After years of relatively small protests, two relatively large ones took place, both in Washington, D.C., both demanding that the U.S. government stop funding the war in Ukraine,

And yet the two actions could not have been more different.

On Feb. 19, about 1,500 people gathered at the Lincoln Memorial. This protest was cosponsored by the conservative Libertarian Party and the liberal People's Party, which grew out of the Bernie Sanders presidential campaign of 2016. The event was dubbed Rage Against the War Machine.

This was an example of what people are calling a "Right-Left" alliance. The idea is that people and organizations with different views on some issues can come together on others and so form a more

powerful movement.

The other protest took place March 18 at Lafayette Square, across from the White House. This one drew about 2,000 people, maybe more, and was cosponsored by a wide range of antiwar organizations including the ANSWER Coalition, United National Antiwar Coalition, Code Pink, Veterans for Peace and was endorsed by some 200 groups, including the Virginia Defenders and the Odessa Solidarity Campaign.

So what's the problem?

The Libertarian Party, which really ran Feb. 19, is a right-wing organization that stands for a particularly brutal form of capitalism, one with no restraints - no labor laws; no laws against structural racism, sexism or LGBTQ oppression; no government programs of any kind that benefit the working class and oppressed communities; no public schools, public libraries,



Photo by Phil Wilayto

Several thousand people march in Washington, D.C., March 18 to demand an end to U.S. funding the war in Ukraine and many other causes.

ies, Social Security, Medicaid, Medicare, Section 8 housing, nothing. In its view, the only proper function of government is to protect life and property, which means the cops, courts, prisons and the military.

And to unite with the LP, you have to agree to demands that totally ignore the central issue of white supremacy and the need to defend and expand programs that address human needs. It doesn't matter what individual liberal speakers may say at their event, it's the agreed-upon program that counts. Supporting a "Right-Left" alliance means abandoning the working class and communities of color.

In contrast, March 18 called for defunding the Pentagon and funding much-needed social programs. It targeted racism and promoted the right of self-determination for oppressed peoples.

These differences in politics between the two protests were reflected in their different demographics. Feb. 19 was mainly white men between the ages of 20 and 50. March 18 was thoroughly multiracial, with

many young people of color.

The fact that two very different events protested the same main issue sparked a heated debate in the antiwar movement. Some argued that, with the war in Ukraine escalating, alliances with right-wing organizations were both justified and necessary. Others argued that such alliances mean abandoning communities of color and only serve to further legitimize and strengthen the Right.

The Defenders took the second position. What's more, we intervened. We put together a little pamphlet arguing why a Right-Left alliance was such a bad idea, took it to Feb. 19 and distributed hundreds of copies to the crowd. We had many conversations, and may have opened a few minds.

Then we mobilized for March 18, reaching out to friends and allies in Norfolk, Roanoke and Harrisonburg. And we rallied and marched in D.C. and were invited to address the indoors program that followed the march. (The pamphlet is posted at odessasolidaritycampaign.org.)

These are difficult times and a lot of good people are scared. But the answer isn't to turn to backward forces. That just paves the way for a more powerful, rightwing movement.

And that's what we should be fighting against, not uniting with.

**May 2:
International
Day of Solidarity
with the People
of Odessa!**



odessasolidaritycampaign.org

May 2 marks the day in 2014 when a mob led by openly fascist organizations in Odessa, Ukraine, trapped scores of progressives in the House of Trade Unions building and set it on fire, killing at least 42 people. Each year, the Odessa Solidarity Campaign, a project of the Virginia Defenders, encourages people to remember the massacre in some public way. We will be posting suggestions on our website. "We do not forget - We do not forgive!"



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