

Buffalo Forum



Local Publication of the
U.S. Marxist-Leninist Organization

Workers of all countries, unite!

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December 19, 2014

Vol. 18 #12

Self-Reliance, Self Respect, Self Defense

As students, youth and all concerned continue organizing against racist police killings and brutality and the complete lack of punishment for these crimes, the issue of who to rely on to develop solutions has come to the fore. Among the people the answer is increasingly that we must rely on our own efforts. Our dignity and self-respect require organized resistance as it is only through fighting for justice that we keep our respect and uphold our duty to resist. Our communities also need to be self-reliant in defending our rights and providing for our security. Self-reliance, self-respect, self-defense.

Together our communities have people experienced in providing security and doing so without weapons, like

Self-Reliance • 8

SAY NO TO CLOSING LAFAYETTE, BENNETT, EAST, MLK

Raising Quality of Public Schools Requires an Increase in Public Control

Lafayette, Bennett, East, and MLK, four schools targeted for closure by the New York State Education Department (NYSED) are organizing to oppose these efforts and instead keep their schools public and increase public control of them. Organizing efforts at all the schools are involving students, teachers, staff, parents

and various organizations in this struggle and urging all to join in improving the quality of education. Through their own efforts and in the face of huge pressure from NYSED, including arbitrary requirements and very limited time for some, all four schools developed redesign plans for

Increase Public Control of Schools • 3

Cuomo Calls “Education Bureaucracy” the Enemy and Targets Buffalo

On December 18, Governor Andrew Cuomo’s office sent a letter to Dr. Merryl Tisch, Chancellor of New York State (NYS) Schools, and Dr. John King, outgoing NYS Commissioner of Education. The letter, sent by the Director of State Operations, says Cuomo intends to introduce an

Cuomo Targets Buffalo • 4

Redesign Plans Call for Schools to be Organizing Centers for Community

Recent public meetings by Bennett, East and Lafayette High Schools and the Martin Luther King (MLK) Multicultural Institute (pre-K - 8) presented redesign plans for these schools that were developed by teachers, staff, administrators and alumni. The plans addressed student needs

Schools as Community Centers • 5

Buffalo Stands With Ferguson For Justice and Rights

Buffalo joined Ferguson and resistance in New York City, DC and many cities across the country where numerous actions and meetings occurred demanding justice, defending rights and calling for an end to racist police killings. Buffalo saw a major demonstration on Bailey that marched to the police station at Warwick. Various actions followed including

a march down Elmwood by Buffalo State and UB students, another protest and die-in at Bailey and Kensington, a rally at Elmwood and Bidwell and march down Elmwood, meetings on the west side and east side at Merriweather library, a rally on the steps of City Hall where clergy and unions joined the call for justice, a

Buffalo Stands With Ferguson • 8

New Yorkers Win a Ban on Fracking!

A broad, persistent and determined movement committed to a ban on fracking in New York recently achieved its goal. On December 17, Governor Cuomo announced his decision to ban high volume

(horizontal) fracking, the dangerous method for drilling for natural gas and oil. The achievement came in the face of pressure by the energy monopolies to expand fracking

Fracking Ban • 9

TREMENDOUS VICTORY!
CUBAN FIVE ARE FREE See p. 14-16

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Was Dr. Perry Brought to Buffalo to Split Teachers and Parents?

Many people attending the recent Community Action Organization (CAO) event where Dr. Perry of Hartford, Connecticut spoke anticipated that he would give emphasis to private charter schools as a means to improve education in Buffalo. That is what he has done elsewhere. He himself has formed a charter school management company, though at present it does not manage any charter schools. So a presentation on private charters was anticipated.

As he brought out at the meeting though, Dr. Perry is the principal of a public magnet school in Hartford. Whatever he has accomplished in relation to education has been done at a public school, with public unionized teachers. This fact is likely part of the reason Dr. Perry encouraged those attending to demand that successful schools in Buffalo, like City Honors, be replicated and more seats provided at them as one step to take.

Given Dr. Perry is a skillful speaker who mixes story telling and jokes into his presentation, it is significant that he barely spoke about private charter schools. He clearly did not forget to do so. Rather, he likely had a different aim in mind in speaking to the largely African American crowd. That aim appears to be to split these parents from Buffalo teachers.

Perry emphasized that graduation rate and reading levels in Buffalo are not acceptable and that parents had to act to do something about it. Perry then went out of his way to target teachers as the problem. It is true that parents need to demand — and are demanding through various organizations and at school board meetings — that

public schools be improved. The issue is, how is blaming teachers going to do that? The long history of the struggle for public schools, including opposing their segregation by the government, incorporating African American studies, broad curriculum and libraries to support them, readily shows that it is by uniting students, parents and teachers together that advances are made. A united effort is required to gain an outcome that favors the people.

Splitting parents and teachers and pitting them against each other only worsens the prospects for improving the schools. It serves to create conditions for eliminating public governance; putting publicly funded schools in private charter hands; and eliminating teachers as a profession. This direction is consistent with efforts being made by Governor Cuomo and the rich billionaires he represents (see p.1). It is consistent with closing schools, state takeovers and charter takeovers — all of which greatly eliminates the role of parents in the education of their children. What is needed is expanding that role and creating conditions for parents, teachers, staff and students to together decide all matters of education.

Dr. Perry also sought to dismiss poverty — a major problem in Buffalo — as a factor influencing learning. This was done mainly through sleight of hand. Responding to a questioner who raised that poverty is a factor in learning, Perry said poverty does not determine whether an individual will succeed. To prove his point he asked the audience

Effort to Split Teachers and Parents • 3

INFORMATIONAL FORUM

- ***New York State Common Core Curriculum and High-Stakes Standardized Testing: Facts vs. Myths***
- ***Western New Yorkers for Public Education: Parent panel to discuss education policies, reforms and how to refuse the tests and help your child***

SATURDAY JANUARY 17, 2014

**EAST HIGH SCHOOL, 820 NORTHAMPTON ST.
8:30am Registration and Breakfast • 9am-11am Meeting**

Sponsored by Buffalo Parent Teacher Organization

I • INCREASE PUBLIC CONTROL OF SCHOOLS

their schools. Unlike NYSED, which operates mainly behind closed doors and without providing information to the public, these schools all engaged the public in developing the plans.

Organizing included distributing main highlights of the redesign plans (which commonly are 50-100+ pages long) to the public, putting content on facebook and webpages for public comments and public meetings where all concerned were able to speak and voice their views. Organizing was done to include alumni as well as current students, teachers as well as principals, existing staff as well as community organizations ready to contribute to raising the quality of education.

Hundreds of people participated in the various activities. What stood out at every meeting is the broad desire of the people to keep schools public and to have schools serve as centers for the community — such as for after school programs, meetings, evening classes, family sports and music, art, day care, and more.

Buffalo Forum applauds the teams at the schools and all those who participated in formulating and presenting the redesign plans to the public. These meetings and efforts have been an important part of developing the fight for *Public Control of Public Schools!* The organizing made clear people want to have more say and a *deciding*

say in their schools, not closures and private takeovers where the public has no say.

The schools, including the buildings, belong to the public. Communities are best served by increasing the role and control of teachers, staff, students and parents together in deciding matters of education. This includes designing the content of curriculum, how best to assess development by students and teachers alike, methods of teaching and learning as well as day and evening programs at the school that best suit the needs of the communities they serve.

The redesign plans have now been submitted to the Buffalo School Board, which can accept or modify them or accept other plans that could be submitted by private interests. (At present it is not known if plans other than the four by the schools were submitted.) The School Board must approve plans by January 28 and students, parents and teachers are gearing up to participate at that meeting. Plans must then be submitted to NYSED by January 30, 2015. NYSED has the final say and can, as has occurred in the past, reject the plans using arbitrary excuses and close the schools as early as the 2015 school year. Such action to eliminate the public from having any say over what happens to the schools may be taken over the summer to take advantage of the absence of teachers, students and staff.

Stepping up organizing now for *Public Control of Public Schools* is even more important. This can be done through more public meetings,

house meetings, joint efforts by community and school organizations, and more. *Buffalo Forum* urges Buffalo School Board members to organize public meetings starting now through the end of January, to continue to provide public space to debate and develop unity in defending our public schools and in blocking state efforts to close them. We urge the four targeted schools to continue to have public meetings and to involve all concerned in defending the schools and preparing to block any efforts to close them.

Public education that meets the needs of the youth is a social necessity and responsibility. By relying on our own efforts and defending the right to education and public right to have control, we can defend our public schools and raise their quality.



2 • EFFORT TO SPLIT TEACHERS AND PARENTS

if they were born poor. The majority raised their hands. He then asked how many were college graduates. The majority raised their hands, an accomplishment applauded by all.

However, the issue is not whether someone born into poverty can learn. All children can learn. The issue is whether poverty negatively impacts learning for students as a group, a collective, and as individuals. Facts on this are overwhelming — yes it does.

Addressing the problem of poverty is an important part of addressing problems of education in Buffalo. This is not to ignore the role of teachers inside the buildings, which is significant. But rather to recognize that raising the quality of education means

raising employment and taking measures to compensate for the difficulties facing poor working parents — the majority of parents in Buffalo.

The redesign plans submitted by the four schools facing closure are efforts to do this, by keeping schools open longer, providing parent and family classes and supports, engaging parents, teachers and students together in solving problems, etc. Perry said not word one about these efforts and their value to improving reading and the quality of education more generally. He did repeat several times that parents should push to close Buffalo schools. Again, no mention that such closures would open the way for more private charter schools, which mean

less possibility for parent involvement when more is required.

Why not argue out directly why the redesign plans do not serve to raise the quality of education and therefore the schools must close? We do not think the argument can be made. Why not instead speak to the united efforts by parents and teachers at these schools as positive examples to be replicated? This would have contributed to concrete action parents can actually take to improve the schools and the surrounding communities. So too would urging all concerned to unite in the fight to defend the equal right to education for all and to develop our own alternatives where students, parents and teachers together decide.

I • CUOMO TARGETS BUFFALO

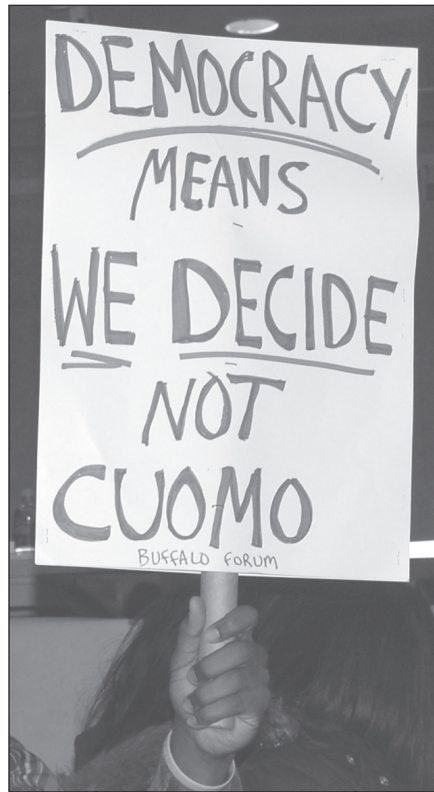
“aggressive legislative package” to “reform” public education. The letter then has a list of 12 questions for Tisch and King that show Cuomo will aggressively pursue eliminating the public school system and the role of the public in governance. This is all done in the name of benefiting the students — who are not consulted or involved in any way!

This direction is made most clear at the end of the letter, which once again claims that public schools, with unionized public teachers, are a “monopoly” that must be broken up. The letter can be read to expand the forces being targeted to include principals, school boards and district administrators. This is particularly true given the content preceding it, such as more mayoral control and consolidation and regionalization of school districts.

The letter states: “Several weeks ago Governor Cuomo said that improving education is thwarted by the monopoly of the education bureaucracy.

The education bureaucracy’s mission is to sustain the bureaucracy and the status quo and therefore it is often the enemy of change. The result is the current system perpetuates the bureaucracy but fails our students in many ways.” While the letter shows the main focus of Cuomo’s attack remains teachers, the use of “bureaucracy” also targets administrators and more generally public governance as the “enemy.” Why introduce such language?

Cuomo will not actually engage in a public debate on these issues and instead uses terms like enemy to try to silence discussion. King, similarly, was known for his refusal to hold public meetings. For example the meeting on the Common Core testing and teacher evaluation regime that King held in Buffalo (December 2013) was by invitation only and those invited were not permitted to speak. And while teachers, parents and students and organizations of various kinds have put forward, in public meetings, ways to defend the right to education and raise the quality of the schools, Cuomo ignores these efforts and proposals (see p. 1). He instead turns to Tisch and King, both known to block public participation and governance and support privatizing public schools, as King’s actions against Buffalo public



schools show.

Buffalo Singled Out

Buffalo is directly targeted in the letter. This is likely in part because of the firm resistance to attacks by Cuomo and NYSED. This includes opposing their efforts to close Buffalo schools and hand them over to private charters, which are known for doing no better or even worse than public schools when it comes to educating students. Teachers and parents together are joining in independent organizing to defend their interests, as shown in recent public forums. The Buffalo Teachers Federation refused to endorse Cuomo for governor and instead stood up for pro-education Green Party candidate Howie Hawkins. The Buffalo schools slated for closing by NYSED are all resisting, developing redesign plans and involving the public in that process. Efforts to split parents and teachers are not succeeding. School Board members are joining the fight too. These are among the factors leading to a concerted attack on Buffalo.

Cuomo, as a public official, takes no responsibility for the *government failure*

to guarantee the equal right to education for all, including the funding and resources required for teachers to teach and students to learn. Instead, he blames the schools, and by inference the teachers, principals and district administrators. The letter asks, “What steps would you take to dramatically improve priority or struggling schools — schools that condemn a generation of kids to poor education and thus poor life prospects? Specifically, what should we do about the deplorable conditions of the education system in Buffalo?”

An economy that produces growing poverty and inequality can only produce “poor life prospects.” This is a function of an economy that does not meet the needs of the majority. The schools are not the source of the problem. Further, it is significant that Cuomo refers not to particular schools but to the “education system in Buffalo.” This is code for a state takeover of Buffalo Public Schools and subsequently their closure or privatization, using privately controlled charters. Both serve to eliminate public governance and weaken or eliminate the teachers’ union. This approach also eliminates public school boards and administrators. It is this public governance that Cuomo has in mind when he says the “bureaucracy” is the enemy. It is also why he is calling for more mayoral control of schools. In this way, power is concentrated in executives at the state and local level and the role of the public and public governance is eliminated.

State Imposed Teacher Evaluation

Five of Cuomo’s twelve questions are directed at teachers. The “questions” — actually proposals — include having the state impose, in law, scoring for teacher evaluations. The letter specifically calls classroom observation — known by educators to be a more reliable and useful means of evaluation than test scores — “subjective,” while test scores are considered “objective.” Had he asked parents, students and teachers, he would know that the test scores are not at all an objective measure of a student’s abilities, development or contributions. He also must be deaf given the very loud rejection across

Cuomo Targets Buffalo • 5

I • SCHOOLS AS COMMUNITY CENTERS

as well as striving to serve the communities that surround the schools.

MLK Innovations

The plan for MLK is perhaps the most innovative, with great effort to directly involve students more in deciding issues of education. The plan uses themes that address social problems, such as Social Justice and Human Rights and Environmental Advocacy. It is project-based and interdisciplinary, with students and teachers together deciding the questions addressed and the design of projects. It is vertically aligned, so students at all grade levels are addressing similar themes while engaging in varied activities based on their level.

Learning includes going into the community to do surveys and assess needs and adjust projects accordingly. This serves to involve students in identifying problems as well as involving people in the surrounding communities in discussion about solutions.

The plan also includes ways to involve parents more in educational and other school activities, including participating in the classroom, volunteering, newsletters and generally participating in decision-making. It puts in place collaboration of various kinds with Buffalo organizations, so as to

further enrich the education while unifying all those involved in working to raise the quality of the public schools. The overall spirit is to direct education to engaging all in finding solutions to existing social problems and do so on the basis of increasing the decision-making role of students, teachers, staff and the broader community.

Plans for High Schools

Lafayette, on the west side and with a large number of refugees and non-English speakers, will address the needs of their students by having the International Newcomer Academy, to include 12-16 year olds district-wide. Lafayette currently has a student population that is 70 percent English Language Learners. This Academy will be cross-curricular and bring students up to grade-level reading and writing skills. The plan also includes interpreter training so students can assist those in the community and prepare for such work. It will also have other academies within the school, such as an Educators Academy and one for travel and tourism.

East and Bennett proposed to keep their schools open until 9pm and provide GED, adult-education and vocational classes, family supports including child care, sports

and recreation, and other needs. The aim is for the schools to serve as community organizing and educational resource centers, contributing to raising the quality of education for students and the community as a whole.

Both schools also had specific proposals for students to gain college credits and cross-curriculum studies as well as job-related studies (known as Career and Technical Education, CTE). These include health programs for certified nursing assistants and medical coding as well as dietary assistant and fitness training at East High School. At Bennett, it includes programs for the building trades and business. Both schools also plan to add an eighth grade and provide special supports for improving reading and math skills for eighth and ninth graders.

While each school has its particularities what was clear to all attending these meetings was the drive to raise the quality of education and keep the public schools public. There is recognition that education needs to be looked at anew and schools organized in such a way that they meet the needs of students, teachers, communities and society as a whole. The redesign plans are an effort in that direction and should be supported by all.

4 • CUOMO TARGETS BUFFALO

the state of the Common Core testing and teacher evaluation regime by parents and teachers alike. More than 60,000 students refused to even take the state test last spring and many thousands more will do so at testing time in April 2015.

By having the state set evaluation scoring percentages in law, Cuomo wants to eliminate any negotiation by teachers on their evaluations — an instrument used to fire them. He wants to increase the weight given to test scores while decreasing the role of principals — human beings who know and work with the teachers. It is an effort to essentially be able to fire teachers at will and eliminate collective efforts by teachers to defend their rights.

This is further indicated in the additional attacks on teachers. Cuomo wants measures to more easily fire teachers. He wants to institute merit pay — “financial incentives”

— which are known not to improve teaching while engendering a more insecure, competitive and divisive atmosphere. Teachers especially need a cooperative environment of mutual respect and assistance. Merit pay is designed to eliminate cooperation and collective resistance.

Cuomo also wants to change the teacher certification process, impose an additional competency test and extend the probationary period for teachers so it takes longer to get tenure. This is all done in the name of recruiting the “best and brightest.” But what bright teacher would want to work in such insecure, unjust and test-filled conditions where the state and not their peers and principals evaluate them and can fire them?! Cuomo’s demands likely pave the way for broad and increased use of un-certified, non-union college graduates who only teach for 3-5 years, as is already being done through

Teach for America.

As an additional means to limit public governance, the letter asks, “Do you think we should restructure the current system through mergers, consolidations or regionalization?” Regionalization and mergers generally are a means to decrease representation and the role of the public. This is being proposed at a time when the problems society faces require increasing the role of the public. Indeed, that role needs to be raised to one of decision making by the people themselves. This is the requirement of democracy today. It is what parents, teachers, staff and students are fighting for as essential to renew the public schools, raise their quality and actually secure the equal right to education for all. Fighting in this direction of defending rights and demanding the public right to decide is precisely what Cuomo is trying to prevent.

Hands Up, Don't Test

(Interview by EduShyster blog with Jesse Hagopian on recent protests against police violence and struggles against the Common Core testing regime. He is an African American teacher at Seattle's Garfield High School, where there have been student walkouts opposing testing and police brutality.)

* * *

EduShyster: You happened to be in Boston recently giving a talk about the new uprising against high-stakes testing on the same night that thousands of people here were protesting police violence and institutional racism. Here's the people's mic — explain how the two causes are related.

Jesse Hagopian: If I could have, I would have moved the talk to the protest to connect the issues. I would have said that the purpose of education is to empower young people to help solve problems in their community and their society. The purpose of standardized testing is to learn how to eliminate wrong answer choices rather than how to critically think or organize with people around you or collaborate on issues you care about. These tests are disempowering kids from the skills they really need to solve the big problems that our society and kids themselves are facing—like rampant police brutality and police terror. What's the point of making our kids college and career ready if they can be shot down in the street and there's no justice? You look at how testing and the preparation for testing now monopolizes class time — that is the American school system. [...] We face huge problems as a society: mass incarceration, endless wars, income inequality. Our education system has to be about empowering students to solve those problems.

EduShyster: I can think of one key difference between the two movements. All of the people who are protesting testing are white suburban moms who are unhappy that their kids are not as brilliant as they thought.

Hagopian: That comment is offensive



Garfield Students Walk Out for Ferguson

for lots of reasons but one of the biggest is that it dismisses the parents and teachers of color who are leaders of this movement. Look at Castle Bridge Elementary in New York where more than 80% of the parents opted their kids out of the test. The PTA leaders who helped spearhead that movement are both parents of color. Look at Karen Lewis in Chicago, who has led a civil rights struggle for the schools Chicago's students deserve, which includes a fight against high-stakes testing. In Seattle we organized a multi-racial coalition, and some of the most vocal opponents of the MAP (Measures of Academic Progress) state test were Black teachers, myself included. We were able to partner with the NAACP and it was a really powerful coalition.

At one point the NAACP held a press conference and said "Look: the MAP test is the tool that's used to decide who is in Advanced Placement (AP) classes which are overwhelmingly white. This is a tool of institutional racism and tracking and the MAP tests have long played that role. If this is the metric that we use to decide who is advanced and who is not, and only white children end up being identified as advanced, then something clearly is not working."

EduShyster: In your new book, *More than a Score*, you argue that the movement

against high-stakes testing actually started with civil rights activists. Explain.

Hagopian: The first major test resisters were Black intellectuals. Horace Mann Bond has a beautiful passage where he describes how these tests are used to rank and sort our children and how, when you test the kids in the rich neighborhoods who have access to all of the resources of course they do better. It has nothing to do with intelligence — it has to do with access to resources. What he wrote in the 1930's is what we see happening in our schools today. Or W.E.B. Dubois, founder

of the NAACP, who spoke out against early standardized tests because they were grafted onto the public schools via the eugenics movement, the idea being that it was possible to prove white supremacy through "scientific" methods. He knew from the very beginning that these tests were designed to show Black failure, and they are still showing that. The fact that there has been such a stability of test scores — that rich white students score the best — shows that these are a tool for ranking and sorting. And increasingly these tests are being used to shut down schools in poor neighborhoods that serve predominantly students of color.

EduShyster: Here is where I have to channel one of my favorite critics. He teaches at a Boston charter school, and as he'll be quick to ask, if those schools are failing to teach kids at the most basic level, should they be kept open?

Hagopian: That is a great question. As much as I vehemently defend our public schools against corporatization and what I call the testocracy, I think that we have to acknowledge that our schools have long played the role of ranking and sorting students into different strata of society, and students of color in particular have been sorted into the bottom. There is a tension in public schools because on

Hands Up, Don't Test • 7

BALTIMORE, MARYLAND

Protesters Take Over School Board Meeting to Oppose School Closures

Students in Baltimore, many wearing their *I Can't Breathe* T-Shirts from protests against police brutality, took over the Baltimore school board meeting to block the closing of their schools. A vote on closing six schools, including Heritage High School attended by the students. Organized in the Baltimore Algebra Project, the youth held a “die-in,” lying on the floor and chanting, “The school board has failed us,” and “Black lives matter.”

In what is becoming typical of school boards confronted with demands by the public not to close schools, the 10 board members left the room and refused to even hear the protesters and discuss their concerns. One of the protesters called to the board as they filed out, “Where are you going? You work for us.”

The protesters took over the board member’s seats and continued to discuss the issues, bringing out that closing the schools was unjust and the school board needed to be accountable for their decisions. The students raised that it is government that is failing, by closing schools supported by students, teachers and parents,

like Heritage. The students spoke out, emphasizing that students trust the faculty at Heritage and have a positive working relationship that needed to be strengthened, not eliminated. They also heard from a former Heritage teacher and a Heritage parent about the history of the school and why it should remain open.

Protesters called for recent alumni and parents to have a place on the school board and more of a role in deciding educational matters, along with the students. In this manner the students provided an example of how the meetings should be conducted



and the importance of public participation in governance.

Only after the students, parents and teachers left did the board members come back. To their shame they voted to close Heritage and four other schools and delayed the closing of Abbottston Elementary.

6 • HANDS UP DON'T TEST

the one hand they play that ranking and sorting function, but on the other hand they hold radical democratic possibilities to empower people with the knowledge that they need to transform society. That is why schools are contested spaces and why every civil rights movement in our history has been focused on the schools in some way. We need to transform our school system. The question is “who are the best people to do that?” And the best people to do that are teachers and parents—not billionaires or the one percent. The sorting process worked out just fine for them. [...]

EduShyster: Garfield High is associated with rabble-rousing teachers because of the successful MAP boycott, but students there are really active too. In addition to walking out to protest the Ferguson decision, students also walked out over budget cuts. Are all of these walkouts getting in the way of their test prep?

Hagopian: Garfield High is going through an incredible season of student activism. I am the adviser to the Black Student Union at Garfield High School, whose members were recently recognized by the Seattle Human Rights Commission as being rising human rights leaders. After the Darren Wilson decision, they called a meeting in the cafeteria, held a speak-out, then 1,000 students marched out of Garfield and to a rally at the NAACP. I happened to be driving down the road and had to pull over because all of a sudden here come 1,000 students chanting *Hands Up, Don't Shoot!* The students will tell you that the problem is not just in Ferguson or on Staten Island, but with institutional racism. They look around and it is there in the Seattle Public Schools with, for example, disproportionate suspension rates for minority students. They feel like it is their responsibility to highlight these

issues and to act on their own behalf. [...] They are teaching a whole city about the depths of racism in our society and what it means to stand up for what you believe in. That is exactly what education should be about.

These students did not just become activists overnight, by the way. The last few years, students protested against budget cuts at Garfield High, followed by the successful MAP boycott that galvanized our whole community, and really demonstrated to students and teachers the power of standing up. I think what I am most proud of is that we are actually showing what the alternative to rote memorization and standardized curriculum looks like.

(Jesse Hagopian teaches history and advises the Black Student Union at Seattle's Garfield High School. He is the editor of More Than a Score: The New Uprising Against High-Stakes Testing.)

I • BUFFALO STANDS WITH FERGUSON

teach-in and more.

The seething anger at the failure to punish those responsible for continued racist killings and attacks was broadly felt and righteously directed by many at *all* those responsible, from the top down. In Buffalo this includes the NFTA police, guilty of the majority of profiling and brutality against African American youth and youth in general. It includes the Justice Department and FBI, with their “investigations” and “negotiations” but no charges, no convictions, no end to the impunity. It includes the governor who is acting to decimate our public schools, which decimates our youth, especially African American youth.

As work goes forward, the racist government crimes and violence are the target and officials from top to bottom are accountable. Government efforts to divide resistance, encouraging people to blame each other and pit black vs. white and youth vs. elders is being opposed. Defending one collective — African Americans — is a responsibility of all. The government would like nothing better than to see such splits, just as they are

striving to split parents and teachers.

Together, government efforts to isolate and marginalize those fighting can be confronted. Putting rights in first place and holding the government responsible for *their* failure to guarantee those rights and punish those guilty for violating them will strengthen resistance.

Plans are going forward now to organize in a step-wise fashion to engage more youth, including those from the high schools. Racist police brutality, especially by the NFTA, hits youth the hardest. It is also youth and students who are needed to defend our public schools from attack. Now is the time to do education, outreach, door-to-door efforts, public debate, so as to prepare to block efforts to close the schools and keep the jails.

As can be seen here and elsewhere, the fight for the right to education goes hand in hand with the fight against racist police brutality and profiling. This connection is commonly expressed in the existence and resistance to the school-to-prison pipeline and rejection of the genocide of mass



incarceration of African American and Latino youth.

Work to unite and rely on our own efforts to defend the communities and schools is going forward. Care is being given to planning so as to keep aims clear and develop actions that serve those aims.

All interested are encouraged to contact *Buffalo Forum!*

I • SELF RELIANCE

the Nation of Islam and the Peacekeepers. We have people trained in non-violent conflict resolution and restorative justice, where situations are de-escalated and resolved in a manner that assists all. Our communities do not need an armed, military-like police force occupying them. Problems can be solved without violence and through other means. And because we recognize and respect rights, we together are better equipped to resolve problems and defend our communities.

Self-reliance, self-respect, self-defense stand in opposition to current calls by government at all levels to rely on the Justice Department and more federal investigations to prevent more racist killings. This is promoted even though it is the federal government, including the Pentagon, Department of Homeland Security and Justice Department, that are responsible for the militarization of policing at all levels. This includes the weaponry, tanks and combat uniforms,

and the culture of militarization that says police are aggressors, facing an enemy and are to act first and shoot to kill. They are to take pre-emptive action in the name of defending themselves from threats, just as the military does, with drones, Black Ops, torture and assassinations. There is a military culture that does not have the concept to serve and protect the public. Indeed the phrase has even been removed from Buffalo police cars.

It is also the case that the Justice Department by law is required to provide statistics on police killings and use of force but refuses to do so. There is also a 1994 law in place that allows the Justice Department to file suit against police departments with patterns and practices of unconstitutional conduct, and to obtain wide ranging court orders, consent decrees, and independent monitors. Known as the Justice Department’s Pattern and Practice Unit, there are consent decrees in New Orleans, Oakland and elsewhere. There

is one now being negotiated in Cleveland, where police killed 12-year old African American Tamir Rice. There is one with the Erie County Holding Center. But the profiling, racist killings and impunity have not stopped. They have worsened. The ratio of police killings to overall crime incidents, for example, increased by 75 percent from 1992 to 2012. This means crime has gone down while police killings have dramatically increased. The Justice Department and its investigations and decrees solve no problem.

The impunity for racist government profiling, brutality, mass incarceration and killings are blatant and meant to be. It is a repeated warning to stop resisting, stop standing up for rights, as these racist government crimes will get even worse.

Our security and our future lie in standing together to defend rights — the rights of African Americans, of youth, of all. Self-reliance, self respect, self-defense.

The Alarming Research Behind New York's Fracking Ban

Nicholas St. Fleur, *The Atlantic*, December 19, 2014

The battle over untapped natural gas in New York State appears to have reached its end. Following an extensive public health review of hydraulic fracturing, Governor Andrew Cuomo announced a complete ban on the oil and natural gas harvesting practice in the state on Wednesday, December 17.

The 184-page report, conducted by the New York State Department of Health, cites potential environmental impacts and health hazards as reasons for the ban. The research incorporates findings from multiple studies conducted across the country and highlights the following seven concerns:

Respiratory health: The report cites the dangers of methane emissions from natural gas drilling in Texas and Pennsylvania, which have been linked to asthma and other breathing issues. Another study found that 39 percent of residents in southern Pennsylvania who lived within one kilometer of a fracking site developed upper-respiratory problems compared with 18 percent of those who lived more than two kilometers away.

Drinking water: Shallow methane-migration underground could seep into drinking water, one study found, contaminating wells. Another found brine from deep shale formations in groundwater aquifers. The report also refers to a study of fracking communities in the Appalachian Plateau

where they found methane in 82 percent of drinking water samples, and that concentrations of the chemical were six times higher in homes close to natural gas wells. Methane was 23 times higher in homes close to fracking sites as well.

Seismic activity: The report cites studies from Ohio and Oklahoma that explain how fracking can trigger earthquakes. Another found that fracking near Preese Hall in the United Kingdom resulted in a 2.3 magnitude earthquake as well as 1.5 magnitude earthquake.

Climate change: Excess methane can be released into the atmosphere, which contributes to global warming. One study predicts that fracking in New York State would contribute between 7 percent and 28 percent of the volatile organic compound emissions, and between 6 percent and 18 percent of nitrogen oxide emissions in the region by 2020.

Soil contamination: One analysis of a natural gas site found elevated levels of radioactive waste in the soil, potentially the result of surface spills.

The community: The report refers to problems such as noise and odor pollution, citing a case in Pennsylvania where gas harvesting was linked to huge increases in automobile accidents and heavy truck

crashes.

Health complaints: Residents near active fracking sites reported having symptoms such as nausea, abdominal pain, nosebleeds, and headaches according to studies. A study in rural Colorado, which examined 124,842 births between 1996 and 2009, found that those who lived closest to natural gas development sites had a 30 percent increase in congenital heart conditions. The group of births closest to development sites also had a 100-percent increased chance of developing neural tube defects.

In 2008, New York State suspended its fracking activities pending further research into the health, environmental, and economic effects. Since the moratorium six years ago, many different scientific groups have conducted hydraulic fracturing research, as the state's report reflects.

Howard Zucker, the acting State Health Commissioner who helped spearhead the report, addressed the ban with Gov. Cuomo in Albany. "I cannot support high-volume hydraulic fracturing in the great state of New York," said Zucker. He added, "I asked myself, 'would I let my family live in a community with fracking? The answer is no.'" [...]

I • NEW YORKERS WIN BAN ON FRACKING

and their disinformation that it is safe. It was the movement in New York that fought for and secured an investigation by the Health Department of the grave harm fracking causes to human beings, including birth defects and respiratory problems. Acting Health Commissioner Howard Zucker was forced to admit that given his findings, based on numerous scientific studies, he would not live in a community that had fracking. Joe Martens, the Commissioner of the Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) also had to confirm the harm to the environment, including the poisoning of water and air. He said the DEC would issue "legally binding findings to prohibit high volume

hydraulic fracturing in New York."

Here in Buffalo the many students and others who have demonstrated and organized to ban fracking in New York — and everywhere! — joined in celebration. A special salute was extended to Rita Yelda, a main organizer for many years on this issue. All agreed that it was the firm and unrelenting efforts by people across the state, dogging Cuomo at every turn and refusing to accept anything less than a ban that was the main factor in Cuomo's decision. All also recognize that given it is an executive decision, it can be changed at a later date, by Cuomo or a different administration.

Now attention is being focused on

preventing New York from becoming a superhighway for pipelines, compressor stations, storage facilities and other infrastructure to get fracked gas and oil from Pennsylvania and Ohio to the east coast, New England, Canada and overseas (see p.10). Banning fracking in New York needs to mean keeping fracked gas out of the state and contributing to a ban in all states. Organizing also includes demands for expanding the use of clean energy of various kinds, including wind and solar. Work is still going forward to demonstrate in Albany January 7 to demand Cuomo recognize a ban is a ban and support these demands against pipelines and infrastructure and for renewable, clean energy.

New York Superhighway to Transport Fracked Gas to New England and Overseas

New Yorkers Against Fracking

The grassroots movement to ban fracking has raised awareness about its negative consequences, resulting in larger numbers of New Yorkers, both upstate and downstate, advocating for a ban on horizontal fracking, which was recently won. However, gas companies, aided and abetted by the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC), are building a multitude of new gas infrastructure projects in New York.

Methane gas, and the chemicals that travel with it, are being transported through a spider web of pipelines and associated gas infrastructure, including compressor stations, metering and regulating stations, pigging stations, and storage facilities. New York should not only ban fracking, but our policymakers should say no to the gas industry that is using our state as a superhighway to deliver fracked gas to New England and overseas. New Yorkers are already feeling the impacts of shale gas development, from Minisink in Orange County, to beautiful Seneca Lake, to the Rockaways in New York City.

The organization Stop the Algonquin Pipeline Expansion (SAPE), is one of many grassroots groups that have sprung up in response to ill-advised infrastructure projects. SAPE was founded in October 2013 when Spectra Energy pre-filed its application for the Algonquin Incremental Market (AIM) expansion project. The AIM expansion includes a new 2.9-mile segment of 42" diameter high-pressure pipeline that will cross the Hudson River from Rockland County and enter Westchester County 1,500 feet from the Indian Point nuclear facility. This new pipeline segment will run 450 feet from an elementary school. The three existing smaller diameter gas pipelines that run under Indian Point would remain in service, as well.

Experts have stated that building a new 42" pipeline in this area creates a very hazardous situation and that an independent and transparent risk assess-

ment is necessary. Paul Blanch, a nuclear expert with 45 years of experience said, "Some of the possible consequences of a gas line fire/explosion to Indian Point include loss of power to the entire site, secondary fires from liquid fuel storage tanks, reactor core damage and melting, asphyxiation of site personnel, spent fuel radioactivity releases exceeding those of Fukushima, and social/economic damages exceeding \$1 trillion."

Local, state and federal elected officials signed a letter to the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) supporting the call for an independent and transparent risk assessment and we have met with federal elected officials to urge them to take a leadership role in ensuring that an independent risk assessment is undertaken. SAPE is currently running a call-in campaign to our federal elected officials, Senators Schumer and Gillibrand and Representatives Lowey, Maloney and Engel, to tell them to support the health and safety of their constituents. If pipeline explosion or other disaster at Indian Point were to occur, the consequences would devastate the entire region. Please join our call-in campaign by going to our website or our Facebook page for the script and contact information.

The AIM project also includes an expansion of existing 26" diameter pipeline to 42" diameter high-pressure pipeline through the New York City watershed, through parklands, and within hundreds of feet of many homes, schools, businesses and houses of worship in this densely populated region. Two existing compressor stations in Stony Point and Southeast are being expanded and toxic emissions, as well as CO₂, will increase. Industry itself acknowledges that methane leakage from gas production, transmission and delivery is significant (up to 9%) and the U.N. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) reported that methane is 86 times more potent as a greenhouse gas than CO₂ over a 20-year timeframe.

New York is in a key geographical position, situated between the Marcellus Shale region and New England. Spectra Energy is not only proposing the AIM project, but it also has two additional expansions planned on the Algonquin line, the Atlantic Bridge and Access Northeast. The AIM and Atlantic Bridge projects are predicated on a greater need for "natural" gas in New England, but Spectra's website clearly shows that the gas will be exported to Canada through the Maritimes and Northeast pipeline which connects to the Algonquin in Massachusetts. There are two LNG (liquefied natural gas) export terminals in Nova Scotia, Canada slated to export the gas overseas. Therefore, domestic customers in New England who think they will be getting cheaper energy will find themselves in a bait and switch situation after they convert home heating and electric generation to "natural" gas. When the gas is exported, it will be sold on the global market for a higher price. Why should New York be the sacrifice zone for fracked gas so that the industry can generate greater profits by exporting the gas?

Renewable energy technology is moving forward quickly; therefore, it doesn't make sense to invest billions of dollars to build gas infrastructure that incentivizes fracking, exacerbates climate change and endangers the health and safety of the people living in the path of the gas infrastructure. The powerful grassroots movement that has opposed fracking in New York for the past five years must work just as hard to raise awareness among the citizens of New York and our elected officials about the risks and negative impacts from the build-out of gas infrastructure. New York can decide to forge a path as a renewable energy leader or it can be the superhighway for gas generation and transmission. Please join SAPE and other grassroots organizations that are working so hard to support a fossil-free New York.

We Can Ban Fracking, New Yorkers Pave the Way

Wenonah Hauter, Food & Water Watch, December 18, 2014

Fantastic news came from the state of New York this week when the Cuomo administration announced its decision to ban fracking in the state. This exciting decision is a tribute to everyone who has worked so hard in New York to protect the state from the ravages experienced elsewhere from fracking.

The decision in New York will have a ripple effect across the country and act to strengthen efforts against fracking nationwide. The story of how tens of thousands of fractivists fought and won in New York with their blood, sweat and tears is awe-inspiring and demonstrates that we should fight for what we want—not just the best that can be negotiated in a backroom deal or what others say is politically feasible. Instead we should work to change the political reality in order to win real improvements in people's lives and protect our fragile planet for future generations.

Here is the full story: On Wednesday, December 17, the Governor convened a cabinet meeting where Acting Health Commissioner Howard Zucker presented the findings of the Department of Health's review on fracking. He described the peer-reviewed studies showing that fracking contaminates air and water and harms health, and he highlighted that many of the long-term health effects are still unknown, as epidemiological studies have not been conducted. Commissioner Zucker ended his presentation by saying, "Would I live in a community that would allow fracking? The answer is no."

Then in this real-time drama, Joe Martens, the Commissioner of the Department of Environmental Conservation indicated the department would issue "legally binding findings to prohibit high volume hydraulic fracturing in New York." They will be included in the supplemental generic environmental impact study that will be released in the New Year, an approach that Governor Cuomo supports, and that will effectively ban fracking in New York.

This is particularly exciting because just three years ago, conventional wisdom in New York's mainstream environmental community held that fracking was inevitable



in New York and that strong regulation was the best we could hope for. But Food & Water Watch, Frack Action, Catskill Mountainkeeper, Water Defense, United for Action, Citizen Action of New York and several other organizations joined together to launch New Yorkers Against Fracking (NYAF) - with the audacious goal of winning a complete ban in the state of New York. For the next three years, thousands of people engaged in activities around the state, from massive demonstrations, to sending in comments to the Department of Environmental Conservation on the health risks of fracking. NYAF grew to over 250 national, state, and local groups.

For the last two years, it has been impossible for Governor Cuomo to go anywhere in the state without fractivists by the dozens, hundreds, or thousands rallying outside his appearances, delivering the clear message: ban fracking now. At his polling place this November, Cuomo recognized the movement as the most powerful protest movement in the state.

I am proud that Food & Water Watch was the first national organization to stand with the grassroots organizations and to call for a ban on fracking. This hard-won victory shows that we can win when we build political power. It also shows that we can win when we organize around a clear message and an unambiguous goal. It should inspire reflection among those mainstream environmental groups reluctant to take a strong stand against fracking or those who attempt to split the difference by supporting both a moratorium and stronger regulations at the same time. We need to be clear and uncompromising in calling for a ban on fracking and other extreme extraction practices.

Governor Cuomo heeded this call, and has positioned himself as a national leader in the movement to shift to an energy policy that is safe and based on efficiency and 100 percent renewable energy. New York is a bellwether state for fracking nationally, and is the first shale state to take such bold action against fracking. This decision has implications for other states considering fracking like Maryland, Pennsylvania, California and others.

In contrast to Cuomo's decision today, Governor of Maryland, Martin O'Malley recently released regulations for fracking in his state. The Obama Administration's Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has refused to reopen investigations on instances of water contamination from fracking. Governor Hickenlooper in Colorado continues to oppose even communities' ability to prevent fracking, Governor Brown in California continues to bury his head in the sand when it comes to the real health and environmental impacts of fracking, and Governor-Elect Wolf in Pennsylvania is floating a severance tax as a way for the state to make money off fracking, rather than taking on this dangerous practice.

Politicians with national influence or larger political aspirations should take note that support for fracking nationally has fallen, especially among Democrats and Independents, over the past few years. A PEW poll issued this November found that a 47 percent plurality of Americans, 59 percent of Democrats and 53 percent of Independents nationally oppose increased fracking. This ban in New York comes exactly one week after Congressman Mark Pocan and Congresswoman Jan Schakowsky introduced a bill to ban fracking on public lands, the strongest federal bill on fracking to date.

Algonquin Plan Poses Risks to Indian Point and Residents

Paul Blanch, Engineer

Spectra Energy plans to place a larger gas pipeline near Indian Point. The probability of a gas line failure is remote but is not zero. It is unconscionable and irresponsible to continue this project prior to a complete, independent risk analysis.

Nuclear power plants and natural gas transmission lines provide energy for homes and businesses. Due to the inherent hazards associated with these energy sources, the federal government “regulates” both. The proposed routing of the Algonquin natural gas pipeline near the Indian Point nuclear plant poses the risk that these hazards may team up to harm the community.

I speak as a professional engineer with more than 45 years of nuclear experience including formerly reporting directly to the Chief Nuclear Officer at Indian Point and an expert witness for the State of New York related to the re-licensing of Indian Point.

There are three existing natural gas transmission lines traversing the Indian Point site within 600 feet of vital structures. There has not been any publicly available analysis demonstrating the risks of these lines. The Nuclear Regulatory Commission has refused to provide this information under the guise of national security, yet has maintained that the “secret” analysis shows Indian Point is not at undue risk.

Failure of any of these lines could result in a total loss of cooling to the reactor cores and 40 years inventory of spent fuel. There are no provisions within the area to combat this event until valves are remotely closed from the pipeline company’s facility in Houston, Texas. In the meantime, the energy released from a ruptured line in one hour would exceed the energy released from one of the atomic bombs dropped on Japan in 1945.

Some of the possible consequences of a gas line fire/explosion to Indian Point include loss of power to the entire site, secondary fires from liquid fuel storage tanks, reactor core damage and melting, asphyxiation of site personnel, spent fuel radioactivity releases exceeding those of



Fukushima, and social/economic damages exceeding \$1 trillion.

Now Algonquin/Spectra wants to place yet another high-pressure 42-inch line also in the vicinity of Indian Point, doubling the existing capacity. According to the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC), “the proposed route would not pose any new hazard to the (Indian Point) facility.” There is no way FERC could make this determination without a complete risk analysis. And FERC’s Draft Environmental Impact Statement ignores damage prevention, emergency response and public awareness, which are federal Department of Transportation requirements.

Algonquin gas pipeline project sparks safety concerns

An independent study of a gas pipeline near a nuclear facility in another state concluded it represented an undue risk. The amount of gas flow and energy in that pipeline was less than 1/1000 of the Algonquin/Spectra project and the facility was located in an area with much lower population.

The probability of a gas line failure is remote but is not zero especially if terrorism is considered. This may possibly

be one of the most attractive targets in the nation.

The event would be aggravated by the decision of Spectra to not include any automatic gas termination valves and no means to combat the fire/explosion prior to gas flow termination. The gas lines are not designed to the most stringent safety standards as discussed in Department of Transportation (DOT) regulations. The only gas isolation valves are remotely controlled from Houston, Texas. It seems the community around Indian Point is protected against a gas pipeline rupture triggering a nuclear plant accident — unless a gas pipeline ruptures. That is unacceptable.

The State of New York and all of the impacted counties must demand an independent and transparent analysis be conducted by an independent engineering organization. The cost for this study should be borne by Spectra Energy.

It is unconscionable and irresponsible to continue this project prior to a complete, independent risk analysis. The potential consequences of this event are too devastating to the New York area and my home State of Connecticut not to design this new line to maximum safety standards and assess the risk.

“Cuban Five” at Heart of U.S.-Cuba Deal

By Marjorie Cohn, Friday, December 19, 2014

In the course of delivering his historic speech dramatically altering US Cuba policy, President Barack Obama briefly mentioned that the United States released three Cuban agents. These men are members of the “Cuban Five,” who were imprisoned for gathering information on U.S.-based Cuban exile groups planning terrorist actions against Cuba. Without their release, Cuba would never have freed Alan Gross. And Obama could not have undertaken what ten presidents before him refused to do: normalize relations between the United States and Cuba.

Fighting Terrorism Against Cuba

On June 8, 2001, Gerardo Hernandez, Ramon Labanino, Antonio Guerrero, Fernando Gonzalez and Rene Gonzalez were convicted of criminal charges, including conspiracy to commit espionage, and conspiracy to commit murder, in a trial in US district court in Miami. They were sentenced to four life terms and 75 years collectively.

In a 93-page decision, a three-judge panel of the Eleventh Circuit U.S. Court of Appeals unanimously reversed their convictions in 2005, because the anti-Cuba atmosphere in Miami, extensive publicity, and prosecutorial misconduct denied them the right to a fair trial. The decision of the three-judge panel was later overturned by a decision of all the Eleventh Circuit Judges, sitting en banc, so the convictions stood.

But the Cuban Five have steadfastly maintained their innocence and there has been a worldwide campaign to free them. In Cuba, the five men are considered national heroes.

Since the Cuban revolution in 1959, anti-Cuba terrorist organizations based in Miami have engaged in countless terrorist activities against Cuba and anyone who advocated normalization of relations between the United States and Cuba. Terrorist groups including Alpha 66, Commandos

F4, Cuban American National Foundation, Independent and Democratic Cuba, and Brothers to the Rescue, have operated with impunity in the United States – with the knowledge and support of the FBI and CIA.

One witness at the trial testified that Ruben Dario Lopez-Castro, who was associated with several anti-Castro organizations, and Orlando Bosch, who planted a bomb on a Cubana airliner in 1976, killing all 73 persons aboard, “planned to ship weapons into Cuba for an assassination attempt on [Fidel] Castro.”

The three-judge appellate panel noted, “Bosch has a long history of terrorist acts against Cuba, and prosecutions and convictions for terrorist-related activities in the United States and in other countries.” Luis Posada Carriles, the other man responsible for downing the Cuban airliner, has never been criminally prosecuted in the United States. Declassified FBI and CIA documents at the National Security Archive show that Posada Carriles was the mastermind of the airplane bombing.

Several terrorist acts in Havana were documented in the panel’s decision, including explosions at eight hotels and the Cuban airport. An Italian tourist was killed and people were injured. Posada Carriles has twice publicly admitted responsibility for these bombings.

In the face of this terrorism, the Cuban Five were gathering intelligence in Miami in order to prevent future terrorist acts against Cuba. The men peacefully infiltrated criminal exile groups. The Five



One of many U.S. actions that contributed to freeing the Cuban Five

turned over the results of their investigation to the FBI. But instead of working with Cuba to fight terrorism, the U.S. government arrested the five men.

Former high-ranking U.S. military and security officials testified that Cuba posed no military threat to the United States. Although none of the five men had any classified material in their possession or engaged in any acts to injure the United States, and there was no evidence linking any of them to Cuba’s shooting down of two small aircraft flown by Cuban exiles, the Cuban Five were nonetheless convicted of all charges.

A poll of Miami Cuban-Americans reflected “an attitude of a state of war... against Cuba” which had a “substantial impact on the rest of the Miami-Dade community” where the trial was held. Dr. Lisandro Perez, Director of the Cuban Research Institute, concluded, “the possibility of selecting twelve citizens of Miami-Dade County who can be impartial in a case involving acknowledged agents of the Cuban government is virtually zero.”

The appellate panel concluded: “Here, a new trial was mandated by the perfect storm created when the surge of pervasive

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National Network on Cuba Statement on the Cuban Five

December 17, 2014

The National Network on Cuba (NNOC) is overjoyed that the 3 remaining members of the Cuban 5 have been released from United States prisons and have returned to their families and homeland. The NNOC has proudly joined people around the world in demanding the release of the 5 for the 16 years of their unjust imprisonment.

We applaud the efforts and share the happiness of each person who participated in a demonstration demanding freedom

for the 5, who attended an educational event, who raised the issue in their communities, who called and wrote to elected officials, who wore a “free the five” button. We especially share the happiness of the families of the 5 and of the Cuban people who never rested in their fight for this long overdue victory.

The recent focus on Cuba including today’s release of the Five, the upcoming Summit of the Americas, exposure

of USAID’s nefarious efforts to subvert Cuban society, and the Cuban medical missions fighting Ebola, present an opportunity for all of us committed to Cuban solidarity. We must now increase the demands that all aspects of the blockade be lifted, that Cuba be removed from the list of state sponsors of terrorism, and that the Cuban right to self-determination and sovereignty be respected.

Volvieron! (Returned!)

South Africa’s National Union of Mineworkers Statement on Release of the Cuban Five

December 19, 2014

The National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) welcomes the decision of U.S. President Barack Obama to release the remaining three members of the Cuban Five, Gerardo Hernández, Antonio Guerrero and Ramón Labañino who were wrongfully sentenced to life imprisonment in the U.S.

The NUM is thrilled that after long and

difficult years in prison the last three of the Cuban Five are finally set free. The NUM was in solidarity with other progressive forces across the world who fought hard for the release of the Cuban Five.

Obama’s decision to release three of the Cuban five and to normalize relations with Cuba is courageous, brave and necessary.

The release of American contractor Alan Gross from a Cuban prison is also sign of a renewed change in US and Cuba diplomatic relations.

We hope this will lead to a formal end to the U.S. trade embargo on Cuba, which will significantly open up relations between the two countries and allow travelers and trade to flow relatively freely.

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community sentiment, and extensive publicity both before and during the trial, merged with the improper prosecutorial references.” Nevertheless, the five men never received a new trial.

Fernando Gonzales and Rene Gonzales were released and returned to Cuba after serving most of their 15-year sentences. Hernandez was serving two life sentences. Labanino and Guerrero had a few years left on their sentences. The latter three men were released as part of the historic deal.

The Door Is Now Open

In his speech, Obama mentioned the hypocrisy of the U.S. refusal to recognize Cuba while we enjoy normalized relations with Communist China and North Korea. He announced several other new measures designed to normalize relations between the United States and Cuba.

But Obama did not lift the U.S. blockade of Cuba, which consists of economic

sanctions against Cuba and restrictions on Cuban travel and commerce. Every year for 23 consecutive years, the United Nations General Assembly has called on the United States to lift the blockade, which has cost Cuba in excess of \$1 trillion.

The U.S. trade embargo of Cuba was initiated during the Cold War by President Dwight D. Eisenhower in response to a 1960 memo written by a senior State Department official. The memo proposed “a line of action that makes the greatest inroads in denying money and supplies to Cuba, to decrease monetary and real wages, to bring about hunger, desperation and the overthrow of the [Castro] government.” As Obama stated, that strategy has been a failure.

During the Clinton administration, Congress passed the Helms-Burton Act, which tightened the blockade. Obama promised to try to work with Congress to repeal this legislation.

Because of the significance of the Cuban

exile community in Miami, and the strategic importance of Florida in U.S. elections, no U.S. president has dared to normalize relations with Cuba. As Alice Walker wrote in *The Sweet Abyss*, “Many of our leaders seem to view Florida’s Cuban conservatives, including the assassins and terrorists among them, as People Who Vote.” Obama has taken a courageous step in shifting U.S. policy toward Cuba.

In their simultaneous speeches today, both Obama and Cuban President Raul Castro thanked Pope Francis for his efforts in helping to engineer the historic deal. CNN reported that bells were ringing in churches all over Havana. This is a wonderful day indeed.

Marjorie Cohn is a professor at Thomas Jefferson School of Law, deputy secretary general of the International Association of Democratic Lawyers, and a former president of the National Lawyers Guild .

Cuba and the United States Renew Diplomatic Relations

Full Text of the Speech by Cuban President Raul Castro

(Cuban President Raul Castro addressed the nation December 17 in a broadcast on radio and television on the recent developments in the Cuba-U.S. relations. The full text of the speech by President Raul Castro is reproduced below.)

* * *

Fellow countrymen,

Since my election as President of the State Council and Council of Ministers I have reiterated in many occasions our willingness to hold a respectful dialogue with

the United States on the basis of sovereign equality, in order to deal reciprocally with a wide variety of topics without detriment to the national Independence and self-determination of our people.

This stance was conveyed to the US. Government both publicly and privately by Comrade Fidel on several occasions during our long standing struggle, stating the willingness to discuss and solve our differences without renouncing any of our principles.

The heroic Cuban people, in the wake of serious dangers, aggressions, adversities and sacrifices has proven to be faithful and will continue to be faithful to our ideals of independence and social justice. Strongly united throughout these 56 years of Revolution, we have kept our unswerving loyalty to those who died in defense of our principles since the beginning of our independence wars in 1868.

Today, despite the difficulties, we have embarked on the task of updating our economic model in order to build a prosperous and sustainable Socialism.

As a result of a dialogue at the highest level, which included a phone conversation I had yesterday with President Obama, we have been able to make headway in the solution of some topics of mutual interest for both nations.

As Fidel promised on June 2001, when



President Raul Castro, right, greets three returning members of Cuban Five

he said: "They shall return!" Gerardo, Ramon, and Antonio have arrived today to our homeland.

The enormous joy of their families and of all our people, who have relentlessly fought for this goal, is shared by hundreds of solidarity committees and groups, governments, parliaments, organizations, institutions, and personalities, who for the last sixteen years have made tireless efforts demanding their release. We convey our deepest gratitude and commitment to all of them.

President Obama's decision deserves the respect and acknowledgement of our people.

I wish to thank and acknowledge the support of the Vatican, most particularly the support of Pope Francisco in the efforts for improving relations between Cuba and the United States. I also want to thank the Government of Canada for facilitating the high-level dialogue between the two countries.

In turn, we have decided to release and send back to the United States a spy of Cuban origin who was working for that nation.

On the other hand, and for humanitarian reasons, today we have also sent the American citizen Alan Gross back to his country.

Unilaterally, as has always been our practice, and in strict compliance with

the provisions of our legal system, the concerned prisoners have received legal benefits, including the release of those persons that the Government of the United States had conveyed their interest in.

We have also agreed to renew diplomatic relations.

This in no way means that the heart of the matter has been solved. The economic, commercial, and financial blockade, which causes enormous human and economic damages to our country, must cease.

Though the blockade has been codified into law, the President of the United States has the executive authority to modify its implementation.

We propose to the Government of the United States the adoption of mutual steps to improve the bilateral atmosphere and advance towards normalization of relations between our two countries, based on the principles of International Law and the United Nations Charter.

Cuba reiterates its willingness to cooperate in multilateral bodies, such as the United Nations.

While acknowledging our profound differences, particularly on issues related to national sovereignty, democracy, human rights and foreign policy, I reaffirm our willingness to dialogue on all these issues.

I call upon the Government of the United States to remove the obstacles hindering or restricting ties between peoples, families, and citizens of both countries, particularly restrictions on traveling, direct post services, and telecommunications.

The progress made in our exchanges proves that it is possible to find solutions to many problems.

As we have reiterated, we must learn the art of coexisting with our differences in a civilized manner.

We will continue talking about these important issues at a later date.

Thank you.

Tremendous Victory! The Cuban 5 Are Free!

On December 17, after 16 years of unjust and false imprisonment, the U.S. released the final three members of the Cuban 5: Gerardo Hernández, Ramón Labañino and Antonio Guerrero, who were welcomed home in Cuba. Two other members had been released earlier and were already in Cuba. The Five reunited and again affirmed their commitment to the fight against terrorism and in defense of the Cuban revolution.

The Cuban Five were anti-terrorist fighters. They were in the U.S. striving to prevent more terrorist attacks against Cuba, which were being organized and launched from Florida. The U.S., far from stopping such terrorism, protected those involved in the attacks, like Louis Posada, while arresting and charging the Cuban Five. The false nature of the charges can be seen in the fact that the U.S. government paid journalists to plant false stories and whip up fear about the Five. It was also shown in the 93-page decision by a three-judge panel of the Eleventh Circuit U.S. Court of Appeals. The judges unanimously reversed the convictions of the Five in 2005, saying prosecutorial misconduct, the anti-Cuba atmosphere in

Miami and extensive publicity and denied them the right to a fair trial. While this ruling was later overturned, it stood as a clear indictment of the government and its unjust imprisonment of the Five.

People and organizations in the U.S. and the world over demanded the release of the Five and worked long and hard to secure their freedom. The Cuban government was also relentless, calling on the U.S. to negotiate for their release and finally succeeding in bringing the U.S. to the table. The release of the Five and development of diplomatic relations with Cuba is a positive step. To develop these relations further, the U.S. must end the criminal blockade of Cuba that has caused tremendous economic losses and suffering for the Cuban people. Relations of mutual



Cuban Five Together in Cuba

respect and benefit are in order now!

Buffalo Forum extends its congratulations to the Cuban five and their families, to all the Cuban people and to their leadership, Commanders of the Revolution Fidel Castro Ruz and Raul Castro Ruz. We congratulate all the people and organizations in the U.S. and worldwide who worked hard for this victory and who now join in calling for an end to the blockade. Congratulations to all on this great victory!

PALESTINIAN PRISONER SOLIDARITY NETWORK

Samidoun Congratulates the Cuban People: The Five are Free!

December 17, 2014

Samidoun Palestinian Prisoner Solidarity Network sends its hearty congratulations to the people of Cuba, and to Gerardo Hernandez, Ramon Labanino, and Antonio Guerrero and their families on the occasion of the release of the final three of the five Cuban political prisoners held in U.S. jails for sixteen years.

The Cuban political prisoners were freed today in a prisoner exchange with the Cuban government for USAID agent Alan Gross. Two other Cuban political prisoners – who together with Gerardo, Ramon and Antonio made up the Cuban Five – Fernando González and René González, were released earlier from U.S. jails.

The Cuban Five came to the United States in order to protect Cubans from

violent attacks by private right-wing militant groups based in the United States and supported by U.S. imperialism. Their case, of five people imprisoned in the heart of U.S. imperialist jails for seeking to defend their country from attacks from U.S. soil, inspired fighters for justice around the world, including many activists, advocates and lawyers within the United States, who took to the streets, protested, struggled in the courtrooms, marched, rallied and built a movement to demand freedom for the five Cuban political prisoners in U.S. jails.

Today, the release of the Five is a true victory for the Cuban people and all who struggled for justice in the case of the Five. Just as we celebrate when every Palestinian political prisoner is freed, we celebrate

today with the Cuban people that their own prisoners today will join their compatriots in their homeland as free people.

We celebrate and welcome today Antonio, Gerardo and Ramon! We also join in the call to free all of the political prisoners held in U.S. jails, including Mumia Abu Jamal, Leonard Peltier, Oscar Lopez Rivera, Norberto Gonzalez Claudio, Ricardo Palmera, the political prisoners of the Black Liberation Movement, and the Palestinian political prisoners in U.S. jails, including the Holy Land 5 – and to free the prisoners around the world who are held in the interests of U.S. imperialism, domination and hegemony and those of its allies, including every Palestinian prisoner in Israeli jails.