



Struggle-La-Lucha.org

Open letter to gun rights supporters coming to Richmond, Va., on Jan. 20

written by Phil Wilayto
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Community members in Richmond, Va., protest the police murder of Marcus-David Peters, a Black man, in 2018.

My name is Phil Wilayto, and I'm the editor of The Virginia Defender, a community newspaper based here in Richmond. We cover issues of interest to working-class folks from all communities.

I'm also a gun owner who's opposed to some of the laws being proposed in the 2020 General Assembly.

And I'm a Richmonder who's concerned about what might happen in my town on Monday.

The Virginia Citizens Defense League [VCDL], the organization that has called for lobbying and a rally on Jan. 20 at Capitol Square, says that as many as 50,000 people may show up. They wanted to come armed — Virginia is an open-carry state — but Gov. Ralph Northam has declared a state of emergency and banned civilians from carrying firearms on the Capitol grounds.

Nobody knows just what to expect, and tensions are running high. Some normally open downtown businesses plan to close on Monday. Some non-gun lobbying groups have cancelled their plans to come to Richmond. Virginia Commonwealth University is advising its more than 31,000 students to stay away from the downtown area. The VCU Health System's emergency room has tripled its staff to be prepared for possible mass casualties. And the cops are gearing up for trouble.

Some liberals view all gun rights activists as racist, right-wing yahoos, lumping them in with the extremist organizations that try to infiltrate the gun rights movement for recruitment purposes. And the FBI arrests on Jan. 16 of three neo-Nazis who supposedly put together a homemade machine gun and bought more than 1,500 rounds of ammo as part of their plans to join the Richmond rally didn't do much to calm anyone's nerves. We've heard rumors that white supremacist organizations like the Proud Boys and the League of the South are coming to Richmond. These kinds of thugs are not your friends. Far from it.

I believe that people have a right to own guns: for sport, for hunting, for self-defense. I agree that guns don't kill people, people kill people — although they often do it with guns. And that's what scares non-gun owners.

In 2017, the most recent year for which there are figures, nearly 40,000 people died from gun-related injuries in this country. More than half the deaths were actually suicides, which raises the question if those people would have killed themselves if they hadn't had a gun at hand.

Then there are the senseless killings by mostly young men in poor city communities. We lost 66 people to homicides last year here in Richmond. So there are good reasons why some people think there are too many guns in too many hands.

But it's also true that you could ban all the guns in this country and we would still have people killing people. The real reason for the mass shootings and the endless fatal individual killings is that this society is addicted to violence.

It's true. We promote it in our movies, TV shows and video games. Our police departments are armed to the teeth with "surplus" military equipment. We make violence the basis of our foreign policy. This country was born in violence against Indigenous and enslaved people, and that culture of violence has continued to define us as a country. Banning guns does nothing to address that.

What I'm really worried about is that, with the liberal Democrats acting like anyone who owns a gun is suspect, the average person who has a gun for legitimate reasons will be more open to right-wing arguments and possible recruitment. That would be a disaster for all working people.

You have to understand that, while you might see your movement as just against government overreach, it can come across as something else altogether. The idea that thousands — maybe tens of thousands — of armed, mostly white men are coming to Richmond on Monday is not a good "optic," as they say. It sets off deep historical memories.

I know the VCDL states on its website that, "We are not there to push any other agenda. Our total focus is on protecting our right to keep and bear (sic) arms. Period. This is not about flags, statues, history, etc. Just guns." We appreciate that. People with very different political views on other issues can still agree that people have the right to self-defense.

Of course, picking Jan. 20 as a gun rights lobby day is already a pretty bad optic. It's the federal holiday honoring the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., a man of peace brought down by a gun. The VCDL might have picked a better day.

Plus, it means the schools are out, and there may be a lot of kids in the area.

And with Northam banning civilians from having guns on the Capitol grounds, that means thousands of armed people roaming the downtown area. And this includes some openly right-wing groups that have a whole other agenda.

I'd like to point out here that the right to self-defense is not a "white" issue. The old Black Panther Party stood for the right to armed self-defense against police brutality. The Southern-based Deacons for Defense provided armed security for many civil rights events. And today, people who live in crime-plagued neighborhoods have a legitimate interest in being able to protect themselves and their families. And if unreasonable gun laws are passed, they're likely to be enforced in the same racially discriminatory ways as other laws already are.

In other words, there are other possible allies out there. So there are all kinds of reasons to make sure your movement isn't hijacked by extremist groups promoting division and hatred.

I think most gun owners don't hold grudges against other people because of their race, creed or color. They just want to be able to protect themselves and their families, and they have a right to do this without unreasonable interference from the government.

But if this movement is going to be successful, it needs to consciously exclude those right-wing elements that would attempt to infiltrate this movement and subvert it for their own twisted agendas.

People who respect Adolf Hitler will never respect democracy. They're not our

friends. In fact, they're our enemies. And they should have no place in a real gun-ownership movement.

So welcome to Richmond. Be safe, watch each others' backs and be sensitive to the people who live here. They'll be here long after you're gone.

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