

An antiwar message is raised at Norfolk's annual NATO parade

written by Phil Wilayto
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The North American Treaty Organization, or NATO, has two Strategic Commands – one in Belgium, the other in Norfolk, Virginia. And every year Norfolk holds a NATO Festival, complete with a parade, to honor the U.S-led military alliance that supported Portugal in its wars against African anti-colonial liberation movements; led the destruction of Libya and the former Yugoslavia; played leading roles in the

U.S. wars in Iraq and Afghanistan; and helped provoke the present war in Ukraine by expanding eastward to the very borders of Russia.

This year, the festival took place on Earth Day – totally ironic, since militaries are the greatest polluters on the planet. But along with the thousands who came out to watch the parade was a small band of antiwar activists holding a bright yellow 5-foot by 10-foot canvas banner that read “Fight Poverty, Racism + Global Warming, not NATO’s Wars!”

The protest was sponsored by the Hampton Roads Coalition for Peace & Planet and endorsed by Norfolk Catholic Worker, the Virginia Defenders for Freedom, Justice & Equality and the Odessa Solidarity Campaign, which has been supporting the antifascist people of Ukraine since 2016.

As the antiwar activists set up along the parade route, just down from the official reviewing stand, they wondered what kind of reaction they might get from those who had come out to view the parade. After all, Norfolk has one of the largest concentrations of military bases in the world, including the largest naval base, and the military is a major economic engine in this port city of 235,000 people, more than 10 percent of whom are military veterans. But the city also is majority people of color, with a poverty rate of 17.4 percent, so there was reason to think the banner’s message might have some chance of resonating with the public.

As it turned out, there was not one hostile comment – or gesture – during the entire hour-and-a-half parade. What was even more interesting was the number of positive responses, both from the onlookers and the parade participants themselves.

Each of NATO’s 31 member countries had a contingent in the parade, complete with a float, but a large number of the marchers were members of high school bands drawn from states as far away as Pennsylvania. There were lots of curious stares and even some smiles from these young people.

When the contingent from Spain marched by and one enthusiastic antiwar protester shouted out, “No a la guerra” – no to the war, a woman leading the young marchers turned and shouted back, “No to war!” – twice.

Several onlookers gave the thumbs-up sign. One young man walked in front of the banner, smiling and holding his hands to make the heart sign.

So the protest concluded without incident. It would have been good to have had more people, but it was important that, in the midst of the only parade in the U.S. honoring NATO, which with the U.S. is carrying out a devastating proxy war against Russia, that there were voices of opposition.

The protest was also important because it came just four days after federal indictments were issued against members of the African People’s Socialist Party, accusing them of acting as agents for the Russian government because the party and its Uhuru Movement has strongly opposed U.S. support for Ukraine in the war with Russia. The day before the protest, the Odessa Solidarity Campaign, a project of the Virginia Defenders, had issued a statement condemning the attack on the APSP. The protest was another sign that antiwar activists would not be intimidated and would continue to speak out against the roles of the U.S. military and NATO around the world, and particularly in Ukraine.

To read the OSC statement, see <https://odessasolidaritycampaign.org>.

To read the leaflet passed out at the NATO protest, see [LEAFLET](#).

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