



News from the Grassroots

November 2022 Issue 120

Virginia Organizing has a new chairperson!

We're proud to announce that Lily Hungarland became the new chairperson of the State Governing Board this month. Lily joined Virginia Organizing as an intern with the Danville chapter while she was still in high school. She joined the board soon after and has participated in the Danville, Charlottesville, Lynchburg, and Richmond chapters.

Lily has worked on many campaigns, including Restoration of Rights, Education, Women's Issues, and Housing. She is a public school teacher in the Richmond area. Thank you for your leadership and dedication, Lily!



We also want to express our deepest gratitude to Ladelle McWhorter who has been chairperson for the last seven years. Del has been involved with Virginia Organizing from the beginning. Fortunately, she will remain on the board.

A Win for Workers

The Fredericksburg Chapter and the Custodial Workers of the Stafford Schools achieved a victory on November 8 by getting the Stafford County School Board to include their list of demands in the contract they made with a new company that will provide custodial services.

Virginia Organizing and workers delivered a list of demands to the School Board during its public meeting in September. They wanted an increase in the minimum wage for custodians to \$15 per hour—an increase of \$4 (36%) over the minimum they currently earn. They also demanded that the workers have paid time off, including holidays and other leave, and health, dental, and vision benefits. On November 8, the Board agreed to include these requirements in their contract.



Dismantling Racism

After three years, Virginia Organizing held our three-day in-person Dismantling Racism Workshop over the weekend! 39 people participated, including our wonderful Spanish interpreters.

The group was made up of leaders, staff, and board members from Wise County in Southwest to Suffolk on the coast and many places in between.

Some members have lived in Virginia all their lives. Others moved here recently. Several members originally came from Latin America.

Virginia Organizing has been offering this workshop for decades. Over the course of the weekend, participants begin by discussing their personal experiences with racism. Then they start to explore the definitions of personal, cultural, and institutional racism, and even practice a role play where they see the concrete every day actions that perpetuate it.

They separate into a caucus of people of color and a white caucus during one session. After that meeting, the white caucus produces a list of commitments to work to dismantle racism going forward.

They enjoy a night of cultural sharing where people offer music, dancing, stories, and other meaningful gifts. Finally, chapters meet to discuss actions they can take in their communities.

We also want to give a big shout out to Andrae Hash and Dan Idezou of the Christiansburg Institute for co-facilitation and a wonderful presentation about the history of the institute.





Wytheville Candidate Forum

The Wythe County Chapter's candidate forum was attended by about 60 people on November 3.

Wytheville Town Council candidates Mark Bloomfield, Candice Johnson, and Cathy Patterson attended.

9th District candidate Taysha DeV Vaughan also answered questions from the audience. Rep. Morgan Griffith was invited but did not reply.

Featured Community Partner | The Clinch Coalition

Nigerian afrobeat legend Fela Kuti had a hit song about water, entitled *Water No Get Enemy*. If it was easier to sing along to it might be an anthem for today's water protectors here in the US, groups like The Clinch Coalition (TCC) right here in Southwest Virginia. The crux of the lyrics is that we all depend on water to live and thrive. But what do we do when the very thing we depend on is a threat to healthy communities.



The people who work with The Clinch Coalition, like Sharon Fisher, know this as much as anyone who lives in the sacrifice zone that is Appalachian coal country. Sharon comes from five generations of coal miners and her father was a member of the United Mine Workers of America. "He instilled in me to stand up for what you believe in and not to be intimidated by those in power," she says. Her own experiences of the outdoors, and the legacy she received from her father, led her to seek out environmental justice work after retiring. That is when she found TCC. The Clinch Coalition name refers to the Clinch Ranger District of the Jefferson National Forest, which is a tributary to the biodiverse Clinch River. TCC's mission is to protect and preserve the forest, watersheds and wildlife in their region. TCC organized in 1998 to resist and mitigate the effects of logging, which had contributed to flooding and causing the death of an elderly man. More recently, they have been calling attention to damage caused to stream beds by irresponsible use of ATV trails that were formed to bring economic development to surrounding former coal towns.

And like her father, Sharon has found her colleagues at TCC are not intimidated by those in power. TCC has learned over the years that environmental advocacy can be threatening to people who have an interest in allowing environmental destruction to remain unchecked. TCC members have had their homes threatened, dealt with online bullying, and faced lawsuits. In spite of the threats, they continue to document environmental damage and have created a River Watch group to monitor water quality and challenge regulatory agencies for protection of their wetlands, streams, and rivers.

Sadly, Sharon doesn't envision a future when they can rest. Even with environmental issues directly affecting them, "most people just want to live their lives," she says. "It is hard to sustain action against those in power." It is the dedication of the small group of

volunteers and staff at TCC that gives Sharon energy and hope, the ones who persist even when things get exhausting, even in the face of threats.

"We need elected officials who understand how the devastating effects of over a century of extractive industries have impacted the people and the land," Sharon says. "I am encouraged with the recent coalescing of local environmental organizations to work together to reach out, educate, and engage community members."

It is small, local environmental justice organizations like The Clinch Coalition, operating deep inside our sacrifice zones, who are the most easily overlooked but who are the most critical to the fight. These are the ones who are on the front lines, and they deserve all of our support, regardless of where we are, because what impacts them first will impact us all.

Giving Thanks

I can't tell you how much I appreciate all of our members and the work you do to make Virginia a more just and equitable place to live.

Our State Governing Board is an amazing group of experienced leaders who understand how to bring people together and find strategic ways to win issue campaigns.

Our organizing could not happen without our chapter leaders who speak out in their communities about what they want to see changed. And if you contacted a decision-maker this year, attended a rally or a workshop, or went to a chapter event, you also took action to bring change.

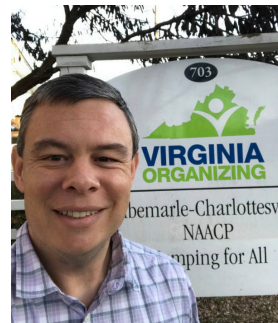
We have 18 cities and counties where we organize this year and nearly 50 partner groups we administer. Our organizers, administrative staff, and interns work with dedication to our goals and it shows.

I'm thankful, too, for the volunteers who hand-write thank you cards and help us send mailings and enter data. This year UVA's service fraternity Alpha Phi Omega helped us a lot. They even pulled weeds outside the office building!

I'm especially thankful for our donors. You make all of this great work possible.

Thank you for everything that you do, and for your radical generosity,

Brian Johns
Executive Director



Local Chapters and Areas Served:

Charlottesville/Albemarle County, Danville, Eastern Shore, Harrisonburg/Rockingham County, Fredericksburg Area, Lee County, Lynchburg, Martinsville/Henry County, New River Valley, Newport News/Hampton, Norfolk, Portsmouth, Richmond Area, Suffolk, Washington County, Waynesboro, Wise County, Wythe County

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