

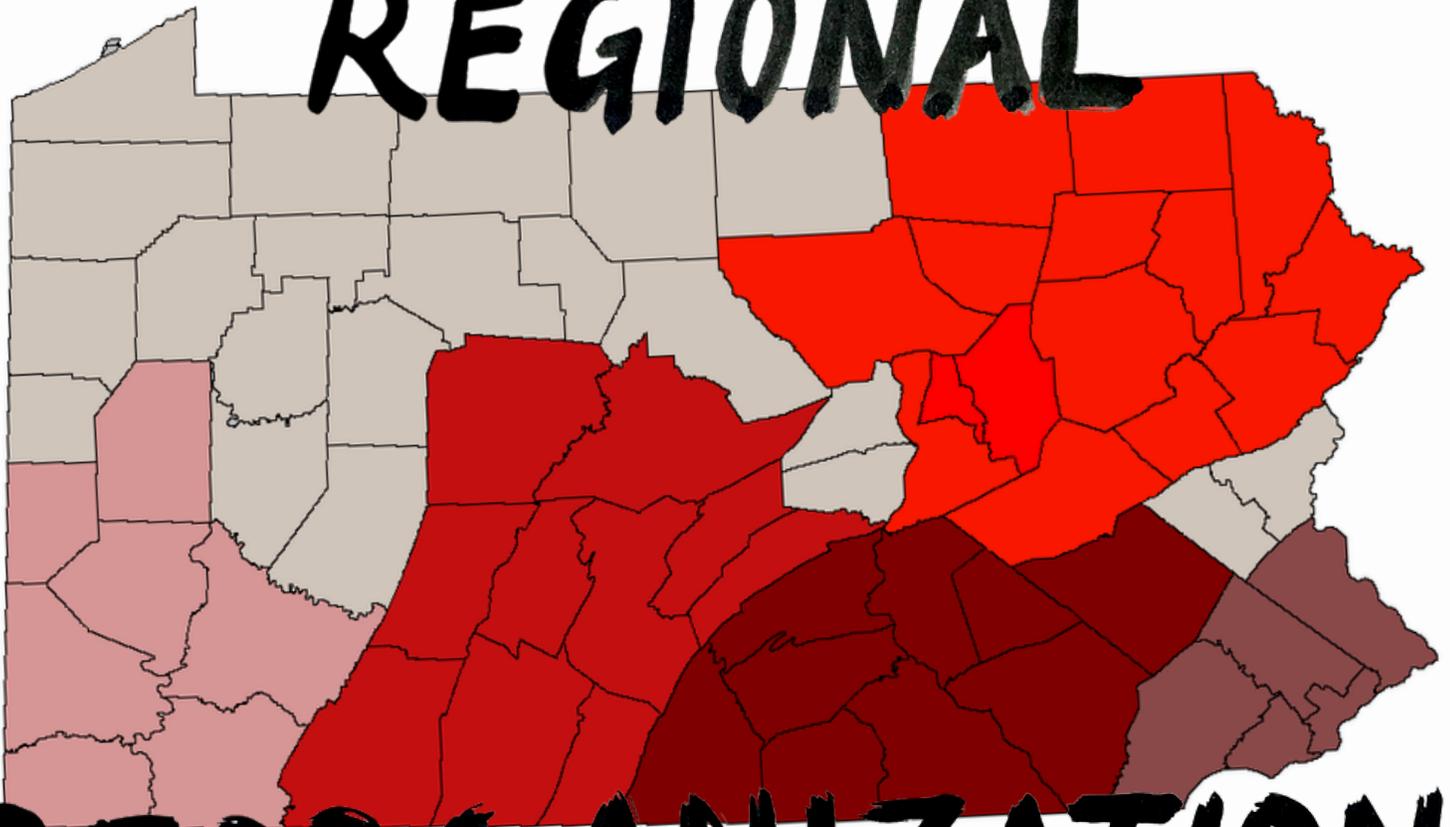


THE KEYSTONE

A BIENNIAL NEWSLETTER
PUT PEOPLE FIRST! PENNSYLVANIA

Spring/Summer
2022

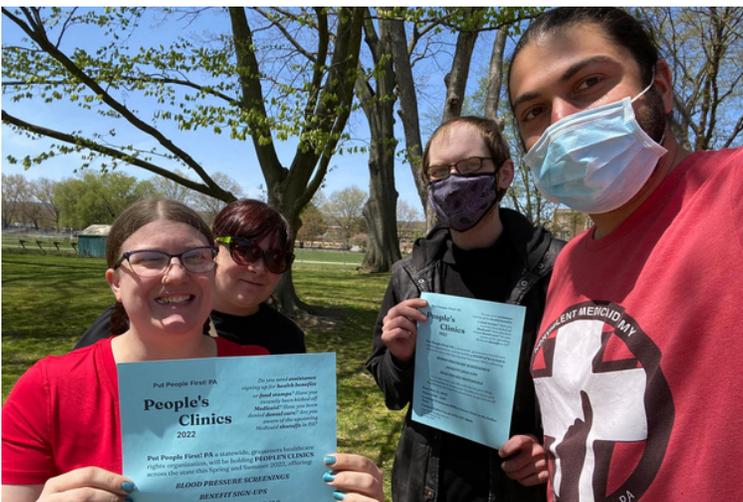
REGIONAL



REORGANIZATION

2022

This year Put People First! PA became regionally reorganized in order to meet more of our base! Read inside about our 2022 Campaign Plan and our refocus on base building and pivot towards becoming political centers of gravity. **Read more on page 16.**



Clockwise, from top left: PPF-PA co-founder **Nijmie Dzurinko** helps to lead a chant at the Poor People's Campaign (PPC) march in Philadelphia in April 2022; **Harrison Farina**, co-coordinator of the Southeast PA HRC, at a protest against hospital closures in May 2022; **Jacob Butterly** at the PPC MORE Tour stop in Philadelphia; members of the **Northeast PA HRC** pictured putting up flyers for their People's Clinic in May 2022; members of PPF-PA's **Steering Committee** pictured at the Winter Steering Committee Retreat in February 2022.



Poor People's Campaign

A National Call for Moral Revival

MASS POOR PEOPLE'S & LOW-WAGE WORKERS' ASSEMBLY AND MORAL MARCH ON WASHINGTON AND TO THE POLLS

June 18th, 2022

poorpeoplescampaign.org/june18

Photo credit to Stephen Pavey

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WHO ARE WE?

Put People First! PA gives voice to everyday people who are struggling to meet our basic needs. We define our basic needs as things we need to live healthy and fulfilling lives — things like education, housing, health care, jobs with living wages, food, and a healthy environment.

We're a membership organization made up mostly of people who know from our life experience that poor and working people need to unite and have a voice.

We're building, county by county, all across Pennsylvania. We're urban and rural. We're multiracial. We're politically independent. Until we unite, we don't have the power to change things.

PPF-PA's Legislative Team

The PPF-PA Legislative team has come a long way since its beginnings. Formed in April 2021, this team was created to build and guide our legislative strategy in a politically independent way. We develop guidance for legislative visits, offer assistance to Healthcare Rights Committees (HRCs), provide a central location to track all of our visits, and create statewide events to advance PPF-PA's legislative agenda. During the first couple of months within the team we reviewed and discussed the procedures for legislative visits put in place by Campaign team in preceding years: how to set up appointments with legislators, how to create an agenda, how to create lawmaker briefs, how to enlist and assign roles to other PPF-PA members for legislative meeting participation, and how to practice for and lead a legislative meeting in a way that prevents lawmakers from taking over the agenda. We also developed a standardized protocol to debrief and report back on the visits.

Legislative visits are a huge and very important part of the work coordinated by the PPF-PA Legislative team. Following a visit, we look at the debriefs from those who made the visit and discuss lawmakers' responses to our healthcare as a human right stand, the resonance of our personal healthcare stories, and the "intelligence" we glean from legislators through our prepared questions or from their volunteering information without prompting. Elected officials and/or their participating staff members are invited to share their position on healthcare as a human right and their healthcare stories too—very insightful information that can create a personal connection. We also note whether the lawmaker was willing to commit to supporting and advocating to other elected officials for a Public Healthcare Advocate (PHA) bill. The Legislative team, in conjunction with the Campaign team and HRCs doing legislative

visits, have accomplished many important goals. Since 2019, HRCs have met with about 52 legislators and played a role in getting the PHA bill introduced to the PA House in September 2021. We also collectively hosted a successful PHA Town Hall in November 2021, attended by many members, some partners, and several legislators' staff members. Our focus during the Spring has been on the PHA Advocacy Day in Harrisburg on April 11, when we met with members of the House Health and Appropriations committees and the Senate Health and Human Services and Appropriations Committees.

The work of the Legislative team is closely integrated with that of other teams. While Base building team is helping to hone the skills of PPF-PA members in organizing conversations that will be used at our People's Clinics, Projects of Survival (PROS) team is helping members learn to sign people up for benefits at those same clinics, and Legislative team is helping members meet with key legislators in the same districts where the People's Clinics will occur. All these activities will help strengthen relationships with constituents within districts of lawmakers we have not yet visited and eventually with the lawmakers themselves.

As the Legislative team developed strategies to help PPF-PA move toward its legislative goals, in the process the team also helped its members to develop leadership. Here are some comments from members about their experience in our project: Anita (SEPA HRC) explains that communication is key to the organization and communicating effectively will successfully execute coordinating various individuals to move as a collective for legislative visits. She has been connecting with her HRC members as well as Legislative team members, building familiarity with whom to talk to and how to clearly communicate our direction. Anita says, "I used to loathe phone calls but they are a key tool in our work on the Legislative team, and I'm much more comfortable making and receiving phone calls. As our connections in the team deepen, and as familiarity with our tool kit like phones, documents, and the landscape we're on, I believe the conditions for further development will continue."



Members from the former Montgomery County Healthcare Rights Committee met with Sen. Amanda Cappelletti (D) to discuss PPF-PA's Public Healthcare Advocate bill in 2021.

Andrew (SEPA HRC) has learned that talking to lawmakers is challenging because there are many layers to penetrate, which makes a personal connection elusive. They recognize those obstacles as corporate interests and ulterior motives. It is a completely opposite experience from talking to members of our class, who are relatable. Making a connection with our class is more direct because we share the same life circumstances in striving to meet our basic needs. Andrew also reflected on how they have grown over the past year in their involvement with the Legislative team. They feel that they've learned to go beyond their comfort level when they need to reach out to other PPF-PA members to ask them to set up appointments with their elected officials and to attend legislative meetings. Calling those elected officials and asking for an appointment is also a little unsettling, but Andrew is leaning into it.

Benita (SWPA HRC) noticed that through the past year of being on the Legislative team, she has been able to walk the talk of what she's learned about organizing the poor and dispossessed—a praxis, one might say. Helping to lead a legislative meeting is about holding powerholders accountable. We are informing them of how their constituents struggle to attain their human right to healthcare. We provide lawmakers with a solution to Pennsylvanians facing Goliath healthcare profiteers, namely, supporting and passing a strong Public Healthcare Advocate bill. Also, struggling with other PPF-PA members

and hearing about their experiences has highlighted how political independence provides the courage to talk to elected officials. Their party affiliation must be completely divorced from our commitment to our class. Communicating in human terms instead of partisan language opens doors.

Jessica (NEPA HRC) remembered how Nijmie and others respond to challenges with restraint, steadiness, and wisdom—like when our Public Healthcare Advocate Bill was introduced unexpectedly before gaining bi-partisan support for it. Jessica also emphasized how vital political independence is when we can be waylaid or side tracked. She added, “We have to be as savvy as our enemy.”

Being a part of the Legislative team continues to be an evolving learning process as team members and other PPF-PA members struggle together and gain experience. As all PPF-PA members know, when we set goals and accomplish them, we grow in confidence, solidarity, and power—where the magic happens. Our collective Legislative team project—as with all the work of the PPF-PA community—requires dedication to study, possession of a class consciousness and analysis, and a commitment to tearing down those mental fortresses Willie Baptist teaches us about, as we develop political independence and love for and loyalty to our class. As we co-create and organize together we become political centers of gravity, so that we can kill the system before it kills us. Forward together. Not one step back! 🖤



The Nonviolent Medicaid Army: Our growing Movement

Build the Nonviolent Medicaid Army is a pillar of Campaign Plan 2022. Put People First! PA is a founding organization of and helping to lead the National Nonviolent Medicaid Army (NVMA). The NVMA is a growing force of poor and dispossessed people and organizations using healthcare as a rallying point for the working class. Nationally, the Nonviolent Medicaid Army serves to strengthen the organized forces of the poor and dispossessed alongside the Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival.

“As millions more in this country are thrown into the ranks of the unemployed or underemployed, the demand for Medicaid is skyrocketing, and healthcare will continue to be one of the top concerns on the minds of the American people. The Nonviolent Medicaid Army centers the leading social force—the poor and dispossessed—in the fight for healthcare as a human right, a revolutionary demand in the context of capitalism and a system that seeks to profit off of our pain, sickness and death.” (PPF-PA 2022 Campaign Plan)

Any organization of the poor and dispossessed whose members are directly impacted by the fight for healthcare as a human right or any of the fronts of struggle faced by those who are on Medicaid or who need it, can and should join the Nonviolent Medicaid Army. The Nonviolent Medicaid Army is a vehicle through which we can cohere leaders to assess the terrain and take strategic action together to grow “the new and unsettling force” into an unstoppable nonviolent army commensurate with the times we are living in.

In March, the National Nonviolent Medicaid Army held a retreat with leaders from across 12 states to build relationships and collectivity, equip NVMA leaders with organizing skills to build the NVMA, and develop the NVMA plan for 2022. Some of the key themes around the current conditions and coming crises included a focus on the imminent Medicaid Cutoffs that will impact millions of people when the federal public health emergency expires and hundreds

of rural hospitals will be at risk of closing. We also dug into the legitimization crisis of the for-profit healthcare system and healthcare being a relative weak point of the ruling class and a point of unity around which we can organize our class.

The day also included political education on the political economy of the healthcare crisis and organizing for the right to healthcare, a social media action on the pending Medicaid Cutoffs, 1on1s between NVMA leaders across the country, and the unveiling of a new NVMA Organizing Handbook. Here are some comments (prior to the retreat) from leaders of our partner organizations which have joined the NVMA:

What is powerful about the NVMA is the ability is to go from something we've said for many years — which is that healthcare as an issue has the potential to be a rallying point for the poor and dispossessed — but the NVMA is actually about trying to test that out in reality, and project that in a much broader way — this is actually true, organizing around this issue can move more poor people across the country to a stronger political identity and into political organization and unity.

— Dan Jones, NVMA, FL

Parts of strategy that've been especially powerful [is] leadership development... Actively searching out and utilizing people who are comfortable getting on the call, actually responding to those people who are interested with an ASK... And just the political education itself! ...Giving people the opportunity to UNLEARN stuff has been really important, and it opens a lot of people's eyes. Here in TX people think two ways, Republican or Democrat. ...and now people are starting to see how problematic that is.

— Denita Jones, President, Berkner PTA and Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Director, League of Women Voters, Dallas, TX

We fought for and passed a universal healthcare law here in Vermont—and yet when it came time to implement it, our elected officials caved to pressure from big business and the healthcare industry and pulled the plug. We learned that we have to develop leaders through political education and making the struggle a school and that we have to build political independence for our class—the powers-that-be aren't going to solve our problems for us. This struggle and these lessons don't just belong to Vermont. Through the Nonviolent Medicaid Army, we're joining with working class people all over the country to develop the leaders and the fighting force necessary to win our human rights. ♣

— Kate Kanelstein, Vermont Workers' Center



Building Politically Independent Mass Organizations of the Poor

Reflections on PPF-PA's Winter Study

Political education is a crucial part of our organizing in Put People First! PA (PPF-PA). If you're an active member of PPF-PA, you've probably experienced this practice for yourself. Through political education we study the social problems we're taking on and reflect on the lessons from our own campaign activity, as well as the lessons of other social movements.

One of the ways we practice political education is through collective study. For quite a few years now, the Political Education and Leadership Development (PELD) Team has coordinated seasonal studies with our leaders. Our most recent study was focused on Building Politically Independent Mass Organizations of the Poor.

PPF-PA aims to be a "political center of gravity." Just as earth's gravity is a force that pulls matter to its center, we want to draw the poor and dispossessed into organization. We can do this through base building and developing the clarity, competency, commitment, and connection of our leaders. Through this, our base—the Nonviolent Medicaid Army—sees us as politically independent and as a place to go for answers and to fight back. In this Winter Study on Building Politically Independent Mass Organizations of the Poor we wanted to study how we can become a political center gravity by looking at the lessons from our movement.

This six-week Winter Study brought together over fifty leaders across the country from PPF-PA, the Nonviolent Medicaid Army (NVMA) and the Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival (PPC:NCMR).

Throughout the study we looked at the legacies of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. & the original 1968 Poor People's Campaign, the original National Welfare Rights Organization, the original National Union of the Homeless, the Vermont Workers' Center, and Put People First! PA. We contended with the hard lessons and celebrated the successes of these struggles,

and connected how these histories impact our organizing today. The study included six classes with accompanying readings, three outside discussion group sessions, and a final project.

The primary substantive goal of the course was to support the theoretical development of leaders in PPF-PA in order to successfully carry out our refocus on base building and pivot into becoming political centers of gravity, and for leaders in the NVMA and PPC:NCMR to organize the unorganized poor and dispossessed and build the Nonviolent Army of the Poor. Additionally we hoped to deepen leaders' appreciation for and commitment to the fight for the mutually supportive relations between politically independent mass organizations of the poor and broader efforts to build a mass movement to end poverty, led by the poor. As with all our studies, we aimed to strengthen our political relationships through collective study, debate and discussion, and to build discipline around self and collective study. Below are some participant reflections from the course.

We are spending a significant amount of time this year in an in depth review of the work that United Workers (UW) has done and evaluating the direction that we want UW to take. There is a lot that we are taking from this study and bringing into UW strategy sessions. This includes reflecting on the advantages that come with having an all volunteer organization versus staff that depend on grants; discussions on what it means to be a United Worker and who are the poor; and finally, strategizing for the long term goal of redistributed wealth so that we don't have any poor people.

Michelle Rockwell, United Workers,
Maryland

Having been involved at the tail end of the demise of the original Union of the Homeless, and in one iteration of the Welfare Rights Union and in other efforts in our movement history, it was powerful to look back and see what had come before and how that informed our work then, and also to see how much all of those experiences, from the 60's to the 80's, to the 90's and early 2000's when I was involved, informed everything we do today, and how all of the lessons (positive and negative) have been applied in PPF-PA and other organizations and bodies in our network today. It was powerful to be reminded in this course how much the lessons of all of these past processes have taught us and informed our organizing approach, structure and emphasis on organicity, emphasis on political education and leadership development, the Leadership Development Path, etc.

I could see in our small group and in the study in general how much others appreciated seeing this also and seeing what we are doing today in the broader sweep of this history and how these processes built off of each other and learned from each other.

I was also really struck thinking about how the cadre who were developed in these original organizations and processes went on to organize and develop new organizations, bodies and especially leaders and cadre, who then have done the same to get us to where we are today. For me this really underscored the significance of political education, leadership development and especially the role of cadre and the importance of cadre development.

For me, and I think for others, being able to see the through lines of these processes (lessons learned, analysis, strategy and organizing models building off each other, leaders and cadre going on from one generation to another and developing more leaders and cadre) helps us to understand our history and why we do what we do, and also, while we look at what went wrong (internally and externally) in each of these processes, also helps us to see what was gained in each process. For me, this provides hope and sense of connection, when otherwise it is easy to become demoralized looking at these past efforts. It also reinforces our organizing model and what Sarah from Vermont Workers' Center said so well about how building leaders is the most important victory.

Jen Cox, Southeast PA Healthcare Rights Committee

I think this study gave us a really valuable opportunity to do some self-evaluation. We were able to identify gaps in our clarity, self-discipline, or communication to build on in the future. A lot of the content is also theory we are grappling with in the VWC, so it gave us the ability to talk to other organizers and engage in our organizational political education with more clarity.

Mads Walker, Vermont Workers' Center

This study was extremely successful at deepening my appreciation and clarity about the strategies I've been introduced to organizing with PPF-PA and the NVMA. One of my biggest takeaways is a much deeper, more historically grounded understanding of why pragmatism is not effective, and why we are committed to the organizing principles I've been learning about (base building, leadership development, and political education, especially).

I am still struck by the example of the Welfare Rights Organization's very successful strategy of bringing people into the movement by helping them claim the benefits they were entitled to, and how the ruling class kneecapped that strategy by changing the laws. It just seems like a perfect example of both the power of a demand the ruling class is not prepared to meet ("Healthcare for ALL"), and how the ruling class strategically will give up crumbs and then take them back, or otherwise try to find a way to co-opt any strategy the poor employ.

[T]he concept of organizing WITH our families was new to me. It wasn't something I'd heard before. I'm nervous about reaching out to my siblings with an invitation to this work, but the image of bringing in families all at once feels deeply powerful, and it's work I'm committed to doing eventually, when I figure out how to do it.

Maya Gilmore, Wyoming NVMA

The lessons learned around identifying our base and building leaders are invaluable to our outreach. The refocus on small issues to individual neighborhoods and allowing the people a place to speak will help immensely on our transition to regional Healthcare Rights Committees. I find that in this study we found the concrete actions that led to bigger campaigns.

Frank Scarsella, Central Appalachia Healthcare Rights Committee

Moving forward, there's a lot to take away: that the poor must organize and lead the poor as partners in a struggle rather than models that de-emphasize the transformative power of people mobilized. Political Education is the powerful glue that not only orients us, but keeps us from being peeled off by pragmatism, divide and conquer, and cooptation. Plans will win us our freedom, not personalities, and it is action in conjunction with these theories that truly moves the collective forward.

Anita Knisely-Durham, Southeast PA Healthcare Rights Committee

I think my most profound shift in clarity over the last few weeks, which is not exclusively from the winter study space, is how everything ties back to the money power and we have to unmask that power to our class. Every single one of our Human Needs/Rights is exploited as a center of profit for Wall Street. We have to do that political education, understand the political economy of denying us our Human Rights in order to empower our base, our class, to emerge as the new leading social force for revolutionary change.

I can now articulate why typical non-profit mobilization of the poor is counter productive and tie these methods back to their history roots with Alinsky and Cloward & Piven and juxtapose their philosophies with that of Johnnie Tillman.

The Panther Ps are so clear and concise a roadmap for starting an organization of the poor organizing the poor! Taking this document, together with lessons and guidance and support from PPF-PA, I feel confident we can build something here in Wyoming! 🖤

Erro Lynd, Southwest PA Healthcare Rights Committee and Wyoming NVMA

Kimberly Beechan | SWPA

Personal Reflection: My First Year with PPF-PA



As of February 18th, 2022, I have been a member of PPF-PA for one year. Over the past few weeks I have been reflecting on what this anniversary means to me.

I came to PPF-PA directionless. The George Floyd protests spurred me into action. I knew I needed to do something outside of my usual complacency, but I had no idea what that was supposed to look like.

As I was doing research on various local organizations that fit my political interests, I noticed that not many of them had a clear and coherent strategy towards accomplishing their mission or goals. Not to be disheartened by that, I continued my search and after hearing about PPF-PA through a good friend, I decided to take the plunge and attend my first Healthcare Rights Committee (HRC) meeting.

Before joining PPF-PA I had no experience in an organizing space. I was completely ignorant of the work, both personally and collectively, that organizing entailed. During my first HRC meeting we discussed the 2021 Campaign Plan and I remember finding motivation in the transparent, overarching strategy of the organization. At the time, I had very little understanding of what that plan meant,

but, over the next year it became clear as I had a chance to directly participate in it.

In joining PPF-PA, I knew I was going to have to throw myself out of my comfort zone and I was eager to get to work. I volunteered for my first PPF-PA action, which was the SWPA HRC's first project of survival (PROS). This PROS took place at a food bank distribution event in Pittsburgh's Homewood neighborhood. I had no idea what to expect and was extremely anxious to talk to community members about subjects that I was still in the process of learning about. I soon found that my anxiety was unwarranted - everyone we talked to that day was extremely kind and interested in PPF-PA's messaging. We made many new contacts and were able to sign up ten individuals for Medicaid and SNAP benefits. The success of this event solidified not only my confidence in myself, but also that PPF-PA was the right choice for me.

Since my first HRC meeting and PROS, I have been continuously learning what it means to be a member of PPF-PA. I have attended numerous events, served on the coordinating committee for the 2021 Membership Assembly, and joined the Media & Communications team. Most importantly through all of this, I have grown tremendously as a leader. I am not the anxious new member that I once was. When it comes to PPF-PA, I now welcome chances to jump out of my comfort zone. Joining PPF-PA has been an incredibly rewarding experience and I am forever thankful to be a part of something that is much bigger than myself. ♣

Harrison Farina | SEPA

Struggle is a School: Reflecting on MontCo's 2020 Organizing Work

Mike Tyson once said, "Everybody has a plan until they get punched in the mouth." We had big plans to base build in 2020. Our 2020 Campaign Plan outlined a six-month base building drive throughout spring and summer.



Members from the former Montgomery County Healthcare Rights Committee held and/or attended a number of socially-distanced, outdoor events during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The entire organization was going to be mobilized with "Regional Base Building Blitzes," which are statewide door knockings supplemented by other mass base building tactics and strong follow-up plans. The COVID-19 pandemic hit us hard in March 2020 and brought our plans to a halt. We began to discuss creative ways we could base build during lockdown.

During the previous year, the Montgomery County Healthcare Rights Committee was consolidating a small but committed group of leaders and focusing our efforts on base building in Norristown, the municipal seat and the poorest, most racially diverse township in the county. Our base building blitzes were planned around that area and a few other key towns we identified with our base. But as things changed with COVID-19, we were unclear about what was safe and unsure how to proceed, while seeing everyday the crisis underscore the importance of our organizing.

In late May, George Floyd was murdered by police and the people responded with uprisings in the streets. People erupted in anger, and we knew that this anger needed to be organized into a unified social force. The contradictions were playing out all around us; the global pandemic made them impossible to ignore. We were being told our experience was one thing – that the pandemic was under control, that people were dying because of a "Chinese virus," and that our country was caught totally by surprise – but we knew this was a huge contradiction from what we were actually experiencing every day, even before COVID-19



The former Montgomery County HRC relied heavily on the protests and uprisings in 2020, after the murder of George Floyd, for base building opportunities.

hit – mass deaths from denial of healthcare, lack of safe and quality healthcare, and the state’s facilitation of capital accumulation at the cost of human lives.

In Southeast PA, the first protests took place in Philadelphia but soon rippled out to the suburbs. We saw the opportunity and jumped in to organize around the spontaneous movement of our base. There were protests in unexpected places, and some of them had unexpectedly large crowds. Something new was emerging. We knew our HRC needed to get involved and be present at these events. Our first opportunity to speak at a protest arose early in the summer for a rally at Hatboro Horsham High School. We had connections to some of the students organizing the event, so we got an opportunity to speak. We knew our collectivity was essential in this moment to remain clear. We didn’t write a speech from scratch. Instead, we adapted a speech another PPF-PA leader, Nijmie, gave at a protest in Philadelphia days before. We made sure to adapt Nijmie’s speech to the specific conditions in the suburbs. The speech had a part about "the Four Evils:" racism, militarism, poverty, and environmental destruction, and we emphasized environmental destruction, because Hatboro-Horsham and the surrounding areas had been poisoned with PFAS chemicals dumped by the Willow Grove Air Force Base. These chemicals stay in the environment forever and are known to cause cancer, yet there was very little being done to even warn residents that the water they were drinking was harmful. This issue struck a nerve for many in the crowd, and it even moved some to reach out and join our movement.

We continued attending protests and speaking at them. We continued to use a variation of the original speech. We had found our form: follow the protests and identify leaders. Our strength in this moment was palpable and we were becoming a political center of gravity by projecting a politics of the poor. Even though there was great anger and passion at these protests, they were often politically unclear, succumbing to electoralism and missing the bigger picture. As Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. once said, "The prescription for the cure rests with the accurate diagnosis of the disease." We connected the Four Evils and spoke to the need to understand the root cause of social issues. You could see this message register in people’s faces in the crowd; we were saying something that was moving people. Not everyone liked what we were saying, but we stayed firm in our political grounding and theory of change. We were able to make connections with people who were excited by our message and develop them into members. It was only because of our consistent follow-up process and determination to bring new contacts into the HRC that we were able to make the most of these protests.

We also had weaknesses in this process. The HRC’s capacity was low, and it was hard to be flexible and confident about taking on different roles. Consequently, we each grew accustomed to having the same role at actions. Because we weren’t collectivizing the skills and labor required for different roles (like speaking, base building, live streaming, etc.), our capacity was even more limited and we eventually felt burnt out. However, we were taking small steps and working to intentionally build up our leadership.

In early July, there was a turning point in our activities. We shifted our focus to a struggle centered in Norristown, where our base is highly concentrated. We found out that Norristown was planning to sell their Water and Municipal Waste system to a company called Aqua America, a billion-dollar, multi-state water conglomerate known for cutting people's water off and displacing communities. PPF-PA actually had previous experience fighting Aqua when they tried building a pipeline that would displace residents of a mobile home park. Aqua made an offer of \$82 million in exchange for Norristown's publicly-controlled water system. This quick cash influx would mitigate the city's deficit, so the Norristown City Council voted in favor of the sale in the quickest and most clandestine way, pushing it through in the height of the pandemic over unannounced Zoom meetings. We were horrified to see power holders allow our most basic need and human right – water – be privatized.

Compared to the Floyd protests, we thought the water fight was closer aligned with our campaign for Healthcare is a Human Right. We decided to lend support to a group called NOPE (Norristown Opposes Privatization Efforts), a grassroots group of Norristown residents spearheading the fight against the sale. Our intention was to support their efforts in stopping the sale while bringing them into our larger fight for human rights. Their strategy was to gather one thousand petition signatures to stall the sale and force it onto a public ballot. Because we were on a very short timeframe, we prioritized getting as many signatures as possible instead of base building and getting people's contact information. We were out of the habit of door knocking and talking to people about their Medicaid or dental insurance, but the sewer sale became a way to have agitational conversations with people.

Our efforts to rally public support against the sale eventually led Aqua to back out of the deal. While this was a victory, they immediately tried to buy up sewer systems in the surrounding townships. They will probably be back for Norristown in a few years, as the city becomes more gentrified. It goes to show that the global capitalist powers we are up against will not stop because of local losses and will continue to wage all out war on the working class in the endless drive for profit. This is also a testament to our pressing need to organize regionally and

build regional political centers of gravity, because the ruling class acts regionally. If we are isolated within local towns and cities, we will be helpless to their assaults.

One of our major missteps during this time was our fixation on Norristown. The fight with Aqua gave us tunnel vision, and we stopped militantly attending protests in other townships, as more of our attention was poured into the water fight. This confused some of the newer people who joined the HRC. To some, it wasn't apparent how our campaign for Healthcare as a Human Right was connected to the struggle to save the Norristown sewer system. While we had some discussion and disagreement about where to get involved — to either focus on Norristown or expand our reach — we did not dig into these discussions enough to produce a real consensus, collective clarity, and process of turning the struggle into a school.



One of the best strategies that came out of MontCo's 2020 organizing was staying on message and being able to connect the various issues people were protesting to create a coherent narrative about the systemic nature of state violence.

In *It's Not Enough to Be Angry*, Willie Baptist writes, "All social movements and all social change are products of the confluence of certain

conditions and a certain consciousness of those conditions. In other words, social movements are not simply the results of well-sounding conversations. They are compelled at base by the necessities of changing conditions. Raising the consciousness of the oppressed serves to hasten changing conditions by making their social movements more coherent and cogent. Victory in struggle requires the proper combination of these two indispensable elements.”

This quote deserves to be studied and periodically returned to in order to better inform our practice. It is extremely important because in it, Willie spells out the path to victory, which is the combination of social conditions and the consciousness of these conditions. The quote is also important because Willie spells out what victory is not; we will not achieve victory through “well-sounding conversations” and victory is not simply a mode of consciousness. To be victorious, we must have and raise consciousness of the social conditions that compel the base to change the conditions as a matter of securing the future. To remain on the path that will ensure our victory, we need to make sure that we are properly combining consciousness and conditions – not simply “being right.”

Our misstep in the water struggle arose from an improper combination of conditions and consciousness. We got involved based on the clarity that the water sale was an attack on our class. We were right about that. But our consciousness did not match the base’s consciousness of the conditions at the time. This summer was a time when people were agitated around police violence, and they were ready to take action against state violence in the form of police, not water privatization. We made assumptions about what our base was willing to organize around. When we went to their doors to talk about the sale of the sewer system and the impending rate increase, people were not sprung into action in the same way. We lost sight of the conditions and where people were at; we stopped trying to combine conditions and consciousness and instead focused on getting involved in actions that could lead to easy victories, and seemed to us an “obvious” fight to get involved in. Because we stopped following our form of following protests and panning for gold, we potentially missed connections with leaders speaking out against police violence.

Even though the action around police violence was ephemeral, we needed to lean into it harder. If we were correctly combining conditions and consciousness, we would have known to move with the people, to talk as we walk, and bring them into the broader movement to win all of our human rights. Instead, we got sucked into a fight for concessions because we thought it clearly illustrated how the system is killing us and denying us our basic human rights like water.



The former MontCo HRC, which is now a part of the Southeast PA HRC alongside Philadelphia, Bucks, Chester, and Delaware Counties, initially only had a handful of members involved, but did a lot of organizing despite their limited capacity.

Our HRC still has a lot to be proud of for meeting the suburban protests and being a political center of gravity in the vast and contradictory suburban terrain. This period was marked by intense growth of our leadership. This growth was forged in struggle. Our main victory was the leaders we developed through this struggle. For example, I once felt intimidated by public speaking and never thought I was capable of giving a political speech. Over time, my skills were built up, first by leading chants, then giving a speech, and finally emceeding a rally.

We have to remain grounded in our task even when we make mistakes. We panned for gold and brought leaders into the HRC that are still a part of PPF-PA. Even though not everyone did stick and stay, the process of bringing them into the HRC and trying to orient and develop them into leaders was a deep learning experience for the entire HRC. Even if the uprising of 2020 has long since quieted, we are still building and fighting for an organization that is ready to seize the next uprising. 🖤

Reflections on the Vermont Workers' Center Fall Study

 **Avery Book**, Vermont Workers' Center, Study facilitator:

In November and December of 2021, we (the People's University for Learning and Liberation or "PULL" of the Vermont Workers' Center) organized a Fall Study entitled, **The 140 Million is the Theory of Change**. Since 2016, almost every year, we've organized a Fall Study for our members and for members and leaders of our partner organizations. By far, this was our most powerful and successful political education we've run! It really consistently had fire and energy among the participants, with an inspiring level of engagement with the material, and a shared commitment to grappling with the material to tackle the question of organizing our class, the poor and dispossessed, in the here and now.

Some of the success of the study was the context: almost four years into the launch of the new Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival, there's a base-level connection and resonance with the strategic orientation that identified the 140 million poor people in this country as the leading social force for change. Additionally, we had built deeper relationships with all of the other groups involved through the Nonviolent Medicaid Army. By and large, everyone had a shared starting point, and we could dig into history, theory, and political strategy to understand the strengths and weaknesses of our class and the ruling class.

The five of us in the planning and facilitation team learned a ton from leading this course, both from the participants but also through the process. We had a practice throughout of pairing more experienced political educators with newer members of the team, which really enriched our learning and deepened our relationships. We also developed a real discipline around our presentations: we really wanted to prioritize discussion time with this group of participants, so we spent a ton of time



really fine tuning the presentations so they were efficient and impactful, but just enough to "till the soil" to get rich conversation going. The process of whittling down the presentations was challenging but extremely helpful: we needed to focus on a few core ideas, not everything and the kitchen sink.

Another breakthrough in this study was prioritizing material that elevated and pushed people's understanding in a way that was challenging but not obscured through unnecessarily jargon-y academic language. The University of the Poor Journal was invaluable in this regard, with an incredible array of pieces deeply exploring questions of uniting and organizing the poor and dispossessed using language that is accessible and grounded in the questions of the struggle.

It was so invigorating to study with comrades from Pennsylvania, New York, Wisconsin, Wyoming, Maine, and our home state of Vermont! We are siblings in struggle, and have so much to learn from each other.

 **Jessica Boyles**, PPF-PA, Study participant:

The various content we covered in this study, from the movement to end slavery to the Black Panthers to the history of the Vermont Workers' Center (VWC), deepened, broadened, and fine-tuned my understanding of our current terrain and where we are in building the movement today. One of the specific ways our study impacted my leadership was getting me thinking about the need to develop specific skill sets, competencies, and confidence among our members as they move along their leadership pathways.

Because our class has always been denied access to, well EVERYTHING but, of particular importance to this discussion, access to quality education, training programs, and white collar jobs, we know that many of us lack a lot of the skills members of the ruling class possess, such as computer, organizational, and study skills, as well as an overall sense of confidence and empowerment in our own abilities.

Concurrent to the running of this study, I was also working with members of my Healthcare Rights Committee (HRC) to develop a landscape assessment tool. Through the framing and content of our study, which gave me perspective on the enormity of the battle we face, and with the on-the-ground example of our collective work as an HRC, I developed a sense of the strategic importance of developing basic skills as we're developing leaders. One of our members who's been making strides in her leadership development was struggling with navigating computers and technology. We paired her up with another member of our HRC to help develop those skills. I'm now more mindful of those types of barriers our members may face. It even has me thinking organization-wide and how we can build in this type of support for all HRC's.

The VWC Fall Study gave me the deep context I needed to expand my thinking and appropriately place the work of our HRC and the development of our members into the larger struggle—which has the effect of giving me a mighty kick in the seat of the pants for just how BIG and VITAL and REVOLUTIONARY our work is and how seriously we need to take it.

 **Maya Gilmore, Wyoming NVMA, Study participant:**

I was so grateful to be a part of the Vermont Workers' Center study this fall. It was a rapid-fire introduction to years of the history of our class and the ruling class, and it sparked so many questions and gave me so much to think about. We talked about how prison, the healthcare system, and public schools all absorb different "shocks" – different needs the ruling class is not giving us any other way to meet. It feels like the pandemic is a shock absorber of the ruling class, too, killing off poor people who have been displaced by automation and are no longer necessary to build the wealth of the ruling class.

It's convenient if we die, because they don't value our lives outside the profit we can make them, and they don't want to spend a cent maintaining our lives. And it's convenient if we're scared and demoralized and grieving and turned against each other. Our deaths in the pandemic are not just incidental or a result of poor planning, they're intentional and targeted, and they're making money off our suffering. I guess that's not unusual, but I didn't see it before. A class as organized as our ruling class doesn't make mistakes like that.

I came out of this study thinking about anti-fragility. It's a concept that applies to, for example, human muscles – when you work your muscles, they grow back stronger. How do we build a society that's not just resilient, but built to work, to grow stronger when we stress it out?

Learning more about the depth of the organization of our ruling class scares me, but the first step is knowing your enemy. Then you need to know yourself. There's so much upheaval now that some kind of break feels inevitable. I only hope we're able to grow back stronger and better and more free.

 **Fran Gilmore, PPF-PA, Study participant:**

The Fall Study brought folks from the VWC, PPF-PA and other groups together to look at how we can apply lessons from history to our organizing. We reviewed who the 140 million poor and dispossessed are and how they/we came to be so; lessons from the fight to end slavery; and what strategy, tactics and organization are needed today to win political power for our class. After every presentation, we were asked to discuss how what we'd just learned could help us in our organizing work. There was no escaping the struggle to understand and apply our new knowledge and that's one of the things that made the study so valuable!

The most powerful session for me was the study of ending slavery, for here I could get a picture of the development of the struggle from beginning to end. This history helped me to see how change happened in a more three dimensional way than I had understood before—

as the intersection of a particular moment in history with groups of oppressed rising and passionate supporters helping. I could see how the poor and dispossessed—enslaved people—became a leading force to end slavery, with support from the Abolitionists who created the Underground Railroad, that greatly facilitated slaves escaping, and some of them becoming leaders; at the same time historical forces pushed toward the end of slavery: there was the pressure of the slaveholders to expand slavery west and the pushback from poor folks who had moved west and wanted the west to be free of slavery, a place where they wouldn't have to compete with unpaid labor. Abolitionists saw the potential of these Free Soilers, as they were called, to become allies in the fight to end slavery. At the same time, an unknown candidate for president named Abraham Lincoln ran on an anti-slavery platform, giving many slaves more confidence to escape. And then the Civil War itself brought union troops into the South, making it possible for slaves to escape right into the northern army. So there was a combination of the slaves themselves, their allies, and a particular historical complex of events that contributed to the victory. As a result of this course, I feel I can seek to understand the forces unfolding on the ground in a new, more complex way. ▼

Ron Moose | CAPA

Situating the Johnstown Flood, 133 Years Later

FRIDAY MAY 31 1889: JOHNSTOWN PA, HORROR OF HORRORS, SOUTH FORK DAM CRESTS!

After days and days of hellish rain the call goes out. The South Fork Dam has crested. The steel magnates are far away from their playhouse on the lake and the bosses are safe and warm on the hill when water begins to spill forth from Lake Conemaugh.

The earthen dam was purpose-built for the Pennsylvania Mainline of Public Works, but was

only in operation for a year before the Pennsylvania Railroad made it obsolete. Subsequently it fell into disrepair and disuse and safety features were sold for scrap. By 1881 the Southfork fishing and hunting club had become the owners of the dam and property, a place for the upper echelon in society. Even a member's offer to repair or fix safety features to the Southfork Dam at his personal expense was denied, as this would cause the prize stock fish to escape the lake. Though all of that hardly mattered when 6 to 10 inches of rain fell in 24 hours, and the dam began to overtop. The dam was as helpless as a sandcastle against the water's pull and was soon destroyed.

So began Lake Conemaugh's path down the valley into the city of Johnstown. First on the path of the flood was the town of South Fork, where roughly 30 buildings were destroyed and 4 lives lost. As the water rushed on with a flow rate of more than that of the Mississippi Delta, its next obstacle was the Conemaugh Viaduct, a heavy, stone, single arch railroad bridge. At 40 miles per hour and full of debris, the water battered the bridge, which held for only seven



The Johnstown Flood in 1889 severely impacted the area, causing damage to the city and killing thousands, and the disaster was at least in part a function of capitalistic greed.

minutes. But, because the water had been held back before the Viaduct failed, it allowed more water to build up. So a 70 foot wall of water plus the bridge and houses continued on its 14 mile path of destruction. One mile away, the town of Mineral point was obliterated; nothing remained, not even topsoil, everything was stripped to bedrock.

Two thousand two hundred and eight people lost their lives to the Johnstown Flood, the worst man-made loss of life until September 11th. Bodies were found as far away as Cincinnati, and would continue to be found until 1911.



Witnesses in East Conemaugh, next on the path, described the torrent as “Less like a flood and more like a giant moving hill.”

The main industries in East Conemaugh were the Cambria Iron Works and Gautier Wire Works. The Wire Works had made barbed wire as a specialty and was now included in the tidal wave. Fifty-seven minutes after the dam broke, the “moving hill” of trains and their cars, houses, barbed wire, and trees all hit the city, demolishing all but the most heavily built structures.

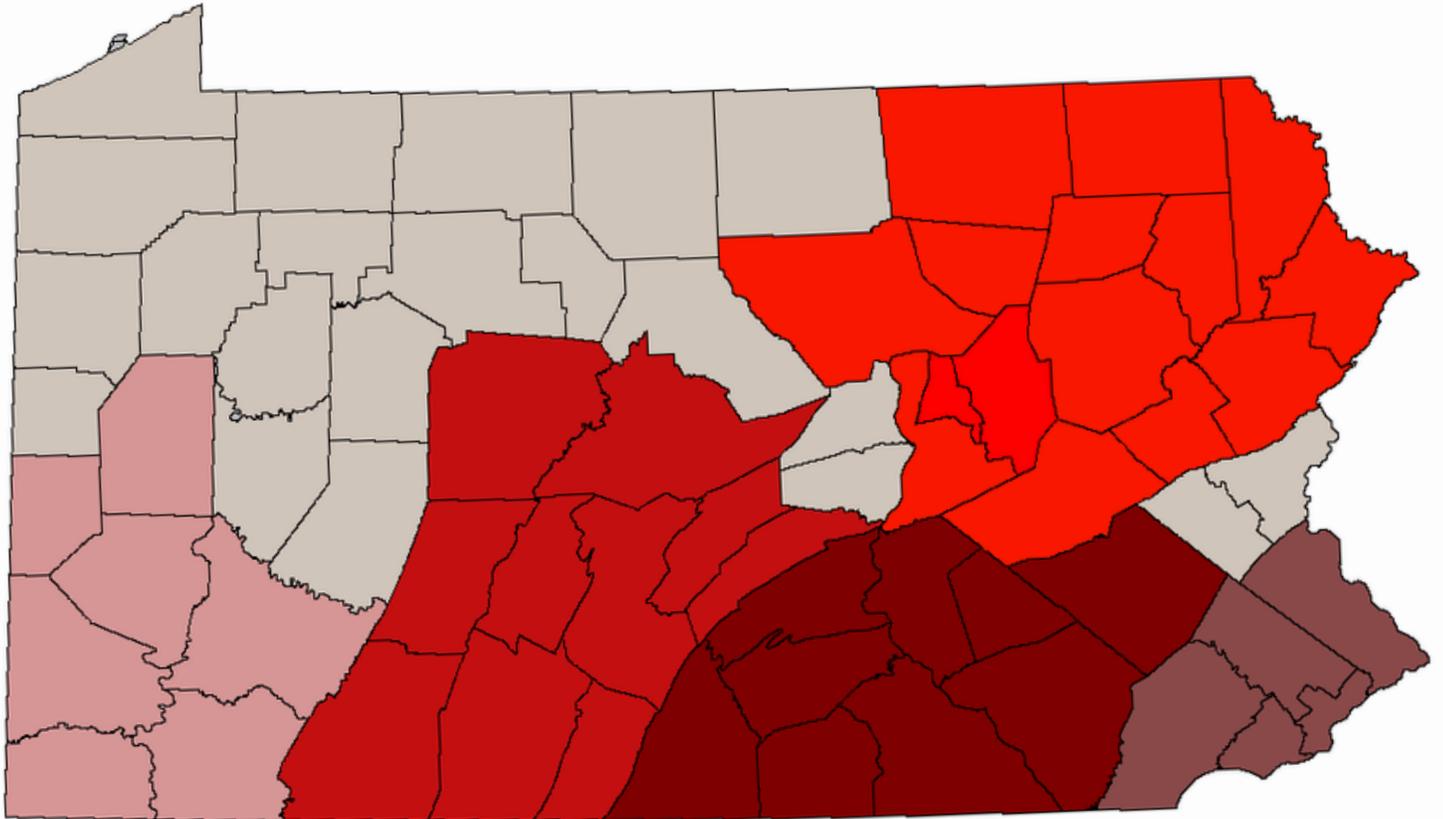
Most of the flood water and debris flowed into the “Seven Arch Stone Bridge” and against the speeding deluge the bridge held the entire time. But, against logic, all the debris, gas and oil had caught fire and an inferno raged for three days. Because the flood path had been impeded by the Seven Arch Stone Bridge, the water flowed backward up the Stonycreek River until the force of gravity brought it crashing into the city once more. When all was said and done there was a wall of debris in front of the Seven Arch Stone Bridge 70 feet high covering 30 acres. Frustrated with the impossible and slow clean up, the city decided to hire a man by the moniker of “Dynamite Bill Flynn” and his crew of 900 men to blow up the timber and wire. It took them three months to do so.

Two thousand two hundred and eight people lost their lives to the Johnstown Flood, the worst man-made loss of life until September 11th. Bodies were found as far away as Cincinnati,

and would continue to be found until 1911. Pennsylvania Railroad managed to restore service to Pittsburgh in two days, allowing relief workers to make their way into what was left of Johnstown. What, you may ask, happened to the rich and powerful men who caused this tragedy? Nothing. Absolutely nothing. They successfully argued in court that the flood was “an act of God.”

This is not the final tale of floods in Johnstown; there were two more major floods in Johnstown in 1933 and 1977. I will end the story with a poem by Johnstown native Isaac Reed:

*Many thousand human lives—
Butchered husbands, slaughtered
wives,
Mangled daughters, bleeding sons,
Hosts of martyred little ones,
(Worse than Herod’s awful crime)
Sent to Heaven before their time;
Lovers burnt and sweethearts
drowned,
Darlings lost but never found!
All the horrors that hell could wish,
Such was the price that was paid—
for fish! ▼*



Fran Gilmore | SEPA

The Pivot: Regional Reorganization & Base building

“Pivot” is the word for 2022! What does it mean? To pivot means to turn; imagine each member turning on their heels and seeing the horizon all around them. The first step of the pivot is geographic: we’re reorganizing by region, combining geographically close Healthcare Rights Committees (HRCs) and expanding their territories into many counties where we haven’t organized before.

The second step is growing the organization into a powerful formation of our class, through a big increase in base building in the new, expanded HRC regions. Our new mantra might be: Base build! Base build! Base build! Our key methods of base building will be Projects of Survival in the form of People’s Clinics and a revival of door-knocking. The goal is for the

- **Southwest PA (SWPA)**
Healthcare Rights Committee
- **Central-Appalachia PA (CAPA)**
Healthcare Rights Committee
- **Southeast PA (SEPA)**
Healthcare Rights Committee
- **South Central PA (SCPA)**
Healthcare Rights Committee
- **Northeast PA (NEPA)**
Healthcare Rights Committee

expanded HRCs to become regional centers of gravity, able to attract members of our base from the 44 of Pennsylvania's 67 counties now included in the HRCs.

Allied to this goal is to meet our base in areas represented by legislators who are key to passing our Public Healthcare Advocate bill through the state legislature. Those are legislators on the Health and Appropriations committees of both houses. We hope to build support for the bill

in our organizing conversations with their constituents who are also members of our base—people on or excluded from Medicaid, those affected by hospital closures and profiteering, and people with insurance who can't afford the copayments or deductibles and so avoid using healthcare. This strategy for locating PROS will necessarily put us into more small town and rural areas, and places that cross partisan, racial and other divides, thus advancing our progress in developing leadership across difference! ▼

Projects of Survival: People's Clinics 2022

Our primary tactic for Projects of Survival is **People's Clinics**. The 2022 Campaign Plan explains how these are regularly occurring, half-day community health clinics in high traffic areas across the state. The clinics allow us to:

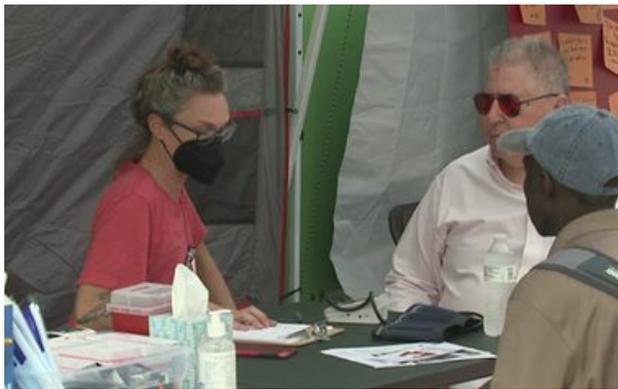
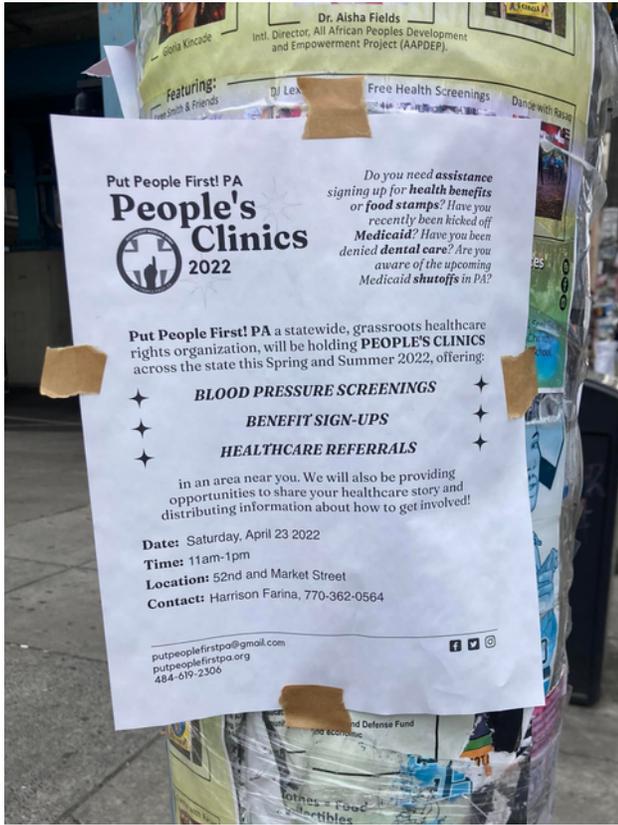
- Meet some of the unmet healthcare needs of the working class while drawing public attention to the healthcare system's failure to meet these needs
- Help people sign up for state benefits, distribute food where possible, and provide other services
- Connect with healthcare workers - with a focus on low-wage healthcare workers - and organize them into our HRCs
- Encourage people to tell their stories and experience having their voices heard
- Identify and develop leaders who have a sense of their own political, power, and clarity
- Build solidarity across difference within our communities
- Expose the larger society to the moral failure and contradictions of governing systems

- Make demands and claims on the power of the state
- Bring people we meet through the clinics into our HRCs - or related partner organizations (Poor People's Campaign, PA Homeless Union, etc)

“An organization in constant motion ‘gathers no moss’; it gathers members and influence. Protest activities start and stop, ebb and flow, while survival projects are steady operations. This keeps members in constant contact with each other and engaged as active members of the organization.”

—***6 Panther P's: Tools for Organizing the Poor to Fight Poverty Now!***

The first People's Clinic of the year was held in Lancaster in January around MLK Day, and was a huge success! This clinic offered blood pressure and blood glucose tests, COVID-19



Clockwise from top left: A flyer from the Southeast PA (SEPA) HRC's People's Clinic in April 2022; Iaan, from the SEPA HRC at the People's Clinic in April, pictured next to the story wall; members from the SEPA HRC signing someone up for Medicaid benefits at the April People's Clinic; members of the Central-Appalachia (CAPA) HRC tabling for their People's Clinic in May 2022; members of the Northeast PA (NEPA) HRC signing somebody in at their People's Clinic in May 2022; Jessica, coordinator of the NEPA HRC signing somebody in at their People's Clinic in May 2022.

vaccinations, help with applying for pardons, drivers licenses, and state benefits, such as Medicaid, Food Stamps and heating assistance. And there were snacks and home-made soup, as well as hundreds of free masks!

During the event, spirited volunteers from a local sorority, as well as members of the Southeast PA (SEPA) HRC went door-knocking at the apartment complex where the clinic was held. They had conversations, distributed masks and personally invited people to attend the event.

The event was a great model for future People's Clinics. It included detailed planning, cooperation of local organizations and PPF-PA folks from the SEPA HRC, and most important, deep organizing conversations—in other words, excellent base building. In the words of organizer Tammy Rojas of the South Central HRC, “We honored Martin Luther King Jr with our words and actions. We shared our stories, deepened relationships and made connections with new people in the community. We heard first hand the experiences our unhoused face everyday, whether that be the fear of freezing to death on the streets, not receiving the healthcare they need, being harassed, targeted and/or criminalized for being poor.”

The local TV station, Fox 43 had a very positive clip about the clinic, quoting Tammy and giving our Facebook page. ▼

Cassandra Hill | SEPA

The Pivot: PPF-PA's Landscape Assessment Project

There are twelve million people residing in Pennsylvania, many of whom are a part of the 140 million poor and dispossessed people desperately trying to make a life for themselves and their loved ones. As a mass organization, and in our efforts to become a political center of gravity, members of PPF-PA have been engaged in an ongoing attempt to thoroughly research our Healthcare Rights Committees'

respective locales, in order to better reach our base—that is, the people we are primarily trying to organize, the 140 million.

Our goal is to become intimately acquainted with our geographic, social, cultural, and economic terrain, while taking note of how these various forces interact. We are also looking into what we like to call “People's Histories” in our various regions. These are the stories and historic events that were pivotal to, led by, or told from the perspective of the working class that shape our present moment here in Pennsylvania.

Below are some excerpts taken from our March Statewide Call during which each Healthcare Rights Committee (HRC) presented key findings of their landscape assessment research, what they feel this information is doing to further their work locally, and how it is helping to carry out the main pillars of our statewide campaign plan, namely:

1. Building the Nonviolent Medicaid Army;
2. Exposing and Targeting Profiteers, and;
3. Holding All Power Holders Accountable.

Southwest PA HRC

“Key to our legislative strategy for the Public Healthcare Advocate and passing a bipartisan bill in the House aligned with our political independence is meeting with legislators on the House Health Committee. There are several legislators in this committee in our expanded Southwest PA region that we'll have to meet with, which means we should prioritize our base building in their districts. That means intentionally base building areas in eastern Allegheny County, Beaver and Butler Counties—all areas where we haven't done base building before.

Organizing in a terrain where our base has also been bearing the impact of...

Southwest PA HRC (cont.)

...ecological devastation—from fracking, coal mining, industrial plants, water pollution—which directly impacts our health, we wage our campaign to indict the entire capitalist system through the locus of healthcare. The system that denies us care is the same system that facilitates the pollution of our communities and makes us sick! So there's an opportunity to make these connections in our base building through organizing conversations, and the landscape assessments help us in making these connections."

**—Briann Moye and
Frederica Phillips**

Southeast PA HRC

In our landscape assessment, we have done a lot of the standard stuff like identifying largest employers and legislative targets, but actually a specific action came to us during the middle of our landscape assessment in the closing of Brandywine and Jennersville Hospitals. ...

Communities in Chester County have no other access to healthcare. So we can go to those neighborhoods, like Coatesville and West Grove, the two spots where those hospitals were shut down, and scope out places to hold Projects of Survival People's Clinics and do some door knocking eventually, which directly leads to base building.

**—Zevi Koretz and Anita
Knisely-Durham**

Central-Appalachia PA HRC

Our landscape assessment in our HRC is a work in progress, and it's been a great tool for us to learn, but also a great chance to help members take on more work and develop their leadership. Looking at what we do have, when we take a look at the five to ten largest employers in our counties, a number of them are healthcare profiteers: hospitals, medical centers like University of Pittsburgh Medical Center (UPMC), Fulton County Medical Center, Medical Center at Windber. Thinking of our campaign pillars, especially exposing and targeting profiteers, it's going to be good to have a grasp of that knowledge, as well as looking at how big a percentage of some places are in terms of people on Medicaid. Sixteen percent of Huntingdon County is on Medicaid; Cambria County is 19.3%.

There are some areas we still need to find information on, like clinics. We've been looking for information on low-income clinics, or resources for referrals, which would be great places for doing Projects of Survival (PROS). There's just a need for basic medical information and attention, and in planning towards our PROS and with base building, we're trying to understand our landscape, that's going to help us with the ability to offer health-related services, and navigate assistance programs, while understanding the conditions our base is in. We've been looking at key legislative areas: Judy Ward on the Senate Health and Human Services Committee, Jesse Topper on the House Appropriations Committee, Senator and President of the Senate Jake Corman, Representative and House Majority Leader Kerry Benninghoff, and Representative Louis Schmitt of the Insurance and Appropriations Committees are all key legislators we're thinking about in our area.

—Maddy Burrows

Northeast PA HRC

We're probably the farthest along in this journey with the landscape/terrain assessment, so we're at the point where we're almost done with all of the pieces and we're starting to actually look at the data. Some of that data that is standing out and will help with the campaign pillars are:

For (1) *Building the Nonviolent Medicaid Army*, we've identified what the rates of folks that are on Medicaid are throughout our region, which is where our base is. So we know, for example, that 42% of Lackawanna County—including adults and children—is on Medicaid, which is whopping. So we know that our base is heavily concentrated in Lackawanna County. We've got about five or six [counties] that are all in the 30% range, so we know there's a high concentration of poverty throughout this area, and that a lot of it's going to be rural poverty. And, we're starting to identify low-income housing areas throughout the region for our door-knocking blitzes, and also identifying promising locations to hold our *Projects of Survival*. Also, we're starting to identify other major issues that we can agitate around as well, and have identified that access to specialized healthcare services, in particular mental health and substance use, are very difficult to access; transportation is huge—we have lots of little towns and people being kind of trapped in those towns and can't really get out to access anything that isn't right in their town, and that's pretty much only urgent care and primary care; the opioid epidemic is huge, one of the things we discovered is that one of our counties has had doubled rates of fentanyl overdose deaths since 2020, so in two years, already high rates have doubled, and that is just astronomical. We don't have all of that data for all of the counties, but to see it for this one county was huge. ...

For (2) *Exposing and Targeting Profiteers*, we're identifying the healthcare profiteers [in our area]. We had already identified some of the main ones in the cities, but now we're identifying them in the rural areas as well. And then there's other profiteers: one we uncovered was the U.S. Army Depot, there is a huge U.S. Army Depot up here that employs thousands of people.

For (3) *Holding Power Holders Accountable*, we have identified our legislative targets, and we are starting to think about and plan for actions and ways that we can target those regions. For example, Bradford County, we now know, is a legislative target and has 37% of folks in the county on Medicaid, so there's huge base building opportunities there.

—Jessica Boyles

South Central PA HRC

Our landscape assessment is also still a work in progress. ... Something that's coming up is that we're noticing that as far as healthcare profiteers, there are some that are in different counties, and they're more dominant in some counties but may have footing in others. But what was interesting was that there seems to be one healthcare profiteer that is common in the entire region: PrimeCare, which does healthcare for prisons and juvenile facilities. We found out, through researching them, that they're actually in the top five across the country as far as profiteering goes, specifically this kind of profiteering around prisons. And they're in multiple states, so this is another monster profiteer, kind of like University of Pittsburgh Medical Center (UPMC). ...

One of the other areas that many of us were interested in learning about was South Central's role in the Underground Railroad, which was very vital and also intense. The enslaved would come up from Maryland along the Susquehanna River and end up in Wrightsville or Columbia which are between York and Lancaster. ...Prior to the Civil War, there was a local politician and lawyer, Thaddeus Stevens, that was actually a part of the Underground Railroad as well, and one incident that took place in Christiana, which is on the border of Lancaster and Chester County, was that 38 people were charged with treason because of a impromptu battle that went down—some call it a riot, some call it a resistance—when bounty hunters from the south tried to take back slaves that Mennonites were actually housing within their facilities. This would have been serious, if these 38 people were charged with a federal crime they would have been looking at death. Thaddeus Stevens took on the case and actually made sure that none of those charges stuck, so all of them went free.

...During the Civil War, the Confederates wanted to make their way to Harrisburg, to the capitol of Pennsylvania, to try and take the state. One of the ways to get there was across a bridge that is across the Columbia-Wrightsville area. So, the people of Columbia rallied together to put detonations on the bridge and tried to blow it up to stop [the Confederates] from getting to the capitol. It wouldn't blow up, but they did douse it in tar—or gasoline, or something that could be explosive—and then, a former slave took a cigar out of his mouth and flicked it and the bridge finally blew. And that stopped the Confederates from being able to make their way to the capitol, which actually diverted them to Gettysburg, where the Battle of Gettysburg took place. ...

...Because of all that resistance then, it has led to other forces organizing and having a focus on South Central. It's important for us to study that history and know that to understand what's happening today. ▼

—Tammy Rojas

Fran Gilmore & Zevi Koretz | SEPA

Advocacy Day in Harrisburg Moves the Public Healthcare Advocate Bill and PPF-PA Forward

April 11th was Advocacy Day for the Public Health Advocate (PHA) bill, HB 1828

We aimed to visit legislators on the committees most crucial for passage of HB 1828: the House Health and Appropriations Committees. We also sought members of the Senate Health and Human Services and Appropriations Committees, anticipating a future companion bill in the Senate. The Legislative Team had worked hard in preparation for the event to identify PPF-PA members and friends who were constituents of those legislators, understanding that legislators are most sensitive to constituents' concerns.

Members from 10 counties (Blair, Clearfield, Huntingdon, Cumberland, Lancaster, Montgomery, Philadelphia, Luzerne, Wayne and Lycoming) met with, dropped into, or dropped off materials at over 21 offices. Two of those meetings were particularly important: we met with Karen Boback, our first Republican co-sponsor, who represents parts of northeast PA; we also met with Joan Bradbury, Executive Director of the Senate Health and Human Services Committee. After hearing Jessica's (NEPA) experience as a home care worker



Members of PPF-PA joined members from the organization Casa San Jose to lobby in Harrisburg in April.

about the horrible conditions in elder care homes and the home care industry, Joan was clearly moved and expressed optimism about the PHA bill's prospects in her committee.

In addition to PPF-PA members, a contingent of three adults and two youth joined us from Casa San Jose in Pittsburgh, an immigrant rights organization that has been active in the Poor People's Campaign and is really motivated by the Public Healthcare Advocate. The Casa San Jose folks, along with a PPF-PA member, were able to have a sit-down meeting with Dan Frankel, the minority chair of the House Health Committee.

In all of our meetings with legislators, we discussed the impending end of the federal moratorium on kicking people off Medicaid, expected to affect half a million Pennsylvanians. We urged legislators to stand against the many proposed state bills that would create hurdles for people to stay on Medicaid, HB 2378, HB 2379, HB 2392 and HB 2393.

Not only did we have a very successful day meeting with key legislators, but we had a number of people who

had never done something like this before and who had a positive experience and learned a lot in the process. We advanced the PHA bill and at the same time many members advanced along the leadership pathway!

How we got here: a nutshell history of PPF-PA's struggle for healthcare as a human right

In 2016-17, PPF-PA won the first ever public hearings on rising insurance rates with the Pennsylvania Insurance Department (PID). This was a big deal, because we made our voices heard about conversations that had gone on between the PID and the insurance companies behind closed doors, and we fought to have a say in decisions that affect us. Through that process, we saw how tightly the PID is captured by healthcare profiteers: despite our testimony, the PID granted the insurance companies rate increases even bigger than they had asked for!

We realized there's no state government office that fights for our healthcare rights. There is no advocate tasked with standing firmly on the side

of everyday people in our battles with healthcare profiteers. We made it our job to fight for such an advocate!

In 2018, we held meetings with Governor Wolf to talk about a vision for a Public Healthcare Advocate (PHA). The following year, we began to meet with legislators to gather their support for the idea of a PHA bill. We developed a how-to guide for legislative visits as well as a report form to keep track of the visits. In 2021 we launched the Legislative Team to further guide and support HRC's legislative visits.

Meanwhile, the Campaign Team met with legal aid and health advocacy organizations to line up support, and began work on a PHA policy paper. In the fall of 2020 we drafted our bill and it was introduced on September 1st to the House Health Committee as HB 1828.

As our visits continued into 2022, they became part of our regional pivot: as we figure out where to conduct our Projects of Survival, we are factoring in areas represented by key legislators, especially where their districts include concentrations of people in our base.

*Next steps:
Where do we go from here?*

All the considerations described above suggest our next steps:

- Base build! Base build! Base build! In the areas where our base is represented by legislators whose support is key to passing the PHA—in the House and eventually the Senate.
- Build support for the PHA among strategic and tactical partners, in particular groups representing people with disabilities, elders, rural folks, and more.
- Explore introducing a companion bill in the PA Senate.
- Collect and broadcast thousands of stories on the healthcare crisis in Pennsylvania by producing our own media and getting coverage in the state and beyond. ▼

Rebecca Neidig | NEPA

Personal Reflection: My Experience with the Broken Healthcare System



I get the impression that a lot of folks come to Put People First! PA because they have had negative experiences with the healthcare industry. That wasn't the case for me. I was drawn in because of the language y'all use. I, too, wanted to unite the poor and dispossessed across lines of difference. I, too, wanted to hold the powerholders accountable when they failed to champion the causes of the People. I, too, wanted to stop the ruling class from profiting off of our sickness and suffering.

But I didn't have any healthcare needs. Or rather, I actively avoided healthcare and denied my needs, a habit ingrained since my childhood. You see, when I was growing up, my family was the very definition of working poor. We were on and off assistance every couple years, depending on whether or not my dad had a "good" job. "Good" jobs meant good pay; too good to qualify for medical assistance. I learned early that seeking treatment meant taking on debt which I would be powerless to pay off.

Routine care was out of the question. I could count on the fingers of one hand the number of times that I saw a doctor as a child, usually only when the school system required it. This led to me growing into an adult who believed at my core that I was unworthy of healthcare and that those who offered it were only trying to trick me into pills and treatments that I would be better off (financially) without. The for-profit nature of the healthcare industry deeply damaged my trust in healthcare professionals. Even after I became more financially secure, I had a myriad of justifications in my mind for not getting new glasses when I outgrew the ones that I was prescribed at 12 years old, going without yearly checkups, forsaking all dental care, and avoiding therapy even as my mental health



issues impacted my daily life and my relationships.

Being a part of PPF-PA changed me. I started tiptoeing around the idea of going to the doctor, at least when I didn't feel well. At the end of 2020, I was diagnosed with diabetes which forced me to confront how much irreversible damage I was doing to my body by shirking my healthcare needs. I've started the messy and awkward process of restarting care that I've neglected for decades. I'm dealing with things that I've never had to before, like the confusing nightmare that is the insurance industry. Every time that a medicine or a test or a visit costs more than I expected, I'm tempted to just give up seeking healthcare and go back to my old ways.

I'm eternally grateful that I have experienced comrades by my side to help me with practical solutions and empower me to seek the healthcare that I deserve, the healthcare that is my human right! ♣

Jae Hubay | SEPA

Building a Moral Revolution of Values through the Struggle for Healthcare as a Human Right in Cuba & the U.S.

In November of last year, I had the honor of traveling to Cuba as a representative of PPF-PA and the Nonviolent Medicaid Army on the Pastors For Peace Caravan. The caravan has a thirty year history of defying the U.S. blockade, which is a system of economic sanctions intended to destabilize Cuban society by creating hoops and hurdles for the island nation to trade with other countries for basic goods like food and medicine. Several of us who participated in the caravan with Pastors for Peace came from organizations that are part of the International People's Assembly (IPA). The IPA is an international network that is comprised of organizations of the poor and dispossessed, like Put People First! PA. Part of the work of the

IPA is to coordinate solidarity activities and study between these formations across geography and different fronts of struggle.

An important part of the trip is for the "caravanistas" to learn about the reality of life in Cuba, because we have been given a lot of misinformation about Cuba by the powers-that-be here in the U.S. The ruling class media tells us that Cuban people don't have access to all the supplies they need because the Cuban government is a failure—but we the organized poor recognize the people making a way out of no way! Our Cuban siblings are doing the best they can with what they have, because they are also dealing with false scarcity being imposed on them through the economic warfare of U.S. state sanctions.

Why is the U.S. capitalist class so hell-bent on disrupting Cuban society that this economic blockade has been imposed for more than 60 years, in defiance of the overwhelming majority of the other UN countries which declare the blockade to be illegal? One reason that was very clear to me from getting to visit the country, is that it is very threatening to the ruling class for the poor to understand how successful a society can be when organized around our needs. In Cuba, where society is organized around the needs of the poor:



Sign outside of the hospital Jae got to visit in Matanzas, Cuba: "It doesn't matter what sacrifices we make for the good that we will win." (Jose L Tassende)

- Everyone has **healthcare**
- No one is **homeless**
- Everyone can get the **education** they want for free
- People **trust** doctors, scientists and the healthcare system

Cuba's medical system has been very successful at keeping people safe during the COVID-19 pandemic, and Cuba has one of the highest COVID-19 vaccination rates in the world. The healthcare system is so effective partially because it is connected to the other ways that people are organized—it is already part of the permanently organized communities in Cuba. So, when Cuba successfully developed its own vaccines for COVID-19 (knowing that the blockade would make it uncertain whether they could buy vaccines developed in other countries) and set out to vaccinate the whole population – they didn't have to create a new system for the vaccine program, the medical system is already integrated into how people organize themselves. The primary care level of medical care is in each neighborhood, and so are the medical workers who work there—they know their patients well because they are neighbors, and they have long-term relationships. The whole community works together in the fight to keep everyone safe during the pandemic. When the hospitals needed more space for people to quarantine, the communities organized isolation spaces together in schools, houses of worship and other community centers, all working together with the medical system and the government. This meant that people could easily isolate outside their home, not having to put their loved ones at risk.

Another reason that the people of Cuba have been kept relatively safe during the pandemic is of course because the medical system operates on the basis of providing the best care possible for everyone—not on the logic of making profiteers the biggest amount of money possible. This fact also has huge impacts on the trust the people have for their doctors and

nurses and about the care they are receiving—they never have to doubt whether the treatment they get is really in their best interest, or if it has the motivation of enriching a healthcare profiteer. It wasn't a question in the minds of the Cuban people whether the vaccines for COVID-19 they would receive would be safe, effective and beneficial to take. People were already used to being well cared-for by the healthcare system, and also to the understanding that doing things to protect the collective also protects individuals, and vice-versa, individuals who receive the care they need makes the collective healthier.



*Jae pictured with one of the scientists who worked on creating the Abdala COVID vaccine—
"I gave her a copy of the Keystone!"*

When the poor and dispossessed took power and reorganized the state in Cuba in the revolution in 1959, one of the first changes they made was to re-make the healthcare system so that healthcare became a human right. The revolutionary movement they had been building across the country in the years leading up to the beginning of the revolution had this as one of its



Art at the Martin Luther King Memorial Center in Havana where Jae stayed.

central demands—it was a way to organize people across the country, across lines of division, and to build the strength of the movement.

Today, the healthcare system in Cuba is one of the best in the world. At the beginning of the pandemic, Cuba sent medical brigades to countries that were being hit the hardest by COVID-19, in demonstration of their international solidarity and their valuing of human life. Cuba has sent these Henry Reeves Brigades for medical support across the world before the pandemic too—they even offered to support the people of the U.S. when Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans in 2005, but the Cuban internationalist doctors were denied entry by the U.S. government. As with any career path in Cuba, people who study to become medical workers do not have to pay for their education. This is even true for medical students from other countries—at the Latin American School of Medicine (ELAM) in Cuba, students come from all over the world, including from poor communities in the U.S., to become doctors without paying a dime.

We know the state apparatus of our country is

violent, in both visible and more invisible ways. The violence of the U.S. state looks different within this country (and toward different sections of our class) than it does in other parts of the world—this is part of the ruling class' strategy to divide and conquer. But the U.S. ruling class and its violent state is a common enemy of the poor across the whole world. We can see it's our enemy here in the US when we lead the world in COVID-19 deaths, with over a million people dead. We know it's our enemy when in the US the poor die from COVID-19 at rates 2 to 5 times higher than those of the rich. We know it's our enemy when people are threatened with getting thrown off the Medicaid rolls en masse this year—500,000 in Pennsylvania and 15 million nationally are the estimates - as the Federal government declares the pandemic healthcare emergency officially over.

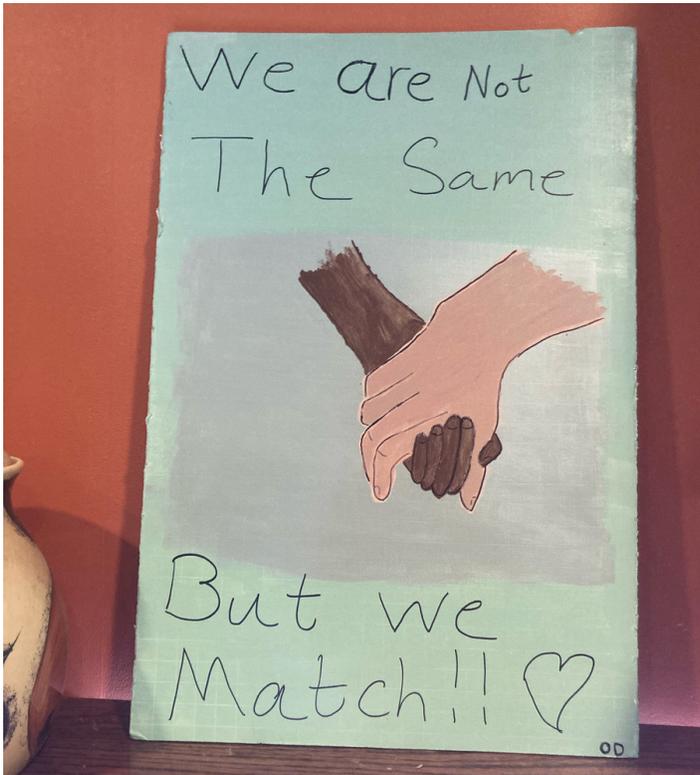
The ruling class doesn't want people to get used to the idea that they can have healthcare without paying for it. Just like the capitalist ruling class doesn't want a country like Cuba, organized around the needs of the poor since 1959, to be a place that we could look to as an example of how to organize society. But Cuba lives, and Cuba breathes! *Cuba vive y respira!* ▼

Arts & Culture

Shari Draayer | SEPA

A painting by the daughter of Shari Draayer, a member of the Southeast PA HRC.

"I've had the enormous privilege of being a transracial adoptive mother. When my children's peers asked them, 'Why is you brown and your mommy is white?' I wanted them to have a non-defensive response that would settle the question. We would put our hands on top of each other's hands and say, 'We're not the same but we match.'"



Fran Gilmore | SEPA

A watercolor painting by Fran Gilmore, member of the Southeast PA HRC and co-coordinator of the Media and Communications Team.





Stay in touch!

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