In Knoxville, Oak Ridge, across the nation and around the world actions mark Treaty’s entry into force

**BAN TREATY INSPIRES ACTIONS**

On Friday, January 22, 2021, yellow banners were unfurled across the country, at more than fifty sites, celebrating the entry into force of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons and declaring nuclear weapons illegal.

The banners were hung on fences and walls, held at universities, town halls, churches, military bases, nuclear weapons sites, banks, corporate headquarters, Air Force and Navy bases—all delivering the same message: nuclear weapons are illegal.

Can we just say those lovely, powerful words one more time? Nuclear Weapons are Illegal!

**OREPA’s Actions**

In East Tennessee, OREPA members joined local Quakers to hold the banner and to deliver two posters on the campus of the University of Tennessee. UT is one of the Schools of Mass Destruction cited in a recent study prepared by the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN). Recent news made it all the more critical that we be there (see University of Tennessee to build bombs? p5).

Then, in the afternoon, twenty people gathered, masked and keeping a safe distance, at the Y-12 Nuclear Weapons Complex in Oak Ridge. We read aloud excerpts of the Treaty.

When we finished, police cars pulled onto the street to block traffic while we crossed to the fence. Our yellow banner was hung on the fenceline, along with a poster-sized copy of the Treaty, and 122 yellow Xs—one for each nation that voted to approve the Treaty in July of 2017.

Two television stations, the Knoxville newspaper, and the OakRidgeToday.com web site were there to cover the event; the Oak Ridger newspaper had an article the day before.

So our first goal, to raise awareness of the Treaty and its entry into force, was accomplished.

We came home and watched the facebook
group, Nuclear Ban Treaty EIF, as reports began pouring in from across the country.

And we noticed the yellow banners.

**The Banner Idea**

The idea for the yellow banners germinated in a meeting of the Alliance for Nuclear Accountability. Wouldn’t it be great to have the same clear message at each of the nuclear weapons sites in the US? ANA’s Board agreed to provide each ANA weapons site with a yellow banner. OREPA’s coordinator designed the banner.

When the idea was mentioned to Felice Cohen-Joppa of the Nuclear Resister, she immediately asked, “Only weapons sites? Not military bases or other places?”

Suddenly, OREPA was in conversation with the Resister and Nukewatch about how to prepare for the Treaty’s entry into force—this was in October, before we even knew when it would happen. But we knew the day was coming, and we wanted to be ready.

So we made a list, began meeting weekly to plan, and hosted three national zoom meetings to spread the word. We created templates and files that people could download and use wherever they were. The ideas multiplied. Why not have churches ring bells?

We launched a facebook group and began to collect members. We worked with Seth Shelden, ICAN’s UN liaison, and John Pope of ReThink Media to develop plans. We wrote an op-ed that was published by *The Progressive* and then syndicated to appear in dozens of papers around the country. We developed a list of a broad range experts and activists who were available for interviews.

ICAN created an interactive map and invited everyone to post their events; we watched it begin to fill up. We did everything we could think of—and watched as people sent us information about their events. The list grew to three dozen, four, five—more than 70 by the time we got to January 21. We put it in our media packet, complete with a Fact Sheet and maps of US nuclear weapons sites and Schools of Mass Destruction.

**A moment...**

All across New England, in the snow, activists gathered with their yellow banners. Some modified the fine print but the message invariably was the same: Nuclear Weapons are Illegal. The message was delivered in Maine, Vermont, Massachusetts, Connecticut, New York, and down the eastern seaboard—Maryland, the Pentagon in Washington, DC, at Newport News Shipbuilding in Virginia, North Carolina, and the Kings Bay Trident base in Georgia.

And it swept across the country—yellow banners appeared in Pittsburgh at PNC Bank, Ohio, in Wisconsin at Northwestern Mutual, Detroit, Michigan, Minnesota, Tennessee, Kansas City, and at SAC.
headquarters in Omaha, Nebraska.

The banner appeared at the University of Arkansas, in Dallas at six Congressional offices, and across the southwest: New Mexico at the Trinity site and at Los Alamos; in memory of downwinders. In Arizona, at churches that rang bells and the University there and at the Raytheon site. In Nevada, at the Test Site and at NNSA headquarters.

In Colorado, at city hall in Colorado Springs, and at Raytheon and Northrop Grumman sites. In Southern California at Vandenberg AFB and in Ojai; at UC Berkeley and at Lawrence Livermore Lab and Lockheed offices. At Idaho National Lab in Idaho Falls, and even in Hamburg, Germany!

There were scores of other events: the Loretto Motherhouse in Kentucky rang its bells and had an article in the local newspaper. Ground Zero in Washington state hung banners and posted billboards—Kansas City and Norfolk, VA did billboard, too.

People posted selfies with signs—We did it! Nuclear Weapons are Banned!—and wrote letters.

And what happened in the US was replicated over and over all across the globe marking the historic moment when the nuclear weapons joined chemical and biological weapons, land mines and cluster bombs and poisonous gases on the list of weapons prohibited by international law.

...or a Movement?

Which brings us to “What now?” Will January 22 be a moment in time, or will it be the launch of a new movement for the abolition of nuclear weapons?

On February 25, OREPA will co-host a debriefing zoom meeting that will evaluate January 22 activities and then turn our faces to the future. Other events are being planned—we’ve been invited to participate in a conference in Japan in February and an ICAN/Back from the Brink workshop in March.

The amount of organizing we did for January 22 paid off. It also took a lot of time and energy, and is not really sustainable for OREPA if we are to keep a focus on Tennessee’s nuclear weapons activities.

Whatever happens, we will be involved, and we will be contributing everything we can. The energy of the current moment cannot be lost. The effort put into making January 22 happen was a small downpayment on the much greater effort it will take to make the promise of the Treaty a reality—to bring the US and other nuclear nations into the Treaty.

Fortunately, we have tools—the resources already prepared by ICAN can help people organizing around the financing of nuclear weapons and can help university communities confront support for nuclear weapons at their schools.

The challenge is organizing the collaborations and building on our success to develop the political will and strength to compel our elected officials to step away from the nuclear abyss.

President Dwight Eisenhower, a five star General, famously said that the day would come when people would want peace so badly the politicians would have to get out of the way and let us have it.

We aren’t there yet. But with the entry into force of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, we are one giant step closer than we were.

Top: Felice and Jack Cohen-Joppa of the Nuclear Resister hold the banner at the Raytheon site in Tucson, Arizona.

Bottom: Nukewatch’s John LaForge and Marion Küpker hold a banner in Hamburg, Germany. For more photos of OREPA’s day, see orepa.org; for more on the banners around the world, including a nice video, check out the facebook group: Nuclear Ban Treaty EIF.
Jerry Brown and Robert Rosner, writing for the Bulletin on cnn.com:

“Even so, we face fundamentally greater threats to humanity than this pandemic. We refer to the catastrophic dangers that nuclear weapons and climate change pose—dangers that preceded this pandemic and will persist long after it ends. Unfortunately, and unlike the priority given to developing a vaccine against the virus, little progress was made to reduce the danger of the world’s nuclear weapons arsenal or to effectively slow the carbon emissions warming our planet in 2020.

“The sudden appearance and confused response to the virus makes all too clear how ill-prepared the world can be when it has to deal with an unprecedented threat of global magnitude.

“...has evolved over the years to consider other existential threats—climate change and biological attacks. Last year, in moving the hands closer to midnight than at any time in the clock’s 70+ years, the Bulletin also noted their concerns were exacerbated by the failure of political and other leadership to take steps to address the concerns even as the threats increased.

This year, as if to underscore the Bulletin’s point, the world was struck by a global pandemic—a natural coronavirus, no less maleficent for its origin. Did this demonstration of the power of these threats shake some sense into the political world?
Years ago, Admiral James Watkins, then Secretary of Energy in a Republican Administration, said, “Nobody likes nuclear weapons.” Since then, I’ve noticed on a number of occasions that the Admiral may have, unfortunately, overstated the case.

The latest example: Randy Boyd, President of the University of Tennessee, announced on December 9 that the university is preparing to bid on the management/operations contract for the Y-12 Nuclear Weapons Complex in Oak Ridge. The move would elevate UT’s status on the Schools of Mass Destruction List, making them an actual manufacturer of the weapons of mass destruction just declared illegal by the international community.

Boyd said that Tennessee would join with Texas A&M University to bid on the two billion dollar per year contract that would cover both Y-12 in Oak Ridge and the Pantex weapons assembly plant in Amarillo, Texas.

The current operators, Consolidated Nuclear Services, a consortium led by Bechtel, learned last year that its contract option would not be renewed. Among the reasons—CNS’s failure to address critical safety issues that had been identified more than a decade ago.

In announcing the intention to bid on the proposal, Boyd told the Knoxville News-Sentinel it is a “no-brainer.” Perhaps that is understandable, coming from Boyd, a millionaire businessman whose decisions through most of his career have been driven by financial calculations.

But the University of Tennessee’s mission is not to amass money; it is to pursue the education of young women and men—a mission that does not overlap in any way with the management of an industrial nuclear weapons production operation.

There are departments within the university, in fact, that are dedicated to the idea that brains are useful for thinking about a broad range of things, not just money and profits. Ethics and morals, to name two.

A statement released by more than 170 faith communities around the world to mark the entry into force of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons—including major mainstream denominations in the US and scores of Roman Catholic communities—declares “the possession, development and threat to use nuclear weapons is immoral.”

In response to the UT announcement, OREPA will work to organize opposition among the various constituencies who form the university community—faculty, students, alumni, employees, administrative personnel, retirees.

We started on January 22—people entering UT at the main entrance on Circle Drive were greeted with a large banner declaring the entry into force of the Ban Treaty. We also posted poster-sized versions of the Treaty at the entrance to Ayers Hall, the Administration building, and the Nuclear Engineering Building. We left flyers there, too.

In the weeks to come, we will be working to educate, organize and mobilize across the University system.

On the morning of January 22, OREPA and local Quakers left poster-sized copies of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons outside the Nuclear Engineering Building and at the main entrance to Ayers Hall, the Administration building on UT’s flagship Knoxville campus.

We left flyers on the bulletin board outside the Nuclear Engineering Building entrance.
Is it time to hope yet?

It’s Christmastime in Washington
The Democrats rehearsed
Gettin’ into gear for four more years
Of things not gettin’ worse...

Those were the opening lines of a Steve Earle song, written a few decades ago, that suddenly seem relevant again. With the installation of the Biden Administration, it’s fair to ask “What can we hope for?”

For now, the signs are not good.
It is a good thing that President Biden moved quickly, and that Russian President Putin responded just as quickly, to renew the New START Treaty, the last live US/Russia bilateral arms control treaty.

Five years ago, one could have hoped that this moment of renewal would have included the announcement of new reduction targets, the result of a new round of negotiations. As it is, we are feeling lucky the treaty survived the Trump Administration.

Beyond that, though, it is uncertain that the new Administration will take steps to reduce the nuclear danger or scale back modernization efforts. We won’t know until we see the first Biden budget, sometime this spring, whether the weaponeers will continue to enjoy annual funding increases the way they have during the last five Administrations.

There have been some reports that the Biden Administration intends to review some projects on the drawing board, but Energy Secretary nominee Jennifer Granholm, when asked if she would “assure appropriate increases to modernize the nuclear weapons enterprise?” answered succinctly: “Yes.”

We also don’t know yet who will chair the critical committees in Congress now that the Senate is in Democratic hands; by the time you read this, those names will be known—the key questions will be about the Armed Services Committees, the Strategic Forces Subcommittees, and the Appropriations Committee’s Energy and Water Development subcommittee.

These committees set the policy and determine the funding for the weaponeers’ wish lists. Will they be chaired by Senators and Representatives that have NNSA programs back home to protect?

The new administration is likely to commission a new Nuclear Posture Review—the document that describes US nuclear policy plans and lays the groundwork for activities on the ground.

In the meantime, we have some possible indicators as Biden appointees go to hearings in Congress. Kath Hicks, nominee for Deputy Secretary of Defense, told a Senate hearing “I am worried about the state of readiness of the nuclear triad, and, if confirmed, that is an area I would want to start to look at right away.”

So at least one appointee is putting the Armed Services Committee on notice to expect a significant budget increase request.

Meanwhile, the modernization of the US nuclear weapons complex continues apace, the global nuclear arms race moves forward, and the nuclear peril increases. It certainly appears that official leadership, absent some compelling force, has no intention of changing course.

Set against that is the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons and the determination of citizens around the world to use the treaty as a lever to pry the nuclear weapons states loose from their long-standing, ossified positions. Since Honduras became the fiftieth state to ratify the treaty, triggering its January 22 entry into force, two more nations have ratified the treaty, and more ratifications are on the horizon.

Despite the fear and stubborn recalcitrance of the weapons powers, the momentum of history continues to grow. Nuclear weapons have been stigmatized by the treaty, and pressure will grow, first on states that have a subsidiary role in the nuclear powers’ various positions, and then on the nuclear powers themselves.

This won’t happen on its own. It will happen only if we harness the promise and the energy of the treaty into a new movement for nuclear abolition.