On January 22, 2022, the Nuclear Ban Treaty will turn one year old! Although the United Nations voted to approve the Treaty in 2017, it didn’t enter into force until 90 days after it reached the 50th ratification. That put the date at January 22, 2021—the date the world began the transition from the Era of the Great Threat to the Age of the Ban Treaty.

Last year, OREPA worked with Nukewatch, the Nuclear Resister, and the Alliance for Nuclear Accountability, with support from ICAN and ReThink Media, to encourage actions and events across the country. We created a yellow banner and other resources, held national zooms to spread the word, and did our own events, first at the University of Tennessee and then in Oak Ridge.

When the day was over, we were delighted to find reports from more than 100 actions across the country. The message of the day was simple: Nuclear Weapons are Illegal!

AND NOW

Since then, we have been working to establish that effort as an ongoing movement—the Nuclear Ban Treaty Collaborative has four active working groups. The Days of Action Working Group has been preparing for January 22, 2022; if you visit OREPA’s web site you’ll find all kinds of resources that will be used around the country.

The message this year is “Join the Treaty!” In some form or fashion, that is likely to be our message every January 22 until the day we don’t have to make that demand because the US has, in fact, joined the Treaty.

Will we ever get there? It seems a lot of dominoes have to fall before we topple the giant resistance of the nuclear weapons states. But some of them appear to be wavering. More on that in a minute.

JANUARY 22 IN OAK RIDGE AND...

But first—what are we doing in Oak Ridge on January 22? The several dozen people who came last year will recognize it as a reprise—we will have a public reading of excerpts from the Treaty and we will protest the ongoing production of nuclear weapons at the Y-12 Nuclear Bomb Plant with Yellow Xs on the fence.

Our action will take place at the intersection of Scarboro Road and Bear Creek Road, the main entrance to the bomb plant, starting at 2:00pm. We will be observing all appropriate COVID precautions, so please wear a mask if you join us.

Can’t join us in person in Oak Ridge? Not a problem. You can be part of the day of actions without even leaving your living room, unless you need to get a pen from another room. That’s right, writing letters is a very important thing you can do—and one that very few people actually take the time to do.

A letter to the editor will remind people that nuclear weapons are still a threat, and can also point...
out how much money is being wasted on bombs. You can find a template for a letter to the editor on OREPA’s web site under “Resources for Action in the Age of the Ban Treaty.”

A letter to your Congressman/woman asking them to support the Ban Treaty (there is a bill in the House) or to your Senator asking why so much money is being spent to fund a new nuclear arms race when we claim not to be able to afford child care support for working parents—either or both would be great. Again, templates with suggested language are on the web site.

We only have a few champions in Congress, and we could use some more—but no one is going to step up unless they are nudged and supported by constituents.

We need more people like Senator Ed Markey, who addressed his colleagues in the Senate this month as they debated the latest Defense spending bill: “We should not accept the logic that says we can afford to build a $100 billion dollar intercontinental ballistic missile that will never be used, but we cannot possibly afford paid family leave that Americans desperately need. Universal pre-kindergarten is too expensive but padding the wallets of defense firm executives with taxpayer dollars is money well spent. That’s insane. And immoral.”

You can get more ideas and share your action on Facebook: look for Nuclear Ban Treaty Days of Action.

THE POWER OF THE PEN

Why write a letter to the editor? Because hundreds of people who otherwise would never have given a thought to nuclear weapons will pause after reading your letter. And maybe, just maybe, one of them will decide to do something...

STEPS TO ZERO

The path to finally getting rid of nuclear weapons is not likely to be a short one. But there are milestones along the way we can already identify, and we are approaching one of them.

In March, the First Meeting of States Parties will take place in Vienna, Austria. It will not be a long meeting, but it will be important. Voices of those who have been affected by the use of the bomb — in Japan and around the world where nuclear tests were carried out — will be highlighted.

Almost as important as the activity will be the roster of attendees. Because acknowledging the Treaty is the first step for nuclear weapons states and their allies. In the last month, both Norway and Germany have indicated their intention to attend the First Meeting of States Parties. This is a big breakthrough—two NATO nations, undoubtedly getting strong pushback from the United States, have determined to go to the meeting. Why? At least partly because their citizens are demanding it.

Which underscores the need for us to build an abolition constituency in the United States to press our government to face the Treaty. The US has no intention of attending the First Meeting of States Parties—we are scared to death of the Treaty that will require us to give up our nuclear weapons and meet the world on more equal terms.

Beyond the First Meeting, the next steps will be for the five NATO countries that host US nuclear weapon on their soil to ask the US to take them away. This, too, is a possibility. Organizing has been going on for some time, and in several countries the Green party is an active part of the government.

When the countries around the world who are under the ”security umbrellas” of the nine nuclear powers tell those powers to take their weapons home, the pressure on the weapons states to join the treaty will rise.

In the end, it will require external and internal pressure to move the United States. OREPA, and the Nuclear Ban Treaty Collaborative we are helping to build, is committed to putting ever-more pressure on the United States to join the Treaty.

OREPA’s newsletter is printed four times a year in Knoxville, Tennessee and published on-line at orepa.org. Contributions to OREPA’s work may be sent to P O Box 5743, Oak Ridge, TN 37831 or may be made securely on-line at OREPA’s web site: www.orepa.org. All gifts to OREPA are tax deductible.

The Oak Ridge Environmental Peace Alliance is a grassroots nonprofit organization working to educate and organize people about nuclear weapons production in Oak Ridge, Tennessee. We advocate an end to weapons production and we work to create and nurture nonviolent community in East Tennessee.
New Y-12 contract awarded

It’s a frying pan/fire kind of story as new Management & Operations contractor for the Y-12 bomb plant is announced by the National Nuclear Security Administration.

And the winner isn’t…

This time last year, the University of Tennessee’s President, Randy Boyd, announced that UT was partnering with Texas A&M to submit a bid for the $28 billion Management and Operations contract for the Y-12 Nuclear Weapons Complex in Oak Ridge.

On November 20, the National Nuclear Security Administration announced the winner—and it wasn’t UT.

Even before the University of Tennessee announced it was joining in the contract bid, it was in the nuclear bomb making business.

According to the Schools of Mass Destruction report issued by the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN), the current Y-12 operator, Consolidated Nuclear Security, considered UT a “key university partner.” In a 2011 Memorandum of Understanding, plans were laid out for the school and the bomb plant to expand their partnership; in 2014 an article noted that UT brings “valuable expertise to Y-12 in a variety of disciplines, while providing unique educational and research opportunities for UT students and faculty.”

So when the National Nuclear Security Administration announced in late November that it was awarding the Y-12 management contract to Nuclear Production One, LLC, eliminating the University from the competition, it was only slightly good news.

OREPA and the UT student group SPEAK (Students Promoting Environmental Action in Knoxville) had mounted opposition to the university’s bid, writing letters to the President and the Trustees. SPEAK published a piece in the school’s newspaper, and in early November, Rachel Stewart, president of SPEAK, addressed the Trustees at their annual meeting, appealing to the University to withdraw its bid. The Trustees did not respond to Rachel, neither have they replied to OREPA’s letter or SPEAK’s.

Now that the contract appears to be off the table, we are back where we were before—the University of Tennessee is providing support for the manufacture of nuclear weapons.

OREPA will continue our campaign to get UT out of the bomb business. And we will continue to be active in the Nuclear Ban Treaty Collaborative’s Working Group, connecting with activists at universities across the country to address the complicity of schools in the production of nuclear weapons, now declared illegal by the international community.

And the winner is…

The contract UT didn’t win went to Nuclear Production One, LLC, a corporate entity created especially for the contract. Nuclear Production One is actually two companies—Fluor and Amentum. Both companies have long experience working at Department of Energy and National Nuclear Security sites.

In their press releases announcing their success in landing the Y-12/Pantex contract, they touted the expertise they would bring to the job. “With a strong footing in nearly all of the DOE offices that this award can support, it is a natural fit for Fluor,” said the president of their Government Group, Tom D’Agostino.

That name might ring a bell to people who have been monitoring nuclear weapons work for a while. Before joining Fluor in 2013, D’Agostino was … that’s right, the Administrator at the National Nuclear Security Administration! He’s not the only former NNSA official to have had a role at Fluor, just the highest ranking one.

Other sites that Amentum and Fluor have worked at, mostly in cleanup activities, include Savannah River, Hanford, Idaho National Lab, Fernald, Portsmouth, Paducah, Los Alamos, and Rocky Flats.
In celebrating their contract win, the companies spoke of their experience, but they neglected to mention the dark side of that experience. A 2016 article by Patrick Malone at the Center for Public Integrity noted that Fluor’s Hanford subsidiary paid $1.1 million to settle a complaint that it had lobbied government with federal funding; the woman who blew the whistle on the illegal activity was awarded $200,000. Fluor denied wrongdoing.

It turns out that settlement was only the tip of the iceberg. Fluor, a company that celebrated its contract to build nuclear weapons that will destroy all life on the planet if ever used, that tagged its news release #FluorBuildsABetterWorld, was fined $33,000 at Fernald for nuclear safety violations. And in 2020, Fluor was fined almost $600,000 for nuclear safety deficiencies at Idaho National Lab.

One web site that tracks corporate violations by government contractors noted Fluor has racked up more than $28,000,000 in fines since 2000, including nearly $2 million for “nuclear safety violations,” $4 million for “kickbacks and bribery,” and nearly $10 million for False Claims Act violations.

While all of these corporate crimes are troubling, perhaps most unsettling are the repeat nuclear safety violations—nuclear safety lapses are among the reasons the current Y-12 contract was not renewed.

The Defense Nuclear Facilities Safety Board reports almost weekly discoveries of criticality safety violations and issues. The most recent available DNFSB weekly reports, November 5th and November 12th, each record a nuclear criticality safety infraction. Unfortunately, events like this are not anomalies—they are almost routine at Y-12.

Not to be outdone by Fluor, its partner, Amentum has a track record of its own. Amentum’s parent company, AECOM, has been fined more than $160 million since 2000! The fines range from False Claims Act violations ($109,395,164 in fines for 9 violations) to $20 million dollars for fraud, just shy of $1,000,000 for environmental offenses and, yes, of course, $3,866,250 for 12 nuclear safety violations at Hanford, Savannah River, and other Department of Energy sites.

Drumroll, please...

Meet OREPA’s new organizer: Cody Dishner

It has been a long time since OREPA was financially secure enough to expand our staff, and the timing could not be better!

By the time you read this, we will have a new organizer on staff—Cody Dishner! Cody is new to OREPA, but not to activism—he has worked on campaigns against the Keystone Pipeline and Chevron.

He comes to us from Athens, Tennessee, where he has been the acting managing director of the Library. Before that, his résumé included time with the Peace Corps in Eswatini (formerly called Swaziland in English). While there, he drew fire for his work with women’s rights activists.

Cody will be responsible for building OREPA’s membership with a special emphasis on outreach to the next generation of nuclear abolitionists.

OREPA President Kevin Collins, who led the hiring team, said, “We’re excited to have Cody join the OREPA staff based on his variety of experience, and we look forward to seeing what he brings to the community as an organizer.”

During the interview process, Cody noted that he opposes nuclear weapons as both a matter of conscience and a matter of economics so he should fit right in.

December 16 is Cody’s starting date, and we will be indoctrina— uh, orienting and training him for the first few weeks while he is settling in with OREPA and Knoxville. But if you attend any OREPA events and see a new, smiling face, please walk up and introduce yourself to Cody!

Securing the right to vote was at the heart of the civil rights movement. In towns and cities, White power was challenged in marches to City Hall and county courthouses by people who were simply trying to register to vote. Time and again, White power responded with vicious violence. The passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 was seen as a major victory for the movement.

Today, that blood-soaked victory is in peril. Efforts to suppress the vote in communities of color take many forms—redistricting, misinformation campaigns, purges of voting rolls, restrictions on early voting and vote-by-mail or absentee voting, voter registration restrictions, denial of the vote to convicted felons, and direct challenges to voting outcomes.

None of these efforts to "preserve the integrity of our elections" is aimed at White people.

The work of Stacy Abrams in Georgia since 2016 is the other side of the coin. Abrams mounted the largest voter engagement/registration/turnout effort in decades, winning both Georgia Senate seats for the Democratic Party and, in the process, reminding party leadership that true power rests in the hands of the people, people often overlooked by politicians who go to Washington, DC, and, after a few years, begin to think they alone hold and wield power.

OREPA's 2022 Community Conversation, on Friday, January 14, 2022, will focus on actions we—all of us—can take to defend the right of every citizen to vote and every vote to count.

The theme for the evening is: Every voice heard; every vote counted—securing power in the political arena.

We have invited members of Knoxville’s City Council, the Knox County Election Commission, and leaders in the community to serve on a panel to discuss the state of voting rights in 2022. The Conversation this year will be a hybrid event, with a small group participating in person at the Beck Center and a larger zoom audience that will be invited to join in the question/answer/discussion period following the panel’s presentations.

This will mark fourteen years of Community Conversations during Knoxville’s MLK celebrations;

This year’s conversation, organized by OREPA, will be co-sponsored by the Beck Center and Knoxville’s MLK Commemorative Commission.

The ballot alone will not secure justice or equality—that’s why the movement didn’t stop in 1965. But the ballot is crucial to building the political power that is a significant piece of the justice equation.

The Conversation is not the only thing OREPA does to celebrate King's birthday — our giant puppets are the hit of the MLK parade each year, and, at least so far, we are planning to have a parade in Knoxville on January 17!

Every voice heard; every vote counted

22 Years of Sunday Vigils!

Every year, on the last Sunday in November, the Sunday vigil begins with an anniversary photo, and then we begin a trip down memory lane, recalling vigils past, people fondly remembered, the reason we are here, week after week, month after month, year after year—to be a persistent presence for peace, a witness to life at the main entrance to a bomb plant that is preparing to destroy the planet.
by Marylia Kelley and Ralph Hutchison

More than fifty years after his death, The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. is remembered as a civil rights icon, recalled for his stirring words at the Lincoln Memorial in 1963 when he declared “I have a dream!”

Beyond that, for lots of people, things get blurry. When an MLK parade is led by the local high school ROTC honor guard, equipped with guns, in full military regalia, one wonders what the apostle of nonviolence who decried war in all forms, might have said about that.

“Civilization plunged into the abyss of annihilation. The alternative to disarmament may well be a civilization plunged into the abyss of annihilation.”

There’s no need to guess, though, about what King would have said about the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, and we might suspect he would not have been displeased that the anniversary of the Treaty’s entry into force falls just a week after his January 15th birthday, on January 22.

Here are just a few of the things King said about nuclear weapons back in the day. In the last Sunday sermon he preached, days before his assassination, King said:

“It is no longer a choice, my friends, between violence or nonviolence. It is either nonviolence or nonexistence, and the alternative to disarmament, the alternative to a greater suspension of nuclear tests, the alternative to strengthening the United Nations and thereby disarming the whole world may well be a civilization plunged into the abyss of annihilation, and our earthly habitat would be transformed into an inferno that even the mind of Dante could not imagine.”

King was not a late-comer to the discussion about nuclear weapons. In the early days of his public ministry, in 1957, he said:

“The development and use of nuclear weapons should be banned. It cannot be disputed that a full-scale nuclear war would be utterly catastrophic. Hundreds and millions of people would be killed outright by the blast and heat, and by the ionizing radiation produced at the instant of the explosion . . . Even countries not directly hit by bombs would suffer through global fall-outs. All of this leads me to say that the principal objective of all nations must be the total abolition of war. War must be finally eliminated or the whole of mankind will be plunged into the abyss of annihilation.”

King’s objections to nuclear weapons were not superficial. He understood the devastating effects of the bombs and the reality that the effects of nuclear war would not be limited to the combatants; they would be global. In that sense, he was decades ahead of his time—scientists now know that even a limited nuclear exchange will trigger a nuclear winter that would cause a global famine.

King also called for his religious colleagues to join him in his denunciation of nuclear weapons. “I am convinced that the church cannot remain silent while mankind (sic) faces the threat of being plunged into the abyss of nuclear annihilation,” he wrote in 1963 in the Christian Century. “If the church is true to its mission, it must call for an end to the arms race.”

Unfortunately, King’s statements about nuclear weapons could be delivered today with equal cogency and even more urgency. Now, nine nations possess nuclear weapons, and they are deployed on hair-trigger alert around the globe. Military experts like Admiral William Perry and analysts at the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists agree that the threat of nuclear catastrophe is greater now than at any time in our history.

If you want an MLK sound-bite on nuclear weapons, here’s what he said about nuclear war in an article in Liberation magazine, 1959:

“I have unequivocally declared my hatred for this most colossal of all evils.”

Want to celebrate with Action?

We can hardly imagine a better way to celebrate King’s birthday than taking action! The two anniversaries falling so close together in January are a perfect opportunity to reclaim King’s legacy and educate people about the Ban Treaty—by writing a letter to the editor of your local paper. Here’s a sample: feel free to adapt it or submit it as it is!

To the Editor:

On January 15 we pause to celebrate the life of Martin Luther King, Jr., an apostle for nonviolence. And now that holiday is joined by another reason to celebrate, just one week later. On January 22, 2021, the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons entered into force; this landmark treaty will be celebrated around the globe this year and for years to come.

King would be pleased. He decried nuclear weapons, calling them the most colossal of all evils, noting correctly that if they were used, they would plunge humanity into “the abyss of annihilation.”

The United States has not yet signed the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, but it should. US leadership could deliver the world from the threat of the abyss. It would be a great way to honor Dr. King—and to preserve future generations.