

Linking the Left Forum and Thomas Paine

by Victor Madeson

This year the Left Forum is scheduled for May 20–22, at John Jay College of City University of New York, www.leftforum.org/. I hope that many of us can attend on the 21st or 22nd, maybe in connection with a panel, or for mid-year planning and exchange of materials. In passing conversation with organizer Seth Adler, I proposed that Left Forum be renamed the “Thomas Paine Forum.” It seems unlikely for now, but offers a direction to form a 501 c 4 organization.

For now, a national Thomas Paine Actor project was mentioned at the Annual Meeting. My vague idea, years ago, was like a “Marx in Soho” (by Howard Zinn) stage play, but there was low enthusiasm for a similar production on Paine; even if there were involvement of prominent individuals (Bill Moyers, Harvey Kaye, Eric Foner, or others). My conclusion was that a long time horizon was required, including a business plan. An intent - still vague - for 2016 would aim towards having one actor per Congressional District prepared to help portray Thomas Paine, so that several could work together to do it for local schools. Three weeks ago I watched Todd Carpien, who has done a number of professional roles, present an excellent portrayal (in period costume) at a local Toastmaster's group (it was based on Ian Ruskin, but that need not be a focus). Todd would be willing to help on the planning and I know of several individuals in New York City with a similar interest and some resources for such an effort. No doubt other board members can add more. This could provide an agenda for the workshop or be included in a broader panel discussion. Both these actors and our group can particularly focus on “What Would Thomas Paine Do?” using the springboard of You Tube video, www.youtube.com/watch?v=itvtwoVCTxM “Why Thomas Paine's Common Sense Is Important” (Chris Hedges, Cornel West, Richard Wolff) in 2014 and our TPF panel at Left Forum 2012, “Thomas Paine: Contemporary Debates, Controversies and Relevance” (Frances Chiu, J. Ward Regan, Michael DeDora).

The 2016 Left Forum conference theme is: **Rage, Rebellion, Revolution: Organizing our Power**. It promises to offer something fundamentally different from conventional politics and the media hype of a presidential election year. After all, something profound is shaking from the streets and the offices, from campuses, factories, and stores, as more people than ever are growing impatient with grotesque inequalities of today's corporate system, its oppression of vast populations, and its destruction of the commons: from *Occupy Wall Street* to *Black Lives Matter* and a *Fight for \$15*; from escalating climate justice demands to the massive national support for Bernie, who proudly wears a Democratic-Socialist label. Following in the tradition of Thomas Paine, the Left knows that we need to reject our corrupting corporatism by embracing a program for change: which entails the conscious avoidance of catastrophic wars and a capitalism that no longer works for the 99%. And, like Thomas Paine, modern citizens reject “charters” that grant endless cycles of depressions, unemployment, and austerity. The Forum will build on the growing consciousness that basic social problems are looming in ways that traditional politicians, journalists, and academics have barely conceded --and that there are far better alternatives. We should join to share, discuss, and debate those alternatives and how best to achieve them.

We should at least encourage attendance in this worthwhile Left Forum conference. As in 2015, I am prepared to buy a block of tickets for an “early bird” discount price. Hopefully, many more than in previous years. All feedback is welcome.

Victor Madeson, TPF Vice-President, has organized Thomas Paine panels at the Left Forum for several years. The panels have been well received and several participants have joined TPF.