

# Albany County Issues a Peace Dividend Proclamation

By Lawrence S. Wittner, [Foreign Policy in Focus](#), October 17, 2012

On October 9, 2012, the legislature of Albany County, New York approved a [proclamation](#) calling upon Congress to withdraw U.S. troops from Afghanistan, cut the U.S. military budget, and use the savings to fund vital public programs at home.

This official demand for new national priorities—by a county of 304,000 people—was not entirely novel. Within the past year or so, the U.S. Conference of Mayors passed a similar resolution, as did [the governments of numerous cities](#), including Pittsburgh, Los Angeles, Cleveland, Hartford, and Portland. Even so, the idea of “moving the money” from war to peace had largely fallen off the political radar screen. The Albany County Peace Dividend Proclamation, as it was soon dubbed, has helped bring it back to public attention.

The Albany campaign began this past July, when—in my capacity as a national board member of Peace Action, America’s largest peace organization—I learned that the city of Philadelphia had just passed a “move the money” resolution. As Doug Bullock, a long-time friend of mine in Albany’s peace and social justice community, was a member of the Albany county legislature, I passed along this news to him, suggesting rather casually that he might want to promote a similar resolution on the Albany county level. He replied that he’d be happy to try it, but needed a public campaign to back him up. Could we put one together?

Actually, we could. I was well connected within the Albany region’s peace community, serving on the steering committee of Upper Hudson Peace Action and dealing frequently with the leaders of other local peace groups. In addition, I had strong credentials in the local labor movement, serving as executive secretary of the Albany County Central Federation of Labor (AFL-CIO), as a member of the executive committee of the Albany chapter of United University Professions, and as a long-time activist in the Solidarity Committee of the Capital District (an independent organization rooted in the local labor movement).

Moreover, in recent decades, Albany’s peace and social justice community had grown ever more intertwined, amassing a good deal of overlap in membership and a strong “movement culture” among the region’s various progressive organizations. And with national polls showing the general public fed up with the Afghanistan War and preferring military cuts to cuts in social spending, the peace movement was more in tune with popular sentiment than ever.

Yet significant factors weighed against the possibility of success. Although Albany County is heavily Democratic, much of the local Democratic Party is controlled by machine politicians who might just as well have been Republicans. Doug's strong antiwar stance has not been the norm. Indeed, in 2008, when he tried to get the legislature to pass a resolution opposing the Iraq War, the legislators not only strongly rejected it, but banned all future resolutions!

### **Corralling Allies**

Despite the obstacles, we decided to move forward with a Peace Dividend Proclamation campaign—one that would involve getting a majority of Albany County's 39 legislators to sign an official statement on behalf of the county. After securing volunteers from Upper Hudson Peace Action and the Solidarity Committee, we conferred with staff members from Peace Action of New York State and national Peace Action, who helped us pull together the relevant statistics and wording for the proclamation. Once the proclamation was in final form, Doug circulated it to potentially sympathetic legislators and—to our delight—secured six additional co-sponsors.

The next step was to recruit friendly organizations to join the campaign. We divided up a list of peace, labor, religious, environmental, political, student, tenants' rights, and other organizations among ourselves. We approached them about not only endorsing the proclamation, but also sending a speaker and turning out supporters for the September 10 meeting of the county legislature.

In Albany County, immediately preceding the official meeting of the legislature, there is a public forum during which citizens are free to speak to the assembled legislators on any issue. We used this opportunity to good effect, presenting 10 speakers from well-known labor organizations, peace groups, and constituencies. To offset possible charges that the proclamation "disrespected the troops," we drew upon two veterans as speakers—one of whom identified himself as coming from "Vietnam – Class of 1968." We also distributed the proclamation and a list of 19 local organizations that had endorsed it.

Even if we hadn't secured any signatures that evening, it would have been a useful exercise, for the assembled legislators were forced to sit through 50 minutes' worth of lectures on the costs of war—both economic and human—and the need to fund social programs.

But in fact we came away that evening with 18 signatures out of the 20 that we needed for a majority. That gave us until October 9, the next meeting of the legislature and our self-imposed deadline, to gather just two more signatures. And that wouldn't be difficult, would it?

Unfortunately, it proved very difficult. In the following weeks, Doug brought the proclamation to legislative committee meetings for additional signatures, but no one else was willing to sign it. Among the Democratic holdouts, some said that they did not believe that issues of war and peace should be addressed by a county legislature. One Democrat angrily denounced the proclamation as “unpatriotic,” claiming that she had been told that by the county executive. Another said that it would undermine President Obama's reelection. A few said they were thinking about it.

Among the 10 Republican legislators—none of whom had signed the proclamation—there was even stiffer resistance. Some simply dismissed the proclamation as the Democratic presidential campaign platform. Others said that they would be willing to sign it if the savings on military programs were not rechanneled to domestic social programs.

Eventually we picked up an additional Democratic signature, bringing us to 19 out of the 20 we needed, but we began to feel a bit desperate as the October 9 deadline neared. Would we ultimately fail, just one signature short of our goal?

### **Closing the Gap**

In the final days, we mobilized some of our most powerful organizational endorsers—the AFL-CIO, the Interfaith Alliance of New York State, the Working Families Party (which, under New York law, can and does make cross-party endorsements, often of Democrats), Veterans for Peace, and United University Professions—to send letters to holdout legislators. We pored over the mailing lists of key groups, identified the constituents of targeted legislators, and called upon them to phone these legislators and urge them to sign the proclamation. We asked other groups (such as the Albany Friends Meeting and Bethlehem Neighbors for Peace) to mobilize their members for the same purpose. We drew upon other legislators and people with political connections to pressure key holdouts to sign. Finally, we scheduled a press conference and rally outside the doors of the legislature in the half hour just before the legislature was to meet. Then, on the evening of October 8, Doug phoned to tell me that he had just spoken with a legislator who said he was going to sign on October 9. And on the afternoon of that final day, he did.



Our [rally](#) turned into a victory celebration. At the legislature's Public Forum, we distributed a list of [29 endorsing organizations](#) (ranging from the RFK Democratic Club to Women Against War and the Peace and Justice Commission of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Albany) and brought in another battery of speakers lauding the proclamation. By the end of the night, the proclamation had [22 signers](#) (all of them Democrats), a solid majority. On October 10, in accordance with the terms of the proclamation, the Albany County Clerk mailed off copies to President Obama, New York Governor Andrew Cuomo, the New York congressional delegation, the New York State Legislature, and all government departments in Albany County.

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