

Louisiana teacher jailed for speaking out at school board meeting

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A public school teacher in Louisiana was summarily arrested, manhandled, handcuffed and carted off to jail on Monday, January 8, during a public school board meeting in Vermilion Parish, 150 miles west of New Orleans.

Deyshia Hargrave, an English language arts middle school teacher, was victimized for voicing her opposition to a proposed pay increase for the school superintendent and citing 10 years of pay freezes for school employees.

The entire incident, including teacher Hargrave's well-chosen words, was caught on video and has gone viral. (Second comments by Hargrave, which lead to arrest begin a 6:15).

The Vermilion Parish school board meeting was packed with schoolteachers opposed to a nearly \$38,000 raise for Superintendent Jerome Puyau who already makes \$110,190. Teachers in the parish, members of the Louisiana Association of Educators, have not received a raise in a decade.

Hargrave opened her remarks by identifying herself as a teacher at Rene Rost Middle Schools. In a calm and deliberate voice, she stated, "I have a serious issue with the superintendent or any person in a position of leadership getting any type of raise. I feel like it is a slap in the face to the teachers, the cafeteria workers and any support staff we have. We work very hard with very little...The last few years, I've seen class sizes grow enormously."

Referring to claims that the district's improved ratings justify the pay increase, she said, "I don't care if the performance targets were met, you are making our job even more difficult. We are jumping through hoops and *we* are continuously meeting those goals...It is a sad, sad day in Vermilion Parish... *We* are doing the work, the students are doing the work.

"At the top—that's not where kids learn. It is in the classroom. And those teachers, like myself, are not getting a dime from that. That is unspeakable.

"My second concern is that you are actually taking this vote with a man who just, by chance, knew so-and-so, however that happened. The people didn't put him in. If he wants to run and the people put him in, then you can do your contract and your raises and whatever you deem necessary.

"I feel that I am speaking on behalf of more than just myself...Many teachers are scared to speak out...I want to use the word 'absurd' to describe even considering giving someone a raise when teachers are working this hard and not getting a dime."

The video indicates that Hargrave indeed spoke for many teachers. In a similar critical vein, another person asked about the superintendent's last evaluation, but was shut down by the board President Anthony Fontana, who claimed that questions, rather than comments, were "out of order." The board then began the vote to approve Puyau's contract and to discuss the amount of the increase. In the midst of the discussion, a teacher is heard to loudly point out, "This is not a democratic government then," to the general agreement of the crowd.

In the course of discussion, Hargrave was recognized again by the chairman. "How are you going to give this raise? When I started ELA [English Language Arts] we had 21 kids in a class, and now we are having 29. And we haven't gotten raises. You are basically taking our money," the teacher concluded.

Fontana, who voted in favor of Puyau's contract, attempted to prevent further discussion at this point, interjecting, "Stop right now, this is not germane to what is on the agenda," he declared to the growing anger of the assembled teachers who shouted, "Yes it

is!”

“What’s on the agenda is the superintendent’s contract,” he rejoined, to which the teachers replied, “With a raise!” “I am [speaking to the point],” Hargrave adds, still speaking calmly but forcefully. “How do you take a raise—you are basically taking from the teachers, from the employees under you, when you have class sizes that big? That speaks to what you just voted on,” she pointed out.

At this point, a uniformed marshal approaches Hargrave threatening, “Leave or I will forcibly remove you.” The teachers around her shout, “She was recognized.” And as she is being forced to leave the room, many comments follow—“It’s pretty sad,” “This is the most disgraceful thing I have ever seen.”

Shortly later, the room erupts as someone shouts, “They’re putting her in handcuffs.” As we see in the video, Hargrave is screaming in horror. The camera shows the teacher laying prone in the hallway being handcuffed, and we hear the deputy stating after the fact, and incredibly, “Stop resisting.”

Hargrave was carted away in a police car, taken to jail and booked with “remaining after being forbidden” and “resisting an officer.” She posted bond as charges were being considered, however, Abbeville’s city prosecutor, Ike Funderburk, subsequently stated she would not be formally charged or prosecuted. He attempted to distance the city from the marshal, who is a school resource officer and employed by the school board, claiming he was “not acting in any official capacity on behalf of the city of Abbeville.”

After Hargrave was removed, the board voted to approve Puyau’s new contract and increase his pay from \$110,190 to \$140,188.

After the meeting Fontana defended his actions, comparing the manhandling and arrest of the school teacher and parent with the removal of an unruly student from a classroom. “If a teacher has the authority to send a student, who is acting up and she can’t control, out of the classroom to the principal’s office, under our policy we have the same rules,” Fontana said. “We have certain rules: three-minute speech, it has to be civilized, it can’t get off target, it has to be related to the issue before the board.”

The marshal, Fontana insisted, “did exactly what he was hired to do...She’s the one who made the choices that got her arrested.”

The ACLU of Louisiana released a statement stating, “Deyshia Hargrave’s expulsion from a public meeting and subsequent arrest are unacceptable and raise serious constitutional concerns. The Constitution prohibits the government from punishing or retaliating against people for expressing their views, and the fact that a schoolteacher was arrested at a public meeting of the school board is especially troubling.”

The fact that the video immediately went viral is an indication of how widely Hargrave’s comments resonate among tens of millions of workers who have seen their living standards decline and essential services starved of resources. No matter how small the official institution, its instinctive response to any challenge to inequality is the police baton and repression.



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