Teacher's arrest in Louisiana: Another day, another outrage

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What could be more "American" than a local school board town hall meeting? The type of scene portrayed in a Norman Rockwell painting—democracy in action, an opportunity for ordinary citizens to air their complaints and have their voices heard, the embodiment of "civic duty" and accountability. In today's America, however, Rockwell, witnessing the fate of Louisiana teacher Deyshia Hargrave, might be driven to adopt more the style of Francisco Goya or Hieronymus Bosch.

At a school board meeting held this past Monday, the courageous teacher at Rene A. Rost Middle School in southern Louisiana's Vermilion Parish had the temerity to question, with calm but determined insistence, why the local school board had voted to give the district's superintendent, Jerome Puyau, a $38,000 raise on top of his $110,000 salary.

Hargrave, an English language arts instructor who was named the 2015-16 teacher of the year at her middle school, noted that the decision was a "slap in the face to the teachers, the cafeteria workers and any support staff" who are "not getting a dime." Class sizes in the district have jumped from 21 to 29 students in recent years, she noted, while teachers have not received a pay raise in a decade.

Like so many school districts, Vermilion Parish, deep in Louisiana's "oil patch," faces a multimillion-dollar deficit, drained of resources from spending cuts and slumping tax revenues. Of the pay raise, Hargrave asked, "How are you going to take that money? Because it is basically taking it out of the pockets of teachers."

Hargrave was ordered to shut up. When she protested, a deputy marshal, under the instructions of the school board president, told her to leave. After she complied, the marshal pushed her to the ground, handcuffed her and put her in a patrol car, accusing her of "remaining after having been forbidden" and "resisting an officer." The whole process was recorded on video, which has since been viewed by millions of people.

Every day such outrages are repeated in countless forms. News coverage of the events in Louisiana was still at its peak when a new video spread across social media showing an incapacitated and evidently impoverished woman deposited, in the freezing cold and at night, at a Baltimore bus stop. She was left there by security staff working for the University of Maryland Medical Center—apparently an example of the practice of "patient dumping," or the forcible discharge of individuals lacking insurance.

The fate of Hargrave has struck a popular chord. An online petition, "Why I stand with Deyshia Hargrave," has already been signed by more than 20,000 people, including nearly 4,000 in Louisiana. Signatories came from across the US and the world, including from Western and Eastern Europe, Russia, Brazil, India, Australia, South Africa and Algeria.

The statement by the middle school teacher that "*We* are doing the work" and "*You* are making our jobs more difficult" resonates with the daily experiences of working class people in the US and around the world.

What gives school board officials the right to siphon off resources and shut down protests? Their petty larceny is inspired by far greater larceny, their authoritarian disposition gains sustenance from a broader social environment.

Tens of millions of workers suffer from declining living standards as the stock market blows past 25,000 and corporate America celebrates a massive tax cut. The population is hit by disaster after disaster and confronts the indifference of corporate-controlled governments. Essential services like education and

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health care are starved of resources, even as the political representatives of the corporate and financial elite, whether they call themselves Democrats or Republicans, find limitless resources for bank bailouts, tax giveaways and wars.

The ruling elites are so accustomed to doing whatever they please without resistance that they respond to the first signs of opposition with the police baton. This class contempt for the concerns and democratic rights of working people percolates from the White House and halls of Congress in Washington down to the level of the petty bureaucrat tasked with enforcing budget cuts and austerity.

If this is the response of a local school board to the challenge of a small group of teachers, what would the response of a billionaire like Amazon's Jeff Bezos be to a real rebellion of the working class and a mass movement that threatened his wealth and the dictatorial rule of his class? Bezos wouldn't call out deputy marshals and hired security guards, he'd call out the US Army.

Such injustices and outrages against personal dignity, the diverse consequences of a common cause, social inequality, build up in the consciousness of the working class. And when this sentiment emerges in political form, the target will not just be local school officials.

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