

“Keep fighting, we have to come together”

Educators denounce attack on Louisiana school teacher Deyshia Hargrave

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Readers of the *World Socialist Web Site Teacher Newsletter* have expressed their solidarity with Deyshia Hargrave, the Louisiana teacher who was violently manhandled, arrested and jailed for speaking out at a local school board meeting last week. Hargrave was hauled off to jail for having the temerity to challenge a pay raise for the school superintendent while teachers in the Vermilion Parish school district have suffered a decade-long pay freeze and repeated budget cuts.

For many educators, the attack on Deyshia is symbolic of the increasing attacks on democratic rights and growing social inequality within education and society as a whole. Thousands have denounced the attack on the First Amendment rights of the young English teacher and given statements identifying with the universal truths she spoke. Nearly 35,000 in the US and around the world have signed the petition demanding an apology from the school board.

Several teachers have written to the *WSWS Teacher Newsletter* to register their opposition to this outrage. Selim from Norway wrote, “Shocking treatment of a fellow teacher/educator.” Fernando from Chile stated, “What a shame, the boss had no better arguments than to expel her and under arrest. What democracy is this.”

Another reader of the *WSWS*, Joanne in Florida, emphasized that public education is being starved while there is no limit to federal handouts to the wealthy, “I was a teacher for 16 years and finally gave it up in disgust. The restrictions on teaching increased, the responsibilities increased, and benefits were cut. If we got a raise after fighting for it for months, it was not enough to keep up with years of inflation.

“While we couldn’t afford books for students, the billionaire France family got \$40,000,000 in taxpayer money to improve the Daytona Speedway. This type of

subsidizing the rich continues. At the same time, each time a new superintendent of schools was hired, that person would start at a higher rate (over \$100,000) of pay with enormous benefits. The boards and politicians help each other to get richer while stealing from the rest of us.”

A Detroit public school teacher spoke on the parallels between the Louisiana teachers’ struggle and that of Detroit teachers. “I do not think there was anything inflammatory in what she said. To me what they did violated her First Amendment rights. She had a right to speak out. I would say to her ‘Keep fighting, we have to come together.’

“I have been a teacher in Detroit Public Schools for 16 years and I can definitely relate to what happened to her.

“It is now almost two years since the sickout by Detroit teachers over conditions in the schools and other things. I heard we made the news all over for standing up for what is right,” she said referring to the “viral” reach on social media of teachers’ photos of Detroit Public Schools rooms with black mold, falling ceiling tiles and thoroughly unsafe conditions.

Teachers organized their 2015-16 job actions independently of and in defiance of the Detroit Federation of Teachers and used social media to publicize their struggle and coordinate the sickouts. Michigan has a punitive anti-strike law and dozens of teachers were summoned to court in January 2016 and their jobs were threatened in a legal vendetta aimed at smothering the protests and the popular support teachers were winning among workers and young people in Detroit and beyond.

Explaining the financial threats against protesting teachers, she continued, “They threatened us, too. They told us they were going to fine us, something like \$250 a day each for walking out. I thought what they did to us was a way of trying to have control over us, to keep us at

the bottom of the barrel.

“We had already been hit by a 10 percent pay cut, which they took from us through a so-called loan to the district. I felt it was unconstitutional that any kind of employer could use my money, say you are going to give it back, then use it to balance the budget. I say it is unethical. It is almost like slavery in the sense that you are never allowed to be elevated up. They want to keep us at the bottom.

“I think it was right for her [Deyshia] to bring up that the teachers deserved to get a raise, to be paid for all the work they do. How many schools did the superintendent visit? If he deserved a raise why not the teachers? It is the teachers who go the extra mile to help the students.

“We are the ones that go to the professional development and work with instructional leaders in our buildings to implement the plans. We are the ones that go way beyond our regular work hours to see our students’ grades go up. We stay up late at night grading papers and writing our lesson plans. This is our work. That teacher was speaking the truth.”

Lilybeth, a young Detroit teacher, said, “Deyshia speaking up is a big deal. Teachers can be afraid to speak out to administrators for fear of their jobs. I think it is very admirable, very brave. It shows the breaking point with teachers and the whole education system.

“Overall teachers are underpaid. We never have a day off, we work weekends and breaks. This is true especially in Detroit. At my old school in the EAA [Education Achievement Authority], paraprofessionals were teaching classes, in fact the majority were taught by paraprofessionals rather than actual teachers.

“It may be a cliché, but we do create the future leaders, the future generation. We do try to teach them to think for themselves. It is up to us now to push back.”

Educators around the world continue struggles against government-mandated cuts and to defend their rights and the rights of their students, underscoring the international character of this battle.

*Teachers from across the central **Indian state of Madhya Pradesh** rallied on Saturday, January 13 to demand the right of contract teachers to become regularized under the state government’s education department. Several, including four women, shaved their heads—the first-ever tonsure protest by the group—to demonstrate their commitment to the struggle. The teachers say they are demanding, “equal pay for equal work” with permanent teachers and a proper transfer policy.

The teachers had planned to “present” the chopped off hair to Sadhna Singh, wife of Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan, but were prevented from reaching her residence by the authorities. “We don’t know which department we belong to. The education department says we are employees of local bodies. The local bodies say we are employees of the education department. Over 2.88 lakh [288,000] temporary teachers are caught in this situation for the past several years,” said a demonstration organizer.

* **Nigerian teachers** protesting the mass firing of nearly 21,780 teachers for “failing” a competency exam were met with a militarized government force in Kaduna. About 24 police vans, two armored cars, 10 special motorcycles and hundreds of police lined the streets last Thursday. “We are ordered by the CP (commissioner of police) not to allow the protesters to cross Independence Way,” a police officer said.

Nonetheless, hundreds of protesters crossed security barricades, marched about seven kilometers and delivered a letter of protest to Governor Nasir El-Rufai. The governor’s aide responded, saying this was “why we had to go to the State Assembly to enact a law banning any kind of demonstration.”

*Several hundred **Bangladeshi teachers** launched another indefinite hunger strike on January 9 in front of the national Jatiya Press Club in the capital of Dhaka to demand that teachers in religious madrasa schools be placed on government pay and benefits. It is now in its sixth day. Twenty-one striking teachers have been treated with intravenous saline and at least 124 others are considered “ill.” According to Bangladeshi newspaper the *Daily Star*, there are “around 48,000 teachers of 10,000 madrasas who are not getting any pay, since the institutions got registered under the Madrasa Education Board in 1984”. The protest followed a similar “fast-unto-death” by teachers fighting to be added to the government pay scheme. The first protest ended on Friday, January 5.



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