

Nashville teachers, school workers denounce pay freeze

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At a public hearing on Tuesday night, June 5, officials from the Metro Nashville City Council outlined a proposed 2018–19 budget, which includes no money for teacher and school employee pay raises but continues tax giveaways to the rich.

Dozens of teachers and school workers lined up before the City Council to have their brief say on a budget that mandates serious cuts to school personnel, programs and free lunches. It will also eliminate a paltry 2.5 percent pay raise that was proposed for teachers.

“How can we proclaim to the world that we are such a smart and creative city when we spend between \$3,000 and \$4,000 a year less than the national average per public school student and \$15,000 less than children in some private schools in Nashville?” one participant asked.

Nashville resident Marti Profitt told councilmembers she knew of schools where children would run to the bathroom between classes in hopes of getting the only stall with a door. She spoke of schools where children had classrooms without furniture and of one teacher’s pleas for chairs.

“She told me, ‘I’ve got 36 children and three are sitting on the floor,’” Profitt recalled. “Councilmembers, do you ever have to look for chairs?”

Nashville, Tennessee, which has been billed as the “It” city for its trendy restaurants, pubs and art galleries, is covered with corporate offices with lobbies that “feel like cathedrals,” Profitt added.

City and state officials have given away hundreds of millions of dollars in tax breaks, incentives and out-right grants to corporations to build those “cathedrals.” And they do not lack for chairs.... or doors on their bathroom stalls or toilet paper and paper towels like

many schools.

One of the latest was a \$1 million gift from the City Council to Hospital Corporation of America (HCA) to buy furniture for new offices despite the company making \$2.1 billion in profits last year.

“Among the incentives Metro provided HCA to move three of its subsidiaries into a headquarters building downtown was \$1 million for the company to buy office furniture,” CBS affiliate NewsChannel 5 reported recently. “But less was said about the \$66 million incentive package Metro gave HCA to build the headquarters for three of its subsidiary companies.”

The furniture the city paid for with money that could have gone to the schools was a “premium wood finishes” table for \$8,321.25, a “Guitar Pick Table” (Nashville is also known as “Music City”) for \$4,190.18 and, for the executive lounge, a “Tuxedo Sofa” for \$6,540.45.

Teachers across the United States and around the world have shown new energy and courage to fight back after decades of low wages and deterioration of public schools. Hundreds of thousands conducted statewide walkouts in West Virginia, Arizona, Kentucky, Oklahoma, North Carolina and the US territory of Puerto Rico.

One of the most common complaint wherever there was a teachers’ struggle was repeated at the City Council in Tennessee. “Teachers are in the only profession where you steal from home to bring to work,” one middle school teacher complained to the Council. “This is a common joke among teachers, but it is no longer funny.”

As the WSWs has previously reported, analysis of Census Bureau data in 2015 by the Brookings Institution revealed Nashville to be one of the most unequal cities in the nation. It ranked sixth out of the 50

largest metropolitan areas for income disparity.

“Residents in the 95th percentile have an average annual income of around \$170,000, 7.9 times more than those in the 20th percentile, who earn little more than \$21,000,” the WWS reported.

The finance website GoBankingRates.com reported that Nashville last year experienced a cost of living increase of 15.4 percent—the fourth-largest increase of all major US cities. Meanwhile the median cost for homes rose by 30 percent in 2015–2017, from under \$260,000 to nearly \$340,000. That was the largest increase in the nation, according to the business site.

“Home prices like this are well out of range for a starting Nashville teacher, who can expect to make barely \$43,000 a year, well below the Nashville median income of \$61,000,” the WWS concluded.

And teachers know it.

“The cost of rental property has gone up another 3 percent this year—our salaries haven’t,” one teacher told the assembled city officials. “Teachers want adequate housing.”

The *Nashville Business Journal* noted that, based on GoBankingRates.com, to live “comfortably” in Nashville today requires \$70,150 a year.

Many of the speakers were deferential to the Council, thanking them for listening and pleading for money for the schools. One school employee, however, felt no need to curtsy before the officials. Instead he exposed the Council’s dirty little secret of habitually opening city coffers to corporations.

“I’ve watched them build (sports) stadium after stadium, and a (new) convention center go up,” he said. “We always seem to find money for that. We find money to give tips to developers, we find money for corporate welfare (but) for some reason we always have to balance the budgets on the backs of working stiffs. Why are you taking money away from working people and handing it to millionaires?”

As the WWS reported in February of last year, sometimes the giveaways can only be described as nothing less than obscene:

The Nashville/Davidson County City Council has voted to grant almost \$14 million in “tax incentives” for the construction of a private hotel water park, which few if any working-class residents will ever use.

In a press release describing the \$90 million, 217,000 square-foot water park at its Gaylord Opryland Resort

and Convention Center, Ryman CEO Colin Reed said the project was “a major demand inducer for families and adult leisure guests looking for upscale recreation options. This really, truly will be the first luxury water park of its kind in the United States of America,” Reed told the *Tennessean* newspaper. “This is a water park on steroids.”

While city officials lavish millions on new playgrounds for the affluent, the remarks of one Nashville schools para-professional exposed the consequences of years of budget cutting and official indifference towards public school employees and students.

Para-professionals work with the most “vulnerable” and the most “medically fragile” students,” she said. Some have eating problems, others behavior problems, and the job can mean lifting students as large as the school worker. Duties can include having to change everything from dirty diapers to sanitary napkins, she added.

“I want you to imagine doing that kind of work and doing it every single day for \$11.57 an hour, which is the starting pay for para-professionals,” she told the panel. “The average salary for a MNPS (Metro Nashville Public Schools) para-professional is \$19,620. That is not a typo. That is not an error—they make less than \$20,000 a year.”



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