

Teachers rally in Nashville, Tennessee to demand pay raises

Warren Duzak
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Hundreds of Metro Nashville Public School teachers rallied in the capital of the US state of Tennessee last Thursday in a “Day of Action” to demand pay raises and increased school funding. The protest was held as the Nashville City Council’s Budget and Finance Committee was to consider Mayor David Briley’s proposed budget for the 2019-20 school year.

School officials reported more than 1,000 teachers and school employees had reported sick or absent for other reasons the day of the protest and march. Local “tweets” reported that four smaller noon demonstrations were held at different locations in Nashville and that at one elementary school, 90 percent of the educators had called in sick.

The sick-outs were organized by teachers independently of the Metro Nashville Education Association (MNEA) and union officials publicly distanced themselves from school employees’ “wildcat strike.”

The school board requested \$76.7 million more than last year for the upcoming school year, intending to pay for a 10 percent raise for teachers. However, the budget submitted by Mayor Briley—a Democrat—proposed only a \$28.2 million increase for schools, which would cover only a paltry 3 percent cost-of-living raise for teachers who, like educators around the country, have received little or no raises over the last decade.

Teachers who organized an April 11 “sick out” by about 1,400 teachers and other school employees are demanding a 10 percent raise. Last year, even an insulting offer of 2.5 percent for teachers was reneged on.

The budget committee took no final action last week but announced that it will meet with the school board again on May 29. The City Council, which is also controlled by the Democratic Party, must approve the

city budget by July 1.

“What we are seeing is the reflection of the values of the people who can appropriate those kinds of resources,” a seventh-grade math teacher with 17 years in the schools told a WSWS reporter. “There are people in this town who are swimming in money and there are people at the same time who teach here but can’t afford to live in this town. All these things have led to the point where people are fed up. We are not asking to be millionaires, but we don’t want to have to work two or three other jobs just so we can do what we love.”

“Cost of living has gone up here in Nashville,” Terry Riggans, a McGavock High School teacher, told WTVF Channel 5 television. “Raises haven’t gone up with that, so it’s made it harder for us as teachers to be able to stay in the jobs we’re doing. How can you teach the kids without the proper funding to make sure we attract teachers to our area?”

The *Nashville Business Journal* recently reported that to “live comfortably” in Nashville, where the median cost for a home exceeds \$300,000, required an income of \$84,000 a year. Starting teachers make about \$43,000 a year and there are many teachers who started teaching a decade ago who do not make even that much.

“I’ve been here for eight years and I don’t make that much,” said Donna, an elementary special education teacher.

According to the school system’s salary schedule, a teacher with a PhD. and more than 26 years’ service makes little more than \$76,000, while some “support” staff start at as little as \$11.02 an hour.

In an effort to pit one group of workers against another, Briley’s budget proposes that all full-time city employees in a “general pay plan” make at least \$15 per hour. However, metro school employees are

“exempt” from being paid even this paltry sum.

A seventh grade arts teacher told television reporters, “It’s either I move, or I find another career. We are tired. We want more. We deserve more.”

As the WSWS reported last year, the City Council approved tax breaks of almost \$14 million to help with the construction of a private \$90 million water park for hotel guests only.

In another story, we reported 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 the year before. The furniture the city paid for, with money that could have gone to the schools, included a “premium wood finishes” table for \$8,321.25, a “Guitar Pick Table” for \$4,190.18 and for the executive lounge, a “Tuxedo Sofa” for \$6,540.45.

Just recently, the state and city combined to give Amazon, owned by the richest man in the world, \$102 million in tax breaks and other incentives that included a \$65 million cash payment. In return, Amazon gave \$106,000 to about 20 schools. In other words, for almost every \$1,000 the city handed to Amazon, the corporate giant gave back \$1 to public education.

Local NBC affiliate Channel 4 conducted a poll that showed 77 percent of respondents supported teachers.

To mobilize this potential support, however, Nashville teachers are going to have to build new organizations of struggle, controlled by the rank-and-file and independent of the Metro Nashville Education Association (MNEA) and the Tennessee Education Association (TEA), which are politically allied to the budget-cutting Democratic Party. The last 16 months of strikes and mass protests by educators across the US, starting with the revolt of the West Virginia teachers in early 2018, has shown without a doubt that the unions do not unite educators, but do everything they can to isolate individual struggles by teachers, wear them down, and then sign agreements that are entirely acceptable to the corporate and political establishment.

A middle school math teacher told the WSWS that until recently he had resigned himself to the belief that teaching jobs would continue to be poorly paid. “I thought that was just our lot in life until I began looking into the reasons we’re not being paid a lot and hearing more personal stories of teachers,” he said.

The sickouts organized by teachers themselves, he

said, were the beginning of what a rank-and-file committee would look like. “If that is what it takes to create a public school system and allow teachers to live where they teach, then that is what we need.”

After reading the WSWS *Teacher Newsletter* story on protests by teachers in Nashville, around the US and the world, he said, “The reporting has more insight. The coverage went more in depth and showed how the city was spending its money. It showed how better public education was not going to be achieved if spending keeps going to everything but public education.”



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