

“Progressive” Tennessee Democratic mayor uses COVID-19 crisis to push budget cuts

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30 April 2020

On April 7, Lee Harris, the Democratic Mayor of Shelby County, Tennessee, proposed a “lean and balanced” budget which would enact cuts to the majority of the county’s essential services. Shelby County, which includes the city of Memphis, is one of the largest distribution centers in the United States, as well as one of its poorest regions.

Using the COVID-19 pandemic as the supposed justification for the cuts, Harris declared in a text message to the *Memphis Commercial Appeal*: “We have to. The economic outlook has darkened. We will have to make some tough choices and tighten our belt, like everyone else.” The plan would slash over \$10 million from the county budget for the fourth quarter of 2020.

Under Mayor Harris’s plan, all regional divisions would be affected including administration and finance, information technology, planning and development, public works, corrections and judicial. Health services, community services, and the sheriff’s office would be spared. The Shelby County school district would also be spared because of a \$16.50 increase in the regressive “wheel tax” car registration fee added to the \$50.00 fee that was already in place.

According to official figures, 20.8 percent of the county’s nearly 1 million residents, the majority of whom are in Memphis, live under the poverty line, which in 2015 stood at around \$11,770 for a single adult and \$24,250 for a family of four.

According to SchoolDigger.com, the Shelby County school system is rated 134th out of the 140 districts in the state of Tennessee. Memphis was rated the poorest major metropolitan city in the United States in 2018. The overall poverty rate in Memphis is 27.9 percent and child poverty is 44.9 percent. The roads in working class neighborhoods are not being maintained properly,

and the electrical, sanitation and sewer systems are in a state of disrepair.

Class tensions are boiling over in the city. Earlier this year there was a wildcat strike scare among sanitation workers. And at the end of March approximately 400 workers at a Kroger grocery warehouse in the city walked off the job to protest long hours and unsafe working conditions as the coronavirus was spreading through the state.

Harris, a supposed “progressive” Democrat, campaigned for mayor in 2018 vowing he would “attack the underlying roots of poverty.” As with all defenders of the capitalist system, Harris has revealed his true colors amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

Previously, Harris advocated for “new innovative solutions” but without any real substantive program. On April 19, 2018, the Memphis Mid-South Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) endorsed Harris and four other “progressive” candidates. They said at the time, “These folks are all dedicated fighters for social, racial, and economic justice, and we’re proud to support them!”

Further unmasking the mayor’s posturing as a “progressive,” however, was the political opposition this plan encountered from within the local government. County Assessor Melvin Burgess, whose budget was supposed to have been cut by six percent, called out Harris: “The revenue budgetary shortfalls that are projected, were projected two years earlier,” he wrote in an email to other county officials at the time. “Therefore, I cannot help but believe that the current budgetary ‘crisis’ arises from a problem that existed quite sometime before COVID-19 became a household word.”

Shelby County Trustee Regina Newman also noted that they’ve received more this year in property tax

revenue than was collected the year before, so why would it be necessary to cut the budget now?

In other words, such cuts were long-planned, with Harris merely looking for the right opportunity to push them through. In a pushback by elected officials sensing the time inopportune, Harris's budget proposal was voted down. County Commission Chairman Mark Billingsley affirmed overall plans to resume cuts at a later date, stating, "Anticipate layoffs... Those elected officials that don't want to cut now, they'll be forced to cut come 2021."

Shelby County is home to numerous shipping corporations and distribution warehouses, such as FedEx, Valero, Nike, International Paper, AutoZone and Amazon. In 2010, the local government formed an Economic Development and Growth Engine board (EDGE), a panel of individuals who promote tax incentives to companies that want to set up operations in the Shelby County-Memphis metro area.

According to the EDGE website, since 2010 the panel has "abated" more than \$610 million in taxes. This alone could cover the expansion of innumerable public services and school system upgrades. In addition, the massive waste within the bureaucracy just in the EDGE appointments alone could also provide needed essential services to workers in the community.

The latest budget squabbling in Shelby County comes as Tennessee state officials, with direction from the White House, implement the criminal policy of reopening the local economy in the middle of the pandemic, which will guarantee untold disease and death for the population. The actions of the supposedly "progressive" Democrats likewise underscore the bankruptcy of the two-party political system.

Further exposed are the fraudulent pseudo-left politics of groups like the DSA. These organizations, after campaigning for Vermont Senator and so-called "democratic socialist" Bernie Sanders in the Democratic presidential primary before his defeat by and subsequent endorsement of former Vice President Joseph Biden, have sought to save face by turning to local campaigns as a supposed means of continuing their mission of reforming the Democratic Party.

The Democratic Party, a party of big business, austerity and war, is as immune to efforts to "push it to the left" at the local level as it is nationally. To defend their social rights amid the pandemic, workers in the

educational system, logistics industry, food service and other essential businesses, need to break free of the capitalist two-party system and fight to build the Socialist Equality Party in the United States, the genuine party of socialist revolution.



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