

Maryland Democratic Party officials cite coronavirus crisis to impose sweeping budget cuts on workers

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On Thursday, May 21, the County Council of Montgomery County, Maryland, approved a \$5.8 billion operating budget with \$70.3 million in spending cuts. The council's unanimous vote, done under the cover of the coronavirus pandemic, offers a preview of what is to come as local and state governments across the country respond to tax revenue shortfalls caused by the shuttering of non-essential businesses by emergency orders between March and May.

The proposed budget for fiscal year 2021 has changed several times since the office of Democratic County Executive Marc Elrich made its first recommendations before the pandemic took hold of the region. The county expects further cuts to follow this year due to economic fallout from the pandemic.

The county is one of the wealthiest in the United States and the most populous in the state of Maryland with more than 1 million residents. As of Monday, Montgomery County had 9,699 cumulative recorded cases of COVID-19. In just seven days last week, case numbers rose 22 percent, according to the Maryland Department of Health.

So far, at least 502 people in the county, which borders Washington, D.C., to the northwest, have lost their lives to the coronavirus, the highest number of deaths for any local jurisdiction in the state of Maryland. Maryland as a whole has had over 46,000 cases and at least 2,207 deaths. Such numbers are expected to increase substantially in the days and weeks following the Memorial Day weekend, as public officials encouraged sightseers to move about freely.

Following Thursday's vote by the Council, Elrich said he "fully recognizes that the FY21 budget by necessity will be a flexible document that will evolve to

take into account what are changing daily circumstances." Council President Sidney Katz, also a Democrat, said the latest budget proposal "provides stability, while we await a clearer picture of expenses and revenues that will emerge during the summer and fall," when the Council could slash more spending and cut additional services.

The largest spending cuts are for Montgomery County Public Schools, while another \$32.4 million in tax-supported funding for various departments was cut. The county has used a projection of \$600 million in lost tax revenue over the next two years as justification for the budget cuts. Affected in the proposed cuts are numerous county employees, whom would see no new raises or benefits. Many such workers, such as emergency responders and transit workers, are at increased risk of infection during the pandemic.

While certain Montgomery County employees are receiving hazard pay, there are no plans to extend that in the long term. Currently, employees who frequently are in contact with members of the public are making an extra \$10 an hour, while those who have to come into offices are making an extra \$3 per hour.

Montgomery County is often touted as a "progressive" haven just outside the nation's capital. It is among the wealthiest jurisdictions in the United States, with numerous government and military agencies and contractors headquartered nearby. The county's executive and nine-member legislative council are strongholds of the Democratic Party. In the past decade not a single council seat has been occupied by a non-Democrat. The executive office hasn't had a Republican official represent it since 1978.

Ahead of the budget vote, the Council had already

ruled out the prospect of raises for county workers. Last week, in addition to rejecting a motion for pay raises for non-union employees, the Council voted down, by a 7–2 margin, three separate three-year bargaining agreements with the Municipal and County Government Employees’ Organization (MCGEO) Local 1994, Fraternal Order of Police Lodge 35, and the International Association of Fire Fighters Local 1664. The contracts for the three unions had already been renegotiated since the start of the pandemic after the Council rejected earlier contracts. Many of the members of these unions are frontline workers during the pandemic, in addition to thousands of other county workers such as bus drivers, EMTs and teachers.

County employees would have received raises of just 3.5 percent, while non-union workers would have had their pay raised by a meager 1.25 percent. In rejecting these small increases, Katz again cited the projected budget shortfalls, stating, “This is not about what our employees deserve. This is about what our county can afford.”

At a virtual Council hearing earlier this month on the contract approval, MCGEO Local 1994 president Gino Renne warned that morale among rank-and-file workers was already “below zero” because of the pandemic and their already inadequate wages. “My workers are not overly paid,” he said. “The average salary in my union—in the service, labors, and trades [sector]—is about \$50,000. These folks are struggling every day.”

The County Council’s clear contempt for the working class is evident in their rejection of pay raises at a time when workers are putting their lives at risk every day just by showing up for work. Further adding insult to injury, Council members are still set to receive their scheduled pay raises at the end of this year, as their salaries, unlike those of county employees, are tied to increases in the Consumer Price Index.

Following the Council’s initial vote last week to reject pay raises and ahead of Thursday’s budget vote, groups including MCGEO, the Montgomery County Education Association, the Montgomery County Renter’s Alliance and others organized a protest in front of the house of Council Member Hans Riemer in Takoma Park.

Cpl. Leonette Brown Dixon, a member of the corrections officers union, demonstrated the increasing anger of workers at the role of the Democratic Party

and the various so-called trade union organizations that seek to tie workers to them. Speaking to the local ABC News affiliate, Dixon said: “When we [the MCGEO union] endorse most of these guys, that’s the only time that we see them. They make promises to us when we endorse them. I was on the endorsement committee, and the moment they get in office it’s like we never had a conversation with them.”

The MCGEO is affiliated with the United Food and Commercial Workers union, which has helped to force its members in meatpacking and grocery stores to remain on the job without adequate protection even as the pandemic has ripped through their communities, infecting thousands of workers.

Compounding the workers’ frustration is the fact that Montgomery County approved millions of dollars in spending for non-essential projects such as a \$54.9 million pedestrian tunnel and \$5 million for the Montgomery County Economic Development Corporation, which promotes business interests in the county.

The cuts are of a piece with an increasing budget crisis at the state level. Last week, the office of Republican Governor Larry Hogan announced a “staggering” budget crisis in the state, with a projected loss of \$925 million in state revenue by June. On Wednesday, Maryland’s Board of Public Works proposed an initial raft of cuts totaling \$120.6 million. According to the *Washington Post*, “the modest trims... would still leave as much as \$1 billion that needs to be cut from state balance sheets by the end of June.”



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