

Teacher arrested during protests speaks on social conditions in New York City

Tim Avery
13 June 2020

The *World Socialist Web Site* recently spoke to Brigitte Brantley, a New York City educator who most recently taught eighth-grade social studies at a charter school in the Bronx. On June 2, a local news station's video interview of Brantley at a Bronx protest against police brutality went viral on social media. The interview has accumulated 7.5 million views on Twitter at the time of this writing.

In the video, Brantley identifies herself as a mother and a teacher. Asked whether she thinks the protests are born out of frustration, she says, "Yes, they're sick and tired of being sick and tired. This is what sick and tired looks like."

Asked a leading question about whether rioting and looting are overshadowing the protests, she says, "You gave \$1,200 to people to survive on in March. What you thought was going to happen? You took summer youth [employment] away from the youth, what you thought was going to happen? They need jobs. Feed our babies and we wouldn't have this problem."

Hundreds of Twitter users replied to the video in an outpouring of appreciation and support. One user replied, "Just imagine the knowledge she's giving in her classroom, too." Another wrote, "I wish every single teacher was more like you. You are saving lives."

"The support is crazy," Brantley told the WSWs, "and it's good to know there are teachers who are thinking the same way I'm thinking."

By coincidence, the day of our interview with Brantley was her ninth anniversary working in education. Three days earlier, on Saturday, she learned that she would not receive an offer to teach next year at her school.

"With me protesting and it going viral, I feel like the school made a choice to respect their brand. I'm not mad at it," Brantley said. "I'm just more hurt because I'm going to miss my children."

The decision may also have been linked to her arrest at

a protest a few days prior at Mill Brook Houses in the Bronx. "We got there at 7:47. We were getting ready to disperse at 7:55," Brantley said. "The police blocked us in from the top of the hill and from the side."

"Eight o'clock comes. [NYPD Chief Terence] Monahan was there. He releases the audio of [NYPD Commissioner Dermot Shea] about the curfew, and literally right after that went off, the police basically tried to charge us." Protesters were arrested, zip-tied and shoved onto buses before many were ultimately released upon arrival at the local police precinct.

Brantley was not afraid during her arrest and does not regret being present at the protest. "I was willing to put my body on the line to make sure that my son knew, if anything happened to me, 'My mom fought hard for me.'"

"My son is eight years old. Tamir Rice was 12," she said, referring to the young boy shot and killed by a police officer in Cleveland, Ohio, in 2014 while carrying a toy gun. "That's a scary feeling, because my son is really the most loving kid in the world."

After learning she was unemployed, Brantley launched a fundraiser on GoFundMe with a goal of \$10,000. As of this writing, over 3,000 individuals have donated a total of over \$53,000.

She intends to use the money to support a tour of American cities where police killings have sparked protests and attracted media attention. "I want to go see what has been done since Michael Brown was shot by the police," she said. "What has the police department done? What have community organizers done since after the CNN coverage?"

While on the subject of her being let go from her school, our interviewer asked for her thoughts on school privatization and cuts to education in New York City and more broadly, noting that a WSWs article on the subject, "Massachusetts school district gets rid of art, music and

PE teachers for coming school year,” had gone viral among teachers within the previous week.

“The fact that there’s new police officers and new school safety officers in school buildings? It’s mind-boggling to me,” she said, noting her contempt for the claim that there is no money for the schools. “You have enough money to have all of these police officers in the school building, but you don’t have enough money for all of us to have supplies in our classrooms, or you don’t have enough money to get a SmartBoard fixed that’s been broken for the last two school years?”

“These schools say, ‘Your kids are the future, your kids are the future,’” she said. “Why would you cut things that actually engage them in the classroom?”

Turning to the broader social crisis in New York City, she relayed an anecdote about a child whom she knew to have undocumented parents coming to school wearing only a sweater after there had been a significant snowstorm. She went to buy him a coat and new shoes that very day.

“To this day, he talks about it. ‘Remember when Ms. Brantley bought me a coat and shoes?’ To this day.”

The dire conditions of masses of children in the city are increasingly exposed by the ongoing coronavirus pandemic, she noted. “You didn’t know that this parent struggled to pay her cable bill, but yet you want them to go online... it shouldn’t have taken a pandemic to expose these things.”

She was also concerned for nurses, noting her appreciation for the nurses who have shown up to protests to distribute snacks and masks. “When the outbreak first happened, some of the hospitals didn’t have PPE [personal protective equipment], so they used to wear trash bags over their scrubs as PPE,” she said. “A nurse... her main goal is to save lives, and you mean to tell me you don’t have enough money to make sure she’s got a mask over her face so she can continue to save lives?”

“It took a pandemic for you to realize that they’re essential,” she said, adding, “It took a pandemic to realize that our local supermarkets are essential.”

WSWS writers first contacted Brantley over Twitter, where they encouraged her to watch the site’s online forum, “Revolution and Counter-Revolution in America,” which analyzed the extraordinary events of the previous week, including the worldwide protests against police violence and the Trump administration’s bid for dictatorship, from an international Marxist perspective.

Brantley was able to attend and watch through to the end of the livestream. She was particularly struck by the

contribution of Genevieve Leigh, the national secretary of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) in the US, on the social forces behind young people turning out to protests in record numbers.

“This isn’t an era in which you have to convince young people that there’s something deeply wrong with society,” Leigh said on the livestream. “Things like institutionalized drone assassinations, all the police murders you now see on social media, mass shootings at schools, these have all become a part of normal life.”

Brantley, perhaps naturally given the age of her students and that of her son, thought of those even younger than the youth to whom Leigh was referring. “To me, when we do go back to school, the first thing they need to do... is get these kids mental health checks. These kids are going to suffer from so much trauma from all of this.”

She also discussed the online forum’s call for workers to break with the Democratic Party and take up the fight for socialism. “I had that conversation with my mom. I don’t want to be a Democrat anymore,” she said. “Where all these protests are happening, we voted some of these Democratic leaders in, and they’re not doing anything for us... We do need to break from them, and I would love a socialist kind of country.”

Asked if she had any closing remarks for teachers, nurses, and other workers reading the WSWS, she said, “Let them know that we are the real heroes... When the pandemic ends, we’re still going to be the real heroes.”

“It’s our time. We have to protect ourselves, because the government clearly can’t do it. So we the people have to protect ourselves.”



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact