

Washington D.C. Democratic Mayor proposes austerity while calling for an increase of police presence in schools

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1 May 2023

On March 22, Washington D.C. Democratic Mayor Muriel E. Bowser proposed a budget for fiscal year 2024 which includes the slashing of funding for public safety, transportation, and education as the city government prepares for federal pandemic aid to expire by next year.

Bowser stated that the cutting of the city's resources, in anticipation of a fiscal gap in the budget, is due to fear of a recession. She also cited a decline in revenue generated from commercial real estate due to the "long-term impacts" of telework during the pandemic.

The Mayor specifically noted increased costs relating to rising interest rates imposed by the Federal Reserve as well as the NATO conflict in Ukraine's impact on the rising cost of energy and food prices. Bowser claims additional funds are needed to maintain collective bargaining agreements with the city's teachers, firefighters, and other government workers. Also, to maintain retirement accounts and the increased cost of maintenance of the parks, recreational programs, library projects, and more.

The city has had to cut spending while depending on alternative revenue streams to address the fiscal shortfall. The plan reports that the city anticipates \$578 million in revenue from its automated traffic enforcement cameras and plans to install hundreds of additional cameras.

This essentially amounts to a hidden tax on city residents and visitors. The *Washington Post* cited city traffic advocate Zach Israel, who stated the plan for as many as 300 new cameras was tantamount to "conceding that the main purpose [of the traffic cameras] is for revenue, not for making our streets safer."

Furthermore, Bowser aims to cut 759 unfilled city positions or a reduction of \$373 million in costs and tap into \$257 million from the US capital's "fiscal stabilization reserve." The city's local bus system, DC

Circulator, is expected to get its service reduced by half. Three routes will be eliminated to save on costs, along with the elimination of 30 vacant crossing guard positions for city schools.

The *Post* quoted Democratic DC Council member and Transportation Committee chairman Charles Allen, saying that the budget "does a lot of damage" to the transit systems and is a complete about-face of Bowser's prior prioritization of transportation.

The next fiscal year's proposed budget also contains a cut in public education of about 3.4 percent from the last fiscal year. This is due primarily to the sunsetting of the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ESSR) federal aid program established to financially aid schools across the country throughout the pandemic. The *Post* noted that D.C. public schools received \$47 million in relief during the 2021-2022 school year but will only receive \$6 million for the present year and a final \$4 million by 2024.

The Georgetown University Edunomics Lab points out that schools across the country will need to decrease their annual spending by \$60 billion, which is a cut of about 8.6% or \$1,200 per student, as the relief comes to a halt by September 2024. Dr. Marguerite Roza, director of the lab, was cited discussing the significance of this cut, saying, "Public education has not seen [a fiscal cliff] of this magnitude at any time in the past, including the last recession."

The looming fiscal cliff is not limited to just the city. It has also impacted the greater region and its transit system, the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA), regionally known as Metro. The transit system has been putting its potentially defective rail cars back into service since last year despite never resolving the causes that led to derailments in October 2021. This

was in response to an anticipated \$185 million budget deficit due to the pandemic's impact on the regional economy.

Workers at the DC Circulator and other sections of transit workers have gone on limited strikes throughout the region as they seek to maintain and improve their living standards amid surging inflation. The Amalgamated Transit Union Local 689 has in every case contained and isolated these strikes, imposing below-inflation wages. In 2021, MetroAccess workers went on a one-day strike for higher wages.

The attack on public infrastructure and schools is characteristic of the ruling class's attempt to address the social and economic crisis by imposing austerity on the working class while ramping up funding for the police. This is a national strategy of the ruling class, imposed by the Democratic Party in major cities.

While the DC police or Metropolitan Police Department (MPD) will only face a 2 percent funding reduction in Bowser's new spending plan, the mayor remains committed to hiring more officers.

In her proposed spending plan, Bowser aims to repeal the D.C. legislature's 2022 decision to remove all MPD officers brought in as School Resource Officers (SRO) from DC charter and public schools by 2025. The decision to reinstate SROs was co-introduced by various Democratic DC Council members, including former mayor Vincent Gray and chairman Phil Mendelson in March under the "Safe Schools and Amendment Act of 2023."

MPD officers are facing a slew of criminal charges and investigations for various killings of D.C. youth. Recent footage showed MPD officers killing 17-year-old Dalaneo Martin in Northeast D.C., prompting an investigation into the events by the FBI and US Attorney's office. Another MPD officer was charged with the murder of a 27-year-old motorist stemming from an incident in August 2021 in Northeast D.C.



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