

Detroit firefighter speaks out: "All these kids do not have to die"

A WSWWS reporting team
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Reporters from the WSWWS met with a group of Detroit firefighters at a station not far from the scene of the December 27 fire that killed six children. By the time their company arrived to assist, the blaze had already claimed the children's lives. The firefighters expressed concerns over cuts that have taken place in the department, leading to an increase in civilian casualties and grave danger to the firefighters themselves.

"All these kids do not have to die," one firefighter said. "Although there is tremendous public support for additional firefighters and modernized equipment, it is opposed by city officials who are indifferent to human life, including our own.

"I have been in the hospital 20 times with serious injuries that could have been prevented if we had the necessary manpower and tools. I really feel for the families who are losing their loved ones and for my fellow workers. This is having a big impact on our emotional and mental state. I'm sure you can feel what it's like to pull charred little bodies out of a building. By the time we arrived on the scene, our coworkers were really shaken."

Another firefighter added, "With the type of cuts they are making, I get more and more frightened whenever we have to go out. Enormous pressure comes with this job, but they are making our lives and those of the people who live in this city impossible."

One of the senior firefighters described the impact of budget cuts over the years. "In the 1950s and '60s, Detroit was number one in fighting fires. Other cities would come to Detroit to look at how we organized our fire department.

"Beginning in 1974 things started to change. Dozens of companies were closed. The excuse given is that the population is shrinking, but the fact that people are

leaving the city does not change its demographics. Detroit is very spread out, and when you start to close companies it hampers our ability to reach the location in a timely way. The inner city is 144 square miles, with one of the highest number of single-family homes in the country.

"We used to have six men on a ladder truck, now we are down to three. It takes at least two men to unload a ladder, which can be 30 to 40 feet long. This leads to severe injuries."

This firefighter had been hospitalized over 90 times in the course of 20 years. With burns everywhere, he also has a dislocated shoulder and a severely cut finger.

Another firefighter said, "Detroit is an old city and in some cases the equipment can be 40 years old. The Detroit fire commissioner, with less than five years of firefighting experience, is ordering new rigs without high-pressure lines. That means when a fire truck arrives on the scene, you have to go to the back and hook up the line for water pressure.

"When you talk about saving lives, a matter of seconds is critical. On the older trucks, there is a large rubber hose that the firefighter pulls off immediately. It is estimated that they will save a lousy \$1,000 by not having the rig. What right do they have to do things like this?"

In addition to the cuts in manpower and equipment, fire inspections throughout the city have been drastically reduced. Firefighters described the impact this can have. They detailed what happened at a recent fire at a high-rise senior citizens' home.

"It is amazing that only two people were hurt in that blaze and no one died. Because it was an older building there was no sprinkler system, which is now required by law. However, every building over a certain number of floors must have a standard pipe system so that a fire

engine can hook into the pipes.

"When we hooked into the pipe by the building, it burst, and we had to get water from elsewhere. The Fire Marshall division had not inspected the building for four years. If there were regular inspections, problems like this would not occur.

"What is happening really angers me. There is such a total disregard for the concerns and needs of the people. Everyone I have spoken to said they would gladly pay some additional taxes, if it came to that, to have proper fire safety, but the fire commissioner and city officials act as if it does not matter."



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