

## Union delegates denounce government hypocrisy over September 11

# US firefighters protest Bush's veto

Jeremy Johnson  
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Delegates to the convention of the International Association of Fire Fighters (IAFF), representing more than 240,000 professional firefighters and emergency medical personnel in the US and Canada, voted August 14 for the union to boycott an upcoming appearance by President George W. Bush at a memorial honoring firefighters killed in the September 11 attacks. The president has been invited to address the October 6 annual ceremony of the National Fallen Fire Fighters Foundation in Washington DC, which will pay tribute to the 343 firefighters who lost their lives in the collapse of the World Trade Center in New York City, as well as more than 100 additional firefighters killed responding to other emergencies.

While the union's international president quickly backed away from the boycott call, some local union officials and rank-and-file members have indicated that they will go ahead with the protest.

The unanimous vote by the 2,000 union officials at the IAFF's annual convention in Las Vegas came the day after Bush announced his rejection of \$5.1 billion of supplemental spending that included some \$340 million for fire department funding. Congress had voted for \$90 million for long-term monitoring of the health of rescue and recovery personnel at the World Trade Center site, where workers were exposed to intense toxic fumes and dust. It also voted for \$100 million to improve emergency communications systems, whose failures were blamed for as many as 200 of the 343 deaths of firefighters on September 11, and \$150 million for equipment and training for 18,000 fire departments nationwide.

Introducing the resolution, R. Michael Mohler of the Virginia Professional Firefighters Local 774 said, "The president has merely been using firefighters and their families for one big photo opportunity. We will work

actively to not grant him another photo op with us."

Ironically, only two days earlier union officials had opened their convention by showing videotaped remarks of President Bush expressing sympathy and admiration for the firefighters who responded on September 11. Apparently caught unawares by Bush's funding rejection the next day, union President Harold Schaitberger was forced to stand up and ridicule the videotape he had shown, mocking Bush's own mantra about "terrorists" by saying, "President Bush, you are either with us or against us, you can't have it both ways."

Schaitberger rejected the call for a boycott, however, announcing on the last day of the convention, August 16, that the union would do nothing that would "bring any kind of dishonor or disrespect" to a memorial service. "The delegates certainly have their individual opinions, but I am charged with making the final decision," said the IAFF president.

Even after Schaitberger's announcement, some firefighter union locals are apparently continuing to urge a boycott of the October 6 ceremony, telling their members to instead attend a ceremony scheduled the following week at Madison Square Garden in New York City that will honor members of the city's fire department who died on September 11. The New York City firefighters unions, which are organizing the event, had earlier indicated that Bush would attend. Last week, however, they stressed that no invitations had yet been issued to any government officials.

For the IAFF delegates to call for a boycott of the president must reflect intense pressure from rank-and-file firefighters. The workers undoubtedly are incensed and feel a deep sense of betrayal, given Bush's repeated comments about "honoring America's heroes," i.e., the firemen and rescue workers killed in

the terror attacks. The boycott exposes the hypocrisy of the Bush administration, which used this hollow phrase as propaganda to bolster its war effort and conceal the anti-working class character of its domestic policies.

Since September 11, the White House has intensified its policies of enriching the financial elite at the expense of working people. This began with the \$15 billion bailout of the airline industry—which did nothing to protect the 100,000 airline workers who lost their jobs—and proceeded to, among other things, efforts to strip federal employees at the newly established Homeland Security Department of their civil service protections and union rights.

While Bush's budget-cutting triggered the vote by the union, firefighters are angered over low pay, inadequate staffing, and lack of safety equipment—all of which existed long before September 11, but have been intensified since, due to local budget crises produced by falling tax revenues.

New York City, for example, is in a deep fiscal crisis with Mayor Michael Bloomberg embarking on a program of austerity. The day after the IAFF resolution, thousands of New York City firefighters took to the streets to protest their lack of a pay raise in the 27 months they have been working without a contract. The demonstration was actually called by the police union, the Patrolmen's Benevolent Association, whose contract also expired over two years ago, but far more firefighters than cops participated.

A widow, whose husband, Kenneth Marino of Rescue Company 1, died on September 11, carried a sign saying, "My husband RISKED and LOST his life for only \$550 a WEEK!" New York City firefighters start at \$32,724 a year, and are paid far less than those in nearby suburbs. The Bush administration has rejected appeals to use \$500 million in disaster relief funds pledged to New York to help pay for raises.

Bloomberg, in the same cynical style as President Bush and former New York mayor Rudolph Giuliani, expresses his wish to "do more" for the firefighters, but claims his hands are tied by the city's \$5 billion budget gap. While threatening layoffs, he maintains that the uniformed services should be happy to accept 5 percent annual pay increases, along with numerous accolades for their bravery. No mention is made of the city's refusal to negotiate a contract two years ago when the budget was in substantial surplus.

The former media tycoon Bloomberg has a personal net worth of over \$4 billion, making him one of the wealthiest individuals in America.

The bitter feelings towards politicians were shown at the August 15 rally by the chorus of boos which greeted New York Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton as she took the platform. Clinton received only scattered cheers when she demagogically denounced "zeroes for heroes" as "unconscionable," but offered no relief.

Chants from the crowd of "Strike! Strike!" and "Shut It Down!" reflected the desire of the demonstrators to take independent action, even in defiance of New York State's punitive Taylor Law, which imposes heavy fines and jail terms on public employees who go on strike.

The August 15 demonstration was not the first outburst of anger expressed by New York City firefighters. In a spontaneous protest last November, firefighters clashed with police, storming barricades and bringing demolition work at the World Trade Center site to a standstill in response to then Mayor Giuliani's order to sharply reduce the number of firemen assigned to the painstaking search for remains of their fallen comrades. Among other things the city wanted to accelerate the clean-up process and reduce overtime payments. Protesters also complained that the recovery of tons of gold bricks that had been stored in a basement vault of the World Trade Center was one of the city's principal aims, while finding victims' remains was viewed to be of little importance.

That confrontation with the Giuliani administration resulted in the arrest of a number of firefighters as well as the presidents of the two New York City firefighter unions. It prompted the IAFF to call off a memorial service for its members lost at the World Trade Center scheduled for last November 18. At the time, the union said it would be "hypocritical" to participate together with Giuliani in such a tribute.



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