

# Pittsburgh, Pa.: Workers protest layoffs and austerity budget

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Over the past three weeks, hundreds of city workers, parents, children and senior citizens in Pittsburgh, Pa., have taken part in almost daily demonstrations. The protests have targeted Democratic mayor Tom Murphy's decision to lay off 731 workers and slash city social programs to offset a \$60 million deficit Murphy wrote into this year's \$386 million city budget.

Public Works Department, Parks Department and General Services workers chanted "Impeach Murphy" and "Mayor Murphy's got to go" at a demonstration of 150 city workers on Friday, August 22. The workers conducted a slow picket back and forth across Grant Street to disrupt rush-hour traffic. Mayor Murphy is attempting to wipe out nearly 20 percent of the city's 4,353-person workforce and devastate vital social programs with one blow to resolve the budget deficit. This comes after handing out tens of millions of public dollars to stadiums, convention centers and private department stores over the 10 years of his administration.

Maurice Owens, one of 17 city refuse workers to be laid off, told the *World Socialist Web Site*: "I started work this morning at 6 a.m. We are only supposed to work eight hours, but I am just getting off to come to the demonstration at 5:30 p.m. This is not an easy job. It is hard labor picking up rubbish in front of people's houses. You take the youngest, quickest and possibly strongest 17 from our workforce—which Mayor Murphy is doing—and it will hurt the older workers who are already beat up from doing this work.

"I am one of the 17 they want to lay off. I have a fiancée and two boys, but does Murphy care about this? No. I voted Democratic and I am shocked. Murphy promised the city workers a lot of things, but now he is reneging. When it comes to stadiums and convention centers, they make us pay out of our pockets for them. But when it comes to our jobs, there is no money."

The cuts, which were announced August 6, will

drastically reduce social services and destroy jobs. In addition to the layoff of workers from the sanitation and public works departments, the 731 layoffs include all 27 Medical Emergency Services workers, which the mayor wants to turn over to the fire department. Workers at pools, recreation centers and senior centers will be laid off. All 202 school-crossing guards are being cut by the city, but the budget-strapped school board said they would rehire 100 of them. Simultaneously, the mayor announced the closing of 27 city pools, 19 recreation centers and four senior centers.

The demonstrations began on the day Mayor Murphy announced the layoffs and cuts. Hundreds of crossing guards and their supporters demonstrated in front of Station Square where Pennsylvania governor Ed Rendell was speaking. The next day, the EMT workers demonstrated on the steps of the City-County Building. They went into the mayor's fifth-floor office and demanded to see him, but were rebuffed. Then they went to City Council Chambers, where they were finally given a meeting, from which the press was barred. An impeachment petition campaign to oust Murphy under the City Charter was also begun August 6.

Leo Levandowski, a mechanic for 27 years, came to the August 22 demonstration. He explained, "I am still employed, but many of my brothers aren't. We lost our body shop and our road service group. One guy laid off had 29 years, another had 32 and two more had over 20 years service. They have kicked us in the teeth. We see this as the start of privatization. It used to be that we did everything in-house. Now less and less is being done in-house.

"They have no problems coming up with money for the Lazarus department store and the rich. But when it comes to the necessary services that maintain the city for the common person, they don't have the money. Our directors make \$93,000 a year, while your average EMT

makes about \$9.00 per hour. That means three EMTs could be hired for the pay of one director.”

Barb Nemmer, a disabled mother, and her disabled son also attended the rally. She told the WSWs, “I am here because I live on the South Side slopes. How will my son get to school if Murphy cuts the snow removal? How can his health be protected when he cuts the EMTs and firemen? Who will take care of my son and provide the services he needs? Where can my son go to play now that Murphy has closed all the recreation centers?”

“My son was born three months premature. He has trachamalyasia, which is narrowed air passages. He has asthma; he is very small for his 10 years. He is on crutches because he has cerebral palsy. He has had five or six operations to straighten his legs, toes and to lengthen his spinal cord. He must have recreation centers in the winter, he can’t be outside in the winter with a walker or crutches on ice and snow.”

Barb added, “I left a message for Murphy in his office the other day. It was a little booklet. It shows my son with the city workers in a recreation center, and with other city workers like firefighters, and just had ‘Why?’ on the front of it. I don’t expect Murphy will answer us.”

Much of the anger of city residents is because these cuts come on top of state and county layoffs and cuts in services made earlier in the year. The state cut funds for education, libraries, mass transportation and other services in July. The county government recently cut services and laid off workers.

Jim Roddy, the Republican commissioner of Allegheny County, has borrowed money to keep the county social programs operating until November, in hopes the additional state funds will be authorized by then.

Mayor Murphy wrote a \$60 million shortfall into this year’s city budget in consultation with high-level business leaders and newly elected Democratic governor Ed Rendell. In a *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* interview, Murphy admitted that he did not have to make any layoffs and cuts this year at all. He told the paper that if he continued to try to balance the budget as he had in the past, even without any tax increases, he could have successfully balanced the budget and saved workers’ jobs and city programs for at least two more years. But he said he was tired of patching together budget solutions, so with the help of a consensus of business advisors, he decided to provoke a crisis and begin the layoffs and cuts now.

The plan was either to force the state legislature to approve additional taxes that fall primarily upon workers and the poor or to create conditions that would force deep

cuts and drastic layoffs.

Murphy’s plan calls for a 0.45 percent payroll tax on people who work in the city of Pittsburgh and raising the occupation tax on suburban residents who work in the city by more than 500 percent. By contrast, the plan calls for a 50 percent cut in mercantile taxes and a nearly 20 percent reduction in the business privilege tax. Already 17 of the top 24 employers pay no taxes at all. Such companies as financial houses Mellon Bank, PNC, National City Bank and Federated Investors receive tax exemptions, and many others such as the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* receive a manufacturing exemption.

During his decade as Pittsburgh mayor, Murphy has handed over tens of millions of taxpayers dollars to private corporate interests to build baseball and football stadiums, despite voters’ sentiments. He provided \$11 million for the downtown Lord & Taylor department store, which just announced its closure, and some \$37 million more to the Lazarus department store, which will most likely shut its doors after its five-year commitment expires in a few months.

This reverse-Robin Hood tax proposal is the opposite of a bailout. It is, rather, an undemocratic measure to usurp the mandate of Pittsburgh voters, put the city on rations, and enable the politicians to cut more jobs and privatize social services.

These reactionary proposals, however, have not gotten off the ground for the present due to a state budget impasse in Harrisburg. Similar to the situation in California, Republicans along with many Democrats in the state Senate are refusing to support any measures that will increase taxes and are demanding drastic budget cuts instead.



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