

Facing layoff, California city worker commits suicide

Kim Saito, Rafael Azul
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On March 17, nearly half of the workforce in the Southern California city of Costa Mesa received “pink slips,” termination notices effective in six months. That afternoon, one of those workers, 29-year-old Huy Pham, a city maintenance employee, committed suicide by jumping off the fifth floor of the Costa Mesa Civic Center building.

Pham, who had worked for the city for four-and-a-half years, was helping to support his mother and an extended family. He had been at home with a broken ankle and was not supposed to work, but was called in at 2:30 p.m. to receive his layoff notice at the maintenance offices. He never showed up. At about 3:20 p.m., witnesses saw him leap from the eastern rooftop of City Hall.

As workers gathered at City Hall, several lashed out at City Council members and blamed them for Pham’s death. One man cursed at the city manager. Others rushed at council members entering the building. One worker, stricken with grief, had to be restrained by his comrades from physically assaulting two city officials.

The city council of Costa Mesa voted to approve the draconian measure on March 1 as the first step in a plan to cover a \$1.4 million deficit by outsourcing 18 city services to the private sector, cutting pension contributions by about 40 percent and sacking employees.

Affected will be 213 of the city’s 472 full-time employees, including the entire fire department of 90 workers, 12 jail staff, 50 city maintenance workers and 30 dispatchers. Only the police department will be exempt from layoffs. City leaders claim the cutbacks are necessary because pensions are draining the city’s revenues.

Billy Folsom, 58, a mechanic who got a pink slip, told the *Washington Post*, “It’s like they decided to

blow up the city. It’s devastating.”

The WSWS spoke with Manuel Villa, a part-time parks and recreation worker.

“The suicide actually hit me kind of hard. Pham and I had been partners. He had great skills, was book smart, and he could do anything. He was going to become a construction manager. He had a lot going for him. We’d worked on fire stations, historical society buildings, the City Hall, everywhere. He was very talented.

“He wasn’t married but lived with his mom and his brothers. You really don’t know what goes through somebody’s mind when you get laid off.

“I expect to be laid off soon. Before the full-timers go, all the part-timers go first. For me, I worked here two years before. I wanted to be full-time; I wanted a secure job. I came from the private sector where I had been a carpenter.

“The city council is set on the cuts. Parks and recreation, street sweeping, street maintenance, building inspection, some engineering and firefighting have been targeted. They want to outsource it all. The decision was made without negotiations with the unions.

“If what’s happening in Wisconsin goes through, it’ll trickle down everywhere. If this goes through here in Costa Mesa, this will be ‘ground zero’ for every other city.

“I don’t know what they [the unions] mean by fighting. Maybe it’s finding a legal loophole, but I was surprised that there have been no organized protests. When I was in the carpenters union, they’d at least call a few demonstrations to protest.”

Costa Mesa is in its fourth year of budget deficits, largely due to a much smaller tax base as a result of collapsing housing prices and falling sales tax revenue

from large area retailers. This is the city's second round of budget cuts. Last year Costa Mesa sacked 77 employees and cut local services, including an afterschool program.

City Councilman Jim Righeimer, a right-wing real estate developer, is leading the attacks. He is a vociferous backer of targeting labor costs, including pensions.

The announced layoffs will reduce city contributions to the pension fund by about \$7.2 million, down from \$15 million this year. Estimates for the overall labor cost savings range from 15 to 40 percent.

This past week, Costa Mesa officials hired a communications specialist who will earn \$75 an hour, or \$3,000 a week, to "improve communication" with area residents. In response to the news, one resident told a local newspaper in a letter to the editor, "I find it amazing that the city has the gall to hire a public-relations consultant in the wake of layoff notices and an employee suicide."

The response of the unions to the budget cutting has been to decry the layoffs, while offering no real resistance. The Costa Mesa City Employees Association (CMEA) issued a letter challenging the legality of the job cuts.

In the case of the larger Orange County Employees Association (OCEA,), which represents 18,000 public employees in cities and special districts in Orange County, including more than 200 Costa Mesa public employees, the union leadership has engaged in various antics, but failed to mobilize its membership. The police physically restrained OCEA manager Nick Berardino as he shouted at city's officials over the layoffs at one event.

Last year, to help resolve a \$30 million Orange County deficit, Berardino offered to force the OCEA membership to accept pay cuts and furlough days.

On Saturday, thousands of workers and students marched in downtown Los Angeles, 35 miles to the north of Costa Mesa, to protest the Costa Mesa sackings as well as attacks on the working class in Wisconsin and other states. Many protesters carried signs denouncing the "war on workers." Ironically, the march coincided with the announcement by Los Angeles municipal unions that they had tentatively agreed to pay cuts by their members to help balance the municipal budget and prevent the sacking of about 600

employees.



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