

Thousands demonstrate against New York Mayor Bloomberg's plans to close 20 fire companies

A. Woodson
7 June 2011

Up to 3,000 New York firefighters and their supporters demonstrated this weekend against billionaire mayor Michael Bloomberg's plan to close down 20 fire companies across the city.

Hundreds marched from the fire station that houses Engine Company 205 in Brooklyn Heights across the Brooklyn Bridge to City Hall in lower Manhattan, where their ranks swelled to 3,000 as they demonstrated against Bloomberg's latest attack on fire protection.

Bloomberg and the Fire Department (FDNY) had kept the identity of the 20 companies under wraps until last month, when the city was required to give the companies 45-day notice that they would be shut down. Plans to close the stations have provoked opposition throughout the communities affected.

Rallies have already begun in several affected neighborhoods. On May 31, 300 community residents came together to protest the closure of Engine Co. 157 in Port Richmond, Staten Island. Opponents of the closure of Ladder Co. 104 and nearby Engine Cos. 206 and 218 are planning a protest in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, and other protests have been scheduled.

The dangerous decision to close 20 fire companies is the latest step in the administration's efforts to cut back on fire protection for the city. Six companies were eliminated in 2003. Three consecutive classes of new recruits into the fire service have been cancelled due to budget cuts.

The manpower level for the FDNY is now around 11,000. It will hit a 40-year low after the company closures. Nearly forty years ago, in the 1970s, during the last economic crisis in the city and the last round of major fire company closures and layoffs, entire sections of the city were burned out.

The mayor has jumped at the latest chance to slash fire companies. His spokesperson boasted that the elimination of the six fire companies in 2003 only made the city safer. The implication is that the elimination of three times that number

in 2011 would make the city over three times as safe from fire disasters. The mayor has made the absurd claim that the deep cuts would not significantly impact response times.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to several firefighters attending the demonstration.

Martin, a firefighter in Engine Co. 205, which is listed to be closed, said, "The information the Mayor and the FDNY is putting out about response times is skewed. A Ladder Company might be two minutes away but by itself it can't put out a fire. So the clock for response time stops at two minutes even when the fire engine is farther away and hasn't arrived yet. Ladder and Engine companies work together. The Ladder Company searches for victims, while the Engine Company pumps the water on the fire. The system works well, and they shouldn't mess with it.

"They have already subtracted one guy from 60 of the Engine Companies. These firefighters who were moved off of the trucks were dispersed throughout the system. Now they need a second truck to help move the hose, which was the job that extra man did. They are playing games with the response time numbers.

"It has been three years since we had a new class of firefighters. Now with people retiring or being promoted to lieutenant, manpower is down. But we are getting a record number of emergency calls. When the economy is depressed the amount of emergencies and fires go up."

Anthony Carbone, a 23-year firefighter, told the WSWs, "It is obvious when you close fire companies you are going to increase response time. Everyone knows when you do this it will affect the outcome of fires in terms of injuries, property damage and people losing their lives.

"The city is using a lot of misleading statistics to create the false idea that response time will not be significantly affected by these cuts," Anthony added. "Response time is critical because it has been proven that a fire doubles in size every 30 seconds it burns. This number may not be exact, but it is close. This means that what happens to a couch fire

from the time it starts to burn with a flame, is that it only takes two minutes without intervention to burn up your living room. This is testament to how important response time is. Nothing is more important.

“Closing fire companies is another tactic of the mayor’s to disguise how serious these cuts are. Some fire stations have two or three fire companies working there. So the tactic is that if you close down a fire company, it may look like you are leaving the fire station open and fully operational. Inside the firehouse, if the company that is closed down is an engine company, then you can’t get water on the fire. If it is the ladder company, then you cannot rescue people who are trapped in the burning buildings and could be burned to death.

“The engine company is also the EMS first responder to any kind of medical emergency. If the engine company is cut, then you lose your first responder EMS as well.

“They have also taken the fifth man away from 60 engine companies who had them before February 1. This was to throw them into the general pool to avoid a worse manpower shortage. The fifth man was needed to help attach and carry out the long hose to reach the fire. Without the fifth man to help, often what happens is that someone from the second truck and Engine Company to arrive is needed to assist getting out the hose for the first engine on the scene. This slows down the effort to fight the fire all down the line.”

“The community support for our fight to keep the fire companies open has been overwhelming.”

Edwin Roman, Jr. was at the rally with a group to support the firefighters. He said, “We are from Williamsburg, Brooklyn. Around where we all live there is a fire company being shut down. It is going to cause a lot of problems for people there. It will affect all of the people in the neighborhood. The next firehouse is about 15 minutes away. This means there will be a big delay. It will cause people much more danger. More people will die because there is no fire company around.”

Lieutenant Joe Garafola has been a firefighter for 30 years in Brooklyn and Manhattan. Now he is in Ladder Company 125 working in Queens. He described the firefighters’ situation. “There are 20 companies who are now set to be closed. The City Council and Mayor may end up saying they won’t close 20, they will only close five, and they will say that they are heroes. But five company closures would be five too many. It would be a tragedy.

“The system of fire coverage is like a bicycle wheel. They point and say they won’t cut the one in the center. They will cut ones on the outside. But each fire company is the center and the hub for everyone else. Basically, they are playing a charade. If everyone were constantly sitting at attention and available in their station houses, it might work then. But

companies have to go out of the station houses to train every day. They also have to do building inspections all over. When somebody is busy like that, you run out of resources. The question is, do we have enough resources, and the answer is no.

“It is unbelievably devastating to close 20 companies. They say fire safety is a matter of seconds, which is the difference in response time. It is all connected because response time is determined by distance, whether a company is busy and where they are, as well as the traffic on the city streets.

“The fire service is like a life insurance policy. It is there to save lives and property when you need it most. If you don’t have it, and your neighborhood doesn’t have it, everything goes down hill.

“I think the union was partially right in the slogan they have us carry on this sign “Save Your Community Fire Company.” As you can see, I have changed it to read “Save All The Fire Companies.” The point I am making is why should we be encouraging a fight between communities over whose fire companies should be saved. The fire services for all communities must be saved, and all fire companies must stay open.

“My sign also reads, ‘Say No to Mayor Megabucks.’ The question again is do you have the resources? They are cutting the millionaires tax. It will sunset at the end of the year. Today, they just came out with the new jobs report. Only 54,000 new jobs were created across the country. Maybe you should have this millionaires tax a little longer, but the politicians are only concerned about making and keeping their friendships with their cronies among the wealthy. They are sunsetting the millionaires taxes, and they are cutting vital services. All citizens should be involved fighting for these vital services.”



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact