

Pontiac, Michigan firefighters fight cuts

Lawrence Porter, Nancy Hanover
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On Monday evening, December 13, firefighters from Pontiac, Michigan held a spirited protest picket outside the city offices of Waterford Township, a neighboring municipality, and then packed the Board of Trustees meeting to oppose the dissolution of the Pontiac Fire Department and its takeover by Waterford.

The proposal to merge the two municipal fire departments was initiated by Pontiac's Emergency Finance Manager (EFM) Louis Schimmel. The plan would place 42 of the present 57 Pontiac firefighters under Waterford's payroll, reducing them to new hire status with accordingly lower wages and benefits. For the majority of Pontiac firefighters this agreement will represent a massive cut in living standards and more dangerous working conditions. The firefighters from Pontiac would remain at Pontiac fire stations, but with reduced crews—causing alarm among the department's first responders, who last year answered more than 500 structural fires involving collapsing buildings.

The major issue at this trustee meeting was the financial agreement to absorb the Pontiac firefighters into Waterford. The Waterford Township Board was promised \$6.2 million in revenues from Pontiac to take over Pontiac's fire department. With an anticipated expense of \$4 million to fight fires in Pontiac, the board expects to receive a windfall of \$2 million.

Facing similar problems as Pontiac and most municipalities, Waterford's financial directors admitted in the meeting that without the added income they also would face a deficit of over \$2 million and welcomed the infusion from its poorer neighbor.

The proposal by Schimmel to merge the two departments is part of a campaign by sections of big business to merge municipal services and destroy past gains of the working class as a matter of principle.

Damon Harney, president of Pontiac Fire Fighters Local 376, told the *Oakland Press* that the union had offered more than \$2.5 million in concessions to keep the jobs in Pontiac. Despite the willingness of the union to implement drastic

wage and benefits sacrifices, Schimmel rejected the cuts out of hand.

"An offer was made by the union, but it didn't take into consideration the costs the city incurs with fire equipment, insurance, liability and legal expenses," stated Schimmel. "This is firefighter math," he added arrogantly. "I've got to save \$3 million bucks and I've got to do it quick. There is no shortage of firefighters so they've got to decide whether they are going to do it or someone else is going to."

"At that point we figured it wasn't about the money," stated Harney to the media. "We knew it wasn't about the service, so we couldn't be quiet any longer. We are here in Waterford because we want the Waterford Township residents to know that their services will be altered also."

Under the law known as PA 4 adopted last March by the state of Michigan, EFMs have dictatorial control over city budgets and policies including the right to privatize services, abrogate contracts, conduct sweeping layoffs or even remove elected officials.

Last summer Schimmel dismissed the Pontiac Police Department. "If we do everything the same, we'll be out of business and nobody's going to get paid," stated Schimmel. "They'll all lose their jobs."

Charli Yarbro, a retired Pontiac firefighter, spoke against the proposal, telling the trustees, "You guys are totally doing an injustice to the citizens of Waterford. You are totally doing an injustice to us because you will not be able to provide fire service in a timely fashion for the city of Pontiac."

"People are going to die," she stressed, emphasizing the reduced manning at Pontiac stations to 12 total firefighters a night. "Maybe you don't care. Maybe all you are thinking about is the bottom line, the money and the budget. But there is no way you should approve this budget tonight."

Several people asked what will happen if the revenues from Pontiac do not pan out. Others called it a ghost budget. "This budget is based on assumptions," stated Quincy Stewart, a Pontiac activist, to the board.

The WSWs spoke to several firefighters about their views of the cuts. “We have had an emergency manager since 2008-2009,” stated Darryl Fowlkes. “Jennifer Granholm (former Democratic governor) brought in a manager in 2008. Schimmel is the third one. None of them have done anything to bring anything into the city. All of them have just cut. The Department of Sanitation is down to 10 workers when they had 30 before. All of the recreation centers have been closed in Pontiac.

“In 1986 we had 123 firefighters. Now we are down to 57, of which 3 are on staff. We average 23-24 fires a day. The only comparison is to the challenge facing Detroit.

“You saw what happened in Tennessee. If you don’t personally pay for fire protection they allow your house to burn down. Fire Departments have been in existence since Benjamin Franklin. This is going backwards.”

Sean Landis, 5 years with the PFD told the WSWs, “This is not a merger, it is a takeover. It’s a slap in the face.”

“There are a lot of unknowns and no one is talking to us,” added Kyle Heckendorn. “We are finding out about things the same way you are, in the newspaper.

“I’m against this EFM law. It is a law of dictatorship. People elected a council for a reason. We live in a democracy. People died for the right to vote and now it is just being taken away. They have no business having an emergency manager law.”

Harney of Local 376 told the WSWs during the meeting, “Our position is this is a bad deal all around. Waterford Township has an entirely different situation than Pontiac. We took 9,200 to 9,500 calls last year. Waterford does maybe 5,000. We deal with 400-500 structural fires a year. They have maybe 10.

“This is not an equal sharing of departments. They said in this meeting that Waterford workers will not be going to Pontiac to fight fires. What does that mean? This is not the fault of Waterford firefighters. The union is calling for shared sacrifice, not a takeover of one jurisdiction by another. Waterford is basically balancing its budget on the back of Pontiac, on the firefighters, the citizens, and the city’s finances.”

Danielle Lewis was at the meeting with her infant son. Danielle’s husband is a Pontiac firefighter with 8 years of service. “I’m against this takeover and the EFM law,” she stated. “It’s a tough job. These firemen really work hard. In fact, one day my husband fought in 23 fires in a 24-hour day. They don’t do it for the money. They do it for the community.”

The current EFM law, which was signed into law by Michigan Republican Governor Rick Snyder last March, now covers the Detroit Public Schools (DPS) and several municipalities: Benton Harbor, Flint and Ecorse, with Detroit and Inkster now under state audit procedures which may lead to an EFM. The establishment of the EFM law has been part of a campaign led by the Mackinac Center since 2005. The well-heeled backers of this policy center—now implementing their vision for the destruction of city services and municipal workers’ wages and benefits—are the Walton Family [Walmart] Foundation, the Charles Koch Foundation, the Dick and Betsy DeVos Foundation [Amway] and the Edgar and Elsa Prince Foundation [parents of Erik Prince, Blackwater founder and foundation vice-president].

State Republicans have their fingerprints all over these draconian measures, although the first EFM provision in the state was enacted by Democratic Mayor Jim Blanchard. The EFMs in Benton Harbor, Ecorse and the DPS are all Democrats.

Meanwhile, a petition drive mounted by the unions to repeal the Emergency Manager law has nearly gathered the required 161,000 signatures needed to force a public vote. From the standpoint of the trade union bureaucracy, the petition drive is an attempt to preserve its own institutional interests and divert attention from its support for layoffs and concessions.

The Socialist Equality Party is calling an emergency meeting to initiate a fight against the cuts and layoffs and to build a political movement of the working class, independent of the two big business parties. This struggle is necessary to put an end to social inequality and secure the social rights of all workers to good-paying jobs, decent schools and neighborhoods. We invite all workers, students and young people to attend.

Saturday, December 17, 2-4pm

Community House
18966 Greenfield Road,
Detroit



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact