

Chicago mayor Emanuel plans attack on firefighters

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On Wednesday, Chicago mayor Rahm Emanuel responded to emerging details about his plans to open an attack on firefighters when their contract expires after June 30. Emanuel is insistent that the new contract include a variety of pay concessions as well as a reduction in staffing levels. This development is part and parcel of the Democratic mayor's budget-cutting agenda, which he shares with Barack Obama and the rest of his party.

While Emanuel's plan does not call for the cutting of firefighter wages outright, a variety of pay-based perks and benefits would be eliminated. These include duty-availability pay, which compensates firefighters for being on-call for 24 hours, premium pay, a wage premium paid to firefighters cross-trained as paramedics, and the physical fitness "incentive." There would be a reduction in pay grades, and holiday pay would be restricted to firefighters scheduled to work on those days. Also eliminated would be a clothing allowance.

In addition, the mayor plans to reduce so-called non-duty lay-up coverage, from the current 12 months over a four-year period down to 12 months over a two-year period. This benefit covers the amount of time firefighters have to recuperate from injuries not directly related to firefighting. The rookie probation period would be doubled, from 9 months to 18.

Since Emanuel came to office, his administration has taken aim at fire department staffing levels, with an inspector general report claiming that the city could save \$57 million per year by reducing crews from five to four for each engine or truck. The latest proposal would instead call for all so-called double houses—those fire stations with both an engine and a truck—to be staffed by 9 firefighters, instead of 10 as they are currently.

Bill Kugelman, former president of the Chicago Firefighters Union, estimated that the cuts would cost the average firefighter \$7,000 per year. The clothing/uniform allowance alone was estimated by the inspector general to run from \$1,250 to \$1,500 for each firefighter.

The decision to reduce crew sizes at double houses poses a direct threat to the lives and safety of firefighters, as well as that of the public.

Quoted several months ago on the topic, Emanuel disingenuously claimed that "safety will be paramount." His real agenda was contained in the following statement: "Savings will also be an issue. And change will be an issue because you cannot say that technology has not changed and made us all better and smarter at doing what we need to do."

In other words, firefighters will face the prospect of doing more with less, in the same manner as many other workers, against Emanuel's absurd claims about technology.

In an article published last year by the *Chicago News Cooperative*, fire department spokesman Larry Langford noted, "Chicago needs larger crews because it has many apartment buildings as well as multi-story public schools and nursing homes," and that even single-family homes "are often very close together."

The city witnesses dozens of fire deaths and serious injuries, among both residents and fire crews, each year. Most vulnerable are low-income neighborhoods where residents contend with extreme weather, utility shutoffs, and aged housing stock.

Langford also noted that there are studies that show four-person crews are only 65 percent as efficient as those with five, which he said "translates into minutes saved, which is lives and property saved."

Emanuel outlined his political stance against the

firefighters in remarks that should serve as a warning to other municipal workers—whether or not they directly on the city’s payroll, including those at the Chicago Transit Authority and Chicago Public Schools—that his mission is to throw back the living standards of workers, as well as their working conditions, to levels not seen in several generations. The financial aristocracy, ably represented by Emanuel, is intent on forcibly taking back the gains won by workers over the course of decades and decades of struggle.

Responding to questions about the proposals at a press conference, Emanuel said: “You describe [the proposals] as cuts. [But] there are places that, while negotiations are private, that I would say are reforms.”

Where the language of “reform” once denoted the implementation of measures that benefited the working class, it is now used to signal the dismantling of those programs as well as a general assault on workers for the benefit of the bourgeoisie.

Emanuel further expressed the assault on firefighters as part of an overall effort against workers, saying: “Our firefighters do a great job serving the city.... They do hard work. We will make sure that they’re properly—not only compensated, but respected for the work that they do.... [But] no part of the budget is immune from change and reform to get greater value for the taxpayers as well as greater service for the citizens of Chicago.... We’re not shying away from difficult decisions.”

Emanuel also tacitly acknowledged that his approach represented a divergence from the policies of former mayor Richard Daley, who was somewhat more conciliatory in his dealings with city workers. In effect, the former has been brought in precisely due to his known ruthlessness, as the ruling elite grew impatient with the slower pace of cuts.

As he said, “I’ve got to make sure that the taxpayers and the residents are represented. That’s my role.... I respect what Tom has to do.... But I’ve got to make sure that we’re making the changes that are necessary for the future and we’re not just doing things that we used to do because we used to do ’em.... We’re not gonna do it just because we did it in the past.”

Firefighters should place no confidence in the ability of the Chicago Firefighters Union to defend their interests. In the end, the union accepts the rationale for concessions, but merely wishes to temper the initial

proposal and thereby justify its own existence. While the union did not endorse Emanuel in the mayoral election, it did endorse Gery Chico, a long-time Daley associate who once headed the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) during the period when it began closing schools and implementing privatization schemes. Notably, Chico indicated he would cut pensions and said he would personally lead negotiations with the unions in order to avoid strikes.

Moreover, details of Emanuel’s plan only recently emerged after Local 2 president Thomas Ryan sent a letter to union members denouncing the mayor’s proposals. Firefighters must make the attacks by Emanuel known to wide layers of workers, where they would surely encounter immense sympathy. It must be made clear that only a broad political struggle for socialism—the running of society to meet social need, including ensuring that emergency response and safe housing are provided for all—will be capable of fighting against austerity and “reform” policies pursued by Emanuel, Obama, and the rest of the ruling class.



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