

Detroit to lay off 164 firefighters

David Brown
27 June 2012

On Monday, Democratic Party Mayor Dave Bing of Detroit announced plans to lay off 164 out of the city's 881-member fire department. This amounts to 18 percent of the current number of firefighters and could have disastrous consequences. The city's fire protection service has been steadily cut and there have already been fatal house fires associated with reduced coverage.

These cuts are part of the city's "consent agreement" with the state of Michigan, whereby Bing and the rest of the Detroit City Council agreed to carry out over \$200 million in cuts. In all, the fire department's budget will be cut by \$23 million. This includes not only the layoffs, but the elimination of seven of the city's 59 fire companies.

In his announcement, Bing attempted to downplay the significance of the cuts. First, he claimed the city would most likely rehire 108 of the laid off firefighters if it gets a \$10.7 million grant from FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency) in September. He further asserted in his press release that most of the remaining 56 firefighters would be rehired as older firefighters retired.

Both these claims are dubious. The FEMA grant is far from guaranteed, and the mayor's priorities have consistently been to cut the budget and funnel money to private corporate interests, no matter the social cost. His second method for rhetorically minimizing the cuts was to point out that there are four times more calls for Emergency Medical Services (EMS) than for fire suppression. So, according to this logic, the cuts to fire protection are acceptable.

The people of Detroit, however, have a very different experience with the budget cuts. This past January, an elderly brother and sister died in a house fire, only two blocks from a "browned out" fire station (closed on a rotating basis). (See: "Two die in Detroit house fire"). It is uncertain whether Doyle Whatley, 77, and Cecelia Vance, 69, could have been saved if that station had

been open, but faster response times overall certainly prevent deaths due to fire.

More recently, firefighters were stretched thin when they had to put out 16 fires on Detroit's east side between 11:45 p.m. last Sunday night and 5 a.m. Monday, the morning of Bing's announcement. Although the fire department suspects arson played a role in that high number, it's unlikely they will ever find out.

Under the planned layoffs, the arson investigation section will be cut in half, even though it is already understaffed. According to the *Detroit Free Press*, of the 5,000 fires flagged for investigation in 2011, only 1,700 were actually investigated. On average, every arson inspector handled more than 150 cases in 2011.

Reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with several Detroit firefighters about the cuts. Many were eager to discuss the situation, but they preferred to remain anonymous to avoid getting in trouble with higher-ups.

One firefighter told us, "Based on the news reports, it's almost impossible to be able to cover the areas we need to cover. The numbers don't lie, the last two weeks we've just been bombarded [by fires]. Yesterday they had eight fires on the east side at one time. To cover a fire you need about five rigs with crew. Last night, that's 40 rigs. With this plan they're talking about only having 50 rigs available. If something like last night happens again we're only left with 10 rigs to cover the rest of the entire city, which we can't do safely."

When asked about Bing's downplaying the cuts with the possibility of a FEMA grant, the firefighter responded. "The thing with grants is that they are only for very specific uses. Most politicians don't really fight for grants because they don't like being held

accountable for where the money ends up.” He then patted his wallet.

The WSWS reporters then spoke with two other firefighters about the storm in September 2010 when 85 buildings burned due to 700 downed power lines. At the time, the WSWS spoke with residents whose calls to DTE Energy about a sparking transformer were ignored for days before it eventually set their house on fire during the storm. (See: “Fires burn throughout Detroit”).

The first firefighter commented, “DTE doesn't maintain their power lines. You can see burned out houses all along this street that have been there for years. But when something big like that happens and people want to investigate, they bulldoze the house really quickly.”

The second added, “Their priorities aren't the people. It's all about making a profit for those on top, and they don't care about the rest. If they can bail out the credit companies and the auto companies, they should find the money to keep the city running.”



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact