

Poverty, budget cuts hit Syracuse, New York

Bryan Dyne
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The official poverty rate in Syracuse, New York has risen to 34 percent, up from 27 percent a decade ago, according to recent data released from the Census Bureau. The sharp rise in social destitution has also hit other upstate New York cities, like Rochester and Buffalo where poverty rates are 33.8 percent and 30.2 percent respectively.

The social crisis in Syracuse has been fueled by a wave of plant closings and manufacturing layoffs in the city of 145,000 residents, which occurred as a result of the deindustrialization of the United States over the past four decades. In August, auto parts maker Magna International closed its New Process Gear plant after slowly decreasing the workforce over the past decade. The plant had 4,000 workers at its height in 2002 and 406 when it closed as a result of Obama's forced bankruptcy of General Motors and Chrysler in late 2008.

Unemployment is also high. Data from the New York State Department of Labor shows that the unemployment rate in Syracuse is 10.7 percent, a 1.2 percent increase from this past spring. More than a third of all households live under 135 percent of the poverty line while 8 percent live on less than \$10,000 annually.

Conditions are similar in Rochester, where the unemployment rate is 11.8 percent.

Syracuse and Rochester Democratic mayors have warned of potential bankruptcy without help from state leaders, but no help is forthcoming from New York Governor Andrew Cuomo. In the current budget \$135 million has been cut from last year's funding level.

Lt. M. McDole, a firefighter in the Syracuse Fire Department (SFD,) spoke with reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* about conditions in the city and the impact of the budget cuts. "We are definitely going out more with the rise of poverty," began McDole. "We have a faster response time than the ambulance, less than three minutes, because we are

stationed around the city. And since most firefighters are EMTs and some of the department are paramedics, we can handle a large variety of cases, so we get sent out.

"When poverty goes up, we get a lot more medical related calls because people don't have the money for preventive medication."

The veteran firefighter continued, "There is no one big cause for fires in Syracuse. It's very hit or miss as to whether it's a smoker who didn't douse a butt or someone leaving a stove on. What we do see commonly is cigarettes from the [Native American] reservations that have paper that doesn't douse itself. And people buy those because they are cheaper."

"Another problem we find is new houses. Modern building codes allow trusses, not rafters, but trusses are more vulnerable to fires and to collapsing so never go up on a trussed roof. And they are in new houses because they are cheaper. Structurally, they are as sound as rafters, but will come down very quickly in a fire."

McDole also spoke on the health conditions of the firefighters. "All types of cancer is very common among firefighters because when something burns, especially all the plastics today, it's a carcinogen. Even with the equipment, some gets through, and it makes cancer a lot more common."

Referring to the budget cuts in Syracuse, McDole added, "Syracuse has been on a down slide for a long time. When we go to put out a fire, we only have one truck company, instead of two. We've only cut one engine company recently, but there are always rumors of more cuts coming our way, or more companies closing, which is upsetting. Especially since we are an essential service. We don't do this job for the money, but because we love doing what we do."

"We are all worried about what happens in a few years when Syracuse goes bankrupt," said McDole.

"What will happen to the department then?"



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