

Cuts in fire protection leading to deaths in Detroit

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A series of brutal budget cuts to the Detroit Fire Department and other social services by Mayor David Bing, the Detroit City Council and Michigan Governor Rick Snyder is producing the foreseeable outcome: the death of Detroit residents.

One tragedy follows another. Most recently, six-year-old Miguel Chavez died, in part due to a delay in the arrival of emergency services, when his family's Southwest Detroit home caught fire. Firefighters eventually took Chavez and his brother, Julio, to the hospital in a fire truck. Julio remains in critical condition.

A week earlier, firefighters from southwest Detroit were called to fight a fire in the northwest, a distance of 18 miles, because of fire station closures. It took the firefighters 21 minutes to make the trip. While the 85-year-old owner of the house escaped unharmed, she lost everything.

Not long before that, a 71-year-old man died in a house fire only four minutes away from a fire station recently closed.

"They are killing people," said one firefighter, after he and a coworker pulled an elderly couple out of their home in a fire in November. "This is another couple that has died in a fire from cuts."

Definite individuals are responsible for a policy that has produced these and many other tragedies. In a city plagued by poverty and unemployment, the ruling class and its political representatives are seeking to shut down large portions of Detroit, driving out those who presently live there.

The "right-sizing" of Detroit goes under the Orwellian banner of the "Detroit Works Project." Developed by the corporate and financial elite in Detroit, the plan envisages the termination of services to large swathes of the city. The browning-out and

closure of fire stations, the shutdown of schools, the privatization of city assets and the widespread termination of electrical power by energy giant DTE are part of the plan.

The Detroit Works Project is supported by dominant sections of big business in the region and nationally, including the Big Three auto manufacturers, DTE Energy, Fifth Third Bank, JP Morgan Chase and American International Group (AIG).

Whatever services remain in Detroit are to be subordinated ever more directly to various profit interests. Emergency Medical Services (EMS) is one target of privatization plans. Another potential moneymaker is the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department, where there is a privatization plan that will eliminate 81 percent of all jobs. There are also plans to privatize the transportation system and public lighting.

Several of the 15 fire stations that were closed last summer are in neighborhoods slated by the project to be depopulated. This includes the stations that house Engine 23 and Ladder 16 in northeast Detroit, as well as stations for Engine 31 and Engine 49 in the Grand River I-96 region on the west side. The latter area has been designated by the Detroit Works Project as a future ecological "green zone."

The destruction of fire services in Detroit has a long history. The department has been under attack from successive Democratic Party administrations, going back to the Coleman Young government in 1981. The first target was the wages and benefits of firefighters, followed by cutbacks in maintenance and infrastructure.

One report found that between 1996 and 2000, 21 people died in fires where defective trucks arrived on the scene. This month, the fire commissioner issued an internal order not to use trucks with aerial ladders, after

it was revealed that they had not been inspected for over a year.

The latest cuts, however, have produced a qualitative transformation. In 2006, the fire department had 1,700 people. By 2012 there were 1,000. Over the past year, the city closed 15 stations—one quarter of the total—while 6-8 stations are on regular “brownout.” Last summer, to save \$100 million, the city imposed a 10 percent cut in pay on all city workers, including firefighters. Overtime pay has been eliminated and medical benefits slashed.

As a consequence of these cuts, firefighters are overworked and under-resourced, increasingly placing their own lives in jeopardy as a result. Detroit has one of the busiest fire departments in the country. By the city’s own admission, firefighters are fighting over 30,000 fires a year, with firefighter crews regularly fighting 3 to 5 fires a day.

The crisis is even greater in Emergency Medical Services. In 2004, the department had 40 vehicles to respond to medical emergencies. This year, there are at best 14 operational ambulances. It is not unusual to have as few as 10 in service, causing wait times to jump as high as an hour, when seconds can mean the difference between life and death.

What is taking place in Detroit is nothing less than criminal. Those responsible must be held accountable. The fight against these conditions must be part of a struggle to transform society in the interests of the working class. Workers must secure the right to fire protection as a part of a struggle for basic social rights—including the right to a job at decent pay, education, health care, housing, and heat and electricity.

The claim of Democrats and Republicans alike that there is no money to guarantee these rights is a lie! Even as the stock market soars and corporate profits reach record levels, the mantra of the ruling class, from the Obama White House down to the city level, is that social programs must be cut.

Both Democrats and Republicans speak for the corporate and financial elite. Detroit exemplifies the role of the Democratic Party, which has presided over the city for decades. Utilizing racial politics, a corrupt elite has benefited enormously while the city has gone from being one of the wealthiest to the poorest large city in the United States.

In opposition to a society based on the subordination of every aspect of life to private profit, the working class requires a society based on social need—in other words, socialism. The necessary resources must be taken out of the hands of the ruling elite, and the banks and corporations placed under the democratic control of the working people themselves.

A new fight-back is required. The SEP calls on all those who want to carry out a struggle to contact us today.



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