

Emergency manager to impose contract on Detroit firefighters

WSWS reporting team
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Detroit's emergency manager Kevyn Orr told Detroit firefighters he will impose a new contract on them starting July 1, when the current labor agreement expires. The details of the contract have not been revealed, but it is expected to include further cuts to the working conditions, wages, safety, health benefits, seniority and pensions of the city's 900 firefighters.

The emergency manager was appointed by Michigan's Republican governor Rick Snyder ostensibly to fix Detroit's ailing finances. In reality, Orr is an unelected representative of the major financial institutions who is required by Michigan's Public Act 436 to pay back Detroit's creditors in full. This will be done with an escalation in the attacks against the working class, including gutting the pensions of city workers.

The Detroit Fire Department (DFD) has already faced major budget cuts under Democratic mayor David Bing and the City Council, which used the threat of bankruptcy to escalate the attacks on the city workers last November. Bing unilaterally imposed a 10 percent wage cut and slashed health benefits of city workers last July under the consent agreement ratified by the City Council.

Now, city workers are facing even more dictatorial measures under the emergency manager. Orr's imposition of a contract on the firefighters will only be the first wave of concessions forced on city workers in Detroit. It is also the beginning of the sweeping cuts to social services and the sell-off of public assets.

Daniel McNamara, president of Detroit Fire Fighters Association Local 344, told the WSWS, "I thought we were living in America. It's going back to the days of 'yellow dog' contracts before the Wagner Act. With PA 436, the EM will not even discuss the terms of the contract just impose them on us.

"We have already seen our pensions frozen and wage cuts of 10 percent or even 30 percent for some fire fighters. We are down 500 fire fighters from five years ago. In the fall, fire commissioner Don Austin closed another five companies and put up to 10 more on brownout. Of the 57 companies we have left, only 42 a day are open.

"The EM has the power to tear up contracts and impose conditions of employment with no input from the unions. It's 'meet and confirm,' that's what we're doing. I cannot bargain for the safety of our members. And if our members are not safe we can't help the safety of the people of Detroit."

The union president, however, had no answer to the attack, saying only that city unions were looking to the courts to overturn the EM law and have "talked to our representatives and senators in Michigan as well as our representatives in Congress."

The complicity of Democrats, from the Obama administration to Michigan state treasurer Andy Dillon and the city government, shows the attack on workers in Detroit is a bipartisan policy and such appeals are a dead end for workers. All of the city's unions, including the largest, the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, have shown their willingness to collaborate with the Democratic city government to impose deep concessions but are opposed to the EM doing it unilaterally.

Detroit has a reported forty fires a day, the most of any major city. As a result of station closures and rolling temporary closures or brownouts, firefighters are forced to travel longer distances across the city, which costs homes and lives. (See: "Cuts in fire protection leading to deaths in Detroit")

Firefighters commented to the WSWS on the undemocratic nature of the emergency manager. "I'm a

veteran. I was in Iraq in 2005 fighting against a dictator there. Now there is a dictator in Detroit. How in a democratic society is the suspension of democracy a good thing?

“Last year, May or June, the tentative agreement was presented as a way to stop layoffs. There were a lot of concessions but it’s not enough. The City Council then told us that the cuts presented to them were not enough. They laid off people immediately and the union didn’t do anything. The union sold us out.”

One firefighter noted the broader issue of corruption of the financial institutions in the US, particularly relating to the housing bubble crash of 2007. “America is a Ponzi scheme. My house is my most valuable commodity and now I’m upside down on my house.

“How is it they could arbitrarily say, when 50 million people are getting ready to retire nation wide, guess what, your house is worth nothing? That’s not by happenstance or because Wall Street was ‘having a bad day’. Somebody had to plan that. That was well thought out. They snookered a lot of people out of their money. It was all about the bankers and Wall Street.”

Fire fighters also spoke about the cuts to city and fire services. “For a structure fire, a house or a building, there used to be three engines, a ladder, a squad and a chief to respond. That’s twenty-one men and another eighteen men if they needed it.

“That was prior to August of last year. Now, you’ll only get eighteen men total. Only a week after this started, you had a handicapped couple in Brightmore die. A week later, another two people were dead in a fire. Trucks are coming from too far away to fight fires in time.

“One of the problems is some of the ladders on trucks aren’t working properly. Some of the ladders don’t work. Some of the water hoses on ladders don’t work. Chiefs have to call in to make sure they get a fully functional ladder truck. Without that, we can’t directly enter the second story of a house.”

“Another issue is the gentrification of the city,” another fire fighter added. “If I went to an impoverished area to save people, who cares? That’s why they close the inner city houses. They only want services for the wealthier people.

“We have to go to those houses though because most of the poor don’t have insurance. If we don’t, all they own is lost. They won’t have anywhere to go. At best

they’ll shack up with family but they won’t get their home back. We also have to save the homes around a burning house, even if what’s on fire is vacant. Especially since all the buildings are so close together.

“If you had forty fires a day in New York City, Los Angeles or Chicago, people would say it’s a problem. In Detroit, no one cares.”



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