

# Detroit firefighters protest bankruptcy, pension cuts

Our reporters  
23 July 2013

Detroit firefighters are picketing fire stations throughout the city this week to protest the emergency manager's decision to throw the city into bankruptcy and attack the jobs, pensions and other benefits of 31,000 current and retired municipal employees.

An ad hoc organization called the Public Safety Workers Action Group called the protests to highlight the dangers facing Detroit's citizens because of decades of layoffs, fire station closings and the outsourcing of Emergency Medical Services (EMS).

Veteran firefighter Dennis Hunter said the department had 1,800 firefighters and 77 fire companies in 1983. Twenty years later, the department only operates 42 fire companies with 830 firefighters. During this period, the number of fire-related deaths has more than doubled, with 79 fatalities in 2012-13, he said.

Firefighters are compelled to respond to fires with outmoded and in some cases dysfunctional equipment. Rotating closures, called "brownouts," often leave the nearest station to a fire closed. This forces firefighters to travel longer distances and delays responses, imperiling the public and increasing the number of firefighter injuries.

A firefighter was hurt on July 6 after rescuers had to pull a water line from several blocks away because of the lack of water pressure in the closest hydrant. Four firefighters were also injured on May 30 by falling debris from a burning building after having trouble with broken equipment and the lack of water pressure.

Now Emergency Manager Kevyn Orr plans to rob retired firefighters of their hard-earned pensions, using the bankruptcy courts to reduce payments into pension trust funds by as much as 90 percent.

"Because firefighters pay into the pension system, we get no Social Security checks, and our pension is the only thing we have to live on," John told the *World*

*Socialist Web Site*. "If it is cut and health benefits taken, how will we survive?"

"For many workers," John continued, "this is the only income for the entire family. For example, if you worked for 30-40 years and have been retired for 10, chances are your wife stayed home to raise the kids, and the family is living on that one income. Also, for many people things are tough and pensioners are helping out their kids and grandkids. I feel what is being done is wrong."

The Public Safety Workers Action Group organized the protests independently of the Detroit Fire Fighters Association Local 344. The actions are being held throughout the week at several battalions from 8-11:00 am in the morning and then from 4:00-7:00 pm in the evening. Friends, family and workers from other locations who oppose the attacks by Orr are joining firefighters at the protests.

"We have gone from over 80 fire companies down to around 40 in the summer months, while still covering the same 139 square miles," a firefighter told the WSWs. "Our workloads have basically quadrupled, and we are out here because it is necessary to take a stand in order to hang on to what we have.

"We want to inform the people of Detroit that not only are we suffering and facing additional cuts, but the population is being placed in danger. Every two minutes a fire is left unattended, it doubles in size.

"The other day, we had to respond from this station [located at Fort and Junction in the southwest side of Detroit] to a fire at Telegraph and 5 Mile Road," across the city on the Northwest side.

"Orr comes in, and he doesn't see citizens and their needs. It's all about numbers, and we do not agree with his numbers. They are saying that the [pension] funds are underfunded because they want to take away what

workers have fought for.

“Every dollar the rich people get is off the backbone of the workers. The politicians are as bad as the corporations, and this includes the entire Congress. It no longer speaks for the working people.”

The Detroit Fire Fighters Association and other city unions have opposed any serious struggle against Orr. Instead, they have complained the emergency manager has ignored their overtures to work with him in “good faith” to impose further concessions on their members.

Last week, the Police and Fire Retirement System and the General Retirement System—which together covers 21,000 retirees—filed a lawsuit in state court arguing that the bankruptcy filing violated Michigan’s constitution and its prohibition against pension cuts. Judge Rosemarie Aquilina ruled that Orr and Republican Governor Rick Snyder had indeed violated the constitution because they knew the bankruptcy filing would lead to benefit reductions.

On Monday, the *Detroit Free Press* reported, US Bankruptcy Judge Steven Rhodes declared that his federal court had the authority to rule on the dispute between the city’s pension funds and the City of Detroit—not the state court in Ingham County.

Rhodes will hold a hearing on Wednesday morning to consider the city’s request to put on hold all lawsuits filed before the city filed for bankruptcy. “If Rhodes rules in Detroit’s favor,” the newspaper reported, “it would put an automatic stay in the Ingham County case,” essentially clearing any legal hurdles for the implementation of deep pension cuts.



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