

# Detroit firefighters speak out on bankruptcy

Tim Rivers, Jerry White  
29 July 2013

In fire stations across the city of Detroit, discussions are being held about the impact of the city's bankruptcy filing and initial efforts by rank-and-file firefighters to mobilize opposition to the emergency manager's attack on pensions and essential services.

Last week, scores of red T-shirted firefighters, organized in the ad hoc Public Safety Workers Action Group (PSWAG), fanned out across the city holding informational pickets and protests outside of fire stations and the Federal Bankruptcy Court. They have explained the connection between decades of layoffs, fire station closings and other budget reductions, and the increased dangers facing residents in the sprawling city of 139 square miles. Since 1983, the number of firefighters has been reduced from 1,800 to 830, and the number of fire companies reduced from 77 to 42.

Many are second- and third-generation firefighters, and due to reduced funding, few if any younger workers have been hired by the department for years, placing ever-greater pressure on older rescuers facing chronic manpower shortages and decaying equipment. Firefighters in their 40s and 50s, with a workload that exacts an enormous toll on their bodies, now face the prospect of having to work more years before retirement or losing their pensions and retiree medical benefits altogether.

"Why stay on the job and risk your life with no guarantee of a future?" said Robert, a firefighter with two decades of service. "We love this job, we love to help people, but we have to take care of our own families too. When I get old, I can't have my kids taking care of me."

Robert, who works at Engine 55, Ladder 27 on the city's west side, pointed to the list of death notices of firemen at the station since it opened in 1926. "You can see that the older guys who were born at the turn of the century were living to their 80s or even their 90s. Today, the younger guys—born in the 1960s—are dying at 45 or 50 because they are exposed to more stuff, like plastics in car fires. There was a fire at Frank's Nursery, which had fertilizer, and most of the guys died years later."

"One firefighter, Dwayne Garland, passed away after being exposed to some chemicals. He was a young guy who

worked out, but when he died six months later, he was only a shell of what he used to be. What I heard was the city gave his family a hard time for his death benefits, saying he had some kind of preexisting condition."

By the nature of their work, firefighters awaiting emergency calls, if not sleeping after working a consecutive 24-hour shift at the station, are doing duties like maintaining equipment and preparing meals in the firehouse. As one younger firefighter said, "When we are at lunch, all we do is discuss the bankruptcy and what they are trying to do to us."

In two cases, discussions with reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* were interrupted when emergency calls came and the firefighters rushed to respond. This included a firehouse on Lafayette Street on the lower east side, which firemen said was the single busiest fire station in the world.

Emergency Manager Kevyn Orr has threatened to reduce the payments owed to the firefighters' pension funds by as much as 90 percent. He has used the federal bankruptcy court to circumvent Michigan's state constitution, which declares that accrued pension benefits are contractual obligations, which cannot be reduced.

In a deliberate effort to inflate the magnitude of the financial crisis—in order to justify his bankruptcy filing and impose his own representatives on the pension trustee board—Orr has claimed the Detroit's Police and Fire Retirement System is \$1.4 billion short of meeting long-term payouts for retirees—or 78 percent funded. The pension fund's own consultant determined—based on the life expectancy of retirees and assumed investment returns—that the retirement account is actually 96.1 percent funded with \$147.2 million unfunded liability.

"It really doesn't matter if its 120 percent funded or 50 percent funded, the city made a commitment to pay into the pension funds and has not done so," Bruce Babiarz, spokesman for Detroit's Police and Fire Retirement System, told the *Detroit News*.

Adding insult to injury, Orr threatened to use the higher figure against retirees in bankruptcy court. "Be very careful. You might have to live with that number," Orr said on WDET-FM radio. "And that means that's less of an obligation that we have to meet in this process."

Orr spokesman Bill Nowling said the city could at some point in the bankruptcy proceedings accept the police and fire unions' figure and diminish their voting power on the city's restructuring plan for unsecured creditors. "We might take them up on their offer...and then they won't get anything," Nowling told the *Detroit News*.

"It is plainly illegal," fumed David, a firefighter with 13 years seniority. "When Orr began saying our pension was underfunded, I started worrying about what that would mean for us. I could see that he had an ulterior motive. They have already proved they are not playing by the rules of democracy," he continued, pointing to the fact that Orr, Republican governor Rick Snyder and Detroit's Democratic mayor had all decided to throw the city into bankruptcy months before a financial emergency was even declared.

"With this bankruptcy, they have gotten rid of democracy in the state of Michigan." Referencing the American Revolution and the Civil War, he added, "It is time for another uprising. Without a rebellion, you have got no revolution. That is the only way democracy is going to be restored. People should be fighting in Detroit like they are doing in Egypt."

In discussions with reporters from the WSWs, several firemen spoke about the spying operations by the US government against the American people that were revealed by National Security Agency whistleblower Edward Snowden. "Aren't we supposed to give asylum to people just like this guy? But oh no, now that he told on the government, they've got to get him," one veteran firefighter said.

"They want to bust up the pension fund," Robert continued. "There is nothing for the working class. I'm driving a 30-year-old truck around. I've been working for the city for 20 years, and before that my dad worked for 26 years.

"It's like the days of Carnegie and Rockefeller—they have absolute power and if you voice your opinion they screw you. Now the monopolies are companies like DTE, which is taking over the public lighting system. They're telling us what they are doing is 'best for the city,' that bankruptcy will help provide better city services. But, on whose backs?"

"It's all about money. They found money for a new hockey stadium and new housing for the rich. But they want to throw the poor people out of the city, across 8 Mile Road. How much is enough money for these people? They already have enough to take care of their families for generations. They even want to take the artwork from the Detroit Institute of Arts so it can hang on some rich guy's two-story townhouse and ordinary Detroiters will never see it."

Firefighters commented on the similarity between Detroit and Greece and other European countries where the banks

were imposing brutal austerity measures. One firefighter pointed to a YouTube video of firefighters in Spain disarming riot police during protests against austerity.

"How can you claim that the city is broke when you pay Orr and his firm over \$3 million?" David asked. "And the chief of police gets \$250,000? It's becoming more and more like a class separation, where either you're rich or poor, with no middle class in between."

Workers also expressed contempt for the official unions, which have opposed any unified struggle against Orr, and instead have insisted that they want to be partners with the emergency manager in imposing the dictates of the Wall Street banks. "You put union heads in there [negotiating with Orr] and they'll get bought off for a cup of coffee. The unions used to be strong. Now the union bosses get invited to the big table, but then they just serve the company," said David.

Raymond, a working firefighter, said, "I believe it is illegal. We as firefighters don't get social security because we do not pay into it. But we have been paying into our pensions every check. Now they want to take it. And for what? So they can build a new hockey stadium?"

Paul has been fighting fires for 11 years. "Our battalion protested at the courthouse on Thursday," he said. "We're trying to work with what equipment we have, but right now it is the bare minimum. When I started fighting fires, I was thinking that after years of service I would be promoted and earn a good living, but now they are just cutting everything."

Daryl is a retired firefighter who worked for 19 years. "I actually still get my disability payments," he said, "but I want to fight for my brothers and sisters who are affected.

"We need to have firefighters all over, both outside and inside Detroit—and we need to shut this city down! We can't stand any more cuts. I'm about as mad as I care to get about this."

*The World Socialist Web Site (WSWS) will continue to publish regular updates on the efforts of firefighters to defend their pensions and health benefits. We call on firefighters to use the WSWS to voice their concerns and as a forum to discuss the questions facing the working class in Detroit, the US and internationally. Firefighters are encouraged to print and discuss these articles in their workplaces and to send comments and updates to the WSWS.*



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