

Davis, California firefighters hit by budget cuts

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Over the past four years, Davis firefighters have been the target of budget cuts, layoffs and deteriorating working conditions.

Over the past two fiscal years, firefighters have seen a 220 percent increase in overtime due to a 20 percent cut in staffing. The number of firefighters has dropped from 45 to 36, to cover a population of 66,000. During the most recent wildfires that plagued California, Davis firefighters were called back from assisting, in an effort to save on the costs that would have incurred.

The department has been without a fire chief since 2009, which workers say has resulted in a lack of consistent leadership, coordination and successful planning.

The WSWS interviewed Bob Weist, firefighter and Firefighters Association liaison, who was the only one allowed under the union's rules to give information to the public.

"The city is cutting street cleaners, tree trimmers, cops and firefighters," Weist said, "because they say they don't want Davis to be the next Vallejo or Stockton [two cities in California that have declared bankruptcy]. The line is they need to resolve these budget issues, even if this is lessening safety for the community.

"But at the same time, the city is also hiring more managers and pencil-pushers; people who write reports... on how badly city services are doing"

Bob noted that Davis' expenditures had actually increased from \$160 million to \$260 million, and that it had chosen to count future unfunded pension liabilities as current expenses, thus inflating the size of the nominal budget shortfall. "These politicians are trying to prove a point" he continued, "that workers' jobs have got to be cut no matter what. And this kind of thing is rampant throughout the country, it's an attack on the

working class."

Davis Professional Firefighters Association Local 3494, an AFL-CIO affiliate, has engaged in a number of stunts whose purpose is to defuse the growing anger of members. These include a petition drive to be sent to the city council and "a public awareness campaign." Since the beginning of October, firefighters have been instructed to maintain an "information picket" on a corner around downtown.

Davis is one of many cities in California that face potential insolvency. In nearby Stockton, the largest city in California to have declared bankruptcy, city services have been slashed and workers' pensions face the threat of confiscation as payment to the city's creditors.

Davis' newly-appointed city manager, Steve Pinkerton, previously worked as the head of Stockton's "redevelopment agency," where he directed the massive housing project that was implicated in the city's eventual bankruptcy.

Threatening workers with the specter of cities already in bankruptcy, city officials in Davis are seeking to preemptively take all the same measures before going to the courts, including laying off public workers and privatizing essential services. In March, Davis hired its first Chief Innovation Officer, whose express purpose is "to increase technology-based economic development within the city" and "retain the companies, entrepreneurs and concepts that emerge from the University of California at Davis".

At an annual salary of \$240,000, the position is funded partly by the private business techDAVIS in a "private-public partnership." As part of the first wave in protecting business, CIO Rob White called for a cut in 300 public jobs.

The fiscal crisis facing California cities, which is

used to blackmail workers into layoffs, pay cuts, and benefit reductions, is part of an offensive by the ruling class throughout the country and internationally. Everything is being cut on the grounds that such measures are necessary to pay off the wealthy banks and bondholders.



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