

New York City preparing to lay off 400 EMS workers in advance of looming second wave of pandemic

Ali Elhassan
26 August 2020

New York City is preparing to lay off nearly 400 emergency medical technicians (EMTs) and paramedics in October in order to balance its budget, as part of a threat to impose the layoff of 22,000 municipal workers later this year. The proposed EMT layoffs represent about 10 percent of emergency medical services (EMS) workers.

That medical first responders, who were on the front lines when New York City was the global epicenter of the pandemic for weeks, will receive pink slips is little short of criminal. It is further proof that New York Mayor Bill de Blasio, Governor Andrew Cuomo and other Democrats, no less than the Republican Trump administration, are seeking to place the burden of the pandemic-triggered economic crisis on the working class.

The city's tax revenue has fallen by an estimated \$9 billion due to the pandemic, which saw the widespread but belated shutdown of many businesses as part of measures to slow the spread of the disease.

De Blasio is threatening to cut 22,000 municipal workers' jobs out of a total city workforce of over 300,000 in October if no agreement is reached with the unions, a number that he himself called "staggering" in June. His executive budget took effect on July 1 and includes \$1 billion in cuts from labor expenses to be implemented in coordination with the unions, with the New York Police Department (NYPD)—which has a \$6 billion budget—being the only city agency exempt from these draconian cuts. (The supposed cut in the NYPD's budget was essentially a shell game that did not meaningfully affect police funding.)

As the main first responders charged with treating patients during the COVID-19 pandemic—which saw the number of medical emergency calls rise to historic highs—the city's EMS workers suffered a catastrophic

toll, with several perishing from the disease and three committing suicide due to emotional trauma related to the pandemic.

The city's 4,300 EMTs and paramedics are grossly underpaid. The starting annual salary of an EMT is \$35,000—\$16.50 an hour—reaching a maximum of \$48,000 after five years. New York City is one of the most expensive cities in the world, meaning most EMS workers can hardly afford to live in the city they serve.

It should be stressed that the pandemic has been exacerbated by the policies of both de Blasio and Cuomo.

Health experts overwhelmingly agree that the massive death toll in New York City could have been sharply reduced, even by as much as half or more. This would have been possible if in the first several months of the pandemic Cuomo and de Blasio had ordered social distancing measures and a shutdown of some non-essential businesses by February 28, when federal officials warned of the looming prospect of a pandemic. Proactive policies to avert the pandemic could have begun as early as January, when the federal government recognized the potential for the virus to spread globally.

Instead, both Democratic politicians and their Republican counterparts at the federal level trivialized the threat to the public and dismissed the increasingly dire and vocal warnings of their own public health officials. Up until mid-March de Blasio was expressing more concern over maintaining the patronage of bars than the emerging health crisis.

De Blasio delayed school closures until teachers began organizing a wildcat sickout, while Cuomo protected nursing home operators. Those decisions lead to the needless deaths of thousands of people, especially the elderly. Overall, 21,000 people died in New York City alone due to the pandemic, according to city data.

The threat to fire hundreds of EMS workers along with thousands of other municipal workers comes at the very moment when the city and state governments are pursuing a catastrophic policy of reopening the city's schools. That would create conditions for a second wave of the pandemic in New York City on a scale similar to, if not worse, than the first.

In this situation, the EMS union is actively trying to prevent workers from fighting the cuts. The union has been in negotiations with the city for weeks, without providing any information to the workers. Then, on Friday, the president of EMS Local 2507, Oren Barzilay, gave an interview to Fox News on the potential layoffs, declaring, "People will die."

He continued, "We're already running thin. We had shortages before COVID-19 began and we have been battling City Hall about this for as long as I can remember and it is falling on deaf ears. So, you're going to cut us by another 10 percent. They [the public] may wait 3-4 hours to get an ambulance."

Such statements can only be understood as a clear signal that the union has no intention of even pretending to fight the deadly cuts. The aim is to pressure the city in the ongoing negotiations, while at the same time browbeating workers into accepting steep cuts and layoffs.

Already, hard pressed city workers are being made to understand that they now have to shoulder the burden of the capitalist crisis by "finding the savings" through increased health care costs, pay cuts, an increased retirement age and intensified exploitation.

The strategy of the de Blasio administration in making public pronouncements on the imminent layoffs of city workers is to compel the federal government to provide emergency funds or the state government to allow the city to raise funds through the issuance of bonds. Either of these short-term fiscal solutions would not mean relief for workers, but would come with strings attached and would exacerbate budget deficits that would then be used to justify further austerity and income restructuring for workers in New York City and nationally.

At the same time, the city has made clear that there will be layoffs in any case. A spokesman for City Hall told the *New York Post*, "all agencies will face layoffs."

This frontal assault on the working class amidst a raging pandemic exposes the class character of Bill de Blasio and the so called "left" wing of the Democratic Party. As a candidate, de Blasio ran for mayor on a "tale of two cities" platform, advocating a wealth tax on the city's ultra-rich in order to fund social programs. In his

statements today he does not even mention the possibility of raising taxes on the city's billionaires or on corporations, as inadequate as such measures would be.

EMS and other city workers need to recognize that the unions and the Democratic Party are not defending their interests, but those of the employers and the capitalist class. They have presided over a decades-long erosion of workers' incomes and living standards. The unions will use the threat of mass layoffs as a gun to workers' heads as they extort massive concessions, supposedly to "save jobs."

In order to defend their jobs and fight for decent living standards and adequate protection amidst the pandemic, workers must break free of both the unions and the Democratic Party. They must form genuinely democratic rank-and-file committees which would be based on the principle of the defense of social needs, not private profit.

In this struggle, health care workers have powerful allies. Already, autoworkers and educators have begun forming rank-and-file safety committees to stop the spread of the pandemic and are engaging in discussions with their class brothers and sisters internationally. EMS workers must follow suit.

Above all, workers must understand that their fight to defend their jobs and social programs and stop the spread of the pandemic must be directed against the capitalist system on the basis of a socialist program. The Socialist Equality Party and the *World Socialist Web Site Health Care Workers Newsletter* fight for this perspective and will provide every assistance to workers in this struggle.

For more information or to get involved, contact us at healthcare@wsws.org.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact