

# Austin, Texas firefighters denounce refusal to deploy department's rescue teams to areas impacted by historic flash floods

Andy Hartmann  
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*Austin firefighters wishing to make contact with the WSWS can submit the form below. All submissions will be kept anonymous.*

The deadly flooding in Texas Hill Country has exposed deep cracks in American society. At least 120 people have died and 170 remain missing in a catastrophe that could have been mitigated with timely warnings and coordinated rescue operations. But years of budget cuts, disinvestment in public infrastructure and politically driven decision-making have taken their toll.

The region lacked any flood warning system. Staffing shortages at the National Weather Service hampered the agency's ability to issue timely alerts. And in one of the most damning failures, the City of Austin Fire Department—despite having “the best water rescue units in the state,” according to Austin Firefighters Association (AFA) President Bob Nicks—refused to deploy rescue teams until after the flooding had already begun.

On July 11, the AFA (Local 975 of the International Association of Firefighters) voted overwhelmingly—by 93 percent—to issue a resolution of no confidence in Fire Chief Joel Baker.

In a statement, the AFA wrote:

The Austin Firefighters Association is demanding a full investigation into the decision and calling for transparency and accountability at all levels of management.

We're urging investigative journalists and the public to help uncover the truth. The lives of citizens—and trust in our local government—depend on it.

The firefighters will not stop until every responsible party is held accountable and systemic

changes are made to prevent such a tragedy from happening again.

According to Nicks, two formal requests for assistance were sent to the Austin Fire Department before the flooding began. Both were denied. A month earlier, Chief Baker had imposed a moratorium on all out-of-area deployments, citing internal “cash flow problems.”

But Nicks dismissed the financial excuse as a “non-starter,” noting that any deployment costs would be reimbursed by the state of Texas. “The message up and down the chain of command was: do not deploy and do not even ask,” he told the *World Socialist Web Site*. It was not until July 4—after the disaster was well underway—that Baker allowed just three rescue divers to be sent to the region.

Firefighters from every other major Texas city, as well as from Oklahoma City and even from Mexico, deployed to assist.

Retired Austin rescue captain Matt Rush rejected the excuse that sending help would have left the city unprotected. “If we send resources to a flood event, we are not losing capability within the city of Austin,” he told *austinpolitics.net*. “We're not closing 10 fire stations in Austin to go help Kerrville.”

Right-wing provocateurs have seized on the controversy to advance a racist narrative (Joel Baker is African-American). Charlie Kirk, the fascistic founder of Turning Point USA, said on his podcast: “How many people unnecessarily died because of DEI?” This vile attempt to use this tragedy to incite racism is aimed at shielding the real criminals—Texas Governor Greg Abbott and the Republican-controlled state legislature, which has refused to fund a flood warning system but has spent more than

\$11 billion since 2021 on Operation Lone Star, the state's anti-immigrant border crackdown.

At the same time, Democratic Party officials in Austin have denounced the firefighters' vote of no confidence. Democratic Mayor Kirk Watson accused Nicks of "politicizing" the disaster during union negotiations. City Manager T.C. Broadnax echoed the charge, calling the AFA's resolution "disappointing." Others affiliated with the Democratic Party have even insinuated that the union's criticisms were racially motivated, forcing the AFA to issue a statement clarifying that the dispute "is not about race or ethnicity."

Nicks, who emphasized that "I am not a MAGA guy," told the WSWS that neither race nor partisanship motivated the union's decision but the imperative to protect lives and hold those responsible to account.

Indeed, what the Kerr floods exposed is the deep class fault lines in the United States. The flood occurred amid record cuts to public spending, including to the National Weather Service and other basic services millions rely on before and during extreme weather events. As has been widely reported, Trump's first administration rejected a funding application from the county government for a flood warning system.

Meanwhile, Democratic Party politicians are carrying out massive cuts to city services in major cities, such as Los Angeles, Chicago and Philadelphia. Watson's arrogant denunciation of the firefighters' principled stand confirms the local government's complicity in the decision not to send highly trained personnel to save lives.

This draining of social resources at every level must be countered by a movement in the working class, independent of both parties, fighting against the Wall Street oligarchy, which is the recipient of these resources.



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