

New York City firefighters protest low salaries

By Alan Whyte
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On the eve of a massive memorial service to honor 343 New York City firefighters killed in last year's terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center, thousands of their co-workers rallied in the pouring rain to protest the city's refusal to pay them a decent salary. The day before the demonstration, held in Central Park, delegates from the Uniformed Firefighters Association voted 365 to 2 to reject the city's wage offer of 11.5 percent over 30 months.

The wage offer was made by then-mayor Rudolph Giuliani and accepted by the union's executive board in August of last year. A vote by the large delegate body had been put off since then amid a series of funerals for fallen firefighters. The longer the delay, the more anger developed among the rank and file.

The firefighters have been without a new contract for almost 30 months, and their previous pact included two years without a pay hike. Faced with a \$5 billion budget deficit for the next fiscal year, the current mayor, Michael Bloomberg—who rejects any tax hikes on corporations or multimillionaires like himself—insists there is no money available to improve the wage offer.

The bitterness of the firefighters over the contradiction between their treatment as media heroes and the miserable wages offered by the city was expressed in various signs displayed at the rally. "A million thanks doesn't pay the mortgage," read one. "I'm a NYC fireman. I can't afford an umbrella," said another, carried by a drenched fireman.

With a starting salary of \$32,000 a year, the city's firefighters are among the lowest paid in the country, while the cost of living in New York is among the highest. Firefighters' anger has grown as Democratic and Republican party politicians routinely invoke their heroism and sacrifice on September 11 to justify everything from war to repression, while refusing to appropriate funds to raise salaries or provide safety equipment needed to protect their lives.

Their greatest ire has been reserved for former mayor Giuliani, who has been lionized by the establishment as the principal hero of September 11. The firefighters' union had

waged an internal debate over how best to express their animosity toward the former mayor at the Madison Square Garden memorial service where he spoke on Saturday, October 12.

Tens of thousands of firefighters from around the country as well as from Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia, Japan and a number of other countries jammed the streets outside the Garden, while inside, members of the Fire Department of New York (FDNY) and the families of the firefighters killed last year heard hymns, eulogies for those who died and a 40-minute roll call of the dead. The reading of the names was followed by a sustained and thunderous applause from the audience.

Many had wanted to turn their backs when the former mayor took the platform or boo him down. In the end, the union leadership counseled against such actions and the uniformed firefighters in the audience sat, staring stonily ahead, during Giuliani's address, and then responded to his remarks with silence.

Giuliani's meager contract offer is only one of the reasons he is so despised by the rank and file. The firefighters are angry over poor equipment. Union officials have charged that over 100 firefighters died in the collapse of the World Trade Center because their outdated and faulty radios failed, and they did not hear orders to evacuate the Twin Towers. These were the same radios that failed in the 1993 terrorist bombing of the World Trade Center.

The Giuliani administration had attempted several months before the September 11 attacks to introduce a new radio system that proved totally unsuited for fire fighting, resulting in the near death of a young firefighter in a basement fire in Queens. The no-bid deal to buy these radios is under investigation by the Manhattan District Attorney's office.

In a recent interview given while promoting his new book, *Leadership*, Giuliani dismissed charges concerning the radios—charges confirmed in a review of the FDNY's September 11 response conducted by an outside consulting firm—declaring that the firefighters had simply decided to

“go down with the ship.”

Giuliani’s role in the September 11 disaster was far from the way it has been universally depicted in the establishment media. Pursuing his usual method of photo-op politics, he led an entourage of senior officials to the scene, where they played no role in the rescue operation, but merely added to the confusion.

The city’s emergency response command post, whose World Trade Center location Giuliani had chosen several years earlier over widespread objections, was destroyed when the building near the Twin Towers in which it was housed collapsed. Investigators have concluded that the failure of that building was directly caused by the igniting of fuel lines that the city illegally installed to power the command center.

Firefighters’ bitterness toward Giuliani was further stoked by his selection of former union president Thomas Von Essen to serve as his fire commissioner. Union officials charged that Von Essen used privileged information that he obtained as a union leader to carry out vindictive attacks on individual members of the department, and to restructure the FDNY’s command structure in order to eliminate Giuliani’s perceived enemies.

The breaking point came last November, when Giuliani and Von Essen ordered the reduction of the number of firefighters involved in the recovery of the remains of their comrades who lost their lives at the trade center. This decision led to a spontaneous march by firefighters into the Ground Zero site, clashes with the police and the arrest of 18 firefighters. Police were sent to the homes of fire union officials in the days after the protest to arrest them as well. In response, the unions called off the mass memorial service that was originally scheduled last year.

At last Friday’s rally, a number of rank-and-file firefighters spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* about the reasons for their anger.

“We deserve a decent raise,” said Larry, a 35-year-old firefighter with 12 years in the FDNY. “We’ve had no raises in over four years, and what they offered just wasn’t enough. We can’t live on it. You’ve got firemen living at home with their parents, guys with children on food stamps, it’s ridiculous.

“There has to be some money out there to give us a decent wage. It’s ridiculous what we work for. There’s always money someplace. When the politicians want a raise, they vote one for themselves. We can’t live on the salaries they are paying us. You’ve got to work a second job, a third job; you’ve got to cut back; and you can’t go on vacations. Guys are coming to work tired. They are not as alert as they should be; and you really need to be on the ball when you’re running into a burning building.

“Every funeral you go to, every speech you hear a politician make, they always say we are the heroes of New York. We do the same job we always did, even before 9/11. I don’t know what to tell them, they keep ranting and raving about how great we are, and yet they refuse to pay us what we deserve.”

Tony, age 42, has been an FDNY firefighter for 10 years. “When it comes to funding the fire departments, President Bush and Mayor Bloomberg say the same thing—they don’t have the money,” he said. “The McKinsey report [on the September 11 response] stated that the radios we used in the 1993 WTC bombing were messed up, and we didn’t have proper communications. They didn’t do anything then, and they’re not doing anything now. So they don’t care. They say, ‘You guys are great.’ We say, ‘How about we get better radios,’ and then they say ‘Oh, we can’t afford that right now.’ They said the same thing back in 1993, the same exact quotes.”

Pat, who is 39, has worked in the fire department since 1993. “We are the lowest paid fire department in the country for cities over 1 million people,” he said. “They say that they don’t have the money now, but when they had the money they didn’t give us anything either. When they had the surplus, we got zero.

“Listen tomorrow at the memorial service and you’ll hear everyone saying what a great job we did and how they feel bad for our families. But when it comes to a contract, they don’t want to pay anything. You’ll see who’s there, you’ll see Giuliani there, using it for his own thing, but he was the one who was in office when they had the money and they didn’t give it to us. So, do they really care?”

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