

A comment on *Burn: One Year on the Front Lines of the Battle to Save Detroit*

By Nancy Hanover
3 October 2012

The recently released documentary *Burn: One Year on the Front Lines of the Battle to Save Detroit*, directed and produced by Tom Putnam and Brenna Sanchez, is a moving and powerful tribute to the impoverished city's embattled firefighters.

The film's Friday evening premiere at the Fillmore Detroit theater, with its red carpet, standing ovations and well-deserved tributes, turned into a genuinely stirring celebration of and homage to the sacrifice and determination of these firefighters.

Hundreds of firefighters traveled to the event from cities across Michigan, the Midwest and Canada, almost all in "dress blues" for the occasion.

The event and the film itself were noteworthy for honoring these workers, as well as for honestly acknowledging the terrible effects of poverty in Detroit and the budget cuts that have decimated the city's firefighting capacity.

Sanchez, a Detroiter, conceived of the film in the aftermath of the death of firefighter Walter Harris in 2008 (Death of Detroit firefighter: victim of a city's social decay), and the film is dedicated to him. His widow attended the premier with Sanchez.

"I wish my head could forget what my eyes have seen in 32 years of firefighting"—those words of Dave Parnell begin the film. The documentary follows his personal story, of retirement and the loss of his wife, along with that of Brendan Milewski. The documentary chronicles a year of the Detroit Fire Department.

Milewski began working as a Detroit firefighter at the age of 20. He notes that while working as a firefighter, he also had three other jobs in order to supplement his income.

In 2010 he was hit by a falling wall while battling a blaze on Detroit's east side. He is now retired, at age 33, paralyzed from the waist down. The film follows

his progress through physical therapy in an effort to regain feeling in his legs. While admitting "the film is extremely painful to watch," Milewski and his wife viewed it again at the Detroit premiere "because of the love surrounding us here in the audience." He spoke movingly to the crowd after the event.

Burn chronicles the devastating depopulation of Detroit in the wake of the plant closures over the last 30 years and provides a vivid visual record of the city's social crisis. The film takes the viewer to several dozen of the tens of thousands of abandoned buildings dotting Detroit. This, in combination with the fact that the city has the nation's highest arson rate, translates into its having one of the busiest fire departments in the nation. Last year 5,784 building fires took place in the city, under conditions of unremitting budget cuts.

The documentary was made through a special agreement with the City of Detroit and the Detroit Fire Department. A number of firemen agreed to wear webcams on their helmets, resulting in an exceedingly realistic and disturbing depiction of their work. *Burn* also shows firemen using duct tape to repair their gear, wearing inadequate or damaged boots and other equipment and driving trucks without authorization to use the pumps.

The filmmakers attended the funeral of 3-year-old Ivory Ivey whose death came about as a direct result of the city's budget cuts. As one fire truck was being repaired, a "TAC truck," a tactical vehicle normally used to transport manpower only, was deployed. The truck had no ladder, and the driver was not certified to use the pumping equipment.

The capacity crowd of 1,800 at the Fillmore Detroit, including hundreds of firemen, booed and jeered as Don Austin, the Detroit Fire Commissioner, defended the city's need to cut the budget on screen. At Ivey's

funeral, a firefighter emphasized that the firemen had done everything they could to save the little girl: “What failed us was not the firefighters, what failed us was the city.”

Austin is shown calling for “abandoned” buildings to be allowed to burn to the ground. Detroit firefighters were contemptuous of this comment too, cognizant that squatters inhabit a large number of empty structures in the city.

There were also many angry shouts from the audience as the policy of “browning out,” or decommissioning, fire stations in Detroit was chronicled in the film. Browning out of stations was begun in 2005 and has led to longer response times and growing numbers of injuries and deaths, and the film shows the intense anger of the firefighters at being forced to work without the equipment needed to protect the city’s population.

The existence of the film is a testament to the tenacity and dedication of the filmmakers. Co-directors and co-producers Sanchez and Putnam were told by film studios, and the Public Broadcasting Service, who produced the original trailer, that the story didn’t have legs. “We were told roundly by every single one of them there is no interest and no audience for a firefighter show or film,” says Sanchez. To pursue the project, the pair raised the finances independently through Kickstarter and indiegogo, and networks of supporters. The Detroit premiere was a fundraiser to enable the distribution of the film nationally.

Sanchez told the crowd, to great cheers, that “dollar one” of profits from the film would go to the purchase of needed equipment for the Detroit Fire Department through the Leary Firefighters Foundation.

The obvious omission in *Burn* is any reference to the role of the Democratic Party in implementing the destruction of city services in Detroit, as well as nationally. This may have something to do with the agreement the filmmakers worked out in order to produce the work. In any event, the words “Bing administration” and “Democrat” are never spoken, only “the city.”

It should be noted that since *Burn* was filmed in 2011, Detroit’s fire department budget has been cut by another \$23 million, with companies cut from 59 on duty per day to only 40-46, according to the *Detroit Free Press*. Salaries have been cut by 10 percent and

further layoffs enacted.

The overwhelming sentiments of those attending the premiere were anger and dismay at the state of Detroit’s fire department. Universally, the question was, “What can we do?” To this, Sanchez replied that the politicians should be held accountable. This is the limitation of the film. Without recognizing the bipartisan, big business policy of subordinating social needs to the profit imperatives of the banks and Wall Street, and acting on that recognition, there is no solution to the downward spiral of America’s cities.

To contact the WSWP and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wswp.org>