
A LADDER UP: ONTARIO FIREFIGHTERS' WAGES IN NEOLIBERAL TIMES

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INTRODUCTION

They deserve it. You can't put a price on people that are in a profession of saving people's lives...You cannot compare people who save lives to people who pick up garbage or cut grass. If they [the other unions] try to use that comparison, we will blow them out of the water. (Toronto City Councillor Rob Ford, quoted in Gray 2007, commenting on firefighters' wage increase).

The seismic economic shifts that came to the surface in 2008, dumping thousands of workers out of private sector work. They are beginning to hit public sector workers, who are experiencing pressure to make concessions and apprehension that they will be next for layoffs. Although some governments have shown willingness to accumulate debt in these times, public sector workers are bracing themselves for an expected round of re-structuring, justified by declining government revenues. As this economic crisis closes the curtain on rampant neoliberalism and opens on what, at first glance, looks like a "revisionist" neoliberal next act, it is worth considering how one public sector unionized occupation - professional firefighting¹ - has been able to adapt to neoliberalism better than other public sector occupations.

How and why have firefighters been able to maintain and even strengthen their labour position during a neoliberal period characterized by attacks on public sector wages and working conditions? This paper contributes to discussions about labour inequities by investigating the relations that have supported this masculinized labour sectors' position. I contend that firefighters have experienced advantages due to their sectors' ties to capital interests and the organization of the labour process. Further, the honourable white masculinity associated with firefighting has been mobilized to strengthen firefighters' political influence. Proceeding in five sections, this paper begins by demonstrating firefighters' advantage in wage, benefits and working conditions through a comparison between Toronto firefighters and Ontario hospital nurses.

This comparison is followed by a brief description of neoliberal governance. The third, fourth and fifth sections take up the ways in which ties to capital interests, honourable white masculinity and the firefighting labour process have operated to buffer and support firefighters' job security and wages, particularly during the neoliberal period in Ontario. I show how firefighting has adapted to this political climate by becoming increasingly involved in emergency medical response; an adaptation that has put them in conflict with other public sector unions. The final section describes worker resistance to this change. I conclude by contending that public safety work and public care labour are becoming both blurred and in conflict under neoliberalism, in ways that are benefiting public safety workers.

Firefighting is quite unlike public services such as health care, long term care, home care, child care, and education. These are "public care" services that support the daily and intergenerational work required to ensure there is a labour force. No matter how or where care work is accomplished, it is work that is generally performed by women. For example, 80% of health care workers are women. Firefighting, on the other hand, is a "public safety" service, with an almost entirely male labour force. During the neoliberal period, which developed in the late 1970's and continues in 2009 in Canada, workers in public safety sectors have experienced fewer of the attacks felt by public care workers: job losses, more part-time, contract and temporary work, intensified work, more unpaid and involuntary overtime and a pause on commitments towards pay equity (Ilcan, O'Connor, and Oliver 2003; Armstrong et al. 2001; Armstrong and Laxer 2006; Aronson and Neysmith 2003; Baines 2004; Worts, Fox, and McDonough 2007). In thinking through public sector labour positions in the face of economic change, firefighters' situation is very different than that of workers in hard-hit sectors.

In 2007-08, I conducted research on Toronto firefighters' rapidly increasing role in emergency medical response. During the course of this research, I was struck by the contrast between these firefighters' wages and working conditions, my own experiences as a worker in Ontario social services, and my research observations of hospital workers (Daly et al. 2008). Firefighters were relatively well paid, had very secure full time permanent employment, did not put in unpaid or "guilt overtime"² and were often without work to do during their working day. They worked in permanent teams where responsibilities were shared and worker safety maximized: conditions that seemed ideal and surreal relative to the organization of much health care work. In 2007, they quietly negotiated a solid three year contract with the City of Toronto – a municipality that told other workers it had no money to offer. Mayor David Miller indicated, "We're proud of our firefighters. They're entitled to an increase" (Gray 2007).

A June 2007 Collective Bargaining update from the Ontario Ministry of Labour noted that this settlement of an average 3.3% annual wage increase over three years was among the largest for both public sector and private sector

agreements reached in the preceding months, topped only by construction workers (Ontario Ministry of Labour 2007). While some Ontario fire services have experienced scrutiny by City Councils, most discussions have been about the relative value of firefighter versus police wages. Firefighters have fought back and come out well (Scott 2007).

In addition to strong wage settlements, firefighters had rights to early retirement enshrined in federal legislation, to which special Canada Pension Plan provisions were added in 2003 (International Association of Fire Fighters 2006, 2009). Taking advantage of legislative changes eliminating mandatory retirement, fire fighters were also fighting –so far unsuccessfully – to ensure that they would not have to retire (Human Rights Commission of Ontario 2008). Further, firefighters’ union campaigns in many provinces, including Ontario, resulted in legislation that gave firefighters with certain health conditions presumptive rights to workers’ compensation. (International Association of Fire Fighters 2007). Firefighters also led a battle to restructure the Ontario Municipal Employees Retirement Savings plan, giving them, with police, a supplemental pension plan and more power at a newly convened worker-employer table. This was legislated by the McGuinty government in 2006.

These gains were preceded by significant increases in Ontario firefighter union membership, stimulated by the policies of the Mike Harris Conservative provincial government. After coming to power in 1995, this government required many municipalities around the province to amalgamate to form fewer and larger municipal governments. When small municipalities with volunteer fire services amalgamated with larger centres that had professional fire services, the volunteer fire services were disbanded and the professional fire services expanded (Press 2007; Barber 2000). This led to new hires and expanded firefighter union membership in many communities. Further, in communities where professional fire services were forced to amalgamate, wages and benefits were “leveled up” to reflect the highest level in each job category. When reflecting on what other municipalities could learn from the City of Toronto amalgamation of 1998, John Sewell wrote,

The rationalization of fire stations and equipment turned out to be more expensive than envisaged – it didn’t save money at all. But the key cost was staff: it proved impossible to reduce the number of firefighters (in fact, city council decided to increase staff), and the salaries were changed to the highest level paid in each job category. (Sewell 2000)

These gains are particularly noteworthy because some of them have been consolidated under governments notorious for their assaults on public sector labour. More generally, these gains defy commonly touted views of how labour markets attribute “value” to particular kinds of work.

The chart below compares Toronto’s unionized professional firefighters situation – as an example of public safety labour - to unionized nurses in Ontario, as my example of public care labour (see chart below).

Wages/Benefits/Working Conditions	Ontario Nurses (public care)	Toronto Firefighters (public safety)
Average annual wage - full time after 3 yrs	\$61,971 in April 2010 (Ontario Nurses Association 2009)	\$78, 741 in Jan 2010
Retirement provisions	Typical negotiated pension provisions add years of service to age. About 24% of nurses are eligible to retire at age 55. The rest will retire later. No special status with CPP or the Canadian Income Tax Act.(Ontario Nurses Association 2009)	Canada Income Tax Act identifies firefighters as one of six public safety occupations that can retire at age 55, and can accrue CPP pension benefits at a higher rate to facilitate this. (International Association of Fire Fighters 2009)
Presumptive legislation for WCB claims	None, although health care workers have highest risk of work-related injury and mental health problems of any occupation. (Health Canada 2004)	Ontario 2007 WSIB recognizes 8 forms of cancer and heart attacks occurring within 24 hrs of fighting a fire as work-related.
Right to strike	Hospital nurses have no right to strike. Public health nurses do.	Firefighters have no right to strike.
Overtime	In 2002, publicly employed nurses worked 6.5% more overtime than the rest of the employed labour force. Voluntary overtime is common, and 26% of overtime is not paid in any way. (Canadian Nurses Association 2006)	Firefighters are restricted from working back-to-back shifts in safety regulations. They cover for one another, but this is voluntary overtime. Further, TFS scheduling allows for a slight over-supply of labour on many shifts.
Right to refuse unsafe work	Nurses in most settings have limited rights.(Province of Ontario 1990) Rate of injury for hospital nurses, in one study, found a 7.4% rate for full time workers and a 5.3% rate for part-time workers (Alamgir et al. 2008) .	Firefighters have limited rights. (Province of Ontario 1990) Toronto has a 2.9% rate of workplace injuries at emergency scenes.(Fire Watch 2008)
Full time/part time	A 20 year trend to part-time and casual work has been reversed since 2005. Involuntary part time work fell from 27% to 11% for RNs and from 39% to 19% for RPNs (Baumann et al. 2008)	100% full time

This comparison shows that hospital nurses and firefighters, who are both engaged in life-preserving work, have very different wages and working conditions. But why? Economic theories of human capital (Friedman 2007; Becker 1993) persist in perceiving labour market dynamics as based primarily on supply and demand, and gendered wage gaps as primarily related to education and experience (Blau, Ferber, and Winkler 1998; Blau and Kahn 2000). Given that demand for nurses has been high, and many nursing positions have gone unfilled in recent years due to a tight labour supply (Ontario Nurses Association 2009), and that since the late 1980s, fire services across North America have had long lists of qualified applicants who wait an average of 3-5 years to get a position, the data above demonstrate the problems with the human capital explanation. Those who argue that educational requirements, skill and potential danger are determinants of labour value will also be puzzled by this chart. Nurses are required to have 3-4 more years of pre-employment education than firefighters and pay for their own education and training, while firefighters receive the majority of their training while receiving a wage. Nurses also have a much higher rate of job-related injury and permanent disability than firefighters. Hospital workers have high rates of work-related death, although due to difficulties in substantiating the path for transmitted infections and diseases, this is sometimes difficult to determine. A London nurse who died in February 2009, from an infection suspected to originate from a drug-resistant, air-borne, hospital-acquired superbug, is a case in point (Dubinski 2009). Despite all of these circumstances, nurses' relative position in the labour force became more insecure through the enactment of neoliberal policies in health care (Armstrong et al. 1997; Armstrong and Armstrong 2002).

This comparison demonstrates that firefighters' compensation and working conditions cannot be accounted for by market dynamics, and illustrates differences between public safety and public care employment. The comparison also highlights the gendered division of labour, and demonstrates that pay equity remains a battle worth fighting. But what, specifically, is it about the relations that underpin public safety work and its compensation that supports firefighters' successes in labour struggles, especially under neoliberalism? Saying that feminized work is usually undervalued, and that care work has been increasingly privatized and ignored under neoliberal regimes, describes part of this situation. But, it does not explain the relations that support public safety labour.

My analysis of Toronto firefighters' situation suggests that firefighters' successes have been built upon their historical constitutive links to property interests. They have been supported by the relations that have maintained and elevated fire fighters as honourable hyper-masculine heroes. The relations that maintain firefighters as a white male cadre are also implicated. Further, their product and the structure of their labour process have had a role, as have the

strategies deployed by firefighter's unions. Firefighters don't have a leg up in labour relations - they've got a ladder.

NEOLIBERAL GOVERNANCE

Labour relations are, of course, situated in politics, and public sector labour relations are doubly influenced. In Canada, the politics of neoliberalism crept in during the 1970s, became increasingly evident in federal, provincial and municipal politics throughout the 1980s, but shook Ontario with the election of the fundamentalist neoliberal Harris Conservative government in 1995. I conceptualize neoliberalism as a logic of governance premised on the belief that markets are the best mechanism for the fair distribution of social "goods" and "bads". Neoliberals believe that human freedom is maximized by competition, and thus they support capitalism's maximum penetration of social life (Brodie 2007) and the application of the logic, if not the substance, of market competition to non-market arenas such as public sector services (Braedley and Luxton forthcoming). Neoliberal governments - which have varied in intensity and style - have not been friendly to labour, due to perceived impingements on labour market competition. During the past thirty years, neoliberal governance measures have been enacted by governments of many political stripes at all levels, as they compete to entice global capital interests to settle down in their territories. They have brought governmental support for capital interests to a particularly high level, usually at the expense of labour.

One of the ways in which neoliberal governments have applied the logic of markets to public sector services is to introduce management strategies borrowed from the business sector. This "New Public Management" (Barrows and Macdonald 2000) aims to reduce public sector service costs through strategies such as eliminating duplication, increasing labour productivity, outsourcing, and focusing on efficiency.

FIRE SERVICES' LINKS TO CAPITAL INTERESTS AND THE STATE

While neoliberalism has elevated capital interests in government policy, there has been a long-standing embrace of capital interests and the state. This relation is evident in fire services' historical role in protecting property. The protection and security of private property arrangements is necessary to capitalist market relations. Just as hospitals support care arrangements, fire services support property arrangements.

Modern fire services and private property insurance companies - the two major life-preservers for property owners - were twin births arising from the devastation of the Great Fire of London in 1666 (Ball and Sunderland 2001). Because property losses from fire require insurance companies to pay out claims,

thus reducing their profitability and/or driving up the cost of insurance, insurance companies and fire services spread together across Europe, then North America. Insurance companies were involved in all kinds of fire prevention and fire suppression activities (Insurance Bureau of Canada 2006). In the early 1800s in Canada, insurance companies took a leadership role in developing volunteer fire services (Baird 1986; Baker 1992). As fire services became municipally operated and professionalized, insurance company involvement shifted from service development to policy and standards development and enforcement (Baird 1986). The industry lobbied for advancements through organizations such as the Canadian Fire Underwriters' Association and the Canadian Manufacturers' Association. It established free fire advisory and inspection services, which were transformed into a government inspection agency in the 1950s, and wrote building and fire codes, which subsequently became legislated national standards (Baird 1986).

Professional, as opposed to volunteer, fire services became established in communities where there were significant property investments (Delottinville and Weaver 1980). Industrial capital investments also spurred the development of fire services. Flour and cereal mills in many towns were particularly susceptible to fire, as was shown by the explosion and fire at the Quaker Oats Company in Peterborough in 1916.

[T]he loss of a major or only industry has often been calamitous for a town. It can mean anything from lost wages, until a plant is rebuilt, to the demise of the industry. A burned out plant may be the last straw that kills a company or the incentive to move elsewhere because of changing market conditions (Baird 1986).

The connection between fire services and insurance industry interests continues. For example, in 1997, a volunteer fire department was converted into professional fire department in the tiny hamlet of Rama, Ontario, due to the insurance requirements for a newly constructed casino hotel³. Contemporary property insurance rates of all kinds increase with distance from fire stations and fire hydrants (Insurance Bureau of Canada 2009).

Providing for the protection and security of private property - through services such as fire, police and military forces - has been viewed as one of the central roles for the liberal state, necessary to the development of both capitalism and liberal democracy (Smith [1776]1976). Neoliberal governments in Canada, with their strong commitment to capital interests, have strengthened this view. The braided relation of fire services, insurance industry involvement, capital interests and the state underpins professional fire fighters' labour force position.

HONOURABLE WHITE HYPER-MASCULINE POLITICS

Firefighters have benefited not only from their ties to property interests, but also from their public image. Firefighters are the most trusted occupation in poll after poll, only occasionally beaten out by nurses (Ipsos News Centre 2007). They are typically regarded as strong, heterosexual and sexy hyper-masculine working class heroes who are kind, fun-loving, brave and selfless. Their occupational solidarity is on regular display in parades and at each other's funerals. Their altruism is visible in malls and street corners as they conduct charity "boot drives". They are also the workers who storm in to rescue you when you are at your most vulnerable, and, in my 182 hours of work observations, they appeared to do their job very well.

These positive public relations were enhanced in the days following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in New York and Washington, when fire fighters became a constant presence on the television news. Firefighters were the heroic, honourable men of '9/11'. As one Toronto firefighter who went to New York to help out indicated,

[A]ll of a sudden the fire service really became the focal point again. You know, the men of the fire department were being the heroes, you know, running into burning buildings and that, and I always thought that was the essence of being a fire fighter. (58i)⁴

Another firefighter had a less romantic view.

9/11 has definitely accelerated stuff like that you know... the Prime Minister goes to not the AIDS conference but the firefighters' thing. So if firefighting in that respect has become so political because it's such a great photo op for them... I think the job was always respected but since [9/11], it's just been a crazy new level. (276g)

In the subsequent furor of anti-terrorism and securitization activities within the North American continent, fire fighters maintained this virtuous image in an environment where other hyper-masculine state-operated labour forces were regularly condemned in public media. In Canada, "support for our troops" was contentious, and Canadian military racist violence in Somalia had left a stain upon military masculinities. Police officers, once generally considered everyone's friend, had lost significant public trust through corruption scandals, racial screening, questionable taser use and violence. Armed only with the instruments of rescue, fire fighters maintained public trust as hyper-masculine, virtuous and self-sacrificing protectors.

This public image has been a powerful tool in advancing firefighters' labour struggles. It is deployed continually in arguments for wages, benefits and

working conditions, where heroism and firefighters' willingness to make the "ultimate sacrifice" is mobilized as a reason to support struggles⁵. As David Miller's comment on firefighter's wage settlement indicates, virtue is no longer its own reward, but a measure of deservedness. In the words of one union official interviewed for my study, "You use what you got. We're the good guys. And we use that. Who wouldn't?" (18g)

Added to this virtue is the fact that firefighters are, overwhelmingly, white men. In 2008, Toronto Fire Services employed only 138 women and 123 people from visible minorities in their entire staff of over 3,000, including clerical and administrative workers⁶, and this is typical of fire services throughout Canada. In my research, I noticed that the design of the physical workspace, the equipment, training and standards and the culture of fire hall life were deeply reflective of the gender and white working class backgrounds of its labour force. Further, firefighters typically expressed denial that the fire service was racist or sexist, although obviously racialized and gendered. A union official insightfully noted that the need for workplace culture change was likely to be fire services' biggest challenge in the future. He described the racist and sexist aspects of collegial discipline and rowdy camaraderie as vestiges of fire services' "military" past that needed to end, but in his opinion, "This is very difficult for our people to grasp" (114g).

In spite of these issues, politicians of all stripes and levels of government seem anxious to associate with firefighters. The white masculinity of the political world seems to find benefit in aligning itself with the honourable white hyper-masculinity of firefighters, and the feeling seems mutual. In 2002, the Ontario government allocated funds to pay for a memorial to fallen firefighters that stands near Queen's Park in Toronto (De Fazio 2005). In 2006, Prime Minister Stephen Harper dropped in for a photo opportunity at the International Association of Fire Fighters annual convention in Toronto (Berenz 2007), after failing to show at an important international AIDS conference in the same city.

The lack of political debate on firefighter issues is often startling, but this success has not been achieved without tremendous organizing efforts. Fire fighters in Toronto have been active in the Toronto Fire Political Action Committee, as part of FIREPAC: a non-partisan group that supports candidates of any party who agree to support firefighters' agendas. FIREPAC has supported candidates from all parties, including Dalton McGuinty of the Ontario Liberal Party in the 2007 election, where they stood guard to form a path at a campaign event to assist McGuinty to avoiding confrontation with members of the Canadian Taxpayers Federation (Cowan and Greenberg 2007). Their support was explicitly explained as a return on the provincial liberal government's actions in support of firefighters' interests (FIREPAC 2007). Canadian FIREPACs have tended to support NDP, Liberal and Green candidates, and, during the 2008 federal election were directed to "endorse candidates from any political party, as

long as they were certain the candidate was committed to looking closely at the IAFF's Canadian legislative agenda if elected and supporting IAFF issues in the House of Commons" (IAFF Firefighters 2008). This agenda has focused entirely on issues that affect firefighters, and has not included issues pertinent to other unions or to social issues in general.

THE ORGANIZATION OF FIRE FIGHTING AND NEOLIBERAL EFFICIENCY

These relations have not meant that fire services have been unaffected by neoliberalism⁷. A 1991 guide for Canadian and American fire chiefs stated, "government services that are unwilling or unable to learn how to compete in the fast-paced, highly customer oriented environments of the 1990s will not survive" (International Association of Fire Chiefs 1991). This comment, with its market language, is one indication of expectations inherent in neoliberalism's New Public Management strategies. The pressure on fire services was particularly acute due to a sharp decline in structural fire incidence evident in Canadian and U.S. fire statistics and shaped by building code changes and building material improvements. Canada's fire loss record was one of the worst in the industrialized world (Baird 1986), but from 1980 to 1984 a sharp decline in both fire-related deaths and property losses (Bounagui, Benichou, and Victor 2004), appeared to indicate better fire prevention and suppression (Richardson 1987). In Toronto, fire incidence declined sharply from 1980 and stabilized around 1998. With lower rates of fire, fire services were under pressure to justify budgets and find savings.

Toronto Fire Services provides a case in point. A frontal assault of neoliberalism hit Toronto Fire Services through an imposed municipal amalgamation, which brought to fruition a longer held neoliberal municipal and provincial government interest in amalgamating fire services - as well as other municipal services - across Metropolitan Toronto. In 1987, a study was commissioned to examine the feasibility of fire services amalgamation as a way to improve effectiveness and efficiencies within the sector. The report indicated that amalgamation would not lead to economic efficiencies, improved managerial effectiveness or improved service delivery that could not be achieved through inter-department cooperation (Boytchuk 1987). However, in 1998 amalgamation went forward. The newly formed Fire Service instantly became the largest fire service in Canada and the fifth largest fire service in North America (Friebe 2003).

From the beginning, Toronto City Council reports indicate the Fire Chief was pressured to show efficiencies and savings from the amalgamation project in business management terms. But the very nature of fire and rescue, which structured fire services' organization, resisted many of the economic

assumptions of neoliberal logic. How do you make a service more productive when the ideal demand rate for that service is zero, yet the possibility that it may be needed renders it “necessary” (Ammons, Coe, and Lombardo 2001; Boukert 1992; Kelly 2003; Pritchard 2002)? How do you make a service more efficient when its major product is “readiness”? Typically, fire services’ quality is evaluated upon criteria related to the number and type of calls to which they responded, their response times, the number of lives lost in fires, the dollar value of fire-related property loss and the year-to-year trend in these statistics. While these criteria provide a quantitative portrait of utility levels, service speed and measures of what fire services have *not* been able to prevent, they fail to measure or reflect the services that fire services are working hard to provide – timely protection and rescue of life and property.

Fire services cannot be rendered more efficient through a strategy of merging fire halls to serve a larger area. Fire hall location assessment has become a complex calculation (KPMG 1998; Toronto Fire Service 2007a), but the bottom line is that more distance means more time to reach an emergency, and less effective interventions result. Further, reducing the labour force per truck or per hall violates effectiveness. Hours of service also cannot be reduced. Efficiencies cannot be realized through specialized or just-in-time staffing either, for two reasons. First, emergencies require close coordination among workers, which is facilitated by familiarity and practice. Second, demand for fire services is extremely unpredictable, and responses vary widely in their nature and in the time, skills and equipment needed. Using occasional workers or less qualified workers for some work is, therefore, not possible. There are also limits to the duties that firefighters can assume. They cannot take on duties that interfere with their emergency response capacity, but their emergency-related duties do not often fill their working day. Any other activity must be able to be dropped at a moment’s notice and cannot be performed reliably by firefighters who may spend many hours at emergency scenes. Further, regulations require crews to stay together, with their vehicle, at all times, eliminating options to deploy workers individually.

Despite these limitations, fire services did make moves to meet neoliberal demands. Interestingly, some of these moves were related to neoliberal governance logic that sees public safety services as appropriately operated by the state, but regards care services as inappropriate when they are “public”. This logic shaped a crisis in the grey zone between “public safety” and “public care” – emergency medical services. Due to provincial government downloading of emergency medical services to the City in 1998, Toronto City Council’s Emergency and Protective Services Committee requested a report from the Fire Chief and the Acting General Manager of the Ambulance Service on “the possible integration of components of Toronto’s Fire and Ambulance Services” (Speed and Kelusky 1998). The report dismissed amalgamation as an unrealistic

option; an unsurprising conclusion given the context of upheaval. But City Council maintained efforts to deal with its substantial budget pressures by pursuing emergency services “efficiencies”. In March, a study was commissioned to determine how “long term savings may result ... through the sale of properties and efficiencies gained among Fire Services and Ambulance Services in the sharing of resources” (Chief Administrative Officer, Commissioner of Works and Emergency Services, and Commissioner of Corporate Services 1998). This study shaped decisions that fire and emergency medical services (EMS) facilities be co-located where possible (Friebe 2003). Given that many fire and EMS across North America have amalgamated, further amalgamation in Toronto seemed likely. In an examination of the Fire Services staffing requirements in 1999, City Council’s Policy and Funding Committee asked for a report on “the efficiencies and related savings on a better coordinated tiered response” (City of Toronto 1999).

The Toronto Professional Fire Fighters’ Association was fully on board with an amalgamation of fire and EMS. This union won the right to represent all firefighters of the amalgamated fire service. It carried forward a well-established IAFF policy to promote Fire-based EMS services, arguing that it made sense to provide one all-hazards first response service, and fire services were in the best position to assume this responsibility (International Association of Fire Fighters AFL-CIO 1995). Given the context of declining fire response and the pressures to improve efficiencies, this move also protected members’ jobs.

It was no shock when the Toronto Paramedics Association circulated a report that argued forcefully against any moves toward Fire-Based Emergency Medical Services (McNamara 1999). This report received adamant and angry response from the Toronto Professional Fire Fighters’ Association⁸, which argued for a task force to examine the issues of EMS delivery (Marks 2000). In the meantime, the newly formed Toronto Fire Service created an Emergency Medical Services Section within its organizational structure of the Professional Development and Training Division. Further, a Consensus Group of Fire Services, Emergency Services and Base Hospital Program representatives was formed “to define a scope of practice for Toronto’s firefighters, to review the training program available to Fire Services, and to further develop the relationship between Toronto Fire Services and the Base Hospital Program” (Community Services Committee 2001a). This group determined that the Emergency Patient Care Curriculum of the Ontario Fire Marshall would be provided to all firefighters under the medical direction of the Sunnybrook Base Hospital Program.

These developments were shaped by health care restructuring’s dramatic effects on emergency medical services delivery. The Harris government’s radical and hasty re-structuring, combined with deteriorating public services and a nurses’ shortage, led to overflowing hospital emergency departments (Canadian

Association of Emergency Physicians 2002). This put pressure on paramedics (EMS) as hospitals went on “restricted status”, refusing to receive patients for periods of time. Several tragedies resulted. In 2000, Joshua Fleuelling died because advanced life support paramedics and hospital emergency rooms were not immediately available. The inquest into Joshua’s death led to provincial government action, but system capacity was not increased. Rather, a “duty to care” was dumped on overloaded hospitals and emergency physicians (Walker 2002)..

During this period, Toronto City Council’s Policy and Finance Committee wanted to know “whether any efficiencies to tax payers and cost savings can be achieved by investigating the need for three-tiered response on every call” suggesting that fire services’ involvement represented an unnecessary expense. Because of 9-1-1 Tiered Response protocols, fire fighters are first on the scene in emergency medical calls. When paramedics get held up, firefighters spend more time on these cases. The Fluelling inquest took notice of firefighter involvement, recommending increased coordination at dispatch between fire and ambulance services and more firefighter training in patient assessment skills (quoted in Community Services Committee 2001a). The Fire Service, backed by their constitutive links to property protection and the structure of fire services, retorted that “the elimination of tiered response would not influence current staffing and fire protection requirements for the City of Toronto”(Policy and Finance Committee 2001). This crisis was still under discussion at City Council in April 2002 (Community Services Committee 2002)

Overcrowding in emergency rooms continued, as a report of three 2008 deaths in an overcrowded Toronto hospital emergency room indicated (Peat 2008). Overloaded hospital emergency rooms tied up paramedics, making them less available for 9-1-1 calls, thus plunging firefighters into even more emergency medical work. Paramedic services, threatened by firefighters’ increased involvement, have mounted a campaign to discredit firefighter involvement. For example, a study of Toronto fire services responses, led by the Deputy Chief of Toronto Emergency Services, concluded that in only 1.25 percent of emergency medical calls did fire fighters have an opportunity to offer “critical” life-saving intervention prior to ambulance arrival (described in Fraser 2007), while failing to comment on the care and comfort firefighters do provide, or on the percentage of emergency medicals that require “critical” life-saving interventions. While both Fire Services management representatives and union officials have indicated to me that this is not a turf war - nor do they want it to become one - the shadow of neoliberalism’s New Public Management and its ideal of market - style competition seems to be realized between public sector services and their related unions.

Emergency medical response is the most significant expansion of firefighting work, accounting for over 50 percent of Toronto Fire Service

responses in recent years and a much higher percentage at many other fire departments. This intensification is not the only one in firefighters' continually expanding scope of practice. Other intensifications were shaped by the events of 9/11, involving firefighters in Canadian anti-terrorism activities commencing in 2002. The post-SARS developments of pandemic preparedness included firefighters on health emergency response teams (Toronto Fire Service 2007a). Firefighters' expanded range of practice now requires them to produce "readiness" for a wide range of potential threats, and has put pressure on them to take more training and maintain a wide range of seldom-employed skills.

Fire services are in the process of becoming, in their parlance, 'all-hazards emergency services'. Neoliberal logic, combined with the decline in fire incidence, has pushed fire services and fire fighters' unions to 'position' themselves, while the structure of their work has provided a buffer from some of these forces. Yet, at the same time, neoliberal logic has shaped circumstances that have pushed firefighters into a role involving some public care. In a submission to the Romanow Commission on the Future of Health Care in Canada, 2001, the International Association of Fire Fighters argued that fire fighters are public health care workers, "[b]ut right now their true potential in the realm of EMS remains largely untapped". The union argued that firefighters can be trained as paramedics, arguing that "the personnel are already there, and they are already arriving at the scene of medical emergencies" and can provide this service "without the added costs of adding a separate and parallel structure of EMS response" (International Association of Firefighters AFL-CIO 2001). Here, a union which represented 17,000 Canadian firefighters advocated for a major intensification of their members' work and a willingness to challenge another public sector group for their turf. It would appear that these neoliberal times installed concerns for efficiency and productivity so deeply that unions have been willing to cooperate with government, rather than align with other unions. This strategy appears to be quite successful, given firefighters' position.

RESISTANCE IN THE RANKS

The firefighters' union has not only cooperated with an intensification of firefighters' work: it has led a struggle to take on more emergency medical response work, in order to preserve their members' jobs and positions. But many firefighters have reservations about this direction, for a number of reasons. First, emergency medical response is perceived to require skills inconsistent with the rest of firefighting work, and to stretch the scope of practice beyond what people can reasonably handle. Emergency response requires well-integrated knowledge, according to my research respondents. "There's no time to look something up when someone might die any second" (17i). Emergency medical response is also somewhat distained due to the perception that it is less honourable and less

“tough”. As one female firefighter indicated, “Don’t think we’re prissy because we do medicals” (158i). Others worry that emergency medical calls - which usually do not involve life-threatening circumstances - tie up trucks and crews, making them less available for their “real” mandate - firefighting. These and other objections were frequently voiced in my contact with firefighters. However, firefighters’ deeply ingrained ethic of public service provides a paradox. In the words of one firefighter, “We all like helping people. That’s why we’re on the job.” (141g) This ethic of public service is no doubt helpful in fire departments’ transformation to an “all-hazards” response model⁹, and produces, in the context of current debates, a barrier to resisting intensifications of firefighting work. However, it co-exists with some firefighters’ view of their new responsibilities. As one respondent indicated, “I think what has happened is that other public services have their niche and the nature of their work is more defined now perhaps, and I think in some ways the fire service picks up the slack for other services” (156i). Perhaps when firefighters get tired of “picking up the slack”, they may take up the struggle with those public care workers whose work has become “more defined”.

A LADDER UP

So, what can we learn from this history? In this analysis, I have suggested that firefighters, as an example of public safety workers, have a relatively privileged position within the public sector when compared to hospital nurses, who are my example of public care workers. Neoliberal logics of governance have eroded public care services. But the relation between fire services and capital interests, as well as firefighters’ public image as trustworthy heroes, their white masculinity and the organization of firefighting work, has buffered firefighters from some aspects of the neoliberal fetish for market - style efficiencies. Firefighters have also benefited from the reduction in the number of municipal governments. But these buffers have not prevented intensification of firefighting work. Firefighters have been required to acquire and maintain an increasingly broad and disparate skill set, and although cooperation with this intensification has a role in firefighters’ advantage, it has also exacted a cost.

This analysis presents us with some troubling conclusions. Revealing some of the contemporary rifts and rivalries within the labour movement and among public sector workers, it suggests that the differently valued public safety and public care sectors have been placed in some conflict due to the pressures shaped by neoliberal logics of governance. It is therefore unsurprising that firefighters’ unions have not always acted in solidarity with unions associated with public care¹⁰ (such as those representing paramedics), but rather with those in positions of power who have returned the favour. At Toronto Fire Services, as one union official phrased it, “We are not looking for a turf war”. Yet, they have

it, and so far have proceeded carefully to preserve jobs by increasing service mandates, carefully justifying their work and deflecting criticism.

The competition and individualism of neoliberal governance, which has supported rampant global capitalism over the last thirty years, appears to have permeated the labour movement in some ways. We need to think our way out of this box. Neoliberal ideology has had phenomenal success in setting the terms under which people have come to understand social relations of many kinds (Luxton forthcoming). Left politics have struggled to gain purchase during this period, often finding their language adopted and manipulated by neoliberal governments in the pursuit of non-progressive goals.

However, there are ways forward. The questions raised in this paper suggest the need for deeper analyses of inequities, conflicts and convergences between public safety and public care sectors as they have become re-shaped under neoliberal governance. We need to see beyond what appear to be simmering and inevitable “turf wars” to the underlying challenges to publicly provided services and public sector work. The important question is how to achieve a more equitable society in which provision of both care and safety services is assured and workers in these sectors are valued and protected. Asking this question supports the positions of all workers, in all sectors.

NOTES

1. I do not include a discussion of volunteer firefighters in this paper, which is an important and related case.
2. Guilt overtime is involuntary overtime cajoled out of workers to cover staff shortages.
3. Rama Fire and Rescue Services, personal communication, June 2007.
4. Each interview in this study has been assigned a unique non-identifying code number. The letter “i” indicates an individual interview. The letter “g” indicates an interview with a group of two or more participants.
5. See http://www.iaff.org/Canada/FactSheets/CPP_2009.htm as one example.
6. These figures were accumulated at my request, from a photo database. The fire service does not maintain data on their workforce diversity.
7. For a detailed discussion of firefighters’ increased role in emergency medical care as a neoliberal policy accident, and firefighters’ cooperation and resistance, see (Braedley forthcoming)
8. The Toronto Professional Fire Fighters’ Association is Local 3888 of the International Association of Fire Fighters, AFL-CIO, CLC.
9. See (Worts, Fox, and McDonough 2007) and (Baines 2004) for two other examples where ethics of service render workers more flexible and, indeed, more exploitable.
10. Paramedics have successfully argued for status as public safety workers in federal and provincial statutes. However, in this analysis, I consider paramedics as public care workers. This is due to my view that paramedicine is publicly funded health care work. Unlike public safety services, its primary role is not to protect or secure the interests of property or the state, but rather to support the social reproduction of the population.

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