As death toll from fatal house fires increases

Mayor plans to relocate poor residents to “downsize” Detroit

Jerry White
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A spate of fatal house fires has occurred in Detroit since the beginning of the year, the majority of which have claimed victims who had their electrical and gas service cut off by the utility giant DTE Energy.

The tragedies—including a January 5 fire on Dexter Ave. that killed two disabled men and a third resident, and a March 4 blaze on Bangor Street, which claimed the lives of three small children—occur as city officials are outlining plans to force residents out of poor neighborhoods and bulldoze their houses in order to eliminate sewerage, public lighting, fire protection and other services to whole swaths of the city.

Meanwhile, the mayor is continuing to gut basic services to the population. The *Detroit Free Press* reported Monday that Mayor David Bing’s administration is “exploring consolidating the city’s health and human services department, closing the Herman Kiefer health complex and shuttering all but two Neighborhood City Halls,” in order to save $2 million a year.

Although the cost of providing health services at Herman Kiefer is largely picked up by the federal government, city officials complain that the physical upkeep of the aging facility is costing $1 million a year. The bigger question being asked by the Bing administration, the *Free Press* quotes Bing official Charles Beckham as saying, is “should we be in the business of providing health services at all.”

The facility—which services 2,000 people a day—is one of the only public health sites in the city, and for decades has provided poor Detroiters with the only access to vaccinations, HIV testing, health fairs and other services. With an infant mortality rate already equivalent to that of the Dominican Republic and ill health chronically pervasive throughout the city, the closing of Kiefer will have deadly consequences.

From the moment he took office Mayor Bing, a multimillionaire and former CEO of a steel and auto parts manufacturer in Detroit, has declared a war on the working class of the city, laying off more than a 1,000 workers, demanding draconian wage cuts from the remaining workforce, and slashing services. Along with the governor-appointed emergency financial director of the Detroit schools, Bing has overseen the closing of scores of schools and a series of attacks on the living standards and working conditions of teachers.

Detroit has become a model for the Obama administration’s reactionary urban policy, which includes “shrinking” cities,” like Detroit, which have been decimated by decades of industrial decline and budget cutting. In the last two years alone tens of thousands of auto jobs in the area have been wiped out, including those shed under the White House’s forced bankruptcy of GM and Chrysler.

With the backing of the Obama administration, including a $40 million federal award for “renewal work,” Bing is embarking on a plan to expel poor residents from “desolate” neighborhoods and supposedly relocate them to more “stable” areas.

According to the *Detroit News*, the Democratic Party-aligned “Brookings Institution, local foundation leaders, several national funding groups and the White House offered financial support of up to $100 million a year for downsizing the city.” Bruce Katz, vice president of the Brookings’ Metropolitan Policy Program, told the *News*, “There is a nothing-left-to-lose quality in Detroit, much like there was in New Orleans after Katrina.”

Speaking on local radio news station WJR last month, Bing said the relocation idea was “absolutely” part of his plans to slash costs. “There is just too much land and too many expenses for us to continue to manage the city as we have in the past.” He continued, “You can’t support every neighborhood. You can support every community across this city. Those communities that are stable, we can’t allow them to go down the tubes. That’s not a good business decision from my standpoint.”

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Bing said he would use internal and outside studies to determine who the "winners and losers" would be. "If we can incentivize some of the folks that are in those desolate areas, they can get a better situation. If they stay where they are I absolutely cannot give them all the services that they require."

In identifying "stable" neighborhoods, Bing said, he was also looking at neighborhoods surrounding schools that Emergency Financial Manager Robert Bobb previously singled out for spending, the Michigan news web site MLive.com reported.

This makes it clear that the mayor and Bobb are working in tandem to shut down services, including public schools, in the poorest neighborhoods and channel money into areas where only better-off segments of the population will be able to afford to live. In the end, this will mean driving the poor out of the city. To where, would be anyone's guess.

The decline of Detroit—whose population has fallen from 2 million in 1950 to around 900,000 today—is likely unparalleled in modern history, with the exception of cities destroyed by war and natural disasters. This devastation was the deliberate policy of the corporate and political establishment that beginning in the 1970s and 1980s waged an unrelenting war against the working class in the city, which through its mass struggles had attained the highest per capita income in America. After three decades of plant closings and mass layoffs, Detroit has become the poorest big city in America.

Having rejected any measures to provide jobs and attract workers back into the city, such as a mass public works project to hire the unemployed and rebuild Detroit, the Obama administration and Bing are seeking to plunge the final knife into the city, with unprecedented social consequences.

A recent survey showed that a third of Detroit's residential parcels are either vacant lots or abandoned homes. Detroit's unused lots are the largest of any city in the country. According to an Associated Press story Monday, the mayor's "radical renewal plan calls for turning large swaths of this now-blighted, rusted-out city into the fields and farmland that existed before the automobile … Roughly a quarter of the 139-square-mile city could go from urban to semi-rural."

The proposals for "urban farming" are largely fantasies to provide a "Green" façade to the destruction of what was once America's fourth largest city and a manufacturing center for the global auto industry.

Having largely destroyed the city, the Democratic Party is now parceling off its most attractive assets—the mayor has hinted that he plans to privatize the city's Public Lighting Department by selling it to DTE Energy—and open up large tracts of cheap land for private investment.

The city is reportedly planning to offer residents 125 percent of the value of their homes, which have fallen in some cases to a few thousand dollars. It is also reportedly planning to use Eminent Domain laws to remove those that resist, seize their homes and flatten them. The "legal" justification for the seizure of personal homes will reportedly include the dubious constitutional argument that a single house remaining in an otherwise abandoned neighborhood is "blighting" the city because it requires fire and other services to the detriment of the larger community.

In addition to other business interests, there is little doubt that Bing's downsizing plans have the backing of DTE Energy, whose CEO Anthony Earley was one of the mayor's campaign fundraisers. Shutting down large portions of the city would reduce the cost of maintaining power and gas lines and give the company's "Revenue Protection Department" a smaller area to patrol when it comes to discontinuing service for non-payment or for those who have jerry-rigged electrical service in a desperate attempt to maintain heat for their families in the winter.

According to press reports, the Brookings Institution in a recent study identified another 50 cities besides Detroit, including Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Baltimore and Memphis, which need to "shrink." In Michigan, the former center of GM's manufacturing empire, the city of Flint is planning similar measures in a plan overseen by former Democratic congressman Dale Kildee.

The SEP and the World Socialist Web Site *encourage residents to attend and share their own stories at the March 20 citizens inquiry into utility shutoffs.*

Saturday, March 20, 1-5 p.m.
Wayne State University
General Lectures room 150
5045 Anthony Wayne
Detroit MI 48202

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