

Detroit firefighters discuss impact of utility shut-offs and budget cuts

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On March 12 Detroit firefighters held a dinner for Sylvia Young, a 30-year-old mother who lost three small children in a house fire on the city's west side. The March 2 fire started just hours after the local utility provider, DTE Energy, cut off gas and electrical service to the home on Bangor Street.

The dinner, hosted by the Phoenix organization, a group of African American firefighters, was held at Engine Co. #40 fire station. As Sylvia Young, her surviving children and other family members entered the station, firefighters stood at attention. The family was welcomed by Phoenix President James C. Harris who told them, "our house is your house" and that firefighters would always be there if Sylvia needed help.

The following day more than 30 firefighters attended the funeral for Tráivion, 5, Fantasia, 4, and Selena, 3, and several acted as pallbearers. (See "Funeral held for Detroit children killed in Bangor Street fire").

The warmth and solidarity of the firefighters stands in sharp contrast to the vindictive treatment Sylvia Young has received from the news media, government officials and DTE Energy, which have repeatedly maligned her. The state attorney's office is threatening to take away her remaining children because she was not at home when the fire started. In fact she was at a discount store buying space heaters and returned with them in hand to see her house engulfed in flames.

The deep sympathy the firefighters have for Young and other Detroit residents stems from their first-hand experience with the consequences of utility shut-offs and poverty in the city. In addition to endangering the lives of ordinary citizens, DTE's utility shut-offs also put the lives of firefighters at risk.

Moreover, Detroit firefighters, like the rest of city

residents, have been hit by decades of budget cuts and layoffs, exacerbating the dangers they face every day.

Several firefighters noted that the dinner was being held on the anniversary of the worst disaster for the Detroit Fire Department in its history, the loss of three firefighters during a March 12, 1987 blaze at an abandoned warehouse and nearby paper factory. At that time, city officials tried to blame a homeless man—who was trying to keep warm in the abandoned factory—in order to divert attention from the fact that city officials had slashed funding for the fire department and closed the nearest fire station.

The firefighters at Engine Co. #40 have responded to several fires in the city where the victims had no utility service. They told the WSWs that fighting fires in a city where residents lack the most basic necessities of modern life—and where the firefighters are short-handed and understaffed—exact a heavy physical and psychological toll on firefighters.

A firefighter with 15 years experience related the story of one comrade, Jackie "Rage" Jones. As a young, inexperienced firefighter, the first blaze he responded to was the February 1993 fire on Mack Ave. where seven small children were killed. The experience—including holding four of the dying children in his arms—had so traumatized him that he was never the same again. Years later Jones took his own life by jumping off the Belle Isle Bridge. The tragic fire was the direct result of the cut-off of water, gas and electrical service to the home. (See "The 1993 Mack Ave. fire inquiry")

Over the last two decades, the city's Democratic mayors have eliminated hundreds of firefighters' jobs, shut down stations and reduced funding for the purchase of new equipment and the repair of decaying stations and emergency vehicles.

Another firefighter said the Fire Department's computers were outdated and there were six Emergency Medical Service (EMS) vehicles that were not properly licensed to carry trained technicians because the city would not spend \$390 to buy the licenses. Many skilled EMS technicians were therefore leaving the fire department to get jobs with local hospitals.

In recent years, the city administration has closed several stations and at least four others have been "deactivated," the closing down of stations for days at a time when the department cannot find available manpower.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with Sgt. Mike Funchess, an officer from Engine Co. #40.

"We are required to respond with seven pieces of equipment to each fire," Funchess said. "But if there are two fires at once in an area and other companies are called in to help it shrinks the available manpower. We get over-stretched and have to figure out where to send our resources first because closed companies have no one to send. I'm afraid this is going to go on until someone is killed. Then the day after it happens they will announce they are putting firefighters on overtime.

"We are fighting fires in poor neighborhoods. I'd say 65 percent of the fires in homes we are told are vacant really have homeless people squatting in them. These people don't want anyone to know they are there. They burn wood in the fireplace to stay warm and put plastic over the windows. You would swear the houses were vacant but people are living there.

"We're supposed to let the vacant homes burn down but I say let's put it out. Sometimes you hear a dog barking inside and know someone must have tied him up in there. It's not my job to let it burn up.

"I think a lot of the fires in the city are not in downtrodden areas but areas where real estate developers want to build a new row of houses.

"The mayor is talking about shutting down whole areas of the city and privatizing services. He won't let us hire. In 1989, when I hired in, there were 2,100 firefighters. There are 800 now.

"We need to hire and bring in new firefighters who are 23 to 25 years old because this is a physically demanding job. The last fireman who was hired—five years ago—was 42, and had been laid off from another city job.

"A lot of young people around the city want jobs.

They could learn to fight fires and that would strengthen us. But the city isn't hiring. Instead, guys are getting hurt and beat up. They've cut us bad. One guy is doing the job of four and they wear out faster."



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