

Committee Against Utility Shutoffs and SEP hold press conference on Detroit fires

Our reporter
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The Socialist Equality Party and the Committee Against Utility Shutoffs (CAUS) held a press conference Friday morning in response to a wave of house fires in Detroit earlier in the week. The conference, which was covered by most of the local media stations, was held on East Robinwood Street, where some of the most severe fires took place.

SEP and CAUS members Lawrence Porter and D'Artagnan Collier spoke at the press conference, emphasizing the role of the city government, led by Mayor David Bing, and energy company DTE in creating the conditions for the disaster. Detroit residents also participated, explaining the circumstances that led up to the fires.

“The devastating impact of the house fires in Detroit on Tuesday is the result of the budget-cutting policies of the Bing administration and previous administrations,” Porter said, opening the conference. “Also responsible is energy giant DTE, which has neglected basic infrastructure while focusing all its energies on ruthlessly cutting off Detroit citizens from gas and electricity.”

The city government and DTE are nervous about the enormous popular anger over the fires. As the SEP/CAUS conference was taking place, Deputy Mayor Saul Green and the Detroit Fire Commissioner met with representatives of DTE to plan out their own response. In remarks following the meeting, Green highlighted five areas that “needed improvement,” most of which point to the responsibility of DTE in the disaster. These include arcing wires, insufficient tree cutting and trimming by DTE, poor information exchange, illegal utility hookups, and lack of response to downed wires.

At the same time, Green made clear that the mayor’s

office would work closely with the energy giant in investigating the disaster. “We’ll be getting together next week after we make sure we have all the right people in the room and additional data that we need,” he said.

Green made clear that the mayor’s office intends to shelter DTE from the destruction caused by its decrepit power grid. “It doesn’t make sense to start pointing fingers and trying to cast blame,” he said.

CAUS rejected the efforts of the city and DTE to whitewash the fires. At the press conference, Porter called for a citizens’ investigation into the cause of the fires, independent of the Detroit city government and DTE.

Porter also said that CAUS rejects the claim made by Bing on Wednesday that the fires were a “natural disaster.” This claim, he said, “is aimed at diverting attention away from those who are truly responsible.”

Porter pointed to the impact of budget cuts on the city’s fire departments. “Firefighters have warned repeatedly of an impending disaster, saying the Fire Department is grossly understaffed and underfunded and requires hundreds more firefighters,” he said.

Porter explained that residents of Detroit—including Shirley Hargrave, who lives on Robinwood Street—had repeatedly called DTE to try to get them to fix problems with the electrical lines. The Hargrave family called on Tuesday, the day of the fire, Porter said, “only to be told that if they kept calling they would be charged for a repair visit by DTE.”

Porter also opposed attempts by DTE to blame “energy theft” for the fires. “The 750 fires were not caused by energy theft,” Porter said. “The collapse of the lines was the product of a decaying infrastructure that has not been upgraded in decades.”

In his comments, Collier, who is the SEP candidate for

Michigan State Legislature, 9th District, said that the fires in Detroit “are one tragic consequence of the subordination of the needs of working people to a handful of politically connected giant corporations, including DTE.”

Collier cited the massive profits DTE has made, including \$315 million in the first two quarters of this year. The company has cut millions in costs, including from utility operations, tree trimmers and maintenance. DTE’s CEO, Anthony Earley, took home \$9.2 million last year, and its investors have benefited from a policy of cost cutting and utility shutoffs.

“DTE’s relentless drive for profit has led to the deaths of many Detroit residents in house fires after utility shutoffs,” Collier said. “It has also contributed to the deaths of two utility workers from electrocution in the past four months. Now this same profit motive has led to a spate of fires across the city.”

Collier noted that the company is able to get away with these actions thanks to its close ties with the city and state government. “Detroit Mayor David Bing sat on the board of directors of DTE for 20 years, from 1985 to 2005,” Collier said. “His inaugural committee was co-chaired by Earley and his wife.”

Collier also explained that the conditions in Detroit were not unique. “The horrific fire that engulfed a neighborhood in northern California last night, the result of a burst pipeline, demonstrates that these are issues that confront all working people,” he said.

“To address the social crisis in Detroit, CAUS and the SEP call for an emergency public works program to rebuild infrastructure and neighborhoods, while providing good-paying jobs for all who can work,” Collier concluded. “Those whose homes have been destroyed must be made whole.”

“The funds for such a program must be made available through the transformation of DTE and other giant corporations into publicly owned enterprises, democratically controlled by working people. This will at the same time be the basis for a rational program to modernize electrical infrastructure and ensure that basic services such as gas, electricity and water are provided to all people as a basic human right.”

Several residents of the area attended the press conference, including Valeria McKinstry, who lives on the block. “We have called DTE on many occasions to ask them to address the problems of lost power, and we get no results,” she said. “In the week before the fire,

there were repeated power outages, power surges. When I called DTE, they didn’t come, they wouldn’t come.”

McKinstry added that problems with the power have been ongoing for a decade. “This started happening in 2000. Any time there is an illegal hookup or the wind blows really hard, my power blows out instantly. It can be anywhere between 10 minutes and 30 minutes before it comes back on.

“If DTE had responded when the community called about the loss of power, this wouldn’t have happened. For over 10 years, we have been trying to prevent this from happening. And DTE’s response is to tell us to stop calling, or to say it is not their responsibility.”

Kevin McDowell, who lives around the corner from where the fire hit, said that he called the fire department when he noticed the fire, but it took 20 to 25 minutes before the first truck came.

Addressing DTE’s role, McDowell added, “They are only going to do what they have to do. They told us it was our responsibility to cut trees around the wire. They would only cut a few branches that are close to the tree, but a year later it grows back.”

Toni Booker, who owns a house on East Robinwood Street, said that she called DTE many times about lines going through trees. “They cut a few limbs, but then said all the lines were phone lines.” She added, “There has not been enough attention on this area. We should not keep capitalizing off of people, just for profit.”

The city is moving rapidly to tear down burned homes. Several houses were razed on Friday, including some on Robinwood Street, and the city announced plans to bring down 50 of the 71 dwellings damaged by fires within 30 days. The city evidently wants to eliminate the evidence of the fires, while using the destruction they caused to pursue its plan for decommissioning sections of Detroit.



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