

Detroit fires expose criminality of DTE and Bing administration

Of D'Artagnan Collier, Socialist Equality Party candidate for Michigan's state legislature, 9th District
9 September 2010

The house fires that have swept through sections of Detroit Tuesday evening, destroying or damaging at least 85 homes and other structures, are a product of the actions of the Detroit city government and energy giant DTE. Decades of budget-cutting have starved essential city services, such as fire protection, of needed funds. At the same time, DTE has neglected the upkeep of basic electrical infrastructure, focusing instead on raising utility rates and ruthlessly cutting people off from gas and electricity.

In a press conference Wednesday Mayor Bing claimed the fires were simply a “natural disaster” that no one could have predicted or prepared for. This is a crude lie aimed at concealing the criminal actions of DTE—on whose corporate board Bing served for twenty years—and the Democratic Party, which subordinates the needs of the city's working class residents to the profit interests of big business.

This disaster was entirely predictable. The fires were largely caused by downed power lines, which fell in the face of high winds. The fires spread quickly, and efforts to contain them were hampered by the shutting down of nine stations, the layoff of hundreds of firefighters and the decommissioning of fire trucks due to budget cuts, with water pressure in hydrants low or nonexistent. Firefighters have warned of an impending disaster, saying the Fire Department needs at least another 200-300 firefighters to protect city residents.

For its part, DTE completely ignored the signs of a potential catastrophe. One resident of the area around Van Dyke and 7 Mile, where at least 17 homes were destroyed, said she had been calling DTE for days to complain about a sparking wire. She was told she would be charged with a service call if she continued to

phone the company, and when she complained of an impending fire, she was told to call 911.

DTE spends millions on aerial flights, spying on the population—accusing it of “energy theft”—but does nothing to maintain power lines, cut overgrowth, and take other basic safety measures. If the company concludes that there is not an immediate danger, they don't even bother to come out—unless it is a matter of cutting off utilities.

Predictably, DTE officials have claimed theft was involved in the current fires even before any investigation has been carried out. This is the same libel against Detroit workers DTE and the media used last winter to cover up its role in the deaths of nearly a dozen people, including small children, senior citizens and handicapped workers, in house fires caused by the shutoff of utility service to their homes.

The city has permitted dozens of DTE inspectors into the neighborhoods where the current fires took place, when in fact the company and its top executives should be primary suspects in a crime investigation and barred from tampering with evidence.

The fires have produced a catastrophe for dozens of Detroit families, but it could have been much worse. Fortunately, there were no deaths—this time. However, the actions of the city government and the corporate giants directly threaten the lives of workers and young people in Detroit.

There was a striking contrast between the heroic efforts of the firefighters and the local population—which sought in whatever way possible to halt the spreading inferno—and the actions of DTE and the Detroit politicians who facilitated this disaster.

These fires are undoubtedly welcomed by Mayor Bing and other city officials. The Democratic Party establishment in Detroit has set out a plan for shutting

down large sections of the city, closing schools, tearing down buildings, and shutting off utility service. If such fires can be utilized to drive people out of areas the government has no intention of restoring, then it is all for the better.

More broadly, the fires are a reflection of the long-term decline of Detroit. Over the past several decades, the city has been transformed from one of the most dynamic in the country into the poorest large city in the United States. Real unemployment is 50 percent. A third of the population lives in poverty. Hundreds of thousands of manufacturing and other jobs have been wiped out.

The Socialist Equality Party and my campaign call for every resident whose home was damaged or who suffered other losses to be made whole. An investigation, organized by working people independently of the Democratic Party and other flunkies of big business, must be carried out to establish the cause of this disaster and hold all those responsible accountable.

I call for an immediate emergency public works program to address the social catastrophe in Detroit. There must be a massive investment in public services. All cuts in the number of firefighters and city workers must be immediately reversed, and thousands more hired at decent wages. Areas of the city that have been allowed to decay must be rebuilt.

The claim that there is no money for such a program is a lie. When it comes to bailing out the banks, funding wars abroad, and padding the bank accounts of the wealthy, there is always plenty of money. However, when it comes to the basic needs and rights of working people—including the right to a home, to a job, to essential city services—the universal call from Democratic and Republican Parties alike is: austerity! This campaign is now being led by Obama, the so-called candidate of change.

As always in times of crisis, the best instincts of people come out. As the fires swept through neighborhoods, residents came together to do what they could to help fire fighters and save the property of their neighbors. Off-duty fire fighters volunteered to help out because of the lack of manpower.

My campaign urges workers to form independent organizations to fight against these conditions. Workers should not look to politicians in Detroit, Washington,

or Lansing. They must mobilize their own strength and initiative. The SEP helped initiate the Committee Against Utility Shutoffs (CAUS) to expose the deadly consequences of the actions of DTE and other utility companies and organize workers to fight back. Similar organizations should be formed to fight against budget cuts, foreclosures, and attacks on working class living standards.

However, the fundamental question that workers face is a political question: Who is to determine how the resources of society are distributed? Both the Democrats and Republicans defend the capitalist system, a system that subordinates all decisions to the profit interests of giant corporations and the wealthy.

I urge workers throughout the Detroit area to take up the fight for a new political movement of the working class, based on the fight for the reorganization of society to meet social needs, not private profits. This is the fight for socialism.



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