

Neighborhood blazes not just a “natural disaster”

Detroit firefighters denounce city budget cuts, DTE

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In the days following the devastating fires that swept through many Detroit neighborhoods, sparked by downed high-voltage power lines and gusting winds, information continues to come to light about the criminal negligence of the city’s corporate and political establishment.

A virtual firestorm erupted Tuesday night, destroying or severely damaging 85 homes, garages and other structures and leaving dozens of families homeless. Burning debris and embers were blown by winds spreading flames house-to-house and across streets and alleys. Shorthanded and underequipped firefighters, grappling with malfunctioning hydrants and exhaustion, fought to protect lives and property. They were aided by residents desperately fighting back the flames with garden hoses.

These heroic efforts averted what could have been a deadly catastrophe.

In a press conference Wednesday, Detroit Mayor David Bing sought to deflect attention from the crippling budget cuts imposed on the fire department and other city services. He told the media, “There are a lot of people who are naysayers who say, ‘You don’t have enough equipment; you don’t have enough people’... But there is no way you can appropriately plan for a natural disaster.”

In reality, cutbacks carried out by Bing and previous Democratic administrations had a direct impact on the severity of the fires and the damage they wrought. Between 8 and 12 of the city’s 66 fire companies are “browned out” each day, meaning they are temporarily decommissioned and unavailable to fight fires due to budget cuts. One of the decommissioned stations was reportedly the closest to a neighborhood that erupted in flames. Residents complained of long delays while waiting for fire engines, even running to nearby firehouses that were empty.

A Detroit Fire Department captain told the *World*

Socialist Web Site, “This was a catastrophe waiting to happen. Lack of resources, manpower and equipment is something we confront each day. In the 1980s we had more than 1,500 in the department, today there are less than 1,000. Of these, 500 are firefighters. The rest are captains, battalion chiefs, drivers and others.”

On Tuesday, the captain said, 230 firemen were fighting the blazes throughout the city. “It was a perfect situation for a disaster: high winds, downed power lines, dry conditions in vacant houses.”

He noted that after years of economic decay there were 80,000 vacant structures and abandoned lots in the city. Three quarters of the blazes that firefighters respond to each year are in vacant homes, he said.

“Years ago these were the well-kept homes of auto workers. You know what happened to them. Now they are abandoned. You have to deal with this if you are going to resolve the dilemma behind the deaths, injuries and stress firefighters face.” Just tearing houses down was not the answer either, he said, “That will just leave empty lots with overgrowth, so the next time you could have a wildfire like what’s going on in Colorado now.”

During the press conference Wednesday, the mayor went out of his way to defend energy giant DTE, which is in charge of maintaining the power lines in the city. The company ignored repeated calls from an eastside Detroit resident, Shirley Hargrave, complaining about a sparking and dangerous transformer behind her house in the days leading up to the fire, and just hours before. A downed power line that hit a garage next to her home reportedly triggered the blaze that led to the burning of more than 20 dwellings on Robinwood Street.

For Detroit firefighters, a rash of fires caused by downed power lines was not only predictable; it was predicted. Every time there are high winds, they witness

the results of the company's profit-driven negligence.

One firefighter with 15 years of service told the WSWs that many firemen were unable to respond to the neighborhood fires on Tuesday because they were preoccupied with securing downed power lines. His commanding officer estimated that 15 of the 58 fire companies activated to deal with Tuesday's fires were "sitting on DTE's lines." These included Initial Response units, which could have put out the fires before they spread. The first 15 minutes of a fire is the most crucial time, he said.

Nearly 750 DTE power lines fell down throughout metropolitan Detroit during Tuesday's high winds. The number of downed lines was the result of a man-made, not merely natural, disaster. In its efforts to cut costs, the utility company has laid off linemen and contractors who trim trees near their lines. This has resulted in a shortage of workers to respond to storm-related damage and a general decline in the maintenance of the aging electrical infrastructure.

DTE's actions have also created dangers for workers. Last month, veteran utility worker Michael Eugene Parks was electrocuted and killed while repairing a power line in northwest Detroit—the third worker killed by DTE equipment in a little over a year.

While DTE spares no expense and brooks no delay when it comes to shutting off service to families who cannot afford its exorbitant rates, it regularly responds with indifference when its malfunctioning equipment threatens working class neighborhoods.

"DTE is fully responsible for the maintenance of the lines and we're doing them a favor to watch them," the firefighter told the WSWs. "We do it because these high voltage lines are a danger to the public. But we have to wait and wait until a DTE crew comes out to repair a line. On Tuesday evening we were spread out watching downed lines, and that kept us from responding to the fires in time."

The firefighter continued, "Many of these power lines are 10, 15, 20 years old and need to be replaced. In fact, they need to be buried underground like they do in newer communities so the wind won't knock them down.

"When a tree limb hits a wire it arcs because the electricity flows into the water content in the tree. The arcing, plus the wear and tear of trees rubbing on the wires, weakens the power lines and causes them to snap in high winds or if they are hit with falling branches. It's like the electrical lines from your car battery. If they start arcing they become brittle and weak and are more

susceptible to break."

Under normal circumstances, he explained, the Fire Department calls DTE if there is a downed or arcing power line while roping off the area with caution tape and waiting until a DTE crew shows up. "Sometimes we wait two hours until we are relieved by another fire truck. Before we had the relief system, I remember sitting on a line all day and all night, maybe 14-16 hours waiting for DTE to show up.

"Even if it's a downed line on a house; no matter how dangerous it is, DTE does not respond as if it is a priority, like 'we have to come out right now.' If DTE had come and cut the wire that was lying on the garage on the east side Tuesday the fire wouldn't have started."

The firefighter also said that DTE failed to carry out proper maintenance to trim overgrowth and tree limbs from its power lines. "In better-off neighborhoods, like the one I live in, DTE trims the tree branches away from the power lines. In the not so well-to-do neighborhoods, they are not trimmed."

During Wednesday's press conference Bing said he had talked to the company's top executive but had not "gathered all the facts."

The multimillionaire mayor has good reason to protect DTE. He sat on the company's board of directors for 20 years, from 1985 to 2005, and his inaugural committee was co-chaired by DTE CEO Anthony Earley and his wife. Several of Bing's staffers are former long-time DTE executives. The administration's efforts to shut down whole sections of the city correspond with the interests of DTE, which no longer wants to maintain service where profit margins are thin.

The mayor lost his composure and attempted to shut down the press conference when a WSWs reporter asked how he could be qualified to judge DTE given his long and close ties to the company.



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