

Fires burn throughout Detroit

Residents hold energy giant responsible

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9 September 2010

Dozens of houses burned down in Detroit Tuesday as fires blazed through all parts of the city, overwhelming the local fire department.

Firefighters were brought in from the surrounding cities of Harper Woods, Warren, Dearborn, Grosse Pointe and Highland Park, the first time the city called in outside firefighters since the 1967 riots.

Residents and firemen said that the majority of the fires were caused by downed electrical wiring. According to residents, DTE, the city's main electrical company, failed to respond in a timely manner to complaints about the failure of the electrical infrastructure.

A total of 85 structures caught fire after heavy winds downed over 700 power lines, according to statements by Detroit Fire Commissioner James Mack and DTE officials.

The largest fire, which destroyed at least a dozen houses, took place on Robinwood Street on the city's East Side. The blaze was apparently set off when a power line or transformer, which had been shooting sparks for days, ignited and set fire to a garage.

Shirley and J.T. Hargrave, who owned the home where the transformer was located, had been calling DTE since Friday. The company refused to send a technician, they said, telling the family to "call 911" if there was a fire.

"This is all a direct result of the lack of response from DTE," said Mary Hargrave, Shirley and J.T. Hargrave's daughter. "We've been calling every day for the past five days; we called four times on Tuesday," said Mary, pointing to the ruins of her family's garage and the smoldering roof of her parents' house. "It almost makes me ashamed to say I

live in Detroit," she said.

Residents noted that while DTE ignored their pleas to fix malfunctioning equipment and downed lines, the company spared no expense and never delayed responding if a worker failed to pay the energy giant's exorbitant bills. "They'll come out here the next day if you can't pay," one resident said.

The Detroit Fire Department had been responding to calls since 3 pm. By the time the fire on Robinwood started, they were so understaffed that they could not dispatch fire trucks to the area. "At first the firemen told me that they would have to let our house burn down, because we didn't have a working hydrant in the area," said Mary Hargrave.

Ms. Hargrave lost many of her possessions when the second story of her parents' house was badly damaged by the fire. "My kids computer and a lot of their stuff just burned away."

In a press conference on Wednesday, Detroit Mayor Dave Bing characterized the fire as a "natural disaster"—caused by winds up to 50mph—which could not be predicted. "The naysayers say there is not enough equipment and manpower. But there is no way you can appropriately plan for a natural disaster," he said.

This claim is aimed at exonerating the role of DTE and the mayor's administration, which has conducted a non-stop campaign of budget reductions and wage-cutting against city workers, including firefighters, since taking office.

Responding to the mayor's claims, Daniel McNamara, president of the Detroit Fire Fighters Association, told the WSWs, "That's simply not the case. This is a four-season state; we've had natural disasters for centuries; hail storms, wind storms, lightning and snow storms. But this is the first time that

we haven't been able to respond to an incident."

"We simply don't have the people," McNamara said, adding that the ranks of firefighters were 200-300 short to adequately protect the population. "They've run our fire companies down to a level that's abysmal," he said. "We've been warning them about this for decades. We've told the city that this day was going to come, and here we are."

Over the last three decades an average of one company per year has been eliminated. In 2004, there were about 1,300 firefighters in the city, the union spokesman said. Now there are 500 positions, with 20 unfilled, according to Fire Commissioner James Mack. There has not been a full new class of firefighters for six years.

"Detroit homes are very close together, and fires spread quickly," McNamara added. "They double in size every three to four minutes. But because of the layoffs and brown-outs, we simply can't get to them fast enough, and they get out of control."

The city of Detroit regularly "browns out" or temporarily shuts down, up to twelve of its fire stations every day due to budget cuts. Of the 65 fire companies in the city, 7 were "browned out" on Tuesday, leaving 58 in service. Among the browned out fire stations was the one closest to the fire on the northeast side.

At the scene of the Robinwood fire Tuesday, firefighters looked exhausted after over three hours battling the flames.

For its part, DTE quickly sought to blame Detroit residents for the fires, citing "energy theft"—in which desperate residents cut off from utilities attempt to restore heat and electricity through unauthorized hookups. "We know that there have been ... instances of energy theft in the area, and there always is the potential for falling power lines and other dangerous situations as people tap into the electrical system," the company said in a statement. After a spate of deaths caused by fires in homes that had had their utilities shut off this winter, DTE similarly sought to blame "energy theft."

At Wednesday's press conference, WSWS reporters asked Bing whether he was qualified to investigate the role of DTE, given the fact that he had been a member of DTE's board of directors for 20 years. "Don't ask me about qualifications, OK; don't ask me about qualifications right now," Bing shouted. "We're

dealing with something with folks' lives. Let me deal with that; let me deal with that."

Maurice, a Detroit firefighter, said, "If DTE had sent technicians out, this wouldn't have occurred. They do not service their wires; there were wires sparking and they did nothing. If DTE feels there is no immediate danger they won't address the problem." Other residents complained that DTE had cut back on tree trimming and other maintenance.

"The firefighters are stretched thin," Maurice added. "We had six off-duty firefighters helping out. It was unbelievable how many structures were on fire."

"They couldn't respond to fires in some neighborhoods because there were no trucks left. The budget cuts have led to the decommissioning of nine fire stations; every day nine houses are basically closed and a tenth station is shut down on rotation."

Ben Hardaway, a local business owner and former auto worker, said the fire spread because there were so many vacant buildings in the area. "There are only 6 occupied properties out of 30 in the two-block area," he said. "All of them have overgrowth with bushes and weeds."

"This is like an urban wildfire," continued Hardaway pointing to the overgrown trees over power lines that contributed to the fires.

The neighborhood on Robinwood Street, once filled with auto workers and their families, has been ravaged by unemployment, home foreclosures and utility shutoffs. "In a neighborhood like this, more than half of the people are living without utilities," said a DTE worker as he disconnected a gas line from a vacant house on Robinwood Street.



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