Victim of Detroit fires: “DTE is to blame”

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Detroit’s Democratic mayor, David Bing, has become the target of growing anger from city residents in the aftermath of the devastating fires that engulfed 85 structures last week. Bing claimed that the fires were caused by a “natural disaster,” in the face of evidence that the decaying lines run by the local utility, DTE, and the cuts in the fire department by his and previous administrations were the major contributing causes of the fires.

The fires erupted on Tuesday, September 7, after a storm swept through the Detroit metropolitan area. By DTE’s own account, 750 power lines came down, primarily from high winds, causing fires in almost every part of the city.

James Jordan, who lives in a working class neighborhood on Detroit’s west side, saw DTE Energy’s large electrical transformer fall on a garage. Jones and other residents witnessed the eruption of flames that quickly swept through the neighborhood. The cause of the fire was immediately clear to the victims: it was DTE Energy’s failure to repair the transformer.

The resulting devastation recalls photos of cities bombed in World War II. Two once-attractive brick Tudor-style homes were completely destroyed. Several other homes were charred and badly damaged. Garages, with their cars inside, disappeared into ashes. Two apparently new cars, as well as several others, were incinerated.

An outraged Jordan said that this catastrophe was clearly predictable. “Three weeks ago there was an outage when all of the power failed,” he told the WSWS. “You can see where they patched it up here,” he continued, pointing to the utility line.

“See the pole? The pole is completely burned, but the wooden fence next to it is left unscathed. That is because this is where the transformer came down.”

“The fire inspector said it started at the pole,” continued Jordan. “The transformer fell because they [DTE Energy] didn’t fix it. All the neighbors saw it fall. One of the neighbors reported the fire. After it started, it took one and a half hour for a fire truck to come. One person went to the station but there was no one there.”

Jordan said he and his neighbors had been experiencing continuous problems with their electricity. “The moment the wind blows you see the lights going off and on,” stated Jordan. “I can tell you from the amount of money we pay for utilities, this should be the least of our problems,” Jordan said.

“I was amazed that after the fire DTE came and fixed the transformer the next day,” he said. “They had 10 trucks here and dozens of supervisors. I have never seen a supervisor here before. After all of the time we have had problems with that transformer, that they could fix that transformer in one day amazed me.”

Jordan said it also shocked him to hear that the city was going to tear down houses only days after the fire. “You drive around Detroit, and you see burned down houses in the city for months. They are tearing down these houses because the city does not want them to be photo ops.”

What particularly upset James Jordan was the charge that the fire was caused by energy theft. “DTE is solely to blame because of the faulty wiring,” he said. “Everyone on the block knew it. Radio station WJOB was saying that the fires took place because people were stealing electricity. I called and told them that this was incorrect and irresponsible. You shouldn’t point fingers if you don’t know what is going on.”

In the city’s unprecedented determination to bury the evidence of DTE’s neglect, Jordan had to fight to keep his house. “In fact, they are in so much haste that they had planned to tear down my house! I had to go down to city hall to stop it. I was really lucky. I only have water damage to the second floor. However, they were

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ready to tear down a house that doesn’t need to be torn down!”

Jordan said that DTE also had his house on the list of houses to be torn down and were ready to turn his lights off.

“All of them are over-reacting because they are embarrassed,” he concluded.

“I spend a lot of time in Europe and Japan because of my job and you never see wires like this up on poles,” he added. “They are buried underground where it is safer. It’s amazing to me that in Detroit you have all of these wires. However, even if you lose power, that doesn’t stop DTE’s billing cycle.”

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