

# East side Detroit residents say fire not a “natural disaster”

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Residents on Detroit’s east side rejected Mayor Dave Bing’s claim that recent fires were a “natural disaster.” They said a small fire caused by a downed power line grew out of control because the underfunded fire department did not respond for at least an hour.

After the September 7 windstorm brought down 750 power lines, fires engulfed 85 structures in the city of Detroit, including 29 occupied homes. In the days leading up to the fires, energy company DTE ignored repeated warnings from residents about dangerously malfunctioning electrical equipment.

According to residents on Moenart Street, a fire that swept through their block was started by a line that had actually come down the previous day. Three houses were completely destroyed, a fourth house was severely damaged, and at least six garages burned down. One block away on Bloom Street, another house was destroyed and several garages burned down.

“The fire started on the garage of my neighbor across the street,” Mr. Lee, said James Randolph, whose house was also damaged by the fire. “By the time the fire department arrived, the fire was out of control. Mr. Lee said the line was on the garage. He said he called DTE but they never came out.”

Tasha Butler, James’ daughter, added, “They said there was a line on the back of the house that was there on Monday. The fire took place on Tuesday.” These comments echo statements by the Hargrave family on Robinwood Street. In that case, DTE also failed to respond to repeated calls about problems with the electrical lines. (See, “Detroit fires: Timeline of a disaster”)

Margaret, another resident, said, “It is not true that this was a natural disaster. I was on the porch when the fire erupted. We could smell that something was burning. We went to see where the fire was coming from and saw that it was because of the line.”

Brothers Ian and Andrew Perrotta also smelled the burning structure and attempted to put it out.

“We ran to the house to make sure that everyone was out of it, and then discovered a small fire in the eaves of the garage in the back yard. By this time—approximately 5:30 p.m.—several residents had already called 911,” Ian wrote in an account of the fire he provided to the *Hamtramck Review*.

Ian, a former firefighter, ran to his house to get a fire extinguisher to put out the fire. However, by the time he returned the fire was beyond his ability to stop it. “Flames jumped from the garage to the house and were quickly climbing the exterior wall to the roof,” Ian continued. “Instead of looking upon the site with curiosity and excitement, residents now experienced alarm and fear.”

James added that the fire could be traced back to the downed line. “They tried to get water on it, but the wind was roaring and it caught the other houses. It also burned two houses on another street. The poles in the back fell down. You could hear the lines popping, like it was a series of explosions.”

Ian Perrotta expressed the same view. “I’m 99 percent sure it was started by the power line. When we went to look for the fire we could see the power line was down. The brush and trees were all over the lines. It was so thick you could not get through it. The trees and brush were a problem anyway.”

Residents pointed to the failure of the fire department

to respond quickly to the fires. “It took one and a half hours for the fire department to come,” said Margaret. “I called at least ten times. I called 911, and they started having an attitude. They were real nasty to me on the phone.”

The Bing administration has expanded cuts to the Fire Department that have been ongoing for about a decade. Between 8 and 12 of the city’s 66 fire companies are now “browned out” each day, temporarily decommissioned and unavailable to fight fires, due to budget cuts.

Ian said several people called 911. “We were there waiting for over an hour before the first fire truck came. Every time we heard a siren we thought it was coming here, but it went somewhere else.”

Andrew, another resident, added, “When the fire department first came there was only one truck. They tried to hook up the fire hydrant that was in front of the house, but there was no pressure.”

The residents explained that the fire fighters desperately tried to get water pressure from several hydrants after the first one failed. They also tried, unsuccessfully, to connect to a hydrant on the next block. Finally, the firefighters had to go a block and a half away to make a connection.

“At the most critical moment in the fire they were trying to get the water going,” Andrew said.

“I don’t blame the fire fighters,” Ian said. “I blame the department. I do think they should have called the fire department in Hamtramck [a nearby independent municipality]. They could have been here in five minutes.”

The neighbors were particularly incensed by the attitude of the Detroit Police. “When the firefighters came they told us to get buckets and hoses and do whatever we could to spray things down,” Ian said. “Once the police came they told people to get the f\_\_\_ back or we would be arrested. They didn’t help. This was after an hour of waiting for the fire department to come.”

Margaret, whose garage was severely damaged, wanted to get her dogs out of her house. “Those dogs

are like my babies to me. The police said to me, ‘Keep your ass behind the line,’ and threatened to take me to jail.”

“The police just antagonized people,” continued Ian. “The police asserted their dominance. In order for people to go across the street they had to go around the block. Then after one hour the police left, even though the fire was still raging.”

In his article Ian asks, “How was a small fire allowed to grow into an inferno? Why did it take over an hour for firefighters to arrive on the scene? And who was in charge of this debacle?”

A Detroit firefighter with 15 years of service told the WSWS that many firemen were unable to respond to the neighborhood fires 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.” Among these were Initial Response units, which could have put out the fires before they spread.

According to this veteran firefighter, the first 15 minutes of a fire is the most crucial time. Typically a fire can double in size every two to three minutes. With winds reaching 50 miles per hour, the fires spread unabated, placing Detroit families in extreme peril.

The Bing administration moved to destroy the fire-damaged homes within days. Bing has expressed no outrage that the fires have taken place; instead the administration has pushed ahead with meetings to shut down parts of the city.



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