Witnesses describe horrific night of Detroit fires

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WSWS reporters interviewed residents on Robinwood Street, on Detroit's northeast side, on the night of the fires that swept through their neighborhood. More than 20 dwellings were destroyed or damaged

Dale Phillips said the fire started, "In one of the houses on Robinwood and spread to the other three houses." Most of the houses had already been abandoned, he said, adding, "There are a few families on the block. And they were scared because it was so close to them."

Phillips said the fire spread because of the wind. "It's so windy, it was catching everything on fire. The brush on the ground, everything."

"This used to be a beautiful neighborhood," continued Phillips. "But people couldn't afford to keep their homes and abandoned them. So they've become a fire hazard. It's a danger for everybody."

"Something happens in this neighborhood every day. But with the wind blowing the way it is, it's much worse."

He explained that many of his neighbors had lost their utility service because they could not keep up with the bills charged by DTE Energy, the utility giant, which also is responsible for the power lines that collapsed triggering many of the fires.

"They need to give people help out here," continued Phillips. My daughter had her electricity cut off. You can't get any help from anybody."

Lynn Hill said she heard it was from a transformer. "It's still sad because people have to live around here. It's bad. The neighborhood is going down. The last four years in particular have been terrible. Now, the city is talking about tearing down all of these houses. What are they going to do, just let them burn down?

"It is going to sit like this. We have houses on our block that have been burned out for three years, and they are still sitting there. You know once you have a fire, you have to pay the city to tear it down. People paid their money, and the house is still sitting there."

Asked about the cuts in the fire department, Lynn said she knew other friends on the west side where a fire was taking place, and they also could not get fire help.

"What are they going to do, wait until everybody gets burned out? There is no help. These firemen can only do so much. They are tired. Right now they need to go somewhere and lie down. It's almost 8 o'clock, and they have been here for almost three hours."

Ben Hardaway, a small business owner and former autoworker said he saw the fire when it began. "The fire started in the alley when it caught a garage on fire. It spread to the adjacent properties. I saw it when it started. We first noticed a flame coming from the alley in an abandoned property. It spread to the adjacent property, and the wind fanned the flames.

"This appears to be an electrical fire from the branches rubbing against the utility lines. The people who live in the first house here had called the utility company several times to trim back the trees from the utility lines. So with all the dry timber and the overgrown brush, the fire started back there."

He added, "The fires took place because there are so many abandoned properties. There are only six occupied properties out of maybe 30. All of them have overgrowth with the bushes, the weeds, everything. I tried to help the gentleman that lives in the first house. We were watering down the roof and the utility line came down."

Hardaway explained that the area has been in decline for the last 6 or 7 years in particular. "I have lived in the area for 25 years. It was called the Nortown area. It

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had a theater on the corner. It is a lot different than 25 years ago.

“We were sitting here watching this and four houses were engulfed before the fire department got here. It happened just that fast because of the wind. The wind was just whipping the flames. It was just jumping from house to house.

“See that house? The only thing left is the masonry work. The firemen were trying to get the front, and then the garage caught on fire.”

When asked about the claims by DTE and the media that “energy theft” may have been behind some of the fires, he said, “People are doing this out of desperation. They have exhausted all of their options, and resort to something that is clearly dangerous, but they do it anyway because they have to survive. If you have children in the house you try to keep them warm. You try to subsist. People who are law-abiding citizens who want to go by the rules, they can’t afford to.”

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