Detroit residents blame DTE Energy for September 7 fires at regulatory hearing

Lawrence Porter
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The Michigan Public Service Commission (MPSC) hosted a hearing September 29 to investigate the role of DTE Energy in the fires that swept through Detroit on September 7. Although the MPSC is widely perceived in Detroit as little more than an arm of DTE, a number of Detroit residents attended, angry and determined to expose DTE and the administration of Detroit Mayor David Bing for their role in the fires.

Speaker after speaker denounced the utility giant, explaining that prior to the fires it was widely known there were serious problems with the maintenance of power lines in Detroit. Others attacked the role of Bing, who called the fires a "natural disaster," noting his close ties with DTE. Several people chastised the commission itself, questioning its sincerity when it has rubber-stamped DTE utility rate increases that jumped 20 percent in Detroit last year and allowing the company to make billions in profits while nearly a quarter of a million households in southeast Michigan, including Detroit had their gas or electricity shut off last year by DTE.

The September 7 fires destroyed 85 structures, including 71 homes in almost every part of the city. By DTE Energy's own account 750 power lines came down as a result of winds as high as 50 miles per hour. Another 17,000 people in the metro area lost power, a regular occurrence due to DTE's lack of maintenance.

In every case that has been investigated by the *World Socialist Web Site* the September 7 fires were the product of fallen power lines. Entire blocks were nearly destroyed as was evident on Robinwood Street, near Seven Mile and Van Dyke on the east side. There, the fire began after a power line came down on the garage of the house belonging to Shirley Hargrave. Hargrave had complained to DTE that she was having problems with the line the previous Friday, three days before the fire. Despite repeated calls, the utility company ignored her pleas, threatening at one point to charge her for a service call if she continued with her complaints.

Perhaps 50 people were at the hearing, which was held during working hours and poorly publicized, including MPSC staff, officials from DTE and representatives of the Detroit City Council.

The biased and unserious character of the hearing was evident from the beginning. It was presided over by Dan Nickerson, an administrative law judge, rather than the three member panel of commissioners. Nickerson, who hears complaint cases against DTE, is widely perceived as partial to the energy monopoly. The MPSC commissioners are appointed by Democratic Governor Jennifer Granholm. They are responsible for the regulation of utilities and provide a public veneer to monopolies who have increased their profits despite the massive growth of poverty in Michigan.

Valeria McKinstry, a member of CAUS and a resident on Robinwood Street told the commission she was there on behalf of her community and friends. She quoted from the letter she wrote to Mayor Bing opposing his description of the fires as a 'natural disaster.'

"DTE Energy failed to act in replacing or removing faulty wires," stated McKinstry.

"They were negligent."

McKinstry said they had reported problems with their wires since the year 2000. She said the response was "either negative, slow or not at all. The lines would sag. One even came down and DTE would not come out."

Carl Williams, who had experienced a utility shutoff, said he felt the people in Detroit were not being represented when the mayor was on the board of DTE for 20 years. "Several people from DTE are now on his staff," stating Williams.

Williams was especially incensed with the justification by Bing that the fires were a 'natural disaster.' "I find it troubling when someone tries to blame God when the wires

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belong to DTE," stated Williams to the panel. "It is asinine to say that wind caused the fires. All this publicity about natural disaster is preposterous. Any time a human will try to blame the creator to protect a corporation—I have a problem with that. He is supposed to represent the people of Detroit. The answer he gave only benefited DTE."

Williams peppered the judge and the commissioners with questions about its rules governing DTE response to line problems, but Nickerson and commission members evaded and dodged his inquiries.

Williams, who studies the regulations, told the WSWS he had filed a case against DTE this year after they shut off his lights and gas. His case, however, was dismissed by the MPSC.

Reginald Amos, a retired Deputy chief with the Detroit Fire Department said the statement by Bing that the fires were a natural disaster were a cover up for DTE.

"September 7 was not a natural disaster, it was caused by human error and negligence. We have a clear case here of a cover up of evidence and negligence. I call for the MPSC to call in federal investigators, as they did in San Bruno California," stated Amos referring to the recent gas explosion that has claimed its eighth victim.

Amos also requested the state attorney general file an injunction on the city to stop the demolition of the homes involved in the fire, equating it to covering up the scene of a crime. "How can there be an investigation if the city is allowed to remove the fire ruins?"

Amos, who said he is for the recall of Bing, said, "There is a conflict of interest with a DTE executive in the mayor's office. The president of DTE was a major contributor to Bing. The mayor understood exactly what he was saying when he called it a natural disaster. If DTE were responsible, they would have to pay 100 percent of damages to renters and homeowners. That's what he is trying to cover up."

Edith Payne, who had also come into conflict with the MPSC in the past, said she had sent the commission a video of over vegetation on wires last year, including a video she had made, but that it was ignored by the commission.

"The problem is you allowed DTE to self regulate," stated Payne. Noting that the MPSC approved $1 billion in rate hikes and surcharges, Payne said she blamed the MPSC for the conditions that created the fires. "It is up to you to enforce it but it is not happening," stated Payne. After stating the MPSC's regulations Payne said, "We can see what is not being done by DTE or MPSC… You know what is going on."

An emotional Sandra Hines made a passionate plea for lawyers to come forward to sue DTE. "We need lawyers to put these people in jail or pay damages," stated Hines. "I am insulted that DTE has only one person assigned to making an investigation into all the people who lost homes. They have a multi billion-dollar surplus off of us. DTE is a corporate monster."

Hines said she was glad to see Anthony Earley, the CEO of DTE, leave as chairman of the company. "I am glad they got rid of Earley; he played a big role in the deaths in Detroit due to utility shutoffs," stated Hines referring to 11 people who have died so far this year after their utilities where shut off.

"Senior citizens sitting in the dark in wheel chairs. A man fell down stairs and died in the dark because he did not have power. They are not God and they seem to be playing God. There are laws. We need some lawyers with courage who would help people."

The MPSC hearing is the first of two hearings that have been called to investigate the fires in Detroit. Next week the Detroit City Council will host a hearing to address the response of the Detroit Fire Department. The DFD has experienced a series of devastating cuts by the Bing administration and previous administrations. They now have a policy of decommissioning 8-12 fire stations out of 66 each day even though Detroit has one of the most demanding fire jobs in the country. To show its solidarity with the Bing administration, the city council sided with the mayor and cut the pay of city workers by ten percent.

Workers should have no confidence in either of these two investigations. The Committee Against Utility Shutoffs has called for an independent investigation of serious professionals and workers to understand the real causes of the fires.

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