

Fire destroys three homes in historic Delray neighborhood of Detroit

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A fire erupted in an abandoned house in southwest Detroit around 6:30 a.m. Thursday morning, quickly engulfing the two occupied homes around it and forcing the shocked residents out into the bitter cold weather.

The fire took place in the partially abandoned neighborhood of Delray. In the 1930s the area boasted nearly 25,000 residents, many of whom were employed in the steelworks of nearby Zug Island. The population has declined to only 2,700 at present. More than 60 percent of the area's housing stock was built before 1939. Many of these structures, abandoned and decayed, are now firetraps.

Wednesday's fire was so intense it could be seen for miles. Luckily occupants in the adjacent houses got out very quickly and there were no injuries.

"We have been complaining about that house for years," stated Ellen Bryant, whose house was destroyed from the fire. "We tried everything and we couldn't get the city to tear it down."

Shorty, a neighbor who came over to console Ellen, said she too had been trying to get the city to tear down the house. "I've been living in this neighborhood for 10 years," stated Shorty. "There are too many abandoned homes and the city does nothing about it. They also don't do anything about foreclosures to help people stay in their homes. If they did these neighborhoods wouldn't be collapsing."

Dan Brown, who lives downstairs in the house that Ellen owns, said he was out walking the dogs at 6:30 a.m. when he saw a glow in the abandoned house next door. "I saw the glow of a fire but it was small," stated Dan. "In fact, I thought it would go out, but it kept rekindling."

Dan said the fire started in the abandoned building, between his house and the house on the corner. He said

the fire spread quickly and hit his home within a matter of minutes.

"It happened so fast," stated Ellen. "I just had enough time to get on my coat."

"We have lost everything," she continued. "We had to leave so fast I couldn't even retrieve my mother's ashes."

In the hours after the fire was put out, a call was made to the Michigan Humane Society to pick up Dan's four dogs to find new homes for them. Dan and Ellen said they were saddened to learn that the dogs will be euthanized if the Humane Society determines they are unsuitable for adoption. "This tears me up, but we just don't have a choice," Dan told the WSWs.

Ellen praised the response of the fire department. "They were here very quickly," she stated.

A firefighter told Dan he saw the fire on his way to work. "The fireman said when he saw it he had the company come over right away," he said. "Luckily no one was hurt." Dan noted that the family on the other side of the house was away with the exception of a son who got out of the house safely.

Detroit Fire Captain Kwaku Atara told the WSWs that the blaze is being investigated as a suspicious fire. According to Atara, in 2010 there were 43 fire fatalities in Detroit, 31 in residential homes. Seven of the dead were children, among them three small children of Sylvia Young, whose home caught on fire after utility giant DTE Energy cut off her service in the dead of winter.

In 2009 there were 44 fire related fatalities, four involving children under the age of 17.

The recent fire is another sign of the social collapse of the Detroit area. Shorty complained bitterly about the lack of resources to keep up the neighborhood, despite the attempts of people like herself to help her

neighbors. The number of abandoned homes, or homes with fire damage, are literally littered throughout the area. Detroit's city administration has admitted there are 90,000 abandoned homes and lots within its boundaries.

The dense housing of Delray grew up with the huge influx of immigrants from Armenia, Hungary and Poland in the 1890s. The village became an industrial center when the Solvay Process chemical plant was established in 1894 and other chemical plants and factories followed. In 1901 the Detroit Iron Works built two blast furnaces on Zug Island. This facility was expanded when it was taken over by Great Lakes Steel Works. Later it was purchased by US Steel.

In the 1980s the entire southwest Detroit area was devastated with plant closures affecting tens of thousands of workers. These included GM Fleetwood Assembly, Ternstedt Fisher Body, Guardian Glass, and Anaconda Copper. In a final blow, US Steel idled its mill in December 2008.

This once-booming and proud neighborhood, like so many others in the city of Detroit, is being targeted by the city government's plans to "rightsize" the city. Statistically the neighborhood is part of the southwest side of Detroit, where poverty already exceeds 31 percent.

Detroit Democratic Mayor David Bing envisions not the upgrading of neighborhoods, but instead their termination, shutting off services such as electricity and gas—to the benefit of DTE energy—as well as trash pickup and fire protection. The aim is to drive out the remaining residents of Delray and neighborhoods like it throughout Detroit.



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