

Veteran utility company worker killed in Detroit-area gas pipe collapse

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Thomas Issac, 50, a 20-year veteran of Detroit-based utility company DTE Energy, was killed on the job Tuesday afternoon after being called to repair a gas leak in the Detroit suburb of Grosse Pointe Farms.

The death occurred on the 400 block of Moran Road around 12:43pm. The local Department of Public Safety issued a press release stating Issac was in a five-foot hole attempting to reach the gas pipe and attach a flow seal clamp when he collapsed.

Issac's co-worker, whose name has not been released, called 911 when he noticed his partner was slumped over and unconscious.

Paramedics removed Issac from the hole and tried to revive him, but he was pronounced dead on arrival at a local hospital.

On Wednesday this reporter approached another two-man DTE crew working in the vicinity of the accident. However, the workers said they were instructed not to talk to the media or anyone outside the company. While they could not comment, they nodded their heads in agreement when it was pointed out that this was happening all too frequently to utility workers. They also concurred with the comment that DTE workers' conditions were not so different from those who face utility shutoffs at the hands of the energy giant.

Matthew Edelstein, who lives near the accident location, told the WSWs that the problems with gas leaks in the area had been on going on for more than two weeks.

"My understanding is the gas main that was there [in front of a neighbor's house] failed and the DTE guy

was in the ditch," stated Edelstein. "It appears the gas displaced the air and he ended up suffocating to death."

Edelstein said the local gas mains date back to the early 20th century. "The house where the leak took place was built in 1928, and the same with the house next it. So my guess is the line dates back to that period."

He went on, "It's older infrastructure, and the company's position is that if there is no leak, they don't replace it. In this case, the homeowner did phone because he smelled gas. They started working on the main and it failed. The worker died in the hole where they attempted to get to the leak."

"OSHA [Occupational Safety and Health Administration] was here yesterday," continued Edelstein, disturbed by the dangerous conditions. "Apparently this is the fourth fatality for a DTE work crew."

Pointing to his own home, where the DTE work crew was continuing to work, Edelstein said he was told they planned to place tubing over the gas line to reinforce it.

"They have been working on my system off and on for the last two weeks. Sometimes I come home and the yard is dug up again." He added that his gas had been off for more than two weeks, forcing him to go to his parents' home nearby to shower.

This reporter spoke to a representative from the Michigan Occupational Safety and Health Administration (MIOSHA) about the number of DTE workers killed on the job, and the spokesperson confirmed that at least three DTE workers have died

since 2009, including Thomas Issac.

However, the MIOSHA representative said the Michigan Public Service Commission (MPSC) had taken over the investigation and had other information on accidents and deaths not shared with MIOSHA. “It could be true [that DTE worker deaths are up to four],” stated the spokesperson of the primary organization in the state charged with overseeing workers’ safety. “We don’t have complete records.”

Public information on Detroit utility workers records the death of Michael Eugene Parks who was killed by electrocution while repairing a power line in northwest Detroit in August 2010, another electrocution in November 2009, and the death of an AT&T utility worker in April 2010.

Thomas Issac’s death is a tragic expression of the social cost paid by ordinary people for an outdated and antiquated infrastructure, and the private ownership of utility services.

It has now become routine for large numbers of people to lose electrical power whenever it is windy or hot in the Detroit area. Several times in the past few months tens of thousands of Detroit-area residents have lost power, including in Grosse Pointe Farms.

DTE representatives were sent to public forums in Grosse Pointe Park and Ferndale to defuse anger at the repeated power failures. Officials at the meetings admitted that the system dated to 1918. (See below: Michigan: meeting on power outages exposes DTE Energy negligence).

In Detroit, where the residents are poorer and have no political clout, the company simply cuts them off when they face difficulties paying their bills. In the suburbs, where the infrastructure is also falling apart, they try to placate people with expressions of concern (one resident in Grosse Pointe Parks called DTE’s recent appearance a ‘horse-and-pony show’). In both cases, DTE’s aim is the same—to maximize earnings.

Last year, DTE reported profits of \$630 million, over \$100 million more than the year before. This wealth,

which is guaranteed by the MPSC, is used to pay huge salaries to company executives, as well as preferred stockholders. The needed investment in infrastructure—replacing old cabling and piping and placing overhead cables underground—is rejected out of hand, even though it would put many to work and create a safer environment.



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