

DTE Energy turns out the lights on Highland Park, Michigan neighborhoods

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In a nationally unprecedented action, DTE Energy has repossessed its streetlights in the Detroit enclave of Highland Park, leaving the small municipality of 16,000 people mainly in the dark. The city was the once-booming site of the nation's first assembly line at the Ford Highland Park plant, built in 1910.

DTE pulled the plug on the city as a result of an unpaid \$4 million bill. The arrearage was the cumulative result of 5-10 years of only partial payments on electricity fees. The utility giant did not just temporarily disable connections, however. It hired contractors to literally remove 1,400 light poles. (See YouTube video)

"Mostly, it was a liability issue; we didn't want to have poles there that were de-energized and likely won't ever be energized again," DTE spokesman Len Singer explained. "Also, we wanted to avoid the confusion of having lights up that don't work." The poles were loaded onto trucks and will be sold for scrap.

Two hundred "more efficient" replacement poles were installed, leaving only 500 lights in the three-square-mile jurisdiction, primarily on the main artery, Woodward Avenue.

Highland Park's neighborhoods have now been plunged into pitch-blackness, affecting thousands of children walking to school, senior citizens trying to get to the grocery stores, and entire neighborhoods. The stripping of the city lights takes place just before "Devils Night," Halloween eve, when thousands of fires have taken place in Detroit neighborhoods in years past—a major concern for residents' safety.

DTE spokesman Singer stated that the utility is under no obligation to power communities that don't pay their bill, but "wanted to maintain some service," according to CrainsDetroit Business.

Last year, the Highland Park administration had allowed DTE to remove alley lights in order to save \$6,800 per month. Mayor Hubert Yopp said the new deal with DTE

had been approved by the City Council last May in the hopes of reducing the monthly utility bill from \$62,000 to \$15,000.

Residents responded bitterly to the action of DTE, whose recent quarterly profits were over \$200 million, and to the willingness of the mayor and City Council to accept the disassembling of the city's lighting system. Yopp is now asking for negotiations for a partial restoration of service, but DTE said it would not reverse its decision.

The WSWs spoke to residents who were, to a person, aghast at the measures taken to deprive citizens of public lighting. None agreed with the lame defenses of Democratic Mayor Yopp. "Burglaries after dark are rare in Highland Park," he said. "That is not a lighting factor."

Terrell Houston said, "There is a major safety issue. I hope they will put them back on, especially when they see that older people need it who walk to the store at night. It's wrong, more people will be robbed, especially older people. It's already unsafe. You just feel that they are taking everything little by little."

Two high school seniors at Clintondale spoke to the WSWs. Shatina Davis said, "It's starting to get dark early. This is making it dangerous. At many of the schools, parents are picking up their kids or taking them to school in the dark." Destini Smith added, "Many people work at night. And if something happens, the police don't come if you call them. It can take an hour if they come at all."

Keith Wade told the WSWs, "My father is 91 years old and lives on Portage Street. The lights are out on the street, and there are several vacant houses on the block. Presently, there are only two families left. It's really messed up." His brother Mark Davis agreed: "It's unsafe and there is a rodent problem. I feel that if you take down a pole, you should replace it with another one. The way they are doing it now, it's the people who will suffer."

According to the real estate index by Neighborhood Scout, Highland Park's safety is rated 2 out of a possible 100. In other words, Highland Park is one of the most dangerous places to live in the US. Crimes per square mile in Highland Park are 497, compared to 41 for the state of Michigan and nationally.

The issue of street crime is, of course, intimately bound up with the longstanding poverty and social decay for which capitalism is responsible. The median household income in Highland Park is a staggeringly low \$17,000. In recent decades, the municipality, like so many others throughout the U.S., has been left to rot, with countless workers and their families abandoned to permanent unemployment and misery. The loss of street lighting in Highland Park is the most dramatic and recent example of this process of decay.

So-called "public" lighting is, throughout the US, subject to the profit requirements of utility bondholders and investors. Under the jurisdiction of the Michigan Public Utility Commission, DTE Energy is guaranteed at least an 11% return on equity. The firm is one of the largest diversified utility companies in the nation with a market capitalization of \$8.6 billion. Its shareholders include many of the nation's major banks and hedge funds, including Vanguard Group, State Street Corporation, Capital World Investors, BlackRock Institutional, Capital Research Global and Bank of New York Mellon.

Under conditions of an unprecedented number of energy shutoffs—last year more than 1 million people in Michigan were cut off at some point in the year—profits continue to roll in for DTE. Second quarter 2011 earnings more than doubled year over year, rising from \$86 million in 2010 to \$202 million in 2011. The company's financial report attributed a substantial rise in operating earnings due to "solid results" at Energy Trading and Detroit Edison—in other words, through market speculation, on the one hand, and continued profit-taking from its 2 million Southeast Michigan customers, on the other.

This stellar financial report was followed up with an October 11 announcement of a new surcharge to its customers in order to recoup the \$19.5 million spent clearing tree lines and restoring power outages caused by storms during 2010.

While no American city has imposed such drastic cost-saving measures as Michigan's Highland Park, nevertheless a number of mid-sized cities have taken similar measures.

Colorado Springs turned off one third of its streetlights in 2010 to save \$1.3 million. As of 2011, the city has turned the lights back on in neighborhoods, but will keep the high-wattage lights lining multi-lane traffic arteries off. In 2009, Muncie, Valparaiso, and Merrillville, Indiana, started curbing streetlights. In 2009, Santa Rosa, California, implemented a program that will run through 2012, under which select lights are turned off and others are equipped with light sensors to cut about \$400,000 from the city's annual budget.

Many additional municipalities are simply allowing the lighting infrastructure to deteriorate to the point where poles don't work and unsafe conditions prevail both for residents and utility workers. Within the city of Detroit, which has its own independent lighting facility, entire neighborhoods are in the dark for weeks or even months at a time, according to a WXYZ news investigation. The city admits that more than 400 citizen complaints about street light outages have been made since the beginning of 2011, but only 11 have been addressed.

"You'll see that many if not most light poles in the city are missing inspection covers, exposing the public to energized wires," a WXYZ Action News report stated. "Many street light poles are so rusted they're just falling over. Often the rusty stumps are left behind. Entire city neighborhoods and stretches of heavily traveled streets are pitch-black, and complaints about street lights are at an all time high," it concluded.

Lack of maintenance of the city's massive underground cable network (braided copper wires carrying up to 24,000 volts) led, this year, to an explosion and a terrible injury to veteran splicer Mark Roseman. High-voltage underground cables are held in place by brackets, and, reportedly, many are badly rusted and do not properly support the high-voltage cables. Roseman's lawyer told the media that failures of underground cables have gone from 5 or 6 in the space of a month to more than 25 now.



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