

Detroit house-fire season begins amid cuts in firefighting

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Early Friday morning a fire swept through a two-flat home on Detroit's eastside, trapping two families with five children, including a one-month-old child and a disabled senior citizen, in a massive blaze.

This is an area of the city where the local fire station is regularly "brownd out" or closed on a day-to-day basis due to budget cuts. In November, Detroit Executive Fire Commissioner Don Austin asked the City Council if they would support "browning out" 17 stations. "Response times are going to increase, and your phones are going to start ringing—am I going to have the support of council? So we are talking about 59 down to 42," said Austin, referring to the number of fire stations in Detroit. Last year, there were 66 fire companies in the extensive 139-square mile city.

In this case, family members owe their survival to the fact that nearby Station 52 was manned and opened on the day of the fire. Also, the quick action of family members and neighbors was decisive.

At 6:30am the fire erupted at 3983 Devonshire, on Detroit's northeast side, an area notable for its larger, brick colonial-style homes. Ray Canty, 21, who lives next door, spoke to the WSWWS, explaining that the occupants of the lower flat woke him up, knocking on his door and screaming that their house was on fire.

Canty said he was worried that his house would catch on fire and knew that somewhere between 10-12 people lived in the house including three children upstairs and two in the bottom flat. News reports state that Jimmie Howard, who is unemployed, lived in the downstairs flat with his fiancée, mother, and two daughters; upstairs was Raquel Triplett, her husband and three children—five-years-old, one-year-old, and one-month.

"They kept saying 'My mom is in the back'," stated Canty. "I've been in that house and knew what the house looked like and how to get through it," and decided to try and rescue the mother. Canty said he and another neighbor then tried to enter the burning building, "But there was carpet on the floor and the fire was burning plastic, big, black, you-can't-breathe smoke."

"I heard her say 'I need my walker' and realized that she was disabled," stated Canty, who said the family generally kept to itself. "Right after that, we started breaking all the windows out. We also sprayed the little family-size fire extinguisher and kept the fire back as much as we could. Luckily she was laying on the floor and she started to crawl toward the front door" as the fire department arrived.

Canty continued, "We told the fireman that we were trying to get her out, but he was like, 'Ya'll couldn't do that.' He had his oxygen mask on and still was tired as hell when he came out. He said 'No. There was no way in hell a regular person could actually have gotten in there and gotten that person out.' So she was pretty much going to die if they hadn't gotten there."

While this was taking place the family in the upstairs flat realized they had to take quick action to save themselves and their three very young children. Raquel Triplett told the media that she and her husband dropped their three children out of a second-story window into the arms of neighbors. "We had to escape in five minutes or... That smoke it became so harsh that we knew we had to hurry up and get out of there," stated Triplett to the media.

"Everything was destroyed," continued Triplett who is now homeless. "The only thing we got out was ourselves."

Firefighters reported to DTE Energy that the home had an unauthorized hookup, although a spokesman said he did not think this was the cause of the fire. A DTE

representative told this reporter that he suspected an overloaded circuit due to space heaters. “We see it a lot, especially at this time of the year,” he said.

Lt. Joseph Crandall, an arson investigator for the Detroit Fire Department, told the *Detroit Free Press*, “The fire began in the living room and extended into the dining room, causing heavy smoke and heat damage throughout the home.” Triplett said she had recently moved into the house with her family and did not know anything about the utility hookup.

“People are just trying to survive,” stated neighbor Harum Echols. “Somebody took my meter to hook up their electricity. You can see that this neighborhood is going through a transition. It was obviously a beautiful neighborhood. But people are losing jobs.”

Echols is renovating his home and is preparing to move into it. He was hoping this is one of the neighborhoods that was going to be saved in the reorganization process Detroit’s mayor, Dave Bing, was implementing. Many areas of the city have been slated for closure through a policy of ending of vital city services such as lights, libraries and fire service.

“I compare it to a three-prong war attack,” continued Echols. “They are coming at you from every angle. You have the people who are selling these housing mortgagees. Then there is DTE Energy. All they want is their money. If you don’t pay they will definitely cut you off. In fact the gas and electricity used to be separate. Now it is together, so if you get behind in one bill they shut both of them off.

“It’s the way our society is structured and it is happening all at once. It’s like it is coordinated. A lot of people out there are not criminals, but they are trying to keep warm and they are doing what they have to do to keep warm.

“I know what it is like not to have heat. I went through this as a child,” Echols stressed, explaining that his father was unemployed when was young. “No one should have to go through that. Children especially are victims.”

Firefighters at Engine Company 52 have established a Facebook page to oppose the ongoing cuts in jobs and pay rates being implemented by the city. “Can you put a dollar amount on a life? If you save money on closing a fire company and someone dies in a fire where that fire company would have been there first.....is that ok? Yet no one can tell you how much they save by closing a fire

company,” states one post.

The web site of TV station WXYZ posted a comment by Christopher Shinneman, a senior firefighter from Engine 52 who was on the scene of the Devonshire Street fire, in which he points out, “Engine 52 is one of the companies that is ‘brownd out’ on a regular basis! If they were closed yesterday this lady would have lost her life.”

The social conditions produced by years of budget cuts, job eliminations and the end of the social safety net are creating conditions that can only be compared to the depression in the 1930s. The recently appointed Detroit Fire Commissioner Don Austin has called for “an adjusted strategy” because of the cutbacks, stating to Fox 2 News that if an initial sweep indicates that a structure is unoccupied, firefighters should “let it burn.”

Democratic Mayor Bing and the Detroit City Council are bickering among themselves over plans to solve the city’s \$200 million budget deficit by destroying what services remain, be it through the fiat of an Emergency Financial Manager, the decisions of a judge implementing municipal bankruptcy or suspending all city workers and reorganizing through privatization.

Only the independent struggle of workers and youth provides a way out of the crisis caused by the capitalist profit system. The Socialist Equality Party is calling an emergency meeting to initiate a fight back and to build a political movement of the working class, independent of the two big business parties, to put an end to social inequality and secure the social rights of all workers to good-paying jobs, decent schools and neighborhoods. We invite all workers, students and young people to attend.

Saturday, December 17 2-4pm
Community House
18966 Greenfield Road, Detroit



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact