

Firefighter says budget cuts are “killing people.”

Elderly couple dies in Detroit fire

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A fire on in northwest Detroit early Sunday morning resulted in the deaths of an elderly couple in their 70s, Kyle and Theresa Bozeman. The fire destroyed much of the house at 20200 Rutherford.

The Detroit Fire Department fights an average of thirty fires a day. The department has been hit hard by a series of budget cuts, including one recently that reduced the number of companies on duty from 59 per day to 40-46. Salaries for firefighters were also cut by 10 percent.

The elimination of fire companies has deadly consequences—leading to longer response times and fewer firemen able to respond to each blaze. The cuts could very well have been a contributing factor in the deaths of the elderly couple.

It is still unclear as to what started the fire on Rutherford, although it appears that the fire started on the sun porch in the back of the home. Family members who spoke to the WSWs about the tragedy raised the possibility of faulty wiring being the case.

The Bozemans’ utilities were on and and not involved with an unauthorized or illegal hookup. According to firefighters more and more fires are being caused by residents desperately using unsafe equipment to heat their homes because utilities have been shut off.

According to a report the WSWs received from the Michigan Public Services Commission, DTE Energy shut off utilities to over 60,000 homes in southeast Michigan from May-September 2012. Consumers Energy is reported to have shut off an additional 66,528 homes during the same period. Using the assumption that an average 2.5 people are in a home this amounts to over 300,000 people having their utilities cut by these companies.

The WSWs contacted the Detroit Fire Department and asked them if the impact of the fire could have

been exacerbated by station brownouts (cyclical shutdown of fire stations). The response was that “there were no browned out companies in the area.”

The WSWs spoke to firefighters of the Detroit Fire Department Engine 52 and Ladder 25—the crews at the station that first responded to the fire—and discovered that they were in fact partially browned out because they were unable to use a critical ladder truck due to a manpower shortage.

“There are normally eight firefighters working in this [fire]house,” said Raymond McCants II, “which is Engine 53 and Ladder 25. On that day, Ladder 25 was closed, which means it wasn’t manned.” Engines and Ladders are specific types of fire trucks, each manned by four firefighters.

If Ladder 25 was operational, “There would have been eight people at the scene instead of just four,” said McCants. “We would have had more people to clear an entrance, help get them [the Bozemans] through the window or to search the house. We’d have had twice as much manpower.”

“At that time,” said another firefighter, Maurice Funchess, “it would have been easier if we had an exit.”

“Three could have been searching,” said McCants. “The other four could have been making an exit.” The fourth firefighter on the scene was getting water for the fire.

“The next arriving company was Engine 30,” continued Funchess. “Then Ladder 27, and then Squad 2, and it took them over 20 minutes to arrive. It took even Engine 30 a while to arrive because of the foggy conditions. And Ladder 27 wasn’t the normal one to respond.”

“Normally, it’s four engines, one truck, one squad and one chief,” said McCants. “We did this with two

engines, one squad, one truck and one chief. And they closed a number of engines after they cut our manpower. They are ‘browning out’ those companies.”

When asked about the cuts, McCants responded, “They’re ridiculous; they are killing our purpose. We do the best we can to respond.”

“And they’re killing people,” Funchess interjected. “This is another couple that has died in a fire from cuts. A few months ago, there was a couple that died because the firehouse that was on their road was closed.”

“Look at the number of deaths in a fire since the cuts,” said McCants. “There were deaths before the cuts, but then these cuts... If that firehouse had been opened, it would have dramatically reduced the response time.”

“A fire doubles in size every minute,” he added, emphasizing how important response time is.

“I’ve personally been involved in pulling out six fatalities in the last six weeks,” said Funchess.

Another fire occurred Sunday morning, which killed Kevin Jackson, a 42-year-old construction worker.

The WSWs spoke to family members of Jackson, who police now think was a victim of a homicide-arson assault.

“He was hurt in a car accident three years ago, and he had to have back surgery,” said Charles Jackson, Kevin’s older brother. He was cut off since 2010 because he couldn’t work. He didn’t get unemployment when he was hurt so he was stuck in the middle. He heated his house with propane.”

“DTE is going too far. There was a gas leak, but because they knew he [Kevin] couldn’t pay, they cut it [the gas line] to make sure it was cut off.”



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