

Closed fire station costs Detroit resident her home

A WSWS reporting team
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A house fire in northwest Detroit burned for twenty-one minutes Saturday night before the first responders from the Detroit Fire Department arrived. Due to fire station closings, firefighters from Engine 33, located in southwest Detroit, had to travel eighteen miles to reach the burning house.

Eighty-five-old Juanita Burgess, the owner of the house, escaped the blaze as it was starting and used a neighbor's phone to call 911. According to firefighters on the scene, everything she owned was lost in the fire.

She's living with her grandson now," said Tywana who spoke to the WSWS. "She was supporting him and now he's supporting her." Tywana has been Burgess' neighbor for the past 16 years and witnessed the fire unfolding.

"There are a lot of laid off firefighters," she continued. "The Curtis station nearby doesn't have a lot of people. The Joy Road station is closed. If they opened the closed stations, we wouldn't have this."

There are several nearby fire stations that are either "browned out"—opened two days then closed two days—or shut completely. If any had been open, the response time to Burgess' house would have been greatly reduced.

The WSWS also spoke with Tywana about the utility shutoffs by utility company DTE that have forced people to use unsafe electricity hookups to heat their homes. "Now DTE wants to shut you off when you owe \$80. They tried to do that to me. It used to be that you would wait until you owed \$1,000 and then you'd get assistance. Not anymore. You can't get assistance for \$80 and DTE doesn't want to wait."

Tywanna described the difficulties of making ends meet. "Right now, my hours are getting cut. I work for a Neighborhood Service Organization and I used to work 60 to 72 hours a week. Now I only work 40 hours

a week, which means I lose around \$300 per week. And I still pay \$80 of health insurance per week."

Erik, a worker passing through, also commented on how DTE operates. "During the windstorm in 2010 when fires sprung up all over the city, DTE wouldn't come to shut power off. Near where I live, six houses burned down and it all started from an electricity pole that was on fire. If DTE just shut the power off, the fire would have been easy to fight.

"The fire department doesn't get enough equipment. When they did show up to fight this fire, they only had one truck, a small one. Me and my neighbors had to help them hold the fire hose."

The closing of fire stations and reduction in manpower is the result of the repeated austerity measures imposed by Democratic Mayor David Bing, even as the Detroit-based auto companies are making record profits. Last week, the City Council approved Bing's plan for furloughs and more attacks on the wages and benefits of city workers.

The WSWS spoke to firefighters at the station where Engine 33 is housed. The firefighters spoke to our reporters anonymously.

"We only responded with Engine 33, our smaller truck. The other, Ladder 13, has been closed since July 14. We're all putting in for a transfer because we can't do our job from this station.

"We keep being told that we are browned out. Ladder 13 is just closed. Even so, the guys here pull double duty because we still have to check the rig every day to make sure it can be used in case it is needed."

"Because of this, other companies have covered 109 fire hours for us. The average fire takes 30 to 45 minutes to fight. So that's about 200 fires in our area others have had to fight for us."

"Morale is real low right now. They've never

reopened a closed company. Never.”

Another firefighter said the budget cuts were having deadly consequences. “There was a fire that Engine 38 responded to last week. There was a person in a wheelchair in the house who couldn’t escape. And there was a closed station just down the street.”

“They want to close down even more companies. Some of the guys took pay cuts recently of \$1,000 a month. Sergeants, lieutenants and captains are going to take a 20 percent pay cut in July—and the excuse they give us is that there is ‘no money’.”

“The union tries to divide deckies [firefighters] and officers. They have different contracts.”

“Our insurance is also not as good as it used to be. We used to refuse raises so that we would get better healthcare. But now that’s being cut. We pay \$100 a month for that. And we refused raises, so where are we now?”

An older firefighter commented, “For the guys with ten to fifteen years left, they don’t have a future. I wouldn’t tell anyone to be a firefighter anymore.

“No one is more upset about the closings than we are,” he continued. “We aren’t firefighters to get rich, but to defend lives. It used to be hard to become a firefighter. When I joined, there were more than 24,000 applicants. I scored a 96 on the test and about 120 people were before me. That’s how good you have to be to be a firefighter.”



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