

Two die in northeast Detroit house fire

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An elderly couple, a Kroger worker and his disabled wife, died in a house fire in northeast Detroit late Monday night. They are the latest victims of fire-related tragedies in the city. Their names have not been released.

The fire occurred in a poor, integrated, working-class neighborhood north of East Village and just south of Grosse Point, the 3900 block of Woodhall Street.

The cause of the fire has not been officially determined. It has been claimed that the fire was started by an unauthorized electrical hookup. However, local authorities have not ruled out arson. An arson investigation is standard procedure when deaths caused by a house fire occur.

Statements by some neighbors seem to indicate that the cause of the blaze was an unauthorized electrical hookup. Neighbor Tyron Hemphill told WXYZ television that, “I know for a fact they didn’t have power.” The house in question also had a tarp acting as part of the roof.

Others have said that the couple possibly had propane tanks inside the house, and that they heard an explosion. Whether the explosion was caused by or was the cause of the fire is currently unknown.

Electric and gas monopoly DTE Energy alleges that large numbers of people, perhaps tens of thousands, have unauthorized hookups. Large number of people are unable to pay the extremely high utility rates charged by DTE and have had their power cut off when they become delinquent in payments, sometimes for sums as little as \$80. In desperation, some resort to tapping into power lines directly.

DTE is known throughout the city for charging exorbitant rates for both electricity and gas and for imposing heavy fees on those who want to have power restored. One family, who lost their home due to a fire caused by an illegal hookup, was charged \$14,000 to have their power turned back on. DTE also

has the support of the Michigan political establishment, which has enacted legislation to crack down on “energy theft.” (See: “Michigan governor signs law witch-hunting workers for ‘energy theft’”) In 2012, DTE cut off utilities—gas and electricity—to nearly 138,000 houses in Detroit alone. Consumers Energy disconnected more than 153,000 houses. Combined with all the utility shutoffs by the various small utility companies, the number of Michigan residents affected by utility shutoffs in 2012 approaches one million, with a large proportion concentrated in the Detroit metropolitan area.

Moreover, programs designed to aid the poor in paying their utility bills are being scaled back, most recently by the sequester cuts that President Obama signed into law March 1. Under these cuts, the already underfunded Low Income Heating Energy Assistance program (LIHEAP) is being cut by \$10 million. Virtually all other utility assistance programs are being cut as well.

Jo Shier, a neighbor of the couple who perished, spoke about their situation. “They were nice. He worked steady at Kroger for most of his life. She tried to work on and off, but she was in bad health. She walked with a cane, hunched over and she wasn’t really able to work. They were around sixty years old.

“It’s questionable whether they were living without utilities. It’s more than likely that it was on and off. DTE charges us a lot.

“I was always just afraid that something like this would happen, and it did. I live next door and you can see where the heat was burning the siding.

“Around here, everyone is just working and paying their bills. These are forgotten neighborhoods. We keep paying bills and taxes and those just keep going up. This is an area where you just have to get up and keep going, and they can’t anymore and that’s the sad thing.”



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