Detroit middle schooler dies after being electrocuted by downed power line

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26 November 2013

The Detroit teen who has been hospitalized since last week after coming in contact with a downed power line has died. Malik Shelton, 14, succumbed to his injuries at 2:30 pm on Saturday at the University of Michigan CS Mott Children's hospital. The cause of death was electrocution.

"He touched a lot of hearts. He was a good kid," said Angelo Shelton, Malik's father.

On the morning of November 18, Shelton reportedly grabbed a damaged power line while walking with friends near his school. Shelton was just starting for home after classes at Burn Elementary-Middle School had been cancelled due to a power outage. The line was hanging low to the ground, and Shelton tried to move through the area, apparently grabbing it in the process. His friends reported that they pulled him off the line after noticing blood streaming from his face.

The power line—operated by utility giant DTE Energy—came down during a storm that swept across Michigan in mid-November leaving 530,000 Michigan residents without power, including 275,000 Detroiters.

Shelton's was an entirely preventable death. He is the latest victim of what can arguably be described as criminal negligence by DTE towards the city's largely poor population. Residents near the school called DTE in the middle of the night and the early morning on November 17-18 about dangerous downed lines and sparks crackling off the electrical equipment. However, as one resident on the day of the electrocution told a WSWS reporting team, local news crews arrived on the scene before any DTE personnel.

Shelton's stepmother, Leonie Shanks, told the *Detroit Free Press*, "They [DTE] should have reacted to it right away. They just reacted too late…we might have maybe had a little bit more time with him if DTE (would) have just sent somebody out there to respond to those calls."

DTE acknowledged it had received the calls from the area but claimed it was overwhelmed by such calls. "I'm not going to get into assessing blame" for the death of the middle-schooler, company spokesman Scott Simons told the *Detroit Free Press*.

Simons told the *Free Press* that before 8 a.m. a DTE crew worker came across the downed wire that would shock Malik while he was on his way to another location. The DTE crew member "taped off the sidewalks on the southwest and southeast corner with caution tape" and then told "several kids to walk around the block to avoid the wires and called in to report the situation." Simons said the incident "occurred after the kids left the school" and after the crew member had left the location, the newspaper reported.

In an effort to protect itself against lawsuits and popular hostility, the utility often engages in such damage control. Tragedies are regularly blamed on the forces of nature if not the victims themselves. In reality, the company has allowed large sections of its infrastructure to deteriorate and has cutback on essential tree-trimming operations, especially in poorer neighborhoods, where the utility giant has already cut off thousands of residents off of electricity for non-payment.

DTE has laid off personnel assigned to tree trimming as part of cost cutting measures, and in 2010, it locked out of 600 tree trimmers employed by its subcontractors, after withdrawing benefits owed to the workers. Across Detroit's poorest neighborhoods, countless power lines are ensnared in tree branches, increasing the number of lines that go down during storms and creating the conditions not only electrocutions but firestorms as sparking wires come in contact with houses and garages.

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One such inferno erupted in 2010, damaging 85 homes. Prior to the fire, DTE ignored repeated calls from Shirley Hargrave and other residents about a sparking transformer near her home. The transformer eventually ignited a garage on Robinwood Street. Shirley's daughter, Mary Hargrave, told the WSWS at the time, "This is all a direct result of the lack of response from DTE," said Mary. "We've been calling every day for the past five days; we called four times on Tuesday."

While such calls go unanswered, DTE always arrives on time when a customer cannot pay the full amount owed. As one of Hargrave's neighbors noted after the fire, “They'll come out here the next day if you can't pay.”

The utility giant regularly shuts off service to families that cannot pay its exorbitant fees. In 2012, DTE cut off utilities to 138,000 Detroit residences, while Consumers Energy cut off more than 150,000.

The multi-billion-dollar utility’s enormous profits continue to flow, while workers, children, and the elderly are left to face the winter cold. Such conditions have led to a series of house fires, which have killed dozens of people, including children, the elderly and disabled, who were forced to use space heaters or other dangerous devices.

The utility monopoly does not want to provide service to poverty-stricken areas. That is why DTE has played a major role in drafting Mayor David Bing’s plans to downsize Detroit by cutting off essential services to whole neighborhoods deemed too poor or under-populated for investment. The company's primary concern in relation to these areas is to prevent people from "stealing" electricity. DTE has deployed aerial infrared cameras and other high-tech security equipment to monitor neighborhoods where they believe people are using electricity without paying the company, yet will not carry out basic maintenance tasks necessary to preserve public safety.

DTE enjoys the closest ties to the political establishment in Detroit and Michigan. It is rewarded with repeated state-approved rate hikes. Under Detroit Mayor David Bing—who sat on DTE's board of directors from 1985 to 2005—the company paid no taxes to the cash-starved city between 2008 and 2010 and instead was handed $17 million in tax rebates, even as it raked in a profit of $2.5 billion.

Emergency manager Kevyn Orr announced in June that operations currently run Detroit's Public Lighting Department (PLD) will be taken over by DTE as part of his sweeping agenda to privatize and sell off city assets. All current PLD customers are to be transferred to DTE, which will assume complete responsibility for electricity provision in Detroit over the next five to seven years.

This is the context in which this young boy lost his life and his family lost a loved one.

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