

Wave of traffic fatalities in Detroit highlights disrepair of infrastructure

Nick Barrickman
2 August 2014

According to the *Detroit News*, there has been a massive uptick in the number of traffic-related fatalities throughout 2014. As of this week, the city of Detroit has seen a record 69 fatal traffic accidents, 20 more than the number counted in the same period last year. Of that total, 41 incidents were hit-and-runs. The increasing number of traffic accidents and fatalities takes place under conditions where the public lighting system is in an advanced state of collapse.

More than half of the city of Detroit's streetlights are currently inoperable, the product of decades of neglect by consecutive city administrations. As of last month, the city had replaced only 10,000 of the planned 65,000 non-functioning streetlights throughout Detroit. The city expects to install the remaining lights by 2016.

Instead of addressing the question of infrastructure, city officials have taken to scapegoating the victims of traffic accidents. "There are a lot of reasons this is happening," said Detroit Police Assistant Chief Steve Dolunt, citing "poor lighting, people walking in the streets instead of using the sidewalks, texting while driving — and sometimes, it's just plain stupidity." Dolunt promised to beef up the department's number of traffic investigators in order to track down hit-and-run drivers.

Other commentators have cited the stripping of copper out of lights' wiring by thieves as the cause of the lighting crisis. This explanation seeks to cover over the advanced state of disrepair into which the city's infrastructure has fallen, the product of decades of funding cuts.

The DPLA currently has only 85 employees manning its circuitry, down from nearly 500 two decades earlier. A report by Fox News found that while other municipalities oversee their city grids with up-to-date computer technology, "The last time the system was

mapped was using a 60s-style board with pins and yarn." The report also found that the city has invested nothing in the upgrading of its infrastructure in 40 years and that after waves of budget cutting, only nine employees are on hand to repair the nearly 1,400 miles of electrical lines which run throughout Detroit.

Last year, Detroit Emergency Manager Kevyn Orr announced his plan to privatize and shrink the city's lighting infrastructure. Under the plan, the Detroit Public Lighting Authority would be phased out and the energy giant DTE would assume control of the city's lighting. The number of lights the city operates would shrink by nearly half—from 88,000 to less than 46,000.

DTE, an energy monopoly notorious for price-gouging its customers and shutting off the electricity of thousands of vulnerable or poor residents unable to pay its extortionate rates, was awarded control of the lighting last year. The deal was arranged through then-mayor David Bing, an ex-DTE official, who collaborated with the state government to install Orr, an unelected financial dictator beholden only to wealthy financial interests.

According to the deal, the DPLA would continue to own the lighting, with DTE being reimbursed with \$210 million in city bonds for maintenance. Meanwhile, the number of neighborhoods receiving street lighting would diminish by 40 percent. Once this is accomplished, DTE would assume full control of the infrastructure. At this point, DTE could begin to raise the cost charged the city for lighting, as prices would transition from wholesale to market rates.

The privatization of the city's lighting is of a piece with the entire bankruptcy process planned by Orr. In recent weeks the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department has announced plans to cut thousands of residents from access to water as it ramps up costs in

preparation for eventual privatization.

The plans to privatize public assets and eliminate thousands of Detroit residents from access to basic utilities are a criminal venture. It is a direct violation of the Detroit City Charter, which, according to sec. 7-905 concerning the sale of assets such as lighting, states:

“1. The city may not sell or in any way dispose of any property needed to continue the operation of any city owned public utility furnishing lighting, unless approved by a majority of city voters voting on the question at a regular or special election.

“2. The City may not grant any public utility franchise for public lighting which is not subject to revocation at the will of the City Council unless the proposition is first approved by three-fifths (3/5) of city voters voting on the question at a regular or special election.

“3. All contracts, franchises, grants, leases or other forms of transfer in violation of this section shall be void and of no effect against the city.”



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact