

Massive fire in Detroit enclave sparks water crisis

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A massive early morning warehouse fire in Highland Park, Michigan, whose smoke could be seen for more than 20 miles away, sparked yet another water crisis, slightly more than 60 miles from Flint.

Highland Park Fire Chief Kevin Coney told local media that the smoldering fire could continue to burn for a week.

Residents were evacuated and schools were closed. Highland Park authorities issued a warning to residents in the city of 10,441 to boil their water until further notice.

Ruth Harlin, executive assistant to Mayor Hubert Yopp issued a statement saying, “There may be some discoloration when those sediments in the pipes come into the homes because the pressure is so low. The mayor just wanted the community to immediately start boiling their water. It’s precautionary at this point.”

Officials from the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department, which supplies water to the enclave of Highland Park, have yet to adequately explain why drawing on the water system to fight a single fire should force an entire municipality’s water supply to become so compromised.

Moreover, the antiquated hydrant system combined with low water pressure tremendously exacerbated the difficulty of fighting the massive fire.

As has become tragically common in Highland Park and surrounding Detroit, firefighters had to scramble to get a fire hydrant that worked. The hydrant closest to the warehouse was inoperable, forcing fire fighters from the Detroit and Highland Park Departments to hook into hydrants a number of blocks away.

Residents complained to the media that anytime a fire occurs, they believe lives are placed at risk as a result of non-working hydrants.

The water system is now under the control of the

newly created regional water board, the Great Lakes Water Authority, which has replaced the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department (DWSD).

The water authority was previously under the control of the city of Detroit, however during the bankruptcy proceedings in 2013-2014 the former Detroit Emergency Manager, Kevyn Orr, sought to fully sell off the water system to a private company but settled on a regional body after this effort failed. Since the bankruptcy was carried out, half of the workers in the water department have been laid off.

So far, the cause of the blaze is unknown. However, firefighters and residents said that small explosions could be heard inside the 350,000 square foot warehouse where numerous propane tanks were being used to heat parts of the facility.

The fire began around 2:30 a.m. on Wednesday. The warehouse, located in the 14300 block of Hamilton Avenue, is the home of five businesses including Reclaim Detroit, which salvages material from abandoned homes and landfills.

Another tenant was Recycling Revolution. The WSWs spoke to employee Paul Harris, who immediately described the warehouse as “dangerous.”

“We recycle parts for Chrysler,” stated Harris. “They recycle anything, everything. We had contracts with a lot of different companies. There was a lot of stuff in there that was flammable.”

Harris said they had to evacuate people from the community because the fire was emitting toxic fumes into the air. “There are a lot of propane tanks in there. It’s dangerous, it’s dangerous even working there. You have to be quite careful. No smoking in the building, none of that kind of stuff.”

Asked about the types of toxins and chemicals that were housed in the building, Harris replied,

“Everything, anything you can imagine. It was very toxic. Very toxic.”

The dangerous fumes were a hazard for both workers in the building and residents, Harris said. “A couple of people had to be evacuated and taken to a hospital. Today people in the neighborhood, especially elderly people, had to be evacuated from their homes and some were taken to the hospital.”

Harris added that the water pressure was substandard and potentially perilous. “In the building, the sprinkler system and all that was shot. None of that worked.” Luckily no one was working at the time of the fire, and there were no injuries. “It would have been bad, it would have been really bad,” continued Harris.

“It was dangerous to work in there anyway. The building had too many violations. The building had no water, it was just not a safe place to work. They had no heat. They were using propane tanks and propane heaters which could very well have been the cause of this fire.

“We always said if it ever went up it wasn’t going out. There are too many flammable things in there.”

Harris reported that all of the neighborhood businesses and grocery stores were shut down due to the lack of water pressure.

Detroit Senior Fire Chief Jack Wiley, who arrived at the scene at 7 a.m., told the WSWS that water pressure was a problem. “Yes, we did have a few problems with water pressure. Most of the hydrants around here have a problem especially when all of the engines are pumping on the same line. This will make the water pressure drop. We made some calls out to the water department this morning after we found the low water pressure, but it has been resolved as of this moment. Also, we cut down on the pumping, so the water pressure has improved.”

The fire chief said the firefighters were concerned about the propane tanks. “We heard that they recycle a lot of stuff here. One of our main worries is the propane tanks that was going off,” adding that they found quite a few in the back of the building.

The water pressure crisis in Highland Park is in many ways similar to Detroit where it is not unusual for firefighters to face difficulties hooking up to fire hydrants and dealing with low water pressure. Both cities are victims of the assault that is being carried out against the working class by both big business parties

and the auto industry.

Highland Park is a city enclave surrounded by Detroit. It was the former headquarters of Chrysler and the site of one of two massive locations where the Ford Model T was produced at the turn of the 20th century.

With the closure of the auto plants in the region and the city, Highland Park, like Detroit, was devastated economically. Presently, nearly 40 percent of its residents live in poverty, and similar to Detroit, the city has been plagued with emergency managers over the city and public schools that have either been closed or privatized.

Last summer, the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department threatened to cut off water to the entire city for a delinquent \$25 million water bill. To appease Detroit’s Emergency Manager, Kevyn Orr, who was taking the city through bankruptcy and maneuvering to privatize the water system, the Highland Park City Council voted to drastically raise water rates on its citizens, increasing the average household quarterly bill from \$171 to \$376, a staggering 119 percent increase.



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