

Five dead in Detroit fire, hundreds of thousands without power after strong winds

Kathleen Martin
9 March 2017

A record 700,000 DTE Energy customers are experiencing power outages in southeastern Michigan, including many in the city of Detroit, due to strong winds on Wednesday. The winds have also downed numerous power lines, resulting in tragic and deadly fires for some of the city's residents.

On Detroit's impoverished east side, at the blocks of Whittier and Greensboro, one fire in a building housing elderly and handicapped residents ended in five deaths. Four others were seriously injured.

"I've never seen anything like it in my life," said Sarah Tobolski, who lives in an apartment unit across the street from the site of the tragedy. "I called 911 back to back and it just rang and rang and rang. The next stoplight you see down the street, that's the fire department," she said, pointing a few blocks down Whittier. "But it took them 17 minutes to get here. I timed it. I don't understand why."

One main reason is that the budget for the fire department has been cut drastically prior to and in the aftermath of the Detroit bankruptcy, the largest municipal bankruptcy in the history of the US. The departments for the cities of Highland Park, Hamtramck and Detroit all now operate together. On days like Wednesday, with extreme weather conditions, units do not have the manpower to respond swiftly to each call.

Residents of the complex jumped out of windows at the back of the building to escape the flames, witnesses told *World Socialist Web Site* reporters.

The mayor's office issued a public statement that urged residents to request assistance from the fire department only in the case of extreme emergencies. "Due to high wind conditions, Communications Operations is experiencing an abnormally high volume of calls for service to 911," the department announced.

"It just stayed burning for hours and hours," Quintin Washington told the WSW. "It was mostly old people, people that couldn't see, things like that. I know there was a blind guy that lived there. The first time the firefighters went in there and came back out, it was at least 12 or 13 people still left up in there.

"I tried to tell them ahead of time. They pushed me back after I was trying to tell them that there were more people left up in there," Washington said. "The police lady grabbed my arm and told me to back up, to 'mind my business,' and I told her to get off me because there were more people left up in there. They heard me telling them. They said, 'We heard you,' but then 20 minutes later they brought the dead people out."

"I saw the whole thing," said Sarah Tobolski. She was one of the first to call emergency services. "I smelled it at first, and when I looked out the window and saw it, I called the fire department. Within five or six minutes, the whole top half of the building was up in flames.

"I've lived here for six years, so I would see the people that lived there all the time, and they were all handicapped.

"After the fire calmed down, they dragged one man out, but you could tell he was dead. It brought tears to my eyes. I'm out here every day, and I would see them all the time, and they're all deaf, or in a wheelchair, they don't have families. I just don't understand how it took so long to get a response [from the fire department]. When the firefighters first showed up you could hear them saying that there was still more people inside.

"The chief was the one who went back in even after they radioed that there weren't any more people inside," said Scott Tobolski, Sarah's brother.

"Last weekend two twin boys were shot at the liquor

store next door,” said Sarah. “This whole area is out of control. The fire didn’t have to go down like that. I don’t understand why. I’ve never seen anything like it in my life.”



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact