

Detroit residents speak about deadly house fire

By David Brown
6 March 2012

A house fire broke out on Detroit's east side Sunday night, claiming the life of an elderly woman and resulting in her husband's hospitalization. The fire started shortly before midnight. The husband, Walter Jones, was able to escape from the house. However, his wife, in her 90s, whose first name has not yet been released, was not able to get out in time and died from smoke inhalation.

The cause of the tragic fire has not been determined, however, a burning cigarette is suspected. WSWS reporters spoke to Joe Williams, a neighbor, to get the details of what happened.

"Walter came and knocked on the bedroom window. My friend and I were in the bedroom watching TV. He said, 'Call 911, my house is on fire, my wife is in there.' So I came to the door in my pajamas and went to see if we could get in there and bring her out. He said he had dragged her to the bathroom. He tried. He was a very active fellow.

"I think the fire department was a little late, because they are just down the street from us. I believe it could have been better. I can't blame the fire department, I blame the mayor with these layoffs and cutbacks. They risk their lives. They got here when they could. There may have been another situation going on. And that's why it took a little longer. With all due respect, they did what they could do as quick as they could do it."

As in many cities across the country, the political establishment in Detroit has responded to the economic crisis by making sharp cuts to city services, including firefighting. The city has been saving money by implementing "brown-outs," in which fire stations alternate the days they are open.

Joe Williams continued: "If I had to put my finger on it, I would blame it on the city administration, Mayor [Dave] Bing, Kwame [Kilpatrick] before that, and

[Dennis] Archer before that. We haven't had a good mayor in a long time.

"These cuts are affecting everyone and it's really messed up. The money the state's getting isn't going to helping people and that's happening everywhere. It's not about color, it's affecting everyone."

Fire station brownouts played a role in a fatal Detroit house fire that killed an elderly brother and sister in January. It is unclear at this point whether firefighters were delayed Sunday night due to the cuts, but the closest fire station is less than a mile from the Jones' home.

Another neighbor, Dennis Greene, also blamed the budget cuts for the loss of life: "Absolutely, more lives would be saved without the budget cuts. Ambulances could get to people quickly. It wouldn't be as dangerous."

Dennis, a custodian, spoke with the WSWS about the deteriorating conditions in Detroit. "They're making it as bad for us as it was before the civil rights movement. The city isn't doing enough. Detroit is a ghost town now. All these politicians, they just give us a pat on the back to get into office, then they break their promises and do the same things all over again."

Greene felt the government was too close to the banks. "They left the little people behind and just bailed out the executives."

Williams had a similar reaction, noting, "We need a recovery in Detroit before Obama can use us as an example for the rest of the nation. Detroit didn't use to be all abandoned and burned out buildings. It's true that they're trying to revive industry on the basis of low wages. When your gas and lighting bills come out to \$7,000 a year, you can't make it on low pay."

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