

“In our neighborhood, the power goes off whenever the wind blows”

Detroit residents speak on weeklong power outages

By Larry Porter
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More than one million Michigan residents have been hit by power outages since a March 8 storm knocked down thousands of power lines and utility poles. The state’s two main utilities—DTE Energy and Consumers Energy—have long neglected the decaying electrical infrastructure in the state while focusing on boosting returns for wealthy investors and top executives.

Detroit residents have a long and bitter experience with DTE Energy, which has conducted mass utility shutoffs against poor residents unable to afford its exorbitant rates. These shutoffs led to a series of fatal house fires. This included a January 5, 2010 fire on Dexter Avenue that killed two disabled brothers, Marvin Allen, 62, and Tyrone Allen, 61, and Lynn Greer, 58. This was followed by a March 2, 2010 house fire on Bangor Street, where three children, Trávision Young, Fantasia Young, and Selena Young, ages 5, 4 and 3, respectively, perished hours after DTE had cut power and gas to the home.

DTE is politically well-connected and various politicians, from Michigan’s Republican governor, Rick Snyder, to Detroit Democrats and African American preachers have all run to the defense of DTE, whose former corporate board member, David Bing, was Detroit’s mayor from 2010 to 2014.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with Detroit residents about the recent power outages and about their experiences with DTE. Artelia Lane, a retired worker, said, “A lot of people in my area lost their power. My mother, daughter, sister-in-law, neighbors, everyone around me lost power. For most of us it was out from Wednesday [March 8] until Saturday and Sunday evening [March 11-12].

“My daughter is especially upset because she works

from home for an airline company. And because it was determined to be an Act of God, they don’t have to pay you.

“Everyone lost food, and because it was cold many people couldn’t stay in their house so they went to neighbors, hotels, or wherever they could go. My daughter stayed at home and used a gas space heater. But that doesn’t heat the entire house, just certain areas.

“I’m staying with friends and we lost power. The entire area was affected. I live in the central section of Detroit and was told that 459 people in this area were affected. If you went up Livernois you could see that the entire strip was affected: all the restaurants—Wendy’s, Popeyes, Church’s Chicken—they were all without power.”

Artelia then explained her experience with DTE. “My house was badly damaged because of a fire that was caused by an exposed line from DTE, which connected to the back of my house from the alley. This happened last August. The wire was frayed and the line started sparkling like a firecracker and exploded like a bomb went off.

“My daughter was a video of the wire and the damage. It’s very dangerous. It could have affected the entire neighborhood.”

Similar fires took place in September 2010 resulting in whole neighborhoods catching on fire. (See: Fires burn throughout Detroit: Residents hold energy giant responsible).

Artelia continued, “I wasn’t at home at the time of the fire, but before I left to go out of town to visit my brother I noticed that the power would go out if I used the microwave, air conditioner or the TV. I called DTE

to complain about it and they walked me through reprogramming my microwave. At the time, I wasn't aware of what was causing the problem. The appliances would go off and we would turn it back on.

"The fire caused extensive damage in my home. Everything has been affected by smoke damage. I believe it was a surge that caused the fire through the TV. The TV blew up. The windows were blown out in the bedroom where the TV was. The fire did damage to the roof. The house is not livable. They estimate there was \$6-\$10,000 in damage but DTE says it is not responsible.

"They came out and replaced the line but that was it. I filed papers against them in January but they haven't responded. The problem is that we don't have anyone, especially politicians like [Democratic Congressman] John Conyers, who will speak up for us.

"In our neighborhood, the power is always going off whenever the wind blows. The problem is the lines are all outdated. And this is not just a Detroit problem. It's a national problem that's happening all over the country.

"I spoke to my cousin, who is an electrician in Detroit and he said that following the massive power blackout in 2003, they only replaced one transformer. He said that nothing was done to change the situation in Detroit and that a similar problem could happen again.

"We are subject to go out at any time. What is needed is a vast replacement of all the lines. They don't want to do that because it costs money."

Gail Gates, the president of the Doris Kendall Block Club, told the WSWs, "The power in our area went out on Thursday, one day after the major outage, which surprised us. We went to bed on Wednesday and woke up to a cold, frigid morning. We asked ourselves, "Why us?"

"My mother is a diabetic. I moved back to Detroit to take care of her, so I took her downtown to stay with other relatives. In order to find out what was taking place we set up a 24-hour text line communication in collaboration with the Oakman Block Club so we could let people know what was happening.

"The outage took place in a fairly large area. There are a lot of seniors on our block, so a lot of people starting picking up their family members so that they were safe. I would say that 60 percent of the people in

this neighborhood are senior citizens in their mid- to upper 80s.

"I'm concerned because it could have been very serious. With a lot of seniors living in the cold, no access to food or electricity, things could have been bad. It's a challenge for the get around as it is, let alone with the cold without electricity.

"What people did for food, I don't know. I know a number of people went to fast-food locations. We have electric meters in my house so we couldn't cook without electricity.

"My neighbor said he went back to his house for clothing and found that it was colder inside his house than it was outside. We are lucky there were no injuries. In fact, it was so cold that for many people they didn't lose any food. Had it been the summer time it would have been a different story.

"One thing I have noticed is that the power shutoffs are starting to happen with more frequency. I moved back in 2013, and since then I have experienced at least four power outages."

The *World Socialist Web Site* also contacted Sylvia Young, the mother who lost her three children in the March 2, 2010 house fire in Detroit. "Feel it's sad and I feel sorry for the people who do not have lights because there was no heat and what about the kids? I'm just glad no lives have been lost due to the power outage and no families have lost homes or kids."

After it was pointed out that two elderly people—75-year-old Lonnie Sibbett and 70-year-old Leona Sibbett—died from carbon monoxide poisoning, likely caused by an emergency generator in their Jackson, Michigan area home, Sylvia said, "I did not know that. My heart goes out to the family. DTE can come cut your lights out instantly but it takes days and weeks to get your electricity and heat back on."

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Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>