

Michigan man, 93, freezes to death after city cuts off electricity

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On January 17, the frozen body of 93-year-old Marvin E. Schur was found by neighbors at his home in Bay City, Michigan, several days after the municipal power company had restricted his access to electricity due to outstanding bills. The death has provoked outrage among residents in this working class city of 36,000, located where the Saginaw River flows into Lake Huron, about 100 miles north of Detroit.

On January 13, the city ordered the installation of a device known as a “limiter” that restricts the amount of electricity a household can use. Between the time the limiter was placed and January 17, a bitter Arctic cold front settled over Michigan, with overnight temperatures in the Bay City area reaching minus 10 degrees below zero (Fahrenheit). It is not clear when Schur died, but an obituary from the local newspaper placed the death on January 15.

Robert Belleman, Bay City’s city manager, said that Schur had accrued over \$1,000 in unpaid electricity bills over the preceding months. No effort was made to visit Schur prior to the suspension.

Neighbors became alarmed when they noticed that Schur’s windows had become covered with ice. When neighbors found Schur’s body, temperatures in his house were below freezing, and water in his sink was frozen. The oven door was propped open, which suggests that Schur made a futile attempt to heat his home using the appliance.

Kanu Virani, a medical examiner who performed the autopsy, said that Schur died of hypothermia, which she described as a “slow, painful death.” “He was wearing a double layer of clothes, trying to stay warm,” Virani said.

Schur had no children and was a widower, but a neighbor named Jim, a retired city worker, told the *World Socialist Web Site* that he was well liked, frequently waving to passersby from his picture window that faces east onto Chilson Street, the working class residential lane where he had lived for years.

Marvin Schur, or “Mutts” as he was known, was a retired worker, having labored as a pattern cutter for years at Baker-Perkins, a Saginaw factory that makes specialized machinery for the food industry. He was born April 30, 1915, and was a life-long resident of the area, serving as a medic with the US Army during WW II.

The “limiter” is a punitive device designed to compel homeowners to pay their bills. It is equipped with a switch-like circuit breaker that completely shuts off the power supply should the household surpass the established voltage level. This is what happened to Schur.

City officials say homeowners can go outside and reset the devices to allow limited electricity to flow again. But they acknowledged that there was no personal contact with Schur to instruct him how to reset the device. Neighbors also noted that Schur was hard of hearing and suffered from some form of dementia.

Nevertheless, if after 10 days a household has still not paid its electricity bills, Bay City cuts off the electric supply completely.

The city’s electric department director, Phil Newston, told the *Bay City Times* that the city currently has 60 to 70 limiters installed across the city, about three times the number in use last year, and that the city sends out about 50 shutoff notices per week. He attributed the increase to the economic crisis.

“It’s been terrible. We’ve seen it for over a year now,” he said. “We actually have almost two full-time people just dedicated to going around and turning people on and off and putting on limiters. It’s just really bad.”

The municipal power company has been steadily raising rates due to the increasing cost of procuring electricity from the major suppliers in Michigan. Last summer, electricity rates were raised by 9 percent. These rate increases present serious challenges to low-income families, families with children, the unemployed and retired workers such as Schur, who live on a fixed income.

On Monday evening, the Bay City Commission met, just as news of the freezing death of Schur had made national news, for a previously scheduled meeting to vote on another electricity rate increase, this one of 3 percent. “But what voters wanted to talk about was how a 93-year-old man froze to death in his home after the city limited his electric use,” the *Bay City Times* reported. The new increase was nonetheless approved, by a vote of five to three.

“We’ve gotten very creative in the ways we purchase power, but it’s a very complicated market and it’s an expensive market,” Mayor Charles Brunner said. “We have to pass the costs on.”

The costs are passed on to a population that can ill afford them. Like much of Michigan, the economy of Bay City is tied to the auto industry. At its peak General Motors’ Bay City Powertrain employed 4,500 people. As late as 2006 it had 1,000 workers. It now employs 300-400 workers. GM’s nearby Saginaw Metal Castings plant had 1,700 hourly workers as recently as 2004. It employs around 800 workers today.

Local residents expressed outrage over the death. Michelle, a local worker who lives several blocks north of Schur’s residence on Chilson Street, said that everyone she knew was angry over the death. She became tearful as she described residents’ reaction. “Everyone is outraged. Everyone is calling each other. I thought there was some sort of law against power shutoffs in the winter,” she said. “I guess I was wrong. It makes me think of my 87-year-old grandmother, and what would happen to her.”

“Our heating bill is outrageous. I have small children, and we spend between \$400 and \$500 to heat our home.”

The town has declined, she said. “My Dad worked for Dow Chemical,” which is located in nearby Midland. “We weren’t rich, but weren’t concerned about losing our utilities either. It’s a tight-knit community.”

Those visiting web articles covering the death have left comments, including hundreds of messages on a discussion thread after a *Bay City Times* article. One reader wrote, “I can’t believe people and businesses these days. To let a 93-year-old freeze to death because of a bill. I don’t care how big the bill is. A man is dead because of money...”

A former resident of Bay City wrote, “I am so happy I no longer live there. At my age, I would fear for my life... Remember, folks, you may be old some day—if your city fathers don’t kill you first.”

Dee Mitrowski, of Moriarty, New Mexico wrote, “Bay City’s old motto: ‘A beautiful view ... of life.’ Bay City’s new motto: ‘We value every life ... according to your utility bill.’

Local officials have reacted with callousness. The electricity commissioner and the mayor attempted to pin the

blame on Schur. “I’m certain if there had been some communication we could have solved this without the tragedy that occurred,” Newston said.

“It’s just unfortunate that this gentleman didn’t reach out,” Mayor Charles Brunner said. “We would have been there. We would have pointed him in the right direction or put him on some sort of payment plan.” Brunner is among the Michigan mayors who lobbied Congress for a bailout of the auto industry, and was recently in attendance at the inauguration of President Barack Obama, who in his inaugural address said American people were to blame for the economic crisis because they had failed “to make hard choices.”

For his part, City Manager Robert Belleman has provoked particular outrage among residents by suggesting that Schur’s neighbors bear responsibility for failing to look after the elderly man.

Rick Luszek, a retired utility worker who lives in the neighborhood said, “This is absurd. Shutting somebody’s electricity off in the dead of winter is criminal. These politicians sit at their desks pushing pencils and say we’re going to cut off electricity today. How can the city manager claim that the neighbors had a civic responsibility to look after this man? What about the city’s civic responsibility to look after him? I say damn Belleman for blaming the neighbors for this man’s death.”

Local residents are right to be outraged by the political leadership of their city and state, which is dominated from the local level up by the Democratic Party. Politicians of both parties have overseen the ruination of Michigan. In moments like the freezing death of Schur, they can scarcely conceal their contempt for the working class people they nominally represent.

But the freezing death of Schur is not strictly a local issue. What killed Schur is not just the indifference of local officials, but the form of social organization—capitalism—that places the profit drive of the financial aristocracy above basic human needs.



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