

Funeral held for Marvin Schur

Unanswered questions remain in freezing death of 93-year-old Michigan man

Tom Eley
29 January 2009

On Tuesday, a memorial service was held in Bay City, Michigan, for Marvin Schur, the 93-year-old man who froze to death some time between January 13 and 17 after the municipal electricity company installed a device on his house to limit his electricity because of unpaid energy bills. This "limiter" cut power to his house, and Schur eventually died from hypothermia amidst a bitter cold front that descended on Michigan that week.

A great deal of anger lingers in this industrial town of 36,000 people over the city's inhuman treatment of Schur and its callous response after his death. Neither the city nor the local newspaper, the *Bay City News*, has explained why it took so long for the circumstances of Schur's death to come to light.

Dozens of people attended the service, including family members, friends and neighbors. In addition, several others attended who did not know Schur personally but came to express their solidarity and feelings of sadness and anger over the man's fate. Schur had no children, but left behind a nephew in Saginaw, Michigan.

During the service one family member thanked the neighbors on Schur's block for looking in on him and assisting him over many years. This was a rebuke to city officials who, in dodging responsibility for the man's death, blamed the old man's neighbors for allegedly failing to check on him. During the service the priest referred obliquely to the need to look after the weak and vulnerable, but did not specifically mention the circumstances of Schur's death.

It was clear many people at the service remained angry over Schur's needless and painful death. After the service, the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with several people in attendance.

Gail Fox is a retired registered nurse on disability who lives in Bay City. She did not know Schur, but said, "I came because I had read the newspaper. This is a disgrace on the

city.

"It's really hard times here. I can't afford my heating bills either. I keep my heat at 50 degrees, and I have a 16-year-old. We have to wear coats inside.

"Look at all the money they're spending on the Wall Street bailouts. I'm still hoping that Obama can change things. I was surprised his stimulus package has nothing for people facing foreclosure. I thought he was going to give more to the people because the Democrats generally do. But I guess if you weren't born with that silver spoon in your mouth nobody cares."

Like Gail, Joanne, a retired supermarket worker, did not know Schur. "You would think that after being unable to pay his bills for four months, especially an old man, that someone would have come to talk to him. They could go out and take the time to make trips to put two limiters on the house, but they couldn't check on him."

"I wouldn't put anything on the house that restricted electricity in that cold weather. Even if he knew what was on the box he wouldn't have known what to do about it. He was too old.

"It was so cold they were saying even take in your animals. I had furnace trouble and got mine fixed. I remember when the furnace fan came on and I was so glad. That little man sat there, minute by minute, and nothing came on. He must have been wondering what's going on.

"Some of us were talking and saying what about those big bailouts and this was a man just sitting in his house, reading his paper, who lost his life. It shouldn't have happened to him."

Another neighbor told the *World Socialist Web Site* that Schur, who was a medic in World War Two, "survived Mussolini, he survived Hitler, but he couldn't survive the Bay City electric company."

The death has provoked anger from far and wide. Hundreds of people from all over the US and beyond have posted comments on discussion threads at the end of the

several *Bay City Times* articles about Schur's death.

A secretary at the Bay City manager's office told the *Bay City Times* that as of 10 a.m. Wednesday she "had taken about 50 calls from across the country and had another 35 voicemails from people angry with the city over Schur's death."

"I've taken calls from Canada, Massachusetts, Texas, New York, Alabama—and that's just the ones I can think of off the top of my head," the newspaper reported her as saying. "I don't know how many anybody else has taken, but that's what I've taken. (People are) calling all city departments, not just our office."

Schur's death demonstrates not only the bitter results of the profit system applied to basic human necessities, but the disgraceful conditions elderly workers face in the US. Rebecca Reimann, the director of the Bay County Division on Aging, told the local newspaper that while there are over 20,000 senior citizens in Bay County, "we reach about 2,000 to 3,000 of them," adding "there's no way were going to be able to know about every situation that's out there."

The director of the local state welfare agency in Bay County, Bernell Wiggins, refused to be interviewed for this article. Wiggins would not answer questions about services the state of Michigan provides to the elderly in Bay County. His employees are prevented by a state gag order from communicating with the press.

Unanswered questions

Discrepancies emerging in the official reaction to Schur's death raise a number of questions. According to city officials, the limiter was put on Schur's home on January 13, for an unpaid bill of close to \$1,100. City officials have admitted that they made no effort to inform the elderly man that the device was installed, much less how to reactivate it so that limited electrical power could have been restored.

Then Schur's body was discovered on January 17, but city officials made no public announcement of the tragedy. Representatives of city hall, the police department, the electric company, and the city managers office at first offered no comment, much less an explanation. Clearly they hoped to sweep the matter under the rug.

The local media, the *Bay City Times* and the *Saginaw News*, reported Schur's death, but not its circumstances, in obituaries published on January 25, eight days after his body was discovered. Both accounts refer to Schur "pass[ing] away unexpectedly Sunday, January 15, 2009 at his residence."

After Schur's memorial service, a WSWS reporter spoke to a journalist from the *Bay City Times*. The journalist said that the newspaper became aware of the actual circumstances of Schur's death only after neighbors told the newspaper that they believed Schur had frozen to death. This was confirmed to the newspaper by the coroner hired to perform the autopsy, Kanu Virani.

On Monday, the newspaper ran an article explaining that Schur had frozen to death after the city had cut off its power. The story was quickly picked up by national news media, and has provoked a wave of outrage.

But *The Bay City Times* has not raised the fact that city officials did not publicly acknowledge the nature of Schur's death until at least a week after its occurrence.

City officials have yet to acknowledge responsibility for Schur's death. After initial reactions attempting to pin blame on Schur himself and his neighbors, they have remained largely silent—concerned, no doubt, about the possibility of legal action for criminal negligence or more serious charges.

The callousness of the city, which is dominated by the Democratic Party, is indicative of a social system that regards the market principle—defense of the profit system at the expense of social need—as the holiest of the holies. In fact, even in the wake of Schur's death city officials continue to operate dozens of "limiters" across the city, and have shut off power to scores of households this winter, many of which are doubtless inhabited by the elderly and small children.

Similar suspensions are taking place across the country and regularly result in house fires, asphyxiations, and freezing deaths. These deaths result directly from the policies of the US political and economic elite, which regard heat, water and electricity not as basic human rights, but as lucrative sources of profit for the financial aristocracy.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact