

Retired GM worker speaks on freezing death of 93-year-old Michigan man

“They want profits or you die”

Jerry White
5 February 2009

Last week a funeral was held for Marvin Schur, the 93-year-old resident of Bay City, Michigan whose frozen body was found in his home on January 17. Schur died of hypothermia after the municipally owned utility company cut off electricity because of a \$1,100 unpaid bill.

Even though nighttime temperatures had fallen to below zero in mid-January, the city placed a "limiter" on Schur's electric meter—a device designed to shut off power if a resident uses more than 10 amps of electricity. Nothing was done to instruct the old man, who suffered from dementia, on how to reset the device and restore limited service.

The painful and needless death and the callous response of city officials provoked outrage in the town of 34,000 people, about 100 miles north of Detroit, and triggered a flood of emails and phone calls to city hall from throughout the US and other countries.

In response to the public outcry, city officials—who had first tried to blame the death on Schur himself, and then his neighbors for failing to look after him—announced they were temporarily suspending the use of limiters and would not cut off electricity to any other homes until the winter was over. Limiters had been installed on 60 to 70 houses in the city.

Marvin Schur, or "Mutts" as he was known, was retired, having labored as a pattern cutter for years at the Baker Perkins factory in Saginaw, which makes specialized machinery for the food industry. Born on April 30, 1915, he was a life-long resident of the area. He served as a medic with the US Army during World War II and was wounded in fighting in the Pacific.

After the funeral, Schur's nephew, 66-year-old

William Walworth of Ormond Beach, Florida, told the *Bay City Times* that it was foolish to think that a "horrible" death like his uncle's couldn't happen again. He pointed out that snow and ice storms in the past days have left hundreds of thousands without power. "There's going to be a couple thousand more Marvin Schurs out there right now," Walworth said.

In addition to surviving family members and neighbors, several workers who did not know Schur personally attended his funeral last week out of a deep sense of social solidarity and anger over the sacrifice of a life for profit.

Lyle Roussey, a retired General Motors worker from the Flint area in Michigan, spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* after attending the service. He said, "The minister spoke, but he never mentioned the injustice that the utility company let this man die.

"After I left the funeral home I was interviewed by television and newspaper reporters. When they asked me why I was there, I told them, 'I am here to protest. I can't believe that he froze to death. He could survive World War II but he couldn't survive the Bay City Electric Light & Power.' I said, 'There should be thousands of people here to protest.'

"A reporter from the *Bay City Times* said he tried to interview the police after Schur's body was found, but they covered it up and would not answer his questions. I couldn't believe it. They only found out he died from hypothermia after contacting the medical examiner."

"This is all the more disgusting. I couldn't fathom that. The man dies for capitalist gain and the small-town government covers it up," Roussey said, "It's sickening. What kind of society do we have? I am getting so fed up."

Responding to reports that Shur had money laid on the table to pay the bills, Roussey remarked, "I was incensed. The city never bothered to contact this old man before they cut off his electricity. The more I learned about it the more irate I became. It was inexcusable."

He continued, "Our whole economic situation is breaking down. I see it every day. Capitalism is falling. Who is the victim? I have a daughter that depends on me. She has kids but can't get food stamps. They've jacked her around. We called the senators and representatives but they don't respond."

"What do we do? We have to fight back."

Like many cities and towns throughout Michigan, Bay City and nearby Saginaw have been devastated by ongoing downsizing of the auto industry. Roussey described the conditions autoworkers and their families have confronted.

"After GM's Fleetwood plant in Detroit closed in 1987 I moved over to Buick City in Flint. In 1990, there were 12,000 people working there. By 1996, when I lost my job, it was down to 3,600."

"They eventually tore down Buick City and I remember going by there and seeing nothing but weeds growing in the abandoned parking lots. The next plant I went to was Saginaw Metal Casting, which had 1,300 workers in 1996. By time I retired 10 years later it was down to 400 people. It's unbelievable."

"The United Auto Workers agree to let the company pay new hires \$14 an hour—half of what they used to. Nobody has any more money. This has devastated neighborhoods and small businesses, and families who have given up on their hopes and dreams of affording to pay for college for their kids."

"Grandfathers are still working in plants in order to support their families. When I retired, two others in my department, ages 75 and 73, kept working. They were too old to work but they were supporting their grandkids that had no jobs and no hopes to get any."

Roussey explained his thoughts about the new Obama administration. "I'm retired and I have more time to listen to the news. I haven't heard a thing about bailing out people facing foreclosures. All I hear is bailouts for the banks."

"Even after Obama has taken over I don't hear about the people. Our 'hero' doesn't give me hope. He is not going to deliver. Obama is helping the banks, not the

working class. How is the bailout of Wall Street going to help us? They've got billions of dollars to give to the banks but nothing to help a poor man to pay his bills."

"There were so many stipulations on the loans to auto companies, but none on the gifts given to the financial institutions. The congress we elected, filled with Democrats, demanded wage cuts to the level of nonunion workers and even took away our right to strike."

"They didn't demand anything like that from AIG and the financial institution when they handed them \$700 billion. And they are still not lending. Now they are going to give the banks a trillion more to buy their toxic assets. Posterity will have to pay for the worthless loans for years and years to come."

"With all this money they could pay off all the mortgages and the banks would be rid of the bad loans. But they won't. Our government is controlled by the wealthy and they don't give a damn. They want profits or you die. It was obvious in the situation with Marvin. How much more brazen can they be?"

"It is time we organize massive demonstrations, in the streets, and stop paying our bills. If they want to bring the sheriffs to foreclose our homes, people should say, 'You're not going to move us.' The working class has to fight capitalism. We have to demand jobs and food stamps for our starving kids."

"What can poor people do? There is going to be a revolution because people worldwide need a government for the people, not profit; a government that is going to help people live, not only allow the top few to prosper."



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