

End all utility shutoffs! For a socialist response to the economic crisis

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24 July 2009

As the Socialist Equality Party's candidate for Detroit mayor, I extend my deepest sympathy and condolences to friends and family of the four Detroit family members who died of carbon monoxide poisoning on July 16, after their electricity had been shut off.

The four victims—Vaughn Reed (46), Mar'Keisha Reed (17), DeMarco Owens (12) and DeMonte Owens (7)—suffocated from fumes released by a generator borrowed from a local church. After the family's electricity was cut off for late payment, Vaughn Reed set up the generator to provide power for breathing machines required by his wife, Marquetta Owens, and her son DeMonte, who suffered from asthma.

By all accounts, Reed was an extremely generous man, giving freely to neighbors and friends. Even in his death he was attempting to do what he could to ensure the health of his family.

In the midst of this tragedy, it is critical that attention be given to its underlying causes. As with so many similar incidents, behind the individual circumstances that led to these deaths lie broader trends. The event exemplifies much of what is wrong with Detroit and American society as a whole—the growth of unemployment and inequality, the prevalence of poverty, the wave of home foreclosures, the lack of adequate child and health care for working people, and, of course, the spread of utility shutoffs.

Like many working class families in Detroit and throughout the country, the Reed-Owens family was financially destabilized by unemployment and a series of health disasters which left it unable to pay its bills. Vaughn Reed lost his job with an automotive supplier in January, becoming one of thousands of Detroit residents who have been laid off as a result of the economic crisis.

Reed filed for bankruptcy, and the courts had sent a letter to DTE Energy—the principal provider of gas and electricity in the city—informing it of this fact weeks before the family's electricity was shut off. Energy companies are required to stop utility cutoffs for individuals in bankruptcy. However, the company claims that due to an address error it did not connect Reed to the house in which his family was living. Electricity was turned off on July 15. Reed asked that it be resumed, but the company refused to do so until the next day. By that time, most of the family had died.

These tragic and needless deaths testify to the antisocial priorities of an economic and political system based on private profit and the enrichment of a financial elite. Even the most basic elements of civilization—electricity, clean water, food, housing—are subordinated to the accumulation of personal wealth by a small minority of the population.

No family should have to go without electricity, and no corporation or politician should have the right to deprive people of the necessities of life.

But utility shutoffs are commonplace in Detroit and other Michigan cities that have been economically devastated by the collapse of the auto industry. Shutoffs for DTE customers have risen by 15 percent this year, according to the company. In 2008, 148,000 DTE customers, or 7 percent, had their electricity turned off because they couldn't pay their bills.

The Reed-Owens family is only the latest to be devastated after having its utilities cut. In January, an elderly man was found frozen to death in his home in Bay City, Michigan after his utilities had been turned off. Last year, three children and their great aunt died in a fire in Highland Park caused by a portable space heater, which the family was using because its electricity had been stopped.

Those who control the giant companies that make these decisions do very well for themselves. Anthony F. Earley Jr., DTE chief executive, received \$4.84 million in compensation in 2007 and \$7 million in 2008. From 2003-2007, he received a total of \$18.31 million.

However, this tragedy is not just about utility companies. As a lifetime resident of Detroit and a city worker, I have personally witnessed the catastrophic decline this city has experienced over the past four decades.

Detroit has been ravaged by the long-term decay of American manufacturing. Today, more than a third of our residents live in poverty and more than a quarter are unemployed. These are the official figures. The reality is even worse.

The Democratic Party in the city has presided over this social decay. This corrupt layer of politicians, completely beholden to the most powerful corporate interests, is now pushing for more cuts in social services, attacks on workers' pay, and the shutdown or privatization of public schools.

On a national level, the Obama administration has handed out trillions of dollars to the banks, while forcing through cuts in the jobs and wages of auto workers. Obama is fully behind the attack on the Detroit public schools, seeing it as a model for the country as a whole. For all the talk of "stimulus," nothing has been done to alleviate the economic plight of working class families like the Reed-Owenses.

My campaign is aimed at developing a movement of workers, youth, the unemployed and all those whose living standards and basic rights are under attack to fight back. I call for the unity of all working people—regardless of race or ethnicity—in a common struggle to defend our jobs and livelihoods.

I urge Detroit residents to form factory, workplace and neighborhood committees to organize mass demonstrations and solidarity actions against utility shutoffs, home foreclosures, plant shutdowns and layoffs.

As the Socialist Equality Party's candidate for Detroit mayor, I am calling for:

1. An immediate end to all utility shutoffs. The gas and electricity companies in Detroit and throughout the country should be turned into publicly owned and democratically controlled utilities.

2. An end to all foreclosures and evictions. Decent housing should be guaranteed as a basic right.

3. A multibillion-dollar government public works program to rebuild our city and ensure employment and decent wages for everyone who wishes to work.

I reject the claim that there are no resources to provide for the needs of the population, including decent living conditions and jobs for everyone. When it comes to the banks, money is readily available.

It is not that there are no resources, but these resources are subordinated to the profit demands of a tiny elite, which controls both major parties and the entire political system.

I am fighting for socialism, which is based on the principles of social equality and democratic control of the economy by the producers in the interests of social need, not private profit. I became a socialist because I recognized that none of the problems that workers confront—in Detroit, the United States and throughout the world—can be dealt with outside of a radical change in the structure of society.

This requires a fight for a political party of the working class independent of the Democrats and Republicans. I call on all workers and city residents to read our daily Internet publication, the *World Socialist Web Site* (www.wsws.org), and help build the Socialist Equality Party as the new mass political party of the working class. I encourage workers to study my program, support my campaign for mayor, and join the SEP.



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