

Thousands line up for utility bill assistance in Detroit

Shannon Jones
25 September 2009

In a scene that evoked images of the Great Depression, thousands of Detroit area residents waited in line for hours at the Michigan State Fairgrounds Wednesday hoping to get relief from utility bills. They came in response to an announcement by the regional gas and electric company, DTE Energy, that it was offering help to hard-pressed renters and homeowners.

Billed as a Customer Assistance Day, the utility said it would offer help to households in applying for home heating credits, weatherization, energy efficiency and other forms of assistance, including health screenings.

Word of the event spread quickly by text messaging. Rumors spread that the company was offering as much as \$3,000 in cash assistance. By early afternoon thousands were in line, many had already waited for hours in oppressive sun and humidity.

When customers got to the front of the line, they found little help available. They could listen to talks on how to reduce heating costs and increase energy efficiency, or they could visit booths set up by local non-profit agencies. Only 50 DTE Energy representatives were on hand to meet face to face.

As the day wore on, many in the crowd became hot and frustrated. Some collapsed from the heat and had to be given assistance by paramedics. Detroit police arrived on the scene to keep order. Finally, DTE closed the gates early.

One DTE Energy employee who spoke to the WSWS said the company had only expected 5,000 people. "This is enormous. The latest count is 10,000, and I think that is low. People in Detroit are hurting."

Tens of thousands of Detroit residents face the prospect of a winter without lights or heat. According to a report last month in the *Detroit News*, Michigan's two largest power companies, DTE Energy and Consumers Energy, had cut off a total of 181,000 customers this year. DTE has already shut

off 115,000, on pace to far surpass last year's 142,000 cutoffs.

DTE Energy touts its so-called Shut Off Protection Plan as a sign of its social concern. However, it more resembles an effort to squeeze blood out of a turnip. Utility customers must meet strict requirements to participate. DTE requires a 10 percent down payment and the balance in 12 to 24 months. One missed payment and power can be disconnected. More than one quarter of DTE's low income customers enrolled in the plan defaulted in July.

Those behind in payments are usually the most vulnerable—the elderly and poor. They often accrue large bills during the winter months when shutoffs are prohibited. They then fall behind when they try to catch up during the summer.

The *Detroit News* reported the case of a disabled man who owed \$3,500 in back utility bills. He agreed to pay \$70 per month. However, he missed one payment and DTE demanded the entire amount. He could not pay and DTE shut off his power. As a result, he eventually lost his home. The case is typical.

Just this past July a man and his three children on Detroit's west side died tragically of carbon monoxide poisoning. The fumes came from an electrical generator the family was using after DTE Energy shut off their power.

As more and more Michigan residents lose their jobs and fall behind on their bills, utility companies are responding by gouging customers even further in order to maintain their bottom line. Starting in September DTE subsidiary Michcon began charging customers an additional \$3.48 per month to help offset the cost of unpaid bills.

A WSWS reporting team spoke to some of the thousands of workers, retirees, students and unemployed waiting in line at the fairgrounds. The volume of the response testifies to the depth of the social crisis in Detroit, where the official unemployment rate now stands at close to 29 percent.

Some people who spoke to the WSWS said they had utility bills of \$4,000-\$5,000. One unemployed worker told the WSWS she had stood in line for nearly six hours, only to be

told that there was nothing that could be done to assist her.

Darla Spinner, a former Ford worker, told the WSWS, “The government generates enough funds to be able to afford to help the poor and the elderly. These health care companies are making billions of dollars, but they are greedy. My grandmother is on a fixed income. She was a teacher. You work for 35-40 years and no one even says ‘thank you.’ My grandmother has to pay for everything—vision, dental—it’s ridiculous.”

Asked about Obama she replied, “I am not sure what this administration is really for.” Regarding Obama’s health care proposals she added “Explain it to us in layman’s terms. Show us what it is, instead of speaking to people as though they’re not important.”

Tawana and her mother Martha had been waiting close to two hours in line when they spoke to the WSWS. Tawana said, “You can’t really find work. I have been unemployed since 2005, on and off, nothing really permanent. DTE Energy bills are high, and they are not really trying to work with people.”

Martha added, “They put me on budget plan, but my income is only \$600 a month and they want me to pay \$300. I can’t afford it.

Speaking about the cuts in bus service recently imposed by Detroit Mayor David Bing, Tawana said, “He messed me up. That was my transportation. It affects everything, getting to church, getting to the drug store, all kinds of things. I have a seven-year-old and a two-year-old.”

Tanisha, an unemployed younger worker, said, “I was not surprised that so many people came out because I knew a lot of people out here need help. I was laid off last year from a warehouse company. And it is real competitive out there looking for work. You have to really stick to your basics when your income is down and rob Peter to pay Paul all the time. But you can’t keep paying partial on the bill because the balance just builds up. And it seems like DTE goes up every year.”

Cynthia Hawkins said, “I came because they said they would help you on your bills and help get the home heating credit. I’m on disability. I just got over breast cancer and I still have to pay for all those pills. Even with Medicare Part D prescription coverage I’m paying \$50 a month for medicine I have to take because I can’t tolerate the generic. I worked at Beaumont Hospital until a car accident in 1998 and now I have to survive on Social Security disability. I get nothing from my job. They don’t care about the poor people.

“No, the recession is not over,” she said, responding to

claims from the Obama administration that the economy was turning up. “The plants are all in a recession. My mother retired from Chrysler and now they are cutting her benefits. What is the point of 31 years in the plant if you can’t even get eyeglasses or get your teeth fixed?”

Further testifying to the social tensions building in the city, the same day about 100 city workers, teachers and supporters attended a rally in front of the City County building in downtown Detroit called by American Federation of State County and Municipal Workers Local 207 to protest the layoffs and concessions being demanded by Mayor Bing.

Many of at the rally had been impacted by the recent cuts in bus service. Rene, a laid off worker from the Wayne County road department told the WSWS, “We need busses, because everyone needs transportation. Bing is not doing anything for us; he needs to go somewhere else.”

A city employee told the WSWS, “Dave Bing approved a pay raise for himself, now he wants to knock off bus service. What about those Detroit people who have jobs in the suburbs and are not going to be able to get to work?”

A former registered nurse, now disabled, said, “The economic structure is breaking down under capitalism. I went from making good money to making nothing. As of two years ago I am living with no income. I lost a \$250,000 home in Rosedale Park. My payments went from \$800 to \$1,400 under (mortgage lender) Countrywide. I ended up in a homeless shelter, and I had lived in my home for 13 years.”



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact