

Cut off from heat in freezing temperatures

Three die in Detroit house fire

Lawrence Porter
6 January 2010

Following a week of bitter cold weather, three people living in a home without gas or electrical service died in a tragic house fire in Detroit early Tuesday morning. It is suspected the blaze was caused by a space heater, which was being used to warm the household as temperatures dropped to 4 degrees Fahrenheit, with a wind chill of minus fifteen, over the last few days.

Killed in the fire were Marvin Allen, 62, and his brother, Tyrone Allen, 61, who were both disabled, and Tyrone's girlfriend, Lynn Greer, 58. The sole survivor was Ronald Gross, a family member, who escaped by jumping out of the second floor window.

According to the Detroit Fire Department, there have been four house fires in Detroit since December 31, resulting in eight deaths. There were 44 fire-related deaths last year.

"This is a terrible loss to our family," Charlotte Nash, the sister of Marvin and Tyrone Allen told the WSW. "We're going to have to bury two loved ones of our family. I'm just thankful that Ronald, my son escaped. A third family member would have been an even greater loss."

According to DTE Energy—the conglomerate that operates Detroit Edison electricity and Michigan Consolidated Gas Co.—utilities were turned off to the house on July 15, 2008, due to nonpayment. Marvin Allen, Jr., told the WSW that his father and uncle had been living without gas and electricity for at least two winters.

"You know, DTE can be hard to work with," stated Allen, Jr., "but they should have been able to work something out. They were two elderly men on

disability. They could have done something. "

Family members said the brothers were struggling financially, living off Social Security and disability checks. Nash said her brothers were trying to have their utilities turned back on but were facing difficulties.

"We know that Lynn had met with DTE and received a confirmation number," stated Nash, "but they said they wanted to talk to someone else," explaining that DTE was delaying turning on the utilities.

Almost immediately after the deaths, DTE Energy sought to blame the tragedy on the victims saying the utilities had been cut off because the family was "stealing electricity."

Scott Simon, spokesman for DTE, admitted that Lynn Greer had applied for utility hook up on December 11, 2009, and that she was told she needed \$181.00 to turn on the utilities. According to Simon, the charge to reconnect service was due to a previous investigation by the energy company in May 2009 that found that the house had been illegally accessing electricity.

Family members and neighbors said the company had dug up the gas hook-up in the yard, delaying any reconnection of gas service.

Company officials complain that illegal hook-ups are a widespread problem, resulting in a loss of \$100 million in profits in 2009.

Although the utility company claims it does not cut off residents during the winter, it makes a regular practice of cutting off service months before. This has resulted in a series of tragic fire-related deaths over the last several years, including the deaths of seven children in a 1993 fire on Mack Avenue on the city's east side.

A spokesman for DTE said the company has shut off

utilities to 221,000 households in Michigan in 2009, up from 142,000 in 2008. Over 400,000 people out of the 2.7 million customers it serves in southeast Michigan are currently behind on their payments.

The neighborhood on the city's near west side was once home to many auto workers and lined with well-kept one- and two-family houses. Like so many around the city—where the real unemployment rate is 50 percent—the neighborhood is scarred by abandoned and burnt out homes. Residents told the WSWS that many of their neighbors, including single mothers with children, were living without heat and electricity, like the victims of Tuesday's fire.

Several members of the family and friends came by the house to see the damage and express their loss for the older family members. Twin brothers Mario and Marco were the grandsons of Marvin Allen. "They were the last older people that were close to us," stated Mario. "Our father died last week. They were the only ones who would really speak to us."

Antonio Lewis, 18, Marvin Allen's youngest son found it hard to believe he had lost his father. "He was just a really good guy."

Nash said she knew that they had a few heaters in the house to keep themselves warm, "but I just did not have the money to give them to put their utilities back on."

"You know," she continued, "DTE is really something else. I had the experience of being charged with a bill that was over \$500. They said I had to pay at least \$210. I paid it and later paid the rest of it off. Do you know that they insisted I had to pay the \$210 again even though I paid off the bill."

"And you know, DTE had that event at State Fair last summer where 10,000 people showed up that was supposed to help people. My friend went there, filled out the paper work and they said they would help her. Nothing happened."

"Marvin also went down to the state fairgrounds last summer to get help. Again, nothing happened."

"It's sad. They claim the THAW program will help people. But you know it has already run out of money. They promised that they will help people but they don't."

Nash concluded, "People don't have heat for no other

reason but that they can't afford it."



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact