Three children perish in Detroit house fire

A WSWS reporting team
4 March 2010

Three children died in a house fire on Detroit's west side on Tuesday evening, while two more remain hospitalized. Another two children escaped the blaze without physical injury.

Only a few hours before the fire started, DTE Energy cut off gas and electricity to the home. While the Fire Department has not yet finished its examination, neighbors believe an electric or gas-fueled space heater which the family was using may have blown up or ignited.

A 30-year-old mother, Sylvia Young, lived in the old wooden house with her seven children. According to the Wayne County Medical Examiner's Office, Trávion, Fantasia, and Selena Young, ages five, four, and three respectively, were killed by smoke inhalation and soot. Children's Hospital in Detroit reports that the two children currently receiving medical attention, Jalen, who is eight years old, and Sylvia, who is three months old, are in good condition.

The death toll could have been much worse had it not been for the actions of three young neighbors who formed a ring outside one of the second-story windows and had three of the children, one of whom was holding the infant Sylvia, jump into their arms.

Jamar Taylor, 18, was one of those who caught the children when they jumped from the burning house.

"I was in my house when I heard all the commotion outside. I heard screaming and hollering and noticed that it was real bad. We tried to get into the front door but it would not open. So we went around the house to the back and kicked in the back door," he explained.

Jamar said they could not get through the flames so they told the terrified children to leap out of the window.

Melvin, who helped in the rescue effort with Jamar, told the WSWS, "I was in my van when I heard an explosion and a bunch of smoke started coming out of the house."

He added that he thought the three who died "ran and hid in the house" because "they were so afraid."

Melvin continued, "They didn't have any gas. The landlord brought them a gas heater."

House fires as the result of utility shutoffs are a regular occurrence in Detroit. In early January, three people—two of whom were wheelchair-bound—died in a home on Dexter Avenue as the result of a blaze caused by a space heater. Not including Tuesday's tragedy, there have already been 10 fire-related deaths in Detroit since the start of the year, a majority of which happened in homes that had no heat or electricity.

As is regularly the case, the media, utility company and city authorities sought to foist the blame on the victim, Sylvia Young. The first reports accused her of virtually abandoning her children because she was at a store at the time. In an interview with WDIV-TV the young mother said a handyman had given her a space heater and that she had been out trying to find more when the fire started. "I didn't know I was leaving my children in danger or I would never have left," she said.

DTE Energy issued a statement that the home was illegally connected to power lines, and that electricity had been turned off in mid-December by the home's previous occupants when they moved out. Earlier in the day on March 2, a DTE Energy employee noticed the jerry-rigged electrical connection and had the access cut off, according to a spokesman.

Kevin, an unemployed worker who lives in the neighborhood, told the WSWS, "A fire like this is nothing new. Every time you look around another house fire is occurring. It's bad that they had no lights and gas. I couldn't live like that. People just can't afford to pay."

While DTE Energy says that it is company policy for a representative to try to speak with a resident before turning off utilities, when asked by the WSWS, the agency could not confirm whether it had talked with anyone living at the Bangor Street home ahead of time.

In the immediate aftermath of Tuesday's tragedy, the company has placed particular emphasis on the fact that the Young family was illegally accessing utilities, as a

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justification for shutting off services to the home.

Scott Simons, a spokesman for DTE Energy, remarked, “Generally, our theft guys will knock on the door before turning off service. We want to turn them into paying customers and leave them with information that tells them how to go about doing that.”

DTE, which maintains “theft-investigation” teams and a “Revenue Protection Department,” has complained that it has lost $100 million due to illegal hook-ups, while acknowledging that incidents have been on the increase as the economy worsens.

DTE Energy had revenues of $9.3 billion in 2009 and profits of $546 million. Its CEO, Anthony F. Early Jr., has made more than $20 million in the last seven years. Last year alone, the utility company cut off service to 221,000 households in southeast Michigan. Presently, 400,000 people are in arrears, meaning that they could lose their service.

Vincent Burton, the next-door neighbor of the Young family, remarked, “I didn’t think they turned off people in the winter but they do. It just shows that they don’t care.”

As Larry, a laid-off worker, told the WSWS, “This is outrageous. Their utilities were shut off in the middle of winter because she couldn’t pay the bill. Then the landlord brought in a gas heater, which it sounds like caught fire.

“I feel for the situation that this young mother must have been in. I was laid off from a plant after four years, and before that I was laid off after 26 years with the Detroit Public Schools. In different circumstances I could have been in the same predicament she was.

“That woman needed help. Instead the media is so quick to criticize. But no one should have to live like that. Social Services should have done something to help her.

“Why did these kids have to die? The media wants to blame the mother. Look, a dog will do everything to stay warm in the cold—what do you think a human being is going to do in the middle of the winter with children?

“Everything is done to blame the victims. But can you imagine what it is like for kids to be living like this? How can you go to school and try to learn when you’re thinking, ‘I got to go home to a cold house’? Or ‘is there any food at home’? The only hot meal they get is the free one at school.

“When DTE shut this woman off all they were concerned about was the money. They didn’t think to ask about the children inside the house. I hope that they don’t come after the mom. But I wouldn’t be surprised to hear on the radio that they are going to try to prosecute her or take away her kids.”

The fire on Bangor Street has produced an outpouring of sympathy from residents in the area.

Corey Tardley and LaKisha Skinner came by the house after hearing about the children’s deaths to leave a memorial for them.

“It’s terrible,” stated Corey. “With kids in the house you would think they would try to find a way to keep their gas and lights on especially in the winter. Most people can’t keep up with their bills. They were living in a house that is old, the furnace is old and needs to be replaced.”

“Utilities are a necessity,” said LaKisha. “How can you live without utilities? It’s just not fair,” she added, crying.

Linda Darby came by the house to place a stuffed animal in remembrance to the children.

“I came by because I am upset with these deaths. I have 3 kids. This could be anyone of us.”

“I know how hard it is,” stated Darby. “I lost my job over a year ago. I feel that given the way the economy is that something should be done to help people. But nothing is being done. I think people have to come together against these things. We try to do the best we can but it’s not enough.”

The *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party are organizing a citizen’s inquiry into utility shutoffs in Detroit. This effort is aimed at unmasking this criminal practice and explaining its relationship to the economic and social crisis in the city. To find out more and to learn about how to participate, click here or contact us. We urge readers, residents, and all those affected by utility shutoffs, to attend the first session of the inquiry on March 20. See below for details.

Saturday, March 20, 1 -5 PM
Wayne State University

General Lectures room 150
5045 Anthony Wayne
Detroit MI, 48202

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

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