

Authorities, media launch witch-hunt against Sylvia Young

Who are the real criminals behind the Detroit house fires?

Tom Eley
8 March 2010

Detroit area media and city and state authorities have launched a witch-hunt against Sylvia Young, the mother of three young children who died in a March 2 house fire on Bangor Street on Detroit's west side.

The basic facts of the case are not in dispute. Energy giant DTE Energy cut off unauthorized gas and electricity hook-ups to the house earlier in the day. Electrical power was soon reactivated, evidently by order of the landlord, who left Young with a faulty and dangerous space heater. As temperatures dropped toward freezing, Young went to purchase new space heaters. While she was gone a fire consumed the house, killing her children Tráivion Young, five, Fantasia Young, four and Selena Young, three. Her 12-year-old son Tywon was able to rescue three siblings, including an infant who he tossed from a window to neighbors below.

Overlooked is another indisputable fact: utility shutoffs inevitably lead to house fires, as desperate households do whatever they can to keep warm. With DTE shutting off households' utilities by the tens of thousands in southeast Michigan—221,000 last year alone—deadly house fires are a common occurrence. In January, three people—two of whom were wheelchair-bound—died in a fire triggered by a space heater after DTE had cut gas heat to their Dexter Avenue house. Last winter, three young children and their aunt died in a house fire in nearby Highland Park. The house was without gas or electricity, which had been cut by DTE.

Fires like the one that killed the three children on Bangor Street result from the subordination of the most basic human needs for water, light and warmth to the profit drive of large corporations. But the media and state authorities have responded to the tragedy by blaming the victims.

In the immediate aftermath of the fire, local media, led by the *Detroit Free Press* and staff writer Amber Hunt, attempted to smear Sylvia Young. In an article headlined “Mom was at Store when Three Children Died in House Fire,” Hunt included the following hearsay statement from

Fire Chief Gary Lauer: “I’m just going by what was said at the scene, that she had gone to the party store.” The clear implication here was that Young was off buying alcohol. Hunt did not attempt to check this second-hand statement by interviewing neighbors or Young herself.

In fact, Young had gone to a discount store to purchase two space heaters after her children complained that they were cold. She left the small children with her 12-year-old son, hardly unusual in the US, and was gone for about 15 minutes. A later television report showed the tearful mother with the two space heaters she had purchased.

Hunt and the *Free Press* are aware that their initial story, with its insinuation that Young had gone to purchase alcohol, has been discredited. But in several articles on the fire since then, they have not retracted it. Instead Hunt has repeated in each article that Young “was not home at the time”—without once mentioning that Young had gone to purchase space heaters.

The media's attack on Young has evidently set the stage for her prosecution, with state officials reportedly considering charges of negligence over her desperate actions to keep her children warm. This could result in Young losing her four surviving children.

Young was doing what any parent would have done, given the situation. Criminal negligence, “recklessly acting without reasonable caution and putting another person at risk of injury or death,” is a far better description of DTE's action in shutting off electricity to a home with seven young children.

Yet while the *Free Press* has criminalized Sylvia Young, it has repeatedly used its “news articles,” penned by Hunt, as a propaganda platform for DTE executives to tout the “many options” available to those who cannot afford the utility giant's high costs.

In one article, the newspaper quotes DTE spokesman Scott Simons as declaring, “We can’t encourage customers enough to contact us if they’re having problems paying their

utility bills, but if we don't know about them, it's very tough." In a different article Hunt quoted another DTE spokesman, John Austerberry, as claiming unauthorized hook-ups are not necessary because DTE "offer[s] protection for customers who are most vulnerable already."

These statements, presented uncritically as fact, are simply untrue. Had the *Free Press* performed basic investigative journalism—attempting to verify assertions—they would have discovered that Young had sought help—pleading with DTE that very day not to cut off her utilities. Young was also one of around 10,000 people who went to an event sponsored by DTE last summer at the State Fair Grounds seeking assistance but receiving none. (See "Thousands line up for utility bill assistance in Detroit")

The so-called "help" available to families is derisory. State and charitable aid is difficult to access and inadequate when it is forthcoming. A WSWs investigative report reveals that the much-touted THAW program is no longer taking applicants and hasn't been for weeks. (See "THAW, United Way: No help for utility shutoffs".) The absurdity of DTE's claims of abundant help—echoed by state and local officials—are exposed by the company's own statistics on utility shutoffs, which number nearly 400,000 in the area over the past two years.

But the *Free Press* and other local media were not interested in revealing the truth about the social crisis in Detroit and exposing who is really responsible. Just the opposite. Their coverage aims to obscure the basic reality and shift blame to the victims.

By all evidence and the testimony of her neighbors, Sylvia Young is a caring mother doing the best she can under difficult circumstances. Like much of the working age population in Detroit she is unemployed, attempting to survive on woefully inadequate public assistance. She told the *World Socialist Web Site* that she had tried to gain assistance for her debt to DTE, but could not.

The media has also maligned Young and, indeed, much of the population of Detroit for "energy theft"—tapping into the electrical grid without making payments to DTE.

Michael Lynch, chief security officer at DTE Energy, said the practice "affects you and it affects me, because we all pay higher utility rates because of these thieves who are stealing electricity and getting it for free."

"These are not individuals that cannot afford to pay their utility bills," Lt. Derek Hassan of the Detroit Police Copper Theft Task Force said. "These are individuals, many of whom have been stealing electricity for years in some cases."

In fact, the vast majority of people in this situation have already lost their utilities, and in some cases have been without them for years. This desperate and dangerous act—in

which several people hooking up wires to utility polls have been electrocuted and killed—arises from mass joblessness and dire poverty, which permeates Detroit. Anyone would prefer safe and affordable access to "legal" electricity, but given the alternative—freezing to death—it is hardly surprising that people take whatever measures are necessary to survive.

The real crime is the sacrifice of the most essential human needs to the personal enrichment of the top executives and stockholders at corporations like DTE.

What kind of society is it that such elemental requirements as water, warmth and light are available to only those who can contribute to the vast personal fortunes of the likes of multi-millionaire Anthony F. Earley, CEO of DTE? This regime of distribution, overseen and enforced by state and local authorities, excuses no one, no matter how vulnerable—not young children, not the elderly, not the disabled. Those who cannot pay tribute to these legal monopolies are counted as worthless, or worse—as criminals deserving of punishment.

The Socialist Equality Party demands an immediate end to all utility shutoffs in Detroit, Michigan, and the US. It further demands the expropriation of the utilities from their wealthy private owners. The utilities must be placed under the democratic control of the working class and made available to all, regardless of ability to pay.

It is first necessary to expose the reality of what capitalist ownership of the utilities means for cities like Detroit. The SEP and the *World Socialist Web Site* encourage residents to attend and share their own stories at the March 20 citizen's inquiry into utility shutoffs.

Saturday, March 20, 1 -5 p.m.

Wayne State University
General Lectures room 150
5045 Anthony Wayne
Detroit MI 48202



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