Elderly woman dies in Detroit house fire

DTE cut gas, electricity in 2006

A WSWS reporting team
11 March 2010

An elderly woman, believed to be in her 80s, died in a house fire on the east side of Detroit on Tuesday evening. While the cause of the fire is still under investigation, a spokesman for DTE Energy stated that the utility company had cut gas and electricity to the house in 2006. It has also been reported that she had no water, although this has yet to be confirmed.

It was the third deadly fire in a Detroit home without utilities since January. Earlier this month, three children perished in a fire on Bangor Street the same day that DTE cut the home's unauthorized hookup to outside power lines. In January, two wheelchair-bound men and a friend died after fire consumed their Dexter Avenue home, which was also without gas and electricity.

The name of the woman who died on Tuesday evening was not officially released, but was reported as Anne Mazenka. Neighbors say she was unmarried and childless, and had lived in the same home on Charles Street since her youth. Though she was reclusive, neighbors helped her with yard work.

"We used to go and help her clean up her yard," neighbor Carolyn Cummings told the *World Socialist Web Site*. "We helped out... so she didn't have to come out because she was so old," another neighbor, Jeff Kubiza, told a local news station.

The fire was reported around 5:00 pm. Before fire fighters arrived, three people attempted to break into the house, but met obstacles behind windows and doors. The local media immediately seized on this as the explanation for what caused the blaze, emphasizing that her home was full of "clutter" and that this hampered rescue efforts.

Among four local news reports on the fire, all reported that the house was cluttered, but only one noted—at the end of its story—that Mazenka lived without utilities. A reporter for the local Fox News station breathlessly led her televised report on the fire in the following manner: "We've learned that the elderly woman who lived there lived a life of hoarding, and that may ultimately have contributed to her death."

One neighbor told the WSWS that the material that rescuers found obstructing the windows may have been placed there by Mazenka to keep out cold air in the absence of gas or electric heat.

When reached by the WSWS, a spokesman for DTE, Scott Simon, acknowledged that the company had cut gas and electric service to the home in 2006. Simon attempted to shift blame to Mazenka, claiming that the company had shut off the utilities because of a fence blocking access to the elderly woman's electricity meter.

"We couldn't get in to read the meter for about a year due to the fencing that she had put up," Simon said. "We were trying to make contact with her that entire time. Eventually, we cut her service. Even after we cut her service, she never tried to make contact with us."

Simon could not say whether Mazenka owed DTE money.

It is not clear how the elderly woman survived without heat and electricity for so many years, and perhaps without water. The Detroit Water and Sewage Department has so far not responded to an inquiry from the WSWS.

Neighbors expressed outrage when they learned the woman had been without heat and electricity since 2006. While the neighborhood is not as impoverished as much of Detroit, most of those the WSWS spoke with had experienced utility shutoffs or know people who have.

© World Socialist Web Site

"There's no reason for turning off power on an old lady," said Jorrell Kennedy, who grew up next to Mazenka. "They know her income level. They know she's living alone. There are no excuses."

"Back in the day, my mother said they were not allowed to shut off utilities for the elderly or people with children," neighbor Carolyn Cummings said. "Lately, they're doing this all the time to everyone, whether you're elderly or you have kids—it doesn't matter. They don't care."

"In 2005, I was without gas for three or four months with five children in the house," she said. "We used a kerosene blower that was dangerous, but we had no choice. We also used candles. My sister-in-law on Justine Street was without electricity for two years."

"My gas was about $600 to $700 a month," she continued. "Then I bought new windows, and my gas is still too high. I've been unemployed since 2008, and I try not worry about what's going to happen when my money runs out. Even now my bill is $400 a month and that's with shutting off the heat at night. I do this every night, then I get up at four or five in the morning before the kids wake up and turn it back on."

"If you ask DTE for a budget plan, they will start you off at $400 a month," she said. "That's no budget plan."

Cummings mentioned the March 5 Bangor Street fire that killed three children on the west side of Detroit. The media and state authorities have seized on the tragedy to victimize the deceased children's mother and so-called "energy theft," by which residents tap into the power grid without authorization from DTE.

"The woman, Ms. Young who lost three children in the fire last week, went for help and was told there was nothing to give her," Cummings said. "They are manipulating those who have little money. Make them wait in line for hours for nothing. We have to stand up and fight against the government prosecuting her when she was trying to do her best."

Another neighbor, Ruth Huckleby, agreed. "Utilities are a necessity," she said. "I have seen people owe $15 and get them cut off. It should be a basic human right. I know quite a few people who get their electricity illegally because they've got kids and they have no choice."

Tiffany Allen, a niece of Carolyn Cummings, used to serve Mazenka at a nearby convenience store. "Who was helping her?," Allen asked. "A Social Security check is not enough to cover utilities when you're by yourself."

Lachana Calloway is a dental assistant and the daughter of neighbor. "It's terrible that she was living without utilities," she said. "DTE shuts you off like you're dirt, like you're nothing. I ran into trouble myself and had to get assistance from FIA [the Family Independence Agency] to pay my bill, which was $1,000. Even after it was paid, they sent me a shutoff notice. DTE claims a budget plan for me would be $402 a month, which I can't afford. So if I get into trouble again before I'm eligible for assistance, it will be terrible. In my household there is myself, my niece who is three and my mother who is disabled and paralyzed."

"This situation is so wrong," Calloway continued. "How can they justify shutting off someone's utilities when the economy is so bad? Look around, people are suffering and DTE is making lots of money. When you ask them for help, they tell you to call these numbers, which are sometimes disconnected. That's all they have to offer—a few phone numbers."

Directly across the street from Mazenka's house is Cleveland Junior High School, which was shut down last year, part of a wave of school closings in Detroit over the past two years. Jorrell Kennedy attended the school.

"They're spending money overseas, billions and billions on the wars, and here they're closing schools and we have people burning up in their homes," Kennedy said.

Attend the Citizens Inquiry on March 20. For more information, or to contact the commission, see here.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site