

“The deaths here at Dexter Avenue should never have happened”

Press conference held by Detroit Citizens Inquiry

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See also, “Video: Citizens' Inquiry chairman and family member speak at press conference”

In the wake of a rash of deadly house fires in Detroit, the Citizens Inquiry into the Dexter Avenue Fire held a press conference on Thursday afternoon demanding an end to utility shutoffs in Detroit and calling for public participation in a fact-finding hearing, which will be held March 20 at Wayne State University in Detroit.

The Dexter Avenue fire took place on January 5, killing brothers Marvin and Tyrone Allen, both of whom were disabled, and Lynn Greer.

Speaking in front of the Allen’s burnt-out house on Dexter Avenue were Citizens Inquiry chairman Lawrence Porter and Charlotte Nash, the sister of Marvin and Tyrone. Standing alongside them were Charlotte’s 20-year-old son, Robert, and Jerry White, a writer for the *World Socialist Web Site* who is aiding the inquiry.

Media attending the press conference included Detroit’s two major daily newspapers, the *Detroit News* and the *Detroit Free Press*; cameramen for local ABC, NBC, and Fox affiliates; and the *World Socialist Web Site*. The press conference was prominently featured on Fox Channel 2 in Detroit.

Porter began by explaining the specific events surrounding the fires. “The immediate cause of the fire was an electric space heater, which the family was using because DTE Energy had shut off utilities in July 2008,” Porter said.

Charlotte Nash said that she knew her brothers had hooked up electricity without authorization. “But what were they supposed to do? My brother had a bad knee, an osteomyelitis infection in the bone that when the cold hits it causes a lot of pain. He had to have heat in the house.”

In his opening statement, Porter noted that there have been many other deaths caused by utility shutoffs. “On March 2, three children, aged 3, 4, and 5 died in a house fire on Bangor Street, on the city’s west side,” he said. “Sylvia Young, the mother of the children, pleaded with DTE not to shut off her utilities only hours before the blaze. Yesterday, a fire claimed the life of an elderly woman on the east side, who was living in a house that was without utilities since 2006. “

Porter noted that much of Detroit’s population has been maligned for “energy theft,” a term used to describe attempts of desperate households to tap into the energy grid without paying DTE. The victims have been blamed.

Porter continued, “The Citizens Inquiry will ask the question: Who is really responsible? It will examine the role of DTE, which last year alone turned off utilities to 221,000 households in southeast Michigan, a 50 percent increase over 2008. DTE Energy is a private company with profits of \$546 million in 2009. Its CEO, Anthony F. Earley Jr., took home \$7 million in pay in 2008 alone.”

Porter said the Citizens Inquiry will also address the role of state and local authorities in utility shutoffs and fires. He noted that that the Michigan Public Service Commission, which oversees and approves DTE’s shut-

off policy, is comprised of appointees of Governor Jennifer Granholm, a Democrat. Government programs aimed at helping people in need are woefully inadequate, Porter said.

The Citizens Inquiry will also address the relationship between house fires, utility cutoffs, and the broader social crisis. “The inquiry will place these fires within the context of the social crisis in Detroit, where over a third of the population, according to official reports, lives in poverty and the real unemployment rate approaches 50 percent,” Porter said.

“The deaths here at Dexter Avenue, and many more like them, should never have happened,” Porter concluded. “No human being should be forced to live without basic necessities such as gas, electricity and water. Yet this situation confronts hundreds of thousands of working families.”

Porter called on all workers in the Detroit area to attend the fact-finding hearing at Wayne State University on March 20 in General Lectures Room 150, from 1 to 5 p.m. “At this hearing, the commissioners of the inquiry will take testimony from residents and experts on social conditions in Detroit,” he said. “It will be an opportunity for workers to have their voices heard and begin the process of fighting back against these intolerable conditions.”

After opening statements, Nash was asked whether she blamed DTE for the deaths of her brothers. “I do in part,” she said. She said that the family had made payments to DTE prior to the fire in order to restore service.

Nash told reporters that Lynn Greer had even been given a confirmation number by DTE, but that gas and electricity were never turned back on. She said that DTE had not given her an explanation for why service was not resumed.

A reporter for a local news station asked why Porter and the Inquiry commission believe that utilities are a basic right. “They are not now a right,” Porter said. “We are saying that they must be a right.”

Porter explained to reporters that the problem of utility shutoffs was national in scope. “This is a major crisis for working people all over the country,” Porter said. “About 4.3 million households had their utilities cut off last year.”

“This is not a race question either. This is a class issue,” he added.

“How many people are living in Detroit without utilities? No one even knows,” Porter said. “Most people have no idea of the depth of the utility crisis, even though they themselves are going through it, nor the forces that are behind these events that have caused such anguish in their families. People are dying. People are dying on a regular basis because they are living without utilities.”

Responding to a question about the role of the Socialist Equality Party in supporting the inquiry, Jerry White said that the purpose of the Citizens’ Inquiry is to represent the interests of working class people. “If you look at DTE, it is an enormously politically influential company. Mr. Earley, the CEO, is a major fund raiser for [Democratic Party Detroit mayor] David Bing. Jennifer Granholm appoints the heads of the Public Services Commission which agrees with these shutoffs.”

“No one speaks for working people,” White said. “That’s why the Socialist Equality Party initiated the Citizen’s Inquiry.”

For more information on the Citizens Inquiry into the Dexter Avenue Fire, click here.



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