

Citizens Inquiry into the Dexter Avenue Fire holds first hearing

A WSWWS reporting team
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At the initial public hearing of the Citizens Inquiry into the Dexter Avenue Fire, held Saturday at Wayne State University in Detroit, Inquiry commissioners heard testimony from residents, experts, and researchers about utility shutoffs and house fires in Detroit, the practices and political influence of energy giant DTE, and the broader social crisis in the city.

The testimony revealed nightmarish conditions in Detroit overseen by a political establishment dominated by corporate interests. A number of residents spoke of the abusive and arbitrary character of DTE's policies, and several spoke of relatives injured or killed as a result of utility shutoffs. Experts and investigators detailed the lack of assistance to those in need of help, the influence wielded by DTE over politics in Michigan, the profits of DTE and its investors, and the origins of the social crisis in the city.

Inquiry Chairman Lawrence Porter said the Inquiry commission would compile the testimony and release a report next month on its findings, which would be used to expand the struggle against utility shut-offs. He added that the Inquiry would deepen its examination of the role of DTE and its political connections, and would defend Sylvia Young, the mother of three children killed in a March 2 house fire, who is being witch-hunted by the press and persecuted by the authorities.

Porter, a member of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and former Chrysler worker, said the further work of the Inquiry would be part of a broad campaign to secure access to utilities as a basic human right.

He began the hearing with a moment of silence for those killed in the recent house fires. "According to the Detroit Fire Department, 44 people died in house fires in Detroit in 2009," Porter said. "Already in 2010, at least 16 people have died in house fires in the city," he continued. "Eleven of them were in homes without utilities."

The four-hour hearing was attended by 75 Metro Detroit residents, students and experts on utility shut-offs and the social crisis in Detroit. Joining Porter on the five-member commission were Helen Halyard, a long-time leader of the Socialist Equality Party, Henrietta, a Detroit school teacher, Jerome White, a reporter for the *World Socialist Web Site*, and D'Artagnan Collier, a city worker and SEP Detroit mayoral candidate in 2009.

It was in response to the January 5 fire on Dexter Avenue that killed two disabled brothers, Marvin Allen, 62, and Tyrone Allen, 61, and Lynn Greer, 58, that the inquiry was formed, Porter said. The Allens had been without utilities since July, 2008.

This was followed on March 2 by a house fire on Bangor Street, where three children, Trávia Young, Fantasia Young, and Selena Young, ages 5, 4 and 3, respectively, perished hours after DTE had cut power and gas to the home. The children's mother, Sylvia Young, has been targeted by

the state authorities, who have launched legal proceedings to remove from her custody her four surviving children. The attack on Sylvia Young, Porter explained, has been launched to obscure the culpability of DTE and city and state officials.

"These were not just individual tragedies," he said. "This is a situation that faces hundreds of thousands of Detroit residents." The practice of utility shutoffs creates deadly conditions as families turn, of necessity, to unsafe means to heat and light their homes, he told the hearing. In 2009, 221,000 southeast Michigan homes were disconnected by DTE.

Following Porter's opening remarks, reports were given by a number of experts and investigators, and testimony was taken from Detroit residents, including family members and friends of those who died in recent house fires, and others who have been personally impacted by DTE's policies or involved in struggles against utility shut-offs and other aspects of the impoverishment of the working class in Detroit.

The discussion was intense and wide-ranging. Workers, young people and retirees in attendance were eager to speak of their experiences and raised many questions to the commissioners and experts about the policies of DTE and the city and state authorities.

Marvin Allen Jr., whose father, Marvin Sr., died in the Dexter Avenue fire, addressed the hearing. He said that the late Lynn Greer, shortly before the fire, had attempted to make a \$150 payment to DTE to resume service. This resulted only in more "red tape," Allen said. DTE actually had the pipes connecting the home to the gas grid dug up.

Allen said his father and uncle survived on Social Security disability payments—woefully inadequate to meet DTE's rate demands for gas and electricity. "DTE doesn't care about people," Allen said. "It is about profit. That is the bottom line."

Also addressing the hearing was Princess Honeycutt, a close friend of Sylvia Young. A mother of nine children, Honeycutt said that DTE had presented her with the choice of paying either for gas or electricity. She chose electricity, and as a result lived for five months without gas.

Referring to the case of Sylvia Young, Honeycutt explained, "The lights and gas were in the name of the landlord.... She took care of her kids very well; she was a good mother."

Andrea Peters and Tom Eley, who have investigated utility shutoffs for the WSWWS, presented reports to the inquiry.

Peters presented facts showing the connection between utility shutoffs and house fires. She countered the claims of DTE and state and local officials, who blame residents who rig unauthorized connections to

electricity and gas grids to keep their families from freezing in the winter for the rash of deadly house fires. “The danger of house fires begins with utility shutoffs,” she said.

Peters denounced the efforts of the authorities and the press to label victims of utility shut-offs as “energy thieves,” and documented the ineffectiveness of existing programs that are supposed to help homeowners avoid the cut-off of their utilities.

She then outlined the complicity of state officials in DTE’s policies, and documented the close political connections between DTE and Michigan’s political establishment, in particular, the Democratic Party. Detroit Mayor David Bing, she noted, served for 20 years on DTE’s corporate board.

Eley pointed out that, in spite of the economic collapse in Michigan and Detroit, DTE has continued to accrue enormous profits due to favorable actions taken by its regulator, the Michigan Public Services Commission (MPSC), Democratic Governor Jennifer Granholm, and the state legislature. He outlined the personal fortunes built up by DTE executives, and listed the major stockholders in the company—a collection of major hedge funds and finance houses.

DTE Chief Executive Anthony Earley took home \$7.4 million in 2008, the last year statistics were available, and had net wealth estimated at \$23 million, Eley said.

Marilyn Mullane of Michigan Legal Services, which provides legal assistance to low-income households, also spoke. She said that the number of households facing tax foreclosure in Detroit had ballooned from 1,700 to 8,420 in one year.

Families can get a reprieve by producing a utility bill, she said, but “we are amazed at how few families” are able to do so. “We have dealt with thousands of families with triple shutoffs—gas, water and lights.” She said bills in arrearage of as much as \$15,000 are not uncommon.

Mullane explained that the reason for the spike in tax foreclosures is a city policy adopted last year to transfer outstanding water bills to homeowners’ taxes, so that, in effect, homeowners could be turned out of their homes for unpaid water bills. Mullane said that a water bill assistance program set up by the city is essentially useless, and most of the \$5 million allocated to it has vanished. In relation to assistance for other utility bills, “there is virtually nothing there” she said.

Mullane said that the MPSC rubber-stamps whatever DTE demands. “Whether there was a Democratic or Republican governor, very little has changed over the years,” she said. Even safeguards in place—such as a mandated 21-day delay in shutoffs for those suffering medical conditions—are routinely flouted by DTE.

Maurice Funchess, a firefighter, gave a moving statement. “I’ve been to many, many house fires where there has been an illegal gas hook-up,” he said. “I’ve seen many children killed or burned, households who have lost everything they own ... families that are in the process of trying to do what they can to survive. Seeing all of this takes a toll on our hearts.”

Responding to questions from commissioners D’Artagnan Collier and Jerome White, Funchess said that the city has drastically cut fire-fighting capacity in recent years. “When I started work 15 years ago, there were 1,500 firefighters,” he said. “Now there are 800, and several companies have been closed down.”

Funchess noted that several firefighters had died in the line of duty over the past few years. “One firefighter is now doing the job of four,” he said. “Is a shutoff notice worth a life? I don’t think so.”

George Stewart, who investigates house fires for local attorneys and is a member of the activist group Save our Sons and Daughters (SOSAD), said that a large share of the fires he has investigated have been caused by utility shutoffs. “The kerosene heaters people are using here after utility shutoffs are made in Japan,” he said. “They are not even legal to sell in Japan.”

Stewart spoke of the devastating human consequences of DTE’s policies. He pointed out that he has family members in Detroit who have been badly hurt and suffered carbon monoxide poisoning in shutoff-related house fires. “I went to my first funeral of a child in 1984, now it is 2010 and we are still going through it,” Stewart said. “How many kids were killed in fires this year?”

As for so-called “energy theft,” Stewart said people have a choice: “Survive or die, legally or illegally. Do whatever you have to do, or freeze.”

A number of workers and residents raised questions from the floor. Several recounted the arbitrary policies of DTE in disconnecting utilities or not allowing households to connect in the first place. These families have been forced to live without utilities through no fault of their own.

Faith, a mother of two young boys, said she had been forced to live without power due to identity theft. Someone using her personal information had signed on as a DTE customer, and DTE expected her to pay the bill.

“My two sons had to do their schoolwork by candle light,” Faith said. “They suffered psychologically for living without heat and light. This is not a color thing. It is a human right.”

Sheradon Martin told of a similar experience. “I can’t get lights and gas turned on because someone has a bill in my name,” he said. “I am only 22, and I’ve been living like this for six months.”

Vernice Bailey and her children have been living without heat and electricity for five months because the house she moved into had an outstanding bill, she said. To turn on her utilities, DTE demanded birth certificates for everyone living in the house, a death certificate for Bailey’s deceased relative, and a deed. She produced all of this, but months later DTE has yet to reconnect her power and gas.

After several more questions and comments from the floor, inquiry commissioner Jerome White gave a report placing the social crisis in Detroit within the context of the city’s historical rise and fall. He focused on the role played by the United Auto Workers (UAW) and other trade unions in stifling resistance to what has been, “a decades-long assault on the working class.” This attack is now culminating, he warned, in a deliberate policy to shut down vast sections of the city, which would benefit DTE by unburdening it from unprofitable coverage areas.

White noted that Detroit once boasted one of the highest living standards for workers in the US. This, he explained, was based on the massive social struggles of auto workers and other sections of the working class between the 1930s and the 1960s.

Because of this, the city was targeted as the focal point in a ruling class counteroffensive. The UAW signed off on the shut-down of factory after factory, he said, and its leading personnel were absorbed into the corporate structure of the industry.

At the same time, identity politics—the promotion of black politicians

such as longtime mayor Coleman Young to positions of power in the city—was promoted to disarm black workers and divide the working class. This process found its finished expression in the election of Barack Obama as president, who has pressed the most far-reaching attack on jobs, education, and health care.

White was interrupted by applause when he said that making utilities a basic right required socialism. Those in attendance also cheered his comments on Coleman Young, Bing, and Obama.

Socialist Equality Party National Secretary Joe Kishore spoke at the conclusion of the meeting and reviewed the reasons why the SEP had initiated the inquiry. He noted that the hearing had revealed an immense social crisis, including an epidemic of utility shutoffs, which, he said, constituted a “human rights disaster.”

The hearing also exposed those who benefited directly from a policy that had such devastating consequences for millions of people. “It is a common misconception,” he said, “that DTE is in the business of providing heat and electricity. No, it is in the business of producing profit.”

Kishore cited the innumerable ties between DTE and the political establishment. Any attempt to change the company’s policies runs into the problem that “the courts and the politicians are controlled by the very same interests that control DTE.”

Remarking on the fact that Bing was a member of the board of directors of DTE for 20 years, he said, “It is not just that the corporations control the government, the corporations *are* the government.” At this point, Kishore was interrupted by loud applause.

To fight against these conditions, the working class required its own organizations and its own political program, Kishore said. The inquiry was part of this struggle. It was aimed at raising the consciousness of the working class and encouraging its independent organization.

A new perspective, he continued, must include the central demand that the utility companies and all major corporations be run democratically in the interests of social need, not private profit. Basic human rights, such as energy and heat, could no longer be subordinated to the interests of a tiny layer of the population.

“This means the fight for socialism,” Kishore concluded, calling on those in attendance to join the SEP and attend the Emergency Conference on the Social Crisis and War being held April 17-18 in Ann Arbor, Michigan. (For information on the conference and to register, [click here.](#))

Commission Chairman Porter adjourned the hearing by noting that much more testimony had been marshaled than could be presented in four hours. The Inquiry will continue to gather evidence prior to releasing its report, he said.

(Further articles, statements and video reports on recent Detroit house fires and the work of the Citizen’s Inquiry can be accessed at socialequality.com/dexterinquiry.)



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