

# The 1993 Mack Avenue fire inquiry

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The Dexter Avenue fire on January 5 that killed three people in Detroit at a home where DTE Energy, the local utility provider, had shut off gas and electric service was an unnecessary tragedy. It was only one of many similar cases in Detroit and nationally of fire deaths triggered by utility shutoffs.

The Socialist Equality Party has called a fact finding inquiry for March 20 at Wayne State University to expose the conditions that led to the Dexter Avenue fire and the rising number of fire related deaths in Detroit.

This inquiry is being held 17 years after another tragedy, the 1993 Mack Avenue fire that resulted in the deaths of seven children on Detroit's east side, brought the issue of utility shutoffs into the public spotlight. At that time the Workers League, forerunner of the Socialist Equality Party, mounted a campaign to oppose the attempt by authorities to victimize the parents and to expose the social roots of this tragedy.

On February 17, 1993 a fire destroyed the home of Shereese Williams and Leroy Lyons, an unemployed couple living on Mack Avenue in an impoverished east side Detroit neighborhood. Killed in the fire were LaWanda Williams, 9; Nikia Williams, 7; Dakwan Williams, 6; LaQuinten Lyons, 4; Venus Lyons, 2; Anthony Lyons, 7 months; and Mark Brayboy, 2. It was at the time one of the deadliest fires in the city's history.

The tragedy was the product of the conditions of extreme poverty under which the family lived. Leroy Lyons had been unemployed for two years and Shereese Williams was on welfare. They supplemented their meager income by collecting scrap metal. Their house was more than 130 years old and in poor condition. The fire spread rapidly and was so intense it took 45 firemen one hour and fifteen minutes to extinguish it.

The deaths of the seven children shocked residents of the area. Hundreds of people from Detroit and the surrounding suburbs stopped by the fire site to place flowers and wreaths. Over 2,000 people attended a funeral for the young fire victims on February 26.

The media and local authorities attempted to divert attention from the appalling conditions under which the family lived by focusing attention on the parents' absence at the time of the fire. When the fire broke out Williams and Lyons were out looking for copper pipe and other materials they could sell at a salvage yard. When the parents returned home to find their house in flames and their children dead, they were arrested by police and subjected to intense questioning for 48 hours. Wayne County prosecutors later indicted the parents on charges of manslaughter, claiming they were guilty of gross negligence.

Noting the lack of any opposition to the vilification of the grieving parents by the trade unions and the official civil rights establishment the Workers League, the forerunner of the Socialist Equality Party, initiated a campaign for an independent investigation into this tragedy.

The Workers League rejected the attempts by the media and the Detroit Democratic administration of Mayor Coleman Young to scapegoat Lyons and Williams for the deaths of their own children. It insisted this terrible event could be properly understood only by placing it in the context of the social and economic crisis wracking Detroit and other major cities.

It soon came to light that the shutoff of water to the house by the city of Detroit precipitated the fire. On the morning of the fire a work crew from

the Detroit Department of Water and Sewerage shut off water service to the home, without notice, for a past due bill of \$225. It was a typical, bitterly cold, February day. Lyons, thinking the pipes were frozen, attempted to thaw them with an improvised torch. It is likely that embers left behind from the attempt to thaw the pipes later ignited the old, tinder dry wood in the floorboards.

Like many homes in Detroit the Lyons residence had metal bars over the windows and doors to guard against burglary. The fire units that responded to the blaze did not have the special tools needed to cut through the security bars, which delayed rescue of the children. At the time of the fire, Detroit ranked near the bottom among big cities for the amount per resident spent on fire protection.

That a utility shutoff played a role in the Mack Avenue fire was not coincidental. During the course of the same winter scores of people died in house fires in Detroit and other poor urban or rural areas where the shutoff of water, gas or electricity played a role.

In 1993, 328,467 people in Detroit lived below the official poverty line. It ranked as the poorest big city in the United States, a ranking that it maintains today. The neighborhood where the fire took place had been devastated by plant closures over the past 15 years, including the shutdown of Chrysler's Dodge Main, Lynch Road Stamping and Mack Stamping plants and many other smaller factories. According to a census report one half the children in the near east side of Detroit lived in households with less than \$10,000 annual income.

## The citizens inquiry is established

The Workers League called for the convening of an independent Citizens Inquiry into the Mack Avenue fire to establish the truth behind the tragedy and turn the tables on the attempts of the authorities to scapegoat the parents. On March 4, Workers League candidate for mayor of Detroit Jerome White issued a statement calling for an investigation into the fire. He declared, "An examination of the facts will establish if anyone is to be tried for manslaughter and criminal negligence, it should be Mayor Coleman Young, (Michigan) Governor Engler and the corporate bosses, not Lyons and Williams. I call for the convening of an independent workers commission to take testimony from those who have had their utilities shut off, fire fighters who face cutbacks, victims of house fires and others who have suffered from layoffs and budget cuts."

The Workers League held a public meeting April 4 at Wayne State University attended by workers, youth and housewives, including relatives of the fire victims. A resolution passed unanimously supporting the establishment of the citizens' inquiry and calling for a picket outside Detroit Records Court to demand the dropping of charges against Williams and Lyons.

The Workers League mounted an intense campaign with its newspaper *The International Workers Bulletin* in working class neighborhoods and workplaces in Detroit and its suburbs opposing the prosecution of

Williams and Lyons and explaining the case for the citizens inquiry. Initially many workers were swayed by the media propaganda and seemed hostile to the struggle to defend the parents. But as the Workers League fought to make the real facts known, workers began to respond.

The *International Workers Bulletin* carried regular exposures of conditions in Detroit relating to utility shutoffs, housing conditions, fire protection and levels of poverty and unemployment. Among other facts the Workers League discovered that 26,000 households had their water shut off each year in Detroit and 19,000 had their gas disconnected. It traced the increase in utility shutoffs to cutbacks in assistance by the state of Michigan. It noted that a good portion of the 85 fire deaths in Detroit in 1992 were the result of the use of dangerous electric or kerosene heaters by families who had had their gas service turned off.

The Workers League called a press conference just prior to the scheduled May 4 preliminary hearing of the case against Lyons and Williams to announce the citizens' inquiry. Local media, including the *Detroit News* and the *Detroit Free Press* attended.

In preparation for the Citizens inquiry the Workers League solicited expert testimony and assembled a panel of commissioners. Chairing the commission was Larry Porter, a former Chrysler auto worker and investigative reporter for *The International Workers Bulletin*. Other commission members included Emmanuel Jones, a bus driver for the city of Detroit; Ralph Edmond, a retired construction worker from Pittsburgh; Jim Lawrence, an auto worker from Dayton, Ohio; David Peters, an auto worker from the Detroit suburbs; and Helen Halyard, assistant national secretary of the Workers League.

Workers League supporters collected more than 10,000 signatures on petitions demanding that the charges against Williams and Lyons be dropped and distributed tens of thousands of copies of a brochure exposing the frame-up in Detroit and surrounding suburbs.

As it built support for the inquiry the Workers League had to answer a smear campaign by the *Detroit News*. The *News*, which was virulently hostile to Lyons and Williams, had refused to report the press conference announcing the formation of the citizens' inquiry. Instead it published a crude defamatory column accusing the Workers League, among a laundry list of slanders, of being in political sympathy with the Shining Path, a Maoist guerrilla group in Peru.

Despite the blackout by the major mass media the campaign for the citizens inquiry went forward. It culminated in a well-attended June 19 hearing by workers, young people and professionals from Detroit and the surrounding suburbs. Over the course of the seven-hour hearing commissioners heard reports from 13 witnesses, who gave detailed testimony on the facts surrounding the fire and the devastating conditions facing working people in the city.

Larry Porter chaired the hearing. In his opening report he explained that the Workers League had initiated the campaign for the inquiry into the Mack Avenue fire because "there was no one else speaking out against the open scapegoating of an unemployed working class family..."

"There has not been an outcry by government officials, academics or sections of the middle class against water and utility shutoffs.

"There was no opposition to this attack by any organization claiming to represent the working class. The trade unions have been completely silent even though the headquarters of the United Auto Workers is less than two miles away from the fire scene."

He continued, "As far as the media and the government are concerned, the real crime this family committed was being poor. A citizens inquiry is necessary because no one else is interested in bringing out the social reasons why this fire took place and attempting to change them."

Venus McDowell, sister of Leroy Lyons, testified first. She described her family's struggles and hardships since moving to Detroit in the 1950s. She also recounted the mistreatment the family encountered at the hands of the media, the police and city authorities in the wake of the February 17

fire.

Monique Sasser, an east side Detroit resident, was a witness to another house fire in January that killed four small children across the street from her home. She testified about the hostile attitude of the media and police toward the family. As in the Mack Avenue fire, police treated the mother of the dead children, who was across the street at the time the fire broke out using her neighbor's telephone, as a criminal. Sasser denounced the attempts of the media to demonize poor, working class families. "We're portrayed as lazy, that we want things handed to us. They say we don't want a better life and choose to live in poverty. People who say that just aren't thinking. They just don't know."

### **Water bonds a source of Wall Street profit**

Patrick Martin, a member of the editorial staff of the *International Workers Bulletin* gave a report on the structure of the utility industry. He explained that Detroit Water Department bonds generated \$20,000,000 in interest for wealthy investors each year. He noted the involvement of Wall Street investment firm Goldman Sachs in water department bond issues, which generated millions in fees annually for the company. As for the electric and gas utilities in Detroit, they had averaged a 19 percent return on equity over the preceding three years.

Jim Dennis, a veteran construction worker testified on the condition of the Lyons house on Mack Avenue and other residences in the area. "To say the housing in this area is substandard would be a gross understatement. There is only one word that can describe it, and that is deplorable. The overwhelming majority of the houses which I inspected are not fit for human habitation."

He described the house where the children died. "The condition of the house was extremely poor. It was typical of houses in the area. They were in an advanced stage of decay."

He reported that most of the homes in the neighborhood were very old, in fact built in a period before construction codes were established. Homes were rarely insulated, leading to tremendous heat loss and high heating costs. Many had older gas and space heaters, so antiquated the gas company would no longer service them.

Delores Rollins, a clerical worker in the department of building and safety in the Detroit suburb of Pontiac described how the agencies that are supposed to be in charge of inspecting and regulating housing are hamstrung by budget cuts.

She described the difficulty that working class families faced in finding decent housing at an affordable price. She said that her office received 100 calls a day from people complaining about substandard housing. "Almost all our calls are from people begging for attention or help."

Four unemployed auto workers addressed the citizens inquiry. They gave accounts of their experience in the auto industry and the devastating impact of the loss of their jobs due to plant shutdowns and the failure of the United Autoworkers to mount any opposition. Gregory McDowell, the husband of Venus McDowell and the uncle of the seven children who died in the Mack Avenue fire, spoke of his experiences after being laid off by Chrysler in the early 1980s. For the next 10 years he went from one job after another, never again securing stable employment. "Had I been able to keep my job at Chrysler, I would have 21 years right now. Once I was laid off I never recovered from the loss in wages, benefits, a car and a home, or a stable income to provide a decent life for my family."

Daniel Bellamy, whose father was a Ford worker, lost his job due to a workplace injury. He was denied unemployment and victimized by Chrysler and received no assistance from the UAW. As a consequence he was forced to take a series of low-paying jobs and collect General

Assistance welfare payments. In 1991 he was one of the 81,000 people cut off General Assistance (GA) by the state of Michigan.

Bellamy told the hearing: "When GA was cut, thousands were put in the street because they lost their only source of income. I've see people sleeping in cars, boarded up buildings and alleys."

The testimony of the workers demonstrated the failure of the trade unions and the perspective of reforming capitalism and putting pressure on the Democratic Party. Their old organizations and the union officials, Democratic Party politicians and civil rights leaders in whom they once placed confidence had abandoned workers in Detroit.

## Findings of the commission

Following the hearing the commission issued its findings. It concluded that the immediate cause of the Mack Avenue fire was the shutoff of water service to the home. Moreover, contributing to the deaths of the children was the poor conditions of the house and the lack of essential equipment by the fire department, especially for removing metal security bars.

The central issue, the commission declared, was the extreme poverty and deprivation faced by millions of working class families rooted in chronic mass unemployment.

It concluded that it was groundless to hold Lyons and Williams criminally responsible for their children's deaths and that the prosecution of the parents was being used by authorities to divert attention from the deepening social crisis in Detroit and throughout the US.

The commission further drew attention to the failure of the Democratic politicians, NAACP or the AFL-CIO to defend the parents, noting that only the independent initiative of the Workers League could bring to light the real facts surrounding the case and make possible a counteroffensive against the witch hunt.

In its recommendations the commission insisted that water, electricity and gas service, being basic necessities for civilized life, should be provided at minimal cost to all households with payments indexed to income. It further called for outlawing the shutoff of essential utilities.

It called for emergency measures to put the unemployed to work and for the upgrading of fire protection and other essential services and for the construction low cost, high quality housing.

The commission insisted that the prime lesson to be drawn from this experience was the necessity for the independent political mobilization of the working class outside the structure of the capitalist parties and bureaucratic trade unions against the capitalist profit system.

Due in large part to the counter campaign conducted by the Workers League in defense of Lyons and Williams, the couple were acquitted of all charges at a trial held in October 1993. Despite the incessant media propaganda, the jury was able to see through the "home alone" argument. In fact, the issues raised by the citizens inquiry--the shutoff of water, cutbacks in fire protection, the impact of poverty--played a major role in the trial. The not guilty verdict was an implicit indictment of the city and its agencies that created the conditions for the disaster by shutting off water to the home.

The impact of the party's campaign was so evident, that the first issue raised by the judge as jury selection began was that potential jurors be asked if they had signed the petition circulated by the Workers League calling for the dropping of charges against Lyons and Williams.

Since the time of the Mack Avenue fire social conditions in Detroit have gotten far worse. As a result of the economic crisis and the collapse of the auto industry unemployment has skyrocketed. Utility shutoffs have reached epidemic proportions. In 2009 DTE Energy alone turned off utilities to 221,000 households in southeast Michigan. The state of

Michigan, which regulates DTE, approves its policies.

By launching an investigation into the fire deaths on Dexter Avenue and the social conditions which underlay them the Socialist Equality Party is helping to develop the political consciousness of the working class to enable it to fight back against the attempts of big business to push the economic crisis onto its backs. The inquiry into the Dexter Avenue fire play an important role in laying the basis for the development of a political movement of the working class against the capitalist profit system, which will guarantee to all the right to safe and affordable housing, a secure job, health care and education.

To order a copy of The Truth Behind the Mack Avenue Fire click here.



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