The Citizens Inquiry into the Dexter Avenue Fire

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The Socialist Equality Party has initiated the Citizens Inquiry into the Dexter Avenue Fire to expose the deadly threat posed by utility shutoffs and to build a movement to stop them.

The campaign for the inquiry was launched after a fire at 8011 Dexter Avenue in Detroit, Michigan took the lives of three people—two elderly and disabled brothers, Marvin Allen (62) and Tyrone Allen (61), and Lynn Greer (58). DTE Energy shut off their utilities, and the fire appears to have been caused by one of multiple space heaters in the home.

This particular tragedy is an expression of a broader crisis. In the weeks since the fire at Dexter Avenue, several more lives have been lost under similar conditions. On March 2, three young children—aged 3, 4, and 5—perished in another fire caused by a space heater, only a few hours after the mother of the children pleaded with DTE not to shut off her heat and electricity.

DTE's own data show that it shut off 221,000 households in 2009, up 50 percent from the previous year. The immense social crisis in Detroit—the product of decades of deindustrialization and the destruction of hundreds of thousands of jobs in the region—has been intensified by the economic slump. The official poverty rate in the city—once one of the wealthiest in the US—is now over 30 percent, and the real unemployment rate approaches 50 percent.

Millions of workers face the same conditions throughout the United States and internationally. The economic crisis is being utilized as an opportunity to intensify the exploitation of the working class, leading to the destruction of millions of jobs and an attack on the most basic necessities. Broad sections of the population are forced to choose between heating their homes, paying for rent or health care, and putting food on the table.

These conditions must be opposed and reversed. The SEP calls for an immediate end to all utility shutoffs and home foreclosures. There must be a massive public works program to provide jobs for all and rebuild the infrastructure of cities like Detroit.

How can such a program be realized? There are several middle-class organizations that campaign on behalf of this or that issue—utility shutoffs or other elements of the social crisis. Yet their opposition is continually compromised by their political relationships with the Democratic Party and the trade unions. Bound up with such ties, these organizations refuse to connect particular elements of the social crisis to the underlying social and political conditions that give rise to them.

In campaigning for the Citizens Inquiry, the SEP begins from an entirely different standpoint. It starts from the premise that the working class can fight for its interests only through its independent initiative, in opposition to the Democratic and Republican parties and the entire corporate-controlled political set-up.

The SEP has immense confidence in the strength of the working class. By exposing the social and political roots of the Dexter Avenue fire and other deadly house fires, the SEP aims to raise the consciousness of the working class and encourage its independent organization.

In an article published Friday on the press conference held by the Citizens Inquiry, the *Detroit News* wrote that the SEP "aims to get state lawmakers to launch an inquiry into how DTE handles shutoffs." This is a misrepresentation. The inquiry does not appeal to government officials in either Lansing or Washington. Rather, it has as one of its aims the exposure of the incestuous relationships between the Democratic Party—which has long controlled the city of Detroit—and

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the corporate elite, including DTE.

The inquiry will also examine and expose the consequences for millions of people of the unceasing drive for profit and personal wealth by a tiny layer of the population. Over the past two years, DTE has accrued profits in the hundreds of millions and has paid out tens of millions to its executives. Meanwhile, state regulators have approved substantial rate increases for DTE customers in Detroit without regard to the suffering of the city.

Every aspect of life—from jobs and wages to public education, from parks and libraries to the most elemental human needs, such as warmth, water and light—is subordinated to the profit dictates of the big corporations and banks. This system is ruthlessly enforced by both parties of big business.

The social crisis, the nation's worst since the Great Depression, has been seized on by the Obama administration to target auto workers and teachers and to slash social programs, while transferring trillions of dollars in social wealth to the very Wall Street speculators who triggered the economic disaster. The claims that Obama would usher in an era of "change" have been shattered.

As Inquiry Chairman Lawrence Porter stated at the press conference, "This is not a race question either. This is a class issue." In an earlier period, the struggles of Detroit workers paved the way for the elevation of living standards more broadly. Now, workers in Detroit are being targeted in a far-reaching offensive against most basic needs of the entire population.

The utilities must be placed under the democratic control of the working class and run for the benefit of society as a whole, rather than for the personal enrichment of the executives and financiers.

Workers and students are entering into struggle. On March 4, hundreds of thousands protested cuts to funding for higher education. Europe has been gripped in recent weeks by a wave of strikes and protests against the bankers' demands for austerity measures to make workers pay the price for the economic crisis.

But a new movement of the working class requires a new perspective. The SEP urges workers internationally to follow and support the Citizens Inquiry, and asks residents of Detroit to attend the first hearing, to be held March 20, from 1 to 5 p.m., at Wayne State University in Detroit, in order to share their own stories, develop a plan to fight back, and spearhead a broader movement.

For more information on the Dexter Inquiry, click here.

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