

The significance of the Dexter Avenue Fire Inquiry

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The hearing of the Citizens Inquiry into the Dexter Avenue Fire in Detroit on Saturday was a significant step forward in the political organization of the working class, not only against utility shutoffs but against the devastating decline in living conditions as a whole throughout the region.

The Inquiry was initiated in response to a January 5 fire on Dexter Avenue in Detroit, which killed two disabled brothers, Marvin and Tyrone Allen, and Lynn Greer. On March 2, a tragic fire on Bangor Street claimed the lives of three children—Trávia Young (5), Fantasia Young (4), and Selena Young (3). In both cases, Detroit utility company DTE Energy had cut off heat and electricity to the homes.

Voices were heard at Saturday's hearing that have been completely blocked out by the media and the political establishment. Workers in Detroit—including firemen and friends and family members of fire victims—readily seized the opportunity to relate the horrific consequences of utility shutoffs on the lives of ordinary people.

Through reports and testimony, the Inquiry established the fact that in the United States, supposedly the wealthiest country in the world, it is commonplace for workers to be shut off from utilities for non-payment of bills. The number of people affected is staggering. In 2009, 221,000 homes were cut off from heat or electricity in southeast Michigan alone. Over 4 million have been impacted by utility shutoffs nationwide.

Reports prepared for the inquiry established a clear and undeniable connection between utility shutoffs and house fires, as families resort to unsafe methods to keep warm in the winter. Dozens of people die every year in the Detroit area. Particularly affected are the most

vulnerable sections of the population—young children, the elderly and the disabled.

The hearing also revealed the economic logic that underlies these conditions. Testimony established that DTE has increased its profits over the past year, despite conditions of economic depression in Detroit. It has done so by shutting off those who cannot pay, while substantially increasing rates for its remaining customers.

Policies that produce disaster and death for workers produce riches for the corporate elite. One report to the inquiry noted that Anthony Earley, CEO of DTE, takes home more than \$7 million a year, including a \$1.5 million “performance bonus” in 2008. Behind him stand even wealthier Wall Street investors with substantial ownership stakes in DTE.

DTE is not in the business of providing heat and electricity, but providing profits to the corporate and financial elite. If its policies result in entirely avoidable deaths, from the standpoint of the company and its investors this is nothing more than a public relations problem. Indeed, Wall Street recently applauded moves by DTE to raise energy rates for consumers because of the positive impact on the company's bottom line.

At the same time, the immense social crisis of Detroit—which has a real unemployment rate of 50 percent—is the outcome of a decades-long policy of deindustrialization, carried out at the behest of the financial aristocracy. A presentation by Jerry White, showing photos of downtown Detroit a half century ago and contrasting them with the devastation of the city today, had a significant impact on those attending the hearing.

The hearing had a clear political character, exposing the innumerable ties between DTE and the Democratic Party in Detroit and Michigan. Political conditions in

Detroit resemble those of a “banana republic.” The government structure is an auxiliary arm of the corporations.

Detroit Mayor David Bing served for 20 years as a member of the board of directors of DTE. All of DTE’s policies are reviewed and approved by a state agency appointed by Democratic Governor Jennifer Granholm. Government officials like Bing and Granholm are little more than corporate flunkies, hired to implement policies that directly benefit this or that business.

Predictably, there was a media blackout of the hearing. Although a reporter for the *Detroit Free Press* attended the hearing, he evidently did not like what he heard. An article published on Monday (“A Solution Sought in Utility Shutoffs” by Cecil Angel) did not mention the Inquiry, instead devoting extensive space to promoting a public relations event being staged by DTE.

The conditions revealed by the inquiry are not unique to Detroit, and they do not apply only to utilities. In innumerable forms, the basic requirements of life for the working class—food, electricity, housing, health care, education—are sacrificed to the money-mad profit drive of a tiny layer of the population.

What could be more fundamental than the demand that utilities not be shut off? And yet, the facts brought forth by the Inquiry hearing made clear that a struggle for this demand requires the mobilization of the strength of the working class in opposition to capitalism.

The initiative for the Citizens Inquiry came from the Socialist Equality Party. In organizing the hearing, the SEP started from the premise that its aim was not to appeal for a change of policy from the political establishment, but to develop the political consciousness and independent strength of the working class.

The hearing is only the beginning of an ongoing fight. The SEP is continuing this campaign, and will encourage and popularize the struggle against utility shutoffs. It will seek to develop similar campaigns throughout the country and internationally. Such struggles, however significant and necessary in themselves, must be developed within the framework of the fight to establish a genuinely independent political, socialist and revolutionary movement of the working class.

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