

State attempts to victimize mother of fire victims

Sylvia Young says she pled with Detroit utility to keep heat on

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The Michigan state government is attempting to victimize the mother of three young children who died in a fire that erupted only hours after the family's utilities were shut off on Tuesday.

The state attorney general's office has reportedly filed a neglect case against Sylvia Young, 30, for not being home at the time of the blaze. Young says she fears the state will attempt to take away the four children who survived.

The move by the state is part of a media-backed campaign to blame Young for the tragedy, covering up for those who are responsible: DTE Energy for cutting off her utilities, and the government for approving the utility company's policy.

Young told the *World Socialist Web Site* that she pled with an employee from DTE not to shut off electricity and gas service to her house on the day of the fire. She said that the DTE employee knew that there was a family with young children living in the home, but said that he had to do his job and shut off the utilities.

A space heater the single mother was forced to use to warm her seven children is believed to have caused the fire, which quickly engulfed the old wooden structure on the 4600 block of Bangor on the city's west side.

The fire was the latest of a series of deadly blazes since December, which have claimed at least 14 victims, the majority of whom had their utilities cut off.

Lost in the March 2 fire were Trávia Young, 5, Fantasia Young, 4 and Selena Young, 3, who died of smoke inhalation and soot. Thanks to the quick and collective action by neighbors the other children made it out alive, including three-month-old Serena, who was tossed from the second floor window. Sylvia's 8-year-old son, Jalen, 11-year-old son, Tywon, and 6-year-old son

JaShawn also escaped.

Serena and Jalen Young were discharged in good health from Children's Hospital in Detroit on Thursday.

Sylvia Young told the WSWs that she asked the DTE representative to wait until her landlord could bring proof she was renting the house and that the landlord was responsible for utilities. But the technician said he couldn't wait. The gas and electric meters were then padlocked, cutting off service to a home with seven children, including a fourth-month-old baby.

Spokesmen for DTE Energy have said they cut off service to the home because it had been "illegally" hooked up and there was no record of a paying account at the address after previous residents moved out in mid-December and cancelled their service.

The utility company's policy is to automatically cut off service when they see an unauthorized hook-up, regardless of the consequences this will cause the occupants. A company spokesman, Len Singer, said, if the company was aware of an unauthorized hook-up, "we're going to take action on it." This, he said, was for safety reasons, downplaying the company's concerns over lost revenue.

Standard procedure was knocking on the door and trying to make contact with the occupant of the home, Singer said, "so a proper account can be opened in their name." He claimed not to know whether any contact was made with Sylvia Young on Tuesday.

Told that it would be apparent to anyone that there were small children in the house, who would be deprived heat in the winter, Singer responded, "I don't know that there was evidence that there were occupants of that house. We had no information about the owner who might have been there or what the make-up of the people might have been. We wouldn't know if there was a family or children," he

claimed because there was no record of payment activity.

In her interview with the WSWs Sylvia Young debunked these claims. “Nobody contacted me from DTE before Tuesday. Then they came to my door and said they had an order to turn off my lights. The guy said he had to do it.”

Far from being unaware of the presence of children, the technician saw them as he was standing at the front door. “He saw my kids. They were running in and out of the front door past him. They were all there. But the guy just kept saying he was just doing his job.”

Sylvia told the WSWs that the lights and gas were in her landlord’s name and were included in \$650 in rent she paid each month. “The DTE guy said if I showed him a lease statement saying how long I had been there that might help. I told him that my landlord was on the way with the lease and he would be there in 15 minutes or maybe half an hour. He said he couldn’t wait.”

She continued, “I had an outstanding bill from before with DTE—that’s why I put the utilities in my landlord’s name. I knew they wouldn’t hook the services back up because of what I owed, and I couldn’t afford to pay it.

“Even if I came up with the lease they were still going to cut it off. I was paying the landlord but DTE was still going to make me pay before putting the service on.”

In an effort to exonerate the utility company of any responsibility, the news media and DTE Energy have said the tragedy was due to the electricity being illegally turned back on by the landlord’s handyman after it had been shut off earlier in the day.

On Wednesday, both daily newspapers reported that DTE investigators found that the locks placed on the electric and gas meters had been cut after service was shut off. According to the *Detroit Free Press*, “The Detroit Fire Department is investigating whether that second illegal hookup led to the deaths of three children.”

The effort to label Detroiters as “energy thieves” is a libel aimed at concealing the fact that it was the socially criminal action of DTE that set into motion the events that led to this tragedy. The media’s portrayal of events also lays the groundwork for victimizing Sylvia Young.

From the very beginning, the media sought to discredit this young mother, suggesting that she had abandoned her children because she was out of the house at the time of the fire. This collapsed when it was revealed that she was out shopping at the local dollar store for space heaters after DTE had shut off the heat. The space heater brought to her landlord’s handyman was faulty and gave off

sparks.

“The media is trying to destroy me,” Sylvia told the WSWs, “and make me look like I am a bad parent. I didn’t know I was leaving my children in danger or I would never have left. All I can do is think about the kids.”

While seeking to criminalize the poor, the media says nothing about the levels of poverty and desperation that are leading Detroiters to take the dangerous step of jerry-rigging hook ups to power lines, an action that has led to many electrocutions. As a result of the sharp hike in unemployment, particularly in the auto industry, one out of ten residents in southeast Michigan had utilities shut off by DTE last year, a 50 percent increase over 2008.

Sylvia told the WSWs, “I am on FIA (Family Independence Agency) assistance. I’m raising seven kids on \$347 every two weeks. Out of that I pay \$650 a month in rent.”

As part of their public relations campaign, DTE and the media often say that the utility company will provide help for those struggling with their bills.

Sylvia pointed to the hypocrisy of such claims. “DTE never contacted me to help. Everything is a money thing with DTE. If you are a dollar off on your payment plan they will cut you off.

“There are no programs to help. Everybody lined up last summer at the State Fair Grounds thinking they were going to get money to help pay their utilities bills. It didn’t work out. It was still going to cost you out-of-pocket money. After waiting for hours and hours in line they shut the thing down before I even got to the front.”

A fund has been set up to help the family, including to help pay the high funeral costs for the children. Donations can be made to the Young Children Memorial Fund at any Comerica Bank.



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