

Mother who lost three children in Detroit fire speaks out

Legal witch hunt against Sylvia Young collapsing

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The effort by the state of Michigan to frame up Sylvia Young, the mother of three small children who perished in a Detroit house fire on March 2, is falling apart as the charges of neglect against the 30-year-old mother have been exposed as nothing but a concoction by the authorities.

On Thursday afternoon, a representative of the Department of Human Services told a referee at the Third Circuit Court that everything Sylvia said at the time of the fire had been proven true, and that the agency had determined she had not been neglectful to her children.

Hours before the fire, Sylvia—a single mother of seven children—had pleaded with a representative of DTE Energy not to discontinue her gas and electric service, explaining that her landlord was in charge of utilities to her home. The representative said he could not wait for the landlord to arrive and padlocked the gas and electric meters on the Bangor Street house.

Later that day the landlord allegedly reconnected the electrical service and brought Sylvia a space heater. However, it was faulty and began to spark. As nighttime approached and temperatures fell below freezing, Sylvia—without a car because it was in the repair shop—was forced to leave the home to buy additional space heaters, leaving her 12-year-old son, Tywon, in charge. Shortly afterwards, she returned with the space heaters in hand to see the house engulfed in flames.

Due to the courageous actions of Tywon, who dropped his four-month-old sister, Serena, out of the window into the arms of neighbors and got his other two siblings, Jayshawn and Jaylen out, four children survived the blaze. Tragically, three of the youngest children—Tráivon, 5, Fantasia, 4, and Selena, 3—died of smoke and soot inhalation.

From the very beginning, Sylvia was treated like a criminal by police and fire interrogators, and the news media spread the slander that she had been at a “party store” at the time of the fire. Within a day of the death of her children, Sylvia was dragged into court, charged with “neglect” and deprived of the

custody of her surviving children. To this day, visits with her children—who are being watched by Sylvia’s mother, Martha Young, are restricted, and she is not permitted to spend nights with them.

Sylvia told the WSWs that she was detained by police the day after the fire and subjected to repeated questioning and intimidation. “They asked me what happened. Where I went. How old my kids are. They wanted to tell me my oldest child was only nine going on ten. I know how old he is—he’s 12 going on 13.

“They kept on saying, ‘You’re not in trouble, just tell the truth.’ I was. They wanted me to lie, to do something stupid so they could charge me. I am a single parent with seven children. I take care of my kids. I gave up my life for my kids. I spent seven days a week with them. As soon as I had my first child I knew that was my job. [The police] tried to ride me and break me.”

The callousness of the authorities towards the most oppressed layers of the working class is well known, but the treatment meted out to this grieving mother was particularly vindictive and cruel. Sylvia was unable to even bury her children until 11 days after their deaths because she was in and out of court fighting against the efforts to take away her surviving children.

There were never any grounds to charge Young with neglect. Instead, the charges were used to malign her and divert attention from the real perpetrators of this tragedy, DTE Energy and the state regulators that approve the company’s shutoff policies.

It has become the modus operandi of the authorities and the media to blame the victims, particularly as the death toll from utility-related fires increases. On Thursday, a fire in a small single residency hotel room killed one man and injured another living without utilities and using space heaters, bringing the total number of victims without utilities who were killed to 10 since the beginning of the year. The media and DTE immediately blamed the “illegal” electrical hookup and

“energy theft” for the tragedy.

During the hearing Thursday, the representative of the Department of Human Services told the referee that the Detroit Police Department and Detroit Fire Department had investigated the charges. “The question of who hooked up the utilities was resolved, it was the landlord. And the mother had gone to get space heaters.” He added, “All the facts bear out what she said. We don’t see the mother as neglectful.” With housing and mental health assistance for the family, he said, the agency believed any remaining questions about providing the children with a safe environment would be resolved.

The court had previously appointed an attorney—known as a guardian ad litem—to “protect” the children against their own mother, and had given her two weeks to gather evidence of neglect. At a hearing Thursday morning the attorney admitted that she never interviewed the children and had barely made an effort to do so.

The referee adjourned the hearing giving the guardian until the afternoon to interview them. When she returned, the attorney said she went to the children’s school but the “principal did not feel comfortable having her speak to them without their mother.”

The effort to turn the children against their mother was so transparent and feeble even Referee Nicholas J. Bobak had to acknowledge that the guardian’s efforts were “minimal,” that “two weeks is enough time” and that there were only “two efforts, one today, one yesterday” to question the children. Nevertheless, he said, “because of the seriousness of the allegations, this court is inclined to continue until tomorrow at 8:30 a.m. and the attorney for the children is instructed to interview the children.”

From the beginning, the legal witch hunt against Sylvia Young has been aimed at breaking her will and silencing her, in order to cover up the responsibility of DTE and city and state authorities. Despite the terrible ordeal she has gone through, the young woman and her family have been courageous and insisted on breaking the web of lies concocted against her.

In addition, there has been widespread support for Sylvia in the working class, growing anger over DTE’s practices and growing support for the Citizens Inquiry into the Dexter Avenue Fire: Utility Shutoffs and the Social Crisis in Detroit. This has made it politically difficult for the authorities to proceed with their prosecution.

At the same time the working class must remain vigilant and be prepared to oppose any future attacks. At the hearing, the representative from the Department of Human Services said that even if charges were dismissed, the court-appointed guardian could seek a new hearing or petition to remove Sylvia’s children at a future date.

After the hearing Thursday, the WSWs spoke with Sylvia’s brother, Jimmy, a 33-year-old worker recently laid off from a local factory. “Sylvia is okay when she is with the kids but it is the same routine every night—she cries herself to sleep without

them.

“The day after the fire she was detained by a very abusive police officer. He took her cell phone so she couldn’t call for help, and I found her left in a room by herself. While they didn’t put her in cuffs, they wouldn’t let her leave.

“She didn’t deserve this. They tried to break her. They put her in a room with children’s toys and tried to put guilt on her. They disrespected my family and even ran my name through their computer.”

Jimmy added, “Sylvia’s car broke down on March 1, the day before the fire, and it was in the repair shop. If her car was working she wouldn’t have left the kids—they would have gone with her. The older kids said, ‘Go on—we’ll watch the small ones.’ They knew that she would never leave them alone. The kids are her life.”

Speaking about DTE’s policy of utility shutoffs, Sylvia said, “This has got to stop. They have their cars riding up and down the streets digging up the gas lines. In winter, the people who shut off service go home to a warm house with lights. The utility guy who came to my house left us in the dark and said, ‘That’s my job.’ How can anybody do that? He looked at my kids and said he had a job to do.

“I went out to get the space heaters so that the kids wouldn’t freeze in the nighttime. The kids were saying that they were getting cold. I went to help my kids. It’s not like I just had a bunch of kids and didn’t take care of them. I love my kids. Now I’ve lost my babies.”

After the fire she said, “The fire investigator asked if I coached my kids to answer the way I wanted them. I didn’t speak to them about the fire because I did not want them to relive it.”

Sylvia’s mother, Martha Young added, “The lawyer for the children didn’t even bother to call me. They had no case against my daughter. Why did they have to go through with this? Why did they punish her?”

The Citizens Inquiry into the Dexter Avenue Fire: Utility Shutoffs and the Social Crisis in Detroit is holding a public fact-finding hearing on Saturday, March 20. For more information, click here.



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