

Vendetta continues against mother who lost three in Detroit fire

Sylvia Young and family members speak out against utility shutoffs

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The legal witch hunt against the young mother who lost three of her children in a March 2 house fire in Detroit—just hours after DTE Energy cut off heat and electrical service to her home—is continuing. Sylvia Young’s next appearance is set for April 9 at the Family Division of the Third Judicial Circuit Court.

A court-appointed guardian *ad litem*, who ostensibly represents the interests of Young’s four surviving children, is pressing ahead with a petition to prevent Sylvia from resuming custody of her children. The next court date is a probable cause hearing, where the guardian must show evidence to continue her petition.

Within hours of the fatal fire, Michigan authorities stripped the grieving mother of her remaining children, claiming she was guilty of neglect for not being in the home at the time of the fire. More than three weeks later, visits to the children—who were placed in the temporary custody of their grandmother—are still restricted, and Sylvia is not allowed to stay with them at night. This is based on the claim that she is a risk to her children.

There are absolutely no grounds for such a specious claim. On the contrary, her actions on the night of the fire demonstrated that she was doing everything possible to protect her children from freezing. She was at a store purchasing space heaters during the short time that she left her children in the care of her 12-year-old son Tywon. She returned, with the space heaters in hand, to see her home engulfed by flames.

Due to the courageous and quick action of Tywon—who dropped his four-month-old sister out of the window into the arms of neighbors, and helped get two brothers to safety—four of the children survived the horrific blaze. However, three of the youngest children—Trávia, 5, Fantasia, 4, and Selena, 3—succumbed to smoke and soot inhalation.

Rather than being treated with compassion and assistance, the distraught mother was immediately subjected to accusations and intimidation. The first news accounts claimed she was at a

“party store” when the fire began. The media and state authorities sought to depict her as irresponsible and ultimately guilty for the deaths of her own children.

This corresponded with the needs of DTE Energy, whose shutoff policies have led to the deaths of at least 10 people in Detroit since the beginning of the year. If Sylvia Young was not responsible for the deaths, then the obvious culprit was DTE. DTE executives are well aware that utility shutoffs will result in death and injury. They proceed anyway in order to protect their profits and the income of their wealthiest investors.

Even before her injured children were out of the hospital, Sylvia was detained, interrogated by police and fire investigators, dragged before a court and subjected to an intrusive examination by the Department of Human Services’ Child Protective Service agency.

While the resources of the state were thrown against her, the young mother was given a revolving door of court-appointed attorneys who knew little or nothing about her case. In the space of five days, she was brought before the court on five separate occasions.

Despite this effort, the Department of Human Services—and the state attorney general’s office behind it—was forced to drop its petition for temporary custody last week. Assistant Attorney General Richard Karoub acknowledged that there was nothing to contradict Sylvia’s account of the events. “The question of who hooked up the utilities was resolved—it was the landlord,” Karoub said. “And the mother had gone out to get space heaters. All the facts bear out what she said. We don’t see the mother as neglectful.”

On March 19, Referee Nicholas Bobak at the Third Circuit Court withdrew the petition filed by DHS and denied the guardian’s request that it be continued. However, this action did not lead to the return of Sylvia’s children. Under Michigan law, the court-appointed guardian was allowed to resubmit the petition in her own name.

In her court filings, the guardian *ad litem*—Mayssa Attia of the Child Advocacy Program—contended that Sylvia “left seven children under the age of 12 at home alone in an unfit

environment.” The deliberate misinformation about Tywon’s age—used to bolster claims of negligence—was belied by the listing of his birth date—November 10, 1997—in the court filing itself. In another vindictive swipe at the young woman whose home was destroyed in the fire, Attia added, “Mother does not have housing and doesn’t know current address.”

Whatever the personal motivations of the guardian *ad litem*, her actions dovetail with the interests of DTE and state authorities that sanction the energy giant’s criminal shutoff policy—both of which want the blame for the March 2 fire to be foisted onto the mother.

The struggle to win back her children could take months and even years. The court-appointed guardian at Wednesday’s hearing filed a request to amend her temporary custody petition, raising the specter that she could seek the permanent removal of Sylvia’s children.

Sylvia’s only “crime” is that she, like more than a third of Detroit’s population, lives in poverty. The fact that at least half of the city’s children lack adequate shelter, clothing, medical care and food—the definition of environment neglect according to state agencies—is not due to the failings of struggling parents.

The social crisis is the outcome of deliberate policies by the corporate and political establishment, which has driven up unemployment and slashed social programs in order to boost profits. In his latest budget proposal, for example, President Obama reduced by a third the funding for the Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP), despite record demand for aid.

The WSWs spoke with Sylvia and other family members this week.

“People need to know about me,” Sylvia said. “The way it is presented in the media is I don’t deserve my kids, that I was only interested in the Family Independent Agency (FIA) taking care of them. FIA didn’t take care of my kids. I did.

“From the beginning, when they first questioned me, they wanted to break me and make it look like I wasn’t fit to take care of my kids.

“My record speaks for itself. Before this DHS investigated me to see if I was a good parent. In the end they congratulated me for doing a good job, being a single parent with seven kids. They gave me tips on raising my kids, and I followed them. I know what my job is. I took the responsibility to raise my kids.

“They are making me out like a criminal because I got my lights and gas cut off by DTE,” Sylvia added. “DTE is swamped with people looking to get their lights back on. But they want you to put down \$400, \$500 or \$600. If you don’t walk in there with a check, you won’t get utilities.”

Sylvia’s sister Shomika, 34, added, “If they gave the children back it will show that Sylvia is a responsible parent, and DTE doesn’t want that. We can’t even grieve together when we are running back and forth from court. Why are they dragging her through the courts when they already did an investigation? She can’t even pick up the pieces when she has to appear in court

even on a Saturday.”

Sylvia’s brother Jimmy, 33, a laid off factory worker and community college student, said, “Last summer we stood at the State Fair grounds for seven hours looking to get help from DTE. The police shut it down as I was approaching the door. We waited all that time—and my sister was pregnant then—and didn’t get any help. They were turning people down if you didn’t have cash money to pay them. They tricked you into thinking you were going to get help when all they wanted was to get you to pay.

“As we got near the front of the line, the police started shouting on the bullhorns for everybody to clear out. People were angry because they spent all that time for nothing. I thought there was going to be a riot. My mom was out there with her walker. There were disabled people and the elderly and they didn’t get help either.”

“How can you pay hundreds or thousands in utility bills with a mortgage, a car note and school to cover? It’s not like wages have gone up, they’ve gone down.”

Jimmy continued, “They say my sister is a bad parent. But how many parents are going to wake up at 7 a.m. and drive clear across town so she didn’t have to take them out of a school they loved?

“I’ve been like a partner with my sister, like her kids’ father. She didn’t know anything about the utilities until the day DTE came to shut them off. They were in the name of the landlord. On the day of the fire I got a call from another sister saying Sylvia needed space heaters because DTE shut off her utilities.

“Then I got a call from a friend saying my sister’s house was on fire. I never thought there were kids in there because my sister would never leave them. Then I heard that there was something wrong with Trávia and he was in the hospital. My sister called back and said he was gone and the other two were also. I almost died, but I got myself together because I knew I had to be there for my sister.”

“In the past there were movements, pickets and the whole community would fight. No one stands up for anything anymore, and they put the blame on the weak. I can’t understand it—this is one of the poorest cities in the country, and the mayor, Bing, is a multimillionaire. There has to be more of a movement. If you’re alone throwing stones, DTE is too big a company to move. But if we all get together and lift a boulder, then we can get some change.”

For more information on the Citizens Inquiry into the Dexter Avenue Fire: Utility Shutoffs and the Social Crisis in Detroit, click here



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