

Blaming the victims of fatal house fires

Detroit News runs to the aid of DTE Energy

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Last week the *Detroit News* published a front-page story with the banner headline, “Electricity theft rising in Detroit.” The article, written by the newspaper’s editorial page editor, Nolan Finley, is a shameless and crude defense of DTE Energy, the local utility monopoly whose ruthless utility shutoff policies have led to a rash of deadly house fires in Detroit.

The article appears as public outrage mounts against DTE. Finley, who is known for his right-wing and pro-business columns, runs to the aid of the company by asserting that the victims of the fires themselves were responsible for the tragedies.

The premise of the article is that DTE is being inundated by an “epidemic of utility thefts” and that concern for safety—not revenue and profit—compels it to disconnect hundreds of illegal hook-ups each day. While acknowledging that “desperation” contributes to the high number of such hookups, Finley says “greed” is at least an equal motivation for “stealing natural gas and electricity.”

Like an embedded reporter with the US military in Iraq or Afghanistan, Finley boasts that he drove around with the head of DTE’s 61-man “revenue protection unit” on the city’s impoverished east side looking for illegal hookups in backyards and alleys. In one case a wire runs from a utility pole into a “tumble-down home that appears to be barely habitable,” he writes, with a wire that “snakes across piles of garbage and brush in a backyard before slipping through a hole in the exterior wall.”

Finley notes—almost in passing—that 70,000 Michigan homes and businesses—most of them in Detroit—have unauthorized hook-ups, and that the company’s special unit dismantles up to 500 such connections every day. Further on he reports the southeast Michigan Red Cross responds to as many as six fires a night—making it the busiest chapter in the nation—and that at least one of those daily fires is linked to an unauthorized connection.

The columnist does not care to explain what these

staggering figures reveal about the state of deprivation and human misery in the city, where the real unemployment rate is at the Depression level of 50 percent. Nor does he suggest the high number is connected to the unaffordable rates the utility company charges and the way it gouges the city’s impoverished residents to boost its bottom line.

Uncovering such facts is not what Finley is setting out to do. The column is in fact nothing more than a company PR job masquerading as journalism. Finley’s scarcely concealed aim is to relieve DTE executives of any responsibility for the deaths that result when power and gas are cut to homes.

Finley explicitly points to the fatal March 2 fire on Bangor Street (although he gets the date wrong) as one that was caused by an “illegal hookup.” Three small children—Trávia Young, 5, Fantasia Young, 4, and Selena Young, 3—perished in the blaze, which occurred just hours after DTE shut off gas and electric service despite the pleas of the children’s mother, Sylvia Young.

In order to conceal the company’s responsibility for these deaths, the news media immediately accused Young of abandoning her children, claiming at first that she had gone to a “party store” when the fire erupted. In fact the young mother was at a local discount store purchasing space heaters to warm her seven children as temperatures fell below freezing. In the brief period she was gone, Sylvia left the children in the care of her 12-year-old son whose quick thinking and courage enabled four of the children to survive.

It is no coincidence that Finley’s column appeared in the *Detroit News* the same day—April 16—that a Third Circuit Court referee was forced to drop negligence charges against Young and ordered her remaining children be returned to her custody. The *Detroit News* did not bother to send a reporter to the court hearing, knowing full well that the complete exoneration of the 31-year-old single mother was a severe setback to DTE. Instead, it served up Finley’s brief for DTE.

Finley's column also comes in response to the growing support for the campaign initiated by the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) against utility shutoffs. The *News* is well aware of the Citizens Inquiry into the Dexter Avenue Fire: Utility Shutoffs and the Social Crisis in Detroit, having sent reporters to the press conference announcing its March 20 hearing. The inquiry released its findings earlier this month, which indicted DTE for the deaths in utility-related fires.

Without mentioning the Citizens Inquiry by name, Finley writes, "For advocates of the poor, the answer is simple: If DTE would stop disconnecting electric and gas service, the need for illegal hook-ups—and the fire deaths—would go away." This undeniable fact is dismissed out of hand by Finley, who turns over much of the rest of his column to spokesmen for DTE. He paraphrases Steven Kurmas, the president of DTE's Detroit Edison division, who suggests that it is "unfair and simplistic" to cast "the issue as an insensitive and profit-motivated corporation exploiting desperate people."

DTE cannot just give away electricity and gas, the writer complains. "Allowing utility bills to go unpaid while continuing service invites more unpaid bills," Kurmas warns in the column. This, of course, is a tacit acknowledgement that the over-riding concern of the company is securing as much profit as possible. No one should get the idea, they insist, that the provision of gas and electricity should be a basic right—not a source of riches for corporate executives and Wall Street investors.

"We can't allow theft to become a cultural norm," Kurmas declares. "It increases the costs for everyone, it's morally wrong and it is extremely dangerous."

In other words, it is morally wrong for low-income families to do whatever is necessary to warm themselves in the winter—but it is not morally wrong for multi-millionaire executives to shut off utilities to hundreds of thousands of households each year, knowing full well their actions will lead to the deaths of children, senior citizens and the disabled! Such a perverse statement stands testament to the depravity of the corporate and financial elite and their mouthpieces in the media.

DTE, Finley claims, is wracked by a "dilemma." Its executives, he admits, are "acutely aware that shutting off service can have deadly consequences." However, he continues, DTE has "an obligation to tear down dangerous homemade hookups."

"We're the bad guys no matter what we do," Kurmas complains piously.

The article also repeats the company's bogus refrain that it does everything to provide assistance to low-income residents and the accusation, in Finley's words, that "too many [people] don't seek help in the first place." In fact, programs like the DTE-sponsored Heat and Warmth Fund (THAW) quickly run out of money each year, while the Obama administration has proposed slashing funding for low-income heating assistance.

Finley then gets down to brass tacks, citing Kurmas' approving comments about Mayor Bing's pledge to tear down some of the tens of thousands of abandoned houses in the city. "The vacant houses are a major contributor to the problem [of illegal hookups]," Finley writes, adding, "Those who would otherwise be homeless find the abandoned structures too tempting to pass up. And since they're squatting without the owner's permission, they aren't likely to call DTE for service."

The energy giant has been an enthusiastic supporter of Bing's plans to shut down whole sections of the city and force residents out by ending public services. This will no doubt save the company the cost of maintaining its infrastructure in low-profit neighborhoods and reduce the number of square miles its revenue protection unit must patrol. Bing, a millionaire businessman himself, spent two decades sitting on the board of directors of DTE.

Like the Democratic mayor, the *Detroit News* speaks for the corporate interests that run the city, not the hundreds of thousands who are the victims of their single-minded drive for profit. The libel penned by Finley is a graphic illustration of the morally depraved character of the corporate elite in Detroit and its bought-and-paid-for spokesmen in the media.



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