Thousands in Detroit face utility shut-offs with end of “winter protection plan”

Lawrence Porter
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As of April 1, more than 60,000 households in the metro-Detroit area who were under a “winter protection” utility shut-off plan sponsored by regional energy giants DTE and Consumers Energy now face large accumulated bills and the danger of being shut off.

Known among utility workers as the “Spring Surge,” the wave of shut-offs that come with spring is regarded with dread in the households of thousands of working class families, as minimal protections for maintaining electricity and heat during Michigan’s long cold winter are lifted.

Under the plan households—mainly headed by low-income elderly residents— must pay a certain minimum amount during the winter months. No debt is forgiven. It is only rolled forward to the spring months, when a plan for repaying the entire backlog must be worked out with DTE. If households are unable to pay the cumulative bills, they will not have utilities for the next winter.

DTE said that in Detroit, 22,000 seniors, those age 62 and over, were enrolled in their Winter Protection Plan. Gas provider Consumers Energy covered an additional 38,417 senior and low-income families in the metro-Detroit area with a similar plan.

In the past, low-income families, not just senior citizens, were included in DTE’s Winter Protection Plan and thereby had protection from shut-offs in the winter. According to Lee Singer, spokesman for DTE, beginning last year, low-income families were placed in the “Shutoff Protection Plan,” a program that lasts the entire year requiring customers to enter into a monthly payment agreement. The monthly payment is determined by the past due amount and projections of future monthly costs.

In Detroit, where many homes are not fuel-efficient, the winter bills tend to be very high, making year-round monthly payments nearly impossible for many working class families. If a household misses two payments, according to DTE, service can be terminated.

David Moore, 50 and awaiting disability payments, said he received a shut-off notice last month after his bill reached $1,800. “This is crazy. I live in a one-room apartment without gas, only electricity,” he told the *World Socialist Web Site*.

“How can a bill get that high?”

“You know that DTE doesn’t care,” David added. “I could see it if I had a big house. But they are charging me $350-$400 a month for this little cubby-hole that I have.”

David has been out of work for nearly two years after being injured at an axle plant that made parts for the Big Three US automakers. “I can’t work and I am trying to get some help in any way I can,” he said.

Tomeisha, 23, a student at Wayne County Community College who lives with her mother and two brothers, said her family was under the Winter Protection Plan and were recently notified that if they did not pay their bill in 10-20 days they faced shut-off.

“This is crazy,” stated Tomeisha. “They told us we have until this week to pay the bill. How are we going to pay a $1,000 utility bill?”

Tomeisha’s mother recently qualified for disability and is the only person with an income in the family. A neighbor was recently shut off for an $800 bill. “People don’t understand. How are we going to pay this?,” Tomeisha asked. “People have food bills and everything else. How are we going to afford this, especially when we are in a recession?”

“They say there is help, but help where? You have to go to the Salvation Army to get help, but that is only

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after you get a shut-off notice," Tomeisha added.

"When you go there [to DTE], you wait in a long line and then they tell you, well now, well now, but people are trying to keep their lights on. I understand that we have to pay for these things, but why do you have to pay an arm and a leg for heat? They act like they own the heat that was placed on this earth. But the don't, they just control it."

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