

The house fires in Detroit and the West Virginia mine disaster

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The recent series of fatal house fires in Detroit, Michigan and the April 5 mine explosion in West Virginia, which killed 29 coal miners, reveal the brutal reality of American capitalism.

In Detroit, house fires have killed more than a dozen people since the beginning of the year, including two wheelchair-bound brothers and their friend in a January 5 fire on Dexter Avenue, and three children, ages 3, 4 and 5, in a March 2 fire on Bangor Street. The majority of victims had their gas and electrical service shut off by utility giant DTE Energy.

The mine explosion, the deadliest coal mine disaster in the US since 1970, occurred at the Upper Big Branch mine near Montcoal, West Virginia. There is overwhelming evidence that Massey Energy, which runs the mine, willfully disregarded basic safety regulations in order to boost production of highly profitable metallurgical coal. As one area resident said, “We’re nothing but disposable commodities.”

These tragedies were the subject of a resolution adopted by the Emergency Conference on the Social Crisis & War held last weekend by the Socialist Equality Party and the *World Socialist Web Site*. Delegates unanimously voted to condemn DTE and Massey and demanded that their executives be held legally responsible.

The resolution noted that these deaths “are the consequences of criminal policies pursued by companies determined to extract as much profit as possible from the working class. The profits go to pay the enormous salaries of top executives and satisfy the demands of Wall Street investors.”

DTE Chief Executive Anthony F. Earley, Jr. received \$9.2 million in total compensation in 2009, the same year that his company cut off service to 221,000 households in southeast Michigan. Massey Energy

CEO Don Blankenship made \$35 million in 2007 and 2008 by slashing jobs and wages and flouting safety laws. Since 2000, at least 47 miners have been killed and hundreds more injured at Massey operations.

From the standpoint of Earley, Blankenship and their major investors, the lives lost are of little consequence—collateral damage in the pursuit of profit.

Rather than protecting the lives of working people, the government agencies in charge of regulating the utility and the coal company act as accomplices of the corporations. In similar fashion, the news media conceal the real causes of the tragedies, and in the case of the Detroit fires, blames the victims themselves.

In both Detroit and West Virginia, the working class has been betrayed and abandoned by the trade unions—in Detroit, by the United Auto Workers union; in West Virginia, by the United Mine Workers union—leaving workers with no organization to defend themselves.

The resolution continues, “The fact that the victims of these tragedies came from different sections of the population—African-Americans in inner-city Detroit and white workers in rural Appalachia—only underscores that the working class, no matter what color or nationality, faces the same struggle. Under capitalism, every aspect of life—including the right to life itself—is subordinated to the profit interests of the super-rich.”

This basic truth—that the working class faces common conditions, common struggles and a common enemy—was learned through decades of bitter battles and sacrifices. Both auto workers and coal miners had to overcome the efforts to divide the working class along racial lines during the mass organizing struggles of the 1930s and 1940s.

Over the last thirty years, however, the United Mine Workers and the United Auto Workers have waged a

war against class consciousness and social solidarity. In their place, they have promoted class collaboration, dog-eat-dog competition between workers, and the most poisonous forms of national chauvinism.

Meanwhile, the political establishment, led by the liberal supporters of the Democratic Party, has elevated race as the most important category in American life. Affirmative action and identity politics express the narrow interests of a section of the upper-middle class and minority business owners, who have increased their wealth even as conditions facing the majority of minority workers have deteriorated sharply.

The election of Obama and his administration's policies—attacking the working class while enriching the financial oligarchy—make clear, once again, that the basic division in the United States as in every other country is class, not race or nationality.

Decades of plant closings and layoffs, culminating in Obama's decision to force General Motors and Chrysler into bankruptcy, have turned the Motor City into the poorest big city in America. Real unemployment has reached the Depression level of 50 percent, with well over a third of the population living below the official poverty level.

Nearly 50 years after the publication of Michael Harrington's *The Other America* brought to light the grinding poverty in Appalachia, West Virginia remains one of the poorest states in the US, trailing only Mississippi and Louisiana. In 2008, before the full impact of the recession hit, the state's poverty rate was 17.6 percent, with poverty in the mining counties of McDowell and Mingo hitting 33 percent and 25 percent, respectively. The West Virginia Center on Budget & Policy estimates that one in four West Virginians and 34.4 percent of all children in the state have fallen into poverty during the recession.

The money-mad speculation of the financial elite in the United States and internationally has produced an economic disaster, throwing millions of people out of work and bankrupting entire countries. To guarantee the wealth of a tiny layer, an assault on the working class is underway, under the mantra of "austerity," that will have disastrous consequences for the living conditions of the broad majority of the population.

The immense growth of class tensions will inevitably produce social explosions. The coming struggles of the working class require a new leadership and political

perspective, and a political party that is completely independent and opposed to the two parties of big business.

This perspective was the basis for the establishment of the Citizens Inquiry into the Dexter Avenue Fire, which earlier this month released the findings and recommendations from its fact-finding hearing. (See: "Citizens Inquiry into the Dexter Avenue fire: Utility Shutoffs and the social crisis in Detroit: Findings of the Commission").

A committee of Detroit area workers and young people has now been formed to fight to mobilize the working class against utility shutoffs, appealing directly to DTE workers to refuse to comply with company instructions to terminate service. Such struggles must be developed throughout the country and internationally, and unified upon the basis of the common class interests of workers everywhere.

The deaths and tragedies caused by capitalism can be ended only by mobilizing the working class to take political power in its own hands and reorganize economic life to meet human needs. This means replacing the profit system with socialism, which includes the transformation of energy conglomerates such as DTE and Massey Energy into public utilities, owned collectively and controlled democratically by the working class.

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