

Resolution of Conference on Social Crisis & War

On Detroit fires and the West Virginia mine explosion

20 April 2010

This resolution on deadly house fires in Detroit and the West Virginia mine explosion was passed unanimously at the SEP Emergency Conference on the Social Crisis & War, held April 17-18 in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Further resolutions and articles on the conference will be posted in the coming days. (See, "SEP Emergency Conference advances strategy for struggle against social crisis and war").

Recent tragedies in two different states expose the nature of class relations in America and the deadly consequences of the capitalist system.

In Detroit, Michigan, house fires this year have killed more than a dozen people. On January 5, a fire on Dexter Avenue claimed three lives, including two wheelchair-bound brothers. On March 2, a fire on Bangor Street killed three young children, aged 3, 4 and 5. As it has done to hundreds of thousands of families in southeast Michigan, utility giant DTE cut off utilities to both homes. The company is well aware that this policy leads to fires and deaths.

On April 5, a mine explosion in West Virginia killed 29 workers, the deadliest coal mine disaster in the US since 1970. The Upper Big Branch Mine, run by Massey Energy, had been cited for hundreds of safety violations over the past year.

All of 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 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 basic safety protections. Since 2000, at least 47 miners have been killed and hundreds more injured at Massey operations.

In Detroit and West Virginia, the government agencies that claim to protect the interests of ordinary people functioned as accomplices in the deaths of these workers.

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

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 conference denounces the efforts of DTE and the authorities to blame the victims of these tragedies in order to conceal their own responsibility. The media continues a campaign to vilify so-called "energy thieves," while Sylvia Young—who lost three small children in the March 2 Bangor Street fire—has faced a legal witch-hunt because she was buying space heaters at the time the fire broke out.

This conference supports the Citizens Inquiry into the Dexter Avenue Fire: Utility Shutoffs and the Social

Crisis in Detroit, and endorses its findings and recommendations, which were released last week:

- The shutoff of utilities should be immediately stopped and made illegal.
- DTE workers should refuse to comply with company instructions to shut off utility service.
- All charges against Sylvia Young must be dropped and her children immediately returned to her. DTE should compensate Young for her loss, ensuring that she has a safe home to raise her family and financial assistance.
- DTE, Massey Energy and their executives and regulators should be held legally responsible for their actions.
- There should be a multibillion-dollar public works program to end poverty, create jobs and rebuild communities in metropolitan Detroit, West Virginia and throughout the country.
- The utilities and the mining industry should be nationalized and transformed into publicly owned, democratically run entities, to guarantee gas, electricity and water as a basic human right, not on a for-profit basis.

The establishment of a committee to fight utility shutoffs on the basis of these findings must be the beginning of the broadest mobilization of the working class in Detroit and around the country to fight for decent, safe and affordable housing for all. This struggle must be conducted independently of the trade unions and the Democratic and Republican politicians—the bought-and-paid-for representatives of big business.



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