

An appeal to DTE workers

Committee Against Utility Shutoffs (CAUS)
5 May 2010

Workers and young people attending an April 29 meeting in Detroit called by the SEP voted to establish the Committee Against Utility Shutoffs (CAUS) to take forward the fight against gas and electric shutoffs, which led to a series of fatal house fires in the city this year. The committee decided to distribute as widely as possible the findings and recommendations of the Citizens Inquiry into the Dexter Avenue Fire, Utility Shutoffs and the Social Crisis in Detroit, and to make this the focus of a campaign to mobilize the working class throughout the metropolitan area against shutoffs.

*As part of that campaign the committee issued a statement appealing to DTE workers to refuse to carry out management work orders to disconnect services. Below we post the statement. (Download in **PDF**)*

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Since the beginning of the year more than a dozen Detroit residents have died in house fires that were the direct result of DTE disconnecting gas and electrical service to their homes. The victims included two disabled brothers and their friend in a January 5 fire on Dexter Avenue, and three children, ages 3-5, killed March 2 on Bangor Street.

These were working class people just like you. If you were to lose your job—like more than 1,200 DTE workers did over the last few years—or face some other emergency, you could find yourself in the same situation, unable to pay your bills and facing the termination of your lights and gas.

That is why we are appealing to you to stop utility shutoffs and end the terrible human toll they exact. You have the power to collectively refuse to terminate service and make the decision to protect the lives of your fellow workers and their families.

DTE, the city politicians, and the media have sought

to drive a wedge between DTE workers and the victims of these fires. Rather than acknowledging their responsibility, DTE officials have accused the victims of “energy theft.” At the same time they try to justify their exorbitant rate hikes by saying they are necessary to pay wages and health care costs for employees. Yet it is not ordinary employees who benefit from milking the population of Detroit but the corporate executives, like CEO Anthony Earley, Jr., who pocketed \$10 million last year.

We are well aware that DTE workers do not want to terminate services to families in need and imperil their lives. As Sylvia Young, the 32-year-old single mother who lost three children in the Bangor Street fire, said, “On the day of the fire I pleaded with the representative of DTE not to shut off my service. I asked myself, how could someone shut off heat to a house with seven children in it, including a four-month-old infant? Without heat how can you keep them warm in freezing temperatures? How can you cook food or even warm up a baby bottle?

“My first reaction was to blame the man who showed up at my door. Then I thought, everyone is being cheated, even the workers at DTE. The executive that runs DTE never cuts off people’s lights and gas; his heart doesn’t hurt. Instead he sends someone else who is going to have to have this on his heart forever. The guy who cut me off, maybe he has a family and kids too. He said he was only doing his job and there are no jobs in Michigan. If he doesn’t do it he loses his job. The boss sits up there and tells workers to commit murder. Like a gangster he is using the little guy to do the dirty work and he’s got the money to pay off the judge, the politicians and the president. It’s time that we all stand up and fight this.”

Far from defending the interests of DTE workers or ordinary Detroiters, the Utility Workers union is completely on the side of the company. UWUA Local

223 officials have said nothing about the utility-related fires and have insisted that DTE workers must do everything to protect the revenue and profits of the company. This is the same argument the union officials have made to justify concession after concession and the destruction of hundreds of jobs.

If there are large numbers of people tapping into power lines it is a measure of the desperation in the city where the real unemployment rate has reached the Depression level of 50 percent. The recent rate hike given to the DTE has made it impossible for tens of thousands to maintain service.

The only thing top management is concerned with is boosting its profits and share value so top executives and big investors can make millions more. During the last two years, as it discontinued service to more than 400,000 households in southeast Michigan, the company conducted a vicious downsizing and cost-cutting campaign against its employees.

Last week the energy giant announced a 29 percent increase in first quarter profits over last year, despite the deep recession in the state. Afterwards it boasted to Wall Street investors that the profit surge was due to rate hikes it imposed on customers and reductions in “utility operations and maintenance costs.” In 2009 it cut costs by \$130 million and is aiming for another \$60 million in reductions this year, chiefly through wage and benefit cuts and speed-ups.

There is little doubt that cutbacks are taking their toll on the lives of utility workers too. AT&T worker Kevin James, a 41-year-old father of two, was electrocuted April 15 when he was hit by a DTE power line when performing service on a utility pole. Last November, a DTE worker was electrocuted at a substation on the city’s northwest side.

The company is seeking more rollbacks in workers’ living standards and working conditions when the current contract runs out next month. The UWUA—which boasts about its “partnership” with DTE—has already accepted sweeping concessions behind the backs of workers.

It is time to take a stand. But the fight to defend the jobs and living standards of utility workers is inseparable from uniting the working class throughout Detroit against DTE and the politicians—like former DTE board member David Bing—who stand behind it. For this you must take a stand against utility shutoffs

and join the fight to mobilize the working class to guarantee that lights, gas, and water be provided to everyone as a basic human right, not on a for-profit basis.

The author recommends:

Citizens Inquiry into the Dexter Avenue fire: Utility Shutoffs and the social crisis in Detroit
Findings of the Commission

CAUS web site
<http://socialequality.com/dexterinquiry>



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact