

# Four California children die in blaze at home without electricity

Andrea Peters

1 May 2010

Four young children perished in a house fire in northern California on Wednesday. The blaze was sparked by a candle that was being used because the local utility provider, Pacific Gas & Electric (PG&E), shut off electricity at the home for non-payment.

The energy company, which raised utility rates at the start of the year, is currently engulfed in a scandal over its installation of so-called “smart meters.” Thousands of customers have issued complaints in recent months, stating that their bills have become inexplicably high since the devices were installed.

Natalie Rogers and Nevaeh Nunn, both age two, and Keviana Morgan, age one, were found dead in their apartment shortly after the blaze broke out at nine o’clock in the evening. Four-year-old Robert Charles, the brother of Nevaeh and Keviana and a cousin to Natalie, died after being taken to the nearby hospital in Fairfield, California.

The mothers of the children, Latisha and Shetarra James, made desperate efforts to get the youngsters out of the home, suffering burns and smoke inhalation as a result. Neighbors broke the apartment’s windows and tried to douse the flames with a garden hose.

Rudy Sylvan, who lives across the street from the Jameses, responded to the mothers’ cries for help and attempted to get inside but was unable to. “I wish there was something else I could do,” Sylvan told the *San Francisco Chronicle*.

The police, the first to arrive on the scene, also made attempts to rescue the children, but were driven back by the heat and smoke. By the time firefighters arrived, it was too late.

Friends of the family describe the James sisters as being shattered by the events. Shetarra, the mother of Nevaeh, Keviana, and Robert, lost all of her children. The tragedy is made all the worse by the fact that Keviana’s father was killed in a shooting two years ago. Referring to Keviana, “That’s the only thing I had left of my son,” said the girl’s paternal grandmother.

Investigators looking into the cause of the fire found two other candles in the home, in addition to the one that sparked

the blaze. They were the family’s only source of light. It is unknown how long the Jameses had been living without electricity or how high their PG&E bill was.

According to local television station KTVU, neighbors said the two mothers were loving and attentive, but “struggled financially.” They are reportedly in “desperate need of financial help to bury the children.”

Local authorities, who claim the mothers were in the apartment building’s parking lot when fire broke out, may attempt to prosecute the James sisters. Investigators have turned the case over to the district attorney’s office, which will decide whether or not press charges.

The death of these four children is a direct consequence of PG&E’s actions. If the utility company had not disconnected electricity service to the family’s apartment, they would not have had to resort to candles for light. While investigators have explicitly identified these candles as the cause of the fire, local authorities have made no mention of PG&E’s responsibility in the children’s death. Nor, for that matter, will they make any effort to criminally prosecute the company. Instead, they are considering whether or not to victimize the two adult sisters.

The circumstances that led to this tragedy are becoming increasingly widespread in California. The official unemployment rate in California is 12.6 percent, with nine counties having joblessness levels above 20 percent. Under these conditions, many homes are losing their utility service for non-payment. In California, electricity bills are often one of a household’s largest expenses. Temperatures regularly reach well over 100 degrees in many areas of the state through much of the year.

In 2009, 288,000 households across the state had their utilities shut off, an increase of 17.6 percent over the previous year, according to the California Public Utilities Commission.

In January, PG&E raised electricity rates by an average of 2.9 percent, bringing the average bill for residential customers to \$76.79 a month and \$304.38 a month for small businesses. However, the actual increases that many

customers have experienced are much greater than this, because California has a tiered-system for determining how much a household pays for electricity.

The more electricity a home uses, the more it is charged per watt. In 2000-2001, the rates for customers who fall into the lowest two usage tiers were frozen, while those for customers in the upper three tiers were raised exponentially. This was done so that the utility companies could recoup the money they had to spend buying power at exorbitant rates because large suppliers, like Enron, began manipulating the state's deregulated energy market.

However, at the start of 2010, PG&E lifted rates for all customers. In particular, it increased the per-watt amount charged to households that use less electricity in an effort to bring their rates closer to those charged customers in the upper usage tiers. Therefore, these homes have seen their bills increase by much more than 2.9 percent.

Currently, PG&E is planning to impose another rate hike, targeting regions in the state where per-watt costs have tended to be lower overall. It aims to increase its revenues in 2011 by 6.4 percent over the current year, bringing its total to \$1.1 billion a year.

Residents in the Bay Area and the Central Valley, the region of the state where Wednesday's deadly house fire occurred, could see their bills increase by as much as \$100. PG&E has stated, for example, that customers in San Francisco and the surrounding cities can expect to see their payments rise by a factor of nearly eight, from an average of \$10.73 to \$88.13 a month.

The energy company insists that because the per-watt rate for higher-use customers will decrease somewhat, the rate hikes are fully justified. However, households that consume a lot of electricity, which tend to be located in areas of California with extreme temperatures, will still pay exorbitant amounts for electricity. A recent report in the *San Jose Mercury News* noted that under PG&E's proposed plan, the average bill for a home that consumes 1,500 watts of electricity would decline by \$108.62—that is, to \$371.46 a month.

In recent months, the company appears to have also increased profits through the installation of so-called "smart meters." These digital devices allow the utility company to remotely monitor a household's electricity usage, eliminating the necessity of sending workers out to read meters in order to determine customers' bills.

Since last year, PG&E has installed 5.5 million such smart meters in homes across California. The company has received thousands of complaints from customers insisting that their bills have inexplicably risen and that the meters are inaccurately recording usage. For months, PG&E denied that there was anything wrong with the new devices, insisting

that the increases households were seeing were because of rate hikes and higher usage.

On Monday, the utility company acknowledged finding problems with 43,376 of its smart meters. According to PG&E, 23,000 devices were improperly installed, 11,376 failed to record consumer usage information, and 9,000 were unable to connect to the wireless network and transmit data. Despite this staggering admission, the energy giant continues to insist that the meters only misread households' electricity usage in eight cases.

According to the *San Jose Mercury News*, PG&E Senior Vice President and Chief Customer Officer Helen Burt told a California Senate hearing called to investigate the matter, "Last fall, when we said 'the meters work,' we meant it. They do. But that doesn't mean that every single one of them works 100 percent of the time."

Burt's statement is, quite simply, idiotic. Clearly the meters do not work, as thousands of ordinary Californians already know. Or rather, they work to the benefit of PG&E, which has undoubtedly fleeced countless of households with the devices. Whether a smart meter played a role in the fire that took the lives of the children of the James sisters is unknown.

In addition, the utility company is currently financing a multimillion-dollar campaign to secure the passage of a proposition in California that would make it much more difficult for municipal utilities—local public electricity providers—to enter the broader energy market and expand the area that they service. PG&E has already spent \$28.5 million to win passage of Proposition 16, which would require a municipal utility to get the support of two-thirds of the local electorate before it could increase its coverage area. The campaign is little more than an effort by PG&E to maintain its near-monopoly in the state's energy market.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**