

CAUS campaigns among striking tree trimmers

Sylvia Young visits DTE contractors' picket line

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28 June 2010

Supporters of the Committee Against Utility Shutoffs (CAUS) last week visited the picket line of Detroit area tree trimmers locked out by utility giant DTE Energy. Six hundred fifty workers employed by DTE subcontractors—Davey Tree Expert, Nelson Tree Service, Kappen Tree Service, N.G. Gilbert and ABC Professional Tree Service—are fighting against a three-year wage freeze and to defend their vacation and holiday benefits, previously funded by DTE.

Sylvia Young, the 32-year-old mother who lost three small children in a March 2 house fire after DTE shut off gas and electrical service to her home, expressed solidarity with the striking workers. She passed out the findings of the Citizens Inquiry into the Dexter Avenue Fire and other CAUS material and discussed the common fight facing DTE workers and the victims of utility shutoffs.

The workers who were manning a picket line in Redford, Michigan are members of International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) Local 17 and had been working under an extended contract since January 1. They were angered over DTE's decision to respond to their strike vote and deadline by locking them out and bringing in out-of-state strikebreakers to take their jobs.

The energy monopoly, which made \$229 million in profits during the first quarter of the year and has paid its executives and big investors millions, is demanding sweeping concessions from every section of its workforce. Workers told the WSWs that line workers, also members of IBEW Local 17, have been working with a contract extension since December 2009.

Another 3,900 workers—at Utility Workers of America (UWUA) Local 223, the largest DTE union—are currently voting on givebacks in health and retirement benefits. The UWUA called off a potential strike earlier this month and signed the deal, which was hailed by the company for cutting costs.

Workers warmly received Sylvia Young on the picket line and expressed their condolences for the loss of her children. Sylvia explained how utility bills rapidly accumulate for working class and poor families, especially since DTE is granted one rate hike after another by the state regulatory agency. She noted that any worker who lost his job or took a pay cut could be in the same situation as she was.

Several workers nodded in agreement, with one worker saying, "It's unfair that they shut people off for unpaid bills." He said he thought it was illegal to shut off heat in the winter time for a family with children." Sylvia explained that was a myth and that DTE shut off hundreds of families, including those with children, disabled people and the elderly.

CAUS members explained the committee's fight to unite DTE workers and ordinary workers in Detroit facing utility shutoffs. This included CAUS's demand that utility workers defy management instructions to terminate service. Such an action would win enormous support for DTE workers' struggles from Detroit residents. So far this year, DTE and the other Michigan utility company, Consumers Energy, have shut off approximately 161,000 Michigan households, according to the state regulatory agency.

Supporters of CAUS explained that the committee

was fighting for the transformation of DTE and other utility giants into publicly owned enterprises, owned collectively and run democratically by the working class. Agreeing, one striker commented, “These utilities should be run to provide services, not put money in the pockets of CEOs who increase their pay every year. Corporate America is taking everything from the hard working people.

“They talk about government money helping to build the infrastructure and create jobs, but nothing is happening. Yet the banks on Wall Street get trillions. Where’s my bailout, Mr. Obama?”

Another worker added, “We asked Governor Granholm to stop the scabbing; but she won’t because all she cares about is the profits of DTE.”

A CAUS member explained that Detroit’s mayor, David Bing, had been on the board of directors of Detroit Edison (DTE’s electrical division) for 20 years and was doing the bidding of the corporation, including plans to privatize city lighting and hand it to DTE.

Another worker said, “It used to be that the employers paid some respect for the work you did. Now it all about the money, with the executives trying to make the biggest and fastest profit for the big shareholders. We’re out here, just fighting for the right to have vacations.”

Another worker said, “Now they are trying to take away our jobs. If they can pay someone \$12 an hour, they’ll do it. In the South, the line clearance workers have high rates of deaths, injuries and property damage. I have to take 5,000 hours of training to be a journeyman.”

Fred Downs, who has been working as a tree trimmer for 29 years, said, “This is a real dangerous job, especially when storms knock down lines and they are exposed.”

Sylvia Young spoke about an AT&T telephone worker who was electrocuted by a power line while working on a DTE utility pole near her house. She said, “They acted like it was nothing. He was killed and his body hung there for a long time because he was working alone. What compensation do they give to your family if you are killed?”

Fred responded, “Nothing, just like they did yours.”

He continued to explain that the situation was getting more dangerous because DTE had laid off 96 line men to save money. Several years ago, Fred said, there were

700 to 800 workers trimming trees and clearing lines; now there were only 650.

“They want to get rid of higher paid workers and replace us all with people making \$12 an hour. Edison used to pay our vacation and holiday but they want to get rid of 11 paid days. That would cost us \$1,800—we can’t take that.

“We used to earn \$55,000-60,000 with overtime pay; but all of that has been cut. I’ve only made \$17,000 so far this year and that’s only because of the bad storms we had.

“The rest of the DTE workers support us, but DTE has threatened to reprimand and fire any lineman who refused to call in the scabs to do our work. But they are letting us know where the scabs are so we can picket the site.”

CAUS members argued for the need to organize the working class independently of the Democrats and Republicans and build rank-and-file committees of workers to oppose the collaboration of the unions with big business. A striker explained that the companies were using the concessions granted by the United Auto Workers as a model for taking gains away from workers everywhere. “After the strike ends,” he said, “we think they are going to start hiring a lot of low paid workers to replace us. Whatever deal we get will be rotten.”

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