

An appeal to DTE workers

Committee Against Utility Shutoffs (CAUS)
2 June 2010

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.

Now the energy giant, which saw its first quarter profits rise 29 percent to \$229 million while turning off service to tens of thousands of homes, is demanding that you accept further cuts in your jobs and living standards. DTE wants unlimited power to spin off operations to low-wage subcontractors and slash health care benefits to current workers and all future retirees. In a communication to workers, the company, which paid its top CEOs tens of millions of dollars last year, is saying workers' benefits are too "rich" and "out-of-market," given the economic climate in Michigan.

Those who lost their lives in utility-related fires are working class people just like you. If you were to lose your job or were forced to take substantial wage and benefit concessions—like tens of thousands of auto, utility and other workers in the Detroit area have done—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 management's instructions to terminate service to working class families and make the decision to protect the lives of your fellow workers and their children.

If you were to do so, you would win the overwhelming solidarity and support of working people throughout Detroit in your fight against job cuts and concessions. The greatest allies of utility workers are not big business politicians such as Governor Granholm

and Detroit Mayor Bing—who are bought and paid for by DTE—but hundreds of thousands of working and unemployed people in Detroit who face the same enemy as you do. Winning that support, however, requires that you stand with them in a struggle to stop all utility shutoffs.

DTE, the city politicians, and the media have sought to drive a wedge between utility workers and the victims of these house fires. Rather than acknowledging their responsibility for these deaths, DTE officials have accused the victims of "energy theft."

At the same time DTE tells the people of Detroit their exorbitant rate hikes—including a staggering 20 percent last year—are necessary to pay wages and health care costs for employees. Yet, as you well know, it is not ordinary employees who benefit from milking the population of Detroit but the corporate executives, like CEO Anthony Earley, Jr., who pocketed at least \$25 million over the last five years.

Echoing the company's slanders against ordinary people in Detroit, the vice president of Utility Workers Union of America Local 223, Rich Harkins, told CAUS he is against banning utility shutoffs. "No. I would not support ending all shutoffs because there are people who can pay and choose not to," he stated.

This simply repeats the line of DTE's multimillionaire executives who insist that "energy theft" is hurting the company's bottom line. It is intended to justify the unaffordable rates DTE charges and thus, the massive profits that are made from them.

There are not, as Harkins insists, thousands of households with the means to pay for utilities that refuse to do so. 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 after decades of plant closings and mass layoffs. With

the downsizing of the auto industry and the wave of home foreclosures, the conditions in the suburbs are catching up. In Dearborn, nearly one in five residents lives in poverty, while the figure is 15 percent in Warren.

The argument used by the UWUA to justify utility shutoffs—that DTE has the inalienable right to make profits—is the very same argument it uses to impose concessions contracts on its membership. Workers are continuously told that their jobs can only be protected if the energy giant makes money and thus, there have to be givebacks. The ultimate result of this is not, however, the protection of jobs, but their destruction and the pauperization of the working class.

In the name of making the Big Three “more competitive” the UAW accepted hundreds of thousands of layoffs and the transformation of auto workers into a cheap labor workforce, with new hires making \$14 an hour. In exchange for selling out their members, the auto bosses and the government handed the UAW control of a multi-billion dollar retiree health care trust and a major ownership stake at GM, Ford and Chrysler. The UWUA is following the same pattern.

DTE is not in the business of providing essential services to the population, let alone preserving the living standards of its workers; it is in the business of making money for its top executives and Wall Street investors, whatever the cost to the general public and the workers themselves.

CAUS fights for the nationalization of DTE and other energy monopolies into genuinely publicly owned utilities, under the democratic ownership and control of working people themselves. The provision of basic services—and the securing of decent working conditions and living standards for all utility workers—can only be achieved by taking the energy industry out of the hands of the financial elite and carrying out production on the basis of human need, not private profit.

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, “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.”

It is time to take a stand. 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.

Contact CAUS

Call: 313-915-4541

Read about CAUS at socialequality.com/caus and join the committee.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact