CAUS denounces new Michigan “energy theft” law, endorses D’Artagnan Collier campaign

A reporter
4 August 2010

D’Artagnan Collier, Socialist Equality Party candidate for the Michigan House of Representatives, addressed a meeting of the Committee Against Utility Shutoffs (CAUS) July 29.

A commissioner at the Dexter Avenue Fire Inquiry and founding member of CAUS, Collier is running in the 9th District, which includes much of the west side of Detroit. After a discussion of the political issues arising from the fight against utility shutoffs, the meeting voted unanimously to endorse Collier’s campaign.

Larry Porter, chairman of CAUS, opened the meeting by denouncing the new “energy theft” law just signed by Michigan’s Democratic governor Jennifer Granholm.

“The law criminalizes the poor,” he said, ”making it a felony offense and punishable by up to five years in jail and a $5,000 fine for tampering with or bypassing a gas or electric meter.” The bill also provides penalties as high as 10 years in jail and a $10,000 fine for threatening or assaulting a utility employee.

Porter said, “It is not insignificant that the new law was sponsored by black Democratic state senators from Detroit,” pointing out that both Democrats and Republicans overwhelmingly approved it in the state senate and house.

“This law is designed to cover up for the criminal role of DTE Energy and Consumers Power who are responsible for the death of at least 11 people in Detroit so far this year, including the three children of Sylvia Young.”

On January 5 Tyrone Allen and Marvin Allen, two wheelchair bound brothers, and their housemate died in a fire on Dexter Avenue after they were living without utilities. On March 2, Sylvia Young, the mother of seven children, lost three of her kids after DTE turned off the utilities to the family. In both cases DTE claimed the families had an unauthorized connection.

The “energy theft” bill was passed with the endorsement of the Utility Worker’s Union and the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers.

“Why wasn’t a bill passed to make it illegal to shutoff utilities?” asked Porter. “The Utility Workers Union claimed it was opposed to utility shutoffs and called for the public ownership of utilities. They are dishonest. This is where they really stand; with the Democrats and DTE.

“Granholm claimed the bill is to make it safer for families and that there is plenty of help. Both are lies. The biggest danger families face is living without utilities. While it may be legal to use space or kerosene heaters for heat, or candles for light, all of them have been proven to be extremely dangerous.”

In his remarks, Collier solidarized himself with CAUS and its opposition to the “energy theft” law. “Who benefits from this law?” he asked. “Only DTE Energy.”

“One in five people live in destitution in the US,” Collier continued. “And what is Obama doing? He is with the corporations. They say there is no money for jobs but they have money to bail out the banks. I need your help in building a movement of the working class that will fight for a socialist program to address the crisis created by the capitalist system.”

Collier criticized the role of the unions, saying, “The unions and the government work together against the interests of the workers. This is why we fight for an independent movement of the working class. If they were serious about fighting the conditions, the unions

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would oppose the shutoffs and tell the workers to unite with those facing shutoffs."

According to DTE there are more than 60,000 cases of unauthorized gas and electric hookups in Michigan, a testament to the desperation thousands of working class families face in the desperate attempt to have utilities.

The Michigan Public Service Commission (MPSC) confirmed in monthly reports made available to the WSWS that 176,000 households had their utilities shut off in the first five months of this year, impacting close to half a million people.

CAUS member Lisa said she joined the group because she has personally experienced the dangers caused by utility shutoffs. Lisa said because of job cuts she moved to Detroit from Oakland County, where she had lived for 15 years, and was forced to wait for electrical service.

"The day I was waiting for them to turn the lights on I asked my neighbor if I could use her electricity to charge my cell phone," said Lisa. "She told me that most of the houses on the block were hooked up illegally. The law making utility theft a felony possibly turns the whole block into potential felons."

Asked her response to the CAUS meeting Lisa said, "I understand what needs to be done is a large mobilization of the working class to fight these giant corporations, and DTE in particular. How does a person like Dave Bing, who was on the board of directors for DTE, become the mayor of Detroit, a city that is predominantly poor and black?"

Tahira told the WSWS her response to the law on utility theft recently signed by Democratic Governor Jennifer Granholm: "That's criminal in itself to pass a law like that, with so many people who are unemployed. People are going to die again this winter due to fires. Tens of thousands of people's health is being compromised by living in the cold."

Tahira said she had a $7,000 gas bill and pleaded with DTE to turn her gas on. "I was living in the cold for 7 years, no heat, no gas, no electricity, nothing. My son had frostbite," said Lisa. "He has nerve damage because of that. I almost died in there living in the cold."

She told of her recent experience helping her daughter. "When my mom got sick my daughter had to quit her job to care for her. "This was just before the economic crisis hit. Afterwards I had to pay my daughter's gas bill, because it was in my name. I had to pay $4,000, and then I had to pay a deposit to get it turned back on. It put me in debt. I am stuck paying this bill on time every month for a year."

"I need a new roof on my house, but I don't have the money to buy a roof because I am paying about $556 every single month. Now my job is threatening to close up. I don't know what we are going to do."

The difference between the Michigan Welfare Rights Organization (MWRO) and CAUS also came up in the meeting. Porter said our orientation is not to appeal to the Democrats or DTE as MWRO does with the rallies they call each week in front of DTE's headquarters. "Our orientation is to unite the working class," stated Porter. "The workers at DTE face the same fight as the workers who face a shutoff. In opposition to the policies of the union we say to DTE workers: Oppose the company's policy of shutoffs and unite with your class brothers who now a face shutoff. You could be next."

In addition to voting to endorse the campaign of D'Artagnan Collier, CAUS agreed to widely distribute the findings of the investigation into the Dexter Avenue Fire and to make a special appeal to DTE workers at their work sites to oppose further shutoffs.

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