

SEP candidate campaigns in Detroit against utility shutoffs

A reporting team
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As part of his campaign in the 9th District of the Michigan State House of Representatives, Socialist Equality Party candidate D'Artagnan Collier has been canvassing neighborhoods in northwest Detroit, along with members of the Committee Against Utility Shutoffs (CAUS).

Collier was one of five commissioners at the March hearing of the Citizens Inquiry into the Dexter Avenue Fire: Utility Shutoffs and the Social Crisis in Detroit, the precursor to CAUS. That hearing took testimony from Detroit-area residents and experts on the relationship between utility shutoffs and deadly house fires in the city. The inquiry exposed the criminal policies of energy giant DTE and the role of the local, state and federal governments in protecting the interests of the utility industry. Its findings can be read by clicking [here](#).

Collier's campaign is aimed at uniting the working class throughout the Metro Detroit area in a common struggle against the politicians of big business in both the Democratic and Republican parties.

Collier spoke with Royce, a resident of the 9th District who recently became disabled. He explained that his family is currently facing a utility bill of several thousand dollars, which is largely due to heating charges in homes he had previously rented.

Initially, Royce was told that he could keep his gas and lights on if he paid \$400 to DTE. His youngest child is on a breathing machine, and the family needs electricity to operate it.

But when Royce's partner Laquinta went to the DTE payment center to pay the bill, the utility company took the entire \$1,200 voucher the family had obtained from social services. DTE also demanded that they pay the

remainder of the bill.

This kind of callous treatment of Detroit-area residents is common, with some individuals telling SEP campaigners that they go into a DTE payment center in order to get help towards a \$250 budget-plan payment and come out with a new monthly bill that is twice as high.

In another part of the district, Collier spoke with a worker the SEP had met earlier during the petition drive to place his name of the ballot. Anthony, an 18-year veteran of the auto industry who is now unemployed, had alerted neighbors and family members that Collier and his CAUS supporters would be in the neighborhood. Many came over to hear more about the SEP campaign.

Collier led a discussion about the CAUS program and its recent statement condemning legislation signed into law by Michigan Democratic Governor Jennifer Granholm that sanctions a broad crackdown on the state's poor for alleged "energy theft."

The bill, sponsored by Democrats and Republicans in the Michigan State Senate, makes it a felony offense, punishable by up to five years in prison and a \$5,000 fine for the first violation, to "illegally sell or transfer utility service." This includes tampering with or bypassing gas and electric meters.

"Who benefits from this law?" Collier asked the Detroit residents. "Only DTE Energy. Obama is with the corporations on this and many other things."

"The utility companies and all major corporations must be run democratically in the interests of social need, not private profit," he said. "Basic human rights, such as energy and heat, can no longer be subordinated

to the interests of a tiny layer of the population,” Collier noted.

“I brought you here to tell you about the lady down the block,” Anthony said, speaking to Collier.

“Her husband retired from General Motors, but he died recently. She was trying for six months to get help from THAW [The Heat and Warmth Fund, an energy-industry and government-funded non-profit], but she got nowhere. Though she was current on her light bill, because she got behind on her gas bill, they cut both utilities. She told me that she had to pick between medication, eating, being warm or watching TV. You should not have to make any decisions like that when you’re 77 years old.”

“When I went down there to ask her about talking to you,” Anthony said, “the house was empty. I found out that her nieces and nephews had come to take her to live with them. She moved into that house when she was 22, and they were paying utilities on that house her whole life. She and her husband were paying DTE for some 50 years and they just came and took the wire that brings the electric to the house. It makes me furious. It should be a crime to cut people like that off.”

Clifford, Anthony’s neighbor and a retired autoworker, also spoke up.

“These bills are too high,” Clifford said. “Once they put you on a budget plan, they’ve got you. Be late or miss one payment and you are cut off. Who is going to suffer? It is the older people. We need to start prosecuting the gas company. You want to think this is diplomatic. This is war. Until we turn this back around, we have to think of it that way.”

Mary, another neighbor, walked over to the front porch where people had gathered and added, “I have a sister who is disabled and a niece who is on a breathing machine. They were on the winter protection plan but in February they automatically cut them off. That is what they do to you.

“We had a letter on file saying the lights, gas and water could not be cut off because of the medical conditions in the home. They disobeyed and we had to fight to get them back on. She had to redo all the documentation, and that was very difficult as she is bedridden.”

Angie, Anthony’s sister, explained, “When they cut you off there is a \$600 reconnection fee and on top of that they want a big deposit, plus all the balance due.

How much money are they making off of all those charges?”

“I work at Henry Ford Hospital and we just got a new contract with no raises. The union just took it. They are no good. How is it that the CEO of Henry Ford Hospital can make \$6 million and they don’t have any money for us? All those top executives get big amounts like that and then they come down on us.”



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