

Thousands line up for food, school supplies in Detroit

A WSWS reporting team
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Several thousand people lined up at a church on the west side of Detroit Saturday to get free bags of groceries and school supplies. Parents with small children, retirees and hundreds of low-income workers from the city and surrounding suburbs started lining up at 8 a.m. for the event that started at 11 a.m. The queue circled around the city block.

In scenes reminiscent of the food lines of the 1930s, small children and their parents carried away boxes with potatoes, canned goods and other items.

Detroit, which has been devastated by decades of factory closings and layoffs, has a real unemployment rate of 50 percent. Officially, one out of every three residents lives below the poverty level, with the real level of social misery far higher.

Pastor Spencer Ellis, whose church has been sponsoring this event since 2007, said it was disheartening to see the Brightmoor section of Detroit, once a stable working class area, so distressed. The church has been running a monthly food bank for the last 18 months and has seen the need grow from 60 to 200 families.

Erica, who works with the church, told the WSWS that social need has increased dramatically over the past few years. “When we held the first distribution three years ago, we served about 700 people,” she said. “Last year 1,000 turned out. This year we served at least 1,500,” she said.

“It is a sign of the times,” Erica said. “People are in real need. Some of your average or median income families are also out here today. It’s not just homeless or unemployed residents.”

At the food distribution line, Gleaners Community Food Bank was providing families with one jar of peanut butter, a bag of carrots, and a bag of ham hocks.

In addition, the drastic cuts in federal and state funding for education have forced parents to buy basic school supplies that schools should be providing.

Carmen Adams, an events planner and volunteer, said 1,000 children would receive a backpack filled with paper, pencils, glue and other supplies. She said, “The number of people here is definitely higher than last year with unemployment higher. All these people are lined up and it’s only noon.”

Chanira Roundtree was on line with her small children. She said, “Obama isn’t doing anything to help people out of work. He’s for the rich. I was on line at a store the other day and someone asked why I was using food coupons. I told them because the rich are on coupons and they get everything from us.”

Residents also spoke about the fires that swept through city neighborhoods last week. More than 85 structures were destroyed or severely damaged, throwing dozens of working class families into the streets. The fires were chiefly the responsibility of DTE Energy, which has failed to maintain its power infrastructure and ignored repeated calls about dangerous transformers and power lines, prior to the outbreak of the blazes.

Commenting on the recent fires in Detroit, Chanira said, “So many houses were lost because DTE doesn’t care.

“People are losing their jobs and the economy is bad, but DTE still cuts people off of their lights and gas. People died last winter because they were trying to do anything to keep their kids warm after DTE cut them

off. You know what DTE stands for? ‘Death To Everyone.’ They know people are struggling and what they are doing is murder.”

A home health care provider and her unemployed husband were also on line. He said, “Years ago people moved up from the South to work in the auto industry and get a better life. Now they’re moving back. I was working at a temporary agency and they laid me off. There are no jobs. I went down South looking for work and people are hurting there too. They’re laying off and the wages are very low. I figured I would come back to Detroit because I know people here and maybe I could hustle up some work.”

A single mother, Shannon Drouillard, was on line with her brother Roger and her small children. The family is from Livonia, a nearby suburb. She said, “I was put off work because I needed surgery. But the kids need food and supplies for school. I’m a single mom and I go to college. I’m lucky my family gave us money for school clothes. But we have to get other supplies.”

Her brother added, “I just spent \$500 on textbooks for my college courses.”

Commenting on the recent fires, Shannon said, “It’s terrible all those families losing their homes. It’s BS that DTE cuts families off of gas and heat in the winter, even families with small children. It’s hard to pay those high bills. If my children need food I’m going to pay for them to eat before I pay utility bills. That’s why they shut me off.”

Felicia, a city Department of Transportation employee, was waiting in line for school supplies for her grandchildren. She told the WSWS that she had been under considerable financial hardship due to utility bills. “I had a \$2,000 bill over the winter, partly because my daughter and her children were living with me. But I paid on it consistently. Last month I had paid it down to \$500, and then they sent me a shutoff notice.” She said, “I received the bill this week, dated for September 1. They said I had until September 9.”

Felicia went to DTE, where she was sent to their case management division. “I asked, ‘why are you trying to shut me off? I am paying my bill.’ They said, ‘It doesn’t matter if you are trying to pay—you have to pay your whole bill.’” Felicia told the WSWS she was told

to seek money from social services if she wanted any help.

Felicia also commented on the lack of upkeep of power lines and tree limbs on the part of DTE, which led to last week’s fires. “I live over by Redford High School, which was closed down three years ago,” she said. “There are trees along that street that fall down all the time; large limbs come down with every storm. There was a limb that fell into my yard that was too large for me to budge. I called everywhere, but it was treated as my own problem. It sat there for six weeks, until I had some help to move it to an old lot. They treat fallen trees as none of their concern.”



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