

Utilities must be a social right!

Of D'Artagnan Collier, Socialist Equality Party candidate for Michigan legislature
2 October 2010

This statement has been issued by D'Artagnan Collier, the Socialist Equality Party's candidate for Michigan House of Representatives (9th District) and a founding member of the Committee Against Utility Shutoffs.

Winter is nearing in Michigan, and that means killing season for energy giant DTE.

Every year, people die in the city of Detroit because DTE has disconnected their utilities or because they can't afford to have them turned on in the first place. Threatened with freezing to death, residents take desperate and often dangerous measures to heat their homes.

As the Socialist Equality Party's candidate for the Michigan House of Representatives 9th District, and a founding member of the Committee Against Utility Shutoffs (CAUS), I insist that that gas, electricity and other utilities must be guaranteed to everyone as a social right. These are not luxuries, but basic necessities of life. There must be an immediate end to utility shutoffs, and all those who are without utilities must have them restored.

DTE's shutoffs have reached epidemic levels. In 2008 it disconnected 142,000 homes in southeast Michigan. In 2009, this number grew to 221,000. Already in 2010 it has cut off more than 237,000 homes.

No one knows how many households in total live without power, but the number is far greater than the yearly shutoffs. Hundreds of thousands of people in Detroit—including small children, the elderly, and the disabled—are living without heat, light, or water.

So long as this continues, more horrible tragedies will occur. Tragedies such as the fire last March that killed three children—Trávia Young, five, Fantasia Young,

four, and Selena Young, three—hours after DTE shut off power to their Bangor Street home. Or the deaths of two wheelchair-bound brothers and their friend—Marvin Allen, 62, Tyrone Allen, 61, and Lynn Greer, 58—in a fire on January 2 after DTE refused to turn the power back on at their home on Dexter Avenue.

Deadly house fires are not just accidents. They happen—and will happen again—because the most elementary needs of the population are subordinated to DTE's profit drive. And these are not the only victims. Last month, fires ravaged sections of Detroit after hundreds of DTE lines came down. As it turns out, keeping up the power grid also cuts into DTE's profits!

DTE has been laying off linemen and cutting its tree trimming services for years. In April, the company announced that it cut costs by \$130 million in 2009, and is seeking further cuts of \$60 million this year. At the same time, it has been generating enormous profits—nearly \$900 million since the start of 2009. Last year, DTE CEO Anthony Earley took home \$9.2 million, adding to his combined pay of \$11.4 million in 2007 and 2008.

The entire political system protects these criminal policies. The government, at every level, whether Democrat or Republican, is dedicated to defending the “right” of companies like DTE to turn a profit and line the pockets of its executives and top shareholders.

If there is no money to be made in providing electricity or gas to a household with small children or disabled people in it, then it is DTE's “right” to cut off service. If whole neighborhoods in Detroit aren't generating enough profit, then it is DTE's “right,” acting through Mayor Dave Bing, to shut down those neighborhoods.

The Socialist Equality Party and the Committee Against Utility Shutoffs stand for a different set of rights. We say that heat, light, and water are basic social rights for all, regardless of ability to pay!

But these rights cannot be won without a fight. And they can't be won by appealing for support to the Democratic Party or the groups that back it.

In Detroit, city officials, all of them Democrats, enforce DTE's shutoff orders with the long arm of the law. At the state level, Democratic Governor Jennifer Granholm appoints the Michigan Public Services Commission, which oversees and approves every rate hike as well as DTE's cruel shutoff policies. The legislature passes laws demanded by energy corporations, whether for "deregulation" or for criminalizing "energy theft"—code words for the desperate measures of residents to stay warm.

The Democrats' support for DTE is no accident. The Democrats, just like the Republicans, do not represent the working class people of Detroit, or anywhere else in the country for that matter. They serve the interests of the big banks and corporations like DTE. Bing, for example, served on DTE's corporate board for 20 years. And DTE CEO Anthony Earley served as the chair of Bing's inauguration committee.

The struggle for free and full access to utilities requires workers first break with the Democrats and the whole two party system, and build up new organizations of struggle. In Detroit such an organization already exists: the Committee Against Utility Shutoffs. I encourage all workers—including utility workers—to join CAUS and take up the fight for the struggle for utilities as a social right.

The Socialist Equality Party calls for the nationalization of DTE as part of the broader transformation of the economy to meet the needs of the population, and not the parasitic financial elite. Trillions of dollars can be realized in this way that will put the unemployed to work modernizing the power grid and rebuilding America's crumbling infrastructure.

If you agree with this program, I urge you to join the Committee Against Utility Shutoffs and the Socialist Equality Party. Support my campaign and take up the fight for socialism!

For more information on the Committee Against Utility Shutoffs, visit our web site or follow us on Facebook. To get involved in the Socialist Equality Party campaign for D'Artagnan Collier, click here.



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