

# Detroit town hall meeting on utilities offers residents no help

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On Tuesday and Wednesday of this week, Detroit City Council member and former Mayor Kenneth Cockrel Jr. held a series of forums billed as a means of helping Detroit residents with their pressing utility bills. The hearings, held on the east and west sides of the city, were little more than a hoax. They were designed to make the political establishment appear concerned and willing to help, while offering little, if any, real assistance.

Of the approximately 150 people in attendance at the west side meeting on Wednesday, many were either struggling to keep their utilities on or were already living without them, despite the fact that they had children or older family members in the home.

Hundreds of thousands of households in the Detroit area, and throughout the state, have already had their utilities shut off because they cannot afford them. So far this year, according to information supplied by the Michigan Public Services Commission (MPSC), nearly 300,000 households have had their heat and/or electricity service terminated for non-payment. Since January, eleven Detroit residents have died in house fires that occurred after their utilities were turned off. In 2009, over 221,000 households in southeast Michigan alone were cut off by energy giants DTE and Consumers Energy.

At this week's hearings were representatives of DTE Energy, The Heat and Warmth Fund (THAW), Home Depot, as well as city officials from the Detroit Department of Human Services, which conducts energy surveys of homes upon request.

The forum, chaired by Cockrel, had almost a carnival atmosphere. The event was primarily devoted toward making the residents feel good, in an amateurish equivalent of a dog and pony show, complete with door prizes of insulation products and raffle drawings. The entire purpose was to prevent any airing of the pressing needs of the people in the room.

'This is not a meeting for complaints,' stated Cockrel

bluntly.

The event was divided into three sections, with the main portion consisting of presentations by DTE and others. A second section was made up of vendors handing out information. And finally, upstairs in a small room, residents could speak to representatives from the utility company about their bills.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with residents in attendance.

Betty, who is unemployed, is \$2,800 in arrears on her utility bills. She is on a monthly payment plan, whereby she has to pay DTE \$174 a month.

'Next month my unemployment check stops,' stated Betty. 'I just can't make [the payments], and they are not giving us any aid here.'

Betty said she purchased an older house a year ago for \$2,000. However, the boiler went out soon after she moved in. 'To update the boiler with a new heating system would cost me \$25,000. I just can't afford it. The house only cost me \$2,000. So right now I don't have any heat. I sleep with a stove on and a heater. I have heaters in every room.'

Bridgett Cochran, Betty's sister, came with her to the event. Bridgett has a \$4,000 utility bill that she is trying to get resolved. The bill accumulated after she moved out of a house where the utilities were in her name. After vacating the residence, she later realized the bills were still in her name, but the landlord blocked her efforts to have this changed.

'They told me I have to have a lot of documentation to show I wasn't there,' stated Bridgett.

DTE informed her that she needed to pay \$1,200 and go to the Family Independence Agency (Michigan's welfare agency) for help. 'They are wrong,' said Bridgett. 'FIA will not help you with a bill that is not current.'

'It's a lot of red tape,' explained Betty, adding, 'This is a woman with four kids who is only making \$8 an hour

on call with a temporary service.

Terrance Jeffrey said he also was disappointed with the offer of help he received from DTE. Terrance said he met with an agent from the company, and they lowered his monthly payment from \$300 a month to \$260.

“Hey, I’ll take whatever I can get, but it’s not that much,” stated Terrance. “It’s difficult out here with the way the economy is going. You would think they would help someone who is really trying.”

Terrance is only making \$9 an hour as a security guard. His hours were cut from 40 to 25 a week. “I went from full time work to part time work with full time bills. And if I miss a payment they will cut you off,” he stated.

Derrick Gilliam, who is trying to get his utilities back on, said the bills are just too high. “On my block 80 percent of the people are either on an illegal hookup or are shut off. It’s because they are unemployed.”

“People just can’t pay the rent and pay the utilities too,” Derrick continued. “A lot of houses are empty because people can’t pay the utility bills. Once the gas is cut off, it’s over for that house. The paint begins to crack, the toilets bust up and the pipes burst from the cold. It’s a mess. If you leave it in the winter and come back, it is not livable. A lot of people are moving to apartments and now the apartment rents are going up.”

“My bill was \$2,000,” continued Derrick. “I paid \$1,500 on the bill, but they sent me a shutoff notice the next month. By that time I was broke and couldn’t pay anymore.”

Ines Porter, a senior citizen, said she is on a fixed income of \$1,000 a month. “Now, you tell me, how am I going to pay a \$235 monthly gas bill?” she asked. “I just can’t do it. There are too many people facing these high bills.”

Marion Spellman and Tarnisha Buford had similar complaints. Marion said he had a bill for \$1,000, was shut off and was also trying to get help. Because he cannot get utilities in his name, he is presently living with his mother.

Tarnisha has a utility bill for \$1,100, and is on a budget plan paying \$294 a month. Tarnisha earns \$10 an hour working for a temp agency. With four children, she said she is finding it impossible to pay her bills as well.

“I need help,” stated Tarnisha. “They lowered my payment plan from \$294 to \$225 a month. But my rent is \$850 a month. After taxes, I take home \$360 a week. When you add it up, it is not enough. Everyone is facing the same problem throughout my neighborhood.”

Even as thousands of Michigan residents face the dire

consequences of exorbitant utility bills and shutoffs, DTE reported an increase in profits from \$151 million in the third quarter of last year to \$163 million in the third quarter of 2010. The company also recently requested a rate hike from the Michigan Public Service Commission, so that it could garner an additional \$253 million in revenue.

There is little doubt that the MPSC, which was appointed by Democratic Governor Jennifer Granholm, will grant the increase. Last year the agency’s commissioners allowed DTE to raise utility rates 20 percent for Detroiters alone.

Cockrel and his colleagues in the Michigan Democratic Party are well aware of the desperate social conditions in Detroit. Their primary aim, however, is not to improve conditions of life for the state’s residents, but to ensure that the utility conglomerates and the Wall Street investors that stand behind them can continue making profits at all costs. Aware of the growing anger developing in Detroit and throughout the state, the political establishment occasionally engages in public relations stunts to make it appear as if they’re doing something for ordinary people.

In Michigan, and throughout the country, working class families opposed to the criminal policies of the utility companies—their high rates and their practice of shutting people off for non-payment—should join the Committee Against Utility Shutoffs (CAUS). CAUS insists that access to heat, electricity, and phone service are basic social rights. No person should ever live without them for any reason and no private corporation should make money off providing these essential services.

To join CAUS and find out more about the struggle oppose utility shutoffs, click here.



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