

# Thousands seek help in Detroit with winter utility payments

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Several thousand residents who have either lost their utility service or are in danger of doing so attended a “Customer Assistance Day” sponsored by DTE Energy in downtown Detroit on Monday.

Low-income workers, the unemployed and families with small children braved the bitter cold and the season’s first major snow storm to come to the event, which the energy giant expected to attract up to 7,000 applicants. Behind on their utility bills, many who attended owe the company thousands of dollars.

The event was a public relations affair that will do little to help the enormous numbers of people facing the prospect of a winter without heat and lights in their homes. DTE spokesman Scott Simons said 476,000 customers are currently behind on their bills, and that the utility’s electrical and gas divisions had already cut off service to 200,000 households this year.

There is no state law prohibiting the shutoff of utilities in the winter, despite the fact that house fires caused by space heaters, ovens and other unsafe forms of heating are a regular occurrence in Detroit. During the winter months last year, at least 11 area residents—including small children, handicapped workers and senior citizens—lost their lives in house fires that occurred after the DTE cut off service to their homes. The tragedies provoked public outrage and led to the formation of the Committee Against Utility Shutoffs by the Socialist Equality Party. (See CAUS web site).

DTE urged those attending Monday’s event to apply for assistance from charities like the Salvation Army and cash-strapped state agencies. One such program, the State Emergency Relief Fund (SER), relies on funding from the federal Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP), whose allocation Congress is slated to be cut by 35 percent this season, from \$5.1 billion to \$3.3 billion.

Even after meeting stringent income requirements and other hurdles to qualify for the SER program, a worker with the Michigan Department of Human Services, which oversees the program, told the WSWs, “The maximum help someone can get from us is a one-time \$350 check for gas and another \$350 for electricity—for a total of \$700. You can only use it once and many people run out of money before the winter and have no heat.

“When we make a payment to DTE it holds them off for 30 days. Then they can come right back and shut off your service. If you owe more than a total of \$700, you have to pay off the balance or you’ll be cut off. We’re being overwhelmed by the need.”

Another program, The Heat and Warmth Fund (THAW), which is only available to low-income residents who have received a shut-off notice or have already been cut off and who have exhausted all federal and state funded programs, quickly runs out of resources each year, leaving tens of thousands of households with no assistance.

DTE officials boasted that a series of fundraising events held this past weekend aimed to bring in \$1 million to help residents pay their utility bills. This is a drop in the bucket compared to the hundreds of millions in back bills being demanded by the Fortune 500 company, which has made a half billion in profits so far this year.

“How much more would be available to help utility payers would depend on federal grants from LIHEAP,” Simons told the WSWs. Noting that the program had lost billions in funding, he added, “With fewer dollars it means there will be fewer people getting help.”

Monday’s “Customer Assistance Day” was one of a series of public relations events held by DTE to deflect criticisms over its shutoff policy and exorbitant rates. The events have had the added purpose of boosting the false idea that there are innumerable resources to help customers. They are designed to propagate the myth that if a household’s utilities are shut off, it’s their own fault.

In an effort to deny its responsibility for the house fires last year and prepare public opinion for a further loss of life this winter, DTE, state and local politicians and the news media have also blamed the tragedies on unauthorized utility hookups and so-called “energy theft.” (See “Media campaigns against ‘energy theft’ at beginning of heating season”)

Members and supporters of CAUS passed out a statement (“End all utility shutoffs! Electricity and gas must be social rights!”) encouraging the development of an independent movement of the working class to take profit out of the provision of utilities.

Several residents stopped to speak to the *World Socialist Web Site*. An unemployed construction worker who had an outstanding bill of \$2,000 said, “People are standing in long lines here and there is no guarantee that they will get help. You can get a \$1,000 bill for the winter. Everybody is going through a rough time now. The utility rates are going higher and higher. All you have in this country is the rich and the poor—it’s all divided into classes.

“What are people going to do if they cut off your heat in the winter? People have kids and they are not going to watch them

freeze to death. DTE screams about ‘energy theft’ but people are going to do what they have to. If you were in the woods and it was ice cold, you would start a fire. It’s natural.”

Angela Robinson, who works at Comerica Park baseball stadium, said, “I was laid off for a month and got behind on the bills. They shouldn’t be allowed to cut you off. Heat, water and lights are a basic necessity. There aren’t many jobs and people should be helped.”

Renee Williams said, “A lot of people are behind on their bills. There should be a law against DTE raising rates. Now they have gas and light bills together, and if you can’t pay one they’ll shut you off of both services. People are using hot plates, stoves and space heaters to stay warm. I had a fire at my house last night. It started in the backyard and fortunately it never came into the house. The only reason DTE is holding this event is because that two-year-old lost his life in house with no heat and so many others did last year. It takes people to die before they offer any help.” (See “Two-year-old boy dies in Detroit house fire” )

“A lot of people are struggling. There are no jobs. The Democrats and the Republicans aren’t doing anything. People are willing to work, but they don’t have jobs. You turn in a job application and they say, ‘We’ll get back to you’ or ‘We’ll keep it on file.’

“Mayor Bing is worthless. I heard the city was giving traffic tickets to cars that were on the streets last September after the fires caused by DTE. The cars were all burnt up and they gave the people parking tickets. As for Obama, all these politicians will say anything to get elected and then they will do nothing to help.

“It should be a crime to cut people off—but it isn’t. Kids are dying every day and DTE doesn’t want to take any responsibility.”

Crystal Brittan, a laid-off postal worker, said, “I’ve always thought that gas and electricity should be a basic human right that is guaranteed to everyone. But you are the first one that I heard say that.

“DTE doesn’t want it that way because they are making billions off poor people. This event is propaganda—making it look like DTE is doing something for the people, but they’re not helping. They gave me a \$25 credit for coming here. If they hand that out to a couple thousand of people it won’t even make a dent.

“Some people have \$6,000 to \$7,000 in back bills. My friend had her lights and gas cut off and her children are in the cold. What if people don’t have any place to go? Now they are charging people with fraud for hooking up to the utility lines. But what are you going to do if you can’t pay?”

Daryl and Katherine Burchett have five children and are in danger of having their utilities cut off. Daryl, who is unemployed, said, “I’m laid off from doing fence work and welding. We’re here to get help because the bills are so high. If it weren’t for our family helping us out we would be just one step from being homeless.”

Katherine added, “It would be terrible to be without heat in the winter. We have a three-year-old.”

Daryl continued, “You’re going to see a lot of people from southwest Detroit down here today. They’re no jobs and they are talking about growing crops in the neighborhood. I have nothing

against crops, but we need good jobs.”

Asked about the efforts to portray poverty in Detroit as a race question because of the city’s large African-American population, Daryl said, “That’s a bunch of crock. This is affecting everybody—black, white and immigrant. We’re all facing tough times.”

John Morris, said, “My bill is sky high. I was working at the Salvation Army and now I am laid off. I have a sister at home who is handicapped and she has to pay \$500 a month in rent. The utility bill is in my name and is \$205. I can’t pay that; my sister can’t pay that. I couldn’t make their payment plan to keep from them shutting it off. They haven’t shut it off yet. I am hoping I get some sort of assistance. You hear so much about people getting their utilities cut off, and it is getting cold out there.”

Heddy Dooley told the WSWs, “I am behind on my bill. I am a full-time student on Social Security and have a part-time job. It is hard to find full-time work. I feel bad for the elderly people and the handicapped. Every time the winter comes, you hear about people who die because their utilities were shut off.”

Naomi and Roderick Scott also spoke to the WSWs. “They didn’t give us any help at all,” Naomi said. “I filled out the applications and they gave us the \$50 credit for our bill. They are telling us to go to THAW or the Salvation Army.”

“And THAW is saying they will not have any money until January,” Roderick said. “They are saying there is no help right now.”

Naomi added, “I have four kids and I explained that the best I could do is to pay \$300 a month. They said no, they want the entire sum up front. That’s \$8,000. Where are we going to get \$8,000? We saved up the money to buy the house for \$10,000. The bill is almost the amount we paid for the house.

“I worked at Ford for six years as a full-time worker, from 2002 to 2008. Then I was laid off for two years. When I got called back in 2010 we were put on a lower tier wage of \$14 an hour, instead of \$28. When I complained to the union they said, ‘Be happy you are working.’”



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