

CAUS votes to hold Detroit march against utility shutoffs

Our reporter
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On January 13, the Committee Against Utility Shutoffs (CAUS) voted to hold a march and demonstration against the shutoff policies of the local utility conglomerate DTE Energy.

More than 25 people attended the meeting at a west side library. The proposal to hold the march, introduced by CAUS chairman Lawrence Porter, passed overwhelmingly.

Following the vote, several CAUS members agreed to form a committee to develop a plan of action to build the march, and a number of others volunteered to hold meetings in their homes to build support for the march among city residents.

In introducing the proposal, Porter outlined a plan for the march and demonstration, which will be held on March 12, 2011, beginning at 8011 Dexter Avenue in Detroit. The location is the site of a January 2010 fire that took the lives of two disabled brothers, Tyrone and Marvin Allen and their friend Lynn Greer after DTE cut off utilities to their house.

The march will proceed north on Dexter Avenue for 1.5 miles and rally at the Dexter-Elmhurst Center, located at 11825 Dexter Avenue in Detroit.

The meeting approved the following demands for the march:

- End all utility shutoffs! Restore services to all those cut off from gas and electricity!
- Turn DTE and other utility companies into public enterprises, run democratically for social need, not private profit!
- Hold DTE and its executives legally responsible for deaths caused by utility shutoffs!
- Establish a multi-billion-dollar public works program to put residents back to work and rebuild Detroit!
- Establish a working class movement independent of

the Democrats and Republicans!

The discussion that followed Porter's proposal was wide-ranging. One member asked why CAUS does not advocate residents quitting the electrical grid and using their own sources of energy. A member of CAUS and the Socialist Equality Party, Tim Tower, explained the idea of establishing independent energy supplies would cost as much as \$50,000 for each household—a sum that was impossible for Detroit families. The central issue, he said, was transforming the utility monopolies into publicly owned and controlled entities, so that gas and electricity could be provided on the basis of human need, not private profit.

Another supporter proposed a petitioning campaign to place the issue of the right to utilities on the ballot. "I know there was a campaign that was very effective that DTE shut down," stated the supporter. "This way, we can go around the legislature. It would not be based on what they support or oppose."

Etta, an older member of CAUS, answered her. "People have to understand," stated Etta, "that we have to fight for our rights. They weren't given to us. I'm a senior citizen and I've been in many marches. I can tell you that the only reason Roosevelt pushed for Social Security in the 30s was because he was afraid there would be a revolution in America. We have to march. That's going to let people know there's a movement."

Another supporter, a former member of the Michigan Welfare Rights Organization, asked what was going to be done to address the fact that people are living without utilities now. "While I agree with the long-term goals, what is going to be done now to address people's needs?" she asked. Instead of a march in the neighborhood she proposed holding it in front of DTE's headquarters to pressure company officials to change their shutoff policy.

Porter explained there was no shortcut to building a powerful movement of the working class because appeals to big business and their servants in the Democratic and Republican parties would not change anything. “A new program and party for the working class is urgently needed now,” he said. “We have two parties in power who are committed to defending the wealth of the rich. The only way this will change is when the working class begins to mobilize its own independent strength.”

Porter said the Democratic Party could not be relied on, pointing to the policies of the Obama administration. “Obama provided a bailout for Wall Street,” he said. “But what happened to the working class? This government is cutting the LIHEAP home-heating assistance program even though it is needed now more than ever.”

Porter said the purpose of the CAUS campaign is to mobilize workers to take a united stand in opposition to the shut-off policies of the utility companies. “That’s why we are proposing to hold the demonstration in a working class neighborhood,” he said. “It’s the workers who are going to have to make the change in our society.”

Doris, a member who knows many people living without utilities, said she is ready to fight DTE’s shutoff policies. “Until I met this organization I thought I was the only one who wanted to fight DTE,” she said. “I thought I would have to get my own sign and march because no one else was doing anything. I don’t know about others but I am ready.”

Cynthia agreed. “I’m young and I’m ready to get out and work. Let me know what we need to do and I will be there.”

According to data from DTE, by the end of November, 476,000 customers in southeast Michigan were behind on their bills, and the utility’s electrical and gas divisions had cut off service to over 200,000 households in 2010.

Consumers Energy, the second largest utility company in Michigan serving the middle, northern and western parts of the state, carried out over 126,000 shutoffs, proving that this not a problem relating solely to Detroit and its suburbs.

If the monthly average continued at its current pace of 30,000 shutoffs for the remaining three months of the

year, nearly one million people will have experienced utility shutoffs in the state.

“The shutoff policies of DTE and Consumers Energy are class issues,” Porter said, “affecting both black and white workers who are struggling to make ends meet in an economy that is at near Depression levels.”

Porter also addressed the claims by DTE, the politicians and the media that “energy theft” was responsible for the tragic house fires. Unauthorized hookups, he said, are simply a symptom of the inability of workers to afford utility bills under conditions of mass unemployment and wage-cutting. Rather than protecting citizens from the tragedies caused by the profit drive of the utility giants, Porter said, the politicians from both the Democratic and Republican parties approve the rate hikes and DTE’s shutoff policy.

“The aim of our march is not to protest to these politicians or even to DTE,” stated Porter. “Our aim is to appeal to the workers to fight for a policy that ends all shutoffs. We believe utilities should be a social right. You cannot live without utilities. We are fighting for a program that says these companies should be publicly owned and that utilities should not be based on profit.”

Porter noted that there was no law to make it illegal to shut off someone’s utilities even in the winter, though the link between shutoffs and house fires is well known and was demonstrated by the Findings of the Citizens Inquiry into the Dexter Avenue Fire (see Utility Shutoffs and the Social Crisis in Detroit).



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