

Detroit house fire injures five

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Early Monday morning, January 24, fire destroyed a home on the west side of Detroit where both the gas and electricity had been shut off. The blaze, reported at 5:45 a.m., resulted in the injury of three young people living in the home as well as two firefighters.

Emory Johnson, a neighbor, told the *World Socialist Web Site* that the family had been struggling for some time with low income and high bills. Emory said that local utility giant DTE Energy demanded the family pay \$14,000 to get their service restored.

“The bill was for \$7,000,” stated Emory, “but what they [DTE] do is double the cost because they want collateral. If the bill is \$500 they add another \$500. The \$7,000 is a deposit, but who can pay that kind of money? She couldn’t afford the original bill. How was she going to pay \$14,000? It just wasn’t going to happen.”

Detroit Fire Department spokesman Captain Kwaku Atara said the cause of the fire, on the 11600 block of Vaughn Street, was determined to be cooking-related. Neighbors said there were seven space heaters in the house. Atara stated that the home had an unauthorized, or “illegal electrical hookup,” that was reported to DTE.

“The mother of the home is a single mom with three daughters, two of them in college,” stated Emory. “She works hard, she works for a credit union, but it is hard to keep up when there isn’t enough money coming in,” he stated. While helping each other out of the burning home, one girl suffered a broken leg, another smoke inhalation and the third a skull fracture. The family lost two pets in the blaze.

“They had an unauthorized electrical hookup,” continued Emory, “but what are you suppose to do? They couldn’t afford the utilities because the bills were so high.”

Emory said last summer the mother tried everything to get help with her utility bills. However, wherever she

went they said the money had run out.

When the family was unable to pay the DTE bill last summer, Emory told the WSWWS, the company “dug up the yard to remove the gas connection.” This is an extreme measure that has become commonplace in Detroit, requiring a backhoe to dig up the yard.

It was then that DTE told the family they would require \$14,000 to ever have their service restored. “It is outrageous what they are doing to people. How can you pay this?” added Emory. “If I have a family to feed and a roof to keep over my head, you have to take care of those things. They don’t care. They will come out and dig up your yard for that bill.”

Emory said several of his neighbors had their gas lines dug up. “Man, it was like a regular construction crew on the block, they were here so often. Every time you look around they were digging up somebody’s yard.” These work crews were not there to build anything, however; they were there to destroy and to carry out shutoffs.

“You know, if you are on the payment plan and you are late, they force you to pay the entire amount. I think they have a plan to force people out of these areas anyway,” stated Emory, who lost his home due to taxes. “If you look at who are buying these homes, it is not ordinary people. It is businesses. They are coming in and buying up property cheap.”

“I lost my home for \$208,” he stated. “The house was placed in foreclosure and auctioned off. In the first auction there were no takers, but in that auction you have to pay all of the back taxes, etc. At the second auction I bid \$1,500 but it sold for \$1,708. So I lost my house.”

“All of this is to make the poor man poorer. I think there shouldn’t be any utility shutoffs. There has to be a better way than this.”

It is estimated that close to 1 million Michigan residents have lived without utilities at some point

during the last year. Thousands have lived without authorized use of the electrical grid for a year or more. The poverty rate in Detroit is 33.6 percent for adults and 50.6 percent for children under 18.

This is one of the most dangerous times of the year for Detroit residents as the wind chills are running as low as minus ten degrees Fahrenheit. The WSWS is supporting the campaign of the Committee Against Utility Shutoffs (CAUS), which is organizing a march and demonstration on March 12 to build a movement of the working class to fight for the right to utilities for all.



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