

CAUS holds press conference to announce March 12 demonstration

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The Committee Against Utility Shutoffs (CAUS) held a press conference on Friday to announce plans for a March 12 demonstration against utility shutoffs. The event was held at the Dexter-Elmhurst center in Detroit, which is located in the same neighborhood where a house fire killed three people a little over a year ago after their utilities were shut off.

CAUS Chairman and Socialist Equality Party member Lawrence Porter opened the press conference. He explained that the purpose of the March 12 demonstration, which will begin at 2pm at 8011 Dexter Avenue and end at the Dexter-Elmhurst Center at 11825 Dexter Avenue, is to oppose utility shutoffs in Detroit. He said that CAUS's fight is part of a broader struggle of working people across the US against growing attacks on their living standards.

"Utility shutoffs have reached epidemic proportions in Detroit and the entire region," Porter noted. "Close to 400,000 homes in Michigan had their utilities shut off by companies like DTE and Consumers Energy at some point in 2010. The total number of people affected by gas and electricity shutoffs in this state comes to close to one million. According to the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP), 4.3 million homes had their gas or electricity terminated throughout the country in 2009. Literally millions of people are forced to live without utilities in the US simply because they cannot afford it."

Porter pointed to the toll of suffering caused by utility shutoffs. "In the Detroit area, thousands of working people have gone through this terribly cold winter without heat. Others resort to unsafe heating methods, which can cause house fires and deaths. More than a dozen people died in house fires in Detroit after their

utilities were shut off last year. This includes Marvin and Tyrone Allen and their friend, Lynn Greer, who died on January 5, 2010 at the house where the march will begin. It includes the three children of Sylvia Young, aged 3, 4 and 5, who were tragically consumed in a fire on Bangor street exactly one year ago."

"Both Democrats and Republicans are responsible for these tragedies," said Porter. "Their response has been to shield and defend the companies while working people suffer. Here in Detroit, Mayor David Bing sat on the board of directors for DTE for 20 years. And as the crisis of utility shutoffs intensifies, president Obama has announced plans to cut the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program in half, from \$5 billion to \$2.5 billion."

Porter noted that DTE increased its profits by more than \$100 million last year in one of the most economically depressed areas of the country. "As DTE states in their filing to the SEC (Securities and Exchange Commission), they increased their profit margins through 'increasing customer disconnections.'

"Utility shutoffs are one aspect of an immense social crisis in Detroit and throughout the country, including mass unemployment, poverty and the destruction of basic social services," Porter said.

"CAUS insists that utilities must be a social right, available to everyone, not a luxury subject to the profit-making of companies like DTE and Consumers Energy. We demand an immediate end to all shutoffs and the restoration of service to those who have already been cut off."

Calling these conditions "intolerable" Porter urged working people to oppose these policies "just as working people in Wisconsin are demonstrating in the thousands against budget cuts and attacks on their rights." He continued, "This demonstration on March

12 will be the beginning of such a struggle. We urge all Detroit residents to participate in our march and meeting, and to join CAUS.”

Doris Marie Griffin, a member of CAUS, also spoke. She pointed to the “inhuman conditions” that people are forced to live in and the impossible situation created by the utility companies.

“DTE gives you a rate that you can’t pay. They give you a payment plan you can’t afford, and then if you do not meet that payment date, your payment plan is null and void.

“I think it is time for the people to stand up and let these companies and corporations know that we are not going to continue to tolerate inhumane conditions,” Griffin said.

Lela Howard, another CAUS member, pointed out that many “people who pay their bills still don’t have service.” She spoke about her own experience with the company.

“I went in to DTE and paid \$841, and they told me my gas and lights would be restored the next day. I waited the next day and the day following. I have no service.”

Following his statement, Porter took several questions. Addressing the availability of assistance for those facing utility shutoffs, Porter insisted that the programs available are inadequate.

“THAW, The Heating and Warmth Fund, raised \$13 million in 2010, but it ran out of funds on a regular basis. Last December DTE held an energy assistance day. Many of the people who attended were told they would get help, but did not. We later found out that the purpose of these gatherings is to gather information on the people who are behind in their bills and use that in an aggressive way to shut more people off.”

In response to a reporter’s question about “energy theft,” Porter said that illegal hookups are an expression of the desperate conditions facing masses of people in the area. He noted, however, that rather than the government taking action to prevent shutoffs, they have worked to strengthen the legal hand of DTE in their campaign against “energy thieves.”

“According to DTE, there are 65,000 homes in Detroit that had an illegal connection to their grid. Legislation was passed last summer, supported by government officials from Detroit, to make it illegal, with a possible 5-10 year jail sentence, to have an

unauthorized hookup. If you threatened a utility worker, you could receive 10 years in jail. The Democratic governor of the state signed the law. We noted at the time that the only reason people had unauthorized hookups was that they were desperate to have utilities, especially in winter.

“The fact that politicians passed a bill to defend DTE Energy and not the population is significant. Why didn’t they pass a bill saying it was illegal to shut off someone’s utilities?”

Channel 7 and Channel 2 news in Detroit sent a cameraman to cover the press conference. However, the major print media, including the *Detroit News* and *Detroit Free Press*, and National Public Radio—all of which have carried news stories highlighting Detroit’s “energy theft” problem—boycotted the event.



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