

Lawrence Porter at CAUS rally: “Utilities are a social right!”

14 March 2011

The following remarks were given at the beginning of the March 12 demonstration of the Committee Against Utility Shutoffs by Lawrence Porter, chairman of CAUS and assistant national secretary of the Socialist Equality Party. (See also, “Demonstration in Detroit demands end to utility shutoffs”).

Porter began the demonstration with a moment of silence to remember those who have died in fires caused by utility shutoffs, including Marvin and Tyrone Allen and Lynn Greer, who perished in a January 5, 2010 blaze at 8011 Dexter Avenue, where the demonstration began.

We come here today both in remembrance and in protest. We are gathered here to remember those who have lost their lives in fires caused by utility shutoffs. At the same time we raise our voice in protest against the barbaric conditions that lead to their tragic deaths.

We have come here today to denounce the unconscionable policy of shutoffs that have taken scores of lives in house fires, and have left people to freeze to death because they did not have heat.

One hundred and fifty years ago last weekend, Abraham Lincoln was inaugurated president of the United States. Speaking of the immense tensions building up in the country as it headed toward Civil War, Lincoln declared, “I believe this government cannot endure, permanently half slave, and half free.”

Well I ask you brothers and sisters: can this nation long endure when the freedom to live a decent life is denied not just to *half* the population, but to *its vast majority*?

They say that America is the “land of the free.” But what is freedom? Are you free if you have no job and

cannot afford enough to eat? Are you free if your schools are being shut down and your neighborhoods falling apart? Are you free if you do not have lights or gas? Are you free if your loved ones—like Wanda Scott with her 95-year-old father, or a mother with children—are snatched from your homes because you cannot afford heat?

In America, freedom is determined by your wealth. If you have money, you write the rules, and then you can break them without any penalties.

The government launched a war based on lies, and no one was prosecuted. In 2008, Wall Street nearly wrecked the economy. To this day millions of people are out of work. They even bailed out the banks with tax-payer money, and no one has been prosecuted.

They can shut off your utilities resulting in the death of children, and no one is prosecuted. However, if you steal a little electricity to keep your family warm, then you have to take “personal responsibility,” then you are prosecuted.

The other day, a woman called the CAUS number and said in opposition to our campaign, “Utilities are not a God given right.” I answered, Neither is the right to an education. There was child labor in this country until 1938, only 73 years ago. The right not to have our children exploited in sweatshops, like all rights of the working class, was a right that had to be fought for. This struggle was closely connected to the rise of industrial unions and the newly formed CIO movement that organized the sit-down strikes, many led by socialist-minded workers.

The same is true with the right to vote. Every right the working class has won it had to be fought for. Rights are not given; they are determined in struggle.

We say, utilities are a social right! It is unconscionable that millions of people should have to

go without heat or electricity. People have a right not to freeze to death! They have the right not to live on the bare edge of survival! To realize this right, however, we must fight for it. And this demonstration is an initial stage in this fight.

At the heart of this demonstration is the understanding that if workers are to win their rights, they must organize themselves independently. We must organize independently of the trade unions, who have abandoned this city as they have abandoned the working class as a whole. We must organize independently of the Democrats and Republicans.

It doesn't matter if it is a Democratic administration or a Republican administration, both parties rule in the interest of the corporations, including the utility companies here in Detroit and Michigan.

Under the administration of Jennifer Granholm, and with the support of Democratic state representatives from Detroit, five "anti-energy theft" bills were passed on behalf of DTE. Five bills to blame the victims, but not a single bill to make it illegal to shut off someone's utilities.

As for the illustrious David Bing, well, we hardly need to speak of him. The man was on the board of directors of DTE for 20 years. Twenty years! Like so many politicians today, he passes in and out of government and the corporate boardroom as easy as a rat crawls in and out of his hole.

We say utilities are a social right! And this right is counterposed to the "right" of DTE to make record profits by shutting people off of gas and electricity. It is opposed to the "right" of the wealthy to loot the public treasuries and turn around and demand the debts be paid out of the pockets of the poor.

For America, the land of the free, freedom today means little more than the freedom of a small minority to exploit, plunder and drive into poverty the vast majority.

We reject this entirely, and that is why we are gathered here today. We are here not to appeal to DTE, for they do not hear our appeals. We are here not to beg Mayor Bing, for he listens to a different paymaster. We are here to assert our strength, the strength of the working class. We are here to pledge to carry forward this struggle until we have created a society that no longer sacrifices the lives of those who have died here, along with countless millions throughout the world, to

the altar of profit.

That is what this march is about today. This is a new day for working people. All over the world, working people are beginning to fight. In Wisconsin, workers are marching in the tens of thousands this very day against the determination of the government to destroy their rights. There is a different mood today than there was even a year ago. Working people are looking for a new way to fight.

This is why CAUS was formed, and this is only the beginning. We are prepared to stand shoulder to shoulder with our brothers and sisters all over the world in saying, "We are ready to fight."



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