

86,000 Michigan households hit by utility shutoffs this winter

Larry Porter
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On April 28, DTE Energy held a “Customer Assistance Day” at the Wayne County Community College campus in Downriver Detroit suburb of Taylor, Michigan. Over 4,500 special notices were sent out to area residents who are in danger of a shutoff.

A DTE spokesman said the energy giant was holding the event and planning future ones because of the dramatic increase in the number of households falling behind in payments. The “assistance” days are basically public relations events, which provide little if any assistance to those who cannot afford to heat and light their homes.

Statewide statistics for the frigidly cold months of January, February and March confirm that the utility companies have escalated their brutal policy of utility shutoffs. DTE shut off nearly 50,000 households during the period and the other local gas and electric company, Consumers Energy, shut off another 36,000 households.

The Downriver Detroit area is comprised of 18 neighborhoods adjacent to the Detroit River, south of the city proper. Since the early to mid-20th century, the area has been home to dozens of auto plants, ship builders, steel mills and chemical plants—all of which have either closed or downsized their labor force to a fraction of their levels several decades ago.

Flatrock, for example, has been dominated by auto production since 1925 when Ford Motor Company built its Ford Lamp Factory. In the 1970s the Michigan Casting Company was among the most technically developed casting facilities, however declining demand for the V8 engine led to its closure in 1982. The plant was then purchased by Japanese automaker Mazda and is now a joint venture between Ford Motor Co. and Mazda, known as AutoAlliance.

AutoAlliance now pays roughly half of the entire city

of Flatrock’s taxes and is the area’s largest employer. Last year, Mazda announced the layoff of the second shift—900 workers—and this past February 2011, it said they may pull out of the joint venture altogether because they are operating at a loss. Company officials say the fate of the plant will be determined by mid-2011.

This elimination of jobs throughout the Downriver communities has affected tens of thousands of families and led to growing desperation over utility shutoffs.

Kierra Olivera is unemployed and working casually doing hair. She told the *World Socialist Web Site*, “I had a family member die in a house fire last October from a gas leak. They smelled it long before, but DTE wouldn’t come out. And today they told me they couldn’t help me.” Kierra said that after terminating her budget plan, DTE sent her a bill for \$606 and a shutoff notice. At the Customer Assistance Day, she was told that her account was being closed.

Gary and Sandy Rider came to the assistance day because of a shutoff notice. Gary’s bill was \$1,007, and he was told he needed to make a minimum payment of \$895 to keep his utilities on.

“It is impossible to make ends meet,” said Gary. Sandy added that Gary only gets \$800 a month, a large part of which goes for child support. “It’s impossible to pay these bills. People just can’t do it.”

“I work four jobs to try to make ends meet,” Sandy said. “We are separated, but I try to help the best I can.”

“You see babies with no heat,” continued Sandy. “It is terrible. Last week there were three fires in Detroit. My girlfriend is having problems with her bill. She owes \$450.”

Eddie J. Borom, a Chrysler retiree, said he came to get help with his payments but was told that he and his

wife made too much money to qualify. He explained that one month he got behind in his bill, but the next month he paid extra. “They raised my monthly rate to \$298 from \$225,” stated Eddie, commenting that it was a punitive measure.

“They raise the rates, not because it is needed, but because they can do it. They are greedy. Paying the utility bill is a problem everyone is having. I think it was a mistake to combine the two utility companies [Detroit Edison and Michigan Consolidated Gas] together. Now if they shut off one utility they can shut them both. Politics is part of this. The corporations get the tax breaks but the people suffer.

“A guy like me, who is supposed to be in the middle class, is gone,” stated Eddie. “We were the ones that made these companies what they are and now they are squeezing us out of what little we have. Things are going too far. It has to be put to a stop.

“I worked for Chrysler 37 years and now they have cut our benefits, like dental and other health care provisions.”

“I came here to look for relief to make sure I did not get my utilities shutoff,” said Jerome Jackson, who is subsisting on Supplemental Social Security (SSI), the government disability program. “I had a shutoff notice four months ago. I took it to FIA and they helped me pay for it.

“One of the biggest problems I am facing,” he continued, “is the danger of foreclosure. A government agency purchased 60 homes for many of us. They received government grant money that they were not supposed to use for purchasing homes, only for leasing them. Now they are not paying the mortgage. As a result the house has been foreclosed on twice.”



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