

Detroit residents: “There is nothing here for the people but a struggle”

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On November 21 thousands lined up at utility monopoly DTE Energy’s Customer Assistance Day at Cobo Hall in Detroit. The huge turnout reflects the increasing misery facing ever wider layers of the population in Detroit, the poorest big city in the United States.

WSWS reporters spoke to a number of those attending the event.

Jasmine is a college student at Henry Ford Community College and only works part-time as a tax preparer from November to April. She is on a payment plan, but missed one payment and had her utilities shut off by DTE Energy.

“My dad said this would be a bill-wiping service. There were so many people that it is clear there is no bill-wiping service taking place.

“I had an overdue bill of \$2,000 and I filed a complaint explaining that my electricity was not working. I couldn’t understand how my bill went so high when we hardly used the power. Instead of fixing the problem, they came out and turned off my utilities.

“I’m on the payment plan to pay \$180 a month and I missed one payment. I explained that I am not working and that it is hard getting work. I also explained to them [DTE] that I was not getting full power, that something was wrong with the line. A repairman came out and discovered that the set-up of the line was like a sham job. Still they shut me off.”

Jasmine said she agreed with the opposition to utility shutoffs. “My biggest concern is older people who are on a fixed income. I know older people who are only getting \$600 a month. How are they going to pay \$180? That’s really terrible.

“One of my friends does not have gas and has an illegal electrical hookup. I know it is bad and it is widespread.”

Cheryl Davis told us, “The bills are really high. I am on a monthly plan. They want to charge me \$180 for gas and lights. I am being charged extra for what I don’t use. The bottom line is that they are in control of the people’s money. I am struggling to try to make it. They are making it harder.”

Annette Hines and her daughter Stacy Hines spoke to the WSWS. DTE officials had turned them away because their utilities had already been disconnected. Annette said, “I don’t think utilities should be shut off, especially in the winter. They should work with you some way.”

Stacy explained, “Our gas was shut off in August.” She showed

us a bill for \$4,429.95. “I couldn’t understand that. They had been estimating the bill. They wanted me to pay all of it except \$850 that would be paid by the Department of Human Services. I don’t know what I am going to do. I have two minors in the house and it’s starting to get cold.”

Annette added, “I don’t know what we are going to do. I am not working. There are a lot of people being turned away.”

Curtis Boldin spoke to the WSWS. He said he formerly worked for the now closed Farmer Jack supermarket chain and is currently employed at a glass recycling company. “There is no balance in the capitalist system. The ones at the top have everything. People are going to have to start fighting back.

“The Democratic Party and Obama are back to the Eisenhower days. The Democratic Party now is not progressive.”

Milton Silas worked at the Sterling Heights Ford transmission plant for 15 years before being laid off. He told the WSWS, “My utilities were cut off for \$2,000 and they want \$1,000. You still have to eat.

“Right now I am living with someone else and their utilities have been shut off. If your bill is \$1,500, they want \$750. How can you come up with that much if you are on unemployment? Especially in the winter, you can’t cut off utilities for families and kids.”

Dorothy Woods, age 84, commented, “They are saying I will be cut off. They put me in the hands of a collection agency. Each month I am sending them money. I was cut off in July and they just put me back on October 18.

“I have to have a breathing machine. My doctor faxed a letter to them. They shut me off anyway. I have letters saying that I am paying this agency every single month. It isn’t like I have skipped. I am too old to be without heat.”

Pamela Spears is on disability. She has a \$3,000 utility bill without the income to pay it: “I went to the Department of Human Services in October for help with my utility bill. They told me I had to come up with \$2,400 by November 4, and they would help me with the rest if I wanted to keep my utilities on.”

Pamela has arthritis in her knees and was forced to leave her job at a call in center.

“Where was I going to get it from? I’m on disability and only get \$182 a week. I have to pay rent, food, medical bills, insurance and other bills out of that. How can I do it?

“I have tried everywhere you can think of to get money to pay the bill. Went to the Salvation Army, churches, The Heat and

Warmth fund [THAW], St. Vincent de Paul [Catholic charity], you name it. There was no stone left unturned. I even went to Paypal to get money out.

“What am I supposed to do? I have to eat. My car insurance will run out soon.

“One of the things that really bothers me is what the companies did with the mortgage lending. If I had done any of those things I would be in jail. Those prime lending mortgage schemes should be illegal. And look at the situation. They are still in business making money and getting paid the high salaries.”

Nancy Williams “They are raping us. They have increased the rates, the percentage per watt, and there is no employment in the state of Michigan. You can’t even get a temp service job. All the kids with college educations have the McDonald’s work. There is nothing here for the people but a struggle. They know that and they still keep piling bill on top of bill.

“Like me for instance, I paid all the money I could on my bill because I am on a fixed income. I am still subject to shutoff. I get paid once a month and that’s it. I have to pay my rent, my light and gas, my water bill, plus household things. Where is the money going to come from? I have a family of four and God is not going to drop down any dollars on us.

“I collect Social Security Disability and it is not enough. I get \$841 a month and my rent is \$800. What are you supposed to do in a situation like that? You have a place to live, but then you can’t have it warm and you can’t see inside. They need something better to help people out. I am in shutoff status right now.

“I live in a private residence and I have an illness, I have to at least keep warm or I am in pain. Do they take that into consideration? No. That is not even a qualification under their rules.

“The top dogs need to come down to the bottom level for a week or two and live in somebody’s home that doesn’t have energy, and see how they feel about it. People don’t want to steal, they don’t want to cheat, but if that’s the only option you leave them, don’t expect them not to take it.”

Shawn Rios and Christina Rios, two sisters, spoke to the WSW.

Christina: “It is not so much the electric, but the enormous gas bills. You are not just charged so much for the usage, you are charged tax upon tax. Service cost, distributing cost, this cost, that cost. That’s really where the problem is. There are too many extra charges.”

Shawn: “I live in Dearborn Heights—my taxes are almost as much as my gas and electric. When I was on the payment protection plan, I paid \$74 a month, although my current bill was \$150, and the rest of it goes on a balance and sits there and never gets paid.”

Christina: “And don’t overuse if you are on the payment protection plan. If you overuse nine months out of the 12 they cut you off or they will make your budget go up. So how is this budget helping me if I can’t even pay the regular usage?”

“I stay in the city of Detroit and there are a lot of people I know, a lot of families, who don’t have utilities. A lot of people have their gas turned off and are using space heaters, which causes fires.

As a single mother, what choice do you have to keep your babies warm? You don’t have a choice. And then the elderly feel they don’t have any choice. At this time of life they shouldn’t have to worry. They already did their dues.

“I actually have two jobs and I am a student at Wayne State and have two children who have active lives. It is hard to have in the back of my head, ‘I’ve got to make this money before my utilities get shut off.’ My babies can’t be without hot water and heat and electricity.”

She spoke about the cuts being carried out in the city of Detroit: “A 10 percent wage cut? They already gave at the beginning of the year. The mayor should do a 10 percent pay cut too. Everybody is trying to line their own pockets. And then they want to make drastic cuts at the last minute. I wish more people had participated in Occupy Detroit. That’s a chance for us to be heard.”

Shemiki Leonard was upset to be told that DTE was not taking any more people. Shemiki brought a number of friends with her to get help with her utility bill, but was skeptical that they would really get any assistance.

Voicing the frustration she and her friends felt, Shemiki said “Why do you have me come down here and pay for parking, and there is nothing left because everything is full? I have to pay \$5 for parking to try to get some help for my gas bill, and you turn me away. You give me a white piece of paper with my information on it. I could have gone to DTE Energy’s building itself for this.

“I thought this whole thing was a scam. They said the event ran from 10 a.m.-4 p.m. At 11:15 a.m. they were telling people they could not come in. It’s ridiculous.

“Presently I am in shutoff. I came because I have a bill for \$800, but they want me to pay \$400. I’m unemployed and don’t have it. I lost my job in September and haven’t received any unemployment checks yet. I explained this to DTE, but they won’t accept it, even though their advertisements say to come to them if you need help with your bill.

“What can I do? I told them I have \$150. That’s all I have. They said they would take it, but it still would not get my utilities back on. I have four kids. How is anyone supposed to live?”

Nia Watson, Shemiki’s friend is also unemployed. She has a bill for \$2,500 and also can’t afford the payments. Nia has no cash income and with six children she only receives food stamps and a Bridge card (a debit card that can be used to purchase food).

“I’m also in shutoff and I just can’t afford the payments. What are people supposed to do? I was on a payment plan and it kept going up. At one point it was \$397, then \$400 and now they want \$800 a month. Where am I supposed to get it from?”



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