

Detroit mothers speak on wintertime utility shutoffs

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15 December 2011

Single mothers CC and Ervetta, both unemployed Detroit residents facing utility shutoffs, recently spoke to the World Socialist Web Site about their situation.

CC lives on Detroit's east side with six of her mostly school-aged children. She has been unemployed since 2009. Her federal extended benefits ran out weeks ago, causing her to fall behind in her utility payments. DTE Energy subsequently shut off both her gas and electricity.

Her close friend and neighbor, Ervetta, is a member of the Committee Against Utility Shutoffs (CAUS).

WSWS: So, tell us your situation with utilities.

CC: Last week Monday, my services were shut off. My gas was turned off. Actually what happened was the DTE worker came out to shut both of the services off, and I said "Don't cut both of the services off, please." He was pretty nice, so what he did was cut the gas off but left me with the lights.

So I brought a couple of space heaters to keep the house warm. The following Monday he comes back out and he cuts the lights off.

The DTE rep said, "Do you want to take care of it?" I said I called DHS [Michigan Department of Human Services] and they said they were going to pay \$928.88 towards the bill.

WSWS: How much was the bill altogether?

CC: \$2,672. DHS wanted me to make a payment of \$1,017, which is a deposit for them. I told her I no longer have an income. My unemployment had run out. I said I received my last check last week. And that was only half of the amount that I was getting.

She says, "Well I don't know what to tell you." Then I called all types of different organizations—THAW, American Red Cross, Salvation Army, St. Vincent DePaul. They said they didn't have any help due to fact of there being government cuts. They said they didn't have any money. I even called different types of churches.

I finally called DTE back and I spoke to a lady by the name of Ms. Johnson and she said I could qualify for a program called SPP (Shutoff Protection Plan), which was under the guidelines of low income. She said if I paid \$560 they could do a restore. She said you have to come up with that and we can get your services back on.

WSWS: How do you do that if you don't have an income?

CC: I don't know because I can't borrow it from a relative. I called my sister who works and she said she didn't have it at the time. They sent me a bill today that gives me until the 29th to make a payment. Because they are saying the total due ... the actual amount as of December 7 was \$3,155.08. What is due now is \$982.35, and they want a payment of \$379 by the 29th of this month.

WSWS: That's four days after Christmas.

CC: If it isn't paid, they will shut it off again.

WSWS: So, they gave you a couple more weeks.

CC: Yes. She wants me to come up with the \$560 for a restore, so I was shocked when they restored my service ... they just came back on yesterday. Because I was at her [Ervetta's] house charging my phone and the children went over to their Dad's house.

WSWS: You have seven kids?

CC: Actually, I have eight. Altogether I have eight children. My oldest daughter doesn't live with me. And that's where two of my children are, with her. My other daughter and son are over to his aunt's house.

WSWS: How widespread is this situation, in your opinion?

Ervetta Williams: It's going deeper and deeper. I was working and getting some welfare because I was making too little. Now, I am unemployed and they cut me off both social service and unemployment.

WSWS: So, your circumstances are similar?

EW: They are. I just got a DTE bill myself. It's \$1,228. They say if I want to avoid shutoff, I have to pay \$990.98.

We were just over here adding things up. She was helping me out. You know, two heads are better than one. So we were trying to figure out how we could pay our bills and maintain our houses. Both of us have families to take care of. I have four kids and my nephew makes five.

WSWS: How widespread is it now, with families doubling up?

CC: It's happening a lot. My neighbor that's between the two of us, if it wasn't for her... I could go over there and do some things like cook and bring it back home so the children could eat. Or if it was really, really cold, before I even brought the heaters I could run a cord from her house just to heat the downstairs and we would all huddle down there to stay warm with body heat. That's how it was. We would go over there to take a shower. And when her lights were off they came over here. We helped one another. That's all we can do, especially when there isn't an income in the house.

For me, right now, I don't have any income. No child support. I haven't received anything from the state as far as cash [welfare assistance] goes since 2000. Nothing from them.

I've always worked, so the question is, what can I do now? Looking for a job, there's nothing there.

WSWS: You never had welfare?

CC: No, not since the year 2000. That was the last time I received anything from them. But the last time I applied was the later part of 1998. I was working at Joe Lewis [Arena] and Providence Hospital at the same time and I was receiving cash benefits. And in June 2000 was my last check.

WSWS: So you exhausted the year of federal extended benefits?

CC: Yes. I didn't meet any requirements for any other benefits.

WSWS: How long were you unemployed?

CC: I worked for MGM [MGM Grand Casino] and was released of my duties there in April 2009. But I didn't get it [unemployment benefits] for a year. I didn't get it until December 2010 because they fought me for it. Almost an entire year. They wouldn't release the benefits. I kept fighting, kept fighting, and then finally I spoke to a union rep and she called their manager there and he said they would not fight it any longer.

WSWS: What did you do then?

CC: At the time my sister was able to help me because she was working then. As far as school clothes go ... she would help provide it.

WSWS: So, family, friends helped.

EW: This is going back to a Depression stage. I truly believe it will be a Depression before it gets better.

CC: I think that is really sad because you can't live without a job somewhere and not have a way to support yourself. In terms of government assistance, it's OK for a period of time. It's OK for those who cannot support themselves, but not having a job *period*, and not having a way to take care of yourself or your children, I think that is really sad. How are you supposed to eat? How are you supposed to live? How are you supposed to pay your bills? You can't do it without an income. You can't do it. It's not sufficient. You have to have that. You can't live anywhere without having a job. You can't live without being able to pay your bills. That's why so many people are on the streets, because they don't have a way to have a means. You can't do anything without an income. And that is sad.

EW: There is going to be more homelessness by 2012, the way things are going out there.

Now on cutting the jobs, that's Dave Bing, that's his fault, cutting those jobs downtown. But I'm talking about jobs here, it's ridiculous. You can only do so much on the internet. I have certificates; I have diplomas. I cannot find a job anywhere. The only "job" that called me was a volunteer position at Hutzel Hospital—that's not making any money for my boys or my household.

CC: I think if the state is going to take away benefits, they should pay for school. They should pay for people to get an education, say the health care field. Give them the education they need to get a job, so they are equipped. That would help. I did go to school to be a nursing assistant and have a certificate for phlebotomy and medical assistance, but there's nothing there and the pay is too low for my household size so my income would be less than my outgo.

EW: I have certificates in nursing, computer science and phlebotomy. I attended Ross Career, the American Red Cross and Wayne County Community College. In January I start back to school to complete my Emergency Medical Technician program; I have one more year to go. I have been unemployed since July 2010. I worked for Sanders Janitorial. I was doing that and going to school at the same time.

WSWS: How does this affect your kids?

CC: I had a daughter who graduated this year and I couldn't do anything for her. I couldn't buy her a graduation outfit or a prom dress. It was crazy. I have two 8th graders graduating next year and they have dues, \$100 each, that's \$200, to pay for their dinner-dance and their trip. Then they'll be in high school and they have uniforms and shoes. I have big girls and it's hard to buy clothes. I also have to make sure that we have the money for senior pictures. Most years I tell them I can't buy the pictures, and they'll give me that look—like it doesn't bother them—but you remember how that was when you're

parents couldn't do things for you. "They can't never do nothing..." When I can't give them money for the movies, I feel badly. You want your child to be a child, to enjoy things, but you can't do it.

WSWS: How are they reacting with the loss of utilities?

CC: My children are so funny. They'll say, "We're good. We have each other. We're OK." They try to make me feel better, but I know I'm letting them down. They're like, "We'll wash up in cold water. We're serious." They are good. They are understanding. When it's like that, they won't argue like normal, but they all get along. They are quiet, then. They'll go in the store and watch TV, come back and get their homework done, and make sure to put their clothes out for the next day so that they can see where they are when they get up. This time, I didn't let them stay here because it's too cold. They went to their Dad's.

WSWS: Many children in such situations give up on attending school.

CC: My thing is, regardless of the situation, a parent must instill in a child the importance of their education. Maybe you didn't eat last night, but you can go to school and grab breakfast and lunch. You have to get an education, regardless of what is going on at home. I tell my girls that all the time. That's what's important.

WSWS: What is the next step?

CC: I have an appointment Tuesday at Herman Kiefer at a job resource center and they are supposed to help you in whatever field you have experience. Hopefully that works out and I can find employment.

WSWS: Poverty reports show an increase around the country. Before 42 million, now officially 46 million. Then there are those working who are one paycheck away from disaster. If there's a health situation, or they lose their job, they'll face similar conditions.

CC: Exactly.

WSWS: The majority cut off welfare were actually working, but just not making enough to make ends meet.

CC: Everybody is supposed to get help on utility bills for 6 months and rent for 3 months, through 2011.

EW: I wonder what forms of assistance there are for people out there, if they are steadily cutting jobs? What else can we do because they are steadily cutting jobs? It is causing robbing.

CC: I had a cousin working making the electric battery, making \$12 or \$13 an hour. Worked 8 months and they laid him off, now he's drawing unemployment. It's back to the drawing board. ... Companies also hire you long enough to get a tax break under welfare reform, but then they lay you off. ... There should be more help out there, whether you are working or not, there should be benefits there. Those who do work, they should get help, no matter what. Things have to get better. The wintertime is the most important for utilities, and in the hot days of summer, elderly people have heat strokes. I commend you for what you are doing.



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