

Detroit residents speak out on utility shutoffs

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The WSWs spoke to workers at the DTE payment center in Detroit on the experiences they have had with utility shutoffs. (See, “Utility shutoffs soar amidst mass poverty in Michigan”)

Wallace Douglass, 36, a produce worker who was making a payment arrangement, was not shocked at the level of shutoffs.

“I have faced it before,” Wallace said. “I don’t think anyone should be shut off. People have to have food, rent, childcare and utilities. These things are necessities. They are basic needs. How can you live without water, gas and heat?”

“As far as I am concerned,” he added, “it only goes to show that if they could pay the bills for these things they would. People just can’t afford it in this economy.”

Evelyn Walker, 53 is on disability and receives Social Security and Supplemental Security Insurance (SSI) benefits. Her benefits are too low, however, to allow her to pay rent, food and utilities.

Evelyn is presently staying with her children after DTE Energy shut off her utilities in November 2011. “My bill was just too high,” she said. “I was on the payment plan but I just could not afford it.”

Evelyn’s payment plan cost was \$455 per month, and her rent was \$700 a month. “I was only getting \$714 a month from SSI and SS,” she said. “How could I do it? But DTE insisted I had to make the payments.”

Evelyn said the utilities were turned off in November. At first she stayed with her son for three weeks. Now she is staying with her daughter who also has a family.

“I went to the churches, Department of Human Services (DHS) and every agency I could think of, but

it was too little or too late.”

“DHS helped me with \$350 for my lights and \$350 for my gas, but it is a one time thing. The bill grew to over \$4,000 when they shut me off, and I have a lot of disabilities.”

Charlene Smith, 36 and unemployed, was at the payment center to get her utilities turned back on. “They shut me off yesterday,” she said.

Charlene has a son with severe asthma. “I got a medical note from the hospital because my son requires a nebulizer so they are going to turn it back on.”

“I was paying \$75 every two weeks because I am on low income. I only receive unemployment. But they don’t want to hear that.”

Charlene said she was on the budget plan and defaulted because she could not afford the bill. She receives \$460 every two weeks from unemployment, pays \$650 a month for rent, and has a \$675 utility bill.

“How can I pay this?” she asked. “This doesn’t include food, taking care of a car....it just doesn’t add up. It’s impossible.”

“I don’t think they should cut you off, especially if you are trying to pay the bill and especially in the cold. But they will shut you off anyway, at any time of the year.”

“I’m not one of those who are not trying to pay their bills. I am trying to give them something. But it seems that something is not enough.”



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