

Housing and utilities are a social right

Statement by Phyllis Scherrer, SEP candidate for vice president

**Phyllis Scherrer
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The tragic fires in Philadelphia last week, which claimed the lives of six residents and two firefighters, are an indictment of the social conditions that prevail in the United States. Millions of people lack the most basic necessities while a tiny layer of the population has amassed unimaginable fortunes.

The heartbreaking stories speak to the conditions of life that working people in the US face every day. In one fire in West Philadelphia on Monday, two young children, aged two and four, their mother and grandfather were killed in a house without smoke detectors. The father, arriving home from a double shift at work to find his entire family had been killed, had to be hospitalized from shock.

The previous day, two were killed—a young girl and her great-grandmother—in North Philadelphia. The fire was apparently started by a pot of grease left on the stove after another member of the family returned home and accidentally fell asleep, exhausted from a long shift. The two firefighters were killed when a warehouse abandoned by real estate speculators collapsed on top of them as they tried to battle a blaze.

Similar tragedies take place on a regular basis in America. The worst such event this year was the fire that destroyed a two-story home in Charleston, West Virginia last month, killing nine people, including seven children younger than eight years old. As in many such disasters in poor working class neighborhoods, there were no working smoke detectors in the house.

Such fire deaths cannot really be called “accidents.” They are the absolutely predictable and inevitable result of the growth of poverty and destitution, the deterioration of antiquated housing stock, and the cutbacks in basic social services, from housing subsidies to fire protection, by federal, state and local

government.

Millions of working people, particularly the lowest paid, live in substandard and decrepit housing. According to figures reported by the Department of Housing and Urban Development and the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, in 2009 some 19 million people were qualified to receive housing aid, but only 4.6 million actually received it.

The White House budget for fiscal year 2013 calls for a 7.6 percent cut in HUD funding, with less money in real terms than any budget since 2000. In other words, Obama proposes lower spending on housing than any budget adopted during the eight years of the George W. Bush administration. The administration has already cut the LIHEAP program, which provides home heating subsidies, by nearly 50 percent.

Meanwhile, Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney has suggested that the entire Department of Housing and Urban Development should be abolished. Whether Obama or Romney is elected, the assault on working people will escalate after 2012.

At the state and city level, both Democratic and Republican governments are slashing programs for working people and freeing up utilities to more easily shut off service for those who cannot pay their bills because of unemployment and poverty.

In my home state of Pennsylvania, utility shutoffs have risen 78.6 percent since the passage of Act 201, which loosened restrictions on termination of service and limited the number of payment agreements that utilities could be required to provide for low income and elderly customers. This reactionary law was passed in 2004 and signed by the Democratic governor at the time, Edward Rendell.

Similar measures have been put into practice in Michigan, Ohio, Massachusetts and other Northern

states where the lack of utilities during the winter months is literally a life-and-death question, and fires caused by efforts to reconnect shut-down gas or electricity are common. In southeast Michigan alone, the two main utilities, DTE and Consumers Power, have carried out more than 200,000 service shutoffs a year.

The damage inflicted by utility shutoffs is compounded by the impact of cutbacks in fire department services. This is a nationwide process: Los Angeles has cut its fire budget by 15 percent over the last three years, Kansas City has cut its fire budget \$7.6 million, Baltimore is closing three fire companies, and Virginia's Hampton Roads metropolitan area is consolidating fire departments at the expense of response time.

One particularly dangerous practice is the "brownout," where a fire station is left unstaffed for some period of time. On Wednesday in Lexington, Kentucky, a man suffering severe chest pains stopped at a fire station for help and found no one there. He had to use his cellphone to call 911.

The Socialist Equality Party rejects the claim, made incessantly by the Democratic and Republican politicians, that there is "no money" to provide basic social necessities like housing, utilities and fire protection. The working class, in America and around the world, produces untold wealth with its labor. The problem is not the lack of resources, but the fact that the entire economy and all the resources of society are controlled in the interests of private profit.

While fire stations are shut down and working people forced to live in crumbling structures without gas or electricity, the top 1 percent of the US population raked in 93 percent of all increases in income in 2010, the latest year for which such figures are available. Meanwhile, the number of foreclosures in the United States continues to top all previous records.

The SEP campaign demands an immediate halt to all utility shutoffs, all foreclosures and evictions, and all cutbacks in housing, utility assistance, fire service and other vital programs. We say, guarantee the right to decent housing for all by pouring hundreds of billions of dollars into the construction of new homes and apartments and renovation of existing ones.

The fight for this program is the fight for socialism. Nothing can be achieved without a social and political

struggle against inequality and the profit system.

The productive forces of society—the giant banks and corporations, including the housing, energy and utility companies—must be taken out of the hands of the ruling elite and placed under the democratic control of the population. Combined with a sharp redistribution of wealth, such measures will free up immense resources for rebuilding housing and social infrastructure and ensuring all the rights of working people.

For more information and to support and join the SEP campaign, please visit www.socialequality.com



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