

Detroit workers speak with SEP vice presidential candidate about heat wave

David Brown
3 July 2012

On Monday, a campaign team with Socialist Equality Party vice presidential candidate, Phyllis Scherrer, spoke to workers about the heat wave and its effect on workers. They distributed the WSWS' recent article on the storms and record heat, which have killed at least 18 people and left millions without power through much of the US.

In response to the heat, the Detroit Recreation Department and Detroit Public Library announced the availability of their buildings as "cooling centers," where people can take shelter.

Most of these cooling centers close sometime between 6 and 8 p.m., well before the sun sets. In the coming week the temperature is expected to be over 90 F° in the day and never fall below 69 F°, even in the middle of the night. With an average relative humidity above 40 percent, this makes heat stroke a real possibility for the elderly and sick. Without public places to go, many people look for relief in supermarkets and fast food restaurants that are open late.

Scherrer first spoke with the manager of the Chase branch of the Detroit Library, Mr Wyatt, who said that not many people were coming to the library to get out of the heat. "This is a cooling station, but that just means that it's a public space with air conditioning. We aren't doing anything differently since they called us that, but the city wants to look like it's helping people."

An employee at another library branch confirmed that very few people were using the library to cool off. Capri Ramsey, a worker at the Farwell Recreation Center, another cooling center, told Phyllis that when they close at night, the city doesn't have another public place for people to go. "They just find a church or some other building that won't turn them away."

Even for those who do come to a cooling center for

relief, the air-conditioning might not be working. According to Wyatt: "When it gets really hot like this, it's not uncommon for us to even lose power. Thankfully, that hasn't happened this year, but last year we had three brownouts. It's not a conspiracy or anything, it's just that the infrastructure is old. A lot of this city's power grid was built a long time ago and it just can't meet current needs."

In general, the infrastructure across the nation is outdated and deteriorating. Companies like DTE Energy make hundreds of millions in profit while neglecting any improvement or even maintenance of the utility system. That's why it is expected to take up to a week to restore power to the 3 million who lost it in the weekend's storms in the nation's northeastern states.

Phyllis spoke with workers outside a DTE Energy payment office, about the effect the heat has on their bills and utility shutoffs. The general mood was exemplified by a lady who declared as she walked by, "I don't want to talk unless it's about figuring out how to pay my bills." When Scherrer mentioned the Committee Against Utility Shutoffs and the social right to utilities the lady responded "OK, we can talk."

One Chrysler worker from the Warren Truck Assembly Plant who was rushing to work said, "It's hot at the factory, it's hot at home, and there's no way I can afford air conditioning."

A retiree who worked at Chrysler for 30 years told Scherrer that when he went to live with his children he shut off the power to his old house. Now someone turned it back on, and DTE is forcing him to pay the bill. Other people spoke of being kicked off of their payment plans.

Phyllis also spoke with Doris Hall, a manager at McDonald's. "People come into McDonald's to get

away from the heat. The number of people in there doubles, so there's around 50 people just trying to cool off, but they have to buy something to stay. They come in until we close at either 11:00 or 1:00 depending on the day, and then they don't have anywhere to go until we open up again at 7:00.”

Johnita McCallum told the same story about Meijer, a supermarket where she's worked for five years. “This past week we've been getting about 50 to 100 more people than when it's cool, especially seniors.”

The Socialist Equality Party is running its presidential campaign to fight for the right to utilities, including air conditioning and electricity. The workers and retirees should not be forced to spend hours inside a supermarket just to escape the heat. Millions of people should not be one storm away from spending a week without electricity.

As stated in the SEP campaign program “All the basic utilities—including electricity, gas, water, phone and Internet access—must be made available to everyone as a basic right, not subordinated to the profit needs of the utility companies.”

For more information on the SEP campaign, visit socialequality.com



To contact the WSWWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact