

Eight dead in Maryland following utility shutoff

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A father and his seven children were found dead in their Princess Anne, Maryland home Monday, the apparent victims of carbon monoxide poisoning from a gas-powered generator used after the local utility company shut off power to the financially struggling family.

A coworker had come to search for 36-year-old Rodney Todd, a utility worker at nearby University of Maryland Eastern Shore, after he failed to show up for work for more than a week. After getting no response at the home, she called the police who entered and discovered the lifeless bodies of Todd and his two sons and five daughters, aged six to 15.

“He was a good person,” Stephanie Wells, who worked with Todd, told the AP. “He took care of seven kids.”

Princess Anne Police Chief Scott Keller told the AP that a gas-powered generator with an empty fuel tank was found in the kitchen attached to wires running throughout the house. He confirmed that there was no electricity in the home and said that officers were looking into it when it was shut off.

A spokesman for Delmarva Power would not acknowledge that the company cut off power for unpaid bills, saying only that the matter was under investigation.

Shocked and grieving family and friends gathered Monday afternoon around the one-story wood frame house as the eight bodies were removed. Princess Anne is located 135 miles southeast of the nation’s capital in Washington, DC. The per capita income in the small town of 4,000 residents was \$10,944 in 2010, with 40 percent of the population and 54 percent of those under 18 living below the poverty line.

Relatives identified the children as boys Cameron, 13, and Zycheim, 7; and girls Tynijuiza, 15; Tykira, 12;

Tybree, 10; Tyania, 9; and Tybria, 6.

Sarah Hardy, a close friend of Todd’s, exclaimed to the AP, “How can a man survive off of basically minimum wage with seven kids, and you can’t help him with a utility bill? This man was working. And Delmarva Power cuts the lights off?”

The AP reporter also spoke with Bonnie and Lloyd Edwards, Todd’s mother and stepfather. Lloyd said, “It’s so hard. How can you understand something like this? He was an outstanding dad. To keep his seven children warm, he bought a generator, and the carbon monoxide consumed them.”

“I feel empty,” Bonnie added mournfully. “I’m used to coming up here and seeing my grandkids running up and down the steps.”

The horrible tragedy is only the latest caused by the cruel policy of electricity, water and other utility shutoffs that targets working-class and poor households throughout the United States. The death toll generally increases in the spring after the expiration of temporary winter delays that many utility companies and state regulators observe largely as a public relations matter.

Maryland law, for example, bars the termination of electric service for nonpayment of bills from November 1 through March 31 without an affidavit filed to the Public Service Commission.

Far from holding the giant utility companies and their executives accountable, federal, state and local authorities, along with the news media, steadfastly defend the financial prerogatives of the utilities and their wealthy investors who profit from the purging of “delinquent customers.”

Indeed, the *Baltimore Sun* ran an editorial Tuesday, which instead of condemning the inhuman and murderous practice of utility shutoffs, suggested that the dead father was at fault for making the “disastrous

choice” of “bringing a generator indoors or positioning it in such a way that the exhaust might seep into the home.” A new law mandating that residents buy carbon monoxide detectors is necessary, the newspaper intoned, to “protect children from such bad choices.”

Such reactionary invocations of “personal responsibility” come amidst growing outrage throughout the country over the denial of the most basic necessities of life.

In Baltimore itself, protests have erupted against plans by the city to shut off 25,000 households from water by mid-April. Paris-based Veolia, one of the largest privately owned water companies in the world, has been contracted to “reduce costs and enhance operational efficiencies” in the water department, a code word for layoffs and higher rates.

In Detroit, America’s poorest city, authorities are planning on sending water shutoff notices to an estimated 28,000 households. Last year, the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department (DWSD) shut off service to as many as 900 households a day as part of efforts to squeeze payments from impoverished residents or drive them out of neighborhoods deemed too commercially unviable for investment. The shutoffs were also part of plans to privatize the water system, which has been municipally owned for more than a century.

According to testimony by financial officers at DWSD during the city’s bankruptcy proceedings last summer, the mass water shutoffs were demanded by Wall Street credit agencies Fitch, Moody’s and S&P in order to clear the water department’s “bad debt” and qualify for better terms on the municipal bond market.

While upholding the “rights” of the financial aristocracy,” federal bankruptcy judge Steven Rhodes infamously declared, “There is no fundamental enforceable right to free or affordable water. Just as there is no such affordable right to other necessities of life such as shelter, food and medical care.”

While telling working-class and poor residents that there is no money, let alone any right, to essential services like electricity and water, the Obama administration and both big-business parties are pouring endless amounts of money into the financial markets to further enrich the top one-tenth of one percent of society.

Meanwhile, after decades of falling wages, tens of

millions of low-paid workers like Rodney Todd are unable to meet the rising cost of food, housing, health care and other essential services.

The deliberate and criminal policies pursued by both corporate-controlled parties, including the sanctioning of utility shutoffs, have had the effect of shortening the lives of large sections of the population and returning them to the brutish conditions that prevailed in the 19th century America or England.

In that regard it is worth citing Frederick Engels’ 1845 masterwork, *The Condition of the Working Class in England*. Noting, “we call it murder” when an individual knowingly inflicts a fatal injury on another, the collaborator of Karl Marx wrote:

“When a society places hundreds of proletarians in such a position that they inevitably meet a too early and an unnatural death, one which is quite as much a death by violence as that by the sword or bullet; when it deprives thousands of the necessities of life, places them under conditions in which they cannot live—forces them, through the strong arm of the law, to remain in such conditions until that death ensues which is the inevitable consequence—knows that these thousands of victims must perish, and yet permits these conditions to remain, its deed is murder just as surely as the deed of the single individual.”

The deaths of Rodney Todd and his children are the latest case in which the American ruling class has merited the charge of deliberate and knowing “social murder.”



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