

Work for Me, DTE!

Campaigning for Community Power in Michigan

Co-authored by Michelle Martinez and Bridget Vial

In 2018, Metro Detroit-based environmental justice organizations launched the *Work for Me, DTE!* campaign as monopoly utility DTE Energy prepared to submit their 15-year energy plan, called an Integrated Resource Plan, to the Michigan Public Service Commission.

Michigan Environmental Justice Coalition, Soulardarity, Citizens' Resistance Against Fermi Two, We Want Green Too, Michigan Welfare Rights Organization, East Michigan Environmental Action Council, the Ecology Center, Empower Michigan, Engage Michigan, EcoWorks, Sierra Club and others -- shared a vision of a regenerative economy focused on community solar, energy efficiency retrofits, good jobs, and wealth creation in poor, working class, Black and Indigenous communities.



“If we want energy democracy we need to organize around it, if we want energy justice, we must mobilize against the powerful interests of utility lobbyists and paid politicians. Together we can build the kind of renewable energy economy that is equitable and provides clean air for all our communities.”

-- Michelle Martinez, MEJC acting executive director

DTE Energy, which serves 2.1 million customers in Michigan, mainly in the Metro Detroit area -- was (and still is) in the thick of building out a new generation of fossil fuel infrastructure, while allowing neighborhood-level infrastructure to [crumble](#), [stifling solar](#) and pollution-free energy, and performing more than [200,000 shutoffs](#) annually to families unable to pay some of the nation's [fastest-rising bills](#).

In 2017, DTE and its unregulated affiliates got approval to build two new pipelines, [Rover](#) and [Nexus](#), which feed fracked gas from eastern Ohio and the Appalachian Basin into Southeast Michigan and around the region; DTE also [proposed](#), and subsequently got approval, to build a new \$1.1 billion gas plant near Port Huron, Michigan; and to [purchase gas from their own pipeline](#) at above-market rates. The Michigan Public Service Commission will likely require customers to bear the costs of this infrastructure build-out, plus a 9.9% profit margin, for decades – even as the climate crisis necessitates that we transition our power sector to 100% renewable energy as quickly as possible, and as the price of solar and wind energy falls far below that of fossil fuel energy.

The *Work for Me, DTE!* Campaign (W4M DTE) brought on four community leaders to serve as Energy Democracy Fellows at the beginning of 2019, just as DTE filed their IRP. Through Michigan's [Integrated Resource Plan \(IRP\) process](#), utilities are required to comprehensively spell out their expectations for energy demand over the next 15 years, provide alternative pathways for meeting that demand, and provide reasons for selecting the pathway they did. If the Public Service Commission approves the utility's IRP, the utility is all but guaranteed authority to recover costs (read: “raise rates”) to implement the plan. Through trainings led by Soulardarity, the Michigan Environmental Justice Coalition (MEJC), and others, the Fellows learned about the energy system *behind the bill* -- how energy is made, the impacts on community health and wellbeing, and about the insidious “power politics” of the energy system. The Campaign focused on three demands: Health, Affordability, and Community Power in decision making.

Together, the Fellows and campaign coalition members pushed the Public Service Commission to hold a public hearing in Detroit, organized dozens of residents to

attend and give public comment, and drove more than 3,000 public comments to the DTE IRP online docket. Fellows also traveled to Lansing, Michigan to educate elected officials, connected with energy democracy activists across the country, and plugged into political action on climate justice.

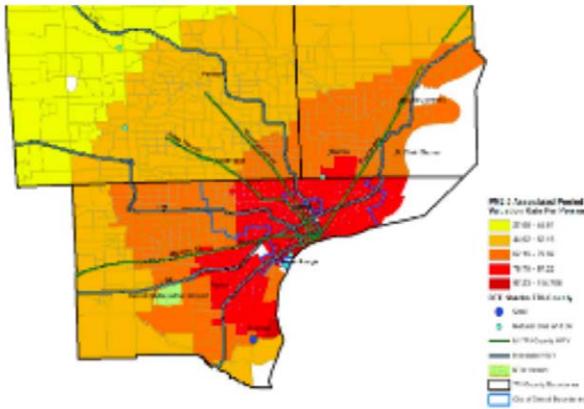


Shimekia Nichols, Soulardarity at the W4M DTE Press Conference before the Michigan Public Service Commission Hearing on DTE's IRP. Photo credit: Michelle Martinez

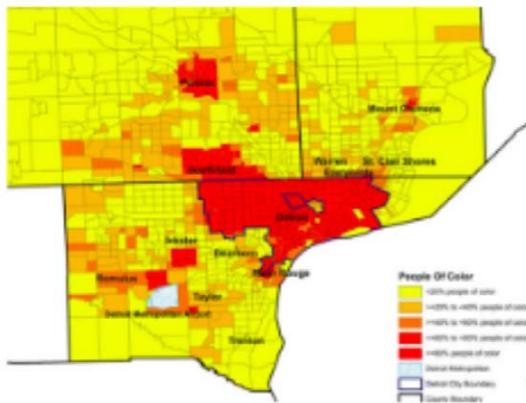


Mama Gloria Lowe, Executive Director of We Want Green Too leads the March for the Green New Deal in Detroit July 2019. Photo credit: Michelle Martinez.

W4M DTE also employed insider tactics on the IRP. The Michigan Environmental Justice Coalition worked with researchers at the University of Michigan to conduct the first ever Health Impact Assessment of the DTE Energy Integrated Resource Plan. The assessment shows extreme racial inequity across DTE's service territory, with wealthier, whiter, and suburban communities having more efficient homes, lower energy burden, less pollution exposure, and lower health costs associated with air pollution and extreme heat exposure, compared to Black, People of Color, immigrant, and low-income communities.



Annual health costs per person, age standardized, where red represents higher health costs, for Wayne, Oakland, and Macomb Counties.

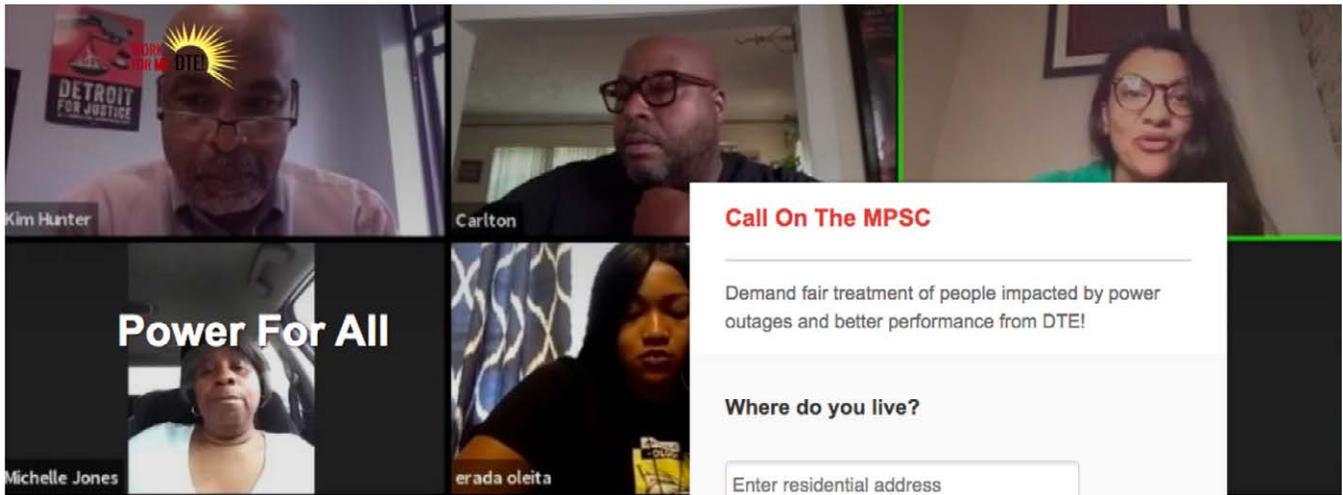


Percent people of color, where red represents a higher percentage.

Soulardarity worked with the University of Chicago Abrams Clinic and Great Lakes Environmental Law Center to legally intervene in the IRP case, as well other high-impact cases, before the Michigan Public Service Commission. Together with unprecedented public pressure, these tactics pushed the needle on energy justice: In her recommendation on the DTE IRP case, the MPSC’s Administrative Law Judge adopted W4M DTE’s demand that health be considered in utility planning. The MPSC failed to adopt this recommendation, but declined to approve DTE’s IRP, instead instructing the utility to make modifications. Six months later, in an Executive Directive on Climate, Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer ordered the MPSC to consider health in future IRP cases.

The Work for Me, DTE! Campaign has created new space for justice-based advocacy in Michigan’s technocratic energy decision-making sphere. Individually, Michigan Welfare Rights Organization has achieved wins on affordable payment plans for low-income families; Soulardarity has threatened DTE’s business model with implementation of solar streetlights and energy efficiency; and the Great Lakes Environmental Law Center has fought state regulators on utility requests for new permits to pollute in environmental justice communities. **Together, the coalition asserts the power of frontline impacted communities to have a say in how we stay warm, connect and plug in, address environmental racism, and plan for a changing climate.**

It’s a “David and Goliath” type of fight. DTE and Michigan’s other investor-owned monopoly utilities wield enormous power in the state’s elections, legislative processes, and regulatory decision-making, and nonprofit sphere through deep pockets filled with our high and fast-rising energy bills. Campaign finance and lobby disclosure shows that DTE and Consumers Energy donated over half a million to legislators in 2019, and employed 69 lobbyists. But those figures don’t include contributions made through dark money front groups like [Michigan Energy Promise](#), which has supported DTE’s positions before the Public Service Commission, is chaired by top DTE employees, and received \$18 million in contributions in 2018 alone. Similar DTE and Consumers Energy-affiliated groups spent \$1 million to oust former Michigan House Energy Committee Chair and vocal utility critic Gary Glenn in his Republican primary race. Utility funds even bankroll nonprofits in exchange for public support of their agenda, which was [visible](#) at the 2019 DTE IRP hearing. In July 2020, W4M DTE held a press conference with Congresswoman Rashida Tlaib and the 2020 Energy Democracy Fellows calling for outage compensation, after a series of power outages coincided with extreme heat days and rising COVID-19 infection rates. Afterward, DTE emailed Michigan state and federal legislators a factsheet of their spending on outage prevention and restoration, and began emailing customers seemingly faulty reports celebrating the company’s reliability.



Campaign action page demanding fair compensation for power outages

Throughout the pandemic, W4M DTE has continued to advocate for health, affordability, and community solar at the MPSC and legislature, focusing particularly on [shutoff threat](#), rising utility debt, and [power outages](#), while engaging in mutual aid and community educational events online. Through statewide energy burden research and collaborative learning circles, the campaign is connecting with communities around Michigan seeking to advance energy democracy. The utility systems in Michigan have enormous power over the decisions made that will impact our future and our lives. Building community power is the only way we can counter the influence of corporations on elections and the scientific community. DTE Energy is paying politicians and advocates through dark money and front groups. The barriers to access to decision-making channels are many but the stakes are high. But locking arms, and focusing on our common future is the winning strategy.

We believe that everyone deserves a warm home in the winter, a safe community, and access to the pollution-free economy of the future, *now*, through democratic processes. Healthy, affordable energy, and community-owned solar, address the gaps that carbon reductionists ignore -- because greenhouse gas emission reduction is not enough to solve the dual problems of environmental racism and corporate extraction in the energy system. From Detroit and Highland Park to the Upper Peninsula, environmental justice communities are fighting for energy democracy and a Just Transition -- shutting down pipelines and smokestacks, and fighting to keep the lights on, and the heat going in the winter. But what's more, environmental Justice communities want solar energy and efficient homes, and family-sustaining jobs making those changes. A healthy, affordable, community-owned energy system will make our communities safer by reducing energy burden, generating wealth, and getting rid of pollution from dirty energy, granting us the right to breathe and thrive in the future.

WHAT IS ENERGY DEMOCRACY?

CONNECT

MEET THE FAM INSTALLING COMMUNITY SOLAR IN OAKLAND, MINNEAPOLIS, AND APPALACHIA

BUILD TRANS-LOCAL POWER

CONNECT ENERGY DEMOCRACY TO HOUSING, WATER, AND RACIAL JUSTICE

WEAVE ENERGY SOLUTIONS INTO CLIMATE RESILIENCE

EMPOWER OUR SURVIVAL

WHAT IS ENERGY DEMOCRACY?

FIGHT

ASSERT COMMUNITY POWER IN DECISION-MAKING

STOP UTILITY RATE HIKES AND RACIST POLLUTION

TELL A NEW STORY ABOUT ENERGY JUSTICE

CHANGE ENERGY LAWS

CO-CREATE A VISION FOR AFFORDABLE, HEALTHY, COMMUNITY-OWNED POWER

MAKE THE VISION POSSIBLE

WHAT IS ENERGY DEMOCRACY?

BUILD

INSTALL SOLAR STREETLIGHTS

MAKE OUR ELDERS' HOMES ENERGY-EFFICIENT

LAUNCH CO-OP BUSINESSES THAT KEEP ENERGY DOLLARS IN OUR COMMUNITIES

BUY SOLAR POWER FROM OUR NEIGHBORS

SELL COMMUNITY-OWNED POWER BACK TO THE GRID

OWN OUR POWER