Pennsylvania mother charged in the fire deaths of her four children

Housing conditions and welfare reform to blame

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The mother of four children who died in a tragic house fire in Farrell, Pennsylvania on November 30 has been arrested and charged with four counts of endangering the welfare of children. Farrell is a small town northwest of Pittsburgh with a population 8,600.

The fire, which killed four of her five small children, is just one of a rash of house fires that has made this winter one of the deadliest in the US in recent years. Anarean O. Anderson, 22, had left her children--Brooke Hamlett, 5, Jaylen Eilam, 4, Ayson Eilam, 3, and Trevon Eilam, 1--alone while she went to pick up a babysitter to care for them while she was at work.

In what has become a common practice for police and district attorneys across the country, the mother is being charged with the death of her children in an effort to cover over the important social issues which are raised by such a tragedy. In particular, it underscores the deplorable conditions in which an ever growing number of poor and low-paid workers are being forced to live.

The state of disrepair of the second floor apartment where the Andersons lived played a direct role in the children's deaths. According to city records, the landlord, Mr. Hardesty, who owns several rental properties in Farrell, had been cited for numerous building code violations last August, including the lack of smoke detectors.

In addition, the back door to the apartment led to a 20-foot drop. The porch that had originally been constructed there had collapsed and was never replaced. The landlord told police that he had propped up a ladder, but it had been stolen. To keep the children from accidentally opening the back door and falling out, Ms. Anderson had a refrigerator placed against the door.

The only exit from the apartment was down a flight of stairs and out the front door. But the door had neither a lock nor doorknob. In order to keep people out and the children inside Ms. Anderson kept a bedspring leaning against the door. Hardesty was cited as well for allowing too many people to occupy the two bedroom apartment.

City building inspector Mark Yerskey said that he never would have allowed the Andersons to move into the apartment under these conditions. According to city regulations an apartment is supposed to be inspected between tenants. The landlord claims that the Andersons moved in without informing him.

Mr. Yerskey told the *World Socialist Web Site*, "I spoke with many of the neighbors of Ms. Anderson. She was trying to work, she was trying very hard to do what she had to do to take care of her kids.

"There were no smoke detectors in the apartment; that is a hazard in itself. It does not look like the kids even tried to get out. Nothing we do can bring her children back. I feel very, very bad for her."

The fire is believed to have been started by faulty wiring in the ceiling between the second floor and the roof. On the day of the fire, Ms. Anderson had reported to the landlord that the power had gone out. Hardesty told police that he sent a repairman who restored the circuit breaker, but did not explore the cause of the power outage.

The landlord has been charged with failure to correct building violations of the city's housing code. At most he faces a $3,000 fine and the cost of demolishing the gutted building. No criminal charges in the deaths of the four children have been filed against him.

The local newspaper, the *Sharon Herald*, reported in

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a story just a few weeks before the fire that the city council tabled a motion in the face of strong protests from landlords. The motion would have authorized fees charged to landlords to cover the cost of hiring additional housing inspectors for rental properties.

Lack of safe and affordable housing is a problem faced by millions of working class and poor families in this western Pennsylvania town and in communities across the country. The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities reports that more than 5 million families live in similar housing conditions.

This incident is, furthermore, an indictment of the 1996 welfare reform enacted jointly by the Democrats and Republicans and signed into law by President Clinton.

Pennsylvania Department of Welfare spokesperson Susan Aspy refused to discuss the specifics of Ms. Anderson's case, claiming confidentiality. However, an examination of her situation demonstrates the difficulties faced by a person in her position.

Like all welfare recipients, Anarean Anderson had to sign and abide by an agreement of mutual responsibility in relation to her employment efforts. The agreement requires recipients to state what they will do to obtain work. If they fail to meet the requirements of their pledge, their benefits can be cut off. In addition, recipients must report once a month to the welfare office to verify their income with a caseworker.

Despite the fact that Ms. Anderson had five children, the youngest one only six months old, she was required to work, and welfare does not pay for childcare while the mother is working. This young mother was placed in the impossible position of having to make a choice between going to work and leaving her children alone, or not going to work and losing all of her benefits, thus being unable to feed, clothe or provide shelter for her family.

Even while receiving welfare Ms. Anderson could not meet the most basic needs of her family. At most, she would have been receiving $647 for her family of six, well below the federal poverty level. In reality, she would have been receiving less, since for every dollar she earns in wages her benefits are reduced. Paying for a babysitter and transportation placed a further drain on her income.

In addition, Ms. Anderson was under the pressure of the two-year time limit in which all benefits will run out. On March 3, 40,000 families in Pennsylvania are due to have their welfare benefits cut off when the first group of recipients reaches their two-year limit under the new welfare bill. While clearly a victim of these government budget cuts and regulations, this young single mother is instead being charged as a criminal following the tragic loss of her children.

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