

Six children die in Detroit house fire: faulty fire-fighting equipment sent to scene of blaze

Larry Roberts
6 December 2000

On Friday morning, December 1, shortly after 10 a.m., a horrific fire in a low-income public housing project in Detroit claimed the lives of six children between the ages of two and seven. The Detroit Fire Department ruled that the blaze at 2535 St. Antoine on the city's east side was accidental, caused by a burning mattress in a first-floor bedroom of the two-story apartment.

Killed in the fire were Blake Brown, 2; Christopher Brown, 4; Joyce Brown, 6; Naomi Fish, 2; Jermaine Fish, 6; and Johnny Fish, 7, all cousins. Also injured were Juanita Fish, 25, the mother of three of the children who perished, and her youngest child, Jonathan Fish, seven months old.

The fire took place at the apartment belonging to Jo Ann Campbell, 31, the sister of Juanita Fish and mother of three of the children who died. Fish had reportedly agreed to watch all of the children while Campbell went to the bank.

Fire officials had initially brought in arson inspectors to investigate, considering the fire suspicious after finding out that Campbell had received an eviction notice. She was three months behind in rent.

Detroit Fire Commissioner Charles Wilson said his investigation, conducted with search dogs, found no accelerants that would link the fire to arson. "It appears someone was smoking and may have dropped a cigarette in bedding material," stated Wilson, "or there were kids playing with matches."

Family members of the deceased children have publicly challenged the assessment of the fire department officials. Jerry Bell, cousin of Fish and Campbell, said neither woman smoked and the children were asleep at the time of the fire. "We believe there were problems with the furnace," said Bell, "and there's no way those children started that fire."

The fire reveals not only the impoverished social conditions in the city; it also exposes the criminal practices of officials in the Detroit Fire Department who routinely send broken equipment to the scene of fires, hampering their ability to fight them. In this instance six children paid with their lives.

Interviews with neighbors, and new reports published in the press, reveal that the Detroit Fire Department sent equipment to the St. Antoine fire that made it impossible for the children trapped in the fire to be saved.

Jo Ann Campbell's next-door neighbor, Calvin Blades, 24, whose apartment was also severely damaged by the fire, described the desperate attempt to save the children. "Usually you hear the kids hollering and playing. That's normal. I heard them screaming

and I noticed that smoke was coming through my vent. My wife told me to get up. When I stepped on the floor I noticed that the floor was very warm.

"Then we heard the glass break. That must have been the sister jumping out of the second floor window with her baby. I saw her lying on the ground with the baby.

"Then a state trooper arrived and tried to kick in the door in the back side of the apartment. I came out of my house to help and you could hear the kids screaming for help. We couldn't kick in the door so we went around to the front door. He kicked it in and smoke just came pouring out. It was so thick you couldn't go in. The state trooper began to break out windows to let air in, but there was nothing we could do.

"It seems like it took the fire department a long time to make it to the fire. We were trying to get into the house for a long time before the fire department came. And when they arrived they said, 'We're not getting any water,' when they pulled out the fire hoses. Then they went to two different fire hydrants to get water. By that time it was too late."

Another neighbor, Michael Patrick, 39, was also disturbed by the response of the fire department. "I was coming back from the store when I saw a state trooper kicking on the door," stated Patrick. "Finally, after going around to the other side, he was able to kick in the door."

"The smoke was extremely bad. The intensity of the heat made it impossible to go in, so he started smashing windows to let the smoke out. We tried everything we could and waited for the fire trucks to arrive.

"It took about 20 minutes before they came. And when they got here they said the hoses didn't work on the truck. Then they went to the fire hydrant that you see nearby, there on the street. That one didn't work. Next they went to the fire hydrant across the way on the other street and finally they got water.

"By that time you aren't talking about saving the lives of those kids. You are just putting out the fire. I saw them [Detroit firefighters] bring the kids out. They had smoke smoldering all over them."

Juanita Fish told the news media she was breast-feeding her seven-month-old child when her niece, Joyce Brown, hesitatingly came in the door. When the child came into the bedroom the room was consumed with intense smoke "within seconds," according to Fish.

"They were making some noise, but then it stopped," Fish

related. She said she tried to save the other kids, “but I couldn’t. I don’t know if the door was locked or it was because my wrists were broken.” Fish said she pushed out the screen in the window of the second floor bedroom and jumped with her youngest child, Jonathan, breaking several of her bones and causing the infant to badly bite his tongue. Both are presently in the hospital. “It was just so fast, so fast,” Fish said.

The response of the Detroit Fire Department

News reports have now confirmed the charges by neighbors that the equipment dispatched to the fire did not work. According to a report in the *Detroit News* firefighters were prevented from adequately fighting the fire and were hampered in their efforts to save the lives of the children.

The first crew of firefighters to arrive at the scene, in truck Engine 1, quickly realized children were in the burning building and attempted to fight the fire with water from their 500-gallon pump-engine truck. However, when they climbed the stairs of the building to rescue the children, they lost pressure and the hoses stopped working.

A second truck, Engine 5, arrived later and began to spray water on the building while Engine 1 looked for the nearest fire hydrant. The closest hydrant, it turns out, was out of service, one of thousands in the city that do not work.

Engine 1 found a working hydrant 100 feet away, but shortly thereafter the hose from the engine to the hydrant burst, again hampering the firefighters’ ability to fight the fire. After replacing the hose and finally pumping water, firefighters again reported they lost pressure.

The man assigned to operate the pump truck apparently was not qualified to operate the engine’s complex pumps. According to the fire station’s journal, obtained by the *News*, Sergeant Edward Pomorski had been given a crash course in operating the pumps that morning when the regular driver left at 8:30 a.m. According to an earlier investigative report, the city routinely places uncertified drivers behind the wheel of fire trucks sent out to fight fires. The *News* investigation also found that the fire department often violates the minimum of four firefighters to a rig.

The scandalous condition of equipment and the practices of the Detroit Fire Department were the subject of a series of exposés last month in the *Detroit News* and *Detroit Free Press*. According to this report, during the past four years at least 21 people have died in fires because fire trucks did not work or nearby fire stations were temporarily closed because of staff shortages.

The investigative report revealed that Detroit routinely dispatches malfunctioning fire trucks. Anywhere between 5 and 11 of the city’s 24 aerial trucks do not work on any given day. The trucks are mechanically so poor that on 75 occasions trucks sent to fires broke down on the way. Logs show that on 25 occasions this year trucks did not start at all.

The city has purchased 14 new pump-engine trucks, 11 of which are either being repaired or waiting for repairs. The truck sent to the St. Antoine fire is one of these new trucks and has already reported electrical and engine problems. A new truck sent to a fire on June 24, in which two people died, also failed to work.

The failure of fire hydrants has been a serious issue for years. Officially 2,286 hydrants are considered faulty; 679 do not work at

all. This estimate is most likely low as the fire department generally inspects the hydrants only visually, and they are rarely turned on to test if they are in working order.

The Mack Avenue fire

In 1993 this reporter chaired the Citizens Committee into the Mack Avenue Fire, established by the Workers League, the forerunner of the Socialist Equality Party, that investigated the circumstances surrounding the tragic deaths of seven children in one of the worst fire-related cases in Detroit’s recent history.

In an area only one mile from the St. Antoine fire, in one of the most impoverished neighborhoods of Detroit, seven children, ages two to seven, died in a house fire on February 17, 1993. Without notifying the family that it was doing so, the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department turned off the water to the home from the street early that morning because of an overdue bill of \$225. The children’s father, thinking that the home’s pipes were frozen, attempted to thaw them with lighted paper. Later that afternoon, around 2 p.m., an ember from that attempt ignited, burning the 130-year-old wooden frame house and trapping the children inside.

The fire was dubbed by the news media as a “home alone” case because the parents were not there when fire engulfed the house. Having no money, both parents had left home to scavenge an old building for copper metal to sell at a scrap yard. Two weeks after the fire the parents were arrested and charged by Detroit city officials in the deaths of their children. One Detroit radio talk show host went so far as calling for the death penalty for the working class couple.

Following a major campaign by our committee, the parents were acquitted of all charges at the trial. Members of the jury stated they believed the parents were doing the best they could for their children and the city was wrong for shutting off their water.

Our investigation of the Mack Ave. fire uncovered that this was not an isolated case. Thousands of families every day in the metro-Detroit area face life-threatening shutoffs of water, gas and electricity. The investigation also determined that budget cuts in the Detroit Fire Department directly contributed to the deaths of the seven children. Detroit closed 21 fire stations between 1974 and 1993, and eliminated 500 firefighters’ jobs.

At the time of the Mack Avenue fire, fire-related deaths had climbed to 85 in 1992, and from February 1992 through February 1993, 40 children had died in fires.

We are now seeing another increase. In 1997, the Detroit Fire Department reported 57 fire-related deaths. In 1998, the latest year for which the city has provided statistics, the death total had climbed to 80.

In this most recent fire tragedy, authorities are again resorting to the threat of prosecution of the parents. Child welfare officials state they plan to investigate why the children of Juanita Fish and Jo Ann Campbell were not in school on the day of the fire.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact