

Ten years since the Mack Avenue fire

## Housing crisis deepens in Detroit

Debra Watson, With photographs by Mary Moore  
21 June 2003

It has been a decade since Leroy Lyons and Shereese Williams lost their seven children in a tragic house fire on Detroit's East Side. On a February afternoon in 1993, a raging inferno devoured the 130-year-old wooden frame home where the family lived.

The parents were out of the house at the time the blaze broke out. When they returned to find their home in flames and their children dead, the police treated them not as bereaved parents but as criminals. Over the following weeks the county attorney, political leaders and the press crudely scapegoated the grieving parents with lurid headlines about children left "home alone."

The Committee for a Citizens Inquiry was formed by the Workers League (forerunner of the Socialist Equality Party) to expose the attempt of big business and the political elite to cover up their own responsibility for the accumulated social distress that lay behind the tragic deaths. The parents were ultimately acquitted of all seven charges, which carried possible prison sentences of 15 years.

The committee's campaign to investigate the fire and its aftermath was waged in the face of indifference and outright hostility from Democratic politicians, the NAACP and the AFL-CIO.

At a June 1993 meeting, the Citizens Inquiry reported that the parents had actually left the children at home that particular afternoon so they could search nearby abandoned factories for scrap metal to sell. Leroy Lyons, a heating and cooling technician, had been unemployed for two years following the 1991 recession. Shereese Williams was on welfare.

After an exhaustive investigation, the Citizens Inquiry concluded that the fire itself was not an isolated case. Tragedies such as the fire on Mack Avenue occur regularly in cities across the US. In Detroit, the conditions were particularly acute in the early 1990s, the result of poverty and unemployment from plant shutdowns and mass layoffs and of deteriorating housing conditions.

Recently, a team of reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* returned to the site of the Mack Avenue fire to document present conditions in the area. They found that the terrible social conditions existing in 1993 have steadily and considerably worsened, despite several years of boom at the end of the 1990s. The onset of recession in early 2001 has further deepened the housing crisis and multiplied the economic and social problems facing working class families in Detroit and throughout the US.

Furthermore, there has been an unbridled assault on social services, including the elimination of the federal welfare entitlement for the poor in 1996 under the Clinton administration. These cuts have left thousands of families and unemployed, the elderly and the disabled completely exposed to the vagaries of the capitalist market.

The number of water shutoffs to Detroit homes climbed to 40,752 in 2002 from 26,000 in 1992. More than 40,000 addresses had their water cut off from July 2001 to July 2002, according to the Michigan Welfare Rights Organization (MWRO). Gas and electric shutoffs are also at record levels.

In addition to the obvious danger to residents of poor sanitation and food

storage, the Citizens Inquiry blamed utility shutoffs occurring in Detroit in the early 1990s as a major contributing factor in the deadly 1993 fire. Lyons, the children's father, thought the water pipes had frozen during the cold February night in 1993. He held a lit newspaper to the exposed water pipes under the house in an attempt to thaw them. He did not know the Detroit Water Department had shut off city water to the Mack Avenue home for non-payment of a \$225 water bill.

It is possible that a spark smoldered in dry rot in the aging timber under the house and later reignited, setting off a chain of terrible events leading to the children's deaths. Other house fires in the US are commonly the result of unsafe space heaters used for heat when utility companies shut off gas or electric service to homes.

Housing conditions for low-income workers have grown steadily more distressed in Detroit and major US central cities right through the economic boom of the late 1990s.

In 1993, the Citizens Inquiry noted that in the 1940s and 1950s between 100,000 and 150,000 housing units were built in Detroit each decade compared to 8,000 housing units built during the 1980s.

During the 1990s, there were only 4,000 building permits issued for single- and multi-family homes within the city limits. During this same period, 40,000 to 50,000 housing units were demolished. About 10 percent of housing units were standing vacant and mostly abandoned in 2000.

The few homes built in Detroit during the 1990s were largely constructed with subsidies from federal, state and city coffers, and with help from non-profit organizations. Private builders and mortgage companies prefer to do business only in the wealthier suburbs, where they can find upscale buyers for highly profitable homes in the \$250,000-to-\$500,000 or even million-dollar range. Overwhelmingly, the age of housing in the city is 50 years or older.

The 1993 report from the Citizens Inquiry drew attention to the loss of 100,000 manufacturing jobs and an official jobless rate of 21.5 percent. By contrast, in 1967, the year that poverty sparked a massive riot in Detroit, the official jobless rate was only 5 percent.

In April 2003, the official jobless rate in Detroit was 13.7 percent—more than twice the national average and double the rate of the late 1990s. But anyone at all familiar with economic conditions in Detroit knows that even this figure grossly underestimates the real jobless situation. The actual rate is much higher, as many have given up looking for work and are not counted. With the loss of so many industrial jobs, wages for workers in the city have been slashed dramatically. Many of those considered employed are working for poverty wages and barely eking out an existence.

Government destruction of cash assistance for 91,000 long-term unemployed underlay much of the deepest poverty in the early 1990s. Family welfare caseloads in Michigan dropped from 227,000 in 1994 to about 70,000 this year. New time-out limits, sanctions and a draconian welfare-to-work program under the 1996 Temporary Aid for Needy

Families (TANF) caused the drop. According to Maureen Taylor of the MWRO, even those families in which parents went from welfare to work are worse off financially due to low wages and the loss of housing, medical, food and other supports.

Even though the city's population dipped below 1 million by the 2000 Census—and despite the endemic poverty—the dearth of affordable homes and apartments has caused housing values to rise dramatically in Detroit. This forces city residents to spend a disproportionate part of their income for housing.

The Citizens Inquiry found a gap of 73,000 families looking for affordable low-income housing in Detroit in 1991. In 2001, HUD, the federal government housing department, reported 51,000 low-income renters in the city of Detroit (with incomes less than 50 percent of the area median) who paid more than half their income for rent, or live in severely substandard housing. It also reported 40,000 very-low-income families paying more than half their income for rent as Detroit's housing crisis began spilling into the surrounding suburbs.

HUD estimates about 23,000 households in Detroit are on the waiting list for federal housing assistance. HUD has gutted public housing in the past two decades and replaced it with an inadequate program of housing vouchers. The program is regularly underfunded by congress.

A 1995 "re-invention" of HUD was geared to privatizing low-income housing and eliminating government housing projects. Future HUD funding is to be structured as a block grant to states under new government proposals. As with TANF, Housing Assistance for Needy Families would limit federal funds and further exacerbate the crisis of affordable housing.

#### **The decline of a neighborhood**

A few neat, well-kept homes remain on Mack Avenue, where hundreds of thousands of auto workers and their families once lived. Juanita Davis, a resident of the neighborhood, lives in one of the tidy two-story homes on the street.

Recalling the 1967 fire, she said she remembers when that happened, it was tragic. I have lived in this area in the same house for 50 years. You can see that most of the housing around here is burned out now and most of the homes along Mack Avenue have been torn down. This is an area that is supposed to be under development.

"I was here in 1967 during the riots. I remember the tanks rolling down the street. But even before the riot, houses were already running down. People were either moving out, or the renter landlords were letting the houses decline.

"Some homeowners tried to fix up their houses. In the 1960s, I was a teacher's aide and a young mother with kids. Model Cities came in and that is when they built the Brewster Housing Project. Now they have rebuilt there but I hear the rents are high. They never got what they called Section D where I live, except to offer loans at interest rates so high I told them to keep the money because I knew I could not pay it back on my salary."

Fifty percent of households in Detroit are considered low-income, in the bottom fifth of the US income distribution, and extreme poverty for some families and individuals has resulted in unprecedented levels of homelessness. There are 4,000 beds in shelters, but some estimate as many as 10,000 are homeless in Detroit. Upwards of 40 percent are women or families with children.

The WSWS spoke to a mother who lives with her middle-school-age daughter in one of a dwindling number of public housing units in Detroit. The mother works and cares for her daughter, who has special needs. They had been trying to move into the newer public housing, but were told there were too few apartments available.

She said, "This is not the best neighborhood for raising a child. I have been trying to get a transfer from this subsidized apartment for over two years. Sometimes I don't even like to look outside.

"They are making millions on the casinos down the street, but people like those you see across the street are out there winter and summer, with nowhere to go. They can't get food stamps, or even Medicaid, and what with AIDS, HIV and a major outbreak of syphilis in Detroit, that is a tragedy. It is a tragedy—some of them could have been a doctor or something like that if they had gotten help along the way."

Among the recommendations made by the Citizens Inquiry in 1993 was the demand that 100,000 high-quality and affordable housing units be built in three years by hiring tens of thousands of unemployed construction workers.

However, over the past decade—and under successive Democratic mayors—the city has spent hundreds of millions on sports stadiums and casinos, and is actively supporting upscale loft developments. Thousands of public housing apartments were torn down and replaced with HUD-inspired "mixed-income" housing with few low-rent apartments for the poor. Little of the promised moderate-income housing has been built, and the city's Housing Department has been embroiled in scandal.

Detroit's current mayor Kwame Kilpatrick has continued the policies of his Democratic predecessors. He has signaled his disdain for workers and their families in the neighborhoods and his determination to drive out the poor from downtown areas to make room for "revitalization." Under pressure from businesses that want their own water costs cut, he has promised to step up water shutoffs in the neighborhoods. He has also tried to ticket local churches that take in the homeless because the "permanent" homeless shelters are usually full.



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