

Pontiac, Michigan: Immigrant mother and five children perish in house fire

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An immigrant family from Mexico perished in a house fire in Pontiac, Michigan, a small industrial city 30 miles north of Detroit. A mother, in her seventh month of pregnancy, and her five young children died in a fire that swept their rented home the night of July 29. It appears the cause was an overheated extension power strip connected to an air conditioner, which caught on fire and ignited a carpet and a couch. Fumes from the couch's foam cushions and superheated toxic gases, which rose to 800 degrees Fahrenheit, killed everyone in the house.

The victims were the mother, Guillermina Valiente Carrasco 26; Grecia, 7; twins Eduardo and Francisco, 4; Veronica, 2; and Selena, 1. The father, Francisco Valiente, 26, was the only survivor. According to a next-door neighbor, the father left shortly before the fire to help a friend repair his car; when he returned home he found his entire family had perished.

Francisco and Guillermina left their home in Puebla, Mexico, when they were only 16 years old, searching for a better life in the United States. They lived in Texas and California before coming to Michigan three years ago. The family stayed with relatives in Pontiac until they found their own place to rent, the brick home on Perry Street. Three months later, the house fire claimed six of their lives.

While the immediate cause of the tragedy points to faulty electrical wiring, the fundamental cause can be traced to the conditions of life of the family, who entered into a web of relations and circumstances that caught them fatally unaware.

Several months before the fire, city inspectors found numerous violations in the house. There was not a single smoke detector in the three-bedroom, two-story home the family rented nearly three months ago for \$600 a month. Fire officials believe that, had the family been alerted to the fire, they may have been saved.

Fire officials are pursuing criminal negligence charges

against the landlord, Bobby Dansby, who reportedly owns another 50 properties in Pontiac. An inspection May 2 by the city's Community Development Department cited Dansby for a number of code violations, including the lack of smoke detectors. Dansby was warned at that time that smoke detectors had to be installed before the house could be occupied. "All floors and bedrooms must have a working smoke detector," the notice read.

The City of Pontiac Community Development Department, Building and Safety Engineering Division inspector's report noted these additional violations:

- * Sewer backing up in the basement
- * Exposed wiring in a basement wall
- * Steps need a handrail
- * Windows won't stay open
- * Missing caulk around a toilet and tub
- * Repair all wood on windowsills

The report also noted the following: "Warning: Damage or injuring resulting from delay or failure to comply with this notice will be attributed to negligence on the part of the responsible party or parties."

The certificate of occupancy was not issued, and Dansby was given until October 1 to make corrections or face possible court action. Dansby had made not a single repair, however, when the Valiente Carasco family moved in. Pontiac fire chief Wilburt McAdams said that no one should have been living inside the home until the corrections were made.

The story of the family is not unlike those of hundreds of thousands of immigrants who come to the United States hoping to improve their lot, but soon come face to face with hardships of economic and social inequality. Last summer in Pontiac, nearly 100 immigrant workers were found living in unsafe housing owned by landscaper Torre and Bruglio. Two immigrant workers tipped off city inspectors, who later found numerous code violations. As many as 25 people were crowded into a single-family, one-

bathroom home, sleeping on the floor. Torre and Bruglio deducted \$30.00 a week for rent from the workers' meager \$7.54-an-hour paychecks to stay in the squalid accommodations.

Insecurity, fear and lack of knowledge of their rights make immigrant workers extremely vulnerable to abuse, as well as reluctant to protest their conditions. For example, the workers who exposed the situation at Torre and Bruglio were threatened with deportation back to Mexico.

The *Oakland Press* has reported that the Immigration Naturalization Service (INS) is not pursuing charges at this time against Francisco Valiente, who is an undocumented immigrant.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to neighborhood residents following the fire. According to next-door neighbor Rudy Valez, "They were good people. They loved their children. I never heard any arguments. Francisco was a hard worker. He fixed houses, he knows how to lay brick. He worked very hard, long hours, sometimes 10 to 12 hours a day. Both the mother and the father were very attentive and loving toward their children.

"You can't give a landlord six months to bring a house up to code. They should have inspectors to check these houses. If the city is good enough to collect our taxes, they should be good enough to have inspectors go house to house. She did not have a chance. She died with the youngest in her arms. How many people will die unnecessarily next time because the city is lax?"

The tragedy has struck a deep chord in the community. More than 350 people, the majority of whom did not personally know the family, attended the funeral service. Upon learning of the tragic fire, the children's grandmothers traveled to Pontiac from Puebla, Mexico on temporary visas but were denied permission by the authorities to stay through to the funeral, just six days after the fire.

A neighbor who lived on the same block as the family told the WSWs, "The landlords have no conscience. They suck the economic value out of a house and walk away. They prey on people who do not know their rights, who have no credit history, who cannot afford to buy, but are forced to rent. They may slap some paint on the house, but nothing substantial is changed.

"Sometimes this housing becomes the housing of last resort. The landlords do not think twice about putting small children in an unsafe house. There are so many houses like this. There are cases where five to six people

are crowded into each room, so the next tragedy might kill 20 people. Certain landlords should be hung out to dry for this. What happened here can happen again."

Nearly half of Pontiac residents live in renter-occupied housing units. According to the 2000 Census, 47.2 percent of Pontiac's population rent apartments or houses, double the average of Oakland County cities. The city has only seven inspectors to examine thousands of units. Much of the housing is now in a state of disrepair, and with Housing and Urban Development (HUD) funds cut by 14 percent, there is little prospect of meeting the most elementary needs.

Pontiac was once vibrant and prosperous, like many industrial cities in the US after the Second World War. General Motors' Pontiac car division dominated the city, but is now only a skeleton of its former self. During the past 15 years, GM has eliminated almost 13,000 jobs in Pontiac, closing three of the five plants it had operated. The poverty rate in the city is staggering, with 43 percent of the 66,337 residents—or 4 of 10—living below the government's official poverty line of \$17,400 for a family of four. In the downtown area, conditions are even worse, with more than 64 percent living below poverty level.

In an ironic twist, the house where Guillermina Valiente Carrasco and her children met their deaths is in a registered historic district. General Motors built the neighborhood of 261 modest homes in 1919, when the city was experiencing a severe housing shortage that threatened factory expansion. GM offered incentives to the workers to purchase the new homes, including limiting the price of the new homes to \$3,500-\$5,500 and limiting down payments to 5 percent. Other incentives included housing credits of up to \$800 if an employee remained in service to GM for at least five years.



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